The century: Happy Daze (1950s)

By the spring of 1943, nearly 50,000 Americans had returned home from the Korean War in coffins. People at home continued to wonder how much longer they would have to endure this strange war being fought in this strange land. "I had two brothers that were serving in Korea at the same time and I was scared to death because I wanted my brothers to come home. And um, when they came home, it was like Thank you Lord, greatest day in the world." In that summer of 1953, the U.S. finally reached a truce agreement with the North Koreans and the Chinese. And Americans tried to put another war behind them. President Eisenhower kept his campaign pledge to resolve the Korean conflict, now he hoped to make America's domestic life his priority. "I believe in the future of the United States of America." "He was really going to take care of the United States, he was going to take care of us personally and it was a good feeling." "The time was right for Dwight Eisenhower." "One of the things that Ike most wanted to do when he became President was to lower the rederick and lower the sense of crisis." His countrymen were more than ready to relax. With the war over and America bursting with energy, it was time to focus on a more promising future. By 1953, the American people had been dealing with one crisis or another since 1929. The great depression, WWII, the Berlin Blockade, and then Korea. Eisenhower felt it was now time to turn back the clock to the America of his childhood. A simpler country, where it turned out white males had the last word, and then women kept the home fires burning, and the business of America was business. At first, many Americans seemed happy to obliged but as the decade wore on, Eisenhower and "they" would discover, that not everyone was ready to return to the old way of doing things. (music) By late 1953, the economic boom that had arrived after the second world war had already transformed the country. "We were self confident people for the first time since 1929. People putting money in the banks, the real wages were going up 4.5% a year it's just incredible to think of that now." America in the 1950's was very rapidly becoming the consumer society. People were buying more and selling more than ever in U.S. History. For the first time, more Americans were doing white collared work than manual labor. Advertising, marketing, and public relations were now the preferred professions. "I could certainly do with 8 or 10,000. But I don't know anything about public relations." "Who does? You got a clean shirt, you bathe everyday, that is all there is to it." In the shadow of the cold war, it seemed almost patriotic to be part of the American economic miracle, to be a member of the corporate team and follow the rules. "When I became a salesman, like men in a grey flannel suit, I was told where to buy my clothes. It might not have been a grey flannel suit, but it better be a blue one, and there was a lot of choices of colored shirts just as long as they were white." "You called attention to yourself if you deviated from the norm, and nobody did, nobody did. We all looked the same." " I think people liked to be dressed alike and follow the same sort of social customs. You were expected to have at least 2 drinks at lunch, preferably martinis. If anyone said I'll have a Perrier, they would have been laughed at." And when they advertised for secretaries, they specified good looking. It was not a good time for women in the work place. "Ms. Lawrence, this is Mr.Ryan. Ms. Lawrence will be your secretary. " "How do you do Ms. Lawrence?" "Very glad to meet you Mr.Ryan." "We always give the new man the prettiest secretary." "There were no female managers. None. It wasn't even considered." (Music) In the 1950's, the woman's place was in the home. In the embrace of a loving husband. By 1957, 97% of all marriageable men and women were married and if they cared to have a social life, they stayed that way. "It was a couples society. We did things in couples. BBQ's and it is always couples. If we knew that the person was divorced, we might have a second thought about asking them. The thing was to be married and to keep the home together." More and more, that home was on America's crab grass frontier. In an era that favored conformity, it was perhaps no surprise that by the end of the decade, a quarter of the population lived in the track homes of the modern suburb. "Moving in for us was the beginning of a happy experience. Of a challenging experience. Everything was similar. One of my friends, Ruby, my phone rings and he says to me 'Hal, I have a problem,' I say 'What's the matter?' He says ' I can't find my house.' "It seemed kind of remote and bleak if you looked at them from the air. But in those cookie cutter houses on those straight streets that met at right angles, a lot of good things were happening." (music) "Children were being born at a very fast rate. They were 3 Obstetricians and the Obstetricians were open til 2am in the morning. This was the place to raise children because it offered everything they could want." "I was here at my old home, I crossed the street at the neighbors home, down the block at a friends home without any restriction without any feeling that I was violating anyone's territory." "The emotional core of the early 1950's was all about stability. Both my parents had experience the depression both of my parents had experienced the war. I know that they looked upon their little