Film star Mary Pickford charmed moviegoers in 1916 for the mere cost of a dime, while telephones and automobiles quickly grew in popularity.

THE WORLD IN

1916

WHILE AMERICANS LIVED IN PRECARIOUS PEACE, EUROPE CONSUMED ITSELF IN THE CARNAGE OF WAR

BY EUGENE FINERMAN

IN 1916, the world's population was approximately 1.75 billion people. The most common form of government was monarchy. There were only three republics in Europe, one in Africa and one in Asia. Most of the monarchs, however, were pampered figureheads, subservient to either a constitution or a parliament. The German kaiser, the Turkish sultan and the Japanese emperor were the puppets of the military. Russia's czar still wielded real power, only limited by his conscience and incompetence.

The population of the United States had just reached 100 million, and as many people lived in cities as in rural areas. With recent advances in medicine—the cure of rabies and diphtheria, the improved treatment of tuberculosis and yellow fever—the average American's life span had grown to 50 years.

Communication was easier than ever. Since 1915, it was possible for a person in New York City to telephone someone in San Francisco; yes, the cost was a prohibitive $20.70 for the first three minutes ($424 today), but it was still a marvel just to consider a conversation over a 3,000-mile distance.

The telephone was not really a novelty—even if the long-distance call was. After all, there was one phone for every 10 people in the country. However, the automobile was a sensation. Until 1908 the vehicle had been a rarity, an ostentatious and not quite reliable toy for the rich. Henry Ford changed that, introducing assembly-line techniques to mass produce an affordable car. By 1916, it took 90 minutes to fully assemble a Model T, which could be purchased for less than

$500 ($10,200 in today's dollars). That still was not a meager amount, not when the average yearly salary was $708 ($14,500 in today's dollars). But the middle class could now afford automobiles, and buy them they did. In 1914, there were 1 million cars on the American road; by 1916, that number had doubled.

While the automobile was increasingly conspicuous, it was not yet the primary form of transportation. America had 21 million horses. It was literal horse power that plowed the farmland and brought the produce to market. Even in major cities, horses were still common in carrying and delivering freight. The typical American kitchen had an icebox, where a large block of ice would keep food from spoiling. Each week the iceman, in his horse-drawn wagon, would deliver a fresh block.

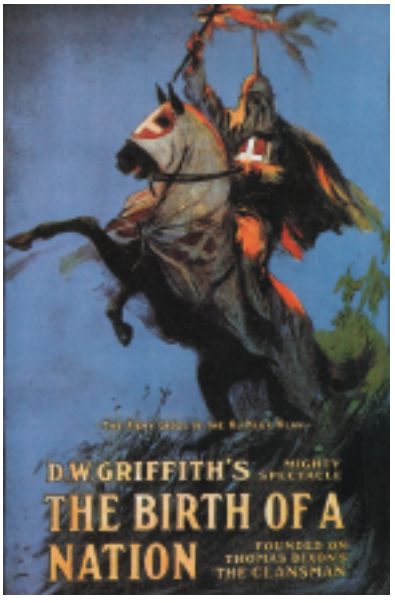
In the cities, streetlights were electric and nearly 20 percent of American homes had electricity; but most homes were still illuminated by gaslight. Electricity was now providing the public with a new and popular diversion: the movie. For the price of a dime ($2.05 today), moviegoers could watch the riotous antics of Charlie Chaplin or see Mary Pickford charm her way out of mishap and adversity.

Of course, some people resented paying that dime. Only a year earlier, a ticket cost a nickel. D.W. Griffith had raised both the quality of the American film and the price for it. His epic *The Birth of a Nation* was a cinematic masterpiece. The 1915 film, a depiction of the Civil War and Reconstruction from a very Southern perspective, was a sweeping spectacle with brilliant cinematography. It had to be seen, the public was eager, and the theater owners knew they could double the ticket prices.

This was America in 1916, a prospering, comfortable country and all too conscious of its precarious place in the world. America was at peace, while Europe consumed itself in the carnage of the Great War [see "Europe's War," page 9].

