

### Chapter 3B: Later Childhood (1955-1960)

New York, indeed, appeared to us, even when we saw it by a soberer light, a lovely and a noble city.”

Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832)

The great big city’s a wondrous toy,  
Just made for a girl or boy ...”

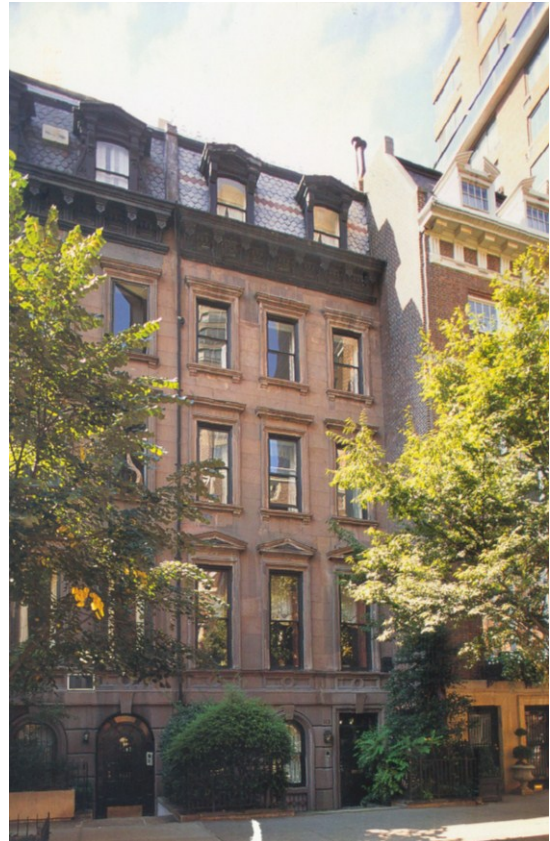
Lorenz Hart, “Manhattan”<sup>1</sup>

**Because this chapter and the previous one deal with a time when I was very young, they are fragmentary and lack narrative coherence. Reader, proceed (if you do) patiently and indulgently.**

#### **6. 112 East 70th Street**

Around 1955 my parents bought a brownstone house on 70th Street between Park and Lexington Avenues. The Fifth Avenue apartment was too small even for a couple with two children – I’m guessing that the decision to move was made when they realized that my mother was pregnant again, even before they knew it was with twins. As the twins were born in September 1955, this probably puts the purchase of the 70th Street house somewhere in the winter of 1954-55, but it could have been earlier. We moved in on October 3, 1955, when I was 11 years old.

The house was a very typical brownstone of the time – built as I recall in the 1870s by a family named Campbell, whose son lived in it his whole life, so our family was only the second one to live there. The street was famous for its elegance – the trees on both sides met above the street, and there was an article on our block in an issue of *Fortune* magazine, from the 1930s I



<sup>1</sup> Of course the line is really “Just made for a girl *and* boy.” Definitely the wrong conjunction for my experience in the years covered by this chapter. “Just made for a *yid* and *goy*” would be a great line if I could ever find a place to use it.

think. We weren't in the same class financially as many of our neighbors – the Mellons, Anthony Quinn, Helen Tucker (daughter of Benjamin Sonnenberg, see the references to him and her in Christopher's papers) – and our house was one of the least elegant on the street. But it was a terrific neighborhood, and the shabbiest house on that street was still quite something.

The house had a front stoop, New Yorkese (from the Dutch *stoep*) for an external stairway to the second floor, which was the *piano nobile*. An entrance to the ground floor was let into the side of the stoop at street level – this was the tradesmen's entrance, and led to the kitchen and housekeeping space. A huge iron stove in the kitchen was probably original to the house, and so was a dumbwaiter for bringing the food up to the dining area. There was a cool damp cellar below this, with a special room for wine storage. On the main (second) floor, front and back rooms were connected by sliding doors to a foyer between them. This was the standard floor plan for New York private houses of the period. There were bedrooms on the two floors above that, and a floor at the top for storage and maids' quarters. We put a laundry room there. The top floor also gave access to the roof. It was a standard New York brownstone of the 1870s, still in its original form.

My parents renovated this house before we moved in. I remember visiting the site when construction was in progress – I was amazed by the pay phone the contractor installed there. Bill Garson, of Goodman & Garson, did the work, and we became friendly with his family, which included his wife Toby and her three children Lee, Lynn and Laurie Oestreicher.<sup>2</sup> The Phillips Family Papers has an album of photographs of the house before and after the renovation. Both the before and after pictures – Campbell and Phillips – showed living spaces representative of the private houses of bourgeois New York families of their periods.

The stoop was removed and the main entrance was set into a kind of plaza sunk about three steps below the street level. We put plantings into this area. The front door had brass lanterns on either side, and led into a small foyer. Our space was directly ahead (south); to the left (east) was the door to the doctor's office which now occupied the ground floor. It had power for x-ray machines and similar equipment – as noted the plan was to lease this space out at first, and use it later for my father's medical office if he needed it. But he never needed it, as he worked only in the hospital and didn't have a private practice. A succession of doctors had it for the whole time we lived there. The people who bought the house after us integrated it into their living space. After the

---

<sup>2</sup> Toby's father was the songwriter Harry Ruby (1895-1974), whose name was originally Rubinstein. It was therefore possible that her family and my mother's family, also named Rubinstein and from the same area in Russian Lithuania, could have been related. We'll never know.

renovation the cellar was not used much – the wine in the cellars had all turned bad, which disappointed my father.

