

Brooklyn Nostalgia

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The web is full of sites where people reminisce about the places they are from, especially when they don't live there anymore and so can romanticize it a bit. Brooklyn, New York, where I am from, seems to be particularly a focus of such memories. One of them, complete with pictures, can be found at <http://www.screanews.us/NewYork/BrooklynOld.htm>.

This site has a lot of good pictures, and some very good memories. Of course, most of the text is hallucinatory (few or no one-parent families), often projecting ("this was my life, so I imagine it was that of others"), and frequently stupid. The "good old days" were not always so good. There is even a book by Otto L. Bettmann called "The Good Old Days – They Were Terrible!" (Random House, 1974), reviewed [here](#) nearly 30 years after it was published. Another site compared various "good old days", going back generation by generation showing what seemed better in memory was not really a very good time. The conclusion on that site is that "the good old days" were never a time period but rather when you were a kid. It is not the time -- it is that things seemed simpler, and often better, and we repress the bad memories from -- when we were kids.

That said, our memories are our memories; we accept the things that are better and regret the things that we miss. However, it is fun to look back at our past, and at our youth, the good and the bad. As far as the Brooklyn described on the website above, at least the pictures are good. While the memories range from the 30's to the 60's, they seem to focus largely on the 50's, and there is a report card from Kindergarten (1a) in 1949, so you can guess his current age.

Many of these things were still around in my memory, although the prices were up. Subways were 15 cents when I started riding them; for a quarter, the newsstand guy at the Neck Rd station would give you the NY Times and a token in change. Phil Ochs wrote a song in the 60s about the "Daily News" with the lyric "7 little pennies in the newsboy's hand and you ride right along to never-neverland!", and I remember that it was a big deal when it went up from a nickel. There is an early picture of me wearing a Daily News "Strike" body placard, having gone with Uncle Benny (who worked there) on a picket line. And Uncle Benny would bring the Sunday News comics home on Saturday -- magic!

I remember pizza slices at 15 cents also, but the real treat was walking to Roma's Pizzeria on Avenue U just east (but if you had asked me I would have said "north" probably, since in that part of Brooklyn the "East" numbered streets increased from west to east; the numbers of the streets were

going UP, so of course it would be north!) of Nostrand Ave to get a WHOLE pizza for dinner. And walk back with it 5 blocks. Toss-up as to whether this beat Brennan and Carr, hot roast beef sandwiches, on the opposite corner. Which I think is still there. (On the map, the area where I lived is the northern part of "Sheepshead Bay", bleeding into southern part of what is labeled "Midwood"; the angled street that crosses the border SW to NE is Kings Highway, which is what most people called that area; Avenue U is a few blocks to the south. Often the whole area north of Sheepshead Bay up to nearly Prospect Park was simply referred to as "Flatbush". For another take, see the 1974 movie "[The Lords of Flatbush](#)", which featured young Sylvester Stallone, Henry Winkler, and Perry King!).



I remember the last of the straw-seat subway cars, the oldest on the Franklin Avenue Shuttle which ran for 3 stops and connected the Prospect Park station on the Brighton train (ours; then the Q, now the D) with the Independent train at Franklin Avenue (or so it said on the maps). Mostly I rode the one stop to the Botanic Gardens station in order to walk the long block down Eastern Parkway to the Brooklyn Museum; a couple of times to the second stop, Park Place, where the Brooklyn Children's Museum was (and, I am told, Brooklyn Jewish Hospital, where I was born, and now part of "Interfaith Hospital" having merged with St. John's).

I certainly remember the crowded beaches of Brighton and Coney Island, and Mrs. Stahl's (under the Brighton Beach subway station on Coney Island Ave and Brighton Beach Ave) and Shatzkin's (on the Boardwalk in Coney Island around W. 38th St.? The same guys with the paper shopping bags with knishes in one hand were hefting a huge metal cooler on their other shoulder, picking their way

among the jam-packed beaches (I can't even describe these -- ENORMOUS beaches, matched in size hardly anywhere in the world, hundreds of yards from boardwalk to ocean -- SOLIDLY packed with people, a couple of inches between their blankets!) shouting "Hot knishes! Cold drinks!"

