

## "Food For Thought" for the Fifties American Dream

- Was your father a WWII veteran, and if so, how did he benefit from the GI Bill? (Was your mother in the service?)
- What do you remember about the home you lived in during the 1950's? Did you grow up in a large city, suburb, small town, or rural area?
- Were you a member of a typical nuclear family in the 1950's?
- Where did your parents meet? Were they from the same geographic region and social class?
- Was your family more religious in the 1950's than today?
- Do you remember much about everyday prices in the 1950's?
- Did you visit any iconic department stores in the 1950's?
- Did your father smoke Marlboro cigarettes?
- Was your mother a contented "stay at home mom?"
- What were some of your favorite television programs?
- Did you think much about those people "living on the margins?"
- Was the decade a period of general prosperity for you and your family-in other words, did you feel you lived "The American Dream" in the 1950's?

*Fate dealt the United States a difficult hand during World War II. Personal and financial sacrifices were required of everyone.*

*But, Americans dealt themselves a much better hand in the 1950s. Middle class prosperity and unprecedented abundance stimulated confidence and vitality.*

*Department stores offered more goods than ever imagined. Television transformed show business. Cars from American manufacturers were instant classics. American music took the world by storm. Magnificent movie palaces were showing MGM musicals and intriguing dramas. American passenger trains were admired worldwide. Baseball was the American pastime. Families rushed to the suburbs and new home sales skyrocketed.*

*In the fifties, standards of living rose, incomes became more equal, and two-thirds of Americans were in the middle class.*

*There was a faith that, given enough effort, anything was possible.*

Introduction to  
1950's American style  
A Reference Guide by  
Daniel Niemeyer



### Roger Ebert's Review of *Pleasantville* (October 1, 1998)

In the twilight of the 20th century, here is a comedy to reassure us that there is hope—that the world we see around us represents progress, not decay. "Pleasantville," which is one of the year's best and most original films, sneaks up on us. It begins by kidding those old black-and-white sitcoms like "Father Knows Best," it continues by pretending to be a sitcom itself, and it ends as a social commentary of surprising power.

The movie opens in today's America, which we have been taught to think of as rude, decadent and dangerous. A teenager named David languishes in front of the tube, watching a rerun of a 1950s sitcom named "Pleasantville," in which everybody is always wholesome and happy. Meanwhile, his mother squabbles with her ex-husband and his sister Jennifer prepares for a hot date.

Having heard a whisper or two about the plot, we know that the brother and sister will be magically transported into that 1950s sitcom world. And we're expecting maybe something like "The Brady Bunch Movie," in reverse. We are correct: While David and Jennifer are fighting over the remote control, there's a knock at the door and a friendly TV repairman (Don Knotts) offers them a device "with more oomphs." They click it, and they're both in Pleasantville.

The movie has been written and directed by Gary Ross, who wrote "Big," the 1988 movie where Tom Hanks was a kid trapped in an adult body. Here the characters are trapped in a whole world. He evokes the black-and-white 1950s sitcom world of picket fences and bobby sox, where everybody is white and middle class, has a job, sleeps in twin beds, never uses the toilet and follows the same cheerful script.

Luckily, this is a world that David (Tobey Maguire) knows well; he's a TV trivia expert. It's a mystery to his sister Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon), so he briefs her: Their names are now Bud and Mary Sue, and their parents are Betty and George Parker (Joan Allen and William H. Macy). "We're, like, stuck in Nerdville!" Jennifer complains.

They are. Geography lessons at the local high school are limited to subjects like "Main Street" and "Elm Street" because the world literally ends at the city limits. Space twists back upon itself in Pleasantville, and "the end of Main Street is just the beginning again." Life always goes according to plan, and during basketball practice every shot goes in. After one player experiences sex, he is capable of actually missing a shot; a dead silence falls as the ball rolls away. "Stand back, boys!" warns the coach. "Don't touch it!"

