

HIST 496:Nationalism in American Politics and Culture  
Professor Samuel Schaffer

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Brooks Swett

Kites Caught in the Telegraph-Wires:  
The Progressives' Attempts to Link America's Rural Past and Modern Future  
through a New Model of Boyhood  
An Examination of the *The Youth's Companion* and *St. Nicholas*, 1890-1910

by Brooks Swett

The article “A City Playground,” appearing in the children’s periodical *St. Nicholas: an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks* in June 1891, provided an account of children’s activities in New York City for country boys and girls who might have wondered how their urban counterparts played or even “exist[ed] without ever a sight of nature’s playgrounds.” The narrator, who had himself grown up a “country boy,” guided his readers on a tour of the West-Side, explaining, with a sense of wonder, the country games that the new breed of city children had adapted to their urban setting. While the narrator assured his readers that the New York boys “play every game that you know, and probably play some of them even better,” he also lamented their situation and their inability to experience “the fuller pleasures of a country life.” These missing fuller pleasures included the ability to fly a kite. As the narrator noted, the city’s telegraph-wires “sooner or later...become the natural end of every kite flown in the street.”<sup>1</sup>

The image of kites tangled in telegraph-wires represented the challenges that Americans faced as technological advances and modernizing forces transformed their traditional activities and lifestyles. Facing the rapid changes and social tensions that accompanied urbanization and industrialization, Progressive Americans grappled for a compelling national identity. As historian Stuart McConnell summarized, “three undeniably important factors: mass immigration,

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<sup>1</sup> Frank M. Chapman, “A City Playground,” *St. Nicholas: an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907)* 18, no. 8 (June 1891): 609, in *Proquest* [database on-line]; accessed 25 October 2007.

industrial unrest, and the Spanish-American War” contributed to a wave of overt and ritualized nationalism during the 1890s.<sup>2</sup> Reformers educated schoolchildren and assimilated immigrants, crusading for a “Flag Over Every School House” and the adoption of the Pledge of Allegiance, while national fairs racially justified America’s role as an imperial power. Historians have devoted much attention to these explicit demonstrations of patriotic fervor and conceptions of American dominance.<sup>3</sup>

However, a more subtle form of nationalism also developed – one that reflected the Progressives’ nostalgia, anxieties, and aspirations as they watched the America of their childhoods giving way to a new and less controlled society. Evident in the literature of contemporary children’s periodicals, this more nuanced nationalist vision reflected the Progressives’ attempts to incorporate the values that had defined their shared rural past within America’s imminent modern and metropolitan future. In their efforts to link these two visions of America, the Progressives turned to the next generation.<sup>4</sup> They identified the American boy as a

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart McConnell, “Reading the Flag: A Reconsideration of the Patriotic Cults of the 1890s” in *Bonds of Affections: Americans Define their Patriotism*, ed. by John Bodnar (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 103.

<sup>3</sup> A wide array of historical studies have examined explicit expressions of American nationalism during the Progressive Era. These include Maldwyn Allen Jones’ *American Immigration* and Desmond King’s *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy*, which respectively analyze the role of growing American nationalism and efforts to promote an “American race” in assimilating immigrants. Richard J. Ellis’ *To the Flag: the Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* and Cecilia O’Leary’s *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* consider overt efforts to promote American nationalism through the curriculums and activities in public schools. The literature of the Spanish-American War, including Paul T. McCartney’s *Power and Progress: American National Identity, the War of 1898, and the Rise of American Nationalism* and Philip Sheldon Foner’s *The Spanish-Cuban-American War and the Birth of American Nationalism, 1895-1902*, analyzes the manifestations of American nationalism in the country’s foreign policy. Richard Rydell’s *All the World’s a Fair* provides an account of the racism that underpinned these imperialist expressions of American nationalism.

<sup>4</sup> While various historians have studied the role of children during the Progressive Era, few have approached the subject through examining youths’ periodicals. Historian David I. Macleod, who has written extensively about children in Progressive Era homes, provides an overview of the changes in family structures and dynamics as well as in adults’ perceptions of youth in *The Age of the Child: Children in America 1890-1920*. More narrowly focused on boys’ experiences, his earlier book *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870-1920* describes the crisis of masculinity that accompanied urbanization and analyzes the Progressives’ responses and limited success through character-building agencies. Writer Anne Scott MacLeod examines specific children’s novels from the Progressive Era in her book *American Childhood: Essays on Children’s Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. While both David I. Macleod and Anne MacLeod

bridge between their nation's past and future. Amidst new degrading urban influences, boys might serve as bastions of the values country life and agricultural labor had traditionally instilled, including resourcefulness, patriotism, and physical prowess, while also acting as promising agents in the world of business and technology. The constructions of boyhood appearing between 1890 and 1910 in the stories and articles of the two most prominent family periodicals, *The Youth's Companion* and *St. Nicholas*, reflected Progressives' efforts to form a composite nationalism by molding their sons to preserve the past even as they embraced the future. This composite nationalism would combine the best attributes inspired by the America of the Progressives' childhoods with the possibilities of their sons' futures. As the New York boys in the article "A City Playground" sought to adapt traditional games and toys to city streets, Progressives aimed to transport the defining principles of rural America to the nation's emerging urban society. The kites in the telegraph-wires then represented not only the challenges posed by modernization but also the convergence of two nationalist visions in the lives of American boys.

