

"We Didn't Start the Fire" (Facts) History Summary from 1949-1989

by Ron Kurtus (revised 23 September 2005)

The [lyrics](#) to the song *We Didn't Start the Fire* by Billy Joel list historical personalities and events from 1949 until 1989.

This lesson lists those people and events and gives a short explanation of their role in history.

1949

Harry Truman

Harry S Truman became U.S. President when President Roosevelt died in 1945. (His middle name was just "S" without the period.) He was responsible for dropping the Atomic Bombs on Japan and ending World War II. Truman started the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after the war. He started his second term in 1949, defeating Thomas Dewey. During his second term, the Korean War was fought.

Doris Day

Doris Day was born in 1924. She started singing and touring with the Les Brown Band at age 16. She made her first movie in 1948 and soon became a popular movie star and singer.

Red China

Communists took control of China after a struggle starting before World War II. Red China entered the Korean War in the 1950s, when it looked like the U.N. forces would defeat Communist North Korea.

Johnnie Ray

Partially deaf singer, whose song *Cry* was a number 1 hit. Ray actually cried in performing the song. He was a top star in 1949 and 1950 with his other hit songs *The Little White Cloud that Cried* and *Walking in the Rain*.

South Pacific

South Pacific was a highly popular Broadway musical and hit movie.

Walter Winchell

Walter Winchell was a top gossip reporter, whose newspaper column and radio show could make or break a celebrity.

Joe Dimaggio

Joe Dimaggio was a popular baseball player for the New York Yankees. In 1941, he set a Major League record of hitting safely in 56 straight games. He was affectionately known as "Joltin' Joe" and "The Yankee Clipper" until he retired in 1952. Dimaggio married actress Marilyn Monroe in 1954, but the marriage only lasted 9 months. In the 1980s, he became known as "Mr. Coffee" because of his TV ads for that brand of coffee maker. He was also mentioned in the song *Mrs. Robinson* by Simon and Garfunkle.

1950

Joe McCarthy

Senator from Wisconsin known for his hearings on suspected communists in the government and movie industry. Known for his brutal interrogations of suspects, resulting in ruining the lives of both guilty and innocent people.

Richard Nixon

Richard Nixon was a member of the House of Representatives from California when he became involved in the trial of Alger Hiss, who was accused of being a Communist and a spy. Nixon presented evidence that help prove Hiss guilty in 1950. This advanced Nixon's political career, and he soon ran for the Senate and won. Nixon later become Vice-President under Eisenhower and then President of the United States. Later investigations indicated that Hiss was actually innocent, although Nixon would never admit to this.

Studebaker

Studebaker was a popular car in 1950. The styling consisted of a torpedo front end and read window. People joked that the car looked like it was going backwards. The company went out of business in 1966.

Television

Television became popular in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Most large cities had only one station. Sets in those days had 10 inch screens and were in black and white. Color was introduced in 1951, but it was years later until color television became universally popular.

North Korea / South Korea

Korea was split into north and south after World War II. North Korea became established as a Communist dictatorship by Soviet Union and Red China, after Japan was defeated. In 1950, North Korea attacked South Korea, starting the Korean War. The United Nations entered the war to defend South Korea. The Soviet Union made the mistake of walking out on the U.N. vote, allowing the measure to pass. Since declaring war was not acceptable without the approval of Congress, President Harry S Truman declared the fighting a "police action" to allow the entry of American troops. The war resulted in a stalemate, and Korea is still divided to this day.

Marilyn Monroe

Marilyn Monroe was a popular "sex symbol" movie star. She was married the author Arthur Miller and baseball hero Joe Dimaggio. She also was rumored to have relationships with President John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, as well as mafia boss Joe Gianconna. She died under suspicious circumstances.

1951

Rosenbergs

The Rosenbergs were a husband and wife who were arrested and executed for selling secrets of the Atomic-bomb to the Soviet Union.

H-bomb

The Hydrogen Bomb was developed under the guidance of Dr. William Teller. It was many times more powerful than an Atomic Bomb and in fact required an Atomic Bomb to detonate. The United States exploded the first H-bomb, but a few years later the Soviet Union also exploded their version of the bomb.