"Pleasantville" has fun during these middle sequences, as "Bud and Mary Sue" hang out at the malt shop where Mr. Johnson (Jeff Daniels) works and park on Lover's Lane (just to hold hands). Then sparks from the emerging future begin to land here and there in the blandness. Mary Sue shares information about masturbation with her mother, who of course has never dreamed of such a pastime (as a perfect housewife, she has never done anything just for herself). As her mother relaxes in her bath, a tree outside their house breaks into flames--in full color! Ross and his cinematographer, John Lindley, work with special effects to show a black-and-white world in which some things and a few people begin switching to color. Is there a system? "Why aren't I in color?" Mary Sue asks Bud. "I dunno," he says. "Maybe it's not just the sex." It isn't. It's the change. The kids at school are the first to start appearing in colors. They're curious and ready to change. They pepper Bud with questions. "What's outside of Pleasantville?" they ask. "There are places," he says, "where the roads don't go in a circle. They just keep going." Dave Brubeck's "Take Five" subtly appears on the soundtrack.

Bud shows Mr. Johnson a book of color art reproductions, and the soda jerk is thunderstruck by the beauty of Turner and Van Gogh. He starts painting. Soon he and Betty Parker have discovered they're kindred spirits. (After Betty turns up in color, she's afraid to show herself, and in a scene of surprising tenderness, her son helps her put on gray makeup.) George Parker, meanwhile, waits disconsolately at home for his routine to continue, and the chairman of the Chamber of Commerce (J.T. Walsh, in his last performance) notes ominously, "Something is happening in our town." Yes, something, in a town where nothing ever did. The film observes that sometimes pleasant people are pleasant simply because they have never, ever been challenged. That it's scary and dangerous to learn new ways. The movie is like the defeat of the body snatchers: The people in color are like former pod people now freed to move on into the future. We observe that nothing creates fascists like the threat of freedom.

"Pleasantville" is the kind of parable that encourages us to re-evaluate the good old days and take a fresh look at the new world we so easily dismiss as decadent. Yes, we have more problems. But also more solutions, more opportunities and more freedom. I grew up in the '50s. It was a lot more like the world of "Pleasantville" than you might imagine. Yes, my house had a picket fence, and dinner was always on the table at a quarter to six, but things were wrong that I didn't even know the words for. There is a scene in this movie where it rains for the first time. Of course it never rained in 1950s sitcoms. Pleasantville's people in color go outside and just stand in it.



LENORE'S MOTHER, Lois, cooked up happy times with help from Betty Crocker.

RECIPE  
BOX



## A TASTE OF THE PAST

Mom's old faithful stirs up memories of beloved family meals.

BY LENORE PETRUSO • O'FALLON, MO

One recent cold, snowy day, while searching for a soup recipe, I stumbled across a cookbook with a faded red cover, worn edges and broken binding. It was my mother's old faithful: *Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book*, copyright 1950.

I chuckled over pictures in the "How to Prepare" section. Hand-mixing, chopping, grating and shredding—no food processors back then. Stovetop melting, caramelizing and dissolving—no microwave either.

I stopped at a soiled page called "Favorite Pancakes." Here was our family's No. 1 destination for Sunday breakfast choices. We'd rush home from church, and everyone would pitch in with breakfast. Mom mixed the pancakes and Dad flipped them. We siblings took turns squeezing the orange juice, frying the bacon or sausage, setting the table and washing dishes afterward. That's right, no dishwasher.

A week or so before a birthday, Mom would ask, "What kind of cake do you want?" We had a universe of cakes to choose from, but our favorites never changed. My sister Rosemary and brother Tony invariably replied, "Banana cake with chocolate frosting." So it wasn't surprising that the page headed "Banana Cake" was one of the most food-splattered. I imagined yellow bananas turning brown on the countertop in preparation for my siblings' special days, and I could almost smell the aroma of those bananas as the cake baked.

My favorite cake, marble chiffon, and my brother Frank's favorite, poppy seed, weren't in the cookbook.

Mom had cut those recipes from the newspaper. Dad's favorite dessert was lemon meringue pie, so I knew why food fingerprints smudged the "Pie Crust" page—no store-bought crust at our house. I could see Mom rolling the dough, carefully placing it in a pie plate and crimping the edges. The page for lemon meringue pie held an obvious clue that the recipe had been a winner: a hole in the center where it had stuck to the previous page. My lips puckered as I remembered the pie's sweet tartness.

