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## Comparing Then and Now

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I recently read the book *The Way It Was in 1876* by Suzanne Hilton. Written in 1975, the book is a historical review of the year our country turned 100 years old. It was a fun read learning about the centennial celebration and other "modern" inventions and products of the time.

The book covers all aspects of life in 1876. Home life, how spare time was spent, sickness, travel, holidays, boys/men, and clothing styles. It also highlighted schooling and society's views on its importance, or lack of importance, especially for women, as well as the limitations of being a female and the progress they had made in the rights and freedoms for that gender. Reading the book gave an interesting insight into how our ancestors had lived, how they thought, what restrictions society placed on them, and how little time they had in their daily lives compared to what we have now. Daily life and chores were time consuming. Travel was difficult and lengthy.

The difference between daily life then as compared to now was constantly on my mind. We focus on writing about our ancestors, trying to find out about their lives and the area in which they lived. This helps bring them to life in our family history. Wouldn't it be fun to do a then and now comparison of your ancestors' lives to yours, or maybe a comparison of your great-grandparents' lives to your grandparents' lives, to your life, and include this comparison in your family history? This could also be made into a fun display at a family reunion.

This is not a comparison of a particular city or county, but an overall comparison of the things that the average person believed or thought during that decade or century. Some simple information searches or a trip to the library could easily bring you all the information you need to make comparisons.

For instance, women today frequently carry a purse. Purses come in various sizes from very small to tote-bag size, but the average female today most likely carries a wallet/money, debit and/or credit cards, driver's license, cell phone, makeup, hairbrush, mirror, keys, and numerous other items. On page 120 of *The Way It Was in 1876*, it explains that women did not carry handbags, but instead had a "reticule," which was tucked into a pocket hidden in the folds of her dress. It said that in Nebraska a teen girl had dropped her reticule, and when it was found, it was taken to the local newspaper, which placed an ad trying to find the owner. There was no ID in the reticule, so the newspaper listed the contents:

"Two white cotton handkerchiefs with hems bigger than the balance, candy fish, 1 short slate pencil (black and chewed at the end—too hard at the other), 1 bit of blue ribbon, 2 bits in money, 1 piece short lack scalloped ribbon, one elastic garter without buckle, 2 short pieces barber pole candy (1 peppermint, 1 lemon), a pair small black kid gloves, 1 parasol tassel, camel's hair brush, 1 love letter (very tender praising her and running down another girl), 1 horsehair ring (unfinished), 3 hair pins, 1 perfume stopper, 1 box of breath perfume, 1 ball of floss, a broken crochet needle, a small piece of raw cotton full of white

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powder, the left heel of a #2 gaiter, 1 stocking with a hole in toe, a thimble, and a nutcracker."

The first thing that struck me in reading this was that I had heard the term "reticule" in books but did not know it was typically hidden in a woman's pocket. It made me wonder how big the pocket was that it isn't noticeable when you see photos of women. It also struck me that the reticule must not have been a small item. Although the contents listed are not individually large, the group together would have created a decent-sized collection. The reticule was obviously not a tiny, delicate item being carried in women's pockets.

Now take your family history and do a chart or comparison of your ancestor's reticule of 1876, possibly locate a photo of what that item looked like, and compare it with a photo of the purses of 1976 (maybe your teen years), and what the average purse of that decade included. Thinking back to my teen years, I recall lip gloss, mood rings, perfume, aviator glasses, money, keys, makeup, paper, pen, and possibly a cassette tape or two of my favorite songs. Others might have had a roach clip, cigarettes, love beads, photos, credit cards, or more. Now bring it to the present and list what the average woman carries today – or even go one step further and speculate on what they may carry in 2076.

Why in a family history book would I want to contemplate the future? Because it will provide your decedents with a look at how you think. Do you remember the TV show *Buck Rogers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*? When it was on TV back in the 1970s, it was someone's speculation on what life would be like in the future. We all contemplated our future life in those terms; it seemed so far away and therefore impossible. Guess what – we are living life in the twenty-first century, and speculation and real life are very different, but at the same time, there are some similarities to what the speculation was.

It is fun to compare how our ancestors anticipated what the future would bring and how the reality of it compares, and it is fun to see how our own opinions of what the future would bring and the reality of it compare. Have fun with your family history writing. Include the past, present, and speculative future because that will give your decedents a glimpse into you and your lifestyle.

*Grace Grogan is a freelance writer and a member of Detroit Working Writers.*