After entering our part of the house, you had to go up a flight of stairs. There was a coat closet for guests on the ground floor and the entrance to the cellar stairs, but nothing else. Going up the stairs put you in a reception foyer, with an antique chest, a closet for family use, and a modern bathroom. To the left (that is, north, facing the street) was a dining room, with bookshelves on one side opposite a large closet-like space for china. This room had a dining table, a sideboard, and another chest, all antiques, and an antique mirror. There were two windows with cased radiators in front of them, where Bruce the Airedale, who looked a lot like King George V, used to stand with his elbows on the radiator case, looking out on the street. Parallel to the dining room was a narrow modern kitchen done in Formica. It had the usual mod cons, a small folding table attached to the wall next to the dining room for Mary to work and eat at, and another window.

The other way from the foyer was the living room. This was the largest space in the house and also furnished in antiques. I remember a sofa, a settee, a wing chair and a “Martha Washington” chair, a large round table and a smaller card table – pretty much the same furniture we’d had at 1136 Fifth Avenue (see Chapter 3A-1). There was also a large piano (not an antique), an antique grandfather clock, and some lamps. I remember winding that clock with the special antique tool, and marveling at the lead weights and the pendulum that provided the motive power. An open display case near the piano held pottery and similar knickknacks, also antiques. A hi-fi system and some LP records were in a small closet in this room – my father had a large modern speaker clad in copper.<sup>3</sup>

Behind the sofa, window panels ran the width of the room. They were covered by two layers of curtains – padded muslin and silk – that opened with pulleys. A door led out onto a terrace built over the doctor’s consulting room, with a steel staircase down to a back yard. The terrace was hardly ever used, and the yard never.

Another staircase began in the foyer and curved up to the higher floors. There was a small sliding panel where the staircase passed the back of the kitchen, so things could be passed through without entering the dining room. I’m not sure what the reason was for this never-used feature. The stairs, which were pretty steep, ended at a landing in a corridor with low bookcases. I spent a lot of time on this landing, reading the books in these shelves.

The corridor had a door at each end. The front room was my parents’ bedroom, also furnished with antiques. I remember, besides the bed, a handsome tall secretary (desk below; bookcases above) and a highboy (like a dresser on legs). The back bedroom was originally shared by the twins. Their room was not furnished with antiques, and after a

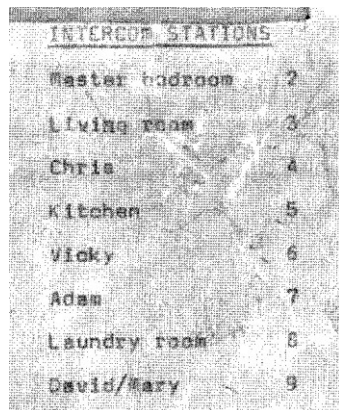
---

<sup>3</sup> *Hi-fi* meant *high fidelity* – a 1950s term for a relatively sophisticated (for the time) audio system.

while was divided by a movable partition running on a track in the floor, to separate them because they fought so much. The two bedrooms were connected by a bathroom. Later the twins were given separate bedrooms.

Up another flight of stairs was another corridor (this one had cupboards for linens and blankets rather than bookcases), and two more bedrooms connected by a bathroom. I had the bedroom facing the street; Christopher had the one in the back, facing the back yards on the block and looking into the windows of the Union League Club at 69th and Park. Later Adam moved into this room, Christopher into mine, and I moved to the top floor.

When the top floor was renovated for me in 1961, I had a bedroom with a built-in closet and cork floor, and an attached private bathroom with a stall shower. There was an open foyer with bookcases on this floor, but the books were just my father's old medical books, including a run of *Medical Clinics of North America*, of no interest to me. I had my own bookshelves attached to standards mounted on the wall. There was a storage room, always jammed with things like suitcases and picture-frames, and a laundry room with washing and drying equipment, an ironing board, and a work space for Jean the laundress. There was a front room which could have been a maid's room but was never really used for anything, and a small room housing the metal spiral staircase to the roof. I often went up onto the roof, which connected to the roofs of neighboring houses so a person could go quite a way down the block over rooftops. The roof curved up at the front, where some decorative Victorian ironwork marked the roofline from the street.



There were phones in most of the principal rooms and on some of the landings. The phones also had an intercom system – the house was too big and the stairs too steep to communicate easily any other way. This intercom was considered quite a novelty by my friends. There were three outside lines eventually – REgent 7-1217 was the main number, REgent 7-1275 was a secondary number, and REgent 7-8498 was my private line, given to me as a teenager so I wouldn't tie up the main line talking with my friends. We had lighted buttons on the phones for the various lines and the intercom, and a hold

button – for the 1950s it was a fairly advanced system. The phones were all plastic Western Electric Series 500 phones.

I originally planned another section called “My World on 70th Street,” to match the earlier section “My World on Fifth Avenue,” but found few topics that really fit here. By the time I moved to 112, aged 11, my world was not as circumscribed as it had been when I was younger. I moved easily all around the City, which meant Manhattan below 96th Street. I went to Collegiate School, which was on the West Side, and so shuttled back and forth across the island every day.

Our immediate family – my parents and those children who were old enough – almost always had dinner together. This was considered an important custom, and indeed social science research has confirmed that it correlates with (although we can't say *causes*) lots of wholesome results. We did this even when, as was usually the case, there was considerable tension in the family.

Invariably my father sat at the “head” of the table, with his back to the street. My mother sat opposite him, and the children sat between them on the sides. I'm not sure whether Christopher sat with us at 1136, as he was not quite 5 when we left. But at 112 our places were: me with my back to Lexington Avenue, next to my father, Christopher next to me, and Adam and Victoria opposite us.

