

TALKING POINT

Technology

The generation that went from coal-oil lamps to the moon

By JIL MCINTOSH
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

On June 18, 1892, my grandfather, Thomas Weston, was born. He was delivered at home by a doctor who arrived in a horse-drawn buggy and worked by the light of a gas lamp.

Fortunately for our family tree, he defied the overwhelming infant mortality rates of the day and lived for almost a century. The world he eventually lived in was one that not even the science-fiction writers of those days could have envisioned.

My grandfather, and all of those born just before the turn of the century, are the generation of technology. Progress has always been with us, but no other generation saw us move so far, so quickly, and quite possibly no following generation ever will.

When my grandfather was young, transportation consisted of horses and steam engines. A practical automobile had been invented a few years before he was born but the mass production that made it available didn't arrive for decades.

He was 16 when the Model T made its first appearance.

My grandfather's first car had a top speed of 15 m.p.h., no brakes (the transmission was shifted into reverse to stop it), and had to be cranked by hand to make it start. Towards the end of his life, his car had fuel injection, air conditioning, a top speed of more than 100 m.p.h. and a computer to keep it all working.

When I sat with him one night watching television in July of 1969, I saw a moon walk that was, for me, exciting but expected. At 10 years of age, I had grown up with the space race.

For him, though, at the age of 77, it must have been a day he thought he would never see. When he was 11, Orville and Wilbur Wright, on their fourth attempt, flew 852 feet at an altitude of 15 feet. Within his lifetime, a man had stepped on the moon.

Conditions at home changed more rapidly during his lifetime than at any time before him. Light bulbs were slightly older than he was, but they weren't much use until hydro-electricity made its way into private homes in the early 1900s.

Once power came into his home, he went from lighting candles and gas lamps and shoveling coal to flicking a switch and turning up the thermostat. That doesn't seem like an enormous change, until you realize that before his generation, people used fire exclusively for light and heat for more than a million years.

The telephone had been around for only 17 years when my grandfather was born. He

saw central switchboards, operators, the introduction of dial and then push-button phones, and eventually fibre-optic cables, cellular phones, fax machines and satellite communications.

I think of "radio days" as being very old, but my grandfather was 3 when Marconi sent the first message through a wireless transmitter. He was about the same age as the movie projector (depending on whose version is considered the "first"), and eventually became a theatre manager in Toronto.

His first jobs were in vaudeville and then in silent movies; "talkies" didn't come out until 1927. The films were enormous, flammable, brittle spools, but he lived to see movies ("pictures," he called them, as in "that was a war picture") sold on video cassettes at the corner store.

Relentless progress even swept aside my grandfather's job when he was 42. That was the year a small round screen broadcast a black-and-white television show. Eventually, he bought a huge color set that flashed the time and station over the show, and changed the channels through a wireless remote control.

An unbelievable number of complicated items went from a tiny spark of an idea to reality during my grandfather's lifetime. He not only saw computers, fluorescent lamps, diesel engines, electric elevators, electric stoves and refrigerators, x-ray machines, electrocardiographs, bifocal lenses, microsurgery, color photography, photocopiers, lasers, solar-powered generators and jet engines, he also saw them go from rudimentary devices to practical objects.

My grandfather passed away in 1989, just barely missing his 100th birthday. There will be progress in the future, progress that he missed seeing, but it is doubtful if we will ever see such sweeping changes in such a short period again. His was truly an era of wonder.

His descendants may one day live on other planets. But they will do so by building on the technology developed by my grandfather's peers: the people who started with coal-oil lamps and still managed to make it to the moon.

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Talking Point is a Monday to Friday forum for a variety of topical issues. Send contributions to The Insight Editor, The Toronto Star, 1 Yonge St., Toronto M5E 1E6 or by fax to (416) 865-3996. Submissions must be no more than 650 words. Please include a stamped, addressed envelope.