Civil defense at the height of the Cold War had two goals: to provide for the functioning of government and society in any emergency, and to save as many people as possible in the event of nuclear attack. However, it was in large part a do-it-yourself program, especially in the suburbs. Only as homeowners constructed their own shelters could any part of the population be expected to survive a nuclear assault. This aspect of the program raises questions about how seriously homeowners took civil defense functions. This query is itself part of a broader question: how did the Cold War impact the lives of ordinary citizens and their communities?

Most histories of the Cold War era have focused on the international tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States, McCarthyism, the military-industrial complex, or United States domestic issues. At the local level, memories of air raid drills and bomb shelters come to mind. Yet, there are no apparent studies on how the Cold War played out in specific communities. While the effects of the Cold War no doubt varied from place to place, this article examines one particular suburban community, the borough of Pleasant Hills, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, where, in fact, the Cold War didn't have much of an impact on the daily life of the citizens. Few if any residents built bomb and fallout shelters, and local clubs and organizations offered little programming related to the threat of nuclear war.
Pleasant Hills is an appropriate place to study the Cold War's local effects because of its history, location, and demographics. Suburbs of the 1950s and '60s shared a number of characteristics: a "more than proportionate share of young married couples and their children"; "families of middle-class status"; and the "predominance of private homes [and] low population density..." Using these standards, Pleasant Hills fits perfectly into this mid-20th century model.

Pleasant Hills Borough seceded from Jefferson Township in 1947, the same year the U.S. government announced the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. Only two years had passed since the United States dropped atomic bombs on Japan to end World War II. In two years, the Russians would develop their first nuclear weapon. Winston Churchill spoke of the "Iron Curtain" in 1946. The Berlin Airlift of 1948 was only a year away. And, on the same day that the new government of Pleasant Hills was inaugurated, Pakistan and India became separate countries.

Pleasant Hills is located 10 miles south of the City of Pittsburgh. In the Cold War era, the Pittsburgh region was the headquarters for a number of major national and international businesses: The Koppers Company, Gulf Oil Corporation, U.S. Steel, Alcoa, and Pittsburgh Plate Glass. As the location for the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Institute of Technology, and the Mellon Institute, Pittsburgh was a center for higher education and scientific research. Additionally, the Pittsburgh region, especially the Monongahela River Valley, was the heart of steelmaking in the United States. In recognition of the region's importance, a ring of Nike missile sites was established around Pittsburgh, and a Pennsylvania Air National Guard fighter interceptor unit was stationed at Greater Pittsburgh Airport for air defense.

Federal census records from 1950 through 1970 indicate that Pleasant Hills was a growing, middle class professional community where nearly all the homes were owner-occupied, single family dwellings. The population of the borough grew from 3,808 in 1950 to 10,409 in 1970. It was overwhelmingly white. In fact, in 1960, there were only eight non-white residents. In 1970, this number was reduced to one non-white (specifically black) resident. The number of men and women was nearly equal. Most adult residents were married and high school educated, and a number had some level of college education.

The Republican Party dominated borough politics and government during the '50s and '60s, a time when the Democratic Party had more registered voters in Allegheny County. This predominance of the Republican Party reflects evidence that workers in professional occupations and Protestants in suburban areas were more likely to be registered Republican. The reason for this political alliance may be related to the pro-business stance of the Republican Party, which would have appealed to the professional and managerial workers who made up a majority of the Pleasant Hills' residents.

Census records for Pleasant Hills in 1960 and 1970 indicate that occupations such as accounting, engineering, law, and medicine were dominant. In 1960, the top three industries that employed residents of Pleasant Hills were durable goods manufacturing, wholesale and retail trades, and professional occupations. The residents of Pleasant Hills worked at the mills of J&L and U.S. Steel, in the corporate offices of H.K. Porter and Mine Safety Appliances, in downtown Pittsburgh law firms, and the stores at Bill Green's Shopping Center. Some residents flew the corporate jets of Koppers and Westinghouse Electric from Allegheny County Airport.