The dining table was an antique, and for family dinners there was no tablecloth, although there was one for occasional big formal dinners, when a leaf was added to the table. Utensils were of heavy silver from Cartier, with my parents' joint monogram SNP. Glassware was Steuben crystal with the same monogram. Dishes were of a pattern we called the *bird plates*, with a colorful pheasants-in-the-grass design throughout. Cloth napkins had the monogram too (it also appeared on the towels). Antique brass candlesticks stood in the center of the table. Mary served the dinner in uniform, stopping by each diner with a serving dish from which we helped ourselves. It was an appealing combination of high style and modest demeanor.



Did we have a starter dish? Sometimes soup or something – I can't remember now if this was a daily event. Then the main course—meat or fish, with two vegetables. Steaks were thick in those days; lobster appeared regularly; and we also had roast chicken or Mary's chicken fricassee, roast beef, fish, occasionally steamed clams. Among the vegetables I remember especially asparagus, fresh peas, so-called *Lyonnaise* potatoes, broccoli with a hollandaise sauce, creamed spinach, and a tomato dish with gobbets of bread stewed in (there was sugar in this dish, maybe that's why I liked it so much). Bread and butter were served on a side plate.

Salad was served next as a separate course. Then dessert – Mary made excellent cakes and pies, and sometimes we had ice cream or “floating island” (a custard dish) or even cherries jubilee, served in flames with great ceremony.<sup>4</sup> Chocolate pudding was a favorite because my father always sneezed exactly twice when he ate this – Mary served his portion with a handkerchief. Wine was often poured and children considered old enough could have a token portion in a small glass. Adults smoked cigarettes between courses.

---

<sup>4</sup> Pouring brandy into the dish and igniting the fumes of the alcohol created blue flames.

The food at my house was terrific – it was a combination of Mary’s southern training and my parents’ French taste. I remember most of this from 112 but I doubt the food in 1136 was much different. Every once in a while I would prepare a dish such as sukiyaki from the cookbooks in the kitchen – *Gourmet* and *Joy of Cooking* were the two most-used titles. These were usually pretty good, but I never got a taste for cooking.

## 7. Youthful interests

I discuss my school experience during this period in Chapter 3C, my reading in Chapter 4, some major interests in Chapters 5 (geography) and 6 (heraldry), and my family’s power dynamics in Chapter 7. As with the previous period, my interior life – what was on my mind from day to day – I have mostly forgotten now, but I do recall a lot of what kept me busy.

### Exploring the City.

I took an early interest in the history and architecture of Manhattan, and as soon as I was allowed to wander freely around town devoted considerable energy to exploring it. I enjoyed the variety of neighborhoods – for example Fifth Avenue at Eighth Street was very different from what it was at 20th, 57th, 95th and 130th Streets. I liked the garment district, and Times Square, and the financial district, and the waterfront, and the upper West Side; I wrote school papers on city history. I developed a keen eye for historical styles and architectural ornament, and would sometimes amuse my friends (and impress girls) by with a running commentary on walks through city streets.

- While doing this I learned the technique of keeping my eye on the second floor and above when going through any city, as the ground floors have often been vandalized by remodeling. Keep your eye above street level and you will see a very different city, not only in New York but elsewhere too.

### Museums



Manhattan was of course prime museum territory, and I spent a lot of time in some of the best museums in the world, which were mostly free in those days. Especially important to me as a child were the





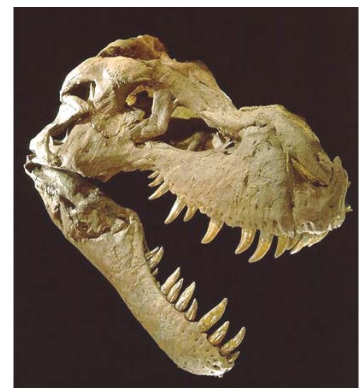
Metropolitan Museum of Art (above left) and the American Museum of Natural History. I cannot remember a time during my years in New York when the Metropolitan Museum was not a big part of my life. I knew it intimately, including a great many of the paintings, the famous rooms, the armor, the Egyptian Wing, the Greek and Roman collections, and lots more (see sample, above right).<sup>5</sup> When I go to New York now I still visit the Met almost every day. I also went often to the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Frick Collection.



The American Museum of Natural History (left) was where the dinosaurs were. But it also had lots of other things, including the Morgan gem collection, stuffed wild animals, the Hall of Birds, dioramas of early New York and of thrillingly topless Indian women, and the magnificent entrance hall (a monument to Theodore Roosevelt), with its endlessly fascinating murals which included heraldic elements.

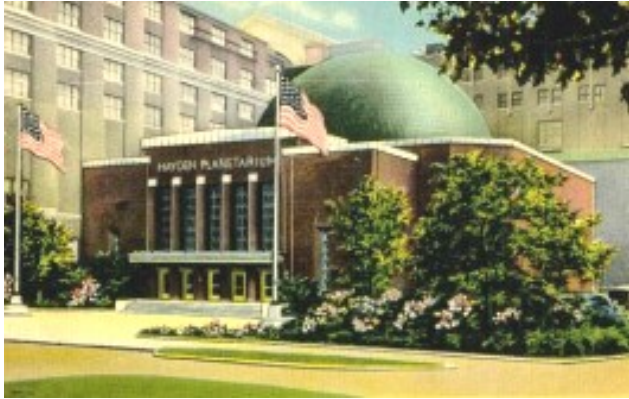
The

equestrian statute in the front, with TR's horse being guided by an American Indian and an African, was also part of this monument. The northeastern forest hall had an enlarged cross-section of the ground with super-sized bugs in burrows. I got to know just about everything in this museum. I can still see in my mind's eye the great mural at the entrance to the Hall of Birds, the elephants in the African Hall, the dinosaur footprint and fossil dinosaur eggs, and much more.



