

The Good Old Days: Growing Up in Cranford, NJ in the 1940s

By Rob Hall

The time frame for this brief essay centers roughly around WW II. Call it the 1940's, and runs it into the early 1950's ... a total of perhaps twenty years. It was the end of a beautiful time, the end of innocence, altogether, a wonderful time to be a kid.

There was no single event that would define the global changes that lay in front of us, just behind a thin curtain. The war, scientific and technological advances, the US economy and more were all players in a cast awaiting the end an era that would change our lives forever. In the meantime, we "the audience" waited for the curtain to go up. The next "act" would be a doozy both in terms of change and the speed with which it would occur.

But what was it like growing up back in:
those earlier times in:

- A very average
- Very stable
- East Coast
- Northern
- Bedroom community of New York City?

In many ways, looking back through today's eyes, it might have been a Hollywood movie set for any of a number of movie home towns. Envision Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland jumping off a boxy yellow school bus whistling a catchy tune as they head to the malt shop to meet their chums. Mickey's vocabulary includes words like "Gee-willikers": and "keen". Judy punctuates surprise with "My stars" or a drawn out "Gah-lee".



Anything stronger would be too risqué or coarse for that time. They are neatly dressed and groomed, and have a pet dog (mongrel) named – you guessed it – Spot, who follows dutifully. Things like drugs, cell phones, artificial intelligence, satellites, jet travel – all that stuff which defines our modern era was over the horizon, close but oh so far away. Maybe that’s a bit over the top, but it’s pretty close to my memories of the way it was. Cranford was unchanging, tight knit, a community in every sense; safe, stable, friendly, in short a wonderful place to grow up. Mickey, Judy and dog Spot would have been right at home there – I was.

As a little kid, about age 6, WW II arrived in our lives. I wasn’t sure where Germany and Japan were, let alone why we should want to destroy them, or they us. We were clearly the good guys. They were the bad guys. The authority figures in our universe told us so and they were not to be challenged. Cousins and uncles were in uniform. Fortunately, all of mine survived, although many from Cranford did not. Dad was too old for the draft, but served as an Air Raid Warden for our neighborhood. He was given a WW I helmet, painted white, an arm band and a whistle. I’m not sure what he did. Cranford is 3,000 miles from Germany and over 6,000 miles from Japan. At that time, bombers had a maximum range of about 500 miles. Realistically, the prospect of an air raid was more than remote. More likely, someone had a warehouse full of old helmets, arm bands and whistles and convinced our government that air raids could be coming and they should do something.

Meanwhile, Mom saved cooking fat that was supposed to end up waterproofing combat boots. She also saved tinfoil (mostly a lead alloy) which she wrapped into a multi-layered sphere like a cannon ball. I coveted the object but was persuaded that our boys needed it more than I did. Once a week I made my contribution to the war effort. Dad gave me 5 cents which I took to Roosevelt School and bought a ‘savings stamp’ which I pasted in a little booklet that someone looking very official gave me. For each 5 cent stamp it cost Uncle Sam 7 cents in printing, distribution, etc. Who cares? It was all part of a great effort, a wave of emotion that we all – young and old – had to be part of.

For us, not touched directly by loss, the war went by in a blur of games of guns (a military version of hide and seek) in which everyone wanted to be a US Marine ... no one volunteered for Samurai. Duke Wayne propaganda movies showed regularly downtown (20 cents admission).



We walked to the diner for a hamburger and French fries – both of which were fried in oil which hopefully found its final resting place lubricating our soldiers' leather boots. Walking saved gasoline and hence rationing credits which we needed for our trip to Vermont (Heaven)...where Dad bought a summer home in the little town of Grafton. I loved it there – still do.

Speaking of Grafton, prior to the outbreak of war, Dad and some relatives decided to paint a large target on a ledge partway up the mountain behind our house. It was a complete lark, probably inspired by a few beers at a sunny July picnic lunch. More the fun, they never admitted to being the perpetrators of these hijinks. The target became a signature for our summer place as well as a hiking destination. When the war came, Dad got a letter from the War Department to paint it out.... “It could be a beacon for bombers” – such was the sometimes crazy fervor of those times. Days after the war ended, the Target miraculously reappeared and is there to this day.

