# Industrial America in 19th Century

### The "Gilded Age" Industrial North

When people talk about the "Gilded Age," they often mean the Industrial North. Here, it was an age of ostentatious display of wealth: absolutely gorgeous, sparkling mansions, balls fit for fairytales, and ever-richer men and women. It was an age of booming factories, streets crammed with horse-drawn carriages and streetcars, all reflected in the windows of ever-growing buildings. That, said Mark Twain, who coined the phrase that defined the age—was the "gilt."

Underneath that was the "muck:" the urban slums where giant rats actually attacked babies. The tenement houses where 30 people lived in tiny rooms and cholera epidemics killed more than half. The streets infected with crime, disease, and loads of filth. The factories where thin, ragged children worked 18-hour days and dropped dead of exhaustion.

The engine that kept pushing the rich into higher and higher stratospheres of insane wealth and the poor down into lower and lower depths of degradation was the new industrial economy. The late 19th century is often called the **Age of Invention,**because so many new inventions changed society and the economy. One example:**Edison's**light bulb. With electric lights, your workers could stay at the factory even later,to produce even more.

Industrialists looked at the new machines that were invented and they felt—well, a little like [this](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-SWArncK6DHM/TbclzsdnROI/AAAAAAAABTM/A0OLlaLh4zM/s1600/money_bags.jpg). With so many machines and so many workers, things could be produced so much faster and cheaper. This was the idea of**mass production**in an **economy of scale.**All sorts of systems could make this run faster, more smoothly, and more profitably.

On the factory floor itself, **assembly line work**mass-produced each part of a final product extremely quickly, and then all put together as a finished product for sale. This meant that one person had to stand in a line for hours on end (we're not talking 8-hour workdays yet—more like 12-16) doing one thing over and over. Absolutely mind-numbing.

The conditions in these factories were awful: dust, dirt, noise, and dangerous machines. Lots of times, workers would become so bored, or so overworked and tired, that they fell asleep at their machines. They often fell or were caught in the machines, and frequently lost limbs or lives.

Why didn't someone dosomething to end this—like, hello? The government? Because the government was, at this time, bossed around by big business and the tycoons who ran them. Remember how pro-business the Supreme Court was, with its interpretations of the 14th Amendment. The industrial elite were rich and powerful, and government also wasn't sure it had the power to force economic regulations.

Business became bigger and bigger, and began to organize itself to be totally monstrous. Some businesses bought others until they controlled all aspects of production, from the raw materials to the transportation to the factories to the markets. These were called **monopolies,**and this system of owning all methods of production is called **vertical integration.**Another method employed by robber barons, like Rockefeller's **Standard Oil,**was**horizontal integration:**buying all your competitor companies and lumping them into one, big one.

The big industries at this time were railroads, steel, and oil—the latter especially important because of the former. The big names were **Cornelius Vanderbilt**(railroads, which by 1869 had succeeded in crossing the whole nation with a **transcontinental railroad**), **John D. Rockefeller**(oil), **Andrew Carnegie**(steel), and financers like **Jay Gould**and **J.P. Morgan.**

Sure, many of these captains of industry caught a lot of flak. Their monopolies were disastrous for competitors and consumers. They totally ruined smaller companies and, by making themselves the onlyoption for consumers, could charge them insane rates. Plus, they could make massive profits from selling their stocks to the public at way-too-high prices and then running away with all the money when they inevitably crashed. No wonder they were called **robber barons.**

However, the men themselves said, "Hey, wait a minute. We're not bad;we're just awesome.You all are jealous of how powerful we are." Andrew Carnegie explained this kind of thinking a little more. He subscribed to the popular idea of **social Darwinism,**which used Darwin's ideology of "survival of the fittest" to explain human society.

According to these ideas—and Carnegie—the robber barons and other elites were rich because they deservedto be: because they were the "strongest" of the species and had worked their way to the top. Carnegie especially liked to remind people that he had been born poor on a farm, and sweated his way to power. He and other believers in Social Darwinism thought that poor people were poor simply because they didn't have the gumption to begin the social climb to prosperity.

In his **Gospel of Wealth,**Carnegie explained these ideas, but he also moderated them a little. No one could deny that there was a lot of inequality, and that a lot of it was tragic. Carnegie acknowledged this, and he even said that it wasthe responsibility of the wealthy to help in some way. However, the help couldn't come in the form of charity—that would just keep the poor in their degrade positions. Real help would enable the poor to "lift themselves up by their boot-straps"—to be "self-made men" in the real "American" way. Carnegie urged rich people to give money to things like libraries and universities to give poor people the meansfor improvement.

This was all very nice, but it obviously wasn't going to work for most poor people. When you had to work for 12 to 16 hours a day—when your whole familyhad to, even the little 8-year-olds—you didn't have time for libraries or school. Thankfully, the poor had other champions, even while the government didn't seem to be paying attention, and they slowly began to clamor for change.