Attached to the American Museum was the Hayden Planetarium (below left), not yet disfigured by its present vulgar sheath. As well as the main show beneath the dome which housed the famous Zeiss Projector, it had a room-sized orrery with the planets revolving around an illuminated globe of a sun, scales which told your weight on different planets, and a lighted sign which directed you to the "Solar System and Restrooms."

<sup>5</sup> Shown: Ceramic plate, *The Death of Achilles*, by Nicolo da Gabriele Spraghe (c. 1520-25).



Although the Museum of Modern Art (above right) was not free, I was a member. I used it as a clubhouse, ate at the cafeteria by the sculpture garden, saw the classic films in their basement auditorium, hung out in the member's lounge, and got to know the collection really well.



The Frick Collection, at 1 East 70th Street (left), was right on our street and still free in those days. My siblings and I used that as a clubhouse too, and we became intimately familiar with the collection, which never changed. I spent many hours reading on the stone benches in the steamy room with the pool and the bronze frog fountains. Jean Barbet's *Angel* (1475), just visible against a pillar in the photo, is shown again at right – this work meant a lot to me in my teenage years, and I still love it.



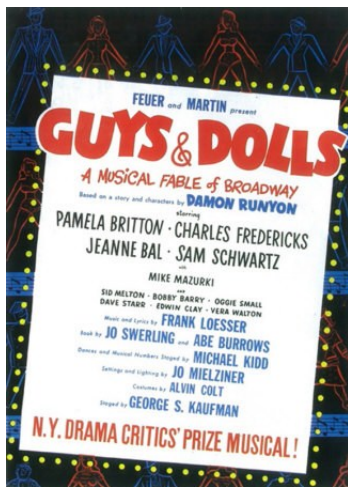
Among the important things I gained from these museum experiences, as I look back on them, were a grounding in art, an appreciation of excellence, and an awareness of the vocabulary of art and art history across the periods and cultures. I also trace my sense of connoisseurship to a growing familiarity with collections at the Met, the Frick, and the MOMA. You get something very different from seeing the same picture 20 times than from seeing 20 pictures once.



Finally there was the Museum of the City of New York (right), at 103rd Street and Fifth Avenue. This had splendid exhibitions of local history, and I went there often. I visited other museums from time to time also, although they were less important. I include the New-York Historical Society (note the archaic but lovingly preserved hyphen), the American Numismatic Society, the Museum of the American Indian, the Fraunces Tavern Museum, and the National Academy of Design. Many museums I now enjoy, like the Asia Society and the Museum of Broadcasting, were not yet founded. And there were other places, not museums, which I also enjoyed – for example the main branch of the New York Public Library, the United Nations, and the Staten Island Ferry.



### Theater



Growing up in Manhattan, the Broadway theater was right there, part of our normal environment. We went to Broadway shows from time to time – we saw *Guys and Dolls*, for example, and my grandmother took me to see Mary Martin in *Peter Pan*. When I seemed old enough my father told me he would pay for the cheapest ticket for anything I wanted to see – in those days the cheapest ticket for a Broadway show was \$2.90. That got you a seat in the second balcony, or standing room at the back of the orchestra. The deal was that he would pay my way into the theatre, but if I wanted a better seat it was up to me to finance an upgrade. I never did upgrade – young and strong as I was back then, I usually took standing room. It offered a better view, and it was easier to see what seats were open to take at intermission, and easier to get to them. So I went frequently, and formed the habit of regular theatre-going which I retain to this day – even now more than 50 years later I ordinarily go to the theatre every Friday night. San Francisco is not Broadway, but there is usually something worthwhile on.

I remember seeing on Broadway, among many other shows: *Pajama Game*, *My Fair Lady*, *Silent Night Lonely Night* with Barbara Bel Geddes, *J.B.* with Raymond Massey and Christopher Plummer, *Barefoot in the Park*, *Sunrise at Campobello* with Ralph Bellamy, *Destry Rides Again*, and *A Raisin in the Sun*. I saw Nichols and May's legendary comedy act, and *Beyond the Fringe*, and Victor Borge, and *The Fantasticks*

(off Broadway). I saw *Fiorello!*, *No Strings* (an unjustly neglected masterpiece by Richard Rodgers), *Little Alice*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, *West Side Story*, *The Music Man*, Marcel Marceau, *Li'l Abner*, *The Best Man*, Cyril Ritchard in *Visit to a Small Planet*, *Irma la Douce*, *The Miracle Worker*, *The Night of the Iguana*, Zero Mostel's legendary performance in *Rhinoceros*, Mostel again in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* with its breathtaking (for me) nude scene, *Any Wednesday*, *Marat/Sade*, *Plaza Suite*, *Hadrian the Seventh*, and much much much more.

## Movies

I went to the movies often. A few memories seem worth including.



Radio City was in its prime then – I remember well being taken by my grandmother to this Art Deco palace (left) with its opulent interiors, and seeing the entire show, which consisted not only of the movie and the Rockettes dancing (right), but also a vaudeville program with singers and acrobats, and newsreels and shorts. One film I saw with her there was *Singin' in the Rain*, with Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor (1952).



Newsreels were still important in the days before television became part of everyone's life. There was a freestanding newsreel theatre inside Grand Central Station which I was taken to a few times, and I remember it with affection.

In my early teens, so-called "art theatres" began serving espresso coffee in the lobby. This was a sensational innovation at the time and pretty much defined the new kind of theatre. The Paris Cinema on 58th Street, next to the Plaza Hotel, was the paradigm. This was before ratings, but unaccompanied children were not admitted to movie theatres, so I would stop people in front of the theatres or approach them on the ticket line and ask if they would get me in. I never had any trouble getting in wherever I wanted – I paid them for the ticket before we got to the window.