Sugar Ray

Sugar Ray Robinson was the middle-weight boxing champion of the world. At the time considered pound-for-pound the best boxer ever. He was also highly personable and popular.

Panmunjom

Panmunjom is where negotiations to end the Korean War took place.

Brando

Marlon Brando became a top movie actor. He was famous for his brooding and mumbling acting style. He received an Academy Award for his role in "On the Waterfront" that brought him to be a top box-office draw. Many years later, he starred in the "Godfather" movie.

The King and I

The King and I was a popular Broadway play and later turned into a movie starring Yul Brunner and Deborah Kerr.

The Catcher in the Rye

The Catcher in the Rye was an extreme popular book among teens, as it epitomized their attitudes and feelings.

1952

Eisenhower

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower ("Ike") had been Supreme Commander in the World War II fight against the Nazis. He later became a popular president of the United States. "I like Ike" was the motto of his followers.

Vaccine

The vaccine to the dreaded disease polio was discovered by Jonas Salk and distributed to the world.

England's got a new Queen

The coronation of Queen Elizabeth took Great Britain by storm.

Marciano

Rocky Marciano was the heavyweight boxing champion of the world. He retired undefeated.

Liberace

Liberace was a popular pianist and entertainer, who had his own TV show in the 1950s. He was known for wearing sequined tuxedos and having a candelabra on his piano. He is credited with advising singer Elvis Presley to also wear "fancy clothes" during his performances. Women adored Liberace, because of his sweet smile and wavy hair.

Santayana good-bye

Famed philosophy George Santayana died in 1952

1953

Joseph Stalin

Joseph Stalin was the dictator of the Soviet Union. He was a harsh leader who had millions of his people executed or sent to labor camps in Siberia. On his way to political power, he changed his name to *Stalin*, which means steel in Russian.

Malenkov

Georgy Malenkov was a Soviet politician and Communist Party leader, and a close collaborator of Joseph Stalin. He briefly became leader of the USSR (March 1953-February 1955) after Stalin's death.

Nasser

Gamal Abdel Nasser was the second President of Egypt after Muhammad Naguib. He was considered one of the more influential Arab leaders in history.

Prokofiev

Sergei Sergeevich Prokofiev was a famous Ukrainian composer who died in 1953.

Rockefeller

Nelson Rockefeller was grandson of oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller. He served as governor of New York from 1959 to 1973. He was the 41st Vice President of the United States of America from December 19, 1974 to January 20, 1977

Campanella

Roy Campanella was the all-star catcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team. His career was cut short by a paralyzing car accident.

Communist bloc

USSR and their satellite countries formed what was called the Communist bloc.

1954

Roy Cohn

Roy Cohn was the advisor to Senator Joseph McCarthy during the McCarthy Hearings on Communists in the movie industry and government.

Juan Peron

Juan Peron was a popular dictator in Argentina. His wife Evita was known for helping the poor.

Toscanini

Arturo Toscanini was a world-famous conductor who died in 1954

Dacron

A new wonder-material Dacron hits the market.

Dien Bien Phu falls

The French lose control over Indo-China, now known as Vietnam with the fall of the city Dien Bien Phu

Rock Around the Clock

Bill Haley and the Comets came out with what was considered the first rock-and-roll hit song, *Rock Around the Clock*. It was the theme music for the popular movie *Blackboard Jungle*.

1955

Einstein

Albert Einstein developed the Theory of Relativity in 1903 and was considered one of the world's smartest scientists. He became a popular figure in the later years of his life. He died in 1955.

James Dean

James Dean was a movie star who became a symbol of young people from his role in the movie *Rebel Without a Cause*. After making the movie *Giant*, which moved him to a top star, he was killed when he lost control of his sports car while driving alone.

Brooklyn's got a winning team

The Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team finally won the World Series over the New York Yankees. They later moved to Los Angeles.

Davy Crockett

Actor Fess Parker starred in the highly popular TV series *Davy Crockett*. A novelty song by that title became the number 1 hit for a short time.

Peter Pan

Peter Pan was a top Broadway play starring Mary Martin, who flew through the air as Peter Pan.

