

FRUGALITY GETS RESPECT

BY WILLIAM HOLDER '75

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL BURKHART



LAUREN WEBER '94 IS THE AUTHOR OF AN ACCLAIMED NEW BOOK ABOUT THE HISTORY OF FRUGALITY IN THE UNITED STATES.

Lauren Weber '94 found her television stand in the free pile at a yard sale. She picked up decorative clay urns for \$10 each in SoHo from a Chinese grocery store; they had held pickled vegetables imported from China. She found an abandoned table in New York's Meat Packing District and brought it home. All it needed was steel wool to remove the grime and goo. She shops at thrift stores and gets more pleasure buying a taco from a street stand near the train line in her Queens neighborhood than she does eating in a fancy restaurant.

She is frugal by nature and has lived that way ever since she graduated from Wesleyan. Newly armed with her degree and working as a waitress at a lunch place in Seattle's Pioneer Square, she made \$8,000 in one year and managed to save \$2,000.

In 2005, when she was riding the G train from Queens to Brooklyn, it dawned on Weber that frugality might be more than just her way of life. She was reading *The Progress Paradox*, by Gregg Easterbrook, which asks why our affluence has not brought us more happiness. "I looked up," she says, "and thought, 'What happened to thrift in America?'"

To find the answer, she left a job as a business reporter at *Newsday* and embarked on a two-year project to research and write *In Cheap We Trust: The Story of a Misunderstood American Virtue* (Little, Brown), which hit the bookstores in September.

When she began the book, celebrating thrift seemed provocative in the face of liar mortgages and record credit card debt. But

then thrift rode back into town atop a severe recession, and she confesses to feeling "a little scooped" by the economy. That cycle, however, is the story of frugality in America, she argues. Thrifty when they have to be, Americans know how to spend money when they have it.

Her view is different from a common historical narrative: that America was once an upright and thrifty country, epitomized by Benjamin Franklin, but rising affluence after World War II spawned more profligate ways and an excessive reliance on debt. Thrift became a forgotten virtue.

After working for two years in the New York Public Library and immersing herself in the records of the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Mass., Weber emerged with a more nuanced and less moralistic view.

Our colonial forbears might not be entirely shocked by the flowering of consumerism in modern times, she contends. Hardly had the Puritans landed when officials began passing a stream of "sumptuary laws" that forbade what they considered to be vulgar consumption such as "double ruffs and cuffs." Also forbidden was the drinking of toasts, in order to prevent drunken brawling. But settlers paid little heed to these efforts to instill moral rectitude.

Franklin saved money carefully when he was young, and in his *Almanac* he advised readers: "Beware of little expenses; a small leak will sink a great ship." In his later life, he privately indulged his taste for fine living by shipping crates of luxury goods, such as silk blankets, china, and damask tablecloths, to the house he and his wife were building in Philadelphia.

Franklin deftly managed his own public image to avoid being tagged as a hedonist. His life embodies the history of thrift: the desire to promote it as a core American value frequently ran counter to the way people actually lived. From the early 1800s, the notion took hold that people who saved their money and lived prudently could escape poverty and achieve a better life. Phrases like "self-made man" and "the architect of his own fortune" aptly described, as Weber writes, "the most admired archetype of America's emerging individualistic, dollar-hunting culture."

In reality, connections and family legacy were much more likely to lead to fortune



Whether by shopping carefully or making her own laundry soap, Lauren Weber leads a frugal life.



than frugal saving of pennies. But reality was up against a powerful myth that placed the burden for escaping poverty squarely on the individual.

Some entrepreneurs pursued that myth with vigor. During the 1890–1920 Gilded Age, John Henry Thiry, a New York rare book dealer who became dismayed with the careless spending of his own sons, founded the School Savings Bank movement. Starting with Public School 4 in Long Island City, the movement grew to include 200,000 school children across the United States who, by 1911, had deposited \$5 million worth of pennies, nickels, and dimes. Weber describes his simple system: “Every Monday morning, the classroom teacher called the roll and invited each student, when her name was called, to bring her change to the teacher’s desk....The students received passbooks in which to watch their money ‘grow,’ as they were introduced to the wonders of compound interest.”

“School savings banks appealed to a generation of educators who, like the social workers and moral reformers of previous eras, looked around them and saw signs everywhere of the decline of modern civilization,” Weber writes. Thiry and others often “took off into flights of rhetorical excess” in their efforts to depict savings accounts as antidotes to ills ranging from poverty to prostitution.

