

Introduction—American Trivia

Who is this American, this new man?—*J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur*

America is so vast that almost everything said about it is likely true,

and the opposite is probably equally true.

—*James T. Farrell*

The United States of America, a federal constitutional republic covering 3.79 million square miles, is home to a population of more than 311 million people. Our nation is composed of fifty states; one federal district: Washington, D.C.; three territories: American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands; and two commonwealths: Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

What are the ties that bind together a country as far-reaching and diverse as ours? Throughout our history, we've lived through the best of times, and we've also lived through the worst of times; yet the heart of our society continues to beat mightily.

We are not a people made from a single stock. Rather, we are a medley of colors, races, religions, and ethnicities. As Jesse Jackson explains, "Our flag is red, white, and blue, but our nation is a rainbow—red, yellow, brown, black, and white."

You might think our language unites us, but in fact we have no official language. Walking down the street in any American city, you may hear Spanish or Chinese or Yiddish or any of the more than three hundred other tongues spoken in the United States. Many people are in the process of transition from the language of their birth to English, while others strive to preserve the language of their heritage.

Is there such a thing as American palate? We all know what hamburgers, hot dogs, and french fries are, but do you know what a cat biscuit is or johnnycake? Have you eaten poi? Gyros? Moose hash? Mountain oysters? Gefilte fish? Some of us would say yes, most of us, no.

How about the arts? Do you like music?—Classical? Country? Rap? Rock? Jazz? Hip hop? Folk? There's something for everyone. Do you enjoy movies?—Westerns? Romances? Action films? Foreign films? Art films? Documentaries? Animation? The choices seem endless. The same can be said for our literature, our fine arts, our theater, and our dance.

We all share a nation with many people who look a little different from us, speak a native language different from ours, and pray in a way that may be foreign to us. In any category you mention, there are a myriad of possibilities. What, then, holds us together in this vast and varied land of ours?

The one thing all Americans have in common is our history. It doesn't matter if you're a first-generation or twelfth-generation American. You own our history. That's what makes you an American. That's the glue that holds us together as a people.

Most of us learn some of that history in school. Then, like so many other facts that we acquired there, the chronicle of our national adventure fades into the background of our lives. Will and Ariel Durant said it best: "We Americans are the best informed people on earth as to the events of the last twenty-four hours. We are not the best informed as to the events of the past sixty centuries."

We hope that this book will make the history of America live for you—that you'll think more about the people who have gone before us and worked so hard to bequeath us a united, spirited, and enchanting country. We hope that you'll find even more precious our national gifts of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

*—Richard Lederer and Caroline McCullagh
San Diego, California*