The concept of boyhood assumed a new importance not only as central to the Progressives' nationalist vision but also as representative of the nation's position in its history and international affairs. By 1890, having survived a civil war and celebrated their centennial, Americans had developed a shared history. As their nation approached full maturity, they hoped to maintain this relatively new but precious past even as they asserted themselves as a modern

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note the Progressives' desire to escape or allay the conditions of modern urban life through specific institutions and novels, these historians do not fully address the reformers' excitement about the future and the more nuanced character they therefore promoted for American boys, as evident in the popular periodicals of the time.

Surprisingly, few extensive historical studies of these periodicals exist. The collection of essays *St. Nicholas and Mary Mapes Dodge* examines mainly the magazine's founding and specific features, while *To the Flag: the Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* describes the overt nationalism *The Youth's Companion* promoted through its flag campaign and Columbus Day rituals. Only historian Fred Erisman's essay "The Utopia of *St. Nicholas*: The Present as Prologue," included in *St. Nicholas and Mary Mapes Dodge*, begins to explore the significance of what he deems the magazine's "presentation of the compatibility of the modern world and traditional values" (196). However, his essay focuses on the Progressives' utopian vision inherent in this "presentation of compatibility" but does not address their efforts to mold the next generation, especially males, so as to realize this compatibility in the nation's future.

imperial power. The Progressives hoped to guide their nation through these formative years and rites of passage by molding their sons in their transitions from boyhood to manhood. In trying to direct both their country and sons to maturity, the Progressives attempted to exercise control within their families as well as across their nation.

### **I. Past Ideals and Modern Realities: Background on the Goals and Methods of *The Youth's Companion* and *St. Nicholas***

The goals and methods of both *The Youth's Companion* and *St. Nicholas* embodied the convergence of the visions of America's past and future that their literature sought to reconcile in the characters of American boys. *The Youth's Companion* aimed to render patriotism compatible with the modern American business world. As it spearheaded the Flag Over Every Schoolhouse campaign, the magazine developed a patriotism that inspired a traditional morality and love of country among young readers even as it launched them into modern commercial interactions. The editors of *St. Nicholas* similarly sought to preserve traditional values within a modern America. Mary Mapes Dodge, the founder of *St. Nicholas*, hoped to offer models of the ideal rural childhood while also addressing topics such as urban life and new technology to prepare readers for the realities they would face in the America that was emerging during the Progressive Era.

*The Youth's Companion* aimed to preserve and market the moral tradition of American patriotism by educating young readers and mobilizing them as commercial agents. As historian R. Gordon Kelly noted, since the periodical's founding in 1827, *The Youth's Companion* had sought to provide "wholesome entertainment for children of democracy." It never included references to tobacco or alcohol and heralded a devotion "to Piety, Morality, Brotherly Love.

No Sectarianism, no controversy." <sup>5</sup> *The Youth's Companion* maintained a commitment to American values that could be traced back as far as the first Puritan settlers.

As the periodical invented new patriotic rituals to promote these traditional values, *The Youth's Companion* drew young readers into the modern marketing world. The periodical mobilized children and young adults as sales representatives in its efforts to encourage the patriotic surge of the 1890s. In attempting to popularize its program for Columbus Day celebrations and the new Pledge of Allegiance, *The Youth's Companion* encouraged students to advertise to their teachers and solicit subscriptions among family and friends.<sup>6</sup> Readers received premium prizes corresponding in value to the number of new subscribers they recruited. A special issue called the "Premium List" regaled readers with the wide variety of premiums they might earn and instructed them in sales techniques, advising them to tell potential subscribers about special promotions.<sup>7</sup> The periodical enlisted its readers as commercial agents not only to publicize its new patriotic rituals but also to revive the conventional symbol of the flag. Enterprising students could write to *The Youth's Companion* to receive one hundred cards reading, "This certificate entitles the holder to a share in the patriotic influence of the school flag."<sup>8</sup> Selling these for ten cents each, they would raise the necessary funds to purchase a flag to fly over their school. Through the premium and certificate programs, *The Youth's Companion* capitalized on and further encouraged children's involvement in a modern consumer culture, even while maintaining its commitment to patriotism and wholesome education.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Hill and Ingrid Satelmajer, "Introduction to *The Youth's Companion*"; available from <http://www.wam.umd.edu/~redman/ed/edcompframes.htm>; accessed 4 September 2007.

<sup>6</sup> "Advertisement 1," *The Youth's Companion (1827-1929)* 65, no. 21 (May 26, 1892): 296.

<sup>7</sup> "Advertisement 6," *The Youth's Companion (1827-1929)* 65, no. 43 (October 27, 1892): 530.

<sup>8</sup> "Advertisement 5," *The Youth's Companion (1827-1929)* 64, no. 12 (March 19, 1891): 165.

