

Our Time

The year 2011 is upon us. I sometimes wonder if our generation really appreciates what we have been able to witness during our lifetime here on the blue planet. Although a great part of the world still lingers in past ways of doing things, modern society has made some truly amazing advances.

For thousands of years, men and women on earth traveled by horse and cart, sailed the ocean in wooden ships, cooked their food by wood fires, clothed themselves with the skins of animals or hand spun items. Methods of communication were by courier and health care was virtually non-existent. Even the great Egyptian, Chinese, Roman and Greek civilizations that flourished for great periods of time in all their glory did not really experience an industrial revolution. There was little knowledge of what was lying across the great oceans for an eternal part of history.

All the way up to the beginning of the 20th century, the horse provided the best means of transportation on land. My grandfather spoke in his Texas Ranger Diary about making a "flying trip" to a ranch in West Texas on his faithful steed. Little did he know that that phrase would become an everyday occurrence for many of our generation and it would not mean on horseback. My mother who was born in 1904 would remember the first automobile she ever saw pattering down a dusty road of an El Paso Lower Valley Farm. She would live to witness a man walking on the moon but never dreamed of gadgets such as cell phones, iPads, or even a simple home computer.

Today we are surrounded by remarkable devices that simply boggle the mind. Humans have seen the technology curve rise sharply in the short span of only 100 years. This generation...our generation, has witnessed the most amazing progress in all of history and those of us that are still present can appreciate having been born at a time that most of it happened.

Geologists, of course normally relate to time periods that are much longer. Simply gazing at a sample of the Pre Cambrian Vishnu Schist rock that I once retrieved from the bottom of the Grand Canyon, I am humbled by just holding this solid evidence of the earth's great history. Trying to imagine what surprises will come in the future, one can only guess about new exciting discoveries. Our planet seems smaller now that growing populations occupy most of it, and today we are exploring neighbor celestial bodies and even discovering new galaxies. As this is being written, biotech scientists are cloning animals, doing stem cell research, and working on life extension.

Today it may be that we as humans are actually stretching too far for answers, and we may eventually outsmart ourselves. But as we reflect on the past, I think our generation should pause and be thankful that we were very fortunate to have lived at this precise point of time in the earth's history. An inscription above the old geology building at the University of Texas at Austin reads: "O Earth, What Changes Hath Thou Seen"....

During "our time" we were there to see some of the big ones.

James V. Richards November, 2000 (Revised 2011)

