

By Tim O'Neill

It's hard to understand the US Army in WW II without understanding the country that produced it.

The generation that fought World War Two was one raised in the Great Depression. The soldiers' political and social views were shaped by that experience and by the dramatic social and economic forces that preceded it. The world of 1941 was a world very different from the one we live in now, and our ability to understand and judge the views and behaviors of the time is limited by lack of direct experience and perspective.

What was the Depression? This was a period of profound economic stagnation that followed the boom years of the 1920's. Economic controls that exist now were largely unknown in the late 20's, though the dangers of the raging bull market and virtually unlimited margins (accounts used to purchase stock on credit with the investor's portfolio as collateral; if the market went down, the margin credit line diminished and if it went below the collateral the result was a "margin call") were well understood by economists. The stock market crash of 1929 was only one step in the downward spiral, and the full force of the depression did not take hold for several years.

Unlike more recent recessions and economic downturns, all of which were comparatively mild, the Depression was principally a *deflationary* event. Inflation, which we know well, is described as "too many dollars chasing too few goods." The buying power of the dollar declines because wages exceed productivity and things cost more and more in nominal dollar terms. This leads to demands for higher wages, which feeds an inflationary spiral. Deflation is just the opposite: "too few dollars chasing too many goods." There is plenty to buy, but wages have sunk so low that nobody can afford them. Because people are not consuming, excess inventory leads to production cuts, which leads to layoffs and closings; since the newly-unemployed are even less likely to consume, the spiral continues. A deflationary spiral is much harder to correct or resist than is an inflationary one. Nobody really knows how to do it by monetary policy (which works well on inflation) other than by mobilizing for a world war with huge government cash flow supported by bonds.

Unemployment was far above even the worst recessions in the decades since. Millions were out of work (as Calvin Coolidge is famously said to have put it: "When more and more people are unable to find work, unemployment results"). The social welfare system as we now know it did not then exist, and was an outgrowth of the Depression; charities bore most of the burden of running soup kitchens and bread lines. Because work was hard to find regionally, huge numbers of unemployed men went on the bum, jumping trains or walking the highways trying to find temporary paying work. Plots of land were

often occupied by camps (“Hoovervilles”) of itinerant would-be workers or just the restless. Communities resisted the indigent; police departments routinely ran such people out of town, setting them off again in search of fragments of a living. Not a few joined the Army just for a place to sleep and three square meals. A class of “down-and-outers” appeared, people who had simply given up trying.

Few films of the time really do justice to the problems. A few, like “The Grapes of Wrath”, stand as stark reminders, but people who are miserable¹ generally don’t buy tickets to see movies describing misery. Films concentrated on glitter and happy endings, things that eluded most Americans in their daily lives.

Labor unions reached a peak of power in those days. The organized labor movement, which began in the latter days of the 19th Century, now represented hope for the few employed, and a provided a bulwark against society’s excesses. They also suffered their own schisms, and were in that respect reflective of the American spirit in the days before WW2.

“Buddy, can you spare a dime?”

The expression “it’s the economy, stupid!” was universally understood in 1941. There was nothing else. Prosperity was something you paid a dime to see at the movies, one of those extravagant musicals where everybody wore white tie and tails and tap-danced through glitter. The country was slowly coming out of the Depression – but very slowly. Prosperity would soon return, but it would come back at the cost of a global war.

There was a joke back then:

Panhandler walks up to a guy on the street, says, “hey buddy – can you spare a buck for a cup of coffee?”

“My good man,” the target replies, “coffee is only a nickel a cup!”

“So, I’m a heavy tipper.”

This was the Great Depression – the era of the “forgotten man.”

How did people live? Not well. The really rich who had not been exposed when the stock market tanked in 1929² still lived in comfort, but most people had to watch every nickle. People most harshly affected worked at odd jobs where they could find them, often moving as itinerants from town to town. Most towns mistrusted these vagrants; they were often jailed or intimidated to encourage them to stay away. The institution of the hard-core itinerant – called by others a hobo, a tramp, or a bum³ – was an American insti-

¹ The French *les misérables* means literally “the miserable ones,” but specifically “the poor.” It was this double meaning that Victor Hugo evoked in his most famous novel.

² Contrary to legend, this was not the start of the Depression. It took two years of deflationary spiral before the results of the crash and the shrinkage of cash had the deflationary spiral in full helix. The few with large and exposed stock portfolios dived out of windows on Black Friday; the ordinary shmoes on the sidewalks just dodged out of the way. Their turn would come.

³ A hobo wanders around looking for work. A tramp wanders around, but takes work only when absolutely necessary to eat. A bum just wanders around.

tution. Some walked, but it was more efficient to take the train. This was as easy as sneaking onto a box car and riding for free, unless the guard (“bull”) caught you or the sheriff



found you. You rode from place to place, camped with other hobos (in “jungles”) or spent a few nights in jail. You stole, panhandled, took odd jobs, wished for better times. Hobos had their own proprietary slang and social customs; for decades after the Depression smaller numbers still roamed the country as before because they acquired a taste for the life of freedom (like the Travelers in Ireland who wander from place to place and have their own secret language, *Shelta*⁴). A tramp was a “bo” (short for hobo) or a “bindlestiff” (a “bindle” is the common bundle of personal items tied in cloth and attached to a stick for carrying) or a “boxcar Willie”; localities had names (Pittsburgh was “the Big Smoke”) as did ethnicities (a “Bohunk” – from “Bohemian” – was a Slavic or Polish worker, a Russian was for some reason a “candle eater”) and rail lines (the Balti-

more & Ohio – B&O – was the “bum’s own”); and personalities (Jesus was “Jerusalem Slim”).⁵

If you lived on a farm, you just tightened your belt. Many who had found work in cities and lost it when Hard Times hit went back home to the farm or the small town to get by. At least you could grow your own food unless you were mortgaged and unable to pay. As the model for this, see “The Waltons.”

If all else failed, you could enlist in the Civilian Conservation Corps or the WPA (Government make-work projects that ended up doing some good⁶) or – if you were *really* desperate – in the Army.

