THOSE FABULOUS FIFTIES.
Just a figment of our imagination?
by Vic Berecz

Do you read those e-mail lamentations about how awful the world has become? I get them all the time from people of a *certain age*, usually extolling the virtues of the 1950s. *LA Times* columnist Gregory Rodriguez recently wrote: "Americans have [a] tendency to sentimentalize a lost innocence that never was."   That's exactly how I feel about the 1950s. It is the decade that's held up as the great ideal American way-of-life that we'd all love to go back to.   I reached adulthood in the 50s and remember them quite well. And, I've got no desire to go back!

Many of my contemporaries seem to remember only the idyllic parts of their young lives. They prefer to forget the day the neighbor's kid died of polio and the entire neighborhood was scared s**tless about their own fate for months. They prefer to forget practicing the futile act of crawling under your school desk to protect yourself from atomic attack, or digging bomb shelters in your backyard, or the *Nike* missile site down the street. They prefer to forget how "colored" people were treated throughout most of this "land of the free." They forget the dad who worked in a mind-numbing, back-breaking factory job. They forget the mom who did piece-work nights in the sweater factory to help make ends meet.

They remember the "golden age" of television and the idyllic lives on *Father Knows Best*. But, they forget that the tiny-screen TV with ghost-ridden images cost four months of a typical worker's wage ... while today a large screen high-definition TV costs perhaps four days wages. And, did *Beaver* live the way your family really lived? Oh yes, they remember the joys of extended families living together. But, they forget the retarded brother or senile grandma locked away in the back room most of the time. They forget the pregnant sister given the choice of a back-alley abortion or going for "a long visit to Aunt Wilma". Yes, they choose to forget. Or was it simply a fictional ideal we've come to remember as *those fabulous fifties*?

Sure, there were many good things about the 50s. Most importantly, they were a welcome relief after two decades of deprivation caused by the Great Depression and World War II. That brings to mind the key issue ... the 50s are perhaps revered because they were in a few ways an aberration – a discontinuity -- in history.

For instance, crime was relatively low – at least the "reported crime" was. It was not only low compared to today's standards, but also to most historical standards ... don't forget the routine murder of dozens of immigrants every night in Manhattan during the early 1800s, or the gun-slinging ways of the *Wild West* later that century, or the crime-plagued *Prohibition Era* known as the *Roaring Twenties* when a majority of Americans chose law-breaking. Yes, the 50s were part aberration, part selective memory, but innocence? Think back. "Lost innocence that never was" I think describes the decade of the 50s very well.

I'm not saying the *nought's* or whatever you care to call the decade coming to an end, were anything special. Like most decades these last ten years had their highs and lows … and I'd be the first to admit there were lots of "lows". But, let's understand that times change, and usually for the better. Rather than looking back, those who are most successful in every decade are the people that accept the world as it is but are unwilling to leave it as it is.   They make the best of the hand they've been dealt, while working for more constructive change. To them the game of life is knowing when the hold'em and knowing when to fold'em. Let's focus on making the upcoming years the truly *fabulous* decade.