

# Preface

---

This book focuses on the daily experiences of workers in distinct occupations and trades throughout American history. These are the generations of working people who built our nation as we know it today. Workers as varied as watchmen during the American Revolution, pharmacists during the post–World War II period, and Antebellum-era hucksters are covered equally as each are representatives of the American workforce. Thus, this text cannot be considered only working-class history, nor is it a study of the struggles and successes of organized labor. Instead, this work takes an expansive view of the American worker, one more extensive than that of Chicago’s twentieth-century journalist and oral historian Studs Terkel, who wrote in the introduction to his 1974 classic book, *Working*, about the ambiguity of The Job: “A search . . . for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor” (Terkel 1974, xiii). While informed by Terkel’s observations, this book is based on the premise that all work has value and should be honored. The waste collector and the farrier are every bit as important to their contemporary societies as the social worker, IT architect, and social media coordinator are today.

In this book, we present an introduction to the variety of jobs that Americans performed. Some workers may have detested their roles, while others found satisfaction—even joy—in doing their jobs day after day. Entries outline the typical daily responsibilities of a worker in an occupation or a profession. However, the occupations and professions covered within this volume are not at all inclusive; it would have been impossible to address the many different jobs Americans held during our over four hundred years of history. Instead, this book comprises representative selections.

Two additional principles inform the choices of the occupations included in this volume. The working people who held these professions were an incredibly diverse lot: indigenous and immigrant, white and black, men and women, the elderly and children. Our choice of occupations was in part to highlight the diversity of our nation. Additionally, we recognize that occupations change over time,

sometimes remarkably, sometimes relatively little. While a pharmacist might also have been an entrepreneur running their own drug store in the mid-1950s, by the twenty-first century, they may be an employee filling prescriptions in a large drug warehouse for a corporation providing mail-order prescription services. In that sense, a pharmacist's social status and attitude toward "The Job" may in fact have changed dramatically over time. Similarly, a machinist today may create many of the products previously made by a patternmaker in the late nineteenth century, but rather than using tools, paper, pen, and muscle, they now use sophisticated computer software to create a design and then program computer-operated machining tools to create everything from trinkets to sell at a local craft fair to parts for rocket engines. Today, machinists and pharmacists are equally likely to wear a laboratory coat while working; this certainly has not always been the case. Furthermore, we assert that the nature of occupations is fluid, not static. Industrialization processes, advances in material and technologies, and computers have driven many of these occupational changes.

This book is divided into six primary sections that are sorted by era, and each section is prefaced with an introduction that provides context to the entries contained within. While there are many vocations that have been around for millennia—like bakers, for instance—many jobs only existed for a short time. The slave driver's occupation no longer exists in America, but examining the daily life of a slave driver informs the era in which they lived, what came before, and why things needed to change. Examining major eras of American history through the lens of their relevant occupations provides an opportunity to see how broader historical contexts were reflected in the lives of the average American. The steelworker's life, for example, changed drastically once the United States entered World War II and the federal government needed an incredible amount of steel as quickly as possible; their hours and pay increased substantially, and those changes had a profound effect on the economy, the workers' neighborhoods, and American society.

It is true that this book could have been organized differently, or its chapters could have been sorted into different eras. But we have chosen to parse this cross section of American labor at watershed moments in U.S. history: the end of the colonial era, the start of the Civil War, the end of Reconstruction, the start of World War I, the start of World War II, and the rise of the internet. American life is always evolving, but these few moments have, in many ways, been the most pivotal in U.S. history—both broadly and as effectuated in the daily lives of its citizens.

This is not to say that these moments are elevated above all others in importance. Rather, they serve the same function as an intermission—a sensible break from the action. But that these breaks are foregrounded herein should not distract from the other divisions, struggles, and revelations that existed and persisted during, between, and across these eras. The industrial revolutions of the late eighteenth



and nineteenth centuries, for example, had a profound impact on every sector of the economy and society, and they were in many ways apolitical, ubiquitous developments that were agnostic toward most of the legislative, societal, or international challenges that the United States faced. Likewise, changes in the organization of production in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the invention of computers and the internet in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, have enjoyed similar sovereign progressions and certainly affected American life in persistent, evolving ways—not all of them positive. But those layers notwithstanding, we believe that this book benefits greatly from its presented structure. Each watershed moment had an immediate and demonstrable impact on every industry, and, branching out, such moments are common touchstones in countless other books and avenues of study.

Many entries have also been appended with primary documents, which provide a “boots-on-the-ground” snapshot of singular voices and lived experiences that have been directly involved with the performance of the associated job. After you read an entry, you may be able to read an oral history of someone who labored as this book describes, or a historical newspaper advertisement for a job posting, or an excerpt from a transcription of a famous speech.

The vast majority of people have to work for a living. This has always been true. The prevalence of this shared experience forms a common bond that brings society together and fosters understanding. It is our hope that this book helps to further that understanding, illuminate unfamiliar histories, and cultivate empathy for the workers who have been—and the workers we are.

#### **FURTHER READING**

Terkel, Studs. 1974. *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. New York: Pantheon/Random House.