

Children's Lives: Comparing Long Ago to Today

How have children's lives changed over time?

Too often we look back at the way people lived and evaluate the past in terms of the technology that dominates our lives today. We ask: Imagine life without automobiles or electric lights or running water. No refrigerators, washing machines, radio, television, or movies? No computers, CDs, cell phones or credit cards. How did they survive? If that is how you want to approach the past, ask yourself this: what future inventions do we not have will make lowans of the future look back and wonder how made it through the day?

Children's Lives in the Home

A better approach is to look at how people of any age adapted to what they had around them. For children, the best place to start is to look at their homes. For children on the Iowa frontier, most homes had to produce nearly all their own needs. Children learned to contribute to the family's survival at an early age. Most lowans lived on farms that raised much of their own food, and children became an important part of the family team. They gathered eggs, worked in the garden, carried in wood and water and perhaps cared for younger brothers and sisters. As girls got older, they learned to cook, sew, preserve food for the winter, do the washing and tend to the sick. Boys helped their father with the livestock, planting and harvest, hunting, and maintenance of buildings and fences. Their opportunities for education were limited to whatever a near-by school offered. When there were heavy demands for their help on the farm, like during corn picking, older boys especially helped a home and went to school only when they could.

Life for children in town usually experienced home improvements before their farm cousins. Many towns installed electric systems in the years shortly before or after 1900 that brought electric lights, appliances, and other conveniences. Town children were more likely to have the opportunity to attend high schools and engage in school activities like music and sports. Automobiles brought big changes in children's lives on both the farm and in town. Farm children could get to school and back home more easily, and their families were not so isolated. All families found travel to neighboring towns for entertainment and shopping easier. Instead of producing so much of their own food and clothing, families were able to purchase more goods from local stores, relieving family members, including children, of some time-consuming responsibilities but making them more dependent on the father's income. The invention of computers, the internet and cell phones greatly enhanced opportunities for everyone in the family, and children could connect with friends and the outside world in ways that pioneer families could not have imagined.

Toys, Games and Culture

Toys and games changed with the times. In early days, with most Iowa families on the farm, brothers and sisters played games with each other. Often they made up their own games and the toys that went with them. They played outside in good weather when they had free time from chores. Through the 20th century, industries grew up devoted exclusively to children's entertainment. Today, you can buy games, expensive sports equipment, foods like breakfast cereals and snacks marketed especially to young children or watch TV shows or movies made for young viewers. Schools expanded and required children's attendance until age 16 or graduation. More and more young people attend college. When homes produced much of what they needed to survive, there were many large families of 8-10 children or even more. As more families began living in towns and cities and families needed to purchase what they needed, smaller families with 2-3 children became the norm.

Children's lives reflected the opportunities and culture in which they lived. As the culture changed, especially with new technologies, families adapted and childhood changed. Children's lives today are much different than our pioneer ancestors', just as the great-grandchildren of today's children will look back and marvel at the things we "lived without."

Supporting Questions

How has play changed over time?

- [Portrait of Two Young Girls with Doll in Baby Buggy, 1890 \(Image\)](#)
- [Boys Posing While Playing Soldier in Davenport, Iowa, 1915 \(Image\)](#)
- [Studio Portrait of Donald Fanton Holding Trolley Car Toy in Gilman, Iowa, 1927 \(Image\)](#)
- [Farmer Earl Pauley's Children Playing with Dolls in Tumbleweed Near Smithland, Iowa, December 1936 \(Image\)](#)
- [Children Playing with Boats in Grundy Center, Iowa, April 1940 \(Image\)](#)
- [Boys Playing Marbles in Woodbine, Iowa, May 1940 \(Image\)](#)
- [Yaeko Nakamura and Family Buy Toys from Fred Moriguchi at Manzanar Relocation Center, 1943 \(Image\)](#)

How has communication and technology changed over time?

- [U.S. Mail Sled Being Pulled by Horses in Alaska, between 1900 and 1927 \(Image\)](#)
- [Man and Woman at Desk with Typewriter, between 1909 and 1932 \(Image\)](#)
- [Telephone Operators, between 1914 and 1917 \(Image\)](#)
- [Lady Signaling Operator on Old-Style Telephone in Scranton, Iowa, April 1940 \(Image\)](#)
- [Crowd of Men Listening to World Series Game in Saint George, Utah, September 1940 \(Image\)](#)
- [Airborne Infantry Officer Using a Walkie-Talkie in Louisiana, 1942 \(Image\)](#)
- [Taking High School Classes via Television in Little Rock, Arkansas, September 1958 \(Image\)](#)

How has transportation changed over time?

