

The 1950s; Those Were the Days My Friend

by Paul H. Belz

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If you are old enough . . . take a stroll with me . . . exhale slowly, clear your mind . . . and go back . . . before the Internet . . . before central ac, crack and semiautomatics . . . before Super Nintendo, Microsoft Windows, or Apple . . . back . . . way back.

I'm talking about hide-and-go-seek at dusk, sittin' on the porch, "Simon Says," kicking cans, skipping stones across the stream, shootin' marbles, lunch boxes with thermos . . . street Arabs, going home for lunch, penny candy from the store, jumpin' rope, skates with keys, 'Mother May I,' collecting Topps and Bowman cards, hard-wired party-line phones, hopscotch, jacks, Elvis, and the Big Bopper, Hula Hoops and sunflower seeds, Old Maids and Crazy Eights, wax lips and mustaches, Mr. Potato Head,

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Erector Sets, Lionel trains, Mary Janes, saddleshoes and collecting Coke bottles for the nickel deposits, running the sprinkler, circle pins, bobby pins . . . Mickey Mouse Club, Rocky and Bullwinkle, Fran and Ollie, Popeye . . . all in black and white.

When around the corner seemed far away and going downtown seemed like going somewhere.

Enforced bedtimes, climbing trees, making snow forts in winter and leaf piles in fall, lemonade stands, cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, sittin' on the curb, staring at clouds, comic books, bubble gum cards, Pez dispensers, step ball, pitching baseball cards, jumping down the steps, jumping on the bed, pillow fights, getting unexpected but welcome "company,"

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ribbon candy, tinsel on the Christmas tree, Jackie Gleason, white gloves, walking to church, walking to the movie theater (to see a double-feature), home delivery by the bakeries and the department stores, being tickled to death, running till you were out of breath, laughing so hard your stomach hurt, being tired from playing . . . Remember that? Not steppin' on a crack or you'll break your mother's back, paper chains at Christmas, silhouettes of Lincoln and Washington, clothes lines . . . the smell of paste in school, pea-shooters, spitballs and detention . . . walking to midnight Mass without passing a drug deal.

What about those Sunday trips with Dad to historical sites, parks, the zoo, the airport to watch takeoffs and landings, or rail crossings to watch long

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freight trains? An amazing new handheld popcorn creator called "Jiffy Pop," that new food called pizza, and sock hops with the "Stroll," "Twist," "Jitterbug," and the "Limbo" . . . Remember . . . when there were two types of sneakers for boys and girls (Keds & PF Flyers) and the only time you wore them to school was for gym? And the girls wore curlers to bed. When nobody owned a purebred dog. When it took five minutes for the TV to warm up (no remotes) and you made frequent trips to the drug store to test tubes. When nearly everyone's Mom was at home when the kids returned from school.

When a quarter was a decent allowance and another quarter . . . a huge bonus. When you'd reach into a muddy gutter for a penny. When girls

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neither dated nor kissed until late high school, if then. When your mom wore nylons that came in two pieces. When all of your male teachers wore neckties and female teachers had their hair done every day and wore high heels. When you got your windshield cleaned, oil checked, and gas pumped without asking; all for free every time. And you didn't pay for air. And you got trading stamps to boot! When laundry detergent had free glasses, dishes or towels hidden inside the box.

When you didn't have to reserve a tee time to play golf . . . When any parent could scold anyone's kid or feed him or use him to carry groceries and nobody, even the kid, thought a thing of it. When it was considered a great privilege to be taken out to dinner at a real restaurant with your parents.

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When they threatened to keep kids back a grade if they failed . . . and did! When the worst thing you could do at school was flunk a test, chew gum or smoke in the bathrooms. And the prom was in the gymnasium and we danced and all the girls wore pastel gowns and the boys wore suits for the first time and we stayed out all night. When a '57 Chevy was everyone's dream car . . . to cruise, peel out, lay rubber or watch submarine races and people went steady and girls wore a ring with an inch of wrapped dental floss or yarn coated with pastel frost nail polish so it would fit her finger. And bats weren't aluminum. The ozone was intact, bikinis dotted the beach, transistor radios blared the new rock 'n roll music and sunscreen wasn't a mandatory beach accessory. When coffee was just called coffee.

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"The man in the moon" was still an eons-old romantic fantasy. The nuclear Cold War faceoff wasn't yet in high gear and the dreaded polio virus was cured. Public schools were excellent and families were intact with no hyphenated names. There were no frivolous lawsuits and citizens were just plain "Americans" without modifiers.

And no one ever asked where the car keys were because they were always in the car, in the ignition and the doors were never locked. And you got into trouble if you accidentally locked the doors at home, since no one ever had a key. Hitchhiking was safe and commonplace . . . Remember lying on your back on the grass with your friends and saying imaginative things like, "That cloud looks like a . . . "?

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And playing baseball with no adults to help kids with the rules of the game. Back then, baseball was not a psychological group learning experience . . . it was a game. Remember when there was no war being fought, no terrorism, and big-city murders numbered in single digits annually? Remember . . . before mass transit vehicles belched clouds of diesel smoke? . . . when stuff came from the store without safety caps because no one had tried to poison a perfect stranger? . . . when trick-or-treat candy didn't need to be x-rayed? With all our progress . . . don't you just wish . . . just once . . . you could slip back in time and savor the slower pace, before suburban sprawl, malls, Interstate highways, and traffic gridlock . . . and share it with the children now?

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Being sent to the principal's office was nothing compared to the fate that awaited a misbehaving student at home. Basically we were in fear for our lives, but it wasn't because of drive-by shootings, drugs, gangs, or bullies. Our parents and grandparents were a much bigger threat! But we all survived because their love was greater than the threat . . . divorce was rare and teen pregnancy was stigmatized, not subsidized. AIDS didn't exist.

Remember . . . when college tuition didn't require loans . . . when the elderly were treasured and lived with their families instead of being shipped to age-segregated warehouses . . . when child day-care centers were rare rather than ubiquitous necessities . . . when Coca Cola was a treat, not a diet staple and typewriters ruled.

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So send this to someone who can still remember Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys, Laurel and Hardy, Howdy Doody and the Peanut Gallery, The Lone Ranger, Roy Rogers, Trigger, and Clark Kent . . . as well as the sound of a reel mower on Saturday morning, docs who made house calls and summers filled with bike rides, catchers ("You're it!"), pick-up sandlot baseball games, cap guns, cherry bombs on the 4th, bowling, church carnivals, Parcheesi, Clue, Slinkies, snowballs, visiting the pool, the Good Humor truck, and drinking Kool Aid.

Didn't that feel good, just to sit back and say, YEAH, I remember all that and those happy days?!

We thought they'd never end.