There was a Saturday children's program at the Trans-Lux theatre on 85th and Madison, now gone. It was mostly cartoons, as I remember it, but it was a direct successor to the

serial programs that had attracted children in earlier years. I went regularly as a child, but not much after we moved to 70th Street.

When I was old enough to be interested I used to go down to the Times Square area and see racy films. There were lots of theatres offering these films, although what they showed was pretty tame by modern standards. There was still rigid censorship in New York State and every film had to exhibit a license from the State Board of Regents. There was no sex on publicly shown film, not even any sex play, but if you sat through all of an otherwise very dull film you might see a flash of a breast here or there. It seemed to me well worth the time. Later there were nudist films, which as “documentaries” were allowed greater freedom than other films to show naked people, and some “nudies” which showed breasts but nothing more.<sup>6</sup>



I kept going back to the Times Square area – as a Damon Runyon fan, I liked the lowlife atmosphere, which in today’s pasteurized environment has been almost completely eliminated. One place I used to visit was Hubert’s Flea Museum (left), a famous establishment even then down on its luck. As well as the fleas, which I never saw perform live (but which could still be seen through mounted magnifying glasses, dead but dressed as people, hitched to wagons or doing circus acts), there were freak shows and novelty acts. I remember a sword swallower and a man who stuck hatpins through his body, including his throat. What a place! I also hung around Greenwich Village, hoping somehow to be turned into a Bohemian or a beatnik. Alas, I

was too young and too timid – if I had been less timid I might have made it.

In those days both sides of 42nd Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues were lined with enormous run-down movie theatres. Years before, these had all been legitimate theatres or vaudeville houses – by the time I took to hanging around Times Square some ran C-list movies in double or triple features, some ran action films, and some ran what passed for dirty films in those days (still of course, as noted, not pornography as the word is understood today). These theatres were huge and had vast balconies; some of them ran all night long. Bums would sleep there, and people would shoot up and make out and fight and get blow jobs, and other gritty things would happen. I haunted these old

---

<sup>6</sup> Although I kept trying, I never saw anything stronger than that until the breakthrough *Sexual Freedom in Denmark*, also in theory a “documentary” on the Danish policy of allowing pornography to be shown openly, which I saw in San Francisco in 1970 at the age of 26, also as a theatre called the Paris (on Market Street).



theatres, smoking cigarettes in the balcony and watching the passing scene. Now that scene is gone, and 42nd Street is all cleaned up. I'm not sure this is for the best.



I remember seeing *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) (left) several times at a Loews theatre on

the East Side – was it on 86th Street and Lexington Avenue? also Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face* (1957) (right) at the same theatre. There were always interesting foreign and off-beat films at the Thalia on 95th Street just west of Broadway. It would be tedious to list all the theatres now closed I used to go to, or the films I saw there. But there were lots of both.



### Television

We got our first television in 1953, when I was nine. I remember this because the day it arrived my Uncle Roy asked to watch the Kentucky Derby (he must have had a bet on), and Dark Star won that year. When the TV arrived my father said he didn't want me watching it constantly, and I didn't – I watched in moderation, one of the few things I ever did in moderation. As I list the shows I liked there are quite a lot of them, but I chose them individually rather than just sitting down to watch TV and seeing what was on.



I watched Sid Caesar's comedy show, called *Your Show of Shows* – Imogene Coca was his sidekick (see left). You can still (2010) see some of his work on YouTube. I liked *Playhouse 90*, an important 90-minute dramatic show, live of course – Paddy Chayevsky, Rod Serling and others wrote for it. I

watched Alistair Cooke (right) on *Omnibus*, the granddaddy of all magazine shows. Perry Como, the crooner famous for being relaxed, had a variety show (prominently featuring himself, of course) that I watched this every week. Perry would

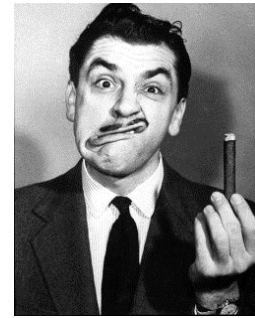




sing, surrounded by showgirls who would introduce the request segment by singing “Letters, we get letters, we get stacks and stacks of letters...”



I watched Arthur Godfrey (left), reprising his radio show on television, with regulars like Julius LaRosa, and Jack Benny, reprising *his* radio show. I liked *Dragnet*, the iconic police show with Jack Webb as Sgt. Friday (“All we want are the facts, ma’am”). Ernie Kovacs (right) was a television comic of singular originality, unfortunately killed in a road accident while still fairly young. You can see



him on YouTube also. I knew his kids from day camp – they were Mouseketeers on *The Mickey Mouse Club*.<sup>7</sup> *Amos and Andy* was a television show, derived from the radio show much despised in later years for its insensitive stereotypes of Negroes, as African-Americans were then known. I never heard the radio show but liked the TV version, which unlike the radio show featured black actors. It didn’t seem offensive to me – but would I have known?



George Burns and Gracie Allen had a television show too, a situation comedy with a monologue by George at the start and finish. I liked it a lot. Also *Topper*, a sitcom based on the books by Thorne Smith (first one published in 1926). Robert Sterling and Anne Jeffries and their St. Bernard dog Neil are killed by an avalanche and come back to haunt the house where Cosmo Topper (Leo G. Carroll) lived. Topper could see, hear and speak to them, but no one else could, and much hilarity resulted from this situation. It was on from 1953-56, and I thought it was terrific.

