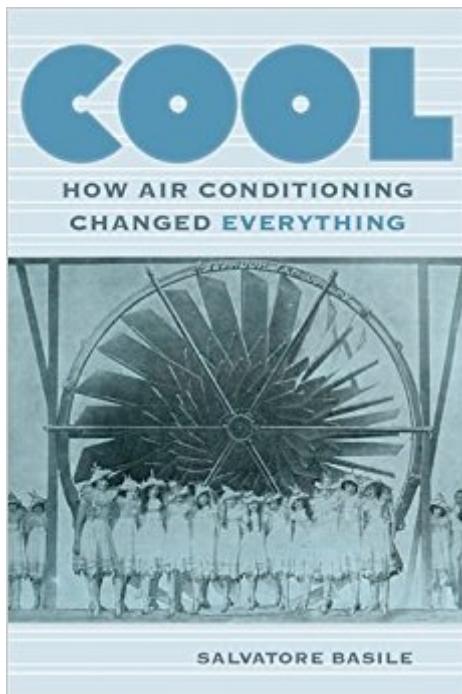


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# Cool: How Air Conditioning Changed Everything



## Synopsis

It's July and it's 94 degrees Fahrenheit. What do you do? Blast the air conditioning. It's a modern miracle of convenience and cooling. How did it happen? Sal Basile's narrative history traces the origins one of the machines we take for granted. It's a contraption that makes the lists of "Greatest Inventions Ever"; at the same time, it's accused of causing global disaster. It has changed everything from architecture to people's food habits to their voting patterns, to even the way big business washes its windows. It has saved countless lives . . . while causing countless deaths. Most of us are glad it's there. But we don't know how, or when, it got there. It's air conditioning. For thousands of years, humankind attempted to do something about the slow torture of hot weather. Everything was tried: water power, slave power, electric power, ice made from steam engines and cold air made from deadly chemicals, "zephyrifiers," refrigerated beds, ventilation amateurs and professional air-sniffers. It wasn't until 1902 when an engineer barely out of college developed the "Apparatus for Treating Air" a machine that could actually cool the indoors and everyone assumed it would instantly change the world. That wasn't the case. There was a time when people "ignored" hot weather while reading each day's list of heat-related deaths, women wore furs in the summertime, heatstroke victims were treated with bloodletting . . . and the notion of a machine to cool the air was considered preposterous, even sinful. The story of air conditioning is actually two stories: the struggle to perfect a cooling device, and the effort to convince people that they actually needed such a thing. With a cast of characters ranging from Leonardo da Vinci and Richard Nixon to Felix the Cat, Cool showcases the myriad reactions to air conditioning some of them dramatic, many others comical and wonderfully inconsistent as it was developed and presented to the world. Here is a unique perspective on air conditioning's fascinating history: how we rely so completely on it today, and how it might change radically tomorrow.

## Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Fordham University Press; 1 edition (June 1, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0823271781

ISBN-13: 978-0823271788

Product Dimensions: 8.9 x 0.6 x 6 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (21 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #569,608 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #191 in Books > Crafts, Hobbies & Home > Home Improvement & Design > How-to & Home Improvements > Heating, Ventilation & Air Conditioning #1807 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Construction #2958 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Pop Culture > General

## Customer Reviews

Many authors of historical texts shy away from any commentary that might smack of an actual opinion. As a result, many historical texts are dry, dull, and unengaging. Basile's book, however, suffers from no such dryness. The author does not shy away from opinionated language, whether it's addressing the folly of the social mores that influenced the masses to eschew the very notion of air conditioning at its inception, or pointing out the sometimes comical ineptitude of would-be climate engineers attempting, through the absurdest of means, to make a name for themselves in the field of artificial cooling. It is rare for a historian to reach out to the reader, as Basile does, with an enthusiasm for his subject which, rather than conveying the message, "see how much I know?" conveys the message, "isn't this cool? Isn't this crazy?" Rather than resting content with his own fascination with history, Basile gives the reader no choice but to join him in his fascination. He clearly understands what he has researched; he explains events as though he witnessed them firsthand, and clarifies the mechanics of the relevant machinery with lucidity and authority. If you don't believe you're interested in a history of air-conditioning, Basile's book will make it clear that you have simply failed to ponder the most interesting questions about the subject, such as: Why did people ever wear wool in the summer? How did people transport ice from the American East Coast to Asia in the 19th Century? What happens when a man tries to stop a spinning metal electric-fan blade with his index finger? The answers to these and a multitude of other engrossing questions are found in "Cool."

I really appreciated this book on how air conditioning raised the American standard of living. Before air conditioning, summers were a slow torture of coping with inescapable heat. Theaters, churches and other places of public gathering were insufferable. Attendees were overheated due to the body heat of crowds. Buildings reeked due to body odors of unwashed masses. It was not uncommon for Congressmen to pass out due to heat exhaustion in the middle of a session. Even U.S. presidents suffered. After enduring a two hour summer ceremony for laying the cornerstone for the Washington Monument, Zachary Taylor in his black suit downed a whole pitcher of ice milk as part of a desperate attempt to cool off. This caused a rupture, and President Taylor died within a few days. As

much of a problem as climate control was for public places, the first major application of air conditioning was for factories. The book tells the story of how Willis Carrier, a Cornell-trained mechanical engineer and future businessman who would soon play a substantial role in bringing air conditioning to a mass market, was tasked with solving a critical problem for the Sackett-Wilhelms Lithographic and Publishing Company, an established color printing company in Brooklyn. Sackett-Wilhelms, like many industries at the turn of the 20th century, was at the mercy of weather. The quality of their print jobs was greatly impacted by small variations in temperature and humidity. A few degrees too many meant that ink would run, colors would be off, and letters would be smudged. Large print jobs would be ruined by the heat, reams of paper would be discarded and critical publication deadlines would be missed. It was not uncommon for the company to have to halt production for especially hot days. The critical problem for Sackett-Wilhelms was not temperature per se but the humidity induced by hot days. Could young Carrier help solve this problem?

