

History told from a personal perspective, emphasizing human consequences for historic moments since World War II. Twenty writers poignantly recall the impact of the Boomer generation along with the turmoil, tragedies, and triumphs that defined their lives and the times.

LOOKING BACK: Boomers Remember History from the '40s to the Present

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LOOKING BACK:

Boomers remember history from the '40s to the present

By Kay Kennedy

*History as seen through the eyes of those who lived it!
Includes stories by 19 extraordinary Americans who recall the events
that defined their lives and the times.*

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Chapter Two

Shared Heritage: History Then and Now

Discovering history – Stories passed down – Cultural influences

“History never looks like history when you are living through it.”

-John W. Gardner (1912-2002) U. S. Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare
1965-1968

History was not my favorite subject in school! And it wasn't apparent at a conscious level at any moment that I was living through what would someday be called *history*.

Yet now I'm writing about history because it's clear how knowing the past—the lives of parents and grandparents and what they lived through—explains so much about the present.

Maybe I didn't care for history in school because it was such a boring, abstract subject, made even more so by passionless teachers who stressed memorizing dates of important events in history. That was probably the only way they could measure whether students were paying attention in class. Yet, I doubt that they really *knew* history other than what they had learned from textbooks. I don't recall ever hearing any of them say they had visited the places told about in history books. Not one of them showed any real passion for their subject.

And after all, wasn't the school's mission to teach readin', writin' and 'rithmetic? History was taught mostly as an afterthought.

History textbooks were no more revealing of human emotions than the teachers who taught from them. There was no background on how or why things happened, what individuals were thinking and what helped form their society's beliefs, hopes and dreams. There was never any information on how significant events affected people. There was definitely no way to understand how history related to my life. We students only learned the facts: that a war happened on such-and-

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such date, and on another date a famous person was born, died, or did something significant.

Add to my disinterest the fact that my family never talked about the history of our ancestors, or told about how some had settled our country before it was a nation. Although I knew I had Native American ancestors, I knew nothing about them until I was grown. And we didn't travel, so there was nothing that would spark my interest in historic places and the roles they played in the heritage of our country.

When I finally started traveling, I quickly realized how little I knew. I could remember place names, and could tell anyone "this is where something important happened." However, I often couldn't remember what or why it was important.

The first time I can remember being truly affected by history was when we visited Vicksburg, Mississippi, and toured the Civil War battleground. As I listened to the self-guided tour tapes, I could see how close the troops were to each other as they fought. They were close enough to see the terrified expressions in each other's eyes as they fired their fatal shots. Then at night they lay down to rest on the bloody battlefield where they had fought because they didn't want to lose the precious piece of ground so hard-won the day before.

That Vicksburg's families had to hide in underground dugouts and that many almost starved before the 47-day siege on their city ended moved me to tears. Women and children had tried to escape when the Union Army moved in, but found their routes closed and turned back to seek shelter. By the end of the siege, many of Vicksburg's citizens and its soldiers were reduced to eating shoe leather to survive.

I wondered, had they become part of this War Between the States willingly? How many were slave owners, or believed in political independence and states' rights, and were standing their ground for what they believed was just? Certainly there were innocent families, especially slaves, who didn't believe in the Southern cause, but had become victims of the vicious battle because they had nowhere else to go. Everyone there paid a high price.

Southern Roots

I was born and raised in the "southern" state of Arkansas that had, at first, chosen to be neutral in the conflict between the North and South because the majority of its citizens believed reunification of the nation should come through compromise rather than coercion. They

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elected a majority of Unionists for a convention to consider secession. Before the matter could be put to a popular referendum in August 1861, 780 of Arkansas' citizens were called up to form a regiment for the Union army to wage war on the South.

At the time, only one in five families in Arkansas owned slaves or were related to slave owners, most of whom were planters in the southern and eastern lowlands. Most of Arkansas is dominated by hilly to mountainous terrain that isn't conducive to large-scale farming, so landowners living in those regions had no need or desire to own slaves. Besides, most who had settled in Arkansas were individualists who believed in political independence; they had left the confining culture of the South and East to find more freedom west of the Mississippi.

While choosing to side with the South wasn't in the best interest of eighty percent of Arkansas' citizens, suddenly the state's leaders had to choose sides to keep from becoming an occupied territory with no say in how their people, land and resources might be used.

Conflicting opinions about going to war divided the state as it did much of the country. Families were torn apart by the Civil War as some brothers, fathers, and cousins chose opposite sides in the fight, trying to do what they believed was best for their families. (See related essay on page 16.)

