

THE FIFTIES

These are the tranquillized *Fifties*,
and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?

So wrote the poet Robert Lowell a quarter of a century ago.

The tranquillized Fifties. It was a fashionable view. Eisenhower on the golf course, or in the hospital, drowsing as his big-business buddies carved up the country. Fins on cars. Hula Hoops. A country entranced by materialism. The age of the expense account.

There was a lot more to it than that. The decade produced heroes, villains, and buffoons in great numbers. It had moments of extraordinary drama, sadness, and delight. Robert Lowell, at forty, may have found it tranquillized, but those of us in our twenties didn't regret our seedtime.

The Fifties included a bitter war in Asia, which at times threatened an American defeat; and a tide of witch-hunting at home which at times seemed to threaten our basic liberties. But it was better than the brutal Thirties, the wartime Forties, the convulsive Sixties, or the tragic Seventies.

The decade had two presidents, Truman and Eisenhower. Neither man, while in office, was regarded as having much style or brainpower. We now know that both were far better than we guessed at the time, and much better presidents than most of their successors.

Eisenhower was a Republican who enjoyed the company of tycoons. He talked about "dynamic conservatism." The Republicans were in the White House for the first time in twenty years, and the conservative wing of the party was strong. Yet, during his eight years in office, Ike either maintained or expanded all the significant programs of the New Deal.

Black Americans (then called Negroes – you didn't call a black a black in those days) began the Fifties almost completely segregated, in everything from water fountains to education. The decade brought about considerable progress and instilled great hope for equal rights, thanks mainly to the Supreme Court and the Chief Justice appointed by Eisenhower, Earl Warren. Warren's liberalism surprised Eisenhower, but Ike did nothing to block the court's landmark school-desegregation decision of 1954. No Congress had passed a civil rights law affecting black voting rights since 1870. One was passed in 1957. Eisenhower was maddeningly slow on civil rights, but what happened while he was in office made possible the accomplishments of men like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thurgood Marshall in the Sixties.

When the demagogic governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, stirred up mobs in Little Rock against the desegregation of Central High

School, Eisenhower landed the 82nd Airborne Division to keep order and enforce the law. It was the first operation by federal troops in a southern city since Reconstruction.

Neither Truman nor Eisenhower was able to control a venomous tide of ideological witch-hunting that started at the end of World War II. The United States had gone on a Red-menace binge after World War I and it did the same thing thirty years later. The blacklists, purges, and loyalty oaths intensified when the new decade began. Many people had genuine concerns about subversion. Alger Hiss, who had been on the American diplomatic team at the Yalta Conference, was convicted of perjury in 1950 on charges relating to the Communist Party. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested that year for passing atomic data to the Russians and later executed, despite widespread protests. The Russians tested an atomic bomb, and most Americans believed they had stolen our nuclear secrets. China had fallen to the Communists. North Korea had invaded South Korea. Americans, at no little cost, had beaten the Nazis. Would they now have to defeat world Communism? Were there traitors in Washington? It was a real question in 1950.

Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin cast his feral gaze on all this and began waving lists of what he described as known Communists in the federal government. With a few courageous exceptions, the national press gave deadpan credence to his vaporous ravings. Distinguished politicians, including Eisenhower, shunned his company but wouldn't speak out against his excesses. Truman, on the other hand, called him a pathological liar. McCarthy and his two young accomplices, Roy Cohn and David Schine, were able to terrorize the State Department and the federal bureaucracy for several years. When McCarthy tried to terrorize the U.S. Army to get special privileges for Schine, who had been drafted, the Eisenhower administration, the Senate, and public opinion finally moved against him. Edward R. Murrow went on television with a carefully worded denunciation, but CBS gave McCarthy equal time for rebuttal. The senator was censured by the Senate in 1954 and died in 1957, his only legacy the ugly word *McCarthyism*. He had helped create a shameful civil war between different groups of Americans. Walt Kelly, creator of the liberal comic strip *Pogo*, wrote, "We has met the enemy, and it is us."

