

The Inexorable March of Civilization by Kurt Meyer

I met with two classes of high school juniors on Wednesday at my Alma Mater in nearby St. Ansgar, Iowa. My assignment was to tell students about Hamlin Garland.

During his boyhood 150 years earlier, Garland lived a dozen miles from where we gathered. The author, who employed the term “trail makers” in a book title, was himself a trail maker. For instance, he was an ardent advocate for wilderness preservation long before such thinking became more widespread.

Garland’s environmental advocacy was rooted in a growing awareness that the prairies of North Iowa were disappearing, a process he participated in from behind a plow. He wrote about this in “Boy Life on the Prairie,” published in 1899 and set in North Iowa. In this book’s conclusion, after being away from Iowa for several years, Garland and a neighbor friend return and notice the diminishing prairie:

“... fields of barley rippled where wild oats once waved. The ponds were dried up; the hazel bushes cut down. The kingbird was still on the wing, haughty as ever, and few gophers whistled. All else of the prairie had vanished as if it had all been dreamed. ... They recalled all the now vanished pleasures of boy life on the prairie, and on them fell a sudden realization of the inexorable march of civilization. They shivered under the passing of the wind, as though it were the stream of time, bearing them swiftly away from their life on the flowering prairies.”

In a 1901 preservation message Garland contributed to a time capsule at Colorado College, which was opened in 2001, the author was passionate: *“Let those of you who will defend the murder of trees and the gashing of hills, celebrating the material wealth and boundless enterprise of the mountain west. My office is a different one. I plead for the preservation of forests and cry out against the desecration of crystal streams. Let me offer sternest opposition to all wanton destruction of things beautiful. Be harshly forbidding to all who pollute the streams, deface the rock, or needlessly assault the earth.”*

In a similar manner, I challenged students to submit at least one sentence for a “virtual time capsule” to be opened in 2123, a sentence (or more) for generations a century hence. NOTE: It’s an 80-minute class period, and whereas I may have been able to lecture for that long, I knew these kids would have never been able to listen for that long.

Frankly, I was startled by these young adults’ anxieties about technology. Let me share the input from twelve students, one-third of all responses, edited lightly for brevity:

--“Technology has made a big impact... try your best to live “old school”: get your hands dirty, play in the dirt, and take on new adventures.”

--“2023 is filled with technology. People are glued to their phones, TVs, computers, etc. There’s more to life than technology. Take this into consideration and enjoy life without technology.”

--“I hope technology doesn’t take over.”

--“In 2023, technology is evolving more each day. The world is becoming run by technology. Don’t let social media take over your life and don’t believe everything you see”.

--"In 2023, technology is all around us. I hope it's used more for good instead of bad. Keep some things old fashioned. I hope robots don't take over the world."

--"Don't let technology run your life."

--"Even with advances of technology and social media, while our small town is a great place to live, there honestly isn't much to do here."

--"Stay in shape, you never know when a robot will come for you."

--"As pollution grows and war conquers, please save the earth as our ancestors did not."

--"Don't have kids as a teenager (or at all)."

In closing, two of these dozen responses were overwhelmingly positive:

--"The world is beautiful, no matter how messed up things seem. There's always beauty even in the most minute, mundane things. Keep on! We're all fighting to keep the life we have in all its glory."

--"Human willpower > anything."

Interesting responses, don't you think? I wonder what Garland's reaction might have been to these students' messages. He saw and wrote about changes that were taking place in his world, most of which it seems were not especially to his liking. At the same time, by the time of Garland's death in 1940, he couldn't have foreseen the technological transformation experienced by today's high school juniors.

Who among us could have, even as recently as two or three decades ago?