

**Exhibit Review- *Mid-Century New Jersey: The Garden State in the 1950s*****Katie Zavoski – Senior Curator****Gordon Bond – Guest Curator****Open March 31, 2018-June 28, 2020****Cornelius Low House/ Middlesex County Museum****1225 River Road, Piscataway, NJ****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.174>**

On March 31, 2018 the Cornelius Low House opened a new exhibit exploring the history and legacy of the Garden State in the 1950s. The exhibit will run until June 28, 2020. The Cornelius Low house is a Georgian style mansion dating to the 1740s and has operated as a museum since 1979. The mansion's seven public rooms host an exhibit highlighting New Jersey innovation and culture in the 1950's. *Mid-Century New Jersey* shows how 1950s culture set the stage for the sweeping social changes of the 1960s and 1970s as well as how evidence of the postwar boom can still be seen and felt today.

The exhibit is divided into 7 galleries across the first and second floor, each with its own theme. The first gallery sets the backdrop for the exhibit and discusses World War II, the postwar industrial boom, and the move to suburbia. The rest of the room is set-up as a period typical living room with furniture that belonged to a family from Middlesex County. The next room deals with food, home, and women's issues. This room highlights time saving innovations in the home and how these were primarily marketed to women. Middle class women had been placed in an unprecedented position in the 1950s. As traditional gender roles were reinforced, women sought new opportunities, such as part time work having Tupperware parties or starting social clubs. This room also highlights an iconic New Jersey establishment, the diner. The diner served as both a family friendly casual restaurant and one that could cater to late night shift workers. The diner and fast food restaurants were also linked to car culture, covered in the next room.

Car culture and the establishment of the Garden State Parkway and NJ Turnpike were instrumental in connecting people to something that is still a huge part of New Jersey culture, going down the shore. This gallery covers the creation of these roads and what a burgeoning car culture meant for the state. It also discusses iconic summer destinations such as Wildwood and Atlantic City.

Going upstairs, gallery four shows a variety of popular toys of the era and mentions others that were an accidental result of World War II, such as silly putty and the slinky. This room has the largest number of and some of the most interesting artifacts. The next room is civil defense and covers the Cold War and the very real threat of nuclear war. It discusses duck and cover, air raid drills, and fallout shelters. In the corner of the room is a TV set and chair showing how families would gather around and watch the news every night. The next gallery is focused on pop culture, the drive-in movie theater and famous New Jerseyans such as Frankie Valli and The Shirelles. Finally, the exhibit culminates in a room dedicated to the social movements that would gain traction in the coming decades.

The exhibit however does not present the 1950s as an idealized decade. In almost every gallery issues of race and gender are addressed. It is largely recognized that the prosperity of this era did not extend to everyone and that discrimination at places like diners and beaches was prevalent. Not only does the exhibit point out issues of discrimination, but it shows how these issues came to a head in the Civil Rights, Women's Liberation, and LGBTQ+ Rights movements in New Jersey.

Overall, *Mid-Century New Jersey* was well researched and informative. It gives an overview of the decade and major national events while highlighting specific New Jersey people, events, and innovations. While some galleries are lacking in actual material objects they more than

make up for it with well-designed panels and reproduced imagery such as photographs and advertisements. Many of the galleries also use video to help the visitor get a better feel for the time. *Mid-Century New Jersey: The Garden State in the 1950s* is a fun and informative exhibit that does a great job of highlighting what is often an overlooked, but influential time in the history of New Jersey.

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