As *The Youth's Companion* involved its young audience in attempts to adapt traditional values and American patriotism to a modern commercial culture, *St. Nicholas* also sought to reconcile America's past ideals and modern realities. The original goals *St. Nicholas* founder and editor Mary Mapes Dodge set forth included both "To give [readers] examples of the finest types of boyhood and girlhood" and "To prepare boys and girls for life as it is. To stimulate their ambitions – but along normally progressive lines."<sup>9</sup> In the essay "Children's Magazines," Dodge expressed the tension between the roles children's literature played in both addressing realities and facilitating escapism. She noted:

In a word, pleasant, breezy things may linger and turn themselves this way and that. Harsh, cruel facts – if they come, and sometimes it is important that they should – must march forward boldly, say what they have to say, and go. The ideal child's magazine, we must remember, is a pleasure-ground where butterflies flit gaily [sic] hither and thither.<sup>10</sup>

Dodge hoped that a magazine of quality literature and illustrations would offer young readers the bucolic pleasure-ground and sense of community that they might lack in American cities. Consistent with the goals behind the patriotic campaigns of *The Youth's Companion* and the founding of *St. Nicholas*, both the literature and non-fiction in these periodicals promoted traditional ideals among young American readers, particularly boys, while also embracing modern possibilities and recognizing new realities. Depicting a vision of a future in which Americans might balance such a commitment to the past and acceptance of modernity, the Progressives revealed their anxieties as well as their anticipation at the prospect and reality of a modernized nation.

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<sup>9</sup> Harriet Quimby, "Periodicals for Children: A Selection," *The Serials Librarian* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 73.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Mapes Dodge, "Children's Magazines," *Scribner's Monthly* (July 1873) as found in *St. Nicholas and Mary Mapes Dodge*, ed. by Susan R. Gannon, Suzanne Rahn, and Ruth Anne Thompson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., Publishers, 2004), 17.

## II. A Substitute for the Woodpile: Preserving America's Rural Past by Molding American Boys

Among these many anxieties riddling Progressive reformists around the turn of the twentieth century was the fear that Americans living in the rapidly emerging urban nation would forget the qualities that a rural lifestyle had inspired in earlier generations. Progressives expressed alarm at the unhealthful influences plaguing cities and a nostalgia for the America of their childhoods. Articles in *The Youth's Companion* and *St. Nicholas* reflected these reactions and the ensuing efforts to mold American boys so they would retain the character that Progressives believed the nation's rural past had once produced. Stories, especially those about famous men's boyhoods, provided the rising generation with models of diligence, resourcefulness, patriotism, and service and emphasized the importance of connections to the nation's past. Even as the Progressives confidently promoted these traits through literary and historical examples, however, they acknowledged the challenges of new urban environments. They grappled for more effective and active ways to ensure that American boys would retain the qualities that they attributed to their past and identified as the foundation of the American character.

As industrialization generated the rapid growth of cities across the nation, Progressives decried the harmful influences assailing the national character in urban America. As historian David I. Macleod noted, urbanization prompted particular concern for young boys' physical and moral health. Macleod argued that at the turn of the century "the conditions of the middle-class urban boyhood – sedentary pursuits, pervasive feminine influences, and prolonged dependency – also raised widespread fears that the boys were growing up weak in physique and will power."<sup>11</sup> *The Youth's Companion* voiced the Progressives' alarm. The 1891 article "City Growth"

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<sup>11</sup> David Macleod, "Act Your Age: Boyhood, Adolescence, and the Rise of the Boy Scouts of America," *Journal of Social History* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1982): 3.

described the urbanization reflected in census statistics as “deplorable” and noted the accompanying increase in “the ill-health, evil, and unhappiness which almost invariably attend the massing of great numbers of people upon a small area.” The author cited statistics about population density and concentration of police officers to prove the extent of misery and immorality Americans found upon “exchanging the comparative physical and moral health of the country.”<sup>12</sup> Several years later, the article “The City and Country Club” reflected the same concerns with urban America in its account of city resident Mr. Wells’ retreat to his country roots when “his health required that he should leave his business for a month.”<sup>13</sup> Progressives viewed the emerging urban America as a hotbed of physical and emotional degradation, to which boys were particularly vulnerable and from which Mr. Wells wisely sought respite.

The Progressives’ alarm at the degrading forces boys faced in the new urban America heightened their nostalgia for their own rural childhoods. The same article about Mr. Wells described him as “a city man who used to be a country boy and, as he says, has ‘never got over it.’”<sup>14</sup> Many American men of the Progressive Era, including the authors published in youths’ periodicals, shared Mr. Wells’ sentiment. One *St. Nicholas* writer, dispatched to the country to research a feature on big game hunting, observed that “every natural, healthy boy” maintains an appetite for outdoors exploration. The author then noted the same boyish impulses among adult males and conveyed his generation’s romanticized longing for adventures in the wilderness, noting, “if you come to know the most sedate and busiest men, underneath their gray hairs you will discover that they often think of how they would have enjoyed seeing new countries,

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<sup>12</sup> “City Growth,” *The Youth’s Companion (1827-1929)* 64, no. 38, (September 17, 1891): 496.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Leon Sawyer, “The City and Country Club,” *The Youth’s Companion (1827-1929)* 80, no. 32 (August 9, 1906): III.

<sup>14</sup> Sawyer, “The City and Country Club,” *The Youth’s Companion*.



hunting wild animals, and fishing in rivers where great fish are swarming.”<sup>15</sup> As they looked back on the possibilities of their childhoods, these wistful men idealized rural areas as the perfect settings for boyhood pursuits. The decline of rural America thereby intensified their generation’s sense of loss of boyhood freedom.

