

A LINE ON LIFE

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"The 100% American" *

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In recent years, especially after September 11, 2001, United States citizens have regained pride in being "*Americans*." However, many of us have different pictures of what a "*100% American*" is. Over 65 years ago, an American cultural anthropologist, Ralph Linton, described his picture of a day in the life of a typical American. I hope his account will do more than amuse you.

Our solid American citizen awakens in a bed built on a pattern which originated in the Near East but which was modified in Northern Europe before it was transmitted to America. He throws back his covers made of cotton (domesticated in India), linen (domesticated in the Near East) or silk (discovered in China). All of these materials have been spun and woven by processes invented in the Near East. He puts on his slippers (adapted from moccasins invented by Indians in the Eastern woodlands) and goes to his bathroom, whose fixtures are a mixture of European and American inventions, both of recent date. He takes off his pajamas (a garment invented in India) and washes with soap (invented by the ancient Gauls).

He puts on garments whose form was derived originally from the skin clothing of the nomads of the Asiatic steppes. His shoes are made from skins tanned by a process invented in ancient Egypt and cut into a pattern derived from classical civilizations of the Mediterranean. He ties a strip of brightly colored cloth around his neck, which is a survival from the shoulder shawls worn by 17th-century Croatians. Before going out to breakfast, he glances through his window (made of glass invented in Egypt). If it is raining, he puts on overshoes (made of rubber discovered by the Central American Indians) and takes an umbrella (invented in southeastern Asia). On his head, he puts a hat made of felt (a material invented in the Asiatic steppes).

On his way to breakfast, he stops to buy a paper, paying for it with coins (an ancient Lydian invention). At the restaurant, a whole new series of borrowed elements confronts him. His plate is made from a type of pottery invented in China. His knife is of steel (an alloy first made in southern India). His fork is a medieval Italian invention, and his spoon is a derivative of a Roman original. He begins his breakfast with an orange (originally from the eastern Mediterranean), a cantaloupe (from Persia), or perhaps a piece of African watermelon. With this, he has coffee (from an Abyssinian plant) with cream and sugar. (Both the domestication of cows

and the idea of milking them originated in the Near East, while sugar was first made in India.) After his fruit and first coffee, he goes on to waffles (cakes made by a Scandinavian technique from wheat domesticated first in Asia Minor). Over these he pours maple syrup (invented by Indians of the eastern woodlands). As a side dish, he may have an egg (from a species of bird first domesticated in Indo-China) or thin strips of bacon (flesh of an animal domesticated in Eastern Asia which has been salted and smoked by a process developed in Northern Europe).

When our friend has finished eating, he settles back to smoke (an American Indian habit). Tobacco was domesticated in Brazil. Indians from Virginia smoked it in a pipe, while the cigarette was derived from Mexico. The cigar was transmitted to us from the Antilles by way of Spain. While smoking, he reads the news of the day (printed in characters invented by ancient Semites on material invented in China by a process invented in Germany). As he absorbs the accounts of foreign troubles, he will (if he is a good conservative citizen) thank a Hebrew deity in an Indo-European language that he is "100% American."

The next time you pride yourself on being "100% American," remember that much of America's present prosperity is due to multiple contributions from various cultures. You can take pride in being an American — but you can still allow others from different origins to take pride in what they are.

* Adapted from Ralph Linton's *The Study of Man*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1936.