Simon William Straus, a real estate fi-

WHILE WEBER IS PRIMARILY INTERESTED IN FRUGALITY AS A PERSONAL CHOICE, SHE READILY ACKNOWLEDGES THAT FOR MILLIONS OF AMERICANS NOW AND IN THE PAST, FRUGALITY HAS BEEN A NECESSITY.

nancier in Chicago, founded the American Society for Thrift in 1914. Like the school savings movement, the society preached a heavily moralistic message that extended beyond thrift and saving to the efficient use of time, appropriate entertainment, and even the proper chewing of food. The Society for Thrift hit its apex, Weber says, when it was invited to host a conference at the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal.

The Society for Thrift had a quick heyday, but then Americans turned to the business of making and spending money, leaving the society as a historical footnote.

While Weber is primarily interested in frugality as a personal choice, she readily acknowledges that for millions of Americans now and in the past, frugality has been a necessity. Many women in the mid-1800s needed to know how to make a mattress by stuffing corn husks into sewn-up sheets, how to use the remnants of burnt coal as garden fertilizer, or how to make homemade glue out of linseed oil, steel filings, egg white, potters clay, and garlic juice. As for broken pottery—they ground it down and used it as a paste for fixing the next broken plate.

For a good portion of U.S. history, women were subjected to “volumes of suggestions, sermons, and scoldings about how to be frugal and budget judiciously,” Weber writes. Lydia Maria Child, drawing on personal experience, wrote *The American Frugal Housewife*, an instant best-seller that went through 35 printings between 1829 and 1850. She broke ground by writing for the poor and provided advice on everything from exterminating bedbugs (an ounce of quicksilver mixed with two egg whites and applied with a feather) to finding a cheap substitute for green tea (the youngest leaves on a currant bush).

Child did not limit herself to practical suggestions. She admonished readers that living beyond one’s means “is wrong—morally wrong...and injurious beyond calculation to the interests of our country.”

Child’s book and many others set the stage for a more formalized approach to household efficiency that emerged most noticeably in 1908 with the establishment of the American Home Economics Association. Efficiency became a practical science, and

over time, emphasis shifted from economy to participating in a more abundant lifestyle through careful buying. By the mid-1900s, the American housewife had emerged as the queen of consumption.

Consumerism as a way of life for the masses took hold after World War II when rising prosperity made it possible for a growing middle class to purchase goods as never before. Advertisers enticed consumers on the newly emergent medium of television, economists extolled the virtues of mass consumption for the nation’s economic health, and credit cards made their debut.

And as for thrift, the 49-year run of National Thrift Week during the third week in October came to an end in 1966. The National Thrift Committee, an offshoot of the YMCA, shut down for lack of money and a decline in membership. Even the school savings programs withered as students almost universally stopped making deposits. Did thrift, as a virtue, vanish from the American way of life?

Not in Weber’s household.

“My father has been called cheap for most of his life,” she writes. As an economics professor for 33 years at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Conn., he didn’t have to run around the house turning off lights, but he did.

“If I was in the shower for longer than a few minutes,” she says, “I’d hear a knock on the bathroom door, followed by my father’s voice saying, ‘Laur, you’re using too much water.’”

At one point, family members were slightly horrified to discover that in his quest to save money, he was washing dishes by hand in cold water without soap. He reused his tea bags not just a few times but 10 or 12 times. Weber remembers all-too-clearly propping her sock-clad feet on the radiator, hoping to capture a bit of warmth when her father set the thermostat at 50 degrees during New England winters. (He has since apologized for being overly compulsive about heat.)

Even though her father wore the same maroon polyester blazer for 30 years, thriftiness is not the same as miserliness, and she describes him as unfailingly generous to causes he cares about. Nor did he and her mother hesitate to send their three children to expensive private colleges.

Weber remembers one minor form of re-

ALTHOUGH WEBER CLEARLY BELIEVES IN THE VALUE OF THRIFT, HER BOOK IS NOT AN ATTEMPT TO PROSELYTIZE.

bellion: As a child she would leave lights on unnecessarily—something she would never do now. She has absorbed the lessons her father taught and lives them day-by-day. Like him, she will spend money but only with care and forethought.

“I will walk 30 blocks to save \$2 on the subway,” she says, “but I’ll be wearing \$350 boots. It makes sense to me. I walk constantly. I’ve bought cheap boots and they’ve either fallen apart or been uncomfortable. I finally decided it was worth spending money. I’ve had these boots for four years, so that amortizes to \$87.50 a year, which seems pretty reasonable.

