

The 1950s Were they better times?

By George Gillow
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Was the era of the 1950s' a better time for Americans to live or are we better off today? It's a matter of perspective. The era of the 1950s, in a sense, began just after World War II and ended in the early 1960s. So it essentially covered a 20-year period. The following are some points about these times compared to today.

The Economy and the Family

- ◆ During the 1950s it was possible for low to medium income families to do well with only one spouse working (in almost all cases the Father). Here is what almost all families could afford:
 - A detached home with a yard (in some cases a small house, but a house). Today even condo ownership is beyond the reach of very many families even if both spouses work.
 - A new or almost new car
 - A television
 - An annual family vacation
 - Saving for college education of children
- ◆ Today, for a large percentage of families, both spouses have to work—sometimes in two jobs each—just to survive. Even apartment rents are too high.
- ◆ In the 1950s, the income tax burden fell mostly on the rich. The very wealthy had to pay over 70% of income in taxes.
- ◆ In the 1950s inflation was 1% and unemployment was 4%.
- ◆ The minimum wage in 1955 was \$1 per hour, which is equivalent to about \$9 per hour in 2003 dollars.
- ◆ A large number of workers belonged to labor unions
- ◆ Most companies had pension plans and medical benefits for employees.
- ◆ Minorities (particularly Black Americans) and women had almost no career opportunities. They were excluded from most professions.
- ◆ Companies did not relocate overseas as much for cheaper labor and to avoid taxes.
- ◆ Companies made good profits, but not the huge profits they make today.
- ◆ Corporate executives made enough to become rich, but not as wealthy as today.
- ◆ Personal, business and government debt was less than today.
- ◆ Business practices were mostly sound. There were fewer hostile takeovers; fewer acquisitions, mergers, and sellouts for financial gain only and less overvalue of stocks for companies that were losing money.
- ◆ The Stock Market rose steadily.
- ◆ The economy was strong and companies were prosperous.
- ◆ American business was beginning to see a threat from German and Japanese products—radios and Mickey Mouse watches (this led to the saying “Mickey Mouse” for poor quality products).



Society and Standard of living

- ◆ Society was separate and not equal even outside the South. Racism, bigotry and hatred were very high. The KKK was much more powerful.
- ◆ There were no organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center that, today, has been able to reduce the influence of hate groups by civil action.
- ◆ There was “white flight” from neighborhoods when minority families moved in.
- ◆ Women who wanted careers had limited opportunities (they could not attend service academies)
- ◆ Women were reluctant to report spousal or child abuse.
- ◆ More people attended places of worship in the 1950s.
 - Today more people watch religious programming on TV.
- ◆ There were fewer divorces.
- ◆ There were no birth control pills
- ◆ Crime was high (San Diego County had a relatively low crime rate, yet there were a number of sensational murders committed by teenagers in the early 1960s). Teen crime remains high today.
- ◆ In the 1950s teenagers were using drugs and alcohol, but not as much as today.
- ◆ Places like beaches, Disneyland, and parks were less crowded.
- ◆ Families did not spread out as much across the country or world. They stayed in their hometowns more often, except those in the Military.
- ◆ People could assume a job was for life.
- ◆ People were closer to their neighbors, particularly in small towns.
- ◆ Everyone worried about atomic war. Today we worry about terrorist attacks.



The Life of Children

- ◆ Children read the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew*. Today they read *Harry Potter*.
- ◆ Children watched a lot of TV and played games (e.g. Parcheesi, Life, and Chinese Checkers) while indoors. Outdoors they played ball games, rode bikes and swam in the summer. Today kids watch a lot of TV and play video games indoors. Outdoors they play ball games, ride skateboards and scooters and swim in the summer.
- ◆ Homework reports had to be hand written or typed on a typewriter. Now students use word processors with fancy graphic capabilities, spell check, and delete and move functions.
- ◆ Streets are more dangerous today than in the 1950s.
- ◆ Child abduction and disappearances were less in the 1950s.
- ◆ For the most part, in the 1950s, parents did not have to worry about what children saw on TV or movies even late at night. Cartoons had more violence than cop shows and westerns.
- ◆ Parents had more time to spend with children.
- ◆ The most exposure children had to sex in the 1950s was from the sex education at school.
- ◆ As today, in the 1950s many children were the victims of bullies.
- ◆ Children were exposed to a lot more cigarette smoke than today.



Health

- ◆ More children got childhood diseases. Before 1955 a lot of children got polio.
- ◆ Surgery such as heart and cataract surgery were much more tedious and dangerous in the 1950s than today.
- ◆ The technology advances such as heart transplants, laser surgery, MRIs, and many medicines that we have today were not available in the 1950s.
- ◆ Surgery techniques were not as advanced as today for repairing the body after serious injury.
- ◆ There were no Aids or Ebola type epidemics.
- ◆ A higher percentage of people died of heart disease.
- ◆ Smokers were everywhere—in all inside areas, on airplanes, trains, hotels, busses, offices and even hospitals. Patients and doctors were allowed to smoke freely in hospitals.
- ◆ Grocery stores had less healthy foods such as those with low fats and low sodium. There was less nutrition labeling on food products.
- ◆ Contact lenses were expensive and uncomfortable. Now there are gas permeable and soft lenses and laser treatments.



