

SNG-Way we were-10-9-17

The way we were, and are

By Jim Nowlan

Garrison Keillor has a gift for recalling the softer, warmer, quirky side of growing up after World War II in small-town America. And he is on target, but only in part.

Here is what I recall from my childhood back then in Lake Wobegon IL, a town of just 1,200.

Life was pretty good in my town for the expanding white middle class. Decent jobs were plentiful at nearby factories.

On hot summer evenings, sans AC of course, couples would sit on their front porch swings to catch a breeze and call out howdys to neighbors strolling by on the sidewalk, trying to do the same.

Saturdays just about every farm family came into our town's bustling main street. Wives would do their marketing at one of the four groceries.

The men might slip down to Charley Hick's barbershop underneath the post office to watch haircuts and spin lies from the rocking chairs. Or slip in the back door—never via the Main Street entrance—to have a beer at Harry Wilson's Café, the one beer emporium in our conservative town.

Others sat in their cars, windows open, parked around the courthouse square, honking in applause to the municipal band's renditions of "Lady of Spain" and spirited Sousa marches. I was always last alto saxophone, no matter how many of us there were.

[In high school, we musicians would enjoy the ice cream social—great berry pies. By college, we would slip up to the Happy Hour in the “big factory town” of Kewanee (pop. 18,000 then; 12,000 today) to quaff a beer. Any fella tall enough to plant his beer money on the bar would be served.]

My early years—the kind Norman Rockwell could have drawn—revolved around family, school, church and Dad’s weekly newspaper. I helped out there by running the clanking, cranky Linotype machine, our version of high tech.

[I was thus saved from the brutally hot, draining work of corn detasseling in summer, which brought decent money to teen boys and girls—if they stuck it out for bonuses at end of season, which most did, with grimaces and real effort.]

But there was a darker side as well:

Whites were still lynching blacks in the South for not knowing their place.

My older brother died at age five of kidney problems, which would be easily resolved today; Mother never really recovered. Mothers also lived in horror that their children would contract the dreaded polio, scourge of the earth then.

[I still shudder at the March of Dimes pasteboard donation placard on the counter at Humphrey’s Café, with the photo of little Johnny entombed though alive in an iron lung. One summer we couldn’t swim at the local lake out of fear.]

And I recall my older sister telling of her new, quite good high school Spanish teacher. Soon after his arrival, it was learned, or thought, that he was a homosexual; we used to say “queer.”

Dad was among the leading men of the community who quickly drove the teacher out of town, "to protect our young."

Divorce was unusual then, though I'm sure many couples suffered miserable lives together. As most women were at home, not working, they had no escape, no place to go, for them and their children.

Today, in addition to the marvelous advances in health care and the new digital technologies, the biggest changes, it seems to me, have been the loss of good-paying jobs and the breakdown of the intact family.

What to do?

I fear the good-paying jobs for the unskilled are gone. And soon even jobs for many "white collar workers" will be lost forever to artificial intelligence.

In an earlier column (go to jimnowlan.com for an archive of columns), I call for "American service credits." This would be government compensation for un- or underemployed workers in return for performing valuable volunteer work, to supplement their income. The idea is too far out of the box at present, and I welcome better ideas.

As for the breakdown of the intact family, I don't foresee young women who can't find—or don't want to find—a suitable mate not having children.

But I do think we can encourage young women to delay and limit the number of children they have before becoming secure enough to rear them in a positive way.

To some of my friends this sounds way too harsh, yet since government is becoming Dad to so many children, I think society has a right to impose some tough love.

After a child is born and mother needs government assistance, she would have the option—the *option*—of not taking such help, or if she wishes to do so, in return she must wear a long-term birth control patch. For a low-skilled single mother, having more than one child is an economic well-being death sentence.

Life is a struggle for all of us, always will be. And tough choices are always required.