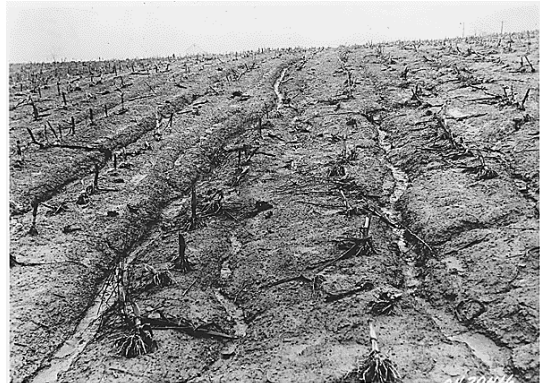
There were special circumstances that tended to make more misery. The 30’s were at the end of a climatic warming period that brought drought to the Midwest and the West. Lack of rain and poor farming practices devastated the plains of Oklahoma, Kansas, and North Texas, creating the “dust bowl.” Often forgotten was that the devastation of farmland extended into the Southeast: much of Tennessee and North Georgia were virtually deforested by poor farming practices and soil erosion; the dense woods you see while

⁴ Shelta has left only a few words in English. It is similar in some ways to pig Latin, in that it reverses consonants. The Traveler word for “name” is based on the Gaelic equivalent (*ainm*) with the *n* and *m* reversed and an ending attached to produce “moniker.” We find this slang term mostly in pulp detective novels in the 30’s and 40’s.

⁵ Frank Capra’s overlooked social justice film “Meet John Doe” had a sanitized view of life on the bum; for the real deal, I recommend a film of the early 1970’s called “Emperor of the North.”

⁶ Example: a South Carolina resident later prominent in politics had a WPA job in Charleston on summer leave from The Citadel. It helped pay tuition, but it had another advantage: the job involved construction of a new battalion barracks for cadets, and this miscreant secretly laid the foundation for a hidden under-ground room. When I was a cadet in the 1960’s the room was still there, and included a small TV lounge, a barber shop, and a tunnel out of the barracks. The builder seems to have felt guilt over the episode many years later, and made up for it by routinely granting amnesty when he visited the school as governor and later as a United States senator. If not for this unnamed benefactor, the author would probably have been marching punishment tours in the 1980’s.

driving through Tennessee have appeared since the conservation initiatives of the late Depression. Poor Farmers depended on loans to operate from year to year – if crops failed, loans were in default and banks fore-closed (gaining, of course, only worthless land). The dispossessed farmers had to migrate or starve; many headed for the golden promise of California, as eloquently depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*.



Political life

Times were so hard that many Americans thought the American system had failed. Thousands of trained workers applied for jobs in the Soviet Union, which many considered a model for the future. Even in the depths of Stalinist depravity and oppression, glowing reports of life in the USSR (like those of Pulitzer Prize reporter Walter Duranty of the *New York Times*, whose mendacity was not revealed until after Stalin's death) convinced quite a few that Communism was the answer, the way of the future.

The split between liberal and conservative philosophies was much wider in the late 30's than it is now. Many intellectuals, including some governmental officials, were not so much liberal in their views as frankly Red. This was not seen by everyone as a liability until after the war (and the Depression), during the "Red Scare" of the late 40's and early 50's.

Party philosophies were much more confused than they are now. The Republican Party had conservative and liberal wings, but in social philosophy was somewhat to the right of current views. The Democrats, on the other hand, were widely split, almost representing two parties. The liberal Northeast and Midwest branches were teamed with relentlessly conservative and reactionary Southern Democrats who shunned the GOP because it was the party of Reconstruction (a more recent memory than now). My grandmother was active in the Texas Democratic Party, a body philosophically somewhat to the right of Vlad Dracula. Memories of Reconstruction –



– an economic and social humiliation from which the deep South did not really emerge until the 60's – were too fresh. No one hated FDR more than a conservative Southern Democrat – but nobody was willing to vote for the party of Lincoln. (It took the Eisenhower-Stevenson election of 1952 to start breaking up the Democratic "Solid South"; with the onset of white reaction to the Civil Rights movement, the shift gathered momentum and produced a solid "red" south – in the current sense of red as a code for Republican states.)

Bolsheviks

There was also a strong progressive tradition in the United States that sprang from various sources – labor movements, the European Socialist leanings of many immigrants, and the reaction against the excesses that had led to WWI among other causes. All these were strengthened by the Depression. The old IWW (Industrial Workers of the World – popularly called the “Wobblies”) had been suppressed⁷ because of its opposition to American entry into the war in 1917, but many former Wobblies were still around, still agitating under other banners. The mainstream labor organizations – AF of L, the CIO (American Federation of Labor (A F of L) did not merge with the Congress of Industrial Organizations to form the AFL-CIO until the 50's), Teamsters, United Mine Workers – tended to be socially rather conservative by comparison (particularly John L. Lewis’s UMW), and fought off Communist influence with a vengeance. So, by the way, did organized crime, which had a great deal invested in the status quo. Wise guys still tend to be socially conservative.

Oddly, many radical movements tended to be openly patriotic – deeply attached to the idea of an America as they felt it could be. Joe Hill, an IWW agitator and popular folk hero wrote the song “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum” (as well as “Casey Jones – Union Scab”). They campaigned, not for a Red takeover, but for a new America, reimagined under their somewhat utopian terms. Such progressive ideas were often fiercely resisted – Joe Hill was executed by firing squad in Utah, and cremated, ashes moved to Chicago and distributed from there to every IWW local because he didn’t “want to be caught dead in Utah.”⁸ Woody Guthrie – no conservative – owned a guitar during WW2 painted with the sentiment “This Machine Kills Fascists.” Isolationism was more a mark of the right wing.



Joe Hill

Soldiers in the late 30’s-early 40’s who were identified as troublemakers were often called “Bolsheviks.” A good fictional treatment of soldier attitudes about these issues is found in the stockade chapters of James Jones’s magnificent *From Here to Eternity*; these themes are not in the film, which appeared in the height of the McCarthy era. Fellow prisoner Malloy, a Gandhiesque progressive and no stranger to Army stockades, acts al-

⁷ Almost forgotten are the draconian measures enforced by the Wilson administration after the United States entered the war in 1917, actions that make the recent Patriot Act seem insignificant.

⁸ *I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night
Alive as you or me.
Says I “but Joe, you’re ten years dead.”
“I never died” said he,
“I never died” said he.*

I heard Pete Seeger perform this in the 1980’s at – get this – West Point. Pete was deeply involved in cleaning up the Hudson River, and we were both associated with West Point’s Constitution Island Association.

most as a *sensei* to the naïve Private Robert E. Lee Prewitt, promoting doctrines, familiar at the time, of passive resistance and an almost Zenlike detachment.

