

MUSEUM on Main Street

The Way We Worked Exhibition Outline

Section 1: Introduction

Work is a central element in American society. Tracing change and continuity in American work and the American workforce in the 20th century, reveals that workers are the backbone of American society. With a strong work ethic, Americans invest themselves physically, emotionally, and intellectually in their work.

1. Video component shows archival footage of Americans at a variety of jobs.

Section 2: Where We Worked

Where we work affects us deeply. A workplace changes over time, creating new experiences and challenges. We either mold it to fit our needs or adapt as best as we can. Where we worked may seem obvious, but start counting it up. Americans work just about everywhere!

1. **In the Elements:** Americans work the land, on the seas, deep beneath the earth, and sometimes even in space. Work “in the elements” was often dangerous or dirty.
 - a. Workers in the fishing and shipping industries often found themselves at the mercy of unpredictable weather and sea conditions. Their work not only powered the economies of dozens of coastal communities, but also led to the development of a seafaring culture built around deep respect for their work.
 - b. Before the rise of industrial work brought many workers into factories, most Americans made their living on the land or in work that obtained resources from the land. Millions of Americans made their way as farmers and still do today. Miners extracted coal, silver, copper and other ores from the earth.
 - c. Today, millions of Americans still work outside the confines of an office or factory. Construction workers, highway workers, and many others brave the elements each day.
2. **Military Service** focus label – Americans serving in the military may be called to do their jobs in any place at any time. With lives on the line on the battlefield, they work under high levels of stress and adversity.
 - a. Military work is also extremely diverse – not only are members of the military soldiers and sailors, they are also scientists, teachers, skilled technicians and trained communicators. “Flipper” panels show how military workers perform functions we also see every day in our communities
3. **In Our Communities:** Americans rely on the efforts of public service workers. From teachers to sanitation workers, from the postman to highway workers, it is difficult to imagine life in communities without their contributions. This work can also be risky, like the dangers that face firefighters and police officers working to protect citizens.
4. **Old Jobs, New Jobs:** Over time, new technologies and cultural priorities lead to the creation of new jobs. Other jobs become irrelevant and simply disappear. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was common to see workers delivering ice and milk on a daily basis. Today, a delivery is more likely to be a pizza or a parcel.

5. **Within Four Walls:** With the increasing emphasis on manufacturing and the rise of white collar work in the early 20th century, more and more Americans stopped working on the land and began working indoors.
 - a. Instead of working within the bounds of daylight, weather, and the seasons, workers moved into an environment where work could take place at any time – day or night. Workers adjusted to shift work and being responsible for just one small job, often done repetitively.
 - b. As more and more Americans moved from working in industrial and agricultural jobs after World War II, large white-collar office spaces became routine. Like crowded factories, these workspaces were often filled with small individual workstations that were engineered for efficiency, rather than privacy.
 - c. And, much of our daily work takes place in the home. In addition to the duties that keep our homes and families functioning, many Americans now keep offices in their homes or perform all of their work from home.

Section 3: How We Worked

Before industrial development, most people did their jobs by hand or with the help of basic tools. The Industrial Revolution introduced laborsaving technologies that increased productivity and efficiency. Mills and factories sprang up. Farming, too, became less labor-intensive. These changes transformed the way Americans worked. Many people moved away from the countryside to find city jobs. Workers formed unions to protect themselves from exploitation in often-dangerous factory jobs. Technology continues to change the nation ... and change workers.

1. **From Agriculture to Industry:** In 1900, nearly 40 percent of Americans worked in agriculture. Today, only 2 percent work as farmers. Mechanization reduced the need for farmhands while increasing the number of factory jobs.
 - a. Former farm workers trekked to the cities, taking up positions on assembly lines and in mills and factories. These speedy new methods and machinery made American factories more efficient than ever, and new workers added to the productivity.
 - b. Big machines meant big jobs could be done faster and with fewer workers, but technological advancements did not eliminate dangerous work.
 - c. Flipbook focuses on how technology helped workers do more, but that human ingenuity and intervention were still necessary to work flowing.
 - d. Video component shows archival footage of workers in industrial environments.
 2. **It's a Small Working World:** Telephones, computers, and wireless technologies provided tools that made it possible to work, access information, and connect with colleagues no matter where we are. New devices allow workers to communicate faster and increase efficiency.
 3. **Workers Unite:** The rise of factories and industrial tools increased productivity, but it also made work more complex and stressful. Industrial workers faced the possibility of physical injury, exploitation, discrimination, and harm. Seeing collective action as their best protection, many of them formed unions and fought for change.
 - a. Disabled workers also lobbied for changes in their working conditions, culminating in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
 - b. Audio component features labor songs.
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4. **Child Labor focus label:** Children had always worked within their homes and on farms, but at the close of the 19th century it was common to see children working in coal mines, textile mills, and other modern industries.
 - a. Many children worked to help support families that desperately needed the money. In some cases, factory owners preferred young workers who were less likely to organize or go on strike.
 - b. Activists like Lewis Hine documented working conditions for children and popular sentiment turned against child labor. It was not formally prohibited, however, until 1938.

Section 4: Who Works

America works. Our diverse, interconnected workforce is a key part of our nation's story. The body of American workers has been shaped by years of struggle, conflict, and cooperation. No specific age, gender, class, or ethnicity quantifies the American worker of today.