Ancient history

Long before paper and pen were invented, ancient peoples realized it was important to leave behind a record of their lives. Thus, storytelling became the way to pass down memories of people, their accomplishments, battles, and records of everyday activities, such as planting and harvesting crops. Native Americans have always used storytelling to pass on legends and traditions, which still play an important role in modern-day Native American rituals and ceremonies. Their history has always been valuable to them.

While many ancient people created paintings in caves and on rocks to document their lives, little is understood about the meaning of most of these symbolic depictions. Without storytelling traditions, modern people would know little or nothing about the lives of ancestors.

Recorded personal stories

About the only personal recollections of the history of early America or the Civil War that remain are found in a few, scattered diaries and letters left to families, and therefore not available to the general public. Many early settlers were illiterate, and those who could write often didn't have time to put their thoughts on paper.

A few personal diaries written on the Oregon Trail have survived, and some families have kept the diaries and letters their ancestors wrote about similar historic treks and daily struggles. Still, there are very few published words about history, written by individuals who lived it, except for autobiographies most often written by famous generals and politicians. Without television or films to document historic moments as they happened, very few personal stories of ordinary citizens have been passed on to help today's generation understand American lives as they related to their times.

Discovering living history

Around the same time that I toured Vicksburg, I became friends with an elderly gentleman in Arkansas who could tell stories handed down to him by his grandfather about hardships during the Civil War. My friend had been a history teacher until fame as a folk musician found him during the late fifties. Then he left teaching to travel the world writing historical songs and performing.

Later, I was introduced to an elderly lady who had always lived in a small Arkansas community and knew the history of every family that had lived there since it had been formed in the 1850s. She told stories about events that happened during the Civil War and even before. Those two people became my "living history" teachers. Suddenly history was fascinating and came alive through their stories!

Both of these wonderful people are gone now, but they stirred up my obsession with learning history—as did visiting places where history is still revered and comes alive as though it happened only yesterday.

The loss of personal stories

With the passing of my two elderly friends and others like them—those who had a connection to events that took place a long time ago—it becomes clear that much of our history is being buried with them. It is also clear that those of us who are living now have

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witnessed some of the greatest events and technological advances in history, and from personal experience, recall much more than will ever appear in future history books.

We are here. We have a personal connection to all the things that are happening and have happened during our lifetimes. At times, we witnessed it firsthand; at other times we saw it played out on television. No matter how we were exposed to these historic moments, most of us paid an emotional price because our voices weren't being heard and our lives seemed to be spinning out of control. Yet, how much of what we've seen and felt will ever get passed on to our descendants in a way that emphasizes our involvement with certain events and their consequences, both good and bad? Typical history books relate basic facts and fail to convey personal feelings or emotional consequences, so how will future generations understand unless we ensure that our individual stories be heard?

Why sharing historic memories is important

In today's society, people don't stay put and families become separated, which leaves little opportunity to personally pass shared legacy along to the younger generation. Besides, many of us are hesitant to recall the past because we don't want to "bore" the youngsters. How can they possibly care about something that happened a long time ago? Yet, how many youngsters would become bored hearing firsthand how we saw, live on television, the first man walk on the moon?

With the release of the popular movie, *Bobby*, a few of today's young people will have learned a tiny bit about Robert F. Kennedy and history during a tumultuous period in our country. However, packaged in a glamorous Hollywood version of the shocking event, will they understand the message? Will they realize how that assassination and others of the '60s terrified their parents and grandparents? Will they know just how horrific and devastating some of the events were to those who witnessed them on television? Can they understand that we all suffered emotional stress because of events during those terrible years: the assassinations of three of our great leaders within a few short years, and increasing numbers of troops our age getting killed in Vietnam—all within the span of less than a decade?

Firsthand familiarity with those events helps explain the cynics among us today. It also explains those who can't seem to forget the

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compelling drama in what we've seen—what we've experienced. The impact on some of our lives will never be erased. It's important that future generations know that!

Who can expect young movie viewers to really understand or be interested in learning the background and emotions surrounding Bobby Kennedy's death and other events of that era? Outside of entertainment, who will explain it to them? Many of their parents don't know the stories. Some, because of busy schedules, are disconnected from current events and rarely pay attention to news other than what they hear as sound bites on radio or television while rushing around doing chores.

I was oblivious to some of the things taking place when they happened—even as they happened around me—important things that should be remembered. I was busy. Like young women today, I was much too hurried and stressed to put concentrated effort into processing information that appeared on television news programs. Most of it didn't have an impact on my life. We didn't have 'round-the-clock news in early television. We had perhaps one hour to catch the news at dinnertime, or during the one-half hour wrap-up before we went to bed—but that was enough time to learn the important news of the day.