- [Ambulance Wagons on the Bull Run Battlefield, 1861 \(Image\)](#)
- [Logs Being Hauled on a Sleigh by a Team of Horses, between 1900 and 1930 \(Image\)](#)
- [Horse-Drawn Wagons Removing Snow in New York City, January 1908 \(Image\)](#)
- [Children in an Automobile, between 1912 and 1930 \(Image\)](#)
- [Crowd and Trolley Cars in Washington, D.C., between 1913 and 1917 \(Image\)](#)
- [Parked School Buses Near Wells, Texas, April 1939 \(Image\)](#)
- [Workers Boarding a Trackless Trolley in Baltimore, Maryland, April 1943 \(Image\)](#)

*Printable Image and Document Guide

Additional Resources

[The Goldfinch: Iowa Folklife](#) (Vol. 10, No. 4, pgs. 11-12, April 1989): This Iowa history magazine for children was published quarterly by the State Historical Society of Iowa from 1975-2000. Each issue focuses on a theme and this particular volume highlighted immigration in Iowa and included articles, games, photos and fiction. The featured article in this edition looked at the games played by Iowans at the turn of the 20th century.

[Transportation: Then and Now](#) by Robin Nelson: This book presents a brief look at how transportation has changed over the years.

[Toys and Games: Then and Now](#) by Robin Nelson: This book briefly describes how toys and games have changed through the years, including such topics as how playgrounds differ and how today's toys relate to those of the past.

[Communication: Then and Now](#) by Robin Nelson: This book briefly describes how communication in the United States has changed through the years.

Portrait of Two Young Girls with Doll in Baby Buggy, 1890



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, W.H. Brewer, Shenandoah, 1890

Description

The portrait is of two young girls with doll, covered by a blanket, laying in their baby buggy. The photograph was taken in Shenandoah, Iowa, in 1890. This style of portrait was known as a cabinet card, where photographs are mounted on stiff pieces of cardboard. They were introduced in the 1860s, but their production waned around the turn of the century.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What can you learn about the past from this photo?
- Why do you think the children are posing with their baby buggy?

Boys Posing While Playing Soldier in Davenport, Iowa, 1915



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Husmann, Alfred, Davenport, 1915

Description

This photograph was taken in Davenport, Iowa, in 1915 of seven boys dressed in soldier costumes. The image was taken by Davenport resident and photographer, Alfred Husmann.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What in the photo is familiar to today?
- What are the children doing in photo?

Studio Portrait of Donald Fanton Holding Trolley Car Toy in Gilman, Iowa, 1927



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Gilman, 1927

Description

Three-year-old Donald Fanton holds a trolley car toy while posing for a professional photograph. Fanton's portrait was taken in Gilman, Iowa, in 1927.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What can you learn about the past from this photo?
- Why do you think the child is holding a toy in the photo?

Farmer Earl Pauley's Children Playing with Dolls in Tumbleweed Near Smithland, Iowa, December 1936



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Lee, Russell, "Children of Earl Pauley, playing with dolls in tumbleweed, near Smithland, Iowa," Smithland, December 1936

Description

This photograph shows two daughters of tenant farmer Earl Pauley playing with their dolls in tumbleweed near Smithland, Iowa in 1936. The image was taken by photographer Russell Lee, who was hired by the federally-sponsored Farm Security Administration to be part of the Photographic Documentation Project. Lee had the task of documenting various social classes and cultures with his photography, and his collection focused on showing farms on submarginal land at Smithland Township in Iowa during the Great Depression.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What are the children doing?
- What is unfamiliar from today?

Citation Information

Lee, Russell, "Children of Earl Pauley, playing with dolls in tumbleweed, near Smithland, Iowa," Smithland, December 1936. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Children Playing with Boats in Grundy Center, Iowa, April 1940



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Vachon, John, "Children playing with boats, Grundy Center, Iowa," April 1940

Description

The image shows three children from Grundy Center, Iowa, playing outside with toy boats. The 1940 photograph was taken by John Vachon, an employee of the Farm Security Administration, who was employed to publicize the conditions of the rural poor in America.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What did children do for play at this time?
- How is play similar or different from today?

