

Remembering New Haven's Youth in the Fifties

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New Haven 50 years ago was in many observable ways a different city than it is today. The urban renewal of the 'sixties was being planned, but had not yet occurred, so the core of the downtown consisted of tightly-packed 19th century brick buildings of several stories, many with shops on the ground floor and apartments or loft workshops on the upper floors. The city still had a number of large industrial factories that employed hundreds or thousands of workers at various skill levels. There were also many small factories and workshops, especially in the metal-working industries, including tool and die work and stamping of parts for larger manufacturers. Shopping for the region was still concentrated in the downtown, as the first suburban malls were just opening. Commuting from the suburbs was from a more restricted area, as residential patterns had not yet adapted to the possibilities created by the recently opened I-95. Smaller proportions of the adult population had completed high school, attended college, or completed college. With large proportions of first, second, and third generations of immigrant peoples in the region, ethnic differences were strongly marked in interpersonal relations and complexly intertwined with differences based on education, work, area of residence, and religious affiliation in the class and status order of the region. This paper will focus on the ways in which a youthful observing participant came to engage the particular class and status order of the region and the time through his adolescent years. The retrospective analysis may be helpful in understanding conditions observed in the current ethnographic study of New Haven.