



Scott #1082, Labor Day, September 3, 1956 (Art Craft cachet)

Labor or Leisure?

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The long weekend is almost here! September 2 is the day the Post Office will close for Labor Day; most of us will not be working.

Today we think of Labor Day as more of a day for leisure, for sunning at the beach or picnicking in the shade. But just 50 years ago, the U.S. Post Office issued the Labor Day stamp to honor the *working* class—the men and women who were American Labor.

The postage stamp, a 3-cent issue, was enough to cover domestic letter delivery at the time. It was issued on September 3, 1956, at Camden, New Jersey; 120 million were authorized. The stamp features a man, a woman, and a child on a blue background—developed from the central subject of a mural designed by Lumen M. Winter. (In 1956, this mural was in the AFL-CIO headquarters building in Washington, D.C.) The man, whose physique indicates he is a working man in excellent condition, has slung four different hand tools over his shoulder. He is also carrying a bundle of rope or cord. His right arm is protectively around the woman's shoulder. She is lovingly showing things in a book to the child. It's as though the fruits of the man's labor not only provide for the family's necessities, but serve as the foundation upon which education and leisure are built. Lest the picture leave any doubt, the cornerstone upon which the woman is seated reads, "Labor is Life." This quote is attributed to Carlyle.

Stamp Facts

0.84 x 1.44 inches

Arranged vertically in double-outline frame

Rotary printing process

Electric-eye perforated

120,000,000 authorized

First day of issue: September 3, 1956

Issued at Camden, New Jersey

Scott Catalog number 1082

Labor is Life

Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881)—a Scottish historian and sociological writer—was one of the most important social critics of his day, concerned about the living conditions of British workers. His lectures (published in 1841) affirmed his belief in the necessity for a strong, paternalistic government. Contrasting the disorder of modern society with the feudal order of 12th-century England in his 1843 work *Past and Present*, Carlyle wrote, “Even in the meanest sorts of Labor, the whole soul of a man is composed into a kind of real harmony the instant he sets himself to work.”

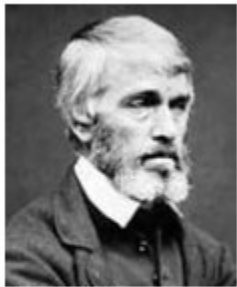


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Just a year after Carlyle’s death, on the other side of the Atlantic, the Central Labor Union held its first Labor Day holiday—a “workingmen’s holiday”—on Tuesday, September 5, 1882.

Workers in New York City took the day off to celebrate their achievements by marching in a parade and enjoying various amusements. By 1884, the Central Labor Union urged other organizations to celebrate and exhibit “the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations” on the first Monday of September.

Several municipalities and industrial centers participated in Labor Day celebrations by 1885 and 1886. New York was the first state to introduce a bill to designate Labor Day as an official holiday, but the first state to actually pass such a bill as law was Oregon on February 21, 1887. By 1894, 31 states (out of 44) had passed similar laws making Labor Day a holiday.

The Labor Day Sleeper

The year prior was the start of an economic depression known as The Panic of 1893. The year is also known for one of the most famous labor strikes in the United States.

Pullman, Illinois (now part of Chicago) was a town that Thomas Carlyle would likely have been proud of. It was a company town that had run smoothly since its founding in 1880 by George Pullman, president of the famous railroad sleeping car business. The town was strictly organized: row houses for the laborers, modest Victorian houses for the managers, and a luxurious hotel that served both as Pullman’s residence and the hospitality headquarters for visiting customers and suppliers. The rent (set by Pullman) for these dwellings was automatically deducted from the workers’ weekly paychecks—drawn from the Pullman bank.

But the Pullman Palace Car Company was not immune to the economic hardships of The Panic of 1893. As the demand for sleeping cars declined, Pullman tried to preserve profits by cutting labor costs. A lay off reduced his workforce from 5,500 to 3,300 employees. Remaining employees saw their wages cut by an average of 25 percent. Rents, a source of income for Pullman, naturally saw no corresponding reduction. The Pullman workers went on strike.

The American Railway Union, led by Eugene V. Debs, was sympathetic toward the Pullman workers. Railroad workers across the U.S. refused to operate trains carrying Pullman cars. Rioting and burning of railroad cars soon followed, and the strike instantly became a national issue.

ALTA OMNIMEDIA

Claiming that strikers had interfered with and delayed the delivery of U.S. mail, on July 4, 1894, President Grover Cleveland dispatched 12,000 army troops. On August 3, the strike was broken. Transportation of the mail resumed and trains once again pulled Pullman sleepers, but workers continued to protest President Cleveland's harsh methods. Appeasing the working class became a top priority. In the immediate wake of the strike, President Cleveland signed legislation making Labor Day a national holiday.

Labor Revisited

Labor today is not the labor of the late 1800s and early 1900s. The 10-hour day and six-day work week were the norm in 1900. Even household chores were far more laborious than they are today. The simple task of doing the laundry, for example—as reported in a recent *U.S. News* issue—took a great deal of time and muscle. The ordeal started at 4:00 A.M., after the clothes had been left to soak over night. Each load took about 50 gallons of water (about 400 pounds), which had to be carried from somewhere. Clothes were scrubbed by hand, wrung out manually, carried outside in baskets heavy with the weight of wet clothing, and hung to dry. The process was repeated for each load until the chore was completed, usually by the end of the day. Talk about work!



Perhaps it is fitting to reflect again on the scene depicted in the Labor Day stamp. The everyman laborer stands strong and proud while the woman and child leisurely peruse the prose of a book. Some may think this book to be one of academic value, while others might fancy it to be one of leisurely interest. One conclusion is clear: The labor of yesterday beget *both* the pursuit of leisure and of academic liberty today.

As so summarily stated by the Department of Labor: “The vital force of labor added materially to the highest standard of living and the greatest production the world has ever known and has brought us closer to the realization of our traditional ideals of economic and political democracy. It is appropriate, therefore, that the nation pay tribute on Labor Day to the creator of so much of the nation's strength, freedom, and leadership—the American worker.”

Credits:

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Simon, Roger, and Angie Cannon. “An Amazing Journey,” *U.S. News & World Report*, August 6, 2001, p.12.

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