Leftist sentiments produced by the Depression were still so strong during the War that mass rallies supporting the Soviet Union and pressing for a Second Front could draw hundreds of thousands in large cities. This was a confused time, one of vast and seething intellectual ferment⁹, conflicting themes and goals brought together by the juxtaposition of economic distress, loss of faith, and a hard war. The Depression effectively ended with the vast government defense spending by 1940 (rather than to any direct effects of the New Deal, which were largely palliative), and with the burst of new and welcome prosperity many assumptions changed – but some did not. The Depression years had nurtured a new sense of social justice in America – one that often went in strange and sometimes perverse directions, but assumed a permanence that assures its survival to this day.

Town and country

There was an enormous difference between regions and between urban and rural areas that seems alien to us now. For one thing, there was no great leveler like television to present a picture of anything “diverse.” Regional dialects were much more noticeable then, to the extent that northern visitors had a tough time understanding the talk in the Deep South, and nobody could make much of New Jersey’s linguistic mix. Though it is hard to believe, until the Tennessee Valley Authority transformed the back country there were people in the hollows and woods of Appalachia who had never seen a town, a toilet, or an electric light; there were pockets where the spoken language was the dialect of English from the time of Elizabeth I (only fishermen on tiny Tangier Island in the Chesapeake still use it, mostly to confound the tourists); on the Sea Islands that dot the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina there were former fugitive slaves whose English was laced with words and grammatical quirks of Mende, a native African dialect, mixed with the English of three centuries ago.



Large cities like New York were still ethnically divided and linguistically polyglot. There were prominent newspapers like the *Vorwärts* (Forward) still printed in Yiddish (a German dialect full of Hebrew words and written in Hebrew characters); Italian was still spoken in many homes in ethnic neighborhoods, and you could hear Russian on every side in Brighton Beach (you still can!). But there was a strong identification with America; in those days basketball was a game for big-city Jewish kids, and the flag was everywhere despite worries that the American dream had turned into a nightmare. Recovery was always right around the corner; next year

⁹ In those days the American Left, whatever else they might be accused of, *thought* a lot. Contemporary left-wingers are generally simple-minded slogan-slingers by comparison.

we'll be "in the money." Meanwhile, America's own Outfit prospered, providing security and a certain amount of income redistribution beyond the legal limits of government policy; names like Alphonse Capone, Meyer Lansky, and Lucky Luciano became household words as mob bosses took care of their little corners of the land of the dollar bill.

Farms were generally small and mortgaged to the hilt. Their productivity was on a downhill slide at the same time that industry tanked, for reasons of poor soil conservation and a deflationary collapse of commodities. Farmers plowed their fields in straight lines, which meant that rain was sluiced down the furrows, carrying rich topsoil with it into the nearest river. Creeks choked with silt, rivers clogged and required dredging, and topsoil disappeared until smaller crops were all the land could support. Agricultural areas in Tennessee, for example, looked like postapocalyptic desert wasteland by the mid-Thirties because farmers had no idea how to farm.



The Department of Agriculture had its hands full. Scientific farming methods headed off disaster – “contour farming,” in which farmers ploughed along terrain contours to trap rainwater runoff and preserve topsoil, saved millions of acres. (In the drive for profits, most large corporate farms no longer bother, and colossal quantities of topsoil parade past New Orleans and into the brown Gulf of Mexico, taking troublesome chemical traces with them.) When crop surpluses drove down the price of commodities, the Feds started paying subsidies *not* to grow crops. (This weirdly sound idea drew a lot of ridicule: “I decided to start small and *not* raise 300 acres of soybeans.”)

The North/South split was particularly dramatic. The South was still devastated by war and reconstruction (less than eighty years before) – heavily rural, oppressively segregated (racism wasn't subtle then), and with a sense of separateness that is only a rumor now. The general attitude was “*Fergit? Nevah!*” (I was raised in east and north Texas – *trust me.*) In some small towns the main source of municipal income was the speed trap for transient Yankees. The South would not recover from Reconstruction, properly speaking, until the 1960's, and the Civil War (or War Between the States, as it tended to be known in the old Confederacy – or the “late unpleasantness” or “War of Northern Aggression”) was a living memory, not just living history. My great grandfather fought with the 4th Tennessee. When I was three I was introduced to a veteran—or so I am assured—and he reportedly sang me a song about “Shiloh's Hill.” That's a suggestion of how little time has actually passed.



Travel

Americans had been relative stay-at-homes until the Depression; economic necessity and the disorganization of routine commerce obliged even the employed to move about as never before, and this created its own set of challenges.

The interstate highway system was far in the future. Roads were two-lane affairs with chuck holes and soft shoulders. Route 66 ran from Chicago to Los Angeles; it was new, in



fairly good repair, and travelers could “get their kicks.” Automobiles were cheap (a rare benefit of currency deflation), and most families with employment could manage, though in the South and rural areas an amazing amount of utility movement was still horse-powered. But the switch from oats to gasoline was accelerating far more than in Europe (which would have consequences in WW2). For one thing, America is BIG – there are comparatively vast distances to cross to get anywhere different from where you started. But long-distance travel with your Model T Ford (fix or repair daily/found on road dead) or your Oldslowmobile was risky – service stations were much more dispersed, roads were worse, and vehicle operation depended heavily on driver

maintenance. If you made it to a garage, it might take a week or two to get that 1932 Packard fan belt and a tin of Dapper Dan¹⁰ hair treatment. Tires were not tubeless – air pressure was enclosed in a rubber inner tube used only as a beach toy by the Fifties. When it was punctured, you had to dismount the wheel, remove the tire, and patch the inner tube with your handy repair kit, without which no prudent driver would leave home, and for mastery of which a Boy Scout received a merit badge. After America entered the war, things got worse – the major auto manufacturers were busy with war contracts, and you had to keep the old whoopee going with chewing gum and bailing wire and God’s tender mercies. America had embraced automobiles like no other place, and the generation of Americans that formed the Army was unusually well-acquainted with repairing engines. The huge consumer auto sector was easily redirected to the production of tanks, trucks, and aircraft, and Americans knew how to keep them running.

Buses were around and busy, but a long trip by motor coach was hard and unpleasant. It was tolerable because life in general was hard and at least you could sit on a bus unless there was only standing room and there were no “bus bulls” to beat the crap out of passengers; and in those days, a man *always* yielded his seat to a lady. It was fairly cheap (and you could buy a box lunch of fried chicken and bread and butter for a small fee). Hobos regarded bus travel as a lazy man’s activity—taking the Greyhound was known as

¹⁰ I think this particular brand was a Coen Brothers invention, but similar pomades were commonly used by men. The “dry look” was not popular until the 60’s.