Elvis Presley

Singer Elvis Presley became a national phenomenon with such number 1 hit songs as *Heartbreak Hotel*, *Don't Be Cruel* and *Hound Dog*. He was called "Elvis the Pelvis" because of the way he shook his hips while dancing. Many religious leaders and school officials banned his songs, which only made them more popular. He later went on to be nicknamed "The King" as the most popular singer ever.

Disneyland

Disneyland opened in 1955 in Anaheim, California. It was a theme park, developed by Walt Disney and based around his cartoon characters. It was designated as a place for family entertainment.

1956

Bardot

Brigitte Bardot was a popular French "sex-kitten" movie star.

Budapest

Anti-communist riots took part in Budapest, Hungary. Soviet troops put down the revolt and arrested many Hungarians, especially students.

Alabama

African-American Rosa Parks sat in a Montgomery, Alabama bus seat designated "for whites only" in 1955, thus starting demonstrations and a boycott of Montgomery buses that lasted until December 1965. Since the boycott was costing downtown stores and white businesses considerable money, negotiations were made to finally integrate the buses. But this even also was a starting point for the Civil Rights movement of Martin Luther King and others.

Khrushchev

Nikita Khrushchev emerged as a leader in the Soviet Union after the death of dictator Josef Stalin. In 1956, he advocated reform and indirectly criticised Stalin and his methods. He became the Premier of the Soviet Union from 1958 to 1974.

Princess Grace

Actress Grace Kelly left Hollywood to marry Prince Ranier of Monaco. She then attained the title of Princess Grace.

Peyton Place

The book *Peyton Place* became the number-1 best-seller. Teens often marked the "good parts" in the book, as they passed it between each other.

Trouble in the Suez

After Britain and the USA withdrew their financial support for the Egyptian Aswan dam project General Nasser nationalized the the important Suez Canal. Egypt was then invaded by British, French and Israeli forces. Under pressure from the United States the invaders left Egypt and a UN emergency force was sent to Egypt.

1957

Little Rock

Nine African-American students enrolled at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Governor Faubus ordered the Arkansas National Guard to surround Central High School to keep the nine students from entering the school, because he believed black and whites should be segregated, despite Federal laws on integration. President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered the 101st Airborne Division into Little Rock to insure the safety of the students. The crisis gained world-wide attention.

Pasternak

Boris Pasternak was a Russian poet and writer. He is best known in the West for his monumental novel on Soviet Russia, "Doctor Zhivago". But he was most celebrated in Russia as a great poet.

Mickey Mantle

Mickey Mantle was a great baseball player for the New York Yankee team. He batted both left- and right-handed, hit at a leading batting average, as well as led the league in home runs.

Kerouac

Jack Kerouac was the author of the best-selling book *On the Road*, which epitomized the Beat Generation of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Sputnik

Sputnik was the name of the first orbiting satellite sent into space by the USSR. Turmoil over its launch initiated the race for supremacy in space.

Chou En-Lai

Chou En-Lai (Zhou Enlai) was the Premier and Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China (also called Red China by Western journalists). He was a popular and practical administrator during the "Great Leap Forward" of 1958 and later pushed for modernization to undo damage caused by the "Cultural Revolution" of 1966 to 1976. Zhou was largely responsible for the re-establishment of contacts with the West during the Nixon presidency.

Bridge on the River Kwai

The Bridge on the River Kwai was a 1957 Academy Award winning movie about a World War II Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.

1958

Lebanon

U.S. President Eisenhower ordered U.S. Marines into Lebanon at the request of President Chamoun to help stop rioting.

Charles de Gaulle

Charles de Gaulle returns to power as the leader of France.

California baseball

The Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team moves to Los Angeles Dodgers and the New York Giants move to San Francisco.

Starkweather homicide

Charles Starkweather was a serial killer who made the news 1958 because of his gruesome murders. Starkweather and his girlfriend, Caril Fugate, went on a killing

spree of 11 to 15 people over a span of a month and a half. They were captured and he was executed in 1959.

Children of Thalidomide

Children of women who took the drug Thalidomide during pregnancy were born with only stubs for arms. After this tragedy, the drug was taken off the market.