Thrifty people have a certain degree of self-sufficiency, she contends. They think creatively about fulfilling their own needs and are improvisational. “My first thought is do I need it, do I have something at home that will do, and then, can I buy it used?”

The payoff for her Spartan lifestyle is that by living within her means, no matter how modest they are, she has been able to travel the world and do work she enjoys. She has savored the opportunity to write a book without the need to hold down a full-time job to support an expensive apartment in Brooklyn, even though her current hour-long subway ride from Queens into Manhattan does sometimes bother her. Thrift is essential for her to lead a meaningful life.

Although Weber clearly believes in the value of thrift, her book is not an attempt to proselytize. She acknowledges that preaching to people rarely works, and that it’s hard for many people to save money. The costs of housing, health care, education, and other necessities have grown faster than wages. She is well aware that her lifestyle is not one that the majority of Americans would willingly adopt. She doesn’t think there is something wrong with a vision of the American dream that includes a house and

car, and the occasional pair of Italian boots.

The aggregate result of excessive consumption is another matter, however. Weber believes that relying on the consumer to spend in an unsustainable way is nothing short of a Ponzi scheme that will lead to disaster. “There is no way we can get back to financial equilibrium,” she says, “until people who overspend and over-leverage themselves clean up their balance sheets. I don’t think that all spending is bad, but we need to restore some balance between saving and spending.”

There is much more to frugality, in her view, than personal balance sheets or even the sustainability of the national economy. The quest for meaning beyond material abundance has always been part of the American psyche, even if at times its hold has been precarious. Look beneath the consumerism that dominates our culture and you will find pockets of people committed to living a low-cost lifestyle—ordinary people, not just political radicals. Occasionally their existence catches public attention, as when reporters started writing about the Compact, a group of people in San Francisco who, in 2006, decided not to buy anything new for a year except food and medicine. Their coverage, Weber notes, ranged from incredulous to skeptical to supportive. The group started a Yahoo message board, and more than 10,000 people signed up.

Why so much interest? “I think it’s because many Americans, explicitly or not, feel uneasy about the spiritual vacuity and the hyper-consumptive dynamics of modern life in the United States,” she says in the book. “As the essayist Richard Todd wrote recently, ‘We have mixed feelings about our things.’”

Then there are the freegans, who take frugality to its logical extreme. Weber encountered them in New York when she went on a “trash tour”—the principal outreach activity of those who practice this lifestyle. Weber was one of 30 novices on the trash tour, which she describes as “dumpster diving, New York-style.” In the absence of good places to put dumpsters, many retailers put their trash out on sidewalks, where it’s fair and easy game for scavengers.

The prospect of digging through trash might make most people want to run the other way, but the point the freegans try to drive home is that we throw out a great deal

of useful materials and good food. Weber describes how she discovered the truth of this view.

“I had always understood that we live in a profligate society, but nothing had prepared me for the sight of such extravagant waste. In front of a bakery near Columbia University, the scents of garlic and onion filled the air as our crew converged on two giant sacks of warm bagels, all perfectly pristine. At a nearby supermarket, I plunged my hands into a bag filled with tomatoes and heads of lettuce. The tomatoes had seen better days, and some of the lettuce had turned to slime, but the veterans quickly worked their way through the hodgepodge and separated out what was salvageable.”

She returned home with a whole-wheat baguette, half a dozen bagels, a lime, a tub of hummus, a container of chicken-fried rice made that day, a sealed bag of parmesan-garlic pita chips and a liter of chicken-and-rice soup that had reached its sale date.

The freegans are unlikely to start a stampede to dumpsters for food, but they practice frugality in many other ways that would be quite palatable to just about anyone—sharing of skills and services, for example.

Freegans represent the far edge of a trend toward frugality that is clearly evident in media coverage and in websites springing up, says Weber. She wonders whether the trend will vanish when the recession eases, leaving her and others like her as barely-heard advocates for low consumption in a landscape of consumerism. It’s possible that other trends in place, such as the growing desire by many to lessen our footprint on the earth, will have an impact on attitudes toward consumption. And, as Weber points out, buying cheap goods is not the answer. Cheap may imply abusive labor practices or poor environmental stewardship on the part of the manufacturer. “It’s really about buying less, consuming less, living in a way that’s easier on your wallet and easier on the environment,” she says. In her own life, Weber tries to practice what she calls “ethical cheapness,” which may lead her to spend more than she needs to if, for example, she is able to support locally grown food.

Frugality may or may not have more staying power than history suggests. But right now, Weber says, “It’s the story of our culture.”