With a similarly heightened nostalgia, the authors of two *St. Nicholas* articles reminisced and revived their emotional attachment to the rural communities of their childhoods. In “A City Playground” the author identified himself as once “a country boy” when he acknowledged his hesitation to admit that city boys had surpassed their country counterparts’ abilities in baseball.<sup>16</sup> In another *St. Nicholas* article “Our Secret Society,” the author provided an account of his boyhood games in which he identified his companions through the professions they pursued as adults. The piece opened with the line, “the Judge of Probate was playing leap-frog with the Specialist in Diseases of the Eye, in front of our little hidden Hut, while the Bank Director and the President of the Gas Company were scouting in the dense woods to guard against surprise from imaginary Indians.” This technique of injecting the present into the past conveyed the author’s acute and bittersweet nostalgia for his country childhood. He also more directly bemoaned the present, noting, “The president of the gas company, once so full of frolic and fancy, is now one of the most preoccupied and even mournful-looking men in town; and the Bank Director has fallen a prey to dividends and coupons.” The author and his boyhood friends now found themselves trapped in the modern business world, far removed from the “dense woods” and other rural settings of their boyhood antics.<sup>17</sup> However, the Progressives

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<sup>15</sup> Julian Ralph, “Plain Truths About Hunting,” *St. Nicholas: an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907)* 18, no. 10 (August 1891): 755.

<sup>16</sup> Chapman, “A City Playground,” *St. Nicholas*.

<sup>17</sup> George Parsons Lathrop, “Our Secret Society,” *St. Nicholas: an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907)* 23, no. 2 (December 1895):140.

experienced this natural transition from games to business with a more acute sense of nostalgia as they also watched the rural America of their fond boyhood days recede before the forces of urbanization.

As the Progressives' alarm and nostalgia drove them to action, they sought to provide young readers with models of diligence, vigor, and service so that their sons would preserve the qualities that they believed rural America had instilled in earlier generations. *St. Nicholas* printed accounts of the boyhoods of great historical figures, praising their discipline and energy as youths and emphasizing the importance of character formation from an early age. The profile "The Boyhood of Michael Angelo" told young readers that the artist had "from the outset...pursued his studies, as well as the apprentice work assigned to him, with the utmost earnestness and activity." In extolling Michael Angelo's precision, the author offered another lesson in the value of diligence with his conclusion that "Behind every work of genius, whether book, picture, or engine, is an amount of labor and pains – yes, and of *pain* – that would have frightened off a weak spirit."<sup>18</sup> Another article "The Boyhood of Edison" admired the inventor's similar unrelenting discipline, which he developed at a young age and thus naturally retained in his later life. According to the author, "there was no confounding young Edison with a mollycoddle," and the "determination, industry, perseverance, honesty, and temperate habits of his boyhood followed him into manhood."<sup>19</sup>

Another historical piece in *St. Nicholas*, "Elizabethan Boys," provided models of patriotism as well as diligence, vigor, and service and directly expressed the Progressives'

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander Black, "The Boyhood of Michael Angelo," *St. Nicholas: an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907)* 18, no. 3 (January 1891): 217.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Rose McCabe, "The Boyhood of Edison," *St. Nicholas: an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907)* 20, no. 10 (August 1893): 761.

preoccupation with developing examples of character to inspire young men. The article admired how Elizabethan boys, “kept so sternly and taught so well, blossomed so early into the flower of noble manhood.” They developed into men who glorified their nation and era through their accomplishments. The article cited one writer from the Elizabethan period who had argued that if sons received proper parental guidance, they ““proved good members of their commonwealthe and countrie.”” As upstanding English citizens, the Elizabethan men not only had “studied hard and been trained severely” but also had grown eager to serve their country after hearing stories of British military escapades. Learning about the value of unwavering patriotism under the most adverse conditions, young men heard tales “from the Low Countries, where some of the best blood in England was fighting – stories of persecution and cruelty and wrong, of steadfast resistance, unflinching bravery, and patriotism.” Esteeming this resilient and energetic patriotism, the article rhetorically asked, “Did [the Elizabethan boy] not resolve to die at his own threshold, if need were, fighting for his own people, and grow a man in thought and purpose, in the resolve?” At home in England, the Elizabethan boys observed how their country benefited from men’s military sacrifice and patriotic fervor abroad. As the article noted, “England had never been so prosperous, never advanced so rapidly in comfort and even luxury.” In analyzing this thriving nation, the author speculated as to the influences that contributed to the strong Elizabethan male character, commenting, “One would like to know just what made them what they were; what futures they planned and dreamed through the long days of childhood; what they heard and saw in the talk and example of the men about them – ever the thing that most influences a boy.” This passage reflected the self-conscious nature of Progressives’ attempts to

develop models of character that would inspire traditional values, especially patriotic service, among American boys.<sup>20</sup>