I was deeply devoted to Jackie Gleason’s variety show and watched it every week – I thought he was the most universally talented fellow ever because he not only did comedy (*The Honeymooners*) and pathos (*The Poor Soul*) but was a bandleader as well. I used to dress up like his playboy character Reginald Van Gleason III, with silk dressing gown, ascot, golf cap, and other accessories, and do some of his moves. Aunt Louise



<sup>7</sup> *The Mickey Mouse Club* was a variety show featuring child performers (Mouseketeers). Most Americans of my age can still sing its theme song, which had lines like “Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, forever let us hold their banners high!” For more on this see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mickey\\_Mouse\\_Club](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mickey_Mouse_Club).

took me to see his show live one time – a highlight of my youth. Here he is (above right) in his signature role as Ralph Kramden, the New York bus driver and constantly defeated everyman.

I also watched game shows like *Strike It Rich* (desperate people winning money by answering easy questions) *Beat the Clock* (contestants doing ridiculous stunts under time pressure), and especially *What's My Line*, a panel show moderated by John Daly, where witty panelists like Arlene Francis, Kitty Carlisle, Martin Gabel, and occasionally Oscar Levant tried to guess the guest's occupation.



Children's shows I watched included *Captain Video and his Video Rangers* (a primitive science fiction show), *Kukla, Fran & Ollie*—Kukla was a puppet, and Ollie was a puppet dragon (left)<sup>8</sup> – and *Howdy Doody*, a wildly popular show in its time (40s and 50s). *Howdy Doody* (right) was a marionette. Some of his characters were also marionettes (such as the villain Phineas T. Bluster and the strange animal called the Flubadub); others



were live characters (like host Buffalo Bob Smith, the Indians Chief Thunderthud and Princess Summerfallwinterspring, and silent Clarabell the Clown with his seltzer bottle). I liked this show so much I even went to a live performance and sat in the so-called Peanut Gallery. *Rootie Kazootie* was a *Howdy Doody* type show – *Howdy* was a cowboy, but *Rootie* was a second baseman. I also remember a show called *Miss Frances' Ding Dong School*. But this was for very young children, and I was already 9 when we got our first TV. So perhaps Christopher watched this show, and I saw it sometimes with him.



*Disneyland*, produced of course by the Walt Disney Company, was a big hit and I watched it regularly. There were four “lands” – Fantasyland, which included the cartoon characters and filmed series like *When Knighthood Was In Flower*; Frontierland, which focused on filmed series about characters like Davy Crockett (“King of the Wild Frontier,” played by Fess Parker (left) – this was a huge craze in 1954, and I had a coonskin hat on the Davy Crockett model); Adventureland (mostly nature films, of which Disney made the best in those days); and Tomorrowland (futuristic stuff).

---

<sup>8</sup> Fran (Allison) was human, but who cared about her when Ollie was around?

Except for Disneyland, cartoons on television mostly meant old silent animations from the 1920s like Koko the Clown (right, by the great Max Fleischer) and Farmer Alfalfa (called Farmer Brown for city kids like me who had never heard of alfalfa). Felix the Cat was one of these, and Max Fleischer's Betty Boop, and later talkies like Tom and Jerry, Mighty Mouse, and Popeye (the Sailor Man). Almost all these shows still have a cult following among people who like me were exposed to them at the right age, and there are websites and Wikipedia articles devoted to just about all of them. You can see samples on YouTube.



Even in my youth I watched the news, at first with John Daly and John Cameron Swayze, and later with Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, and their successors.

Despite this long list of shows – and there were others – I didn't really spend a lot of time with television. Although I really enjoyed shows like *Disneyland* and *Topper*, television was never a priority of mine the way books were, and it was one subject on which there was no domestic conflict that I can remember.

### Radio



When I was a lad live radio shows were still important entertainment. I listened to lots of them. Two popular evening radio acts I remember well were the comedian Jack Benny (left) and Edgar Bergen the ventriloquist, with his dummy Charlie McCarthy (right). Bergen I think was sponsored by Richard Hudnut shampoo. Arthur Godfrey, shown earlier, a red-headed singer who played the ukulele, had



a daytime radio variety show I listened to when I could. He was for many years one of the most famous men in America.

Some radio shows (usually 15 minutes long, I think) came on around the dinner hour, and I often listened to them in front of the old Scott cabinet radio at 1136 (when it was still in the foyer and not yet in the storage room). These included *Gangbusters* (a crime show focused on the FBI), *The Lone Ranger* and *Hopalong Cassidy* (westerns), *Name That Tune* (a musical quiz show), and *Ozzie & Harriet* (a domestic comedy, later popular on television also, which gave a name to the idealization of the suburban nuclear family).

I liked daytime serial soap operas. These were on when I was in school, so I only got to hear them when I was sick in bed. I listened straight through from 12 to 4 whenever I

was sick, and it was almost worth being sick to hear them. Examples were *Our Gal Sunday*, *Helen Trent*, and *Backstage Wife*.

There were also some children's shows I listened to on Saturdays when I was very young. I can't remember their names now except for *Big John and Sparkie*. Sparkie was a leprechaun (that is, a child figure). I will never forget Sparkie's advice to children:

Don't lean your elbow out too far,  
Or it may go home in another car.

### Print media

As mentioned earlier, we got the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune*, and other papers on Sunday. For magazines we got *The New Yorker*, *Punch*, *Life*, *Look*, the *Saturday Review of Literature* with its double-croctic, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and maybe also *Colliers*. We got *Cue* for the movie and theatre listings. Of all these magazines only *The New Yorker* survives. I read most of them every week, although not of course all the way through every issue.