Every crinkled, food-smear page dished up delicious memories—German potato salad for picnics, eggnog at Christmas, mac and cheese on Lenten Fridays.

Picturing the family gathered around our old Formica-and-chrome kitchen table, eating and sharing fun times, truly warmed my heart that frosty winter day. ●

"I always requested banana cake with fudge frosting for my birthday. Mom's recipe is attached to my fridge—and my heart. It's funny how many memories live on in a stained handwritten recipe card."

JEANNE AMBROSE • MILWAUKEE, WI

### Banana Cake with Chocolate Frosting

PREP: 45 min • BAKE: 45 min, + cooling • YIELD: 16 servings

- 3/4 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 2 cups sugar
- 3 large eggs
- 1 1/2 cups mashed ripe bananas (2 to 3 large)
- 1 1/2 tsp. vanilla extract
- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 1/2 tsp. baking powder
- 1 1/2 tsp. baking soda
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1/4 cup buttermilk
- 3/4 cup chopped unsalted pistachios, toasted

#### CREAM CHEESE FROSTING

- 2 containers (8 oz. each) whipped cream cheese, room temperature
- 1/2 cup butter, softened
- 1/2 cup baking cocoa

- 4 1/2 cups confectioners' sugar

- 2 tsp. vanilla extract
- Additional chopped unsalted pistachios, toasted, optional

1. Preheat oven to 350°. In a large bowl, cream butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Beat in bananas and vanilla. Combine flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt; add to creamed mixture alternately with buttermilk, beating well after each addition. Fold in 3/4 cup pistachios.
2. Transfer to two greased and floured 8-in. round baking pans. Bake 45-55 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in center comes out clean.

Cool 30 minutes before removing from pans to wire racks to cool completely.

3. For frosting, in a large bowl, beat the cream cheese and butter until smooth. Add cocoa; mix until blended. Add confectioners' sugar and vanilla; beat until creamy.
4. Place one cake layer on a serving plate; spread top with 1 cup frosting. Top with remaining cake. Spread top and sides with 2 cups frosting. Press pistachios into sides of cake if desired.
5. Cut a small hole in the corner of a large pastry or plastic bag; insert #127 petal pastry tip. Fill bag with the remaining frosting. Pipe concentric circles of frosting over top of cake. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour or until frosting is set.



For more dessert favorites:  
[TASTE OF HOME.COM](http://TASTE OF HOME.COM)

[www.history.com](http://www.history.com) (article by Erin Blakemore)



Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

When Eugene Burnett saw the neat tract houses of Levittown, New York, he knew he wanted to buy one. It was 1949, and he was ready to settle down in a larger home with his family. The newly established Long Island suburb seemed like the perfect place to begin their postwar life—one that, he hoped, would be improved with the help of the GI Bill, a piece of sweeping legislation aimed at helping World War II veterans like Burnett prosper after the war.

But when he spoke with a salesman about buying the house using a GI Bill-guaranteed mortgage, the door to suburban life in Levittown slammed firmly in his face. The suburb wasn't open to Black residents.

“It was as though it wasn't real,” Burnett's wife, Bernice, recalled. “Look at this house! Can you imagine having this? And then for them to tell me because of the color of my skin that I can't be part of it?”

The Burnetts weren't the only Black Americans for whom the promise of the GI Bill turned out to be an illusion. Though the bill helped white Americans prosper and accumulate wealth in the postwar years, it didn't deliver on that promise for veterans of color. In fact, the wide disparity in the bill's

implementation ended up helping drive growing gaps in wealth, education, and civil rights between white and Black Americans.

While the GI Bill's language did not specifically exclude African-American veterans from its benefits, it was structured in a way that ultimately shut doors for the 1.2 million Black veterans who had bravely served their country during World War II, in segregated ranks.

## Fear of Black Advancement

When lawmakers began drafting the GI Bill in 1944, some Southern Democrats feared that returning Black veterans would use public sympathy for veterans to advocate against Jim Crow laws. To make sure the GI Bill largely benefited white people, the southern Democrats drew on tactics they had previously used to ensure that the New Deal helped as few Black people as possible.