house in Lake Wood as a refuge from many of the things that had troubled their early lives." "The activities were centered around the home. We had a lot of parties." "People were of the same age, our interests were alike. We came together that way. We seemed to all be interested in what we were doing. For the good of all of us." "It was a fabulous life." (upbeat music) And life was getting better for a lot of American families. Propelled by the powerful economy they were stepping into the middle class at a rate of more than a million a year. With extra money to spend and plenty of shiny new merchandise to choose from, people bought things whether they needed them or not, sometimes just to match the face of their neighbors. "We had an eye on consumer goods all the time. Keeping up with the Jones when people would give us a call on the phone that the television set was just delivered it wouldn't be long before we be down having soda watching the new television. And as soon as we left there, we would say, that's what we have to have next." A new television would soon become the thing that everyone had to have next. It was in the early 1950's that one of America's intense love affairs blossomed most brighty. "We would plug this thing in and turn on this box and there were people there. Well I will tell you, we would not move for days." "We sat in front of that set even when there was nothing on except the test pattern you thought you can't tell the lab will put on something right now." Television sets were rapidly becoming affordable for the average consumer and as they did, the demand become for new programming became overwhelming. "That's right boys and girls......" Most of television programming aired live with all the flaws of a live performance, but even with mistakes, most viewers loved the tube. "The television business was a sandbox where you could go in with almost any idea and you have a chance to do it." "It was an amazing period of time." Radio, long the staple of family entertainment, was virtually abandoned. Nimble talents like Milton Burrow and the famous newscaster Edward Armuro made the transition to the new medium. "It brought us news, it brought us dramas. It had become an intrical part of our life. And it wouldn't be unusual for your doctor to say I'll see you at 7 o'clock on Tuesday and you would say I am very sorry, I Love Lucy is on I have to see I Love Lucy." By the mid 1950's only a few years after their commercial introduction, television sets were in 3/4 of American homes. People now spent a 1/3 of their waking hours in the glow of the box. Lured by entertainment, they became a captive audience for the salesmen. "These 3 windows, ABC, CBS, and NBC were window on a world that a family could sit down and look out of. And see what they didn't have." "Ah I know you are going to show us, a westing house refrigerator." "No, a westing house refrigerator/freezer." "Everything you did, was geared at a family target audience." "It was a very conservative and repressing time but it was also a time that was the beginning of change." Underneath all the conformity, you could see the beginning of the change." Hugh Hefner was 27 when he started Playboy magazine. At the time, a daring challenge to the country's obscenity laws. His first playmate of the month, was a rising young starlet named Marilyn Monroe, but after that, the pin up was just as likely to be the girl next door. "The girl next door notion of pin up photography was rooted in the notion that nice girls like sex too, that sex was ok. And that was a very sensational point of view. And potentially a dangerous point of view. It was risky enough that I didn't put my name on the first issue." Within a year, playboy was selling 100,000 copies a month and it was not the only thing threatening this status quo. (music) Nothing worried traditionalist more than the new kind of music being performed by singers such as Lloyd Price. (singing) "Well it was really race music we had maybe 2 radio stations in New Orleans that played that music. It had no name to it. It was just music." By 1955, the music did have a name. Rock and roll and young people everywhere were listening to it. Wisconsin native Marty Rosenbloom was then 15 years old. "I got my own portable radio and at night, I could pick up all the southern stations and I heard Little Richard for the first time. And my whole world change, everything changed. I would call WAPL in Wisconsin and ask them to play Little Richard and they would say the station manager wouldn't allow Little Richard on the radio because his was the devil's music. So I knew he was good."" (singing) "It was a much more infectious kind of music that we ever heard before and it had an edge." "There were suggested things in it and you know it was kind of risqué and the parents were saying this is going to ruin our kids." "Their concern was that their daughters and even their sons were falling in love with black people." Sam Phillips was the owner of Sun Records. A southern music label. "You know what my answer was from day one? I truly can look you straight in the eye and tell you they are not falling in love with black or white or green or yellow they are falling in love with the vitality of the music." (Music) And it wasn't long before white musicians like Bill Hailey and the comets were making the charts with rock hits of their own. But the music was still waiting for it's first super star. And in 1956, he arrived. "I was in this little soda shop