If World War II was the last of the "good" wars, Korea may have been the first of the "bad" wars. It was never declared a war by the Congress, and it was fought in a far-off place for goals that were sometimes unclear. Parents had a hard time understanding why their sons died. Korea bears some resemblance to Vietnam. But there is a difference. Fifty-eight thousand Americans died in Vietnam, and it tore the country apart. Almost as many died in Korea – fifty-three thousand – but the country held together in the Fifties.

It was a time in which Harry Truman, an unpopular president overseeing an unpopular war, could fire one of the most famous

generals in history and get away with it. Truman sacked General of the Army Douglas MacArthur in 1951 for what amounted to insufferable insubordination (MacArthur, commander in Korea, kept advocating an invasion of China). MacArthur returned to the United States to the cheers of multitudes, traveled slowly across the country speaking to enormous crowds, and told the Congress, "Old soldiers never die; they just fade away." Which is just what the American people let him do.

The Korean War may have been easier to bear because the economy at home was so strong. The Fifties were the centerpiece of what has been called the longest cycle of capitalist expansion in history. The boom had begun when World War II ended and it would last more than twenty years. There were recessions, and times of high unemployment, but the American people were essentially prosperous throughout the decade.

America was growing, learning, and discovering. In 1952, a terrible epidemic of poliomyelitis crippled thousands and took the lives of thirty-three hundred victims, but later that year Jonas Salk tested his vaccine against polio, and it worked. American scientists won more Nobel Prizes in the Fifties than in the Sixties. Something was being invented every minute.

It was, above all, a time of hope. We believed Henry Luce when he said it was the American Century. We made jokes about the ads that spoke of better living through chemistry, but in our hearts we knew it was true. The great engine of American productivity was exporting growth to Western Europe and Japan. American films and musical comedies were the envy of the world. American art and architecture were unsurpassed.

Yes, the Russians in 1957 had put a sphere about the size of a basketball in orbit around the earth. But we would catch them. We were ahead of the Russians in everything else. Nikita Khrushchev said in 1956, "We will bury you," but no one believed that. America in the Fifties really was the future.

Another way to look at the 1950s, and at these photographs, is to see the decade as a great passage from one style of American life to another, a journey not so much in time as in culture.

When World War II ended, the United States looked as it had looked in the 1930s. Very few civilian products were made during the war. When it ended, there were no new cars, people's houses and kitchens and bathrooms were prewar, the newspapers, magazines, and radio programs were largely unchanged. The look and feel of the countryside, of the big cities and small towns, was very much of the Thirties. At the beginning of the Fifties, America in the summertime was a country of ceiling fans, pitchers of icewater, and dusty roads.

Sears, Roebuck was doing a brisk business selling parts for Model T and Model A Fords, and it seemed as though every other farm was using one of the old cars.

That began to change as the Fifties got underway, but the change was gradual. It took time in a country of 150,000,000 people to get new stoves, clothes, houses, and cars to everybody. And there was a great demand for new products, such as air conditioning, which was nonexistent in ordinary homes before the war. When the decade began, there were no self-service elevators, no direct-mail telephones, no computers, no credit cards, no transistor radios, no diet drinks; practically nobody smoked filter cigarettes. All that had changed by the end of the decade, but when it began, it was a world in which the telephone operator said, "Number, please?" and the elevator operator asked you for your floor.

Television existed only on a local level in 1950. The networks were not able to send live pictures across the country until the following year. Most TV sets were in saloons. The programs were aimed at saloon audiences: wrestling, and ladies with large bosoms on variety shows. As the decade began, only 9 percent of American homes were able to receive television pictures. By 1960, the figure had risen to 87 percent.

The patterns of life in the early years of the Fifties were pretty much what they had been twenty years before. There was a great deal of small-town, Main Street America in those days. The huge migration of the rural poor to the cities was only getting started. The older suburbs were still havens for the well-to-do. Levittowns, suburban bedroom communities for workers, were being built on farmland.

