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A NEIGHBOR LOOKS at AMERICA

from:
America As Americans See It
Edited by Fred J. Ringle
1932
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THE AMERICANS ARE A QUEER PEOPLE: THEY CAN'T REST.

They have more time, more leisure, shorter hours, more holidays and more vacations than any other people in the world. But they can't rest. They rush up and down their continent as tourists; they move about in great herds to conventions, they invade the wilderness, they flood the mountains, they keep the hotels full. But they can't rest. The scenery rushes past them. They learn it but they don't see it. Battles and monuments are announced to them in a rubber neck bus. They hear them, but they don't get them. They never stop moving; they rush up and down as Shriners, Masons, Old Graduates, Bankers ---they are a new thing each day, always rushing to a reunion or something. So they go on rushing till the Undertaker gathers them in to a last Convention.

THE AMERICANS ARE A QUEER PEOPLE: THEY CAN'T READ.

They have more schools, and better schools, and spend more money on schools and colleges than all of Europe. But they can't read. They print more books in one year than the French print in ten. But they can't read. They cover their country with 100,000 tons of Sunday newspapers every week. But they don't read them. They're too busy. They use them for fires and to make more paper with. They buy eagerly thousands of new novels at two dollars each. But they only read page one. Their streets are full of huge signs. They won't look at them. Their street cars are filled with advertising; they turn their eyes away. Transparent colors, cartwheels and mechanical flares whirl and flicker in the crowded streets at night. No one sees them. Tons of circulars pour through the mails, through the houses and down the garbage chute. The last American who sat down to read died in about the days of Henry Clay.

THE AMERICANS ARE A QUEER PEOPLE: THEY CAN'T DRINK.

All of the American nation is haunted. They have a fierce wish to be sober: and they can't. They pass fierce laws against themselves, shut themselves up, chase themselves, shoot themselves: and they can't stay sober and they can't drink. They have a furious idea that if they can ever get sober, they can do big things. But they can't hold it. They got this mentality straight out of home life in Ohio, copied from the wild spree and the furious repentance of the pioneer farmer. The nation keeps it yet. It lives among red specters, rum devils, broken bottles, weeping

children, penitentiary cells, bar rooms and broken oaths. The last man who sat down and drank a quiet glass of beer was found dead ---dead for twenty years ---in Milwaukee.

THE AMERICANS ARE A QUEER PEOPLE: THEY CAN'T PLAY.

Americans rush to work as soon as they get up. They want their work as soon as they wake. It is a stimulant: the only one they're not afraid of. They used to open their offices at 10 o'clock: then at 9: then at 8: then at 7. Now they never shut them. Every business in America is turning into a open-all-day-and-all-night business. They eat all night, dance all night, build build-ings all night, make a noise all night. They can't play. They try to, but they can't. They turn football into a fight: baseball into a law suit and yachting into machinery. They can't play. The little children can't play: they use mechanical toys instead: toy cranes hoisting toy loads: toy machinery spreading a toy industrial depression of infantile dullness. The grown-up people can't play: they use a mechanical gymnasium and a clockwork horse. They can't swim: they use a float; they can't run: they use a car. They can't laugh: they hire a comedian and watch him laugh.

THE AMERICANS ARE A QUEER PEOPLE: THEY DON'T GIVE A DAMN.

All the world criticizes them and they don't give a damn. All the world writes squibs like this about them and don't give a damn. Foreign visitors come and write them up: they don't give a damn. Lecturers lecture at them: they don't care. They are told they have no art, no literature, and no soul. They never budge. Moralists cry over them, criminologists dissect them, writers shoot epigrams at them, prophets foretell the end of them, and they never move. Seventeen brilliant books analyze them every month: they don't read them. The Europeans threaten to unite against them: they don't mind. Equatorial Africa is dead sour on them: they don't even know it. The Chinese look at them as full of Oriental cunning; the English accuse them of British stupidity; the Scotch call them close-fisted; the Italians say they are liars; the French think their morals loose, and the Bolsheviks accuse them of Communism.

But that's all right. The Americans don't give a damn: don't need to: never did need to. That is their salvation.

Stephen Leacock
(1932)

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