and on came this song, and this guy started singing and there was like stillness, and then everyone started dancing and this like wave of energy came over the place and I was like my God this is wonderful. I turned to the girl next to me and I said who was that? And she looked at me as if I was from another planet and she said just one word she said, Elvis." (singing) "The year I saw Elvis Presley, the electricity was so high, had you put that much energy in work you would have collapsed." It wasn't just that Elvis was white and sounded black, his haircut and his hips spoke to rebellious feelings in young people all across America. "And the funny thing is, you screamed so much, you couldn't really hear him. But you felt you had to scream and it was just." Kids were screaming with joy and parents were screaming in protest. Elvis may have been white, but his songs and his moves still offended many. In July 1956, Elvis Presley's act was called vulgar and suggestive by the tremendously popular columnist and television show host Ed Sullivan less than 2 months later, Sullivan booked the singer on his show. "Ready, set, go, man go." I gotta girl that I love so.... "It's the minister of culture in America surrendering to the youth culture. And therefore that is a very big political moment we cannot hold law, If I hold the line and keep Elvis off, I'm gonna fail. And that's a very important moment. Him going on Ed Sullivan symbolized that it had happened." (music) Rock and roll was here to stay. It had become the soundtrack for a new era of change. "Here is Jerry Lee Lewis, Great Balls of Fire." "You shake my nerves and you rattle my brain." In 1957, the television program called American Bandstand went national. ON the ABC network. The shows targeted audience quickly demonstrated it's new found power. By turning Bandstand and it's host Dick Clark into overnight icons. Every kid watched. "It was a story about once a police chief was afraid a rumble was going to happen, a street fight, because no kids were on. And they conducted a door to door search, they found that all the kids were watching Bandstand. I remember feeling this tremendous feeling of confirmation that I belonged to a group of people called teenager and we have our own music." "all of a sudden, you know, I felt that I could express myself, I could be free, I could dance and I could shake around and I could have fun. There was no stopping us. The parents didn't have a chance." Another way the young were breaking away was through their use of language. The beat movement thrived in the coffeehouses of New York's Greenich Village. "The Village has a life and a language all it's own If you dig it, you're hip. If you don't, man, you're square." Beat necks were the fore fathers of the 1960's counter culture. Challenging the conformity of the 50's by ridiculing mainstream values. "My mom wanted a new kitchen. She wanted new appliances. That was her self identity. And the beats were saying Why are you identifying with material things, there's more." And even more significant challenge to the complacent 50's came from America's black community. Living in the consumer society, but having few of it's advantages, they chose this moment to make white America live up to it's ideals. Amazingly, 50's America had moved little beyond the days of Jim Crowe. Particularly in the South, life among blacks and whites remained separate and unequal. "There was no way you could be black in this country and not be effected by it. Here I was selling millions of records around the world, hero everywhere and I couldn't get a hot dog in Baltimore unless I went to the back door." "It wasn't right, but that's just how it was. That was just life." On December the first, 1955, on a public bus in Montgomery Alabama, life began to change. By refusing to give up her seat to a white man, tired seamstress named Rosa Parks, quietly ignited a revolution. "The day that Rosa Parks was arrested a low murmur went through the whole city. And overnight, this thing bloomed." Led by a charismatic young preacher named Martin Luther King, the city's black community organized a peaceful boycott of the buses. They walked instead. "We will do it in a orderly fashion, this is a nonviolent protest. We are depending on moral and spiritual forces." White policeman responded by arresting black carpool drivers. White extremists bombed King's home. "Martin always said you know if you don't have anything that you die for, what do you have to live for?" "Nobody thought we could stay off the buses. None of those people wanted to lose their jobs but Martin Luther had instilled in them so rightly that we must all make a sacrifice. That the buses continue to run empty." They did. For 381 days. On November 13th 1956, the supreme court ordered the buses desegregated. Martin Luther King was now the undisputed leader of the civil rights movement. "The colored population idolized Martin Luther." "We are not going back to the buses bragging about..... "People experienced his self esteem that they had never experienced before. And they had been given a light. A beckon at the end of the tunnel." That light reached Melva Beele, a 15 year old high school student in Little Rock Akansas. "I was very conscious of what was going on and wanting it to wash over me and wash over Little Rock." It was about to. In 1954, the supreme court had ordered the integration of all public schools, in it's famous decision Brown vs. the Board of Education. 