Transportation

- ◆ Freeways were less congested, but there were fewer of them.
- ◆ Travel across town on surface streets and highways took much longer than on freeways today.
- ◆ Cars were stylish and changed radically each year.
- ◆ There were no laws requiring seatbelts or airbags.
- ◆ Many people died in car crashes. Today people are still dying in auto accidents.
- ◆ It took about nine (9) hours to fly coast-to-coast in the USA in the 1950s on a DC7. There were no middle seats and seats had more legroom. Airplane food was better.
 - Today it takes six (6) hours on a jet to cross the country via a hub--if there are no delays.
- ◆ Travel overseas was on ocean liners to places like Europe, Hawaii or Japan. Travel to Africa, South America and other areas was on passenger freighters. These had luxurious accommodations for passengers.
 - It sometimes took weeks to get places.
- ◆ A large number of people traveled by train in the 1950s on such trains as the Santa Fe Chiefs, California Zephyr, New York Central's 20th Century, Pennsylvania's Broadway Limited and others. Today its Amtrak.



The environment

- ◆ Many cities were dirty and polluted in the 1950s.
- ◆ There was no control over dumping of hazardous material.
- ◆ Asbestos was causing health problems.
- ◆ There were few environmental protection laws and rivers and the air were getting polluted (By the mid 1960s air in San Diego and LA was more of a "brown/purple" than today).
- ◆ Atomic tests were conducted near populated areas.

Technology and Life's Conveniences

- ◆ Home air-conditioning was mostly noisy window units.
- ◆ Fewer people had clothes dryers and dishwashers.
- ◆ Microwave ovens did not exist—Microwave cooking was only possible with large expensive “radar ranges”.
- ◆ Generally there are more "gadgets" in the home today than in the 1950s.
- ◆ Today, the Internet has made electronic searching for information and electronic catalog order shopping very efficient. A vast amount of information is available at the click of a mouse.
 - In the 1950s you had to go to the library to find information and often the book or reference material was not available or had been checked out.
 - In the 1950s mail orders required filling and mailing forms
- ◆ Television was mostly black and white. Color TVs were expensive and the quality was poor. There were few programs broadcast in color.
- ◆ There was no satellite transmission of TV signals worldwide until TelStar in the early 1960s.
- ◆ In the 1950s there was no way of recording television programs. There were no VCRs.
- ◆ There was no cable or satellite television.
- ◆ There were no cell phones.
- ◆ There were no electronic calculators.
 - Mechanical desktop calculating machines were expensive and not readily available.
- ◆ Computers were big, bulky, expensive and not very powerful.
 - Computers were only affordable by large organizations.
- ◆ Telephones were dial, not push button.
- ◆ Almost everyone's telephone was on a party line.
- ◆ Long distance calls were relatively expensive.
- ◆ Automobile engines were easier to repair by amateurs.



Politics and Government

- ◆ Politics and government were dominated by progressive Democrats and Republicans who were working on such projects as civil rights and senior citizen health care. Today politics is dominated by conservative Republicans and moderates of both parties.
- ◆ There was not the influence of money in politics as there is today.
- ◆ Political TV commercials debuted in the 1950s. (“I like Ike, you like Ike, everyone likes Ike, so roll out the banner, beat on the drums and lets send Ike to Washington” –first political TV ad jingle).
- ◆ Government debt was less.
- ◆ The 1950s was the era of Senator Joe McCarthy and the House Un-American Committee.
- ◆ There was more money (inflation adjusted) spent on public works during the Eisenhower Administration of the 1950s than during the New Deal (Interstate Highway, St. Lawrence Seaway, Atoms for Peace, Space program).

Entertainment

- ◆ Many movie theaters were beautiful “palaces”. The screens were much larger than today.
 - Sometimes the very wide screen (140 degrees) "Cinerama" movies were shown.
- ◆ Movie special effects were not as well done as today.
- ◆ There were hundreds of well-written TV shows in the 1950s.
- ◆ Daytime television was Author Godfrey and Art Linkletter. Today its Opra Windfry and Jerry Springer.
- ◆ There were no “reality” shows in the 1950s.
- ◆ Game shows were “To Tell the Truth”, “I’ve Got a Secret” and “What’s My Line”.
- ◆ Today there are more documentary and historical shows on TV. CSPAN, History Channel, Discovery Channel did not exist in the 1950s.
- ◆ In the 1950s there were some good documentaries on network TV (“20th Century”, “Victory at Sea”, “You are There”).
- ◆ As with today, many people went to live plays, concerts, and sports events.
- ◆ The public “hero worshiped” movie stars and singers in the 1950s, probably more than today.



Good books about this era are:

1. *The Fifties* by David Halberstam
2. *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* by James T. Patterson
3. *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* by Bill Bryson
4. World Almanacs provide a lot of comparison statistics such as crime, cost of living etc.