

What was life like in  
australia at the  
beginning of the 20th  
century? essay  
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As the establishments of our fledgling federation initiated at the launch of the 20th century, the inhabitants in Australia lived and worked in a society that the government interfered little in, known as the “laissez-faire” policy. This also meant that individuals were left to look after themselves, as they had no protection from the government as we do now, for example Medicare and insurance. Life in the early years of federation was quite different in comparison to our own community now more than a hundred years later. At the time it was the era of massive changes in technology and improvements in quality of life and health but there were still many lives of the poorer members of society that were left unchanged. Luxury was certainly one of the many absent desires of the working class people.

For most Australian workers, the poor conditions did not change at the turn of the century as the employers merely ignored many of the reforms that were introduced by colonial governments. Because it was usually the men who brought home the general income, unemployment was an immediate danger for the family and thus most workers refused to give evidence against their bosses for fear of being sacked.

In the cities, a large percentage of people worked in factories. Despite progressively strong factory laws, the appalling conditions continued. Most factories were half-converted warehouses that were roofed with unlined galvanized iron and so consequently in summer, the temperatures inside were so hot that it reached over 45°C. The usual employee worked about 10 hours a day and sometimes had to work overtime without extra pay. If they refused to do the extra work, they were sacked.

Most factory jobs did not pay more than 16 shillings a week to women. In a textile industry, women were expected to take work home despite already working up to 16 hours a day. Sometimes work was sent out to their homes as it saved the employer the cost of renting a building, of heating and light. As payment for making six dozen bibbed aprons that had taken 96 hours sewing, one woman received only 11 shillings, working for a little more than a penny an hour. Many women or girls who were unmarried were domestic servants who worked as maid, servants and cooks for rich families.

Pay ranged from 10 shillings a week to 25 shillings for a cook. Women accepted these conditions because they were better than those in factories and provided enough to live on and some even "lived in." Working conditions could be slightly better for a few who worked as waitresses or shop assistants but during work hours they were not permitted to sit down, which led to exhaustion. Most girls worked until they were "trained" and then sacked and a new lot was hired. Sometimes even children had to work to help contribute to the family income.

If it seemed like women had bad working conditions, they were not much better for the men. A starch worker in Victoria gave evidence that he only received 30 shillings per week of 54 hours. In this occupation he has to continually go into the stoves where it is very hot and has to kneel a couple of times. Afterwards he has to throw blocks that weigh as much as 7 lb. as high as 20 ft. onto racks in the crystallizing stoves that is later thrown down again and caught. In the ranges the solution of caustic soda lies on the floor, and destroys his boots. A new pair of boots would not last more than five of 6

weeks but in other occupations they could last 6 months. The boss does not provide clothing.

Like so many other workers in those days, the conditions for working men were very insanitary and physically laborious. The pay was also very, very low and most employees were regarded no better than mere slaves. Many occupations were hazardous, for example the building of the Sydney sewerage system that demanded men cutting into solid rock to lay the pipes down. This resulted into the heavy fine dust getting into their bronchial tubes where it strangled the lung from the inside. Anyone who worked at rock-chopping for two years was certain to become ill and die. Many factory owners who used dangerous work practices simply ignored the inspectors because if a prosecution was started, it would have been cheaper to pay the fine (which was a very small amount because of the laissez-faire system) instead of resorting to other means.

Because wages paid to the working class was generally very low, people had to cut down on food and accept insanitary conditions. Yet when a family could afford all the food they wanted, there would always be uncertainties to whether or not the food was pure. One imported batch of cream of tartar proved to be 30% plaster of paris, 16% one ash and 4% starch. Even if food was pure when bought, it was not easy to keep it that way. At that time refrigerators were not widespread in the home so an alternative method had to be used. Instead, blocks of ice were delivered a few times a week and this was place in the top section of a lead lined chest to keep the food cool underneath.

It was not only food that caused health problems. In the early 1900s, thousands of people died from diseases that are easily preventable and curable today. The main killers were tuberculosis, typhoid, diarrhoea and diphtheria. Disposal of household and human waste was a huge threat to public health. Once a week, collectors came around for people to dump their waste. This was often sold as fertiliser or simply dumped on open ground. Sometimes the vegetable or milk would become contaminated and diseases such as typhoid were passed on if the vegetables were not cooked or boiled. Hospitals in those days were so underfunded that 25% of people admitted to hospital died. This was because of appalling unsanitary conditions for example, using unsterilised instruments. Bubonic plague struck Sydney in 1900, carried by rats. Local governments quickly began campaigns for clearing up drains, removing dead animals and cleaning up backyards. The most important Commonwealth activity was setting up of a highly effective Quarantine Service.

Hiring a horse-drawn cab in Melbourne in 1907 was the typical form of transportation but the problem was that there was not real test for a licence. A driver on wages earned about a pound a week but sometimes the passengers refused to pay their fare. Electrification of Brisbane's tramway system after 1897 increased the annual total of passengers by more than 10 million in 3 years. Australia's first locally made horseless carriage took Lord Brassey, the Governor of Victoria around Melbourne on 26th February 1897.

Women, indigenous people and some migrant groups had few rights and were treated differently from the rest of the population. Women, traditionally was depicted as weak and fully reliant on her husbands' earnings. In a male <https://assignbuster.com/what-was-life-like-in-australia-at-the-beginning-of-the-20th-century-essay-sample/>

dominant society, women were denied power or rights even if she had earned just as much as her spouse, looked after the home and took care of the children. The employment of married women was greatly opposed because it increased contraception, miscarriages and neglect of the home. Many Australian girls married at about 18 years of age and were considered an "old maid" if not married by the age of 25.

If you thought the treatment of women in those days were quite bad, the indigenous Aborigines were treated so much worse. Aborigines were used as cheap labour and were paid next to nothing and kept as slaves. Land was taken from them without their permission for white peoples farms and if they fought back there were massacres of both black and white. Not only did Aboriginal groups lose their land, but they were also forced to live on special settlements known as reserves. Children were often taken away from their families forever and were encouraged to think and act as white people did.

Another source of cheap labour was the Kanakas from an area in the Pacific known as Melanesia. The people were kidnapped from their homes and brought to Australia, forced to sign a contract to work for at least three years, then sold to plantation owners as slaves to work in the sugarcane fields of Queensland.

To conclude, Australia was a very different society at the beginning of the 20th century. There are many variations in our community now in comparison to the start of the 20th century. The working conditions have improved tremendously as now there is also a basic wage set to make sure workers are paid appropriately. Health and hygiene has also improved due to

better medical knowledge and technology and electricity are used for a variety of purposes which consequently has improved the standards of living for most people.