1959

Buddy Holly

Buddy Holly was a popular singer and leader of the Crickets rock group. He was killed in a plane crash, along with singers The Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens. In the 1980s, the hit song *American Pie* referred to his death in the line "...the day the music died."

Ben Hur

Ben Hur was a spectacular movie starring Charlton Heston. It was set around the time of Christ.

Space Monkey

Ham-the-space-monkey was sent up in an American space satellite as a prelude to sending a man in space. He was a mean little guy who would often try to bite the workers who put him in the space capsule.

Mafia

Mafia leaders meet in upstate New York to get better organized.

Hula Hoops

Hula Hoops became a national fad. Everywhere, you would see children and even adults trying to spin the large plastic hoop around their waste. TV celebrities would also display their skills with the hoop. The fad peaked and died quickly.

Castro

Fidel Castro--who received his college degree at Columbia University in the U.S.--overthrows dictator Batista and starts up a Communist dictatorship in Cuba.

Edsel is a no go

Ford Motor Company came out with a new car, the Edsel--named after Edsel Ford. The car was to fit in between the Ford and Mercury, but it was the wrong car at the wrong time and lasted only a few years until it was discontinued.

1960

U-2

The United States had been sending the secret U-2 high-flying spy plane over the Soviet Union to take pictures and gather information, when one was shot down by a Russian missile. The pilot Gary Francis Powers was taken prisoner and later released in an exchange for a Soviet spy who had been arrested in the U.S.

An interesting note is that Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald was stationed at the military base where Powers' U-2 took off for the flight. No connection was ever made, but it does seem suspicious,

Syngman Rhee

Syngman Rhee was the first President of South Korea, serving from 1948 to 1960. His method of rule became unpopular, and he was forced to resign by a student-led democratic movement.

Payola

Many disk jockeys were exposed for taking bribes to play certain songs on the radio, thus biasing the record sales. Top national disk jockey Allen Freed was convicted of payola. American Bandstand TV dance show host Dick Clark was accused of payola but found innocent.

Kennedy

John F. Kennedy is elected President of the United States. He is later assassinated.

Chubby Checker

Singer Chubby Checker came out with the song *The Twist*, which started a national dance sensation. Soon, not only teens but also adults were doing the twist. The dance was responsible for popularizing "fast dancing" or rock-and-roll among adults. Chubby Checker's name was a spin-off of the name of the popular rock singer Fats Domino.

Psycho

Psycho was a thriller movie directed by Alfred Hitchcock. The most memorable scene is when the main woman character is stabbed to death while taking a shower.

Belgians in the Congo

The Belgians government in the Congo is overthrown.

1961

Hemingway

Famous author Ernest Hemingway commits suicide.

Eichmann

Former Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann is arrested in Argentina and brought to Israel, where he is convicted of war crimes and executed.

Stranger in a Strange Land

Stranger in a Strange Land was an award-winning fictional book by Robert A. Heinlein about Valentine Michael Smith, who was born during the first manned mission to Mars and was the only survivor. He is raised by Martians, and when he arrived on Earth he had no knowledge of anything about the planet or its cultures. In fact, he had never even seen a woman. But he was the legal heir to an enormous financial empire. He then explored human morality and the meanings of love and founded his own church, preaching free love. Many young rebels of the 1960s selected *Stranger* as their counterculture bible.

Dylan

Singer Bob Dylan leads the folk music craze.

Berlin

The Soviets erected the Berlin Wall, dividing the city into the Russian-controlled part and the area controlled by the U.S., British and French.

Bay of Pigs Invasion

A secret mission led by the CIA with trained Cuban rebels, failed horribly. Outdated maps landed the strike force in the middle of a Cuban base. President Kennedy took the heat due to its failure.

1962

Lawrence of Arabia

The movie *Lawrence of Arabia* starring Peter O'Toole wins the Academy Awards.

British Beatlemania

British rock group the Beatles take over the music scene, with numerous hit records on the Top-40 charts.

Ole Miss

University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) admits its first black or African-American student, James Meridith, with U.S. Marshalls enforcing the rules to integrate the school.

John Glenn

John Glenn becomes the first American to orbit the Earth.

