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HIST 122

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Question 3. Popular Culture and its effects on Women and the working class through the 1890s  
and 1910s

In the early 1910s, working-class people started to popularize nickelodeons. Technology at home started to develop and become more accessible. Middle-class households in the 1890s started to have phonographs and automobiles connecting them with the rest of the world. Vaudeville shows became popular forms of entertainment and amusement parks grew as Americans had more free time. As forms of entertainment started to become accessible, changes in American culture started to shift American society. The growth of new popular culture played a significant role in changing the norms and values of the time.

As consumer culture started to grow, entertainment followed along. The 19<sup>th</sup> century introduced new entertainment such as the vaudeville show, which started to standardize popular culture.<sup>1</sup> Vaudeville was considered appropriate for women and their children and became a popular leisure activity for people as wages became higher for many especially the middle class. Vaudeville provided the steppingstones for amusement parks and movies as they died out in the 1920s. Amusement parks became popular destinations for young adults as they would use them to go on dates or outings with their friends.<sup>2</sup> Affecting not only consumer culture, but amusement parks also started to affect attitudes toward sexuality, gender, personal expressiveness, and

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<sup>1</sup> Robles, Lecture #7, 9/20/23

<sup>2</sup> Robles, Lecture #7, 9/20/23

pleasure.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, the working-class youth started to have different perceptions of these ideas. Amusement parks became a place for them to start to express their own ideas. For families, amusement parks were a retreat from their home but for younger adults they became a place for social activities. These spaces became venues for a new sense of freedom and experimentation, redefining societal norms and expectations regarding relationships and dating.

In the 1910s movies were a new technology and art form, they had lots of different kinds of content starting with very short scenes of everyday life. Later, they started including Progressive era issues, such as child working conditions.<sup>4</sup> Not only were the earliest films new and interesting they were cheap, shown on individual kinetoscopes in places like penny arcades and entertainment venues only costing a penny.<sup>5</sup> Staying accessible and affordable allowed people from diverse backgrounds to remain part of the growing shared culture.

As the movies became more popular with the public, it helped give women more freedom to go out in public. As nickelbacks became popular, women's attendance became super high comprising 40 percent of the working-class movie audience in 1910.<sup>6</sup> It didn't matter what age, status, or relationship the women were in, each were able to enjoy going to the theatre. Part of the reason women were especially keen on going to the movies was because it was safe for them and their families. These theatres offered safe spaces for women to leave their children while

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<sup>3</sup> Peiss, "Cheap amusements," 136.

<sup>4</sup> Robles, Lecture #8 & #9, 10/2/23

<sup>5</sup> Robles, Lecture #7, 9/25/23

<sup>6</sup> Peiss, Kathy Lee. *Cheap amusements: Working women and leisure in New York City, 1880 to 1920*. (Temple University Press, 1986.) 145.

they gathered with their friends. Nickelback owners showed non objectionable films and encouraged women's participation aiming their marketing towards women and their children.<sup>7</sup>

While many married women enjoyed bringing their families to Nickelodeon movies, young unmarried women enjoyed going on dates or having nights out in them. Due to the cheap price, many young women from many different backgrounds also found their own fun. Overbearing parents would let their daughters go due to the thought that they were safer there compared to dance halls and amusement parks.<sup>8</sup> Working class women could afford the penny prices and hide from prying eyes. These venues provided them with a platform for social engagement and departure from previous societal norms.

Many of these women also admired the stars they saw on screen, enjoying the glamour, sensations, and romance of motion pictures.<sup>9</sup> The theatres provided a break from the demands of work and life giving them a chance to escape for a moment in the pictures on screen. Young women were sometimes called 'movie-stuck girls/ matinee girls' as they were fans of the movies.<sup>10</sup> They watched the films with admiration and used the freedom to enjoy themselves, becoming a more visible part of social society.

In conclusion, Nickelback theatres served as a large part of entertainment in the lives of women in many walks of life. Amusement parks of the late 19th century impacted younger adults' views toward sexuality and personal expression, creating newfound freedoms changing consumer culture. Theatres offered a unique space for personal enjoyment, social interaction and

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<sup>7</sup> Peiss, "Cheap amusements," 150.

<sup>8</sup> Peiss, "Cheap amusements," 152.

<sup>9</sup> Peiss, "Cheap amusements," 153.

<sup>10</sup> Robles, Lecture 8, 9/27/23

allowed women to break free from the confines of their roles, offering independence and becoming a significant factor in shaping the eras society.