

The Boston Globe

TUESDAY, JULY 1, 1986

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A return to innocence

LONGMEADOW — One of the bigger surprises of my recent years was the surge of affection and curiosity coursing through me as I stood in the lobby of my New York City apartment building a few months ago and opened an invitation to my Longmeadow High School class's 20th reunion.

Like others of my 215 classmates, I'd spent a good deal of time and energy in the late 1960s trying to leave that pleasant Springfield suburb behind. A few of us had gone to find ourselves in inner cities, my own odyssey taking me to publish a weekly newspaper in some of central Brooklyn's most devastated neighborhoods.

Others of us, I saw as I scanned the list of "located" classmates, had lost no time making for the Sun Belt upon graduation; the more adventurous lived on boats or in artists' colonies on the West Coast or the Virgin Islands, while others had become gilt-edged professionals in Dallas or Palm Beach.

A few of us had gone under, lost to serious crime or violent death.

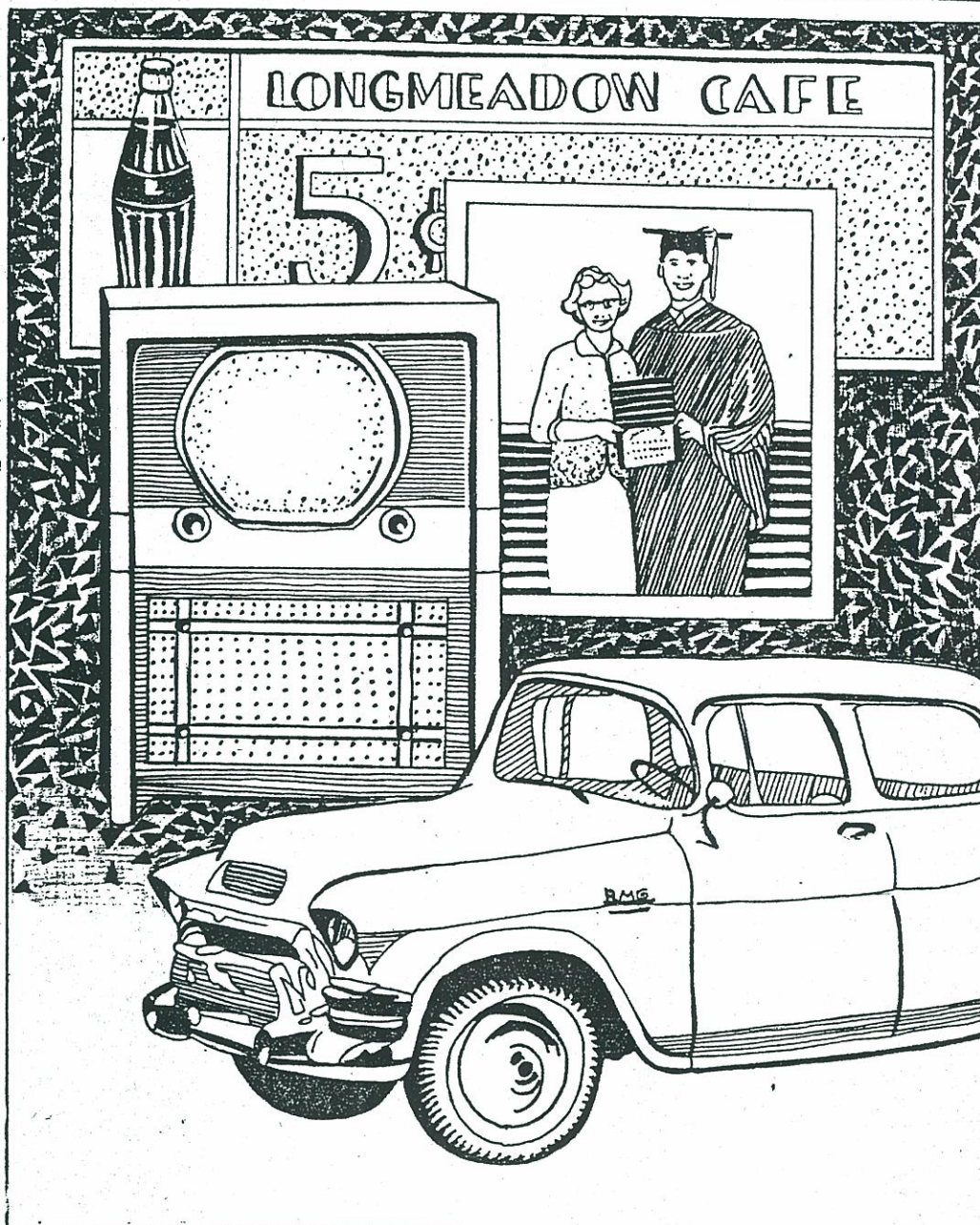
Most of us, of course, had gone straight to the middle of Middle America, marrying, raising children, working as systems analysts, department-store buyers, teachers, small businesspeople, and medical assistants (more often than MDs). A third of us still do these things in and around Springfield, which looks like Middle America when seen from Brooklyn's mean streets.

