

# Are we having fun yet?



View of Paragon Park, Nantasket Beach, 1914 postcard.

Nostalgia, in small doses, isn't particularly damaging. There's no harm in sitting around over coffee, or whatever suits your mood, and reminiscing about old times that weren't nearly as carefree or pleasant as we remember.

But even after correcting for nostalgia, it's hard to shake the feeling that our pursuit of happiness has become a bit more desperate and earnest in recent years. At some point during the second half of the 20th century, fun and entertainment got to be more pricey, less local, and, in some ways, far more complicated than before.

We now tend to look for amusement farther from home, and we spend more money doing it. The area around Quincy offers evidence of the change, if you know where to look.

Start in the Blue Hills, which are visible from almost any point in the city. Walk along the hiking trails and sooner or later you'll come across the remnants of an old ski jump. Back in the 1930s, it was the focal point of a winter carnival that drew as many as 30,000 revelers. Today, the jump's overgrown foundation is the only reminder. There's still skiing in another section of the Blue Hills, but the real winter sports enthusiasts head out to the Rockies or over to the Alps. Even northern New England now seems too close to home to have much snob appeal.

For another example, head over to Nantasket Beach. You won't need a passport or a plane ticket. Just hop in your car. It's only 10 miles from downtown Quincy or 20 miles from downtown Boston. You can even take the bus. And don't worry if your swimwear is a little out of date. Nantasket is not that kind of place. It's a long and beautiful public beach, that, up until the 1980s, was home to Paragon Park. Every metro area used to have a place like Paragon – an amusement park where people could escape the heat of a city neighborhood and enjoy a day of affordable summer fun. Most are now gone. Some have been replaced by oceanview condos or upscale shopping areas; others have transformed themselves into pricey theme parks that can cost hundreds of dollars for a day of "family fun." And then, of course, there's the Mickey Factor. The ultimate amusement park

experience in this day and age means getting on a plane to Florida and coming home with a whopping credit card balance.

We've even managed to turn child's play into a more earnest, complicated endeavor that often puts added stress on kids and parents alike.

One of the unambiguous joys of growing up in places like Quincy in the 1950s or 1960s was that kids could go out and explore the world without having to wait for a ride from mom or dad. There were plenty of opportunities for grade-schoolers and middle school kids to amuse themselves without the suffocating influence of adult supervision. A nine-year-old with a dollar or two in his or her pocket could walk or bike to Quincy Square for an afternoon of comparison shopping at half a dozen candy counters. No money? No problem. You could always sneak into Duane's lumberyard, where the stacks of two-by-fours and heavy timbers made for excellent forts. Or there were salvage yards to rummage through and abandoned quarries for swimming and climbing. In short, a kid didn't have to spend his or her young life being shuttled from one structured activity to another, and parents had more time to live adult lives.

Not anymore. In Quincy, and just about everywhere else in America, childhood seems to have become a more serious business – more competitive, more directed, more goal-oriented – and economic change has had something to do with that.

True, there has always been a certain competitive aspect to childhood: sports, spelling bees, beauty contests, class rank. But towards the end of the 20th century, as more industrial jobs left the country and the economy went global, childhood competition rose to a new level.

A kid can no longer slide through high school and get a decent-paying job at the shipyard or the gear works. Indeed, as Thomas Friedman has pointed out so often, if American kids want a prosperous future, they'll have to hold their own against the best and brightest from around the globe, and the preparation for that global competition starts early. Forget about spending summers as a camp counselor. Kids now need to secure internships "in their chosen field" or establish humanitarian projects in the developing world, or . . . well, you get the idea. Somewhere along the line we bought into the notion that success in the post-industrial economy requires kids to build an impressive portfolio of accomplishments and activities. And parents need to direct those efforts or, at the very least, willingly chauffeur their kids from one self-improving activity to another.

Doesn't sound like much fun, does it? But that's the brave new world we're in. Is it an improvement over the way things used to be? The call is yours.