I personally subscribed to lots of other magazines – I was especially interested in *The New Republic*, but I also read *The Nation* and *The Progressive* and many others. I also liked *Reader's Digest* (for the jokes and fillers) and *Coronet*. And of course *Mad*. At one point I at least *looked* at as many as 40 publications on a regular basis – I counted them up. This was quite a lot in a time without Internet.

I read Disney comics when I was very young – this tapered off after a while. I didn't read comic books and *The New Republic* in the same period. For more on comic books see Chapter 29.B. I did read newspaper comics at all ages (and still do).

New York was full of newsstands in those days, where you could find anything of interest, including *American Sunbathing*, a monthly nudist magazine. I read every issue of *American Sunbathing*, and not for the articles either.

### Stamp collecting



Quite early on my father gave me a stamp album, a large but inexpensive packet of stamps to start out with, a stamp tongs and a pack of stamp hinges. I later added a Scott catalogue, a magnifying glass and a perforation gauge. This hobby took at once – I was hooked from the start. It had many attractions – learning about the world in time and space was one, and all these series and sets which could be filled in was another. I started off interested in American stamps – for example I learned the Presidents in order from the so-called “Prexy”

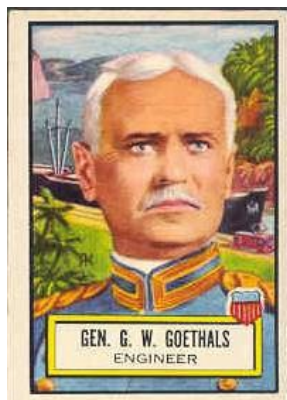


(Presidential) series, where a President's number corresponded to the denomination of the stamp. Thus Franklin Pierce was on the 14¢, Andrew Johnson on the 17¢. As a party trick I can still recite all the Presidents in order, backwards – I save this for very dull parties.<sup>9</sup>

After a while I had all the American stamps I could afford – the ones I didn't have were too expensive – so I switched over to British Empire stamps. This fitted in with the English associations from my father's youth, and fueled a fascination with colonial history (not only British) which has lasted to this day. I got very interested in stamp collecting, read technical philatelic books, and still have a competence in the field. I spent a lot of time and (for me) a lot of money at the Zeppelin Stamp Company, an old-style stamp store on the second floor of a building on East 86th Street near Third Avenue, sitting on the high stools over the glass counter, going through stamp books and picking out purchases. For more on what stamp collecting meant in my life, and the many important things I learned from it, see Chapter 29.A.

I collected coins, too, briefly – I remember I had some large cents (minted until 1857, when they were replaced by the modern-style penny). This never really took as a hobby, although I did have albums in which I collected Lincoln cents, Jefferson nickels and Roosevelt dimes with most of the dates and mint marks. I learned a lot about coins and still appreciate them as historical artifacts and vehicles for design.

### Trading cards



These were picture cards normally included with card-sized sheets of bubble gum from manufacturers like Topps and Fleer. The most familiar kind were baseball cards, but as I did not care for sports I didn't collect these. My favorites were Famous People, which had pictures of statesmen, authors, scientists and others, and Wings, which had pictures of airplanes.<sup>10</sup>



Examples are shown here about half size. I was very involved with collecting these cards, which I now see as part of my broader interest in collecting – see

---

<sup>9</sup> I can also do the 58 counties of California in alphabetical order, backwards.

<sup>10</sup> With the help of a specialist blog [web log], Chuckman's Non-Sports Trading Cards of the 50s Volume 1, I have been able to date the Look 'n' See Famous People series to 1952-3, which fits my recollection exactly. Volume 2 dates Wings cards to 1952. See <http://chuckmannon-sporttradingcardsvolume2.blogspot.com>.

Chapter 29. Although they were called trading cards I don't recall ever trading them – the way to get more was to buy more packs of gum, which were cheap enough (five cents) plus you got the gum, which was full of sugar. I never learned to blow bubbles, although many tried to teach me, but I remember the powdery residue the gum left on the cards. The pleasant smell of the gum lingered on the cards too.

### Sports

I have mentioned my loathing for sports. I was overweight and uninterested, and my disinterest was heightened by the tendency of adults to make sports compulsory in school, in afternoon group, and in summer camps. It was supposed to be fun, but it wasn't fun for me, and not only did I hate having to do it, I deeply resented the ideological outrage of being *compelled* to have fun, an attempt to coerce my opinions as well as my body.<sup>11</sup> The idea of *mens sana in corpore sano* was never in the least convincing to me (see Chapter 3C, note 10), and the idea of being forced to play still riles me.

- Tiger Woods, the golf champion, said: “Don't force your kids into sports.... It's the child's desire to play that matters, not the parent's desire to have the child play. Fun. Keep it fun.”

I did like swimming, though. In the summertime as a child, in Westchester and later on Cape Cod, I was in the water a lot. I got fairly good at swimming, although not in a competitive way. Once I swam the length of Long Pond in Wellfleet, a distance of perhaps a mile, with my anxious parents following in a rowboat in case I got into trouble.

Typically, my parents made swimming compulsory too, and I was made to go to the 92nd Street YMHA on Lexington Avenue to swim in their pool. I guess the idea was to get me to exercise, which I certainly needed to do. But compulsion was not the way to get me to adopt any habit, and to this day I refuse to do exercise in any form even if it kills me. And it might – I now have diabetes, which exercise would help. But I think I'd rather be dead than alive and exercising – if exercising adds an hour a day to my life, but I have to spend that hour exercising, it is definitely not worth it. Not even if it adds *two* hours a day to my life would that miserable hour be worth it.

