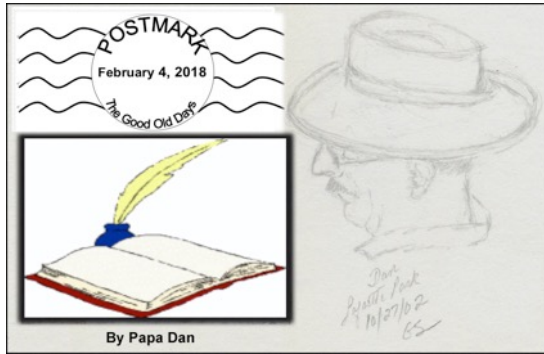


The Good Old Days?

By Dan Sapone



**“Nothing is more responsible for
‘the good old days’ than a bad memory.”**

— Franklin P. Adams

“These are the good old days.”

— Carly Simon

We’ve All Heard It— Or Said it — Some Version of It

I’ve heard it a number of times lately, in various forms, by people of different ages or with very different points of view — myself included — some version of:

“How did we get here? Things were never this bad back in _____”
(and here we fill in the blank with our version of ‘a better time’)

Mighta been “back in the 1950s, when I was a kid,” Or maybe “back in my thirties when my kids were little.” Some might offer: “The 1970s, when I was a kid.” Or “at the peak of my career when I was at the top of my game.” Or “back when movies were better” or “back when the government worked better” or “when I could hit consistently from the three-point-circle.” Or how about “when the world (or the country or the city or the neighborhood) was safer (or cleaner, friendlier, easier to understand or had less traffic)?” Or “two years ago, before . . .”

You know: “The Good Old Days.” You remember.

I suspect each generation can recall a decade or a year (or a month or a day or even a place) when/where the things that are annoying or troublesome or frightening about today were NOT happening (or at least did not seem so annoying or troublesome or frightening in our memory). Do you have a memory of such a time — a time that you remember as being better than today in some way? I bet you have some images in your mind that represent what was better about that time. Were the people better, more reliable, more friendly, smarter? Were the choices available to you more appealing back then? Easier to achieve? Less of a struggle? More fun? Did stuff make more sense to you? Were those times really better?

A Well-Used Example

People my age (the ‘baby-boom’ generation) like to talk about the 1950s and early 1960s, remembering it as a time of stability and simplicity, when music was more harmonious, when post-war America was expanding its prosperity and influence in the world and building lots of shiny new things — cars and highways, and buildings, and corporations, and ... stuff. Maybe we remember that we liked our neighborhood better somehow.

Just for fun, let’s take a look at that time, just was an example. We’ve got pictures ...



Some of us remember the time before seat belts, riding in the back of station wagons and pick-up trucks. It was a time when there weren't so many rules; but I guess we don't want to think about the danger we were in every day. Seat belts started showing up at the end of the 1950s and many of us actually started using them in the mid-1960s.

Other memories come to mind from that era —



Remember when eight-track stereo (left) started showing up in cars about 1964? And when they were replaced by cassette players in the late 1970s? Yes, this was way before CDs (1982). But, we're getting ahead of ourselves. Here's what really mattered at the end of the 1950s:



Before any of us cared about cars, here is how you found your friends in the neighborhood in the 1950s. Here, they're all down the street at Kelly's (he had a swimming pool).



And do you remember when you (OK, your parents) could drive up to a hamburger place (like A&W or the “Panther Drive-In” in Antioch) and the ‘Car Hop’ would come out to the car (sometimes on roller skates) and serve your food on one of these window trays? (What do you mean you never went to the Panther Drive-In in Antioch? There was a time when it was the center of the universe. Didn’t you know?)

Me? OK, I hung out at Fosters Freeze.



Surely you remember when every business had a cash register like this one on the left? Maybe you started using an Instamatic camera with flash cubes to take photos around 1963? (It used film — remember film?) *But, most important of all* was the transistor radio, above on the right. I’m sure you, like me, listened to the San Francisco Giants (as described by Russ Hodges and Lon Simmons) on one of these. And, on Saturday mornings, I listened as Emperor Gene Nelson counted down the Top 30 songs on KYA. Then in the late evening on KYA, Big Daddy Tom Donohue played those same songs and read commercials for Clearasil (the Acne Cream). He would sign on at the beginning of his show with these words: “This is your Big Daddy Tom Donohue. I’m here to clear up your face and mess up your mind.” No fooling, he actually said that every night — don’t you remember?

“The Fifties” Come Into Sharper Focus

Those are some of the things that I remember about that era. I claim that “The Fifties,” the fabled time of stability, predictability and good times, lasted from 1950 until November of 1963. After that, troubling, unexpected things started happening — or maybe I just became more

aware of a wider world with more complexity and danger than I had seen before. I learned that America was in a mortal struggle against The Soviet Union who, we were told, wanted to kill us all with nuclear weapons because they believed that we wanted to kill them with those same weapons. When we practiced diving under our desks at school in the event of a nuclear attack, I became painfully aware that the wider world was a threat to us right here in my town.

On the evening news, Walter Cronkite starting telling us some very disturbing things including the fact that my hero at the time had been murdered on the streets of Dallas. When I showed up in high school in 1964, I began to learn that wars were brewing all over the world and Americans not much older than me were being sent to fight in those wars. I learned that while I was having my stable and secure childhood in my peaceful California town, others in my own state lived in towns that had bloody race riots. The only people of color I met growing up were the housekeepers who worked for my mother and basketball players who played for Pittsburg High School in the town next to ours. I wondered why there were no Black students in my high school and none seemed to live in my town. It wasn't until 1968 — about the time that Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were murdered — that I learned that a class-action lawsuit had been filed against realtors who had conspired to make sure that no Blacks moved into Antioch. I remember being shocked and embarrassed as I packed up to go away to college.

Every day, it seemed, there was more distressing news and I became increasing aware that my own stable and peaceful life was an exception, not the rule, and I was living in the middle of troubled times across my country and around the world.

Well, so much for my example of “The Good Old Days.”

Waiting? What Might We Learn?

Just as we learn that it's foolish to look back and wish for a return to “good old days” we think we remember, it also turns out to be foolish to wait for better days ahead. A song I remember from 1971, written and sung by Carly Simon, advises us to invest our energies into making TODAY the best it can be. The song, “*Anticipation*,” tells us that pinning our hopes on the future is wasteful. She wrote:

Anticipation, anticipation
Is makin' me late
Is keepin' me waitin'

She offers this advice:

I'm no prophet and I don't know nature's ways
So I'll try and see into your eyes right now
And stay right here 'cause these are the good old days
These are the good old days. These are the good old days. These are the good old days.

I take her advice to suggest that we have to invest in THIS day. I observe that there is much to like about today — I am surrounded by people who matter to me and who make my life matter. If today is not what we want it to be, we, along with those close to us, have the responsibility to make it better.

My conclusion? The past and the future are both flawed. THESE are the only “Good Old Days” we get. Maybe they're only as good as we make them.

