

Holidays bring turbulent year of '68 to a close

Fifty years ago this week, December 1968, fast-approaching Christmas and New Year's afforded many Americans an opportunity to reflect back on one of the more frenzied and unnerving years in memory.

It was a year of assassinations, student protests and race riots, remembered today for its widening generation gap and earthshaking political and social tumult. On March 31, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, burdened by an increasingly unpopular war in Southeast Asia, announced he would not seek reelection. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King was assassinated on Apr. 4, and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was shot and killed June 5.

International events included the Soviet Union's brutal invasion of Czechoslovakia (marking the end of the Prague Spring), and the Viet Cong's Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, which helped turn American popular opinion against a war.

Yet in the Twin Cities, the surrounding countryside and its small towns—the middle of Middle America, if you will, or the buckle of the Corn Belt—it was a rather typical Christmastime taken up with decorations, gift giving, acts of charity, family gatherings and worship services.

Signs of normalcy were everywhere. In mid-December 1968, in a local pre-Christmas tradition, the Home Sweet Home Mission handed out 3,000 articles of winter clothing to 80 mothers and some 400 children. And a week or so later, Gerald Nafziger, who lived on the 1200 block of Gettysburg Drive in Bloomington, received the top overall prize in the 35th annual Bloomington-Normal Christmas lighting contest, sponsored by the Jaycees and Illinois Power Co.

That's not to say change wasn't in the air.

The opening in February 1967 of Eastland Shopping Center represented a grievous blow to downtown Bloomington as the region's historic retail center. Both Sears, Roebuck and Co. and J.C. Penney closed their downtown stores and reopened at Eastland as mall anchors. The local department store W.H. Roland, a fixture on the north side of the courthouse square, also moved to Eastland, though it kept its downtown location until 1982 (the Eastland store then closed in 1988.)

Back in 1968, downtown Bloomington was still home to Montgomery Ward, which wouldn't leave until 1980 when College Hills Mall opened in Normal. Two other locally owned department stores also remained downtown, Livingston's and Klemm's (they would close for good in January 1979 and November 1981 respectively.)

All things considered—this being 1968 and all—things were still pretty quiet on the Illinois State and Illinois Wesleyan campuses. In fact, it wasn't until the spring of 1970, with President Richard Nixon's announcement that he was sending U.S. troops into Cambodia, and the subsequent killing of four protesters at Kent State University by Ohio National Guardsmen, that student unrest, marches and street clashes roiled the local campuses.

The Vietnam War, of course, was never far away in 1968. Nine area General Telephone Co. employees serving in the military in Vietnam and Thailand, for example, were given free ten-minute phone calls back home for the holidays. Included were Spec. 4 Tadeo Rodriquez of Bloomington, who before being called overseas was a custodian in the Bloomington district office, and Spec. Donald L. Bane of Ellsworth, who was a storekeeper in the same building.

Eastland, celebrating its second holiday season since its opening, was crowded with shoppers, its fortunes on the rise as downtown's fell. Penney's had double knit acetate Nehru jackets in navy for \$10, and creamy pastel bulky cardigans for \$8. The once-mighty national retailer also had Teflon-coated automatic corn poppers featuring a glass dome that doubled as a serving bowl for \$10.99, or a combination electric can opener / knife sharpener for \$17.99. "Like it? Charge it!" was Penney's advice to holiday shoppers.

In an age before globalization and low-cost overseas manufacturing, many consumer goods were appreciably more expensive than they are today, especially when adjusting for inflation. One dollar in 1968, it should be noted, would be worth about \$7.10 today. Miller Music Co. on North Main Street in downtown Bloomington advertised Wollensak "economy-priced" handheld tape recorders for \$54.95. That comes to \$390 in 2018 dollars! Sears offered its 23-inch (diagonally measured) Silvertone-brand console color TV, said to be the largest color screen on the market, for \$579.88 (or more than \$4,100 in inflation-adjusted 2018 dollars.)

Roland's, with stores both downtown and Eastland mall, still set the standard for elegance and fashion in the Twin Cities. "Let us help you wrap up your gift shopping in a way to please all femininity," promised Roland's two days before Christmas, "beautiful lingerie, blouses, cosmetics, dresses, coats, furs, gloves, shoes, handbags, gifts for the home, slacks, sweaters ..."

Biasi's, a longtime locally owned drug store on the east side of the courthouse square, sold Remington, Sunbeam and Schick ladies electric shavers from \$9.95 to \$21.45. Hildebrandt Drug Store in uptown Normal advertised Hai Karate cologne, \$1.50 to \$1.75 a bottle, and Parker brand gift pens, \$1.98 to \$5.90.

Then as now, some folks and families made moviegoing on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day a tradition. At the long-gone Irvin Theater on East Jefferson Street downtown, it was "Yellow

Submarine,” the psychedelic animated adventure starring the Beatles. The Castle had “Bullitt” with that embodiment of Sixties cool, Steve McQueen, while the Normal offered the decidedly un-cool “double fun show” of Doris Day in “With Six You Get Eggeroll” and Debbie Reynolds in “How Sweet It Is!”

For many Americans, a year full of menace and darkness ended in the wonder and optimism of the Apollo 8 mission, as NASA’s three-astronaut crew—Frank Borman, James Lovell and William Anders—piloted the first manned spacecraft to reach the moon.

“The Apollo 8 astronauts swept today into orbit around the moon,” announced the front page of the Dec. 24 Pantagraph, “and as they gazed back at their troubled home planet, a quarter-million miles away, flight commander Frank Borman offered a Christmastime prayer of peace.” It was a truly wondrous event, witnessed by hundreds of millions across the globe.

The mission is best known today for the iconic “Earthrise” photograph taken by William Anders as the crew readied for its fourth orbit of the moon. It shows the earth beyond the moon, an improbably delicate but beautiful blue marble in the black void.

“Thank you Apollo 8,” one stranger wrote to Borman. “You saved 1968.”