"doggin' it."

Air travel was for the rich and the suicidal—ask Will Rogers and Carole Lombard.

That left the railroads. Travel by train was the same in the early 50's as in the previous two decades, so my personal experiences are relevant. The rail system was still king when I was little, and we routinely rode the ATSF (Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad – hobos called it the “All Tramps Set Free”) from Dallas, where we lived, to California to meet my Navy father's ship. This was a *crack* train, the Texas Eagle. Crack trains usually connected major cities (like the Twentieth Century Limited between New York and Chicago) and had a more genteel clientele and steeper ticket price. Crack trains left and arrived as close to schedule as possible, which isn't saying much, and had their amenities – a lounge car where you could get a



20th Century Limited, 1936

drink, read a magazine, play cards; a dining car with meals served by waiters (all black) in starched and immaculate white cotton jackets and bow ties; a Pullman car or two with interesting small staterooms that had the most amazing bathroom I have ever seen outside the Space Shuttle, an upper and lower sleeping berth that folded into sofa and chair during the day, and a window on the world on one side of the tracks.

And what a world! The ATSF Eagle left Dallas at about eleven AM (just before departure the conductor would take the kids to the front to look at the eagle logo painted on the front of the locomotive), and by summer dusk we were in the dining car watching the chaparral of mesquite and prickly pear slide past, enlivened now and then by a jackrabbit clearing the tracks in a big hurry. At dawn we were in Phoenix, routinely five hours – to the minute! – behind schedule. Breakfast in the dining car, and when we returned to our room the beds had been magically stripped, remade, and folded away. This was living!



Of course, not everybody cared to pay the tariff for a room. There were roomettes and sleeper berths (just a bunk with a curtain for privacy where you dressed, undressed and tried to sleep; it was thanks to an errant curtain on the Texas Eagle in 1951 that I had my first glimpse of a naked lady!). And I could watch America out of the windows.

Arlo Guthrie sang about another crack train, the City of New Orleans. He made two brief points about “freight yards full of old black men” and “the graveyards of the rusted automobiles.” The view out those windows wasn't always that appetizing, particularly as you entered an urban area and approached the yards and the station. People with money did not want to live near the tracks, so the more depressing lives and livelihoods played

out there. I saw the dirty long johns of America on those trips, and have never forgotten the sight. “The conductor sings his song again:”

*Passengers will please refrain
From flushing toilets while the train
Is standing in the station, if you please.
If you feel you must pass water
Then our porter, for a quarter
Brings a vessel to your vestibule.*

(Tune: “Humoresque.” Makes you wonder about all those long walks down the tracks.)

And there was coach. On a crack train it was much like Amtrak coaches today, with plush seats. But there were also the trains that were not, emphatically, in the “crack” category. Worst perhaps was the Louisville & Nashville, called the L&N or, more descriptively, the “Long & Nasty.” The seats were wooden benches, and the train stopped at every town – even the deserted ones. It was like eight hours on the St. Charles Street Car Line (if you’ve ever been to New Orleans) or a weekend at Riker’s Island police holding facility during an earthquake.

Note also that strategic movement in the borders of the US was by train – millions of troops moved from training camps to marshalling areas at the ports by train. Stations in major cities were constantly crowded with servicemen boarding and changing trains, hugging wives or sweethearts or even less formal acquaintances.

Another aspect of travel that would surprise time-travelers from the present: people dressed much more formally, even on the train. Most men wore business suits; men and women wore hats. You did not see the crass informality that prevails today. Casual dress was seen as a mark of lower social class, uncultured attitudes, and frank idiocy. Low class and casual culture were things Americans were sensitive about¹¹, and most preferred to be accused of “putting on the Ritz” rather than be regarded as slovens. No man wore shorts except kids and swimmers, and if you were a woman you didn’t wear slacks unless you were Katharine Hepburn. A tee-shirt was white and an item of underwear; the later use of the tee-shirt as a fashion statement had not occurred to the market. Men’s hair was neatly combed and held in place with hair oil (Wildroot Cream Oil was popular). A man felt undressed without a hat (even bindlestiffs, who called a hat a “louse cage”). A man simply did not appear outdoors bare headed.

It was the way to travel. Things happened on a train ride – you met new people, connected with girls, heard talk and lived a fairly easy life for a day or two. Today, travel is generally an intermission between acts of life; on the train, travel was a part of life. Now you pay premium to ride the Amtrak California Zephyr and relive a more relaxed time. I have come to believe that we’ve lost something.

¹¹ Societies that pride themselves on being classless tend to be excruciatingly sensitive to class distinction.

Amusement

I've always hated the word "entertainment." It suggests that if I am not provided something to watch or to do, I will melt into a stinky puddle like the Wicked Witch of the West. But humans no longer spend their lives trying to find food and evade predators, so we have a need for activity and engagement for their own sake.

Something we have forgotten is that kids' lives were far less scheduled. Kids "went out to play," they weren't hauled to soccer league or other supervised activities. Usually "play" was baseball or stickball, beating each other senseless, or just hanging out. I have no reason to believe it was any safer with Boo Radley lurking in the shadows than Jeffrey Dahmer, but parents didn't worry as much—possibly because the birth rate was higher. I'm not certain what divine security service got me out of the early fifties alive and unmaimed.

How did adults find their fun in those days?

Well, there was always the movies. This was a golden age of film because choices were limited. In addition, life was so tough it was a welcome break from routine to see other people either doing something about it, enjoying things the average schmuck didn't have, or living in some place or time when things were better.

Social conscience films like "Of Mice and Men" and "The Grapes of Wrath" evoked a sense of hope in people, a stubborn belief that the answers to poverty, injustice, and hopelessness lay within us – that we could make things better if we just found the strength and the idealism. Such films might be slightly cynical ("My Man Godfrey") or unabashedly optimistic ("Meet John Doe"). Social conservatives—that is, people who had some money left—tended to regard such films as subversive. Most people just enjoyed the diversion.



Others simply wanted to see on the screen the things they couldn't have: Fred and Ginger dancing in formal wear, Busby Berkeley musicals with long-legged girls (like the original "42nd Street"), and the life styles of the rich and flaky. It was fantasy, but America could still dream. Such movies were like the store window at Macy's before Christmas, full of gleaming toys in a holiday display with young, runny noses pressed against the glass.