During the drafting of the law, the chair of the House Veterans Committee, Mississippi Congressman John Rankin, played hardball and insisted that the program be administered by individual states instead of the federal government. He got his way. Rankin was known for his virulent racism: He defended segregation, opposed interracial marriage, and had even proposed legislation to confine, then deport, every person with Japanese heritage during World War II.

When the bill came to a committee vote, he stonewalled in an attempt to gut another provision that entitled all veterans to \$20 a week of unemployment compensation for a year. Rankin knew this would represent a significant gain for Black Southerners, so he refused to cast a critical proxy vote in protest. The American Legion ended up tracking down the Congressman who had left his proxy vote with Rankin and flying him to Washington to break the deadlock.



Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act into law on June 22, 1944, only weeks after the D-Day offensive began. It ushered into law sweeping benefits for veterans, including college tuition, low-cost home loans, and unemployment insurance.

## The GI Bill's Effect on Black Veterans

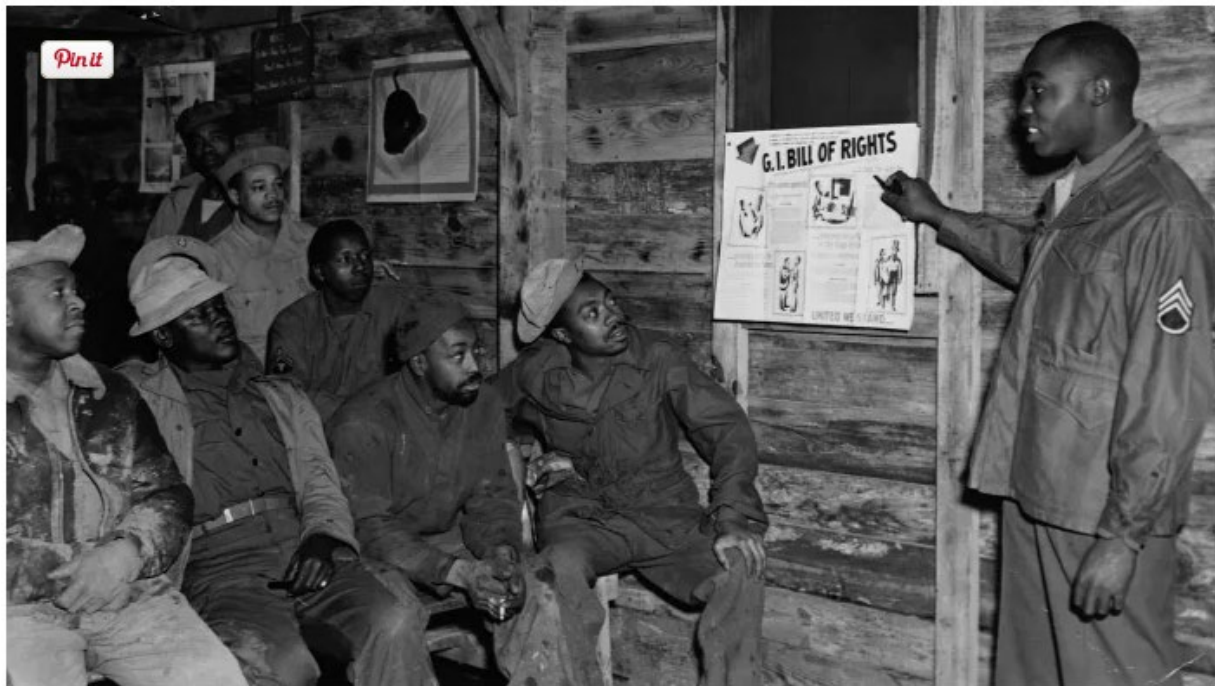
From the start, Black veterans had trouble securing the GI Bill's benefits. Some could not access benefits because they had not been given an honorable discharge—and a much larger number of Black veterans were discharged dishonorably than their white counterparts.

Veterans who did qualify could not find facilities that delivered on the bill's promise. Black veterans in a vocational training program at a segregated high school in Indianapolis were unable to participate in activities related to plumbing, electricity and printing because adequate equipment was only available to white students.