At Roosevelt School, one of Cranford's four grammar schools, I was a fairly good student and heavily motivated to achieve favorable comments on my report card as well as ‘attaboys’ from my parents. Sports were also on my agenda, so the whole experience was a good fit. My class consisted of girls and boys, all White, with the exception of Louis Harris and Omega Hester. There was little or no recognition of any difference between Black and White; little or no religious recognition. Sexual preference was a total non subject. Girls were thought to be different but, we weren't sure of much more than that. It really was, for me anyway, a big happy family. Bobby, Susan, Irwin, Norma, Donnie, Marion, Barry, Mabyn and of course, Louis and Omega, we all got along famously.

Funny how certain odors trigger an immediate and powerful recall response in some remote corner of my otherwise inert brain. The smell of cleaning fluids used by the Roosevelt School janitor evokes one of those flashbacks. In winter the school heating system worked overtime to dry the always wet mittens and overcoats. The heady moisture laden atmosphere bolstered by those chemical vapors brings me back in an instant to the “Cloak Room” at Roosevelt.



It wasn't a coat room. It was a cloak room, even though none of us thought we were wrapped in cloaks. It was rumored that some of the boys used the cloak room to sneak a kiss from a willing and ready female classmate. Such was the extent of the experimentation. Thank goodness those

cleaning agents have been banned by the EPA, effectively eliminating future moments of goofy stupefaction.

Once a week Mr. Weekly – no pun intended – that was his name, Seth Weekly – came to Roosevelt. He was the Town’s Athletic Director for all of the Cranford Schools and most importantly he was a **he**. All of the other teachers, and maybe the entire faculty at all of Cranford’s grade schools, were women. That’s the way it was. Just about everyone’s maiden aunt was a teacher.

No reminiscence of Roosevelt School would be complete without thoughts of the playground. In the fall and spring the younger kids had a half an hour or so each day to go outside and roughhouse, burn off excess energy, play kickball or dodge ball. Recess was pure bliss. After classes ended at 3:05 PM, a small group, all boys, congregated on a particularly dusty corner of the playground to play marbles. The dust was essential to smoothing out the marble shooting area and scratching a 3 foot circle that defined the area of competition. The shot was made by holding your marble between your thumb and forefinger... then a sharp twitch of the thumb and off she went, a glistening bullet on her way to knocking the other guy’s marble out of the circle, then to be added to the collection in your pouch. Certain marbles were more desirable than others - “puries” and cats eyes had great esthetic appeal – metal ball bearings called “steelies” were the atomic bombs of our after class sport.



The Cranford River, on topo and other maps the Rahway River, drains a relatively small area south of the greater Passaic watershed. The River meanders through Cranford, dammed in two places, one in the center of Town (the Hansel Dam) and one below that at Droescher’s Mill. In the 1940’s and before, the River was clean enough to swim in, support a variety of wildlife, freeze solid; in sum it was a source of great enjoyment year round, both visually and otherwise. My pals and I made full use of this wonderful resource.



A covering of ice, about the thickness of cellophane was all we needed to get out our skates and sticks, and head for the Canoe Club to give it a try. The Canoe Club closed for winter but was a good spot to put on skates and warm up around the always present bonfire. Within minutes the police were there, too. When the River froze solid around Christmas, there were hundreds of skaters, some trying to make it from the Hansel Dam to Kenilworth Boulevard. – almost 3 miles – some of which was nearly open water. The challenge getting past those spots, involved revving up to maximum speed, some silent prayer, then blaze across ice so thin you could feel it sink in kind of a rippling wave.



April 15th was the Opening Day of the Trout Fishing Season for which the State fish hatchery at Hackettstown was depopulated and the River “stocked” with new residents bred to be both dumb and hungry. At the crack of dawn on the 15th particular spots, known to be where the state unloaded, were shoulder to shoulder with sports flogging the water. The problem came, if you caught anything. The state raised its fish for the most part in giant concrete tanks and fed them liver pellets which were both cheap and accelerated growth. The water in the concrete tanks became stagnant so the trout exerted only enough energy to stay alive. They ate, got fat, and tasted like cow’s liver. The sports didn’t care. It was a sacred ritual, not to be missed. And if you were lucky enough to catch a big one, the body was endlessly exhibited, touched and admired by those less fortunate.

