

## As the Century Turned

**Directions:** As you read the narrative, keep in mind the town of Grover's Corners, the setting for *Our Town*. Then answer the questions that follow.

For those living in 1900, the last year of the nineteenth century was of little relevance. Taking stock, making prophecy, and getting ready to make a fresh start were on the minds of many. On January 1, 1901, a novelist of the time, S. Wier Mitchell wrote, "The new century came in with God knows what in its hands and was welcomed. We may entertain devil or angel unawares."

*Our Town* begins May 7, 1901, and the first act shows a day in that town, Grover's Corners, New Hampshire.

That year about a half-million immigrants would enter the United States. (By 1905, that number would be a million.)

There were 76 million people in the United States, about 1-1/2 million more men than women. The life expectancy was approximately 49 years. Major causes of death were typhoid and tuberculosis, as well as appendicitis and, for women, childbirth. Of the population, there were 9 million Negroes, fewer than a quarter-million American Indians, and 100,000 Orientals.

The United States produced more than half the world's cotton, corn, copper and oil; more than one-third of its steel, pig iron, and silver and about a third of its coal and gold. The railroad, the main transportation of the country, was one of the major employers.

There were no income taxes, and the U.S. Treasury had a surplus of 46 million dollars. The working week averaged more than 50 hours—for textile workers, 62 hours and in steel mills, 84. Garment factories paid women pressers 8 cents an hour while men earned 25 cents for the same job.

Most states had no laws regulating the employment of children; about 25 percent of boys and 10 percent of girls between the ages of 10 and 15 were employed. In southern cotton mills, six-year-old girls could be found working 13 hours a day, and in northern cities, bootblacks, newsboys, and messenger boys worked long hours even in the bitter cold of winter.

Although there were 100,000 saloons in the country, four dry states, North Dakota, Kansas, Maine, and New Hampshire, had none.

Women could vote in Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Montana, western states with relatively small populations.

In 1901, New York City was planning a subway. Boston had had one for three years. Oil was discovered in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the town of Tulsey modernized its name and the country with its abundance of the treasure.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

On Sept. 6 of that year President William McKinley was shot by an assassin, and lingered for eight days, dying from infection caused from the poorly performed operation to remove the bullet.

Vice-president Theodore Roosevelt took the oath of office as the country's new president on Sept. 13.

In addition to the larger than life Teddy Roosevelt, other major figures of the time included Thomas A. Edison, Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, William Randolph Hearst, Booker T. Washington, Carry A. Nation, Helen Keller, Mark Twain, and William Jennings Bryan. Called the finest speaker of his time, Bryan, an Illinois Democrat and devout Baptist, was considered the voice of the Middle West. Scarcely a town in the whole century could not boast that he had made a speaking appearance there.

All of the famous American poets of the "Golden Age" had died before 1900, but the days of Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost were yet to come. James Whitcomb Riley was the poet of widest appeal, and Edgar Lee Masters was beginning to be appreciated. Other writers of note were Booth Tarkington, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Edgar A. Guest, Sam Walter Foss, and Henry James. Popular then, too, were Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Joel Chandler Harris. Rex Beach, James Oliver Curwood, Jack London, and Zane Grey followed providing the world with action and adventure stories of wild, untamed places.

Except for Mark Twain, the greatest humorist of the time was Finley Peter Dunne, the creator of Mr. Dooley, a Chicago saloonkeeper who became one of the great moralists of American literature.

Young people, like Emily and George of *Our Town*, would have been reading books about *The Rover Boys*, Frank Merriwell, Elsie Dinsmore and Tom Swift. The very young enjoyed *The Five Little Peppers*, *The Bobbsey Twins*, and *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*.

Thornton Wilder, of Wisconsin, who grew up to write *Our Town*, was four years old in that opening year of the 20th century.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. Consider the first act of *Our Town*, which establishes the time. Why do you believe Wilder is so specific?
2. The stage manager refers to some things and people who are also mentioned in **Handout 1** background details. Can you spot them?
3. What kind of information does Professor Willard convey about Grover's Corners; how does it differ from the background information?
4. In act 1, social issues are lightly touched upon—a woman asks about drinking, and a man inquires about awareness of social injustice and industrial inequality. What information is provided about these issues in **Handout 1**? Why do you believe Wilder did not elaborate in the play?
5. In light of what you have read in **Handout 1**, why do you think Wilder included the envelope with the specific address ending: Mind of God?