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America: Land of Opportunity, Land of the Consumer

By **Bill Holmes, P.E.** November 4, 2011 02:39:15 pm[Email](#)[Print](#)[Like](#)

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It took my Irish ancestors maybe two months on a crowded, dark, damp, rolling ship, most likely in steerage, to get to America. They had risked everything to come to this country. Maybe one of them died during the voyage. Life was tough back then. And why did they do it? I can tell you one thing for sure, they didn't do it to sit in cold rooms, with poor lighting and mold growing on the walls.

If they wanted that, they could have just stayed in Ireland eating potatoes. They were undernourished, many just skin and bones. They wanted opportunity, a better life. They wanted to live in a real house on their own land where they could be warm and dry and comfortable. And they wanted McDonalds to fry their potatoes before they ate them, became obese and died of heart attacks.

America had no limits. They could go where they wanted, worship how they wanted, have as many children as they wanted and support them without being a slave to a wealthy landowner who would try and often succeed in working or starving them to death. My ancestors became farmers, working their way from South Carolina to Kentucky and in 1816, to Indiana, the year it became a state. They could clear as many trees as they wanted for fields to farm and for wood to heat their houses. They could think big and the only limitations they had were their own imaginations, efforts, ability and some luck. They needed a lot of children to help them but America had no limits on how many children you could have. My great-great grandfather, Archibald Thompson, eventually owned more than 5,000 acres in southern Indiana (which incidentally, was under about a half mile of ice a mere 10,000 years ago). Married at 30, he and his wife, Elizabeth, had 14 children, one every other year for nearly 30 years. One lived to be 99. Others died within a few days. Life was tough.

Their descendents, and there have been many of them, became doctors, lawyers, engineers, judges, successful businessmen and women, politicians, teachers and nurses. I am sure there must have been at least one serial killer but nobody talked about that at family reunions. A famous picture of JFK during his 1960 campaign shows him with one of my cousins on one of those farms. A good family. Good for building this country. Some eventually moved away, to California, New York, Oregon and even one to Tasmania (no kidding, my cousin Jim) but a few still farm some of those 5,000 acres, nearly 200 years later.

They could live where they wanted and do what they wanted. Anything was possible, and in America, a capitalist society, if you could afford it and were willing to work hard, you could buy it. Although my grandmother, who was born in Archibald's house in 1887 and raised there before the days of electricity and indoor plumbing, I'm sure, never wasted anything in her life, I am betting that at least one of my cousins has owned a Hummer. More than one, I'm sure, has kept their house at whatever temperature was comfortable, failed to wrap their water heater with a fiberglass blanket, and may have even left some lights on when they weren't home. (Please don't tell anyone. It might ruin my career.)

My point is, conservation is not a part of America's culture; of the American mindset. If you can buy it, you can have it. We don't have meters on our heaters in each room that you have to feed money into to stay warm, like they do in Europe. We actually heat our bedrooms. We don't have to walk or ride bikes or use public transportation (Heaven forbid) to get to work. We can drive in our big cars, all by ourselves, for an hour or two to get there.

America is a consumer culture. If you can afford to build a 15,000 square-foot McMansion and pay the \$4,000 a month utility bills, good for you! You've succeeded; you've made it in the land of opportunity!

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Author Bio

**Bill Holmes, P.E.**

Bill Holmes, P.E. founded Holmes Energy LLC www.holmesenergy.com and developed the AutoPilot Monitoring-Based Commissioning (MBCx) System in 1979. He has a B.S. and M.S. in mechanical engineering and has done additional coursework and research for his PhD. He is a former Purdue professor and taught for several years in the Continuing Education in Energy Management Program at the University of Wisconsin.

Bill has produced savings from 20% to, in a few projects, more than 50% from low-cost, no-cost changes in management, operation, maintenance and control alone in all types of facilities including Industrial Plants owned by Fortune 500 Companies.

He is the recipient of a DOE Award for Energy Innovation and was the Indiana Energy

That is why your ancestors endured that long voyage. Of course, some of our ancestors had no choice. They came chained in the holds of ships, but after 150 or so years of scratching and fighting and hard work, some of them are driving Hummers too! And why not, they have succeeded. They deserve it!

So now somebody, the government or the utility company, or celebrity environmental activists with their multiple giant homes (I am not faulting them, remember this is America and they made it big) comes along and tells you that you must conserve, it's your duty to save the earth, to save us from man-made Global Warming. Or you will burn in Hell (or just wait a few years until it gets that warm here). What do you do? Do you open the window and scream, "I am mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore?" Or do you what every normal American does? You complain about the rising cost of energy as you write a check to the utility company and grumble as you walk to the mailbox in your Gucci loafers. Oops, I almost forgot, this is America. That should be as you drive to the mailbox.

But when you turn on the TV or pick up the paper and read about all the steps people are taking to conserve energy, do you feel guilty? Should you put solar collectors on your roof, a wind turbine in your yard or buy new windows? If you have enough money, maybe you can afford to do that, to waste it that way. But let me tell you, in my experience, as my Dad used to say, the amount of energy people use – the kind of car they drive, the size of their house – depends almost entirely on whether they can afford to pay the bill. Of course, there are some people trying to do their part purely out of sincere concern about our planet, but most people are just like the industrial plants I worked with before they shut down or moved to Mexico: the only time they are concerned about energy is when they are short on money to pay the bills. When times are good, who cares?

And if you think I am just being flippant about this, put yourself in my shoes. I have spent my entire career trying to convince people to conserve energy, any way I could, with all the reasons I could come up with. The cost, the environment, our grandchildren, anything I could. When I just took over operating their buildings, did it for them and gave them a check every month, they liked it. They were happy. When they were running out of money, they were interested.

But a few years ago, I finally had to face the really discouraging fact that America is not interested in conserving energy. It is not a society built on conserving anything. Conservation goes counter to our culture. America is a land of excess, shopping malls on every corner, three cars in every garage, giant walk-in closets, Hummers, heated swimming pools and hot tubs. I'm certainly not saying that is bad, that's just the way it is. America is a great place where your only limitation is yourself; people from all over the world are still literally risking their lives to get here, even in this day and age. But America is most definitely not a culture of sacrifice, of conservation.

So now that the global warming people, the green people, the tree huggers, the celebrities, people like me, long-time energy conservation experts and advocates, the utility companies, and the government have given you all of the reasons you should conserve, what are you gonna do? Well, my guess is, like every other red-blooded American, if you can pay your gas and electric bills each month without too much trouble, you are really not going to worry much about it. You have better things to think about, like dinner. You are going to do what most people would do, right after they finish reading the American Heart Association's latest findings on obesity, diet, exercise and cholesterol. You are going to hoist your fat, lazy ass up into your giant, gas-guzzling SUV and drive the three blocks over to the Steakhouse for the all-you-can eat prime rib special.

For more information about energy monitoring, be sure to watch Bill Holmes' "Sustainability Matters" Webinar, "The Case for Permanent Energy Monitoring."

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