

From Don Morrison

I was born in a small Midwestern industrial town, rich in history and churches, poor in most other categories.

So, when I read last week that details of the 1950 census had just become available online, I couldn't wait to scamper down memory lane. After all, this was the first national nose-count in which yours truly makes an appearance. That alone makes it historic.

I was in for a few surprises. Not only did my memory turn out to be faulty, but I learned things about my hometown I never knew. I also realized that its past may hold a lesson for America's future.

First, some advice. Finding anything at 1950census.archives.gov/search is not easy. You need exact addresses, as well as serial numbers for the "evaluation district" maps that lead to the images of the hand-written reports. You can find search tips on many websites. Takes time, but it's worth it.

For instance, I discovered that my parents in 1950 no longer lived at my maternal grandmother's place. I thought we moved out when I was older. But there I am, on a new street – close to my other grandma – in a newish house amid lots of kids, most of them my age, plus a bumper crop of newborns. The Baby Boom, you know.

The 1950 census was the last one conducted in person. Since then, our decennial headcounts have been done mostly by mail or, nowadays, online. Another 1950 quirk: 20 more questions than in 1940. Tragically, most of the answers were written on the backs of the forms, and only the front sides were preserved on microfilm. Still, I was able to glean some interesting information about life back then.

Nearly all the moms reported that they stayed home, and nearly all the dads worked – usually 40 to 48 hours a week, 52 weeks a year. (Vacations were for sissies.) Such diligence earned them about \$3,500, the U.S. household average. My dad made slightly more, as proprietor of a stationery store. But that new house cost him barely a year's salary.

Most people seemed to own their own homes, though a surprising number of respondents were listed as "roomers" in others' houses. Many of those folks were older, single and had adult children nearby. Retirement homes were not a thing yet.

A major surprise was how many foreign-born neighbors I had: the Crivellos from Italy, the Silks from England, the Hernandezes from Mexico. Even the long-timers had foreign surnames: Slawiszynski (from Poland), Bregenzer (Austria via Hungary), Pars (Iran via Greece). To me they were just families with kids eager to play and adults willing to work. U.S. unemployment in the early 1950s hit a peacetime low. Jobs were going begging. I couldn't find an adult male on my street who was unemployed.

America today is similar in that regard. Thanks to a strong economy, there are now several empty jobs for every worker who wants one, a reversal of the usual pattern. For partisan political reasons, however, we no longer let immigrants help fill those openings. A pity. Our native-born population is growing at the slowest rate in U.S. history.

Why? Young couples today tell pollsters they would like to have more kids. But child-care is hard to find, housing has become so expensive that both parents hold jobs, which are linked to health care. People often move for work reasons, leaving family support networks behind.

My folks had it better: a stable economy, political parties that agreed on things, a dense web of civic and voluntary organizations, neighbors who looked after one another, public schools that hadn't been politicized. In addition, grandparents were nearby to help babysit, and people didn't fret over what country you came from.

My folks had no qualms about bringing me into this world, and they soon added three siblings to keep me company. The future was as shiny as my dad's new Oldsmobile 88, with its overhead-valve, high-compression V8 engine.

One other thing was better in 1950: Americans, especially those diligent census takers, had terrific handwriting: neat, legible and entirely cursive. Reading their reports, you realize what an orderly, confident, welcoming country this was.

It could be so again. Which brings me to my lesson. What we need to do is provide a little more support to the kinds of people who could help get us there. I'm talking about the folks who did that once before, in the 1950s: the energetic, optimistic, family-focused, deeply religious, newly arrived Americans I grew up among.