The most positive side to those news programs back then was that newscasters had a professional mandate to mask their opinions, unlike many today. No matter how credible and likeable they were, either of which could have influenced viewers, reporters hid their personal prejudices.

That's not to say news stories weren't sometimes dramatized for effect. However, mostly we were given the facts, which were sometimes unbelievable, sometimes ugly, and we were free to reach our own conclusions based upon those facts.

Today's media

Today it is often difficult to discern the fine line between editorial comments and actual news facts unless viewers take the time to study all sources of news—newspapers, current events magazines, and television. Yes, it's time consuming, but also necessary to form educated opinions on topics that are important to our lives—in fact, our very survival.

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Several programs on television now parody the news or offer cynical, lop-sided versions on so-called news programs. While they're certainly clever and entertaining, there is a danger in some people watching these programs as their only news source. After all, there's no disclaimer at the beginning of the show to inform viewers that what they're watching is only somebody's idea of a joke.

On the other hand, watching news stories on TV all day as cameras follow every excruciating moment of what's happening (like O.J. Simpson's infamous low-speed chase down Los Angeles freeways) cannot really inform us since the reporters know as little as their viewers until the incident is over. So much of what passes as "breaking news today is only television's way of trying to hold viewers' attention so more commercial messages can be directed their way.

These televised incidents and the sense of urgency they suggest only succeed in leaving viewers feeling anxious, and they add unnecessary stress to complicate our already overloaded lives. In the end, is any of it really material that will be important to history?

Reality hurts

As the '60s rolled by, I mourned the public figures who were assassinated during that decade of loss, and I worried about the direction our country was headed. My main duty, I had thought, was to cast a vote every two years—never mind that I might not fully understand each candidate's political stance or where their positions on issues might lead our country. Slowly the reality of what was happening in our country seeped into my soul. Is it any wonder that I became a cynic, like so many others who no longer trusted those in government to tell the truth?

Yet even amid the turmoil, I managed to ignore news reports that didn't directly impact my life. I internalized it all though, and today I live with the ghosts of more than 58,000 Americans who lost their lives fighting a senseless war, and political leaders who were assassinated or politically destroyed by events that seemed to consume the country during those turbulent years and afterwards.

The generation born in the '40s and '50s entered the world as innocents in one of the most prosperous, hopeful eras in history. Yet we always felt our way of life was under assault, by what or whom we often couldn't name.

Cultural influences

Music, entertainment and other cultural influences were also part of our lives and are mentioned in this book. After all, music has always been our background beat. During the '40s, adults danced their worries away to swing music. Elvis became the icon of the '50s as his music seduced a generation no longer content with the safe, predictable, segregated lifestyles of their parents. Stirred by the civil rights movement in the '60s, we embraced music of inclusion that had meaning and challenged the status quo.

Music became an important vehicle behind revolutionary social reform in the '60s. Missionaries of change joined the folk scene to express their views, with the hope of bringing about social justice for all and an end to a war that required the least powerful among us to fight an enemy with whom they had no personal quarrel.

For a while in the early '60s, as folk music offered protest songs that appealed to restless Americans, rock and roll music provided an escape for teenage fans—with groups like the Beach Boys, Beatles, and others like them. Soon though, their beach tunes and fanciful songs about yellow submarines evolved into loud, amplified music with a hard-driving, bitter edge that expressed the effects of drugs, war, poverty and other social ills. During this period the lyrics to country tunes, which had always included references to drinking and cheating, began alluding to more challenges that faced society: divorce, drugs, and despair.

Even today, music reflects the social concerns of the young. Movies and the entertainment world play a larger part in the lives of Generation X, echo-Boomers, and Generation Y than ever before. Since Gen-X (those born from the mid-'60s to 1976) reached their teens, there has been an endless onslaught of entertainment news on nightly TV. Those born from 1977 to mid-'80s (echo-Boomers) and late '80s to mid-'90s (Gen-Y) were raised with the faces of celebrities in their homes every day, causing many to become obsessed with the everyday goings-on of the rich and famous in a way that could never have been imagined by those growing up in the '40s, '50s and '60s.

Those of us lucky enough to have televisions in that era watched shows like "The Lone Ranger" and "I Love Lucy" on tiny black and white screens. That was in an era when married couples on TV and in the movies slept in twin beds so there would be no suggestion that the

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couple ever had sex. The word *pregnancy* was never uttered, not even when Lucy was expecting a baby on her show and in real life.

