

Fifty years ago, on June 24, 1963, 33 of us marched into the high school auditorium and about an hour and a half later marched back out as alumni of Galway Central School. Earlier this year a nostalgic group of locals began meeting to plan our class reunion. There is something about reaching the 50 year milestone that inspires one to reminisce and reconnect with others who shared the same experiences during the 1950's and 60's. We amazed ourselves as we combined our efforts to reach out, search for and re-establish a connection with classmates we had not seen in years. We ran into some roadblocks and dead ends but managed to track down most. Sadly, over the 50 year period, we lost 6 classmates as well as our beloved class advisor, Joseph Swierzowski.

There is a temptation to think of history in terms of events that occurred before one's date of birth. However, between the year we were born, 1945, and graduation, momentous events happened in the world and nationally, some of which affected us as children.



Franklin Roosevelt
1933-1945



Harry Truman
1945-1953



Dwight Eisenhower
1953-1961



John Kennedy
1961-1963

For example, the time period from our year of birth to high school graduation was bracketed by the sudden, unexpected death of two Presidents, Franklin Roosevelt, and John Kennedy. In between Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower guided the nation. Truman, a former owner of a haberdashery, was perhaps best known for authorizing the first use of the atomic bomb as a weapon of war, with the detonations over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, bringing about the end of World War II. By contrast, Eisenhower was a World War II hero principally responsible for planning and executing the Normandy invasion, and reflecting his interest and expertise in military logistics, is memorialized by the Eisenhower Interstate System of highways. The global events of the period 1950 to 1963, included growth of communist influence to the Western Hemisphere (Cuba), the Korean War, the Nuclear Arms Race with the USSR, and initial US involvement in Vietnam Conflict. At home the US Supreme Court took action on school racial integration, development of nuclear power for electric power generation was underway, the principal mode of cross-country travel changed from railway to air and there was a proliferation of inexpensive consumer goods, initially of poor quality, from Japan. The underlying issues connected with some of these events are, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, still following a long arc in time to final resolution.

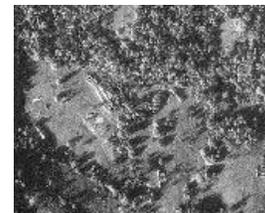
As children in a relatively isolated area of New York State, we were affected by these events to a greater or lesser degree. Certainly, if a family member was directly involved in the fighting during the Korean War there was a potentially big impact with 34,000 US Military personnel killed and many more injured.



West Milton
Containment Vessel



Soviet Intermediate Range
Nuclear Ballistic Missile



CIA Photo, Cuban Nuclear
Missile Site

The nuclear arms race and related threat of war intruded in our lives in several ways. A constant reminder was the West Milton project involving a reactor for training US Navy personnel in operating the nuclear power plant of a submarine. In preparation for the site, a large area of farm land east of Galway village was encompassed by a fence for security purposes, ending recreational use of a pretty little swimming hole in a creek that flows through the property. Tours were given during construction and a classmate who attended remembers it as an exciting and frightening place. The reactor dome referred to by locals as the “golf ball” could be seen from a hill on Jockey St. and presumably was a daily reminder to passers-by of the military presence. After the USSR obtained by espionage the technology for making atomic, and later the more powerful and deadly fusion (hydrogen) bombs, the arms race began in earnest. Fear of an attack on US soil led to survival training which was carried out public schools including Galway Central in a manner consistent with the Civil Defense concept of “Duck and Cover”. There were drills in which we knelt beneath desks, and/or went to the hallways, leaned against our lockers and shielded our eyes. At one time there were posters on bulletin boards describing the steps to take to survive a nuclear attack, and duplicates found their way into homes. Fallout shelters for family homes were a topic of discussion although few were built.

Matters came to a head in October of 1962, when US military intelligence discovered the preparation of missile sites in Cuba, which clearly were intended to provide a means of short duration delivery of atomic warheads to US cities. Under the leadership of President Kennedy a military blockade or “quarantine” was imposed to halt delivery of the missiles and in the ensuing dialogue with USSR leadership it seemed plausible that the events could escalate into a nuclear conflict. Going to bed one night with the knowledge that nuclear war was imminent and might break out before morning is an unforgettable experience. In retrospect the surreal nature of that prospect somewhat relieved the anxiety. And fortunately, due in large part to the skillful handling of the crisis by the Kennedy administration, the situation was resolved and the missiles returned to Russia.



Galway Golf Club
Salt Hill, Galway, Ireland

On the lighter side, during the earlier 1960s, a downstate group of investors, presumably with ties to the Galway Golf Club in Salt Hill, Galway, Ireland decided to develop the property at the northwest corner of Lake and Perth roads to become the Galway, NY Salt Hill club. Extensive renovations were made to the residence and outbuildings, converting them into a hotel and restaurant respectively. At one point there were rumors in the village that Jackie Kennedy would visit during the Saratoga racing season, but that apparently did not occur. The venture lasted several seasons before it closed.



Dr. Jonas Salk, injecting Vaccine



Patients in iron lungs during 1952 epidemic

Iron Lung Facility



Child Stricken with Polio

Other reflections on life during the 50s and 60s include:

Development of the Salk Vaccine for polio meningitis. Polio is a contagious disease leading to paralysis and death. Breathing can be severely affected so devices called “Iron Lungs” were developed to provide a low pressure atmosphere that reduces breathing effort. Prior to the Salk Vaccine contracting it was most prevalent in summer months when children were particularly active, exposed to hot weather and in increased contact with others. Adults could also be affected, a famous case being Franklin Roosevelt, who lost use of his legs during his thirties and was forced to rely on his aides to stand, but concealed the fact of his disability from the public until his death. In the 4th grade we were part of a program to validate the Salk Vaccine. Some of us were given a placebo, others the vaccine. To learn after the trials were completed that one had received the real thing was a relief as it avoided the necessity for a second set of injections.

Home visits by doctors, occasionally under adverse conditions such as snow storms, were routine. In one memorable instance a doctor was forced to stop to install rear tire chains due to slippery road conditions. Nevertheless he made his appointment. In that case Whooping Cough was the disease of concern, which could be deadly. According to one source, in the early 1960s house calls by doctors were 40% of doctor-patient meetings, by 1980 they were 0.6%.

Safety of children seemed much less of an issue then. Enjoying play in the woods and fields for hours without adult supervision was routine, as were bicycle rides on backroads, some of them unpaved, within a ten mile radius of the village. We would play for hours before returning home to our parents. Police presence seemed limited, with the most prominent being a part-time motorcycle policeman who monitored traffic through the village during the summer months.

To be continued in Part 2.