Indeed, the war would be the chief issue of the presidential campaign of 1916. Woodrow Wilson campaigned for re-election on the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War." His Republican opponent, Charles Evans Hughes, could hardly dispute that. Neutrality was a winning issue. There was no sentiment to be on Germany's side. With its history of invading Belgium, its U-boat attacks on passenger ships and pioneering use of poison gas, Imperial Germany was easy to loath. However, there was also reluctance to join the Allies. Irish-Americans did not want to help Britain, the old enemy that was still occupying their ancestral home. Nor was the Russian czar popular among Americans of East European extraction; oppression and persecution were not fondly remembered. America was content to stay out of "Europe's War."

ELECTRICITY WAS NOW PROVIDING THE PUBLIC WITH A NEW AND POPULAR DIVERSION: THE MOVIE.



Hughes, a former governor of New York and a Supreme Court justice, found himself limited to attacking the "anti-business" idea of an eight-hour workday—advocated by some Democratic politicians and labor leaders, who believed the current 10-hour day was too long. In November, Wilson won the election, carrying 30 states and leading Hughes by 500,000 popular votes.

And so 1916 ended, with a world bent on self-destruction and America savoring what would prove to be the last months of a precarious peace.

D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* was a huge hit, as was silent film legend Charlie Chaplin; horses remained the primary form of transportation.

'Europe's War'

WHILE AMERICANS held out for peace in 1916, much of Europe was already mired in a war that had begun two years earlier—the culmination of decades of grudges, ambitions and fears that set Europe into two rival, glowering blocs. Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey formed one alliance; France, Russia and Britain opposed them.

The Great War began in August 1914, after the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and everyone predicted that it would be over before Christmas. Germany calculated a six-week timetable. Such blithe confidence died in the trenches of France, as did millions of men. The headlines of 1916 would have recounted one desperate campaign after another.

Battle of Somme

VERDUN: Having a larger population than France, the German strategy was a war of attrition. It would force France into a battle that would be—as the Germans termed it—a meat grinder. The Germans determined that the French would fight to the last man to hold a series of fortifications at Verdun, in northeastern France. And so in February the battle began. It lasted until December. The French held on to Verdun, losing 160,000 men but not their will to fight. Having lost 140,000 men themselves, the Germans abandoned the campaign.

JUTLAND: The greatest naval battle of World War I was just the fulfillment of a boy's longstanding fantasy. Unfortunately, the boy became Kaiser Wilhelm II—and he never grew up. He wanted a navy that could challenge Britannia's rule of the sea. There was no practical purpose for a large German fleet, not with Germany's limited coastline. And for the first two years of the war, the German navy stayed in port, while the British navy was in the North Sea. On May 31, 1916, the German fleet finally tried to justify its existence.

Off the Danish peninsula of Jutland, the two fleets maneuvered and shot at each other. At the end of the day, an accountant tallying the corpses and wrecks would have said that Germany won. With a smaller fleet, it inflicted far more damage, casualties and ship losses on the British. The British lost 14 ships and 6,000 men; the Germans lost 11 ships and 2,500 men. Yet the German fleet then retreated to its home ports, never to sail again. This left the British navy in uncontested control of the seas.

THE SOMME: To relieve the French at Verdun, the British launched an offensive in the Somme Valley, in northern France. A week's bombardment was supposed to obliterate the German defenses, and the British troops would simply occupy the valley, while three divisions of cavalry would outflank and rout the German lines. However, the British overestimated the accuracy and effect of their barrage. A week's bombardment only eliminated the element of surprise. The Germans were ready.

On July 1, 1916, the British expected 150,000 men—in three waves—to overrun two lines of German fortifications. But only 100,000 soldiers were able to attack. In some sectors, the second and third waves could not move past the dead and the wounded of the first wave. It took three days before the British could get an accurate count of their losses. Of the 100,000 men who made the attack, 20,000 were dead and 40,000 wounded. This was and remains the worst day in the history of the British army. And yet the campaign continued, lasting until November. The Allies gained five miles, at the cost of 146,000 dead. The Germans suffered 164,000 dead.

And there were just as ghastly campaigns on the Eastern Front, where the Russian and Austrian deaths numbered in the hundreds of thousands.