

# On the Delights of Reading Old Magazines

By Samuel Blumenfeld

I recently had the pleasure of perusing a number of old magazines from the mid-nineteenth century to about 1918. They included such great monthly periodicals as Scribner's, Harper's, McClure's, and others. All of them had well-written articles on a wide variety of subjects, reflecting the eclectic tastes of their readers. American readers wanted more than just entertainment. There was a voracious hunger for knowledge, and these magazines provided it, along with wonderful illustrations.

In these old magazines you'll find articles and stories by Mark Twain, Edith Wharton, Henry James, Jules Verne, A. Conan Doyle, Bret Harte, Frederic Remington, Stephen Crane, and many others whose names today don't ring a bell. It's amazing how few of the writers of those days have survived the ravages of time. In those days, Americans were readers, and of course there was no television, or movies, or radio to provide other diversions. So the literary world was where all the entertainment and enlightenment was.

But what I have found of particular fascination in these old magazines are the ads. Some of these magazines had over one hundred pages of ads, selling everything that American capitalism could provide. You can easily follow the development of America's great free-market economy by simply looking at the ads for automobiles. The earliest ads for cars can be seen in magazines published as early as 1898. And if you follow the ads that appear in the succeeding years, you get a fascinating picture of the development of the great American automobile industry. In these magazines you'll find ads for Locomobile, Pierce-Arrow, King, Peerless, Marmon, Franklin, Mora, Columbia, Northern, Knox and other car companies that no longer exist. Most of them went belly-up during the Great Depression. The Fed made it impossible for them to get financing.

Some of the products advertised in those days are still being sold today: National Biscuit, now Nabisco, Ivory Soap, Pabst Beer, Kodak cameras, Whitman's Chocolates, Prudential Insurance, Mennen's Talcum Powder, Quaker Oats, Cream of Wheat, Campbell Soup, and many more. These companies continued to grow and prosper probably because of great management and great products that Americans enjoyed. And they relied on advertising to keep them in the public's mind.

But many other companies now rest in the graveyard of extinguished businesses, such as The Buckeye Camera, Larkin Soaps, Olympia Self-Playing Music Box, Fairy Soap, Blue Label Ketchup, Waltham Watches, and many more enterprises that no longer exist. What we see in the ads is the dynamism of our capitalist system which keeps producing new and improved products for the fussy American consumer. Competition gives good management and good products the edge needed for survival.

Indeed, advertising is such an important part of our economy that today it can drive one crazy by the sheer number of ads we see on television, or hear on the radio, or are

accosted by on the Internet. But magazines are still with us, and with a vengeance. Just look at the magazine rack at Barnes & Noble, and like Vogue and Glamour, they are glossy, with more pictures than text. In the old magazines, illustrations were used to supplement the text. Today, pictures are what you look at page after page with great ads selling luxury products to a materialistic public.

Of course, there are a few magazines that are still literate, such as The New Yorker, The Atlantic, Commentary, Vanity Fair, and our own The New American. But most of the new magazines, like People and US, are geared to the illiterate tastes of the young and are simply picture books with lots of ads trying to sell their young readers on how to be sexy and popular.

Great magazines like Life, Colliers, and the old Saturday Evening Post are gone. But the women's magazines like the Ladies Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, Cosmopolitan, and Redbook have survived by adapting themselves to women's new interests. People still read Time and Newsweek, but their readership is declining.. Most magazines now cater to every nuanced interest of the public, such as cooking (Italian, Southern, Chinese, Vegetarian, Dietetic), decorating, running, skiing, body building, football, golf, travel, finance, antiques, cars, computers, parenting, etc. The great renaissance mind no longer exists in America. You must fit into a niche. Otherwise you won't be recognized.

It is only by reading these old magazines that you can begin to understand how our civilization has changed in a short hundred years. But human nature has not changed. There are still people who want to "kill the Jews." You can find some of them on YouTube. So, as the French say, *plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose*, the more things change, the more they remain the same.