The 1950s - the take home webquest

Conservatism, Complacency, and Contentment
Or
Anxiety, Alienation, and Social Unrest”??

Introduction:

You will participate in a web quest to explore the culture and trends of the 1950s. The various websites will present you with information on everything from Levittown to the trial of Alger Hiss (alleged Soviet spy). Take your time going through the sites and remember to record your answers on your worksheet.

You are about to investigate a world that may seem very different from that which you live in today. It is often recalled as a simpler time, before video games, cell phones, or even computers. You will probably be surprised at how well you can relate to, understand, and even learn from the teenagers in the 1950’s. On the surface the issues between adults and teenagers may seem wholly different, but at their core - they are exactly the same. After all, this is the decade the word "teenager" was first used!

You will explore everything 1950’s including:

**Pop Culture:** consumerism, gender roles, teen behavior, advertising, music, fashion, hairstyles, cars, social activities, hangouts, slang, Baby Boomers, G.I. Bill, Dr. Spock, suburbia, TV, movies, credit cards, the workplace, books, religion, Kinsey and teen idols

**Politics:** McCarthyism,HUAC, Venona Project, the Rosenbergs, the Kitchen Debate, and Alger Hiss

The Task:

What was it like living in the 1950’s?

Your task(to be completed at home) is to gain knowledge of 1950’s culture in order to better understand and connect with the adults and teenagers of the time period.

Using the websites provided on the process page, you will be asked to explore all aspects of the 50’s. This process will take some time, as you will be asked to do some investigative work. You will be finding specific facts and details about important people, items, and activities of the decade.

Once you have completed your investigation, you will create a poster based on your 1950’s character that meets specific requirements.

The Process:

To accomplish the task, you will analyze the decade which I have organized into several different topics:

1. Suburban Living, Teen Live and Gender Roles (and gender roles)
   - Consumerism
   - Workplace
   - Culture of the car
Suburban Life

1. Levittown was the first suburb in the US. Unfortunately, you find out that Mr. Levitt, who is Jewish and claims not to be racist, will not sell to black people. Why not? What happened when one black family purchased a house in Levittown? Listen to the Pete Seeger song posted in the Resources section of the webquest page (and mentioned in the reading on the website). How does he poke fun at the suburbs? What does he say?

2. Write down some of the “tips” given to housewives from the Home Economics textbook. Why do you think that there was such a post-War effort to keep women at home? (What had a lot of women been doing the War?)

3. What should be expected of the housewife? the husband/father? What does Life Magazine say?

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(Textbook ch 27 Section 2) What are the suburbs? Why did the suburbs expand in the 1950s? How was the car related to the suburbs? Be sure to include the Interstate Highway Act.

What positive and negative effects did automobiles have on American life in the 1950s?

4. Time to move to the suburbs! You and your spouse have decided to buy a house in Levittown, NY. Describe Levittown, who built it, and scroll down to the bottom – what were the critics of Levittown (and other suburbs like it) saying?

5. Looking at this episode in particular, why do you think that I Love Lucy was so popular? What might she represent to her audience?
6. Variety shows were also popular during the 1950s and the *Ed Sullivan Show* was one of the best. Describe it.

Elvis was a frequent guest on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Not all teenagers were allowed to watch Elvis though and his performances were often censored. Why was Elvis a controversial guest, and how was he eventually "allowed" to be on TV (i.e. how did they let him?)

**Textbook Question p. 857** – what type of shopping center emerged in the 1950s as a result of suburbs? How did it affect free speech issues? women? consumerism? small businesses? *(we will discuss this as a class)*

7. What was a “beatnik?” In other words, what did they reject? What did they embrace?

List the books/poems written by Ken Kesey, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac.

What is the origin of the word “Beat?”

What effect did the Beats have on the 60s culture?
8. Congratulations - you have fraternal twins. Pick a male and female name.

9. Your older son is now a teenager. Is he a greaser or soc? Describe his appearance.

10. Describe your appearance, your spouse, and your teenage son. Describe in words and sketch head to toe what your character would have been wearing in the following situations:
   - school (son)
   - date/dance (son)
   - day to day activities (all 3 of you)
   - dinner party (you and your spouse)
11. Name, describe in words, and sketch the hairstyle that you might have worn daily.

12. List 2 teen idols that your son might have looked up to.

13. List 5 slang terms with the definition that your character uses.

14. Name 1 dance that was popular in the 1950’s and describe it.

15. Wow….your son is now starting to be interested in girls! He wants to do things like ask a girl out, have a party. It is time for "the talk." Your boy is growing up fast, but you don’t want him to grow up too fast and forget the family. To make things more stressful, your niece is also looking to you for advice on how to behave, and how to prepare for her future. Use the YouTube videos (1-4) attached below to learn what to explain to them.

Son

Niece (female)
16. Unfortunately your teenage son is starting to get a little too "independent." He is not following societal norms. He is getting rebellious. Use the following websites to find out why. You also searched his room while he was at school and found all sorts of rebellious music, TV, movies, and books. Use the links below to find out more about them, and for TV shows you would like him to watch.

Why is he rebellious?

What 4 rebellious movies do you find in his room? (make pretend people owned movies in the 50s)

You find Catcher in the Rye in his room, and unlike most parents you actually read it!!!! What is it about and why was it controversial.

List 3-4 wholesome family TV shows you would like him to watch. What is each about?

17. At a recent dinner party, a "free thinking" twentysomething called you an Organization Man (or your husband, if you're the wife). What did he mean? Why does it anger you and frighten you? What is he really saying about you?

18. Just like your son, you want to be accepted (and admired) by your peers. One requirement for the admiration of your peers was a "Diners Club Card." It was a status symbol. Briefly explain the significance of the card, and why it was a status symbol?
19. You’ve been asked by the local newspaper to write a short expository essay on the car culture and its effect on the country. Watch the video and write 175 words.
20. You are getting bored in Levittown. Everything is the same. You didn't even notice until you heard the song "Little Boxes" by Melvina Reynolds. But you think that Pete Seeger's version is much better. Watch You Tube video # 6 to check it out. The song is about the development of suburbia and the associated conformity. It refers to suburban housing as "little boxes" of different colors. After watching the video, briefly explain why Melvina Reynolds (the original songwriter) and Pete Seeger think you're unhappy?

21. Deep down inside you are unhappy (and you think the same is true about your spouse). Check out You Tube Video #7 to see how the government and economy claim you can be happy and express yourself.

22. Wow........the Russians got the bomb (1949)!!!! How in the world did they get the bomb that quickly. Your neighbors think it must have been Soviet spies in the United States. Your interest in politics and possible espionage is peaked. You research this topic very thoroughly. The resources for this question are links and resources 8-11 on the bottom of the webquest page.

   a. McCarthyism (Wikipedia link)

      i. What is McCarthyism?

      ii. The McCarthy Era brought the Second Red Scare to fever pitch. When was this era? What was the Second Red Scare?
iii. (second paragraph) Describe the hysteria of McCarthy and the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Red Scare.

iv. (Origins section) Was the Communist Party a legitimate political party in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century?

v. (Origins section) For what 2 reasons did Communist Party membership increase though the 1930s?

vi. (Origins section) Why was the US government not anti-communist during WWII?

vii. (Origins section) What 5 events re-ignited the US governments fear of Communism? (in addition to the blossoming Cold War).

\underline{Evaluation:}

This assignment, while lengthy, is worth a complete test grade (100 points doubled). As such, it is an effort grade. If you have any questions along the way, please ask.