



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on January 25, 2011

## New Heroes vs. Old

When I mention that my family used kerosene lamps when I was a small child in the South during the 1930s, that is usually taken as a sign of our poverty, though I never thought of us as poor at the time.

What is ironic is that kerosene lamps were a luxury of the rich in the 19th century, before John D. Rockefeller came along. At the high price of kerosene at that time, an ordinary working man could not afford to stay up at night, burning this expensive fuel for hours at a time.



Rockefeller did not begin his life as rich, by any means. He made a fortune by revolutionizing the petroleum industry. Although we still measure petroleum in barrels, it is actually shipped in railroad tank cars, in ocean-going tankers and in tanker trucks.

That is a legacy of John D. Rockefeller, who saw that shipping oil in barrels was not as economical as shipping whole railroad tank cars full of oil, eliminating all the labor that had to go into shipping the same amount of oil in numerous individual barrels.

That was just one of his cost-cutting innovations. If there was a better way to extract, process and ship petroleum products — or more products that could be made from petroleum — Rockefeller was on top of it.

Before he came along, gasoline was considered a useless by-product that petroleum refineries often simply dumped into the nearest river. But Rockefeller decided to use it as a fuel in the refining process, which made it valuable, even before automobiles came along.

Today, we tend to think of John D. Rockefeller as just one of those famous rich people. But Rockefeller didn't just "happen to have money." How he got rich is the real story — and it is a story whose implications reach far beyond that one particular individual.

Before Rockefeller's innovations reduced the price of kerosene to a fraction of what it had once been, there wasn't a lot for poor people to do when nightfall came, other than go to bed. But the advent of cheap kerosene added hours of light and activity to each day for people with low or moderate incomes.

It was much the same story with the advent of the automobile, which gave millions of people more range in space, as kerosene (and, later, electricity) gave them more range in terms of hours of daily activity.

Here again, automobiles and electric lights were truly luxuries of the rich when they began. Only after ways were developed to cut their costs drastically were such things brought within the reach of ordinary Americans.



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Henry Ford's mass production methods cut in half the cost of producing the famous Model T Ford in just five years. People who had once lived their entire lives within a narrow radius of a relatively few miles could now go see places they never knew about before. The automobile expanded their horizons.

People today who complain about the automobile's pollution have no idea how much more pollution there was before the automobile came along. In New York City, for example, the 40,000 horses that were the backbone of the city's transportation, before the automobile, produced 400 tons of manure per working day, along with 20,000 gallons of urine.

At one time, people like Rockefeller, Edison, Ford and the Wright brothers were regarded as heroes, for having opened vast new possibilities for other human beings. The fact that they got rich doing it was an incidental part of the story.

We still have people revolutionizing our lives. Just think of the computer and the pharmaceutical drugs that have not only lengthened our lives but made them more healthful, so that being 80 years old today is like being 60 years old in times past.

But today we seldom even know the names of those who have made these monumental contributions to human well-being. All we know is that some people have gotten "rich" and that this is to be regarded as some sort of grievance.

Many of the people we honor today are people who are skilled in the rhetoric of grievances and promises of new "rights" at someone else's expense. But is that what is going to make a better America?

*To find out more about Thomas Sowell and read features by other Creators Syndicate columnists and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate web page at [www.creators.com](http://www.creators.com). Thomas Sowell is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305. His Web site is [www.tsowell.com](http://www.tsowell.com).*

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