Or, you could just opt out and go somewhere else. Maybe the Old West, where people lived off the land, minded their business, shot straight (and shot bad guys) and never lied. During hard times there is always the dream of a *better place* – during the calamitous high Middle Ages there was the Land of Cockayne, with all the food you could eat and no pesky bubonic plague; in the 1700's we could dream of Fiddler's Green. In the Depression there was always the Big Rock Candy Mountain ("Where the bulldogs all have wooden teeth/And the hens lay soft-boiled eggs"). This was the destination in "The Wizard of Oz" – a land somewhere over the rainbow where sadness is a distant memory. They even had Technicolor there. The film was about hope and home; L. Frank Baum's original story, by

contrast, was possibly a satire on the 1900 Presidential election and the issue of free silver monetary policy (Dorothy's magic shoes were originally silver), argued by the brainless farm worker (Scarecrow), the heartless industrial worker (Tin Woodsman), and William Jennings Bryan's cowardly lion against William McKinley's mendacious Wizard.

Anywhere but here.

Popular songs reflected the same note of wistful optimism. "Blue Skies," "We're in the Money," and others sounded a note of hope around the corner. Others were pure escape. The Big Band sound gave us a little bit of class in dreary lives. We should also recall that this was before a multibillion-dollar entertainment industry drove constant changes in style or extended a particular genre long after it would have died a natural death. People still knew and sang songs from the Civil War; Kate Smith did a rousing "Listen to the Mocking Bird." In rural areas music tended to folk, and even the record industry (as noted in "O Brother Where Art Thou") found pure gold in "old-timey" and religious themes.

Radio: *ah, radio*. My father was a Naval officer, but also an electronics engineer, and as a kid had been one of the first ham radio operators. He watched me build my first crystal receiver from scratch when I was 11 (early fifties), and at night I could put on the ear-phone and hear the broadcast frequencies. It was better than TV because I made it myself and could lie awake much of the night and nobody would know. The format was very different before television blanked out much of what radio was doing. There were weekly radio dramas, for all ages – mysteries like "Mister Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons" and "The Shadow"; dramas such as "The Count of Monte Cristo"; scary regulars like "Weird Circle." There was "Little Orphan Annie."

There was also the durable "soap opera" (so called because many were sponsored by commercial cleaning products like Ivory Snow; they were generally daytime programs and targeted at housewives). One of the longest-running was "The Romance of Helen Trent," which endlessly asked the question "can a woman of 35 still find romance?" (Apparently not; when the series, long since migrated to television, ended in 1960¹² Helen was still single – and, amazingly, still 35 after 37 years of air time.)

There was music. The opera was broadcast from New York and Chicago. One announcer in Nashville who had his fill of "La Traviata" announced one evening with twanging enthusiasm at station break before the weekly country program: "You've heard the *Grand Oper-ah* – now it's time for the *Grand Old Opry!*" and a legend was born. I'm not making this up.

Country and Western was about half Western in those days. Gene Autry and the Sons of the Pioneers cut record after record that sold out in stores and dominated the local radio stations. Tex Ritter (father of the late actor John Ritter) was the only man outside Metropolitan France who could actually sing through his nose. Corny it might have been, but the West was seen as idyllic, at least it did if you weren't in an overloaded jalopy with bad shocks bouncing along a dirt road, leaving a foreclosed farm behind you and heading

¹² And ended with a flourish; in the last week of broadcast, every single character died, usually in agony. That year saw a massacre of soap operas as TV moved to new formats, and some of the writers had their revenge in this macabre way.

for an uncertain fate in California. This sometimes made the West lose a bit of its luster. And there was no common ground between CW and “pop” – the latter did not exist in the form we know it, and what was “popular” was basically any musical style that was not regional.

Fairs and circuses were still great attractions in those days. The big one was the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey. It still tours, but now the performances are in the local civic center. Back then, the action was under the Big Top – the circus stopped at a fair ground and put up its huge tents (since abandoned after some fatal fires pushed liability insurance costs through the lofty canvas roof). The animals were big and smelly and glumly institutionalized; the action was live. The greatest day of my childhood was the one where I cut school (second grade!) with my perpetually delinquent cousin Day-Day and hitched a ride to the midway near the Cotton Bowl to catch the circus. Cotton candy was a big treat; the fact that it is now available at grocery stores in a plastic bag stands as a leading indicator of the decay of our culture, to say nothing of our teeth. The chili dog and the corn dog (a frankfurter deep-fried with corn meal) were available from vendors, and the side show was to die for. (The chili dogs were to die *of*.)

And the State Fair – also near the Cotton Bowl – was a draw, though it put aside big acts in favor of sideshows, carny games, and livestock. The smells of corn dogs, cotton candy, and cow manure still dwell in memory (and my mother burned my wool shirt).

At the bottom of the scale was the county fair, and none were so memorable as those in the South. By the time I was emerging from my teens, the county fair had declined into a form so lowbrow that families tended to stay away – I remember

mostly that stark three minutes when my Citadel classmate Bubba Crouch wrestled the orangutan at the fair in North Charleston for a pot of \$300 (Bubba was always short of cash, which you sort of have to be to consider wrestling an ape. He’s now a lawyer, or was last time I checked; having been cured of striving with discriminating primates, he now handles divorces).

But in earlier days, the fair was an alternative to the movies or radio, and there were always surprises – fights, for example, huge bets on he-man hammer competition, or – best of all – your eight year old cousin Robby’s projectile vomit from the top of the Rocket Ride.

Life was simpler and a lot cheaper, but just as exciting without video games.

Reading was a bit different as well. On the book side of the equation was the split between “literature” and “pulp”, the latter being a reference to cheap production standards that included soft cover binding and a coarse, newsprint paper. You could almost see the wood chips. Pulp has evolved into “mass market,” but in the 40’s it was an extremely popular medium for science fiction, mysteries and, of course, pornography (which was then



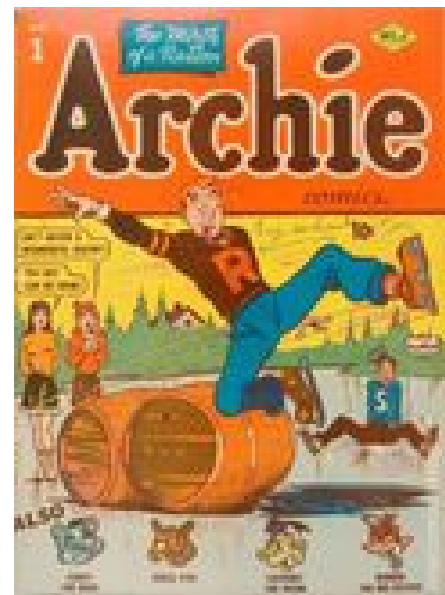
Texas State Fair 1940

far from mainstream and against the law in quite a few places). Literature was a hardcover medium, and included classics and popular authors who had clawed their way up from pulp (like Hemingway). A few pulp mystery writers like Mickey Spillane and Dashiell Hammett, were in a sort of limbo between the two states. SF¹³ had its beginnings in pulp specialty magazines of the 40's with lurid covers that usually featured tentacled critters with multiple hands outraging half-clad but fully developed women in distress. (A woman I dated long ago had a collection of old SF pulpies from olden days, and observed that dating behavior on Earth appears to be similar to that on distant planets, particularly the multiple hands.)