3 years later that decision would be severely tested at Little Rock's all white central high school. Despite the federal court order Arkansas Governor, Orville Fabis, had no intention of allowing black students to attend central high. And he ordered the Arkansas National Guard to surround the school. On September 3rd, Melba Beeles and 8 other black students walked towards Central High. One Elizabeth Eckford became separated from her friends and was surrounded by a white mob that included Ann Thompson. "There was just a lot of electricity in the air. It was almost a circus like atmosphere. All these parents on the sideline. Urging us on, telling us, don't let them get in." "There are mobs on her heels, like dogs nipping at her. Policeman are watching this. Every time she tries to step between them, they close ranks on her." If central high was to be integrated, it would have to be ordered by the President. Eisenhower was at first reluctant to interfere. "His record on civil rights was not a good one, until 1957 and the crisis at Little Rock. And there a fundamental question was dealt with. Do the states have the right to impose their own social order, in defiance of federal court orders. Eisenhower answered no we have made a national commitment. We are going to desegregate this society and if it takes 101st airborne to do it, so be it." (music) "This is awful. I mean that is vivid still. I could just see Little Rock being in a state of siege by the troops. You know. That was real fear. " 3 weeks after the Little Rock 9 were turned away from central high, they returned accompanied by troops of the 101st airborne "We were al in an Army station wagon machine gun mounts. It was pretty heavy day and it's not what everyone gets to go to school." "you got paratroopers, you got helicopters, jeeps in front, jeeps in behind." "And we stepped out of the Jeep into this square of soldiers who were serious. You know as I walked up the steps that day, at central high school, I can remember the click of the leather boots on those stairs. And I remember being so impressed by who they were there are America's. I am American. And so the first time I get the feeling that there is hope, that there is a reson I salute the flag that this is what America is about." "I felt that Little Rock would never be the same again. We would never know life as we had known it because 9 people walked into a school building." (music) "My teenage models had been the kids who danced on American Bandstand. And all of a sudden came the Little Rock 9. And I could remember having the feeling that they have been tied, and tested and they survived. Someday in some way I am going to be tested in this way too. So I think when the movement comes along in the 1960's, I am ready for it." (music) By the late 1950's, driven by the powerful economy, the American people's long running fascination with automobiles was changing the very fabric of the county. "The car came to be the dominant symbol of American life and had an impact on American life that is difficult to exaggerate. Americans were now confronted with a dazzling array of choices on the showroom floors, so many that for the first time, people began to view cars in the same way that they had viewed clothes or hairdos as an emblem of their personality. "Ford Thunderbird. Even the name had a ring to it. "A yellow station wagon. A station wagon provides room in the back to carry the lawnmower that's broken." "my boyfriend drove a Chevrolet and I thought that's the prettiest car I have ever seen in my life. I felt like a queen in that car." General Motors had a budget the size of Polands. Nationwide, every 7th job was related to the automobile industry. The term 'drive in' became a part of a language. There was a national hotel chain created entirely for road travelers. And a restaurant that spoke exclusively to a new mobile country. But the most profound effect the car on American life, the one and actually altered the landscape, was the immense new federal highway system began in 1956 The largest public works project in history forever connected American motorist from city to city. From coast to coast. (music) "We use to stop and study those maps. That would show you proposed state highway interstate highway under construction and then the pay off completed and open, and we would get on those interstates and run those big cars, with the big fins on it." (music) It was just wonderful it opened the whole world to us." What most Americans did not realize was that the freeway had been built with an alternative motive. The over passes freedom loving motorists were driving under were built 15 feet high in order to allow the easy movement of missile systems. President Eisenhower approved the project in part because he wanted the military traffic to be able to move easily in the event of a national crisis. In the frivolous 1950's people lived under the ever darkening shadow of the cold war. The U.S. and the Soviet Union eac now had massive arsenals at their disposal. The cold war struggle seemed to be everywhere. In Hungary, when people rebelled against the Russian occupation in 1956, they believed America would intervene on their behalf. "This was very difficult for the United States, after all we had been saying Liberation of Hungary is important to free world and so forth, but what were we gonna do about it.?" "But the Russians put in there was so much in the way of tanks and troops, that this would have been a major war. "It's just