In these efforts to preserve traditional qualities among American boys, the Progressives not only taught through examples but also encouraged ties to the past. The article “How Patriot Decorated” in *The Youth’s Companion* praised the resourceful patriotism of boys in a western town, called Patriot, as they forged a connection to their nation’s history. A new town, Patriot had not existed during the Civil War and had no graves of veterans for residents to decorate in honor of Decoration Day. The adults’ aphoristic speeches to mark the holiday did not satisfy the boys of Patriot, who preferred a more active form of patriotism. As Wally Clincher declared to a gathered “squad” of boys, “It’s well enough for the old folks to get up a celebration and talk big...but what Patriot needs is to do something.” Wally and the others then decided to “decorate” the poor old maid of the town, who, having lost two brothers and a lover in the fight for the Union, represented Patriot’s “one war relic.” The boys rallied the town to provide her with a new shed and food. This story reflected the Progressives’ belief that identifying and cultivating a connection to the nation’s past would foster traditional qualities among American boys. As the boys strengthened their ties to America’s history, they would learn through experience the importance of active patriotism, initiative, and industry and gain a sense of national tradition. This development of a national memory would bolster the American character and allow citizens to display, through the act of commemoration, the same patriotic pride and commitment that Union soldiers had exhibited in military service. Noting the degree of patriotic fervor among the town residents, the article noted, “If there is any nation among the effete empires and kingdoms of the world that Uncle Sam can’t whip with one hand tied behind him,

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<sup>20</sup> L. H. Sturdevant, “Elizabethan Boys,” *St. Nicholas: an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907)* 27, no. 3 (January 1900): 200.

Patriot would like you to name it.” Further, to preserve the nation’s prestige, “every man and boy, and some women, of Patriot would enlist in Uncle Sam’s army.”<sup>21</sup> The boys’ efforts to associate themselves with the nation’s past allowed Patriot’s citizens to express and further cultivate this emerging national consciousness and American pride.

Even as the Progressives promoted model characters and encouraged connections to the past, they grappled for more active and effective ways to inspire among the next generation the qualities that rural America had once instilled in young men. The Progressives observed that life in urban America did not involve the physical labor that had inspired discipline and character among traditional American country boys. Vast metropolises did not cultivate close-knit communities that would encourage the patriotic development of young residents. Further, urban America not only lacked a healthful lifestyle and community structure but also unleashed a host of new dangers to the national character. In the transformed American landscape and emerging urban nation, the Progressives knew that models of character and tradition would not suffice to mold the next generation. Healthy boys needed physical activity.

Articles in *The Youth’s Companion* reflected the Progressives’ recognition of these new difficulties in shaping American boys. The article “For Idle Hands to Do” lamented the inactivity of American boys. While the author contended that idleness afflicted both city and country boys, he connected the increase in boys’ inoccupation with changes that had accompanied urbanization and industrialization, noting, “The coal-hod has supplanted the wood-pile. In the end the boy sees through the device of trumped up-work, and runs away from it.” The article considered the possible tasks that parents might assign their sons to fight the “loafing disease.” With both alarm and a spirit of experimentation, the author concluded, “Every device

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<sup>21</sup> L.J. Bates, “How Patriot Decorated,” *The Youth’s Companion (1827-1929)* (May 28, 1896): 273.

is worth considering if it will erect one new barrier against the loafing habit – the destroyer of every manly virtue, from industry to self-respect.”<sup>22</sup>

A few years later, the article “Sawing Wood,” which reacted to a speech that had pronounced the task of sawing wood obsolete, similarly acknowledged the new obstacles to maintaining the national character and grappled for solutions. The speaker, who had “been brought up at the wood-pile,” noted that his son could not receive the same upbringing because of the absence of wood in the cities. The article then described Progressives’ more creative attempts to maintain the values this upbringing had inspired. Rather than building a new playground, one city had distributed wood and supplies for boys to saw. When the project proved too costly, the Progressives continued to search for other solutions because, as the article asserted, “So long have we associated the wood-pile with greatness that we wonder perplexedly what substitute the new days can offer for its salutary discipline.”<sup>23</sup>

As Progressives experimented with various alternatives to the wood-pile, they remained optimistic. While they reacted to the emerging urban America with alarm and nostalgia and acknowledged the particular threats it posed to the national character, embodied in boys, they felt confident that they would succeed in preserving the values that had emerged from their rural past. As the author of “Sawing Wood” proclaimed:

Yet somehow, after all, we still seem to have men among us, and every emergency reveals its master, steady-handed, at the helm. What the future will substitute for the wood-pile none can yet foretell. It is ours, however, speeding the old with courage, to greet the new with cheerful hearts. The wood-pile has gone. Yet somehow “discipline must be maintained,” and life will not fail to furnish the means.<sup>24</sup>

The Progressives felt not only the loss of the America of their boyhoods but also the possibility of the new nation their sons would enter. Even as the Progressives aimed to pass on traditional

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<sup>22</sup> “For Idle Hands to Do,” *The Youth’s Companion* (1827-1929) 29, no. 81 (July 18, 1907): 342.

<sup>23</sup> “Sawing Wood,” *The Youth’s Companion* (1827-1929) 83, no. 14 (April 8, 1909): 172.

<sup>24</sup> “Sawing Wood,” *The Youth’s Companion*.

values and an appreciation of the past, they also hoped to prepare the next generation to embrace the future. Under the Progressives' direction, young men might not only provide continuity between Americans' urban lives and shared history but also fulfill the nation's promise as a rising industrial and imperial power.