The borough's median income was $9,550 in 1960, making it possible for Pleasant Hills' residents to participate in the growing consumerism of the time. Modern labor-saving and entertainment appliances, espoused as a sign of American manufacturing superiority and purchasing power by Richard Nixon in the famous 1959 Moscow "Kitchen Debate," were among the products advertised for purchase. Local newspapers carried announcements for Ford station wagons, RCA Whirlpool double ovens, and 21-inch black-and-white Emerson televisions. Shopping was convenient, with
DiStefano's Pharmacy and Miller Hardware at Bill Green's Shopping Center in walking distance. Residents could use the shop-at-home services of Spiegel and Jewel T in addition to the deliveries by Schneider's Dairy and Duquesne Baking.

In 1951, there were about 1,000 housing units in Pleasant Hills. That number grew to 2,435 in 1970. Most homes had room in both front and back yards to play ball, sled ride, and picnic. At $19,000, the median home value in 1960 exceeded the statewide cost of $10,200. Encouraging the benefits of home ownership, Suburban Savings and Loan Company ran newspaper ads in 1961 touting family gardens.

Pleasant Hills lived up to its name. It was a quiet community with only the sounds of playing children and the weekly testing of the fire siren to break the calm. It was typical of the South Hills suburbs of Pittsburgh where the homes were newer and there was no heavy industry—much different from the working class mill towns along the Monongahela River. A saying that circulated in the West Jefferson Hills School District (of which Pleasant Hills was a part) was that the working class people of Jefferson were cookie pushers, and the professional people of Pleasant Hills were cake eaters.

There were many social opportunities for the residents of Pleasant Hills. Kiwanis, Rotary, and Lions clubs were open exclusively to men. The Pleasant Hills Volunteer Fire Company was, at that time, a male-run organization (but wives served in the ladies' auxiliary).

The Pleasant Hills Women's Club monthly meetings provided inspiration and ideas for its members. According to the February 1957 program, three women addressed different topics: Mrs. William M. Marquis, "a special teacher of retarded children," lectured on the "Trainable Retarded Child"; Mrs. Ralph C. Miller, Jr. spoke on "Pottery Making" and Mrs. Allan M. Smith talked about "Garden Therapy." Other club activities included an annual scholarship award for post-high school education, a yearly musical revue to raise money for the scholarship, and a bicycle safety rodeo presented in cooperation with the Pleasant Hills Police Department.

Missing, however, from the women's club programs is any mention of Cold War-related matters. This is significant because the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization in the Executive Office of the President believed that women, and women's clubs (but not men's clubs), had special civil defense responsibilities, including educating others, conducting home preparedness workshops, and encouraging residents to receive emergency training.

The Parent Teacher Association at the elementary school served as another social outlet. During the Cold War, the PTAs were to help children take "a matter-of-fact attitude toward the entire matter of civil defense" to keep them from either panicking or becoming neurotic over a possibility of nuclear war. The Pennsylvania State Council of Civil Defense prepared a booklet for school administrators, teachers, and PTAs listing "suggestions for use at parents' meetings" that included a list of topics related to civil defense. Possible subjects included "Federal, state, county, and local civil defense organizations," the school civil defense program, and plans for home protection.

Pleasant Hills Elementary School offered only one program related to civil defense: an address on October 16, 1958, by Congressman James G. Fulton, whose district included Pleasant Hills. His topic was "What the Atom Bomb Means to Your Child." Another program on March 19, 1959, featured a speaker from the University of Pittsburgh on the comparison of education in Russia and in the United States.

If the women's groups and the PTA were not taking their roles in civil defense seriously, local government tried to do so. Bor-
ough council, in July 1957, authorized “the completion of a full system of civil defense apparatus,” including an evaluation of the status of the civil defense sirens and the purchasing of supplies for the Pleasant Hills Civil Defense Police Force. Borough civil defense officials met with resident registered nurses to plan responses to any emergency, including nuclear attack. In addition to the nurses, the Pleasant Hills Volunteer Fire Company received first-aid training to attend to mass casualties, and all members obtained a civil defense identification card (no doubt to be used in a time of emergency).

The siren for the fire station was purchased with civil defense funds. Like everything else in civil defense, it served a double purpose: as a fire alarm and as a warning siren in case of attack or other emergency. This centralized warning signal replaced six separate sirens that had been located throughout the borough and donated to the fire company by the local steel mills where members of the company were employed. Tested once a week, residents report that they did not think of an air raid when the siren blew. Rather, the wailing sound was associated with a fire call, or just the weekly announcement of the six o’clock evening hour.

