August 2, 2020

Hi Malden Arts-

In response to your suggested activities related to Perle Fine, I’d like to submit some thoughts related to the question: What do you imagine life was like growing up in the first half of the 20th century?

Actually, I’m going to focus on growing up in Malden in particular and not use my imagination so much as share what I learned from my parents and their siblings all who grew up in Malden in the first half of the 20th century. Since the topic is quite broad, I’d like to just talk about my impression that growing up in Malden at this time you had a strong sense of belonging to Malden. You were part of the city and the city was part of you.

How is it that this was so?

**Community groups:** neighborhoods, schools, churches and temples, clubs

Neighborhood—residents felt connected to their neighborhood.

-Being from Maplewood was a different identity than being from Edgeworth.

-My uncle who grew up in Ward One was one of the “Belmont Hill boys.”

-Those who served in the wars were honored by their neighborhoods.

For this reason, there’s a plaque to those from Ward 1 who served and died in WWI above the main entrance to the old Belmont School.

The WWII Memorial at Bell Rock park was until recently only for those from Ward 1 who served in that war; the same is true I think of the WWI memorial at Devir Park. Until recently it only honored WWI veterans from that area of the city.

Neighborhoods/wards wanted to honor any soldier who was “one of our own.”

Schools—residents felt connected to their schools.

-Going to Brown Junior High gave you a different identity than going to Beebee Junior High.

-You often went to school with the same core of kids from grades 1-6 and then a slightly different group from grades 7-9, and because schools were neighborhood schools you got to know who the kids were in your area quite well.

Churches/Temples—most people belonged to a church or temple.

-Most people attended some form of religious service on the weekends.

-The worship part was important, but it also was also an informal way for people to see each other and share news.

Clubs—many people participated in clubs.

-Some were church or temple based: Hadassah, Catholic Daughters, Knights of Columbus

-Others were civic organizations I’m guessing with a primarily social service function: the Eagles, the Elks, the Oddfellows, the Moose Lodge.

**Work**--many people who lived in Malden worked in Malden:

-Most people who worked for the city (government, the schools, fire, police) lived in Malden; in fact, I think police and firefighters were required to live in the city.

-Others worked in local factories: Converse, Lewis Candy, Cuticura, Revere Knitting Mills, etc.

-Others owned their own businesses in Malden: laundries, barber shops, bakeries, etc.

**Transportation**

-Most people didn’t have cars, so they walked to work or took public transportation.

-With so few cars, there was a lot of foot traffic on the sidewalks, especially on the main streets and downtown. A fair amount of the people you passed, if you didn’t know them, were familiar faces.

**Strangers**

-People were much more trustful of strangers as a result of the familiarity with the people around them.

An example: One day when my mother was a teenager in the late twenties, she was approached by a man when walking down Salem Street. He asked her if she wanted to join his track club, the Onteora Club, a private track club for girls. She said yes, joined, and really loved it. (Side note: One member of her team, Louise Stokes, went to the 1932 Olympics. Malden recently created a walking loop dedicated to her. Check it out.)

Decades later when my mother recounted how she was recruited for the team, she noted dryly “That wouldn’t fly these days.”

**Two important events:** the Depression; World War II, “The War.” For those who grew up and came of age during the twenties, thirties and forties these two events were shared experiences that had lasting influences.

The Depression

-People who lived through this time, like my parents, developed a strong “Waste not, Want not” ethos.

-Decades later my mother still rolled out stale bread to make bread crumbs and saved the drippings from cooking bacon for later use as greasing.

-With three older sisters many of play clothes were “hand-me-downs.” This was not so much because we were poor as my mother’s view that with so many useful clothes at hand, why would you waste money buying new clothes?

-Still later, my mother’s grandchildren would ask “Why does Nana save elastics on doorknobs?”

The War

-Most people had at least one family member who was “in the service.”

-People did what they could for “the war effort.” This included saving bits of tin foil and saving rags (don’t know the value) and then donating them.

-My father, newly married at that time, was away for four years in the army. During that time, my mother joined a “bridge club” with some other ladies whose husbands were away. This bridge club continued after the war, and actually met continuously (minus summers) with almost the same group of women until the early seventies.

So, my impression that the residents of Malden felt a strong sense of belonging to the city comes from all of the above. Of course, you belonged. You went to school here, worked here, worshipped here, walked its streets and spent time in its shops, meeting people you knew and crossing paths with lots of familiar faces. You experienced the Depression and the War together and helped each other get through it. You *were* Malden.

It’s a new world and a new Malden. Just want to say that I appreciate all that Malden Arts does for the city, and enjoy taking part in its events. It helps me feel like I’m a part of the city, and that I belong.

Thanks.

Ginny Ferrick