Air traffic was growing, but it took a long time to get somewhere in a twin-engine DC-3. Jet travel was not introduced until 1957. In the early years of the decade, railroads were still the way to go. That included trains like the *Super Chief* and the *20th Century Limited*, which emphasized luxury. Train stations in big cities were rather grand – not just clean and free of derelicts, but places of business and fashion. Reporters went to train stations to interview celebrities. Men wore hats and vests. Women wore gloves, fur jackets, and veils.

If you weren't looking for work, black, or getting shot at in Korea, it was a very nice time. The country felt young. The future was full of promise. You knew where things stood and you knew who you were.

Knowing where things stood meant understanding and agreeing to what the sociologists were beginning to call the power structure. In those days, noted clergymen got their important sermons reported in the papers. Editors paid attention to statements by spokesmen for big business, big labor, and the presidents of big universities. In the Fifties, the elders exercised authority, and few objected.

The liberation of women had not begun, but the stirrings were there. Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* was published in

translation in 1953. Karl Menninger, the psychiatrist, described it as “a pretentious and inflated tract on feminism,” but Philip Wylie, the author, called it “one of the few great books of our time.” About three out of four married women did not work, and women with children were expected to stay at home.

There were children everywhere. By 1956, most of them seemed to be about ten years old. Their daddies and mommies had got together the year after the war, when the baby boom started. There also seemed to be an awful lot of high school kids born before the war began – proud young boys with crewcuts, girls in skirts and bobbysox. Blue jeans were just overalls, and overalls were for farmers. Jeans were Tobacco Road, buddy, and Tobacco Road was out, among the upwardly mobile, sexually ambitious kids of the Fifties.

Sex. It was there all the time, just about everywhere you looked. Jayne Mansfield, John Wayne (who was quite a lot younger then, no kidding), Marilyn Monroe, the boy next door, the matron across the dinner table. Sexually, Americans were drawn as tight as the string on a crossbow. There was a general sense of anticipation, a feeling that delicious experiences were just around the corner. For the young, there were masculine dreams of career and success, feminine dreams of children and a home, but before that – oh, joy! – there would be the end of innocence. And it was all the more appetizing because there was no open promiscuity. The Sixties would bring that. In the Fifties, you pretended that the old proprieties still held, but you went pretty far on the first date.

If there were an index here, it would read: “Sex – see *Automobile*.” “*Automobile* – see Sex.” We had gone from Andy Hardy’s front porch to the back seat of dad’s Chevy. In the Thirties, a few rich kids necked in convertibles. In the Fifties, nearly everybody had a car. No generation of Americans had ever owned so many motorcars; no generation of children had ever had such opportunities to be alone together. The car was a symbol of freedom; when James Dean made the movie *Rebel Without a Cause*, he used his own 1949 black Mercury coupe in the film.

The Fifties produced the great income shift to the young. Parents in the Thirties battled the Depression; in the Forties they coped with meat stamps and gasoline rationing. There wasn’t much to spare. But in the Fifties, kids were given more money to spend, on things like records and phonographs. Especially on records and phonographs. From 1952 until 1960, manufacturers produced more than twenty-six million record players. The long-playing record was invented, which changed listening habits, a lot of things changed: Teeny-boppers emerged as a significant component of the American economy. The young became consumers as they had never been before, in any country. Kids began spending billions on entertainment, and platoons of savvy grownups figured out ways they could spend even more. It was one of

the most profound changes in American life.

The decade had begun with the sounds of the big bands. It ended with rock and roll at full volume. America invented rock and roll in the mid-Fifties and exported it to the world. Rock returned with the Beatles. With that came a new style for the young, long hair and guitars. Jeans, Frisbees, and drugs would soon follow. The whole loose, unstructured youth culture was on its way.

So much had changed by the time the decade ended. The cities were starting to fall apart, the suburbs were filling up, and the countryside was being emptied.

America was becoming a different nation, tied no longer to the certainties of the past. The old consensus was breaking up. Those years were not a tranquilized pause in history, but a laboratory in which the future was invented and tested. Before we got to the Fifties, we had lived in one kind of country. When the decade ended, we were on our way somewhere else.

Jack Kerouac, the bard of the Beat Generation, wrote in 1957,

Where we going, man?

I don't know, but we gotta go.

John Chancellor

Pound Ridge, New York

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