

SNG-Things different now-3-13-17-revised

Things are sure different now. Why?

By Jim Nowlan

There have been dramatic, unsettling changes in my tiny county of Stark in central Illinois since I was a youngster here in the 1950s.

What the Hell has been going on, I think to myself. And why?

When I was a boy, Stark County's gendarmerie comprised a sheriff and his deputy (in a county of 8,500; 5,900 today). The sheriff's wife was the matron of the jail, in which the family also lived, and she cooked the meals for the prisoners.

Today, the sheriff has nine deputies, some part-time, plus two full-time dispatchers 24/7, and the court has a probation officer.

In my hometown of Toulon (pop. 1,400 then and now), there was a one-armed night watchman who checked main street businesses for unlocked doors. Today, the town has several well-trained, part-time young officers.

At Toulon High School, the principal also served as superintendent of the 12-grade district. Other than teachers, that was it.

Today, we have superintendent, principal, dean of students, guidance counselor, social worker, and school nurses, epi-pens at the ready. (Enrollment in the district is slightly higher today as a result of consolidations.)

I recall when farm boy Gordie Allen brought his new rifle into school to show it off. Nobody paid any attention. If that happened today, all nine deputies would be called out to surround and shut down the school.

The 1856 Greek Revival courthouse, where Lincoln and Douglas spoke on back-to-back days in 1858, had a high-ceilinged courtroom where Atticus Finch would have felt at home.

There were actually trials to determine guilt and innocence. Trials are rare today, but that's a story for another day.

Today, my judge friend laments that much of his time on the bench is devoted to listening to the dramas of woman versus "her man," played out in front of him like a telenovela, each demanding an order of protection from the other. (In adjacent, much larger Peoria County I understand there is a courtroom devoted solely to orders of protection!)

In my day, the several churches in each of the county's small towns provided modest help to the indigent, as did the township governments via "poor relief." They still do.

But in addition, we now have non-profit food pantries in each of our towns as well as two private, county-wide social service organizations.

The latter come up with money, for example, to buy a good used tire for Joe's car so he can get to work in the town a few miles over, and the like. They help the poor whose problems fall through the cracks of our lumbering state social service system.

I will now try to take off my rose-tinted glasses as I look back on a great childhood. Things were far, far from perfect then.

In the South, whites were still lynching blacks (Emmett Till, 1955). Around here, a few/some men beat their wives with impunity; law enforcement didn't cross the threshold to intervene.

I recall as well when the proper ladies of the community decreed that the out-of-wedlock baby of my high school friend Ida Mae be wrenched from her arms and put up for adoption, which it was.

In the 1950s, the broad middle-class had less in real terms, such as undreamed of gadgets like smart-phones and wall-size TVs, than do the poor today. But they had ready access to decent jobs.

Today, the jobs have mostly flown, though some men and women remain here, in the lurch, lacking the education, skills, and confidence to chase them. Too many take refuge in government programs and disability insurance, and maybe even pain-killers paid for by Medicaid.

The option of a demanding \$400-a-week job at 10 bucks an hour versus, say, the equivalent of \$300 in food stamps, housing, heating assistance, Medicaid, and no-questions-asked food pantries, all for no work, is for some, certainly not all, a no-brainer.

Some students of poverty are calling it “learned helplessness.”

[I have come around, late to the party, to the realization that LBJ’s Great Society and War on Poverty programs of the 1960s, though they did elevate some out of poverty, may have been overall among the worst well-intentioned programs ever enacted.]

The overriding, really complex challenge for the future is how to provide support for the increasing numbers among us for whom there will be little work, because of the lightning-speed advances taking place in artificial intelligence. And at the same time work with these folks to develop a sense of purpose for their lives.

Obviously, this discussion and possible “solutions” will have to be continued. All I know is that things are sure different now.