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When Summer Was Easy

In rural America, the long, hot months used to mean books, bible school, high dives and war games. Our times are safer—and less fun.

By DAVE SHIFLETT

Of all the seasons, summer seems to evoke the most childhood memories, probably because of its singular status as the Season of No School! Ah, the freedom to frolic beyond the reach of scolding teachers and paddle-wielding assistant principals, to pursue the idle arts of cloud-gazing, star-counting, making firefly lanterns and perhaps even skinny-dipping with an adventurous cheerleader (or, more likely, her less-glamorous cousin).



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As we grow older (I was born in 1955, during Eisenhower's first term), we are naturally inclined to compare summers then with summers now. To no one's surprise, many of us, from the heights of our knowledge, wisdom and middle-age distemper, find that summers aren't what they used to be.

Let us count a few of the ways.

First off, most of us born in the '50s spent summers in the raw, sweltering bosom of Mother Nature, which, with all due respect, wasn't exactly paradise, especially when the mosquitoes started feeding. Home air-conditioners were rare; only about 10% of homes had them by 1965 (around 80% of modern homes are climate-controlled). When it got hot, you turned on a

fan. When it got real hot, you prayed for a thunderstorm.

People prayed a lot more back then, at least publicly, perhaps in part because it was still legal. At my public school in Roanoke, Va., we started each day with the Lord's Prayer, and heads bowed prior to most sporting events, weenie roasts and any other occasion where food was consumed. We were also likely to Praise The Lord when the DDT-spewing antimosquito fogger appeared on the horizon (haven't seen one of those in a while). This was, of course, the era of Mutual Assured Destruction, so it was important to have your bases covered at all times.

Also unlike today, we didn't watch much television during summer break. There were only three channels, and TV played a far-distant fiddle to the preferred vehicles of entertainment and enlightenment: books. We might be out of school, but we had summer reading lists, which these

days don't seem to be as rigorous. A National Education Association newsletter noted a couple of years ago that middle-school students in the Arlington Central School District outside New York City were required to read at least one book during the summer. One whole book!

I recall (dimly) reading 40 books one summer—some assigned and some part of a local library program. This wasn't our only bookish experience. For many children in our neck of the woods, Vacation Bible School was a requirement of citizenship (VBS participation is also down). Besides dispensing cookies, watermelon and Kool-Aid, these programs focused young minds on talking snakes, parting seas and Jezebel's dangerous allure. We still sang "Onward Christian Soldiers," which was excellent preparation for many an afternoon's chief activity: playing war with toy guns.

Contemporary gunophobes will gasp, but guns were as common as iPhones are today. Most boys I knew had at least one toy rifle, pistol or submachine gun (preferably, one of each). We took our marching orders from guys like Kirby in "Combat!" (Kirb was the Baryshnikov of the Browning automatic rifle), Illya Kuryakin of "The Man From U.N.C.L.E." (played by David McCallum, who has devolved into the mild-mannered Ducky of "NCIS") and of course the indomitable Sgt. Rock of comic-book fame. As we grew older we got BB-rifles, which were used (one cringes to recall) to reduce the local bird population and harass squirrels and other creatures further down the Great Chain of Being (we were all devout speciesists). We later graduated to .22s and shotguns; summer camps had rifle ranges and offered National Rifle Association gun-safety courses.



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Jump-rope while big brother culled the bird population: summer in the '50s and '60s.

These days—when a 14-year-old West Virginia student can be arrested and suspended from school for refusing to take off his NRA T-shirt—a high body count would be assumed. I am happy to report that no member of my heavily armed circle ever shot anyone, though honesty requires the admission that one summer afternoon I did manage to shoot myself.

It happened after a small but heavily armed platoon of us was dropped off at a rural lake for an overnight camping trip. As I was taking a drag from a cigarette (essential to looking cool back then), my pistol fell off a nearby bench and discharged, blasting the Marlboro from between my fingers, cutting a groove in my right index finger and nearly trimming the tip of my nose.

Some readers may wonder why parents weren't hauled into court for sending their sons into the woods with loaded weapons. As it happens, my parents, who had earlier been traumatized when my older brother threw a spear into my back (it stuck, but only for a few seconds), are learning of the shooting incident for the first time as they read this article.

The larger fact is that, by today's standards, most parents of that era deserved to do time at Leavenworth. What sinners they were! They sent us outside without sunscreen, let us ride bikes without helmets and jump on trampolines without "safety barriers," and smiled as we vied with our siblings for the premier spot in the family sedan: the ledge underneath the back window, where you could stretch out and take a nap.

This isn't to say that they didn't run a tight ship. When we got out of line we were "corrected" with

the help of leather belts or expertly wielded hairbrushes (known in some households as "Officer Porcupine"). If we cussed (about which more in a minute), we got our mouths washed out with soap. If someone had told us that a few decades hence parents could be arrested for such manifestations of concern, we would have assumed the commies had made good on their promise of world domination.

Yet back then, fixating on possible death and injury would be seen as neurotic. Perhaps this was because our parents had been through the Great Depression and World War II, which made postwar life seem relatively placid. Accidents happened, but they were accepted as part of life.

Another personal story illustrates the point. One summer I got a job on a local farm, where I was soon run over by a tractor and hay trailer, which drove ribs into both my lungs. Though I was initially thought to be dead, a crack team of surgeons revived me. Being young and resilient, I was out of the hospital in a little over a week.