1. **Dreams and Opportunities:** Forty million immigrants made a leap of faith to reach America in the 20th century with an abundance of hope that working in America was their only chance for a better life.
 - a. Millions from Asia came to the U.S. Chinese workers searched for gold in California, powered the construction of railroads, and later started their own businesses. Japanese and Filipino workers also came to America in large numbers.
 - b. European immigrants fanned out across the country and found work in industries, agriculture and in mining. Communities all over discovered that they had a workforce comprised of people representing dozens of different cultures. A flipbook introduces the stories of immigrants from different countries finding work in America.
 - c. Americans who were here already leapt with the same hopefulness, moving to find work when times got rough. During the Great Depression, Americans of all ethnicities became migrant workers in farm fields. And people continue to uproot their lives today, seeking work to help them make their own way.
2. **Great Migration focus label:** Hampered by racism and few job options, many African Americans in the South turned to sharecropping – farming crops on the lands of white landowners – a practice that often left families in debt to landowners. Labor shortages during World War I led to the first “Great Migration” of African-Americans from the rural South to Chicago, Detroit, and other major cities.
 - a. African Americans often still found that racism impacted their ability to work in northern cities. Some workplaces were segregated and African Americans were often only offered low-level industrial or domestic work. Millions persevered and broken into academic, legal and managerial ranks.
 - b. Pullman porters became one of the best-organized groups of African American workers. They often provided advice to African American families as they moved to new cities and became deeply respected.
3. **At Any Age:** Work is a part of life no matter your age. Americans can go through several work ‘stages.’ The notion that work is central to life, even for our children, feeds the American work ethic. Workers form the backbone of American society and families begin teaching that message at an early age
 - a. Workers learn about a hard day's work at very young ages through family businesses. Others get their first taste of work as teenagers with summer jobs, as apprentices, or interns.

- b. Americans believe that success at work is a step to an improved life. That strong work ethic leads many to “burn the midnight oil”. In most communities, there’s always someone at work, no matter the hour of the day.
 - c. A video features interviews about individuals’ first jobs and the lessons they learned as workers.
4. **Family Farms focus label:** Family farms are an icon of independence and self-sufficiency in American culture. Throughout the country’s history, farms provided families with an opportunity to build their own livelihood from the land. For many families, it was the start to building a foothold in a new country.
 - a. For children, farm work provided lessons for developing a strong work ethic at an early age. Young people held roles critical to their families’ economic survival.
 - b. Though most of agribusiness is now focused on large, mechanized farms, today’s family farms are still family-owned enterprises where everyone still pitches in to help sustain the farm. A farming family may no longer depend solely on its agricultural production for income.
 5. **Women against the Odds:** Generations of women struggled for the right to work and challenged outdated stereotypes. As with other groups, historical events helped open the doors to new job opportunities for American women. Thousands embraced the chance to work outside the home or in new fields.
 - a. In the early 20th century, women were often employed as secretaries or clerks and in manufacturing plants. After World War II, more and more women broke through the “glass ceiling” and entered managerial positions. Today, women serve at the highest levels in businesses, the military and government.
 - b. Military service and war industries opened doors for many women. Millions of women served in the WACS, WAVES, or as nurses. “Rosies” showed that women could do any kind of work. Women began working alongside male colleagues in positions previously only held by men.

Section 5: Why We Work

We work for many reasons. Some are practical: bringing in money to pay the bills. Others are intensely personal: pursuing a “calling” to protect or benefit society. Others keep the future in mind: climbing the corporate ladder for prestige. But, work also gives back to us and our communities. Workers often develop strong, lasting personal and professional relationships on the job. For some, work becomes an important part of an individual’s own self-image.

1. **Communities at Work:** Workplaces are social networks. They quickly become like mini-neighborhoods. Workers get to know one another and build relationships. Communities also derive identity for the industries and jobs that dominate their economies.
 - a. Workers bond over shared duties, concerns, or even over conversations about personal interests at a lunch table. Workers and their families interact outside the workplace, taking part in office-organized softball and bowling leagues or attending union or professional organization meetings together.
 - b. Communities all over are recognized by the industries located there. Local industries contribute their image and traditions to adjoining communities through local festivals, parades and even sports team and community nicknames.
2. **Company Towns focus label:** Some industries created “company towns,” to house and provide services for workers.

- a. Company towns represented a more secure life and a new kind of relationship with their employer. Workers and their families shopped in a company store, received health care in a company-tended clinic, and sent their children to company-operated schools.
 - b. Even though these were created communities, they quickly became real towns – with all of the social complexities of any other community and the common bond of a shared relationship with work.
3. **What We Wore to Work:** Deciding what to wear on the job would seem to be a simple matter of choosing comfortable clothing that makes performing tasks safer. However, work clothes are both functional and symbolic.
- a. Some work clothes are functional, keeping a worker safe from a harmful work environment. Hard hats, flight suits, welder’s helmets and gas masks make it clear that a worker engages in risky work.
 - b. Many workers wear clothes that are designed to convey authority and empowerment. A police uniform, a doctor’s coat, or a judge’s robes tell us that the worker has training that gives them some cultural authority. Military insignia tell us a person’s rank.
 - c. Other workers wear clothes that reinforce the image of their employer. Fast food uniforms and business suits offer a company an opportunity to project an image to the public.
4. **The Value of Work:** What is the ultimate value of work to us? Americans work for a multitude of reasons. The work we do is an extension of our personal image and identity. Americans value hard work and recognize the interconnected relationship between work and culture.
- a. Work has practical value – it offers income and is a means for survival.
 - b. Others work to serve society by teaching, volunteering, providing medical care, protecting and defending. Feeling good about making a difference in one’s community may be just as important as the paycheck.
 - c. Some may work to attain a higher level of prestige and the social identity that comes with it.
 - d. Work stimulates us intellectually and professionally.
 - e. Work has social value -- people make some of their best friends at work
 - f. A flipbook features stories about the personal and professional reasons why they work.