Citation Information

Vachon, John, "Children playing with boats, Grundy Center, Iowa," April 1940. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Boys Playing Marbles in Woodbine, Iowa, May 1940



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Vachon, John, "Boys playing marbles, Woodbine, Iowa," May 1940

Description

Children in the photograph are shown playing with marbles, a small spherical toy made from glass. Marbles were a popular toy in the early 20th century and were used to play many different games. The 1940 photograph was taken by John Vachon, an employee of the Farm Security Administration, who was employed to publicize the conditions of the rural poor in America.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What toy are the children playing with?
- What did children enjoy doing for play?

Citation Information

Vachon, John, "Boys playing marbles, Woodbine, Iowa," May 1940. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Yaeko Nakamura and Family Buy Toys from Fred Moriguchi at Manzanar Relocation Center, 1943



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Adams, Ansel, "Mrs. Yaeko Nakamura and family buying toys with Fred Moriguchi, Manzanar Relocation Center," 1943

Description

This image, taken by renowned American photographer Ansel Adams, shows Yaeko Nakamura looking at puzzles with her daughters, Louise Tami and Joyce Yuki Nakamura in a store within the Manzanar Relocation Center in 1943. They are being assisted by the store clerk, Fred Moriguchi. The Manzanar Relocation Center was one of 10 American camps where Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II from December 1942 to 1945.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What toys were available in the Manzanar Relocation Center store?
- What is familiar to today?

Citation Information

Adams, Ansel, "Mrs. Yaeko Nakamura and family buying toys with Fred Moriguchi, Manzanar Relocation Center," 1943. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

U.S. Mail Sled Being Pulled by Horses in Alaska, between 1900 and 1927



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Horses pulling U.S. Mail sled," between 1900 and 1927

Description

The photo shows a team of horses pulling a U.S. Postal Service mail sled. The image of the postal carriers was taken near Nome, Alaska, between 1900 and 1927.

Text-Dependent Questions

- How did people communicate at this time?
- What is unfamiliar from today in photo?

Citation Information

"Horses pulling U.S. Mail sled," between 1900 and 1927. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Man and Woman at Desk with Typewriter, between 1909 and 1932



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Unidentified man and woman at desk with typewriter," between 1909 and 1932

Description

An unidentified man and a woman are shown posing in an office with a typewriter. Before computers, typewriters were used for decades to produce printed text. Typewriters allowed people in homes and offices to use printed text instead of handwriting.