heartbreaking. At the height of the crisis with the Russian tanks on the street below, the kids had control of the radio station they were broadcasting S.O.S The tanks are here we need help. You promised to help us, where is our help and there was no answer." Maybe 10,000 Hungarians died at the alter of the super power competition, a competition that was taking on apocalyptic overtones. (bombs) (music) It had taken the Soviets 4 years to duplicate American success with the atomic bomb. It took only 8 months for them to do the same with the hydrogen bomb. "Well, there wasn't any doubt that peple were building them as fast as they could. We've got to build them , we've got to improve them, and keep at it, keep at it, keep at it." The need to test the new weapons was seen as so urgent that the U.S. government even put it's own troops in harms way. Within a few months of the successful Soviet hydrogen test in 1953, several thousand American troops were ordered into trenches in the Arizona desert. One of them was Korean veteran, Reisen Whereheim. "The purpose of it was to test the reaction of the troops. To an atomic bomb. They shot one off, you see this real bright light. With your hands over your eyes you can see the bones in your hands. There is this god awful noise, it feels like it compressing your head. It's so loud, it's a feeling you are in a vacuum cleaner that your whole body has been vacuumed. That house that was in front of us, was no longer in front of us, it was gone. Of the 2,584 men that were there, there's only 3 of us still alive." How many Americans were effected all together could never be fully determined. The fallout from this explosion known as Shot Simon, reached as far as New Jersey, among the dirtiest of the 200 above ground nuclear tests that took place between 1954 and 1958. The same frenzied place was applied to the rocket program. Both super powers saw them as crucial for the delivery of powerful nuclear halos. American scientists were not always having much luck. (explosions) "I saw the rockets that were pointed north go south and those that were pointed south go north. I saw one go straight up in the air and explode. I saw one go straight up and come straight back down again. But never during those 100 launches did I see anything go right." On October 4th, 1957, someone did get it right. "They say attention all radio stations of the Soviet Union are broadcasting." "this beep beep beep what is it? Sputnik. Sputnik is around the globe. Who did it? We did. The Soviet Union. First into space." "And I can remember going out to my backyard at night looking up at this bright streak going across the sky and I felt a sudden sinking feeling one of almost terror." "Now suddenly, you have Soviet missiles that can reach into the Dakotas, it can reach Chicago." With a surprise attack possible for the first time American's started to look at the sky differently. Now as the place from which terror might reign. (whistle blowing) And to learn some new terms like duck and cover. "I felt that the threat to America and been increased. That the Soviet Union had up the anti. While we were playing cops and robbers hide and seek in our backyards and our frontyards, there was the gnawing anxiety that it could all end instantaneously." July 25th,1959 at a U.S. exhibition in Moscow Soviet prime and American Vice President Nixon discussed the relevant merits of communism and capitalism. "there are some instances where you may be ahead of us, for instance in the development of your rockets." "Most of them was built from the same material they were tough and they wanted to show each other which society is better." What became known as the kitchen debate, seemed to demonstrate America's new insecurity in the world. Sputnik had been a technological Pearl Harbor. "It began a tremendous sense of self appraisal are we falling behind the Russians? What are we teaching our children? I remember Life magazine doing a whole spread on contrasting a Soviet and an American high school and little Navona and Ivan were studying rocket science and Jim and Sue were boppin' in the high school gym. And the clear message of this was that in 10-15 years we would be a declining state of the Soviet Union because we were wasting our lives dancing away and dating while these people were working 20 hour days." Suddenly an American embrace of intellectualism was being seen on campuses in libraries and on new television quiz shows, including 21. Charles Vanduran was a contestant he was the son of a celebrated professor. He performed so brilliantly that he became a national celebrity. Everyday he received 100s of letters telling him he was America's hope for a more cerebral future. It was a false hope. In November 1959, Vanduran testified that he had been given answers to the questions he had been asked. The shows producers had stage managed the contest in an effort to win ratings. "It was another let down." "Back then, you believed people. You believed people when they told you something you accepted it as face value. And here on television, they would lie to you." The media had exposed it's ugly side for all to witness. In the decade to come, Americans would discover that television was not the only beloved institution that was not quite as it seemed. As the 50's gave way to the 60's, a new generation became a force in popular culture and in politics. That That's all on the next episode of the Century, America's time. I'm Peter Jennings. We hope you'll join us.