Supposedly, Carrier's critical insight for air conditioning came when he was sitting on a train in Pittsburgh on a foggy night, observing moisture condensing on the window. Perhaps he could suck the moisture out of factory air and give precise control over humidity by creating an artificial fog and inducing condensation. This idea became the basis for air conditioning. After solving the climate control problem at Sackett-Wilhelms, Carrier went on to build similar, fit-for-purpose air conditioning devices for textile manufacturers, soap makers, leather producers, meat packers, brewers, chewing gum manufacturers, and chocolate companies. Can you imagine a chocolate factory trying to operate in 90-degree weather? Carrier and competing producers of air conditioners went on to design and sell devices to cool businesses open to the public. Movie theaters soon boasted of their new chilled air, offering patrons an opportunity a cool, two hour respite from summer heat in which they could enjoy an entertaining flick. Forward-thinking department chains such as Macy's eagerly embraced air conditioning, seeing it as another mechanism to make their stores more attractive and more pleasant on the nostrils. By the 1940s, Carrier traveled the country presenting his vision of climate-controlled homes with central air conditioning well before that became common place, and his eponymous company soon made that a reality. I was particularly amused by Carrier's unapologetic confidence in the safety and efficacy of his products. According to one anecdote, Carrier was enlisted to install an air conditioning system for the Rivoli Theater in New York. After the project began, a building inspector threatened to delay this highly visible endeavor because he was not familiar with the new refrigerant Carrier was using, dielene, and questioned its non-flammability. Confident in the safety of his thoroughly-tested systems, Carrier whipped out a bottle of dielene, poured some into a cup, ignited a match, and dropped it into the liquid before the

inspector could object. Having a way with words, the author wrote that although the dielene didn't explode, as Carrier knew it wouldn't, the inspector did, but he soon issued the needed permit. This is a well-written book by a talented and funny author. My main and only criticism is that the narrative is sprawling at times. Even though I applaud the author for thoroughly illustrating air conditioning's overwhelmingly positive impact on human life, I sometimes felt inundated by example after example after example. I also wish that the book had more Willis Carrier stories, but that is not really a fault.

Mr. Basile has written a unique history on the evolution of air conditioning from the 19th century up until the present day. It seems hard to imagine when you look at many majestic old buildings in downtown Manhattan from the early 1900's, for example, how many of them were almost like ovens during the frequent heat waves 100 plus years ago, with very little ventilation, much less cool air! Numerous people suffered from heatstroke during sweltering summers back then, and the general public attitude, as Mr. Basile points out, was to grin and bear it as best as one could. Gradually over time, in fits and starts, all this changed, as cooling became more and more available. Air conditioning evolved from various forms of inventive machinery in large scale buildings like the New York Stock Exchange and hotels such as the St. Regis, for example in the early 1900's; then gradually in the 1920's and '30's to various movie theaters and other commercial establishments like Macy's; and finally, after World War II, to more general use in homes, cars, and office buildings designed for internal heating and cooling systems. All this might sound like very dry, boring subject matter, but Mr. Basile makes it all come alive with some great stories and anecdotes, told with much personality and humor. (Particularly when he's describing some of the contraptions people came up with to try to cool large areas such as entertainment venues years ago with what amounted to fans and tons of ice, for example!) Did you know, for instance, that Lucille Ball once swore she'd never do television again after her first sweltering TV appearance on a game show? (Yes, that Lucille Ball!) All the lights needed for TV shoots baked many props and people up until the 1950's as the technology to cool these settings down developed. There is truly a wealth of interesting material here, along with a number of great pictures and illustrations. One of my favorites is that of the "Comet Theatre" from about 100 years ago posting signs offering "High Class Motion Pictures" and "Iced Air" in the "Coolest Theatre in New York" (for just 5 Cents!) Another good one is from 1954 featuring two elegantly dressed ladies staring at "The New Silhouette Carrier Room Air Conditioner" as if it were a Ming vase or some great painting. (This was when such units, commonplace today, were status symbols.) Mr. Basile writes in the caption "Are they admiring its design? Cooling off in the middle of a fashion show? Making a service call?" Mr. Basile's book reminds me that, although this

country has given the world many great inventions, getting there has not always been half the fun! (Think of what a nightmare PC's could be about 20 years ago, for example. Streaming video was more like crawling video, when it worked properly!) And, as he points out in his conclusion, there is still more progress to be made as Willis Carrier's technology starts to give way to one that is more environmentally suitable for our times. (Carrier was the engineer who helped pioneer much of air conditioning and even coined its name in the early 1900's. The company he founded still makes both cooling and heating systems of all sorts for businesses and consumers today ) I highly recommend this book. It is truly one of a kind!

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