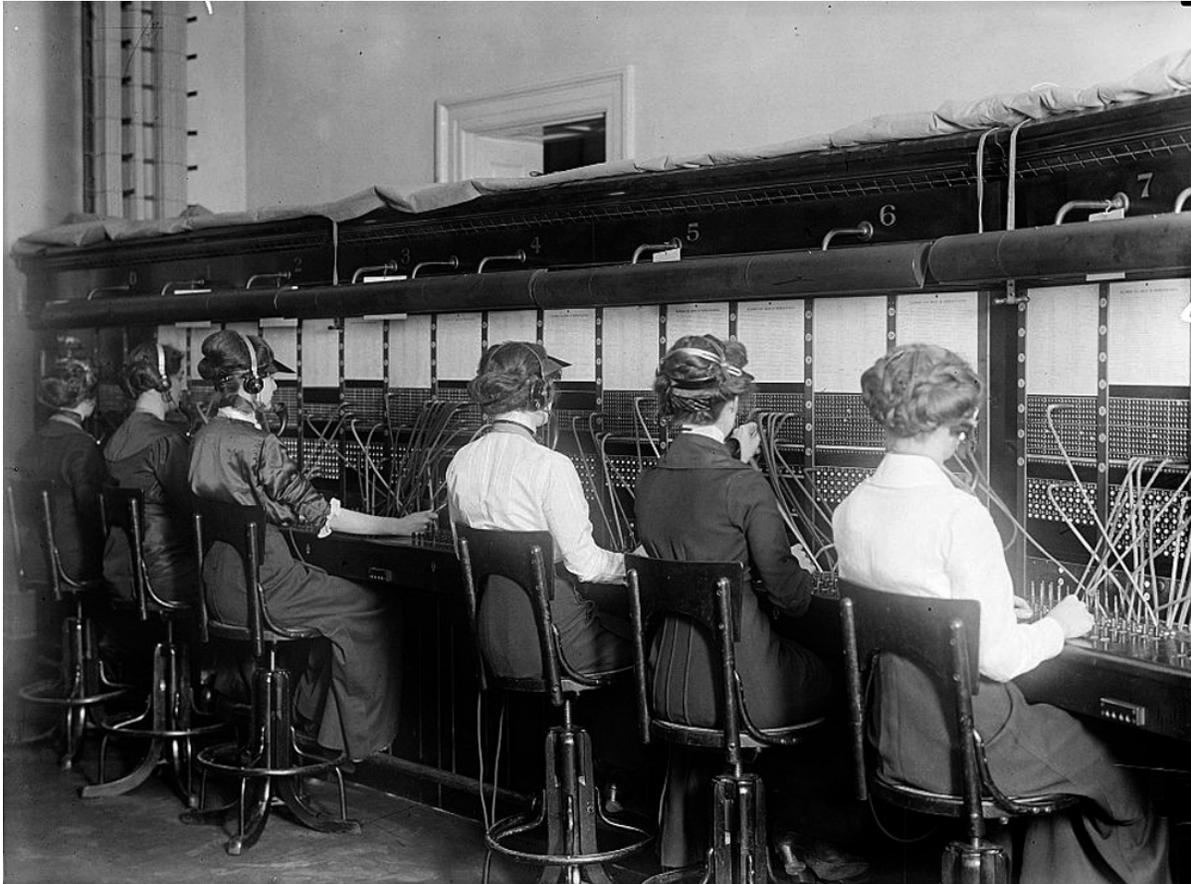
Text-Dependent Questions

- How might the typewriter have helped people communicate?
- What can you learn about the past from this photo?

Citation Information

"Unidentified man and woman at desk with typewriter," between 1909 and 1932. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Telephone Operators, between 1914 and 1917



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Harris & Ewing, "Telephone Operators," between 1914 and 1917

Description

Until the 1960s, telephone companies used manual switchboards to connect calls. Switchboard operators inserted a pair of phone plugs into jacks. In this photograph, which was taken between 1914 and 1917, six female switchboard operators worked to connect people's calls.

Text-Dependent Question

- How have telephones changed over time?

Citation Information

Harris & Ewing, "Telephone Operators," between 1914 and 1917. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Lady Signaling Operator on Old-Style Telephone in Scranton, Iowa, April 1940



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Vachon, John, "Lady signaling operator on old style telephone. Scranton, Iowa," April 1940

Description

A Scranton, Iowa, resident is photographed calling a switchboard operator to connect her call. The 1940 photograph was taken by John Vachon, an employee of the Farm Security Administration, who was employed to publicize the conditions of the rural poor in America.

Text-Dependent Questions

- How did people in Iowa communicate during this time?
- What can you learn about the past from this photo?

Citation Information

Vachon, John, "Lady signaling operator on old style telephone. Scranton, Iowa," April 1940. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Crowd of Men Listening to World Series Game in Saint George, Utah, September 1940



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Lee, Russell, "A crowd of men listening to World Series game, Saint George, Utah," September 1940

Description

The photograph shows a crowd of men in Saint George, Utah, gathered outside a radio shop that is broadcasting World Series baseball game between the Cincinnati Reds and the Detroit Tigers. Before televisions became widely available, radio broadcasting was a primary source for entertainment.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Why are the men gathered outside the radio shop?
- What is familiar from today?

Citation Information

Lee, Russell, "A crowd of men listening to World Series game, Saint George, Utah," September 1940. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Airborne Infantry Officer Using a Walkie-Talkie in Louisiana, 1942



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Airborne Infantry officer using a "walkie-talkie," a radio field telephone, during maneuvers of the Third Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Walter Kreuger," 1942

Description

An infantry soldier in Louisiana uses a walkie-talkie to communicate during World War II. Walkie-talkies were invented at this time to allow soldiers to communicate on the battlefield. A walkie-talkie has a speaker built into one end and a microphone in the other to send messages back and forth.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Who used walkie-talkies and how did they help them communicate?
- What can you learn about the past from this photo?

