

The City Life We've Lost

Within living memory,
cities were places
of decency and grace.



Ten essayists paint the details of urban life one generation ago.

Victor Gold

Driving into New Orleans on the interstate, I veer off the I-10 overpass at the first opportunity and enter the city proper, mindful of Earl Long's warning against expressways as a bane of urban life. Back in the 1950s we laughed at our hopelessly rustic governor when he criticized our progressive mayor for building "so many damn-fool freeways, throughways, overpasses, underpasses, and bypasses, a farmer can't find his way to market." Strictly speaking, the mayor wasn't the culprit. It was Washington, streamlining the federal highway system. But Earl was never one to make fine distinctions when given a free shot at a political opponent, and in any case his warning was prescient. Farmers aside, those expressways have proven to be more curse than blessing to the New Orleans I know, and to American cities in general.

Overhead view of Canal Street at the corner of Bourbon, looking toward the Mississippi River.

To visitors, New Orleans is the French Quarter—narrow, crowded streets lined with baroque wrought-iron balconies that reflect the city's French heritage. But natives know another city, one of broad avenues with evocative names—Esplanade, Elysian Fields, Napoleon—that feature wide greens where canals once ran. Until the 1960s these neutral grounds were neighborly places where pick-up football games were interrupted only by approaching trolleys or the snowball man. The idea of an overhead structure that would transmogrify these playgrounds into sunless caverns was as remote as the possibility of trading our clangorous green streetcars for the dehumanizing mobility of Chicago's El. Yet that is precisely what's come to pass.

Certainly not all the change that's taken place in the past half-century has been for the worse. Few lament, for instance, the disappearance of those WHITE ONLY/COLORED ONLY signs on public facilities. Still, an Orleanian who remembers the special look of Canal Street on Saturday afternoons in the '40s and '50s—a gleaming stretch of marble bustling with activity, the showplace boulevard of the South—can only wonder if Earl, for all his Luddite rhetoric, wasn't on to something.

Victor Gold is a former presidential speechwriter.

Joseph Epstein

I am old enough to remember being afraid of white guys. As a grammar school kid in Chicago, I can recall being afraid of a bunch of thuggish kids who went to a nearby school called St. Henry's, many of them working-class and with the reputation—justified, I suspect—of being Jew-haters. In high school, I remember guys from all-white Schurz High School walking around the track during a football game against my school, Senn, with chains wrapped about their fists, though the police were able to stop them before a full brawl broke out. After a basketball game against a now-defunct school called Waller, five or six of our team's players were caught, beaten up, and at least one sent to the hospital. Later, at the University of Chicago, a group of young Presleys and Brandos one night invaded a fraternity house I happened to be in, with no better motive than that of what we today call “kicking some butt,” which they proceeded to do, at one point banging guys over the head with beer bottles.

So the good old days were not unblemished. But what distinguished them from our days, and what can be extracted from all of the examples I have cited above, is that most violence had at least something in the nature of an explanation behind it. Anti-Semitism may not be a justification for violence, but it is an ex-

planation. So, too, are high school rivalry and, in the university incident, what I take to be class resentment. Motives, causes, effects, logic of some sort was in play.

Today so much of the violence on our city streets is without even the crudest logic. If one is beaten up or even killed, the astonishing point is that one mustn't—you should pardon the expression—take it personally. The violence will have been committed upon you not because of your religion, or your school affiliation, or your good luck (up to now) in life, but because you happen to be in the way of someone who is bored, or angry, or needs a little dough, or a fix, or is firing at someone else. As you hit the sidewalk, try, as I say, not to take it personally.

But return with me now to those milder days of yesteryear, to paraphrase the announcer on “The Lone Ranger” radio show. I am, when I contemplate my own boyhood in Chicago in the late 1940s and early '50s, amazed at the freedom with which I roamed the city as a child. Using the “El” (or elevated train), one pretty much had the run of the city. By the time I was nine years old, my friends and I went miles away on the El to a movie theater called the Modé to see an afternoon's fare of three or four full-length films, a number of cartoons, and one or two continuing serials. The only fear was that we might get on the wrong train. We never did.

By 12 or 13, I was a seasoned walker in the city. And one of my regular stops was downtown, in the Loop, at a boxing gym called The Ringside. I had a special “in” at The Ringside, whose owners, Sammy and Danny Spunt, grew up with my father on tough Notre Dame Street in Montreal. I sopped up the gym's atmosphere as a hobo might go after the gravy on a free meatloaf-and-mashed-potatoes lunch.

I still recall its smells of liniment and leather. I can hear the shuffling of black Hyde boxing shoes in the ring, the grunting of fighters banging away on the heavy bag, the rap-a-tap-a-rap-a-tap of the light bag, and the snap and whistle of rope as sweating fighters

Urban vice, circa 1943.



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