Magazines were much more widely read than now, as there was less competition from other media. *Life* was the visual medium in the days when still photos were the art form, and the *Saturday Evening Post* was growing to provide an outlet for promising writers. The *New Yorker* was the highbrow choice, and you could look sophisticated when you were really just checking out the cartoons – this hasn't changed in 70 years. *Police Gazette* had nothing to do with law enforcement and everything to do with girls not wearing much – clearly a durable historical trend.

And the funnies. The Sunday comics were far more prominent in pop culture in those days. One of Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia's most inspired stunts was to read the Sunday funnies over the radio during New York's newspaper strike. How many now alive know that Dagwood Bumstead was the heir to a fortune and gave it all up to marry a flapper named Blondie? From early in the Depression, Al Capp's innocent hillbilly community of Dogpatch and its native son Li'l Abner kept luckless people in stitches. (Nowadays it would be considered insensitive to native Appalachian rural folk culture, or whatever hillbillies are called these days.) Li'l Abner's "ideel" Fearless Fossdick was a frank sendup of the then-serious Dick Tracy; Fearless was a hapless detective who managed to shoot huge bullet holes in innocent bystanders and was sort of a prototype for Inspector Clouseau. Everybody followed "Little Orphan Annie"; my grandmother's favorite expression was "leapin' lizards!" from that comic. Annie's lesson was apparently that people without pupils never grow old.

And comics. Archie was being stalked by Betty and Veronica even in the early 40's and has still managed to ward them off 70 years later (Archie and Jughead have certifiably the longest tenure in any American high school; apparently even social promotion is out of their reach). Superman was battling crime and kryptonite (he would soon turn to Nazis), and the superhero archetype was about to flower with the beginning of war. Everybody knows Donald Duck's nephews are



¹³ "Sci Fi" is a term used only by casual readers; true fans still recognize only "SF."

named Huey, Dewey, and Louie; how many know what Mickey's nephews were named?¹⁴ Pluto was Mickey's dog (a mouse has a pet dog?); so, what was Goofy?¹⁵

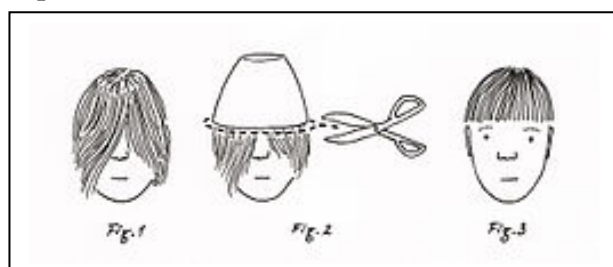
People back then

Accounts and complaints by old codgers, as well as my own dimmest recollections, suggest some general observations about Americans in the 1940's.

We were generally skinnier, particularly the men. This was the result of different diet and a more active life. No one was fat because of a greedy gut – your pal who was packing extra weight had a “gland problem.” The dark side was the nutritional disaster brought about by the Depression: large numbers of volunteers and draftees had to be turned away because of deficiency disorders. Of course, they got high-paying jobs and didn't get shot at except by jealous husbands unexpectedly home on leave or furlough.

As noted above, Americans tended to dress more formally. Jeans were not tailored (they were cut long and you just rolled up the cuffs) and were sold to provide durable work clothes. Kids wore them quite a lot because they lasted forever (important in Hard Times) and could be handed down to younger brothers. Underwear was cotton or linen, and jockey shorts did not exist. There were no specialty running shoes – there were tennis shoes and sturdy basketball shoes (US Keds – smelly shoes I have known!). Boys wore shorts in summer; girls wore dresses.

Haircuts were different. Men's hair was trimmed neatly and tapered on the sides and back, but tended to be longer on top (where it was covered by the hat). Boys sometimes sported what was called the “chili bowl” haircut in the South, referring to a style that



might result from putting a bowl over a poor kid's head and chopping the sides. Moses Horwitz – “Moe” of the Three Stooges – affected a chili bowl coiffure. A haircut was a big event, a chance to catch up on the news and get a shave as well (prepared by draping a blistering hot towel over your face). Safety razors were the rage (and easier – and safer!

– than the old stropped straight razor), but the blades were not stainless steel and had to be changed after every use if you didn't want your face to look like no man's land.

I am pleased to report that the panty hose (an idea that almost by itself choked off the baby boom) had not been invented, and stockings were kept up by attachment to a much sexier garter belt. Stockings were typically silk and not seamless, either, and had a dark line down the back that young women of a certain liberal world view were always “straightening” to help the war effort. Women frequently wore a sturdy girdle (say that rapidly four or five times) with dangling clips to hold up the stockings; the system cinched in the waist a bit, but also made for a structurally rigid rear end. Silk became a

¹⁴ Morty and Ferdie.

¹⁵ Unknown to this day.

strategic material thanks in part to the sudden need for parachutes¹⁶, and stockings were expensive. Nylon was an impossible luxury, but soon so common that women's stockings were called "nylons." Nylons also lacked the sexy seam.

One style resulted in mindless pushback. The zoot suit, a whimsical exaggerated Edwardian cut jacket and accessories originally popular among jazz musicians spread to the black and Latino communities. The excessive use of fabric, discouraged by the War Production Board, was on triggering factor of race riots in Los Angeles (the zoot suit riots) and other large cities.

Racism in the 1940's was neither subtle nor argued – it was real and everywhere. Integration was not a word in circulation then. Yes, "coloreds" sat at the back of the bus, used different water fountains and rest rooms, and had their own hotels.