Citation Information

"Airborne Infantry officer using a "walkie-talkie," a radio field telephone, during maneuvers of the Third Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Walter Kreuger," 1942. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Taking High School Classes via Television in Little Rock, Arkansas, September 1958



Courtesy of Library of Congress, O'Halloran, Thomas J., "Little Rock, Arkansas. Filming high school classes / TOH," September 1958

Description

This 1958 photograph shows an African-American high school girl being educated via television in her living room. During this period, the schools in her Arkansas community were closed to avoid integration after the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case that declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students was unconstitutional.

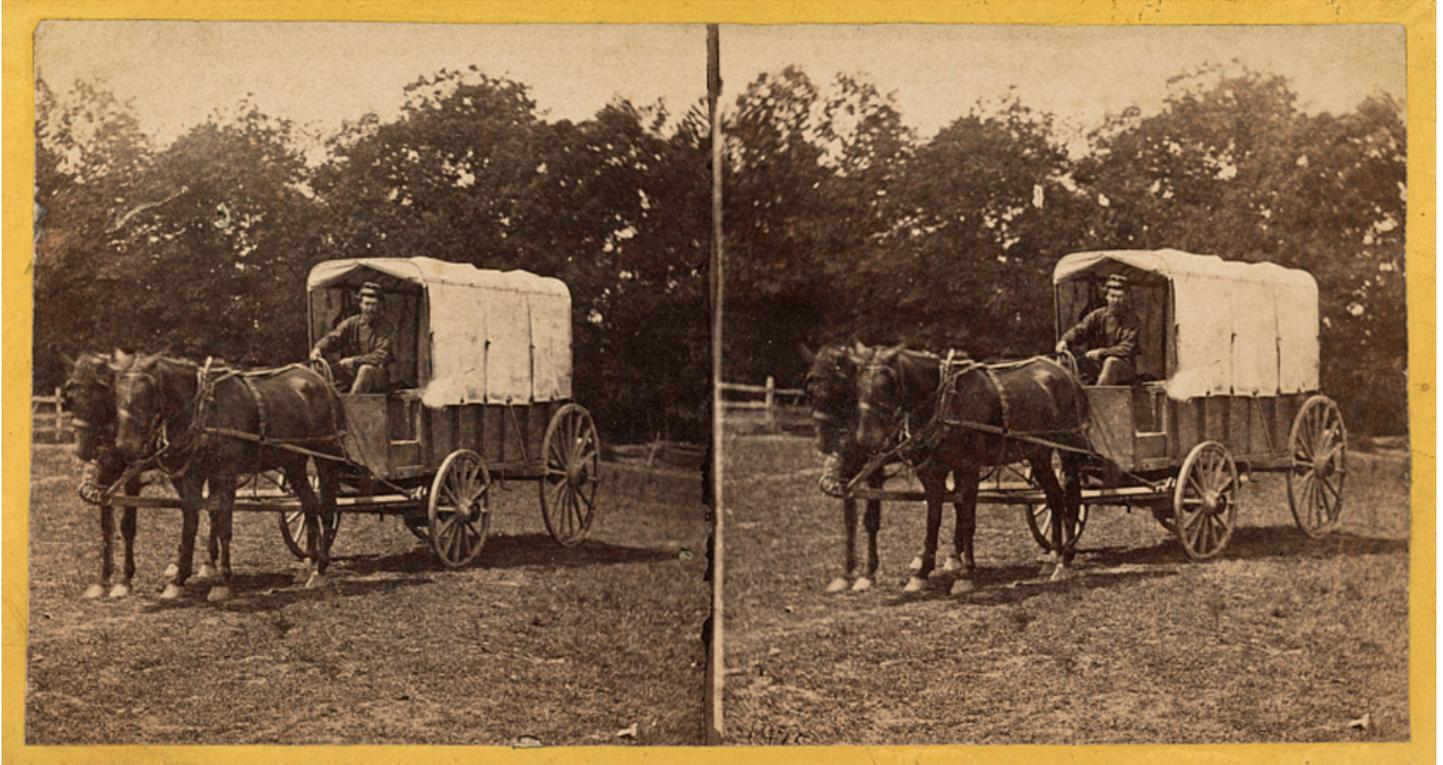
Text-Dependent Questions

- How did people use television to communicate?
- What in the photo is familiar to today?