Today, almost anything goes on television and in the movies, and it's reflected in the way youngsters dress and the many other ways they emulate their favorite celebrities. Perhaps their obsessive interest is because they've had fewer life-changing experiences and distractions than filled the lives of Boomers, things like the draft, wars, protests, assassinations and riots. Or maybe this is their only escape from very different, but just as stressful distractions of drug use, drive-by shootings and guns in schools. Are they becoming conditioned to threats of more terrorist attacks, like the ones in New York and Washington D.C. that they've already witnessed during their young lives?

The more things change, the more they stay the same

The world has changed dramatically over the past seven decades, and technological changes have been fast-forwarding at warp speed since the introduction of the home computer and Internet. The generation born in the '40s and '50s has embraced the Internet for business use, as a way to keep in touch with family and friends, and to research topics they wish to know more about. They get it, but only as one tool at their disposal. The X and Y generations can't seem to live without it. The computer, I-pod, and television are often the only companions of Gen-Ys when they get home from school because Mom and Dad are away at work. Is it any wonder that these electronic boxes often have more influence on youngsters than do their parents and grandparents?

In the '50s, few Baby Boomers truly believed that they would reach middle-age because of the Cold War and living under the omnipresent cloud of a possible nuclear attack. By the '60s the generation gap was in full swing because the values young people viewed as important—formed largely by their fears for the future—were so different from those of their complacent parents.

Is there a similar generation gap brewing between parents and children who no longer understand each other? After all, today's parents who grew up during the late '70s and '80s lived in a world relatively free from war and with lessening fear of the Cold War and the constant looming nuclear threat that had pervaded society for the previous three decades. Meanwhile, children and grandchildren of

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Boomers cannot be assured that their generation will survive to adulthood because of threats of terrorist attacks, or of global destruction from a nuclear or chemical assault by a rogue group or country. Their enemies are not as clearly defined as ours were.

But that's a story for another day. That will be tomorrow's history.

Remembering the Confederacy by Robert Hubata

Politically correct historians conveniently forget that the Confederate States of America stood for anything other than slavery. But in fact, an important objective of the Confederacy was political independence. This was the reason so many non-slaveholding men and women were willing to fight and die for the South. This was the expression of the right of self-determination, a right, indeed a duty, put forward in the Declaration of Independence of the United States.

This aspect of our history is all the more relevant today in an age where many people across the world are expressing this right. Today we are witnessing the emergence of independent democracies in Europe and Asia, as smaller political entities are seceding from larger but less representative nation-states. In Europe, for example, Montenegro recently seceded from Serbia. This was a non-violent act, widely anticipated and not forcibly opposed by the larger country. A similar process had taken place a few years earlier when the Slovak Republic seceded from the Czech Republic. These were desirable outcomes: people got the government they wanted in place of a larger, more centralized government.

It could have been so with the South, whose biggest mistake was waiting too long to secede. By 1860, the North was already too powerful to beat, using conventional warfare. During the ensuing four years, more Southerners died defending their homeland than did all Americans fighting in World War II. Today's descendants of these courageous defenders remember their sacrifice. That's why the Confederate flag is so revered, not because of slavery but in honor of the people who gave their lives for the cause of southern independence.

Slavery, as an economic system, would have been ended anyway, peacefully probably, just as in other countries as diverse as Brazil and the British Empire. Most Southerners understood that slavery's days were numbered, and they would have resolved the

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issue without the bloodshed, had the Confederacy survived. The counterfactual history suggested here might well have been superior to the actual, in terms of black economic advancement.

But, even to talk about the Confederacy as a viable alternative, or to fly its flag, or to celebrate Confederate Memorial Day (a legal holiday in South Carolina), is unacceptable in the context of today's politically correct ideology. Imagine what the reaction would be if one tried to suppress native-American history or to belittle the achievements of blacks. Why can't we at least discuss the South's role in U.S. history, just as objectively?

BIOGRAPHY: Robert Hubata was born in Batesville, Arkansas in 1942. He graduated from Morgan Park H.S. (Chicago) in 1960, University of California at Berkeley in 1967 (BA in Mathematics), and Arizona State University in 2002 (PhD in Statistics). Robert married Cecily Myers in 1963. Children: Rachel (1966). He married Corrine Phillips in 1993 and they live in Phoenix, Arizona. His hobbies are reading, taking pictures, writing, and swimming.

History told from a personal perspective, emphasizing human consequences for historic moments since World War II. Twenty writers poignantly recall the impact of the Boomer generation along with the turmoil, tragedies, and triumphs that defined their lives and the times.

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