

SPEAKING OUT

Let's not get TOO nostalgic

By HADASSAH F. DAVIS

NOSTALGIA is big business these days. From Sturbridge to Disneyland we flock to see restorations and reconstructions of neat New England villages, charming Mississippi steamboats, handsomely appointed colonial mansions, and even rakishly attractive mining camps.

The shows are fun, and many of them are instructive. But where are the chickens being cleaned in the kitchen? How about the babies crying in the cradles? What happened to the damp wads of tobacco which adorned the spittoons and the floor around them? All these, and other unsavory aspects of life in the old times, are passed over in antiseptic silence.

The deception is not serious as long as our everyday experience supplies a counterbalancing realism. The housewife may admire a colonial kitchen with its open fireplace, but she is not about to discard her gas stove. In other areas, however, we only too easily take appearances at face value. The orderly village, the gracious mansion, the cozy farmhouse embody myths which we swallow whole. And so we come to believe that if only our present problems were cleared away life could proceed like an endless ad for Salem cigarettes.

Thus nostalgia encourages both ends of the political spectrum. The conservative dreams of a stable society in which everyone knew his place and was happy in it. The radical imagines that if our

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corrupt institutions were swept away we could return to a state of primeval innocence.

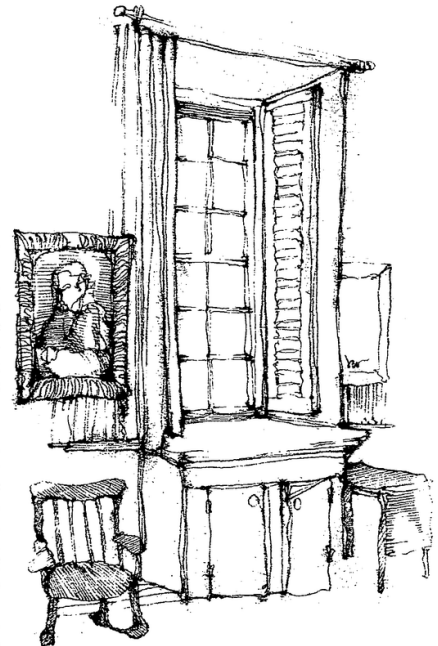
Neither of these illusions could survive a balanced look at the evidence. New England towns were split with quarrels that make Fair Welfare demonstrations look like picnics; life on the self-sustaining farm was long hard hours for little pay; and even in the mansions infant mortality was high, and medical hygiene unknown.

The truth is that any of us transported back in time fifty, or one hundred, or two hundred years, would feel as out of place as the Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's court. We would find the beds hard, or too soft; the food often heavy and sometimes meager, the house too cold or too hot.

We would find manners vastly different from what we are used to, and the general opinions of what is good and worthy often directly opposed to our own.

Above all we would become aware that the future was as hidden then as it is now. We would see that many events then confidently expected never came to pass, and many developments then ignored or unimagined eventually transformed the world.

The present is full of perils, and an occasional whiff of nostalgia, like a sip of brandy, may cheer us up and get us through the night. But if we hope to benefit from the achievements of our predecessors and to avoid in the future repeating the mistakes which have landed us in our present predicament, we had better take a clearer, colder, look at the past.



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