Citation Information

O'Halloran, Thomas J., "Little Rock, Arkansas. Filming high school classes / TOH," September 1958. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Ambulance Wagons on the Bull Run Battlefield, 1861



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Ambulance wagons on the battle field of Bull Run," E. & H.T. Anthony, 1861

Description

During the American Civil War (1861-1865), ambulance wagons pulled by horses were used to transport sick or wounded soldiers off the battlefield. The photograph shown from 1861 is of a man posed in an ambulance wagon on the battlefield of Bull Run in Virginia.

Text-Dependent Questions

- How are ambulances the same or different from today?
- What made transportation possible at this time?

Citation Information

"Ambulance wagons on the battle field of Bull Run," E. & H.T. Anthony, 1861. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Logs Being Hauled on a Sleigh by a Team of Horses, between 1900 and 1930



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Logs being hauled on a sleigh by a team of horses along the government railway, 35 miles from Seward," between 1900 and 1930

Description

The image shows logs being hauled on a sleigh by a team of horses along the government railway. The photograph, taken between 1900 and 1930, was taken 35 miles from Seward, Alaska.

Text-Dependent Questions

- How can animals help with transportation?
- What can you learn about the past from this photo?

Citation Information

"Logs being hauled on a sleigh by a team of horses along the government railway, 35 miles from Seward," between 1900 and 1930. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Horse-Drawn Wagons Removing Snow in New York City, January 1908



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Wagons removing snow," New York, 1908

Description

This photograph shows a line of horse-drawn wagons hauling snow in New York City. The 1908 image was taken before the widespread use of motorized trucks.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What is being transported in the photo? Why do you think it's being transported?
- What can you learn about transportation in the past from this photo?

Citation Information

"Wagons removing snow," New York, January 1908. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Children in an Automobile, between 1912 and 1930



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Children in automobile," between 1912 and 1930

Description

Two children are shown riding in an early model of the automobile. In 1908, automobiles became more widely available to Americans when the Ford Motor Company began mass producing them on factory assembly lines.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What in the photo is familiar to today?
- What can you learn about transportation from this photo?

Citation Information

"Children in automobile," between 1912 and 1930. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Crowd and Trolley Cars in Washington, D.C., between 1913 and 1917



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Harris & Ewing, "Crowd and Trolley cars at corner of Pennsylvania Ave. and 15th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.," between 1913 and 1917

Description

This image shows a busy intersection in Washington, D.C., our nation's capital. The trolley cars in the photo were fully electric when the image was taken between 1913 and 1917.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What forms of transportation did people use at this time?
- What can you learn about the past from this photo?

Citation Information

Harris & Ewing, "Crowd and Trolley cars at corner of Pennsylvania Ave. and 15th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.," between 1913 and 1917. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Parked School Buses Near Wells, Texas, April 1939



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Lee, Russell, "Lineup of school buses near Wells, Texas," April 1939

Description

This 1939 photograph features motorized school buses in Wells, Texas, that were used in the early 20th century. Unlike today's buses, they were made of wood, rather than metal.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What can you learn about transportation long ago from the details in the photo?
- What in the photo is familiar to today?

Citation Information

Lee, Russell, "Lineup of school buses near Wells, Texas," April 1939. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Workers Boarding a Trackless Trolley in Baltimore, Maryland, April 1943



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Collins, Marjory, "Baltimore, Maryland..." April 1943

Description

Workers are shown boarding a trolley car in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1943. The trolley cars were fully electric and powered by overhead lines. Trackless trolleys are more economical than buses to run because they require no gas, but do use tires.

Text-Dependent Questions

- How did transportation help people?
- What in the photo is familiar to today?

Citation Information

Collins, Marjory, "Baltimore, Maryland. Workers boarding a trackless trolley at four p.m. Trackless trolleys are more economical than buses to run because they require no gas; but do use tires. They are run by electric power in wires above the street and can be manipulated from one side of the street to the other," April 1943. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)