



| SEARCH CONTRIBUTOR LOGIN

2



One Last Blog — Rockwell's America: Real or Myth?

September 10 // Bruce Sorte // Hermiston, Oregon

“Did Norman Rockwell paint what he wanted in life or what was?” Ken Patchett suggested as a topic for this blog. So, I reviewed the quality of life metrics for the first three quarters of the last century when Rockwell was painting and compared them with today to see if Rockwell’s simple and optimistic depiction of life was accurate back then.

Think of the Rockwell paintings you remember fondly like the old man painting the flag pole, the man and women signing their marriage license, guys in the back room of a barbershop playing their favorite music, or any of the Four Freedoms – of speech, from want, from fear and to worship.



Every measure that I studied indicated that life is much better today than it was then - lifespan (increased 20 years/Social Security Online and the CIA Factbook), health (e.g. polio vaccine and cancer treatment), government safety nets (e.g. Social Security, Medicare, and agricultural subsidies), educational opportunities (e.g. high school graduation rates increased from 19% to 86%/infoplease.com), environment (e.g. from the recovery of the bald eagle to replacing chlorofluorocarbons to stop the ozone hole), homeownership (increased from 50% to 66%/U.S. Census) and even today’s severe unemployment is far less than between 1930 and 1940/Bureau of Labor Statistics and less for many parts of Oregon than during the recession of the 1980’s/Oregon Employment Department.

In terms of our abilities to work together in communities, by traditional measures like membership in organizations, we are doing less together in communities than we were during Rockwell’s time. Yet, we still have the capacity to pull together. I have found my students’ writing capabilities and ability to respond to questions or their ability to communicate effectively

is increasing. We can thank all that texting and their constant use of all types of media.

Comparing then to now, it was no wonder people wanted to hang Rockwell's paintings on the wall to remember the few good times they had during the far more prevalent times of worry and struggle in their daily lives. Rockwell's biographers, collectors and Rockwell himself agreed that he was painting what he wanted to see in American society.

Still, as I think back on the tough time stories that I remember, the ones my dad told and that I still hear from my mother, Rockwell may have been doing a very good job of portraying people's basic attitude – we can get it done and have a little fun doing it. In the face of severe hardships they remained on the whole very positive and worked together.

Our economy and particularly rural economies are going through a restructuring away from depending on manual skills and goods production towards more dependence on information based skills and producing services. Everyone has been talking about this transition for at least the last 20 years and because there were still lots of jobs in and tied to the housing industry we would not take the transition seriously. For ten years we lived like there was no tomorrow and then rightly so we turned our attention to fighting terrorism.

Government spending and/or cutting taxes will have little to do with the long run economic future of rural or urban Oregon. Economic vitality will depend on working across ideologies so all of Oregon's resources can be focused on creating a far more sophisticated and collaborative effort. We need to significantly improve K-12 education and do with higher education graduation rates what we did with high school graduation rates.

Producing goods in rural Oregon will remain important yet the value that is added to the goods through innovative processing, marketing, distribution, and new ways to utilize those goods will be the critical features.

In a way, the effective government programs (e.g. unemployment benefits) that cushion us when we suffer economic distress have caused our caring and helping skills to become much weaker. Many of those tough time stories included how communities pulled together to support a family after a tragedy or find a job for someone.

Right now the quality of public conversations, which are often based on acknowledged misrepresentations and hearsay with political control as the only goal, are not sufficient to do any serious work toward economic recovery. Unless we focus more on the good of the country than the good of the political parties, I would much prefer to take my chances with all those lower quality of life metrics in Rockwell's time and wander into Shuffleton's barbershop asking if anyone had a suggestion where I could find work.

Posted at <http://www.rippenw.org/authors/26/posts/215>