Racial attitudes different in the North and South. Dick Gregory put it best some years later: "In the South they don't care how close you get as long as you don't get too big; in the North they don't care how big you get as long as you don't get too close." They were also contradictory. My grandparents in Dallas had old friends and family retainers who were well liked and respected, as well as Hispanic acquaintances. But both races were considered inferior and to be shunned except for the ones you knew, who were invariably wonderful people. The logical disconnect never seemed to occur to anybody. My paternal grandfather had a companion of color when he was growing up, a somewhat older boy named "Cricket" who watched out for him. Decades later, Cricket was still around, doing yard work for the family and (I later learned) running a prosperous wholesale plumbing supply business in North Dallas.

Men's clubs were popular. My grandfather belonged to the Dallas Athletic Club (which mostly promoted genteel drinking and poker); my maternal grandfather was a 33rd degree Scottish Rite Mason. There were similar organizations for people of color (note the Mystic Knights of the Sea in the Amos 'n Andy parody). The point of such groups seems to have been (1) getting away from the wife for a while, (2) making business contacts, and (3) acting like an idiot in private. The last is an important missing link in men's lives today; we currently tend to do it in public (locally) and on social media (worldwide).



Zoot suits—note the long watch chain (left figure), a common accessory, and tight cuffs on loose trousers.

¹⁶ British unconventional war pioneer Orde Wingate, while using long-range independent ground operations in Burma, needed to supply his columns by air. Silk was scarce; working with the US Army Air Corps he invented a cargo parachute made of burlap and called, naturally, the "parajute."

How did the general population regard servicemen? Certainly they were the saviors of America and of the world, supermen and lovable big boys. They were appreciated best, however, at a distance. Up close and in large numbers they became a nuisance and a target for scams. Small towns near Army camps were overrun with hordes of lonely, stressed, and horny young men who got into fights, pissed in the alleys, stole the local girls, passed out in the gutters, and made it hard to find a place to sit in a bar on the weekend.¹⁷ MPs were everywhere in the towns and cities, where local law enforcement was overwhelmed. At any moment, the equivalent of an army corps was in jail, in transit, AWOL, or just unaccounted for. Controlling an “instant army” took enormous resources of diligent firmness and patience; ultimately the best answer was to ship them overseas and turn them loose against the enemy; even the AWOLs could only annoy the French, who are easily annoyed.

Around the time of my birth, my father was assigned to the US Navy Submarine School in New London, CT. My mother lived in nearby Groton Long Point in a small apartment. The landlord had a habit of turning down the heat during the day and increasing it just before the husbands returned from training. Nothing was too good for our servicemen.¹⁸



Some places were overwhelmed with uniforms. Ports were particularly crowded – Norfolk, Boston, San Diego, Long Beach, San Francisco. There were large numbers stationed in those areas, but even more transients because these were ports of embarkation. Cities had to roll with the punch. Amusements thrived, of course – there was the Pike, an interesting boardwalk and amusement area in Long Beach, for example, that was still booming during the Korean War. I have been told that Templeton the rat retired there, but this may be imagination run wild. Certainly his descendents haunted the place after closing time. My childhood home escaped

¹⁷ The resentment of some towns towards servicemen lasted for decades. Fayetteville, NC outside Fort Bragg (“Fayette Nam” to those who were there) in the early Sixties had a habit of posting two prices in the coffee shops – one for locals and a higher one for soldiers. The CG of XVIII Airborne Corps put a stop to this in about 1963. In those days we paid soldiers in cash. LTG Train had the soldiers paid in rare \$2 bills. For months, Fayetteville was flooded with portraits of Thomas Jefferson, conclusively demonstrating why this jerkwater place was still solvent. The message got through (the locals were mean, not stupid) and the dual-price policy ended.

At the other extreme was Phenix City, Alabama, across the majestic Chattahoochee River from Fort Benning Georgia. Phenix city was run by a tough redneck mob and 14th Street was overrun with bars, gambling houses, and prostitution during and after the war. Cleaning the town up was a job for the National Guard.

¹⁸ The uncle of a childhood buddy dropped off a pair of shoes to be repaired on the 4th of December, 1941. On the 9th, he enlisted in the Marines and fought through the entire war. The shoes never entered his mind until he returned in early 1946 and found the claim ticket on his dresser. He took the ticket to the cobbler, who was still in business, and asked for the shoes. The cobbler looked at the ticket, rummaged around in the back of the shop for a while, then handed the claim back. “Be ready on Thursday.”

most of that infelicitous time – the only place you could get to from Dallas was Fort Worth, and only Dallas was then at war with Fort Worth.

On the other hand, port cities boomed with the influx of money and the demand for goods and services. The end of the war meant cold turkey for more than one boom town.

Trivia

Copper was a strategic material, and for a while pennies were made of a zinc compound.

So was chromium; for most of the 40's, Christmas ornaments were clear or tinted glass, not shiny and metallic. They seemed ugly at the time, but eventually got “mellow” and evocative of a past when life was slower and the whole world was enthusiastically beating itself senseless.

During the winter, much of the Army in the continental US was at any moment involved in firing and maintaining coal furnaces. (This did not change until the 70's, when environmental concerns forced a change to oil; the next year the oil embargo drove prices up and Congress, which had mandated the change from coal on military installations, held hearings to discover why the Army had done something so stupid. As a captain at Fort Meade I became an expert in anthracite buckwheat coal.) There was a smell in the air that is missing now – or at least gone, I'm not convinced anybody actually *misses* it – and the presence of coal dust was a part of life.

Air conditioning hadn't been invented, at least not in a way that helped anybody. One of my first memories is driving across the desert in the legendary cream puff, a 1947 Ford coupe (in those days, called a “COO-PAY”)—that godawful stretch from El Paso to San Diego via Tucson, Gila Bend, and Yuma, with open windows, dust coating everything, and a big gray thermos of ice water. The main highway was dotted with chuckholes that filled with blowing sand; as the car approached, lizards would sense the vibration and scamper out of the way. My father joked about a transitional zone between Sweetwater and Abilene where the road kill shifted from raccoon to armadillo.¹⁹

Despite the fact that the rest of the world was starving, burning, being depopulated and turned to rubble, America was actually booming by 1943. We had millions of young men from the labor force overseas, creating even more millions of jobs at home. Factories ran around the clock, shift on shift. Silk stockings and parts for the jalopy were hard to get, but movies, restaurants, and night clubs were packed. Deflation had been chased away by huge government contracts and bond issues, and inflation was hard pressed to catch up to incredible productivity absent since 1932 and then set loose like a mighty river pent up behind a fiscal dam. Johnny was gone, but good old 4F Jody was still around, and nobody was geeky enough to lack for a date—it was an ugly guy's paradise. In Leningrad people were starving or eating pancakes of fried Vaseline and sawdust or, *in extremis*,

¹⁹ Almost forgotten is the fact that armadillos, aside from being the only mammal other than man that suffers from leprosy, are good eating. In the 30's, people called them “Hoover hogs.”

their dead. In Baltimore people bitched because *ersatz* margarine wasn't as tasty as real butter.