### **III. A Past Compatible with Progress: Teaching Boys to Embrace Modern Commercial and Technological Possibilities**

To prepare young men for their role in preserving the nation's past and embracing its future, the Progressives presented them with visions of America that showed the compatibility of modern progress with traditional values. Characteristic of the literature of *St. Nicholas* and *The Youth's Companion*, these models showed American boys how they might apply the traditional values of discipline, vigor, patriotism, and service to achieve commercial and technological progress in modern America. The Progressives represented the qualities they hoped to preserve from the past as not only compatible with modern America but further as crucial in advancing both individuals' and the nation's futures. Describing how the Progressives' excitement for the future matched their longing for the past, historian T.J. Jackson Lears has noted, "Anti-modernism was not simply escapism; it was ambivalent, often coexisting with enthusiasm for material progress."<sup>25</sup> In the essay "The Utopia of *St. Nicholas*: The Present as Prologue," historian Fred Erisman described how this ambivalence manifested itself in the literature of *St. Nicholas*. In asserting the utopian nature of the magazine's undertaking "to equip young readers to survive in – and to improve – the world in which they find themselves," Erisman noted that the periodical conveyed "in its non-fiction, a sense of the technological competence necessary to

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<sup>25</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), xiii.

prosper in an urban mechanized world, even as it present[ed], in its fiction, the professed values of the middle-class world of the American dream.”<sup>26</sup> Promoting such “technological competence” and “enthusiasm for material progress” within the context of traditional values, youths’ periodicals encouraged the next generation both to personally capitalize on and patriotically fulfill the nation’s potential as a modern power.

*St. Nicholas* conveyed modern technology and an understanding of it as underlying progress across America. In 1890, an article in *Harper’s Bazaar* discussed the youths’ periodical’s positive contributions in molding American children. The article noted the inclusion of “timely articles” as a critical factor in the wholesome education the magazine offered. These pieces on “subjects of immediate interest” celebrated and explained a wide array of technological advances, including:

the use of light-houses and light-ships, cable-telegraphy, the method of stopping cars by a vacuum-brake, the management of the city fire department, the use of turret ships, torpedoes, torpedo boats in war, the telephone, the foretelling of the weather, the electric light...the cable railway, the elevated railway...<sup>27</sup>

Describing the approach behind *St. Nicholas*, the *Harper’s Bazaar* article echoed the Progressives’ hopes that coming to understand and appreciate technology would improve the next generation. The article concluded that reading “such stories” as the magazine published, “multitudes” of children inevitably became “better, more thoughtful, more refined, and in many ways another kind of children than those who have gone before them.” Equipped with information and intellectually stimulated, these readers might then make more technological

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<sup>26</sup> Fred Erisman, “The Utopia of *St. Nicholas*: The Present as Prologue,” in *St. Nicholas and Mary Mapes Dodge*, ed. by Susan R. Gannon, Suzanne Rahn, and Ruth Anne Thompson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004), 191-192.

<sup>27</sup> “Childdren’s Literature,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 23, no. 49 (December 6, 1890): 968.



advances. The article noted the periodical's success in inspiring further innovation, praising its "ingenious methods...to excite interest in scientific study."<sup>28</sup>

*St. Nicholas* showed young readers that knowledge of technological advances and modern conditions even better facilitated progress when matched with the traditional values that had characterized rural America. During the 1880s, the series "Ready for Business; or, Choosing an Occupation: A Series of Practical Papers for Boys" anticipated the Progressives' belief that young men would succeed if they acted on both the traditional values of diligence and energy as well as an understanding of modern advances. In the introduction to the series, the author assured the reader that he had "no new or mysterious suggestions to make on *how* he can be successful." He repeated the most familiar lessons attributed to life in rural America, saying that, in any profession, a boy must "work hard and be attentive, always willing to learn, steady in his habits."<sup>29</sup> With this discipline, boys could more effectively put to use the information of modern developments in various fields, which the series presented. For example, the feature on "boat-building" explained that "in this age of steam and iron, the 'good old days' of ship-builders are a thing of the past" and advised boys that they would have to focus on "yachts and smaller crafts."<sup>30</sup> This series anticipated Progressives' attempts to achieve progress by combining a traditional work ethic with the recognition of a new America based on technological innovation.

A few years later, the article "The Boyhood of Edison" reflected the Progressives' efforts to provide boys with models of the success of this approach. The profile showed that the inventor's "industry and concentration," combined with his scientific curiosity and knowledge, accounted for his illustrious career. His father revealed that Edison's "earliest amusements were

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<sup>28</sup> "Childdren's Literature," *Harper's Bazaar*.

<sup>29</sup> George J. Manson, "Ready for Business," *St. Nicholas; an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907)* 12, no. 1 (November 1884): 49.

<sup>30</sup> George J. Manson, "Ready for Business; Or, Choosing an Occupation," *St. Nicholas; an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907)* 13, no. 9 (July 1886): 698.

steam-engines and mechanical forces.” As Edison pursued this interest with discipline and initiative, he amassed a broad knowledge of modern technology. The article praised his undertaking, noting, “He read everything on electricity that he could get; he besieged the telegraph offices and the railroad shops along the line” and tried “to solve for himself the why and wherefore of the steam horse’s construction.” Although the article recounted that Edison had been ridiculed as an eccentric boy, he proved a visionary genius and model for young American men because he developed an appreciation for the technological innovations that pervaded the modern nation while also pursuing further advances with the discipline that Progressives attributed to the rural past.<sup>31</sup>

The profile of Edison as well as other stories from *St. Nicholas* and *The Youth’s Companion* taught American boys to embrace not only technological advances but also the commercial opportunities that such a modernized America presented. “The Boyhood of Edison” identified the first display of Edison’s “inventive genius” as his initiative to use the new national infrastructure to improve his business selling newspapers on trains. During the War, Edison “hit upon the novel idea of telegraphing, in advance of his train, the head-lines of the war-news columns, which were promptly bulletined at the stations. When the train arrived his papers sold with electric speed.” Rather than criticizing Edison for taking advantage of a wartime market, *The Youth’s Companion* praised his enterprise and taught young readers that business interests did not conflict with traditional patriotism. Commercial interest not only proved compatible with the traditional patriotic character but also benefited from the energy the nation’s rural past had inspired among young men. As the profile in the *St. Nicholas* noted, “Had Edison been a less energetic boy, he might have remained to this day a vender of news.”<sup>32</sup> *St. Nicholas* not only

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<sup>31</sup> McCabe, “The Boyhood of Edison,” *St. Nicholas*.

