

America's Pioneer Spirit

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Edward Hudgins, February 10, 2011, from The Atlas Society

Pioneers have a vision of something better.

It's a distinct human attribute that we're not stuck in the moment and with what always was. We can be pioneers.

Pioneers are individuals who are dissatisfied with the status quo. Pioneers have a vision of something better beyond their immediate world and ways.

Pioneers take responsibility for their own lives and futures.

Pioneers exercise their independent judgment, often in opposition to conventional wisdom, using their ingenuity to come up with new ideas, inventions, innovations, or enterprises.

Pioneers are risk-takers who have the courage to travel down untrodden paths and into perilous territory to reach their goals. And as a result of their efforts, pioneers make life better and more fulfilling for themselves, and they may make the world a better place for the rest of us.

Perhaps you yawn as you've heard America described as a pioneer nation, but the days of covered wagons crossing the prairies are as gone as are our prehistoric ancestors. So what does all of this pioneer stuff have to do with today?

PIONEERS OF PLACES

Let's start with the fact that America is a nation settled by immigrants.

America's culture until recent times reflected the pioneer spirit of immigrants. All immigrants were dissatisfied with the poverty, repression, or lack of opportunity in the "old country" and sought something better. They wanted to own their own farms or businesses, to work for themselves, to be their own bosses, to live free.

Likewise, early pioneers literally risked their lives in long ocean voyages or in wagon trains heading west in the face of hostile terrain, weather, and natives.

And they had to be innovators on the spot, figuring out how to cross rushing rivers, deep canyons, or high mountains. They had to find food and water where little was available. They had to build shelters out of whatever they could find; those settling in treeless areas became sodbusters, cutting out blocks of the packed-down mud and decayed vegetation below their feet to construct their houses.

PIONEERS OF PRODUCTS AND PRODUCTION

Of course, individuals could be pioneers and discoverers without traveling across physical frontiers. In America, innovators sought fortune and the joy of achievement by pioneering new products and inventions. Their inventions are so familiar that we forget how they have transformed our world.

Benjamin Franklin invented a stove that heated American homes in the century that followed. He invented the bifocals that many of us wear on our noses to this day.

In 1876 Alexander Graham Bell gave us the telephone. Can anyone today imagine a world in which all communications are only via written letters, the dots and dashes of Morse code, or face-to-face conversations? Thomas Edison gave us the phonograph—it was the iPod of its day!—the movie projector, and electric light, as well as the electrical generating system and grid for wiring homes and businesses for power. When were you last in a blackout? Imagine a whole world like that!

Henry Ford didn't invent the automobile but he created a new way to manufacture them. He used standardized, interchangeable parts and, starting in 1913, a moving assembly line with workers at each station along the way performing a single function in a set order to cut the time for producing a single vehicle by over 85 percent compared to previous methods. This meant that millions of Americans could afford his cars.

In 1906 Willis Carrier gave us the air conditioner. Anyone living south of Minnesota or Vermont should build shrines in which to give thanks to this man for their cool comfort during the blazing summer months!

Steve Jobs gave us the personal computer when no one could imagine an alternative to huge, expensive mainframes or imagine why anyone but a handful of scientists would want computers anyway. Jobs has now given us those iPods, iPhones, and iPads, with no doubt more innovations with “i” in front of their names still on the way!

FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM TO EXPLORE

America's pioneering spirit is still alive. Perhaps the greatest challenge for pioneers in the future will be removing the barriers to various frontiers put up by governments. Perhaps what is most needed are political pioneers who will seek to educate the public, to work with think tanks, allies, and interest groups,

and form coalitions that aim at radical results. Now those would be pioneers worthy of comparison to Franklin, Jefferson, Washington, and Madison, who created this pioneer-friendly country to begin with!