We did play a little stickball, and more "Catch a fly is up" (later I heard it referred to as "One-o-Cat") in the street, as well as an odd version of baseball at the spot between our house and the Constantinos' where the narrow driveway on our side was home plate and lined up about midway across from the double driveway of the "rich" (read "attached single family, probably costing about \$8000) houses across the street, which were 1st and 2nd bases on the corners. Pitcher stood in the middle, no bat but slapped the red rubber ball with your hand. That ball, a "spaldeen" (I understand because they were the discarded cores of Spalding tennis balls that were without hairy covers) were the mainstay of every game we played. In addition to the above, and a little hopscotch or potsy (is there a difference?), we had "two-box" (= "hit the penny"), "3-box" (also called "box baseball"), and "5-box" (a complex game involving bouncing the ball in each box). Also "off the wall" and Chinese handball (why "Chinese"?). And, of course, the mainstay because you could play it alone or with friends: stoop-ball (catch it on one bounce, 5 points; on the fly 10 points; off a "point", 50 points -- it comes at you fast -- and off the top step point, 100 points! Or something like that.)

Movies were a quarter for a double-feature, at least on Saturday afternoons (take your sister!). And they were preceded by cartoons. And a nickel bought a candy bar, which went fast. Necco Wafers lasted forever, but had minimal taste. A compromise might be Jujyfruits, Jujubes, or Turkish Taffy, which stuck to your teeth and could be licked out for hours. Maybe that's why I had so many cavities -- or maybe it was because, as a dentist pointed out many years later, that NYC fluoridated its water sometime between the eruption of my "6-year molars" (full of cavities) and my "12-year molars" (very few). I do remember the unanesthetized pain of getting them filled, though!

I never had report cards like the guy on the website (I think he went to Catholic school). First of all, they were not A-F. We had (U)nsatisfactory, (N)eeds improvement, (S)atisfactory, and SO (really S^o, with a superscripted degree mark) that meant superior. I got a lot of S's, some SO's, and scarcely ever better than "N" in my two bete noirs, handwriting and Conduct (sometimes called "self-control")! It seems to me that in Albany, when I was younger, we got graded in both "Ability" and "Effort". I will allow readers to decide which of these I received lower grades in.

I think those high schools in the pictures are Boys, Brooklyn Tech, and Erasmus Hall. I went to none of them.



Bedford Ave was "HS row", being home to (south to north), James Madison (my alma mater, and that of 3 current or recent Senators and a Supreme Court justice, several sports figures, and Carol King -- then Klein -- and Chris Rock -- ok, this picture is from before my time!), Midwood, and Erasmus. Most of the newer HS (not Boys or Erasmus) were "U-shaped"; Tech was a full rectangle, and so big (8 floors!) on each floor than instead of numbering the rooms like 401-435 (as at Madison), they were numbered by corridor (e.g., 4W20).

As far as Coney Island amusements were concerned, when I was a kid Luna Park was gone, but Steeplechase was still there. I never liked the fast or scary or high rides, although decades later my son Matt managed to get himself really sick by riding (alone) the Cyclone several times. I did like Skee-Ball. And shooting. And another big thing was that there were Tuesday night fireworks in Coney Island all summer long, and we mostly watched from the roof of Grandma's building on E. 22d St. I remember when I first discovered somewhere, with pity, that there were places where there were only fireworks once a summer, on July 4.

And, while the website's observation that most people in Brooklyn were Italian, Irish or Jewish might not have been completely true, I remember being quite surprised at some point in adolescence when I discovered there were White Protestants (Christians, but not Catholic and, unlike the non-Catholic Christians I knew, were not Black) -- an idea also expressed (obviously not stolen from me, but I had it way before I read it there) by the mayor-loosely-based-on-Ed-Koch in Tom Wolfe's "Bonfire of the Vanities".

The image of Brooklyn in the popular consciousness, and the memories of those who left it, change with the generations. The "Kid from Brooklyn" was a staple of World War II movies, tough, smart-alecky, and ethnic, often with a Jewish or Italian name. And relatively small, certainly smaller than the big Southern farmboy, another stock character. In the 1950s, when TV was new and based mostly in New York, both the writers and characters were often New Yorkers, and particularly Brooklynites. Shows

like Jackie Gleason's *The Honeymooners* (Irish working class folks living in an apartment that was sparse by any standard) and *The Goldbergs* (Jewish, and a little higher level working class) introduced (stereotypical) Brooklyn folks to the rest of the country. There were a lot of smart kids from Brooklyn, many in important jobs all over the country.

And now Brooklyn is hip. Having transformed the winter hotels and apartments of Brooklyn retirees in Miami's South Beach in the last 20 years, young "new" (= "often moved from elsewhere") New Yorkers are filling the places those retirees came from, moving from the exorbitant rents of Manhattan and long-gentrified Park Slope to the slightly-less exorbitant rents of Brooklyn, filling the formerly Hasidic area of Williamsburg and the asbestos-shingled houses of Greenpoint and Red Hook with yuppies, and the leading edge now moving into – Bushwick! Of course, nostalgia ain't what it used to be!