

1992 HOUSE

BY BILLY FROLICK

Introduction:

The assignment for Mrs. Stanfill's eighth-grade social-studies class was to pick a year in U.S. history and live for a week as if it were that year, without any of the conveniences available in today's modern society. I chose 1992, and for extra credit I persuaded my family to participate in the experiment along with me. Bill Clinton was elected President in 1992. A postage stamp cost twenty-nine cents, and Whitey (sp?) Houston had a No. 1 song with "I Will Always Love You," from a movie starring someone named Kevin Costner, on whom my mother apparently had a major crush.

Scientific controls:

My brother Chris was the most reluctant to participate in the project, as he is way obsessed with the new Maroon 5 CD that he downloaded and didn't like having to listen to crud like Billy Ray Cyrus and Boyz II Men for the duration of the control period. He has a massive DVD collection, which was out of bounds, too, given that DVDs had not been invented in the olden days of 1992. Though Chris has an abiding attachment to one of the girls on "The Real World: Philadelphia," I told him that, for the sake of historical verisimilitude, he had to learn to live without her—and TiVo or his iPod—for a week.

My stepdad Larry's reaction to the assignment was interesting. He said that maybe he'd go out of town to play golf for the week of the experiment because he wasn't actually "in the picture" in 1992. My mom nixed that suggestion.

Since the Internet was not in common use back then, Larry needed to check his stocks in the newspaper, which he had to start buying at Starbucks because he usually reads the news online. Thank God Starbucks was around in 1992. (I think. Not sure, and, under the terms of the experiment, I couldn't Google it.) But I do know that he

couldn't order his usual caramel macchiato, because evidently in 1992 Starbucks barely even served coffee, let alone specialty drinks!!!!

My mom had a "procedure" scheduled for the week of the project and asked if I would make an exception for her, because my cousin Sharon's bat mitzvah was less than a month away and my mom wanted to make sure she looked O.K. in the pictures. It's too bad, because they definitely had bat mitzvahs and photography in 1992. But Botox was not readily available.

So, to keep the integrity of the research project intact, I denied her request and called Dr. Mussman (on a landline—duh!) to cancel her appointment. By the time she found out and called Dr. Mussman back, the slot was filled, and my mom and I became engaged in a significant altercation. As domestic conflict no doubt existed in 1992, this worked well within the parameters of the experiment. My mother wanted to punish me by depriving me of something that I care about, but just about everything that's important to me was basically already off limits for the week anyway.

I learned that one of the biggest hardships endured by people back in 1992 was not being able to use cell phones. At first, I had thought that maybe I could just cut back on the number of calls I made, thinking that usage plans were more limited. However, my research (at the library!) unearthed the fact that cell phones really were not in widespread use back then; there were only humongous car-phone versions, prevalent among early executives in the hip-hop industry.

Attending school for a week without my cell phone aroused feelings of depression. It seemed like everyone around me was text-messaging each other, and after a while I became convinced that they were text-messaging about me. I felt really humiliated, and it made me appreciate the world I live in today.

Research segment:

Not having the use of a cell phone piqued my curiosity regarding how schoolchildren communicated all those years ago. Since my mother was not speaking to me and Larry wasn't around (he did end up going to Myrtle Beach), I turned to primary sources (in the form of classic cinema) for answers. I found "The Breakfast Club" and "Pretty in Pink" in the library—on videotape. Through studying these movies, I learned that back in the eighties and nineties students would hand-write things on little pieces of paper called "notes" and try to pass them to each other in class without getting caught.

Upon my return to school, no one wanted to engage in this practice with me because they were all text-messaging each other (probably about me).

Basic survival observations:

During the period of the experiment, my family subsisted on bread, pasta, rice, and potatoes, just as people did before the turn of the century. My mother said that if you had mentioned food combining or wheat intolerance back in 1992 they might have thrown you into a pond to see if you floated. I have no idea what that means, or who "they" are, but it was the first thing she had said to me in three days and I wanted to avoid another altercation, so I wrote it down.

I discovered that eating so much starch was giving me severe headaches. This, I felt, might explain some of the heinous stuff that was happening in the world back in 1992—weirdos like Ross Perot and Jeffrey Dahmer, or all the rioting that went down in Los Angeles that year. Maybe the grunge look, too.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, 1992 was clearly a very confusing, difficult time in which to live in the United States of America. Having to use landlines and eat carbohydrates were hardships for the people to endure, but Americans are nothing if not resilient. If I had been a teen-ager in 1992, I would have been really challenged to find alternative ways to keep my life interesting, stay thin, and communicate with my peers.

Speaking of which, someone is text-messaging me. I'm so grateful to live in 2005! :) ♦