Liston beats Patterson

Boxer Sonny Liston easily defeats Heavyweight Champion Floyd Patterson to gain the title. Liston was a mean-looking boxer who struck fear in the hearts of his opponents. He was finally defeated by Cassius Clay, who then changed his name to Muhammad Ali

1963

Pope Paul

Pope Paul VI was pope from 1963 to 1978.

Malcolm X

Black Muslim Malcolm X came into the news as he preached separation of the races.

British politician sex

A sex scandal rocks British Parliament.

JFK blown away

President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in 1963.

1964 to 1989

Birth control

Birth Control becomes an issue with the advent of the birth control pill. Later, abortion is legalized.

Ho Chi-Minh

Ho Chi-Minh was the leader of the Communist North Vietnamese, who first fought the French and then the Americans.

Richard Nixon back again

After losing the election for President to John F. Kennedy and then losing his bid to be Governor of California, Richard Nixon fought back to regain prominence in national politics.

Moon shot

The United States landed the first man on the moon.

Woodstock

A farmer in the Woodstock area of New York state donated his land for a rock concert. Surprisingly, 600,000 rock fans showed up, making it the biggest rock concert ever held.

Watergate

Supporters and staff of U.S. President Richard Nixon were accused of breaking into the Democratic headquarters in the Watergate hotel. Nixon tried to cover up the fact and soon he forced to resign from office because of that cover up. Several of his staff members were sent to prison as a result of the affair.

Punk Rock

Punk rock hits the music scene with such groups as the Sex Pistols, who would spit at the audience.

Begin

Begin was Prime Minister of Israel.

Reagan

Former movie actor Ronald Reagan becomes President of the United States.

Palestine

Palestinians protest the treatment by the Israelis.

Terror on the airlines

Numerous airline hijackings are in the news.

Ayatollah's in Iran

The Shah of Iran--who was supported by the United States--was overthrown and Ayatollah Khomeini took over the country. Hostages were taken at the US embassy in Tehran and finally released 444 days later.

Russians in Afghanistan

The Soviet Union enters Afghanistan to "protect" Communist interests in the country. Rebels were supported by the United States, and finally after a long, costly war, the Soviets were forced to withdraw from the country. Ironically, the Afghan rebels later used the arms supplied by the U.S. to fight the Americans.

Wheel of Fortune

The *Wheel of Fortune* TV show becomes a favorite.

Sally Ride

Sally Ride becomes the first American woman in space as a member of the Space Shuttle crew in 1983. Valentina Tereshkova of the Soviet Union was the very first woman in space in 1963, orbiting the Earth 48 times.

Heavy metal

Heavy metal rock comes on the music scene.

Suicide

Suicide rate among young people seems to be rising.

Foreign debts

Foreign debts were increasing inflation.

Homeless Vets

Many veterans of the Viet Nam conflict are now homeless. A major problem with them is drug addiction or alcoholism.

AIDS

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) disease starts to spread throughout the world.

Crack

A potent form of the highly addictive drug cocaine called "crack" or "rock" has been rapidly spreading in the United States, especially in troubled neighborhoods.

Bernie Goetz

Bernie Goetz was a New Yorker who was concerned about crime in the city. After he got on a subway in the afternoon, four African-American youths approached Goetz and demanded \$5 from him. He pulled out a gun and shot all four. Then he shot one of the youths again, as he lay on the floor, severing the spinal cord and paralyzing him.

Goetz escaped but later turned himself in. Many N.Y. citizens deemed him a hero. The case brought about the debate as to whether people have the right to take the law into their own hands. Goetz was convicted only of illegal possession of firearms and sentenced to 8 months in prison. Afterwards, the youth he paralyzed sued and won a \$43 million judgment.

Hypodermics on the shore

News reports showed how hundreds of carelessly discarded hypodermic needles had washed up on the New Jersey shoreline.

China's Under Martial Law

In June 1989, thousands of protesters marched in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China. Many were killed and China went under martial law until order was restored.

Rock and Roller Cola Wars

Pepsi and Coke battle for supremacy in the marketplace.

In conclusion

This gives you a good overview of what happened during that time period.