<sup>32</sup> McCabe, “The Boyhood of Edison,” *St. Nicholas*.

encouraged boys to embrace the business possibilities that arose in a modernized America but showed them the relevance of the nation's traditional values in this pursuit.

The *St. Nicholas* story "Stalled at Bear Run" provided young readers with a realistic depiction of modern America, in which entrepreneurship and the traditional ideal of service coincided. Set against the background of the tumultuous economy and labor unrest of the 1890s, the story recounted the adventures of Ulvig, a seventeen-year old whose parents had immigrated from Norway and eventually settled in Northern California. After his father's death, Ulvig helped his mother with the family bakery and hoped to find work in the mines. Similar to Edison, Ulvig first displayed an entrepreneurial spirit by capitalizing on the new national infrastructure of the railroads. When a train became stuck in a snowdrift and the men of the town remained "puzzled" as to how to supply the passengers with food, Ulvig "decided to answer the question in a practical way." Mounting his Scandinavian skis, Ulvig reached the train and sold sandwiches from the bakery to the conductor to distribute. Ulvig then returned to town, where he publicized the train's predicament and rallied volunteers to dig it out. Having transported the volunteers one by one over the snow on his "drag," Ulvig returned to the train. There he discovered that his father's long-lost sister and her wealthy Boston merchant husband were passengers on the train and had recognized the family name on the bakery advertisements on the sandwich wrappers. At the conclusion, Ulvig and his mother departed to the east coast to enjoy an easier life with their reunited family.<sup>33</sup>

Ulvig's success story proved that young American men could profit from the emerging consumer society even by maintaining a commitment to service. Traditional conscientiousness and discipline did not preclude their participation in modern American business but rather

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas Holmes, "Stalled at Bear Run," *St. Nicholas; an Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks (1873-1907)* 23, no. 6 (April 1896): 502.

enhanced it. Charitable and entrepreneurial instincts proved compatible as Ulvig sold the sandwiches to help the passengers and support his mother by “earn[ing] some money.” In fulfilling these goals, he was rewarded for not only his hard work but also his business techniques. His advertisements on the wrappers facilitated his reunion and future with his rich aunt, while his talk in town generated positive publicity. Before going to sell the sandwiches, Ulvig “made the purpose of his undertaking known, and the shouts and cheers that followed him as he glided down the cañon, proved his popularity.” The townspeople did not criticize his enterprise as exploiting a desperate market but rather praised his ability to earn money by providing a service. Ulvig’s individual interest and that of the larger group coincided, and the group prospered because he pursued his personal ambitions. The unexpectedly high profit from the sandwich sale further sanctioned Ulvig’s motives and endeavor. His unadulterated success encouraged other boys to enter the modern American business world, which was emerging from the nation’s new technology and consumer demand. Consistent with the founder Mary Mapes Dodge’s goal that *St. Nicholas* would communicate “a great deal of instruction and good moral teaching” but only through “hints dropped incidentally here and there,” the story taught readers this lesson through implication rather than explicit instruction.<sup>34</sup> Ulvig’s tale suggested that by remaining both open to commercial practices and committed to discipline and service, boys could achieve progress in their own lives and benefit their fellow Americans. As a second-generation immigrant, Ulvig also illustrated the prosperity and happiness that resulted from fully adopting both traditional and innovative American values. The story’s realistic backdrop of life in a mining town and the forces at play in the 1890s made Ulvig’s approach a convincing model that young boys could actually apply in the real America.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Dodge, “Children’s Magazines,” 17.

<sup>35</sup> Holmes, “Stalled at Bear Run,” *St. Nicholas*.

A decade later, articles in *The Youth's Companion*, describing real-life American entrepreneurs who shared Ulvig's resourcefulness, again brought together aspects of the nation's rural past and business future in the lives of young men. "Keeping the Boys at Home" recounted how a Kansas farmer, who viewed his family as "a pure democracy in which every member is a citizen," had provided his children with shares in the farm. His two sons Fred and John had accumulated capital, rented adjacent plots of land, and earned a significant profit "without neglecting their home duties or their schooling."<sup>36</sup> This story showed boys that, through the individual freedoms and equal rights that the American political tradition guaranteed for them, they could embrace the spirit of entrepreneurship spreading across the modern business nation. At the same time, they could retain not only the qualities but even the lifestyle of rural America. Although preserving the rural lifestyle proved difficult given the realities of urban America, the article's lesson in the compatibility of Americans' traditional qualities and modern enterprise remained convincing as long as the nation retained a commitment to democracy.

