

## SOCIETY

### *A Nation of Joiners?*

"The Growth of Voluntary Associations in America, 1840-1940" by Gerald Gamm and Robert D. Putnam, in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Spring 1999), 147 North St., Norfolk, Mass. 02056.

If Americans in recent decades have exhibited a worrisome decline in civic engagement—as Harvard University scholar Putnam argued in his famous “bowling alone” article of 1995—is that unprecedented? Have Americans until now always been “a nation of joiners,” their civic life growing steadily ever stronger? Poring over city directories from 1840 to 1940 for 26 cities and towns, Putnam and Gamm, a political scientist at the University of Rochester, find a more complicated picture of the past.

There was “steady growth in associational life throughout the second half of the 19th century, accelerating between 1880 and 1900,” they write. That was when the “foundation stone of 20th-century civil society was set in place.” But then the growth slowed to a halt, followed by decline and stagnation. From slightly more than two voluntary associations per 1,000 people in 1840, according to the average city directory, the number increased to more than five by 1910, then dropped to a little above four in 1920, remaining at that level for the next two decades.

Many studies of particular types of associations have likewise found that the late 19th century was a time of vigorous growth. “In Peoria and St. Louis, in Boston and Boise and Bath and Bowling Green, Americans organized clubs and churches and lodges and veterans’ groups,” the authors note. But this usually is attributed to urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. Experiencing turmoil in their lives, runs the conventional argument, men and women in the nation’s great cities formed the associations to make human connections again.

Putnam and Gamm, however, find that “associational life [then] was most vibrant . . . in the small cities and towns of the hinterland, rather than the great cities of the Northeast or Midwest.” The authors are not sure why, though they mention several possible causes, including the greater availability of professional entertainment in the big cities. If a good explanation of what happened can be found, they believe, it might shed some useful light on “the condition and prospects of American civil society” today.

### *The Tremendous Tuber*

“How the Potato Changed the World’s History” by William H. McNeill, in *Social Research* (Spring 1999), New School Univ., 66 W. 12th St., New York, N.Y. 10011.

Neither GIs peeling them nor well-dressed diners eating them au gratin would be likely to imagine it, but potatoes have altered the course of world history. So contends McNeill, the noted historian and author of *The Rise of the West* (1963).

The tuber’s first big role came on the high plateaus of the Andes, McNeill says. There, potatoes served as the main energy source for the Inca Empire, of the 12th through the 15th centuries, as well as for its predecessors and its Spanish successor. “In the altiplano . . . grain did not flourish nearly as well as potatoes,” which grew abundantly on artificially raised fields around Lake Titicaca (between what are now Peru and Bolivia). The Incas converted the moist tubers into

frozen *chuño* by exposing them to the cold night air, then stored them in natural underground deep freezes, where they could be kept for several years.

This method of food preservation allowed Andean civilization to emerge, beginning about A.D. 100, McNeill says. “By collecting *chuño* as taxes from the peasants who worked the raised fields, and disbursing it from imperial storehouses to labor gangs, working at official command, it became possible to wage war, build roads, construct the monumental stone structures that still amaze visitors, and sustain all the other aspects of imperial civilized society in the altiplano, both before and after the Spanish conquest,” McNeill writes.

After Spanish ships returning from South