Simple intimidation kept others from enjoying GI Bill benefits. In 1947, for example, a crowd hurled rocks at Black veterans as they moved into a Chicago housing development. Thousands of Black veterans were attacked in the years following World War II and some were singled out and lynched.

Though Rankin had lost the battle to exclude Black men from VA unemployment insurance, it was doled out inequitably. Men who applied for unemployment benefits were kicked out of the program if any other work was available to them, even work that provided less than subsistence wages. Southern postmasters were even accused of refusing to deliver the forms Black veterans needed to fill out to receive their unemployment benefits.

Black veterans' and civil rights groups protested their treatment, calling for protections like Black involvement in the VA and non-discriminatory loans, but the racial disparities in the implementation of the GI Bill had already been set into motion. As the years went on, white veterans flowed into newly created suburbs, where they began amassing wealth in skilled positions. But Black veterans lacked those options. The majority of skilled jobs were given to white workers.



*Staff Sergeant Herbert Ellison explains the G.I. Bill of Rights to the African American members of the quartermaster trucking company.*

*Library of Congress/Corbis/VCG/Getty Images*

## A White Post-War Housing Boom—And Redlining in Black Neighborhoods

The postwar housing boom almost entirely excluded Black Americans, most of whom remained in cities that received less and less investment from businesses and banks.

Though the GI Bill guaranteed low-interest mortgages and other loans, they were not administered by the VA itself. Thus, the VA could cosign, but not actually guarantee the loans. This gave white-run financial institutions free reign to refuse mortgages and loans to Black people.

Redlining—a decades-old practice of marking maps by race to characterize the risks of lending money and providing insurance—made purchasing a home even more difficult for Black veterans. Lenders froze out poorer neighborhoods, ensuring that loan assistance and insurance would be denied. And new white suburbs often came with overtly racist covenants that denied entry to Black people.

In 1947, only 2 of the more than 3,200 VA-guaranteed home loans in 13 Mississippi cities went to Black borrowers. “These impediments were not confined to the South,” notes historian Ira Katznelson. “In New York and the northern New Jersey suburbs, fewer than 100 of the 67,000 mortgages insured by the GI bill supported home purchases by non-whites.”

## Failure to Receive GI Bill Education Benefits

Black veterans in search of the education they had been guaranteed fared no better. Many Black men returning home from the war didn't even try to take advantage of the bill's educational benefits—they could not afford to spend time in school instead of working. But those who did were at a considerable disadvantage compared to their white counterparts. Public education provided

poor preparation for Black students, and many lacked much educational attainment at all due to poverty and social pressures.

As veteran applications flooded universities, Black students often found themselves left out. Northern universities dragged their feet when it came to admitting Black students, and Southern colleges barred Black students entirely. And the VA itself encouraged Black veterans to apply for vocational training instead of university admission and arbitrarily denied educational benefits to some students.



*Veterans lining up for a last day rush to get counseling on GI bill educational courses at the New York regional office Veterans Administration on July 25, 1951.  
Bettmann Archive/Getty Images*

Those students who did try to attend college found doors closed at every turn. A full 95 percent of Black veterans were shunted off to Black colleges—institutions that were underfunded and overwhelmed by the influx of new students. Most were unaccredited, and with a massive influx in applicants, they had to turn away tens of thousands of veterans.

“Though Congress granted all soldiers the same benefits theoretically,” writes historian Hilary Herbold, “the segregationist principles of almost every institution of higher learning effectively disbarred a huge proportion of Black veterans from earning a college degree.”

## The GI Bill and the Racial Wealth Gap

The original GI Bill ended in July 1956. By that time, nearly 8 million World War II veterans had received education or training, and 4.3 million home loans worth \$33 billion had been handed out. But most Black veterans had been left behind. As employment, college attendance and wealth surged for whites, disparities with their Black counterparts not only continued, but widened. There was, writes Katznelson, “no greater instrument for widening an already huge racial gap in postwar America than the GI Bill.”

Today, a stark wealth gap between Black and white Americans persists. The median income for white households in 2017 was \$68,145, according to the U.S. Census. For Black households, it was \$40,258.

Erin Blakemore (9/30/19 updated)