#### **IV. Conclusion: The Progressives' Difficulties in Molding and Controlling "Irrepressible Children of Freedom"**

The Progressives developed a preoccupation with boyhood as the bridge between America's rural past and modern future at a time when the transition to maturity evoked the position of the nation. They viewed the decades of the Progressive Era as formative years for their country. America approached the brink of maturity as a modern imperial power, undergoing rites of passage and seeking to assert itself on the international scene. At home, urbanization transformed the national landscape, and the Progressives' own boyhoods came to represent that nation's past while the future took shape in the lives of their sons. The Progressive

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<sup>36</sup> "Keeping the Boys at Home," *The Youths's Companion (1827-1929)* 83, no. 27 (July 8, 1909): 332.

impulse to seek control prompted their attempts to determine America's future by molding the rising generation. The literature of youths' periodicals taught boys to combine the attributes fostered in rural America with the drive for progress and profit characteristic of the modernized nation. These efforts to shape young readers revealed the Progressives' nostalgia for the America of their memories and alarm at conditions in the urban nation as well as their ambitions to fulfill the potential of their expanding nation. As the Progressives tried to guide their nation's transition to maturity by molding their sons, they exposed their anxieties and optimism about their ability to exert control both within their families and across America.

The depiction of an American boy in the *Youth's Companion* story "On Washington's Eyebrow," appearing in 1896, powerfully illustrated the link between the development of young men and that of the nation. The story recounted Harry Boyd's celebrations of Washington's birthday. As the only boy aboard an American steamship near the Cape Verde Islands, Harry felt "a sense of being the sole patriot" among the one-hundred-and-fifty American passengers. While captain's orders prohibited Harry from properly honoring Washington and resisting "the ruthless hand of tyranny" by setting off firecrackers at dawn, he devised another way to commemorate the "Father of his Country" when they reached land. At Porto Grande, Harry saw "the biggest old statoot of George Washington that there is in the world," a landscape shaped exactly in the Founder's profile. For Harry, the shape of the land represented nature's justification for U.S. imperialism; the story noted, "It seemed quite absurd to [him] that any nation but one should own such a head of Washington. Obviously nature had intended the star-spangled banner to wave over these islands." To claim the territory as American, Harry set off to raise the American flag on the tree that formed Washington's eyebrow. As he climbed the tree, he encountered several natives, who in broken and silly English, demanded him to "Come-a-

down, you!” and began to cut down the tree. Harry responded with cheeky confidence, masking his alarm. By throwing rocks at the natives (whom the article describes as “rascals – for they really were robbers, as it turned out afterward”), Harry slowed their sawing and allowed enough time for members of the ship’s crew to respond to his signal of distress, the upside down American flag he had raised.<sup>37</sup>

As an adolescent American male, Harry Boyd evoked the position and ideals of his nation during the Progressive Era. At the brink of maturity and surrounded by authority figures from an older generation, Harry set out to prove his independence while similarly asserting his young nation’s position among the more established imperial powers. As Harry ventured into exotic lands and encountered the natives, his country, with similar natural justifications, patriotic fervor, violence, and racist perspectives, sought control over foreign lands and peoples. These adventures represented rites of passage for both the boy and the nation. In addition to his state of development, Harry’s character also reflected national trends of the Progressive Era. His resourcefulness, energy, patriotic spirit, and commitment to national service corresponded to the ideal traits Progressives hoped to preserve in American boys. As urban forces undermined the rustic strength and discipline rural America had instilled, Progressives held up models like Harry, whom the ship’s senior quartermaster praised as “a boy that was a *real* boy and no putty about him.” Harry displayed resourcefulness in devising both his commemorative acts and his escape and took patriotic initiative in his attempts to annex the island for his country. As the captain deemed him, Harry was “simply a child of freedom, always ‘breaking out in a new place’ ...and quite irrepressible.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> H.H. Lewis, “On Washington’s Eyebrow,” *The Youth’s Companion* (1827-1929) 70, no. 8, (September 17, 1891): 94.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis, “On Washington’s Eyebrow,” *The Youth’s Companion*.

Harry's story, however, captured not only America's position and ideals during the Progressive Era but also, perhaps inadvertently, the dangers the maturing nation faced. Even if the Progressives succeeded in their endeavor to preserve in young men the qualities associated with rural America while encouraging them to capitalize upon modern possibilities, they would not necessarily ensure a controlled and prosperous future for their nation. At the end of "On Washington's Eyebrow," Harry returned to the ship, where the captain greeted him, saying, "Well, sir, you got into a nice scrape I hear...This will be a lesson to you, I hope." Although Harry assured the captain that he had learned from his experience and that "It was a foolish thing to do," his final words revealed that he felt little regret. With both an air of wistfulness and patriotic exuberance, Harry looked ahead to future encounters when he declared, "but if I'd taken my rockets with me – cricky! I'd have made those rascals jump!"<sup>39</sup> This exchange demonstrated that even if the Progressives' youth literature and organizations molded the next generation to preserve their past and honor the nation, they would still face difficulty in controlling America's future. Whether "irrepressible" children of freedom or city loafers, the American boys of the rising generation would resist control. And whether these young Americans would channel their boyish impulses and become mature and intelligent participants in the modern world remained to be seen. The Progressives watched both their sons and nation slip from their grasp and enter an unfamiliar future.

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<sup>39</sup> Lewis, "On Washington's Eyebrow," *The Youth's Companion*.



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