I can't speak for those who stayed in Longmeadow; I can only say how good it felt to see them. And I guess I speak for others like me who came back from our private or public maelstroms to that gentle reunion after so many years' straying or staying away.

We came back, I think, because we find we've given up looking down on the almost bovine innocence of those high school years, before Vietnam, before drugs, before liberations real and imagined, even before whispers about one girl's premarital pregnancy and a boy's parents' divorce, and certainly before we knew how to be mean to one another. It seems now, in retrospect, that we were actually very good to one another, and that the town was good to most of us.

I say this with some surprise, for the place had its pretensions. From the moment it began changing from old Yankee village to bedroom suburb in the 1950s, "Longmeadow" meant "exclusive." There's no denying the town was all white and had the highest median income around. If its privileges hadn't haunted some of us as we bicycled our newspaper routes those misty mornings or pumped sodas at Friendly's, I probably wouldn't have made my way to central Brooklyn, or others of my classmates to their rural redoubts.

But the truth is that in those boom years of the '50s, when money and construction were cheap by today's standards, most of the people buying into suburbs like ours were pretty ordinary city folk whom no one would have called wealthy. A good many, like my own parents, had grown up quite poor.



Robin Gilroy illustration

Sure, there were the palatial Glen Arden enclave and the snooty Longmeadow Country Club and their equally awful "Goodbye Columbus" imitations, which propelled some of the old Yankees over the hills to towns more distant. But not, before the best of them, schoolteachers with names like Billings and Chisholm and Wood, passed on their plain living and high thinking to us in the twilight of the old republic.

There was even Longmeadow's open town meeting. In the rough equality of its modest prosperity, the town seemed for most of us a democracy whose blessings worked their way into our bones, just as in other Springfield neighborhoods whose parents had known youthful privation, yet had managed to create some breathing room for children no different from us.

How some of us miss that now. Miss it, because that wasn't just our own youthful innocence there on the precipice at graduation in 1965; it was America's. We know this because two of our classmates who "went under" in the '70s did so right in Longmeadow, which was changing with the rest of the country and which, indeed, had been incubating the seeds of change in us even as we were there.

It wasn't today's Longmeadow we came

back to for the reunion, then, those dozens of us who surprised and delighted one another by returning from California and Texas and central Brooklyn. It was a place you won't find on any map, a spacious empire of peace and soft memories of ourselves on bikes or sunlit Saturday mornings when bulldozers tore through the forests and old stone walls, parceling out the magic of old New England, making piles of earth, scented with uprooted sage, where we played in the cusp of a new America.

Long before we could know what random burdens that new country might deal us, we had one another. And we love one another simply for having been there amid the fresh-cut pine and the mist off the Meadows.

All generations feel that way, and all graduating classes reminisce about it tenderly 20 years out of the gate. Or do they, now that towns like Longmeadow have lost their innocence and their Indian ghosts and some of their rough democracy? The unexpected depth of feeling that pulled so many of us back makes me wonder.

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