For some reason I enjoyed badminton, which was available from time to time at summer camps. But nothing ever came of that. When I was quite young, I used to play stickball

---

<sup>11</sup> What a troublesome, tiresome child I must have been!

on 95th Street.<sup>12</sup> No one forced me to do this, and I liked it. But Collegiate School, with its compulsory games in the *faux*-British manner, turned me off exercise forever.



Yet another compulsory activity was horseback riding. It seems odd for a city boy to be forced to ride horses, but I was. I kind of liked it, actually, at first, but it was not exactly voluntary. I would go on the appointed days to the Claremont Riding Academy at 175 West 89th Street, get my horse, and go out with an instructor on the Central Park bridle path. I got through trotting and up to



cantering. I have a vivid recollection of the Claremont stable with its horsey smell and dung underfoot, and the vast ramp for riding to the second floor. A horse I was riding reared one time on that ramp, but I kept my seat. Claremont opened in 1892 but closed in 2007 – for more see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claremont\\_Riding\\_Academy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claremont_Riding_Academy). I forget how I came to stop riding. Years later I rode a horse in Belize and didn't remember much about how to do it. I guess I could still escape from a city on horseback if I had to, and had a horse, and was not in much of a hurry.

Although I didn't care for sports, Mary Fletcher was a Brooklyn Dodgers fan, and for a season or two I followed the Dodgers with some interest. I remember the excitement about Don Larsen's perfect World Series game in 1956 (for the Yankees, against the Dodgers), and I saw at least one Dodgers game in Ebbets Field. But my interest did not last.

- I still enjoy a baseball game occasionally on TV, or even at the beautiful new (and annually renamed) Giants stadium in San Francisco. I go a few times a year, and appreciate a well-executed play when I see one. But I couldn't tell you who's ahead in the standings, or how the San Francisco Giants are doing today, or what league any team is in. I was fond of the Mets when they started out, because they were by far the worst team in baseball and lost consistently. And when one year (1969) they magically got it together and won I followed the team with intense interest. But this too did not last.

---

<sup>12</sup> Stickball is a New York City street game involving a part of a broomstick, a pink rubber ball of the Spalding type, and a city street including the walls of the buildings to bounce the ball off of.

- Years later Les Wisner taught me how to have the same occasional pleasure in football on TV, the year of the San Francisco 49ers' fabulous victory (1981). I'll watch a random football game on TV every now and then. But not basketball.

## 8. Happy or sad?

What was I thinking about during those years? What was important to me? It is much harder to recall these things than pages of specific factual details.

Was I a happy child or not? Alice Miller, in her psychoanalytic book *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1979), mentions the tendency of adults to idealize their childhood and imagine it was an idyllic time when really it wasn't. I may have the opposite tendency – I imagine a childhood of constant conflict and resentment, based on the unequal power relationships discussed in Chapter 7, but I think this is just as inaccurate. Was my mind always on fighting for autonomy? I don't think so. Most of the time it was on daily life, and books and stamp collecting, and western sandwiches, and *Lady and the Tramp*. I don't think I will ever be able to know the truth about this.

A psychologist's report from 1949 (Document 3B-1) describes me as a "happy, well-adjusted little boy." Certainly there were a lot of happy times. There was also a huge amount of conflict – if there had not been my parents would not have moved against me as savagely as they eventually did (see Chapter 8). No doubt I was an alienated teenager – which teenager is not? And I was sometimes depressed in those years – my Uncle Roy described depression as "The Curse of the Rubinssteins." See this picture, taken in front of the 70th Street house. But I remember nothing more severe than what afflicts most moderately sensitive teenagers.



In January 2009, long after this chapter was first written, I had a drink with a member of my Collegiate School class whom I had not seen for 50 years. We talked of old times, and I e-mailed him a draft of the Collegiate chapter of this memoir (Chapter 3C.10). In his answer he said how sad he expected it would be when he read it. I replied, saying:

Not all sad. The schools were a downer, except for Walden, and my family life was pretty bad. But there were plenty of good times also – I always had lots of friends, at Collegiate and elsewhere; I was constantly reading and educating myself and learning about the world; there was history and geography and heraldry and music and politics (I campaigned for Stevenson in 1956) and all those museums and theatres and the City itself (meaning Manhattan below 96th Street), which I explored intensely. A lot of it was a struggle, but all those things I mentioned are still



important parts of my life.

So I guess the best answer I can retrieve now is: generally happy, despite everything.



Tailpiece: Butterknife from the silver dinner service

**Document 3B-1: Psychological Testing Result from 1949**

**PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTING CENTER**

393 WEST END AVENUE - AT 79TH STREET

NEW YORK 24, N. Y.

ROSALIND F. BLUM, M. A.  
DIRECTOR

ENDICOTT 2-1112

November 1, 1949

Mrs. Samuel Phillips  
1136 Fifth Avenue  
New York City.

Dear Mrs. Phillips:

I want to submit to you a report of the test which I administered to your son, David, on October 28th, 1949.

The total result of the test indicates that David is a boy of superior ability. In general intelligence he excels 99 per cent of others of his age. David's language development is outstanding. He always expressed himself vividly with a fine choice of words. David's concept of numbers, memory, comprehension, fund of information and general reasoning ability are also excellent. David's responses revealed a fine imagination and a good sense of humor.

David made an excellent adjustment to the testing situation for he was independent in manner, spontaneous and at ease. He seemed to enjoy the tasks presented and applied himself well at all times. David responded readily and quickly and went smoothly from one item to the next. David appears to be a happy, well-adjusted little boy with well-rounded ability.

If you have additional questions about the test results, or if I can be of further help in any way, please feel free to call me.

Sincerely yours,

*Rosalind F. Blum*  
Rosalind F. Blum

evr