Toys had a military feel then, and were often made of stamped metal with springs and sparks. Toy guns were in the hands of every boy (who knew how long the war would go on?). Plastic was starting to be used for toys, but was not as ubiquitous as now because both plastic and its source material (oil) were strategic materials. Kids played Army, drilled, and imagined killing Japs. They couldn't wait to reach draft age.



New York City was obnoxious even then.

Yes, you could put a penny on the railroad track and the train would flatten it; no, the practice was never known to have derailed a train.

It was the age of the Quonset hut. This was an instant building made of a half-cylinder of corrugated steel (dozens could be stacked up on a freighter or an LST) with plank in-nards. Very large ones could contain a maintenance shed with a grease rack. Smaller ones could shelter troops. When I was little, my father (a Navy lieutenant commander in 1947) was authorized family quarters of half a quonset hut when he was teaching electrical engineering (“juice”) at Annapolis. We had two tiny bedrooms, a bathroom with shower, and that was it. At Mare Island Naval Shipyard near San Francisco as late as 1959, a Navy captain (equivalent to a full colonel) afloat – that is, assigned to a ship and not part of the shore establishment – was authorized a *full* quonset hut. Of course, this was simply two of the units, separated by a center wall. To use his entire quarters, he had to go out one door, walk around to the other side, and enter through the opposite door. This was practical only if you were not getting along with the missus; which, to be fair, was and is an occupational hazard.

Things that now take forever were “expedited.” At peak production in 1944, a liberty ship or victory ship was launched and towed downriver for fitting-out somewhere every 48 hours. The paperwork for OSHA compliance alone would now take months (and thousands of shipyard workers were sucking in lungs full of airborne asbestos). People found ways to do things. Many of our most successful business principles emerged from the pressing need to do the impossible every single day.

Washers and dryers were rare. There was a thing called a mangle (or “wringer”) – two rollers used to squeeze excess water out of clothes so they could be hung out to dry. Clotheslines were everywhere. Of course, running clothes through the mangle after scraping them on the washboard and then drying them in UV-rich sunlight wore them out fast. (The expression “don't get your tit in the wringer” in the sense of “don't get excited” had a more specific meaning then.)

Radiation was your *friend*. Luminous dials on watches and alarm clocks were filled with, get this, *radium salts*. You went to the shoe store and stuck your little feet into the nifty X-Ray machine to watch your tarsals wiggle. When you went to the doctor's office, there was always the amusement of the fluoroscope – a phosphor screen in front of a

powerful X-Ray source that showed your insides life-size and real-time, kryptonite to your fantasies of Superman. Americans “glowed” with health.

Kids wanted to be cowboys. Rock stars didn’t exist in the sense they do now, though Les Paul had invented the electric guitar. Musicians were considered “cool” but few wanted to be like them, and a crooner is not in the same category as a rock singer. And kids didn’t know how tough a cowboy’s life was – “somethin’ yuh do when yuh cain’t do nothin’ else.”

Use of the “f” word began to expand, though not to the current level of dull punctuation. It took a later war to bring that obscenity to its zenith of utilitarian eloquence.

Campbell’s canned soup ruled, and hasn’t improved a bit in 70 years. I created a scene at age 4 by refusing to eat pepper pot from my bunnykins soup bowl.

Medicine finally meant something. Until the 40’s, doctors hadn’t been able to do much for the sick and hurt but make them feel a little better until fortune dictated they would recover or die. With the coming of antibiotics, the practice of medicine surged for the first time since the age of Claudius Galen, when anatomy was studied by following the legions of Rome. The necessity to care for large numbers of wounded on an expedited basis change the way hospitals operate to this day. Treatment of combat fatigue changed psychotherapy. Health became a more complex, more demanding, and more profitable profession, and health care expanded, causing more people to get sick.

The war also vastly expanded the size of government. It has been expanding ever since, with what can most charitably be termed “diminishing returns.” In the 1930’s, before efficient air conditioning, Congress fled DC during the summer and didn’t return until the mosquitoes started to shiver, and when it was in session tended to do less than now, even though there was more to be done. Now it does far more, some would say with less benefit.

America got abruptly homogenized. People who would never have seen each other or people like them were suddenly elbow to elbow. Southerners found new things to hate about the North, and northerners discovered the shortcomings of life in the South. People as unlike as Serbians and Malays – America is a biggish place – suddenly forged a common experiential heritage on Guadalcanal or Sicily or on endless steaming escort duty to Murmansk or Ulithi. A sense of “American” formed that had begun in the Civil War and stalled in the years after.

Old coots

America changes, and sometimes for the better. As an old coot sitting on my front porch (if my condo had one) complaining about the coarsening of American culture, all things are by no means clear; I see through the bottom of a beer mug, darkly. Things are worse, things are better. I just read that Americans are getting obese because of modern HVAC technology – when the temperature is just right, we don’t burn energy regulating body heat. But that’s arguably better than lunch at a diner in El Paso when it’s 110 degrees outside and only 90 inside under the ceiling fans that move the hot air around and there

are little bitty fly tracks in the guacamole and “coloreds” and Mexicans have to eat somewhere else. It’s a matter of perspective.

We have a prejudice for an older, simpler time; but that time varies a lot. I remember Li'l Abner; my kids remember classic Scooby Doo. I'm not certain there is a trend illustrated here other than the neuropathic inevitability of dumb.

The 1940's constituted a unique time, and one remembered by our fathers (well, your grandfathers or worse) as a golden time because they were young and doing something important. For most of the world, the 40's sort of sucked; but the times to come were in many ways better than the times that had been, if anyone was prescient enough to know it. I'm beginning to understand all this; the strange, sad feeling of time gone by brings me to a halt when I hear the haunting Beatle tune “Eleanor Rigby” and can't help but recall they were playing it on Armed Forces Radio the morning we crossed into Cambodia. The times were always better then because we were young, as the times always seem better before you need "Vitamin M" (Motrin) and Metamucil to get through the day.

Think about the old guys, the veterans who are so much the inspiration for what we do. They came from another age, an age they saw through the eyes of their youth.

They do so even now.