When my Aunt Catherine Kepner Hall (married to Wells) was a young lady, there was a costume canoe regatta on the River. The judges occupied a reviewing stand on the Girl Scout House and the River. Cath and her best friend Joy Hansel were in full Pocahontas regalia, their canoe decorated to look like birch bark. All very authentic to what Hollywood had us believing was the

way Native Americans really looked. They paddled ever so quietly, barely making a ripple down the River, past the reviewing judges. As they say, “quiet as Indians”. They proved the stealth adage. A judge later said they were “invisible”. Never saw ‘em”. The “Indians” went home, vowing to return next year as Washington Crossing the Delaware with cannons blazing.

Fall brings back memories of Football. No, not the New York Giants; they were barely a blip on most people’s radar. Twenty years later television would have arrived, with pro football and so much else. In the meantime, we rooted on weekends for Cranford High. The Gold and Blue played on a weed infested field called The Oval, near the end of Walnut Avenue. We fans gathered in Town and then paraded behind the school band and cheerleaders – hooting, hollering, and throwing confetti.



For me, puberty was just beginning to make its presence felt, churning up all sorts of energy and confusion. Talk about clueless. I had no idea what was going on. Mom and Dad avoided the birds and bees talk like the plague, leaving me to figure things out with the help of the Boy Scout Manual. The cheerleaders were cute as hell and wore short skirts. I watched them more closely than our team slugging it out against Roselle Park. It was indeed a Hollywood movie set A combination of Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, and Spot blended into the “Music Man”, Jimmy Stewart – totally innocent, uncomplicated slow moving, understandable - great times.

The Town commercial area was of course anchored geographically by churches in the center of which North Union Avenue, North and South Avenue converged on the Bank and Railroad Station, and around them, 50 or so small stores and restaurants. We knew most all of the merchants ... thought of them as friends. Like most, if not all towns, Cranford was multi-layered. There were sub communities, defined by neighborhoods, ethnicity, and family, each with easily penetrated walls between the layers. The separations were there more for comfort and protection. You can’t, and would probably not want to, be pals with everyone. That said, we were both taught and instinctively absorbed being respectful, civil, and polite. That’s the way our parents were – that’s the way we were expected to be. Sure, Dad unloaded from time to time using language that would be unacceptable today. Each generation hopefully is better than the one before.

Fond memories of so many, so vital to that sense of community and the way commerce worked.

- Rose and Moe Schecter – Hardware. Always a large bowl of pretzels on the counter. Friendly and humorous. Replaced by a spanking new anonymous Home Depot.
- Cy Breen – The booze man....’A little nip now and then can’t hurt ‘cha.’ Replaced by a spanking new Westfield Discount Liquor.
- Mr. Kurz – Quintessential German butcher. Replaced by a spanking new Kings.

- Charlie Harris – Newspapers, candy, cigarettes, known as “Stubby”... his left hand blown off by fireworks, an object lesson to us kids that Dad never let us forget. Replaced by television and computer generated news.
- John Chapin – Fishing gear, etc. John’s personality didn’t exist. He rarely spoke, but his shop was a magnet for the fishing and hunting set. Replaced by ... nothing. Kids don’t fish, trap, or hunt much anymore.
- Victor Shaheen – Owner of Builders General. Patriarch of a Middle Eastern community. Active in Town affairs, affable, smart, and the boss. Builders General was another fatality at the hands of Home Depot.

There were numerous Italian families – Many from Monti Ferranti, a little town south of Rome: The DiFabios, Iones, Carussos, Massas, Lanzas, Buontempos, were all part of what made the Town tick.

The movie set is long gone. For most people, WWII is barely a memory. Roosevelt School has been demolished. Fishing, trapping muskrats, canoeing, and ice skating on the River are all ancient history. The merchant structure has changed as have places of worship and the Town’s ethnicity.

Good or bad? Who knows? But, when I see a kid, eyes glazed, thumbs working some electronic device, I mourn the loss of Mickey and Judy and the world they lived in. Today’s kids are really missing something special. Something we were so lucky to experience.

About the Author:



Robert “Rob” Hall grew up in Cranford. When his sister, Addie Vogel, sent him the article about Cranford Boys’ Camp in the Summer “Mill Wheel”, he identified himself as one of the camp staff in the photo accompanying the article. Rob then contacted CHS, donating some Boys’ Camp items and the above article about growing up in Cranford in the 1940’s and 1950’s.