We never sued the farm owners. Lawsuits were far rarer than today. "Ambulance chaser" was an epithet with a significant societal sting. Fewer than 90,000 civil cases were filed in 1970, according to public policy analyst Jürgen O. Skoppek, a number that by 1986 had risen 192%. These days we're suing each other over mold, hailed as the "next asbestos." None of which, to my mind, represents progress.

Summers past also looked a lot different. Around 13% of Americans were obese in the early 1960s, as compared with 36% today (about two-thirds of contemporary Americans are considered overweight or obese), which can make a trip to the beach a jarring experience.

The seashore of my youth was populated by people who were, relative to now, fairly thin. Huge people were rare: If you weighed in at 350 pounds or more you had a good crack at getting a job at the freak show (a staple of traveling summer carnivals). Nowadays beaches are covered with human manatees (I should disclose that I could be considered a junior manatee). This may be a testament, in part, to the self-esteem movement, which routed the notion that body size should be a cause of shame. Or maybe it's simply another reminder that there's safety in numbers.



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Teens in 1970s McPherson, Kansas, wait for their chance on the diving board at the municipal pool.

Another cosmetic change: tattoos, which were largely confined to men with military or maritime experience, and bikers. Nowadays, according to a Harris Poll, 38% of adults 30 to 39 have tats, as do 30% of those 25 to 29 and 22% of those 18 to 24. Inked women slightly outnumber men. By comparison, only 11% of Americans 50 to 64 say they have tattoos, a number that drops to 5% for Americans 65 and older.

Why the proliferation of body ink? Twenty-five percent say tattoos make them feel "rebellious," like growing long hair back in the 1960s, while 30% say that they make them feel more sexy, 21% more attractive or strong and 8% more intelligent. Meanwhile, 45% of

Americans without tattoos believe those who have them are less attractive, while 39% say they're less sexy and 27% less intelligent.

Of course, you could always cut your long hair if you got tired of it or faced an unexpected court date. Getting rid of a tattoo is not so easy, though 86% of tattoo bearers said that they have never regretted their decision, perhaps belying the idea that the younger generation has commitment

issues.

Modern beaches are also different intellectually. When I was a kid, you saw lots of thinner people reading fat books. Now you see larger people staring at thin phones. Many are no doubt chronicling the adventures of their favorite literary character—themselves—updating their Facebook accounts with descriptions of eating Oreos, watching a seagull peck the eye out of a dead fish and spending 15 minutes the prior evening flushing the sand from between their massive glutes. It's almost enough to make one pity the NSA snoopers who might be called upon to monitor these communications, thus putting themselves at extreme risk of acute inanity poisoning.

Which brings up another significant change: the rise of the wildly popular salutation/exhortation/denunciation/benediction known as the F-word, which not so long ago was the hydrogen bomb of obscenities, used primarily by men in combat, stevedores and golfers. Now it traipses lightly off the tongues of 14-year-olds at the slightest provocation—should that seagull, for example, hop over and steal a potato chip. Should cell coverage lapse, the oratory might match that of a pirate whose beard had caught afire.

Many oldsters blame rap music and Hollywood for this loss of a great tradition of selective cursing, but I would point instead to the deeply mundane existence of today's adolescents, nowhere more in evidence than during the long months of summer. Could the F-infestation be, at least in part, an attempt to dramatize lives made dull by design—a design requiring mandatory bicycle helmets, risk-free trampolines, pools without diving boards and now an attempt to drop the presumptive drunk-driving alcohol level to 0.05%, which some people can reach with a single glass of wine?

As always, proponents argue that if one life can be saved, it's worth it, though if that's their key concern, they might also focus their hysteria on such threats as falling out of bed, which claims around 600 American lives a year, according to Time magazine, and autoerotic asphyxiation, which takes another 1,000 citizens to early graves, according to WebMD.

Hypercaution has saved lives, but it has diminished life in the bargain.

Summers saw other enormous changes. In August 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, which became as familiar to my generation as the Declaration of Independence. The Summer of Love in 1967 spread the gospel of getting high, enlightening some and blighting others, while in July 1969, Apollo 11 landed on the moon, a testament to aiming high. Richard Nixon resigned in August 1974, AIDS was formally recognized by U.S. health authorities in June 1981. Along the way, summers saw the passing of national figures, ranging from Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford to Judy Garland, Jonas Salk, Jim Morrison and Jerry Garcia.

There were also personnel changes closer to home. Adults who seemed immortal in our youthful summers had their brushes with disease and death. Ditto for some cousins, friends and siblings—and ourselves. We rarely know the names of current bands, usually go to bed when we used to be going out, and say things like "I'd rather get a colonoscopy—make that a double colonoscopy!—than go camping."

Still, for all our nostalgia, we have accepted some of the changes that make modern summers so different from summers past. Should the sun suddenly blink off, for example, we might acknowledge this as a significant setback for our species—but a giant leap forward in the battle against sun-related cancers and premature wrinkling.

And just the other day, I was thinking that if my family had more progressive ideas about lawsuits when I got run over that long-ago June, I might today be living on a very nice farm.

—Mr. Shiflett posts his writing and original music at www.daveshiflett.com.

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