The Obie Construction Company of Pittsburgh, developer of the Hi-Tor Woods development, broke new ground (literally) by building what they claimed was the first house that included a bomb shelter. Built under the house, the shelter was meant to provide protection against nuclear attack (its main selling point) and “hurricanes, tornadoes, and other weather rampages.” The practically designed and equipped shelter had a hot water system, a Westinghouse Electric kitchen, bunk beds for four, sanitary facilities, food storage, first-aid supplies, a weather-warning device and Geiger counter, a fire extinguisher, and concrete escape tunnel. It was exhibited to the public on May 24, 1959. This display was the only known construction of an individual fallout shelter in the borough. Several community shelters were close by at the Cloverleaf Towers Apartments, the Pleasant Hills Municipal Building, the Marhoefer Apartments, and Wesley’s Bowl-a-Rama. Aside from the shelters at the Cloverleaf Towers and the Marhoefer Apartments, which would have supported their own residents, the other community shelters were limited in size and too far to be useful in the event of an attack. This being the case in most communities across the country, the federal government advised that every house have its own shelter.

While Pleasant Hills probably would not have been a specific target in a nuclear attack, its proximity to the City of Pittsburgh and the steel mills of the Monongahela River Valley, which no doubt could have been targets, put the community in a precarious place. In addition, Pennsylvania Route 51 had been designated a secondary evacuation route in a civil defense emergency, which had the potential to involve the borough in a major traffic problem. And close by at Finleyville, Elrama, and Elizabeth, the Nike missile batteries formed part of the air defense artillery ring around Pittsburgh. Until 1960, the headquarters for these units was at the South Park Military Reservation about five miles from Pleasant Hills. While these batteries provided a sense of security for the Pittsburgh area, they were simultaneously potential targets.
Preparations notwithstanding, it is unlikely Pleasant Hills would have survived a nuclear attack. A group of Pittsburgh scientists created a scenario of a 20-megaton weapon exploding as an air-burst over Oakland to study the effects of a potential nuclear attack on the city. They issued a report in 1962 evaluating the power and energy created by such a blast; the adequacy of shelters to protect people; and the damage to buildings, businesses, and people that could result. Extrapolating information from the report, the effects on Pleasant Hills would have most likely included permanent blinding of any person looking at the flash of light resulting from the bomb’s detonation; third-degree burns from the heat wave that would be produced; the possibility that houses would have been demolished and people literally lifted away by the winds created by the blast; great loss of life in the firestorm that followed; and severe radiation burns from the nuclear fallout, even for those few who had reached a shelter.

The authors of this report concluded that family fallout shelters (such as the one constructed by Obie Construction) would have been practically useless against the amount of radiation generated and the firestorm resulting from a nuclear blast. Specifically, the report questioned the value of the civil defense plans and preparations that the Federal government presented as important. The various types of in-home and community shelters that were designed, sold, and constructed were evaluated for their ability to withstand the blast and fallout from a nuclear attack and, depending upon their location to ground zero, found wanting. Beyond their proximity to the bomb’s impact, there was also the danger that the outside air vented into the shelter would become contaminated or blocked, suffocating those inside. Moreover, the scientists doubted that these shelters could store the supplies necessary for a month-long stay and still have capacity for people. The report noted it was unrealistic to expect people to reach shelter in time, and also considered impractical any plans to provide adequate medical treatment in the event of an attack. While the report does not specifically call for citizens not to build shelters, that suggestion can be inferred. If the program to build shelters was as futile as this report suggests, why did the government encourage their construction? Guy Oakes has suggested that the shelter program was a form of propaganda “based on deceit, mythmaking, and illusion.” The goal of this propaganda was to convince the public that nuclear war was survivable.

For all the talk of a Cold War, Pleasant Hills couldn’t decide how to participate. Although the borough government took appropriate civil defense measures, residents didn’t. The citizens weren’t blasé about international tensions, nor were they necessarily in denial of the dangers of an assault: one woman reported that when she was a child during the Cold War, the sound of an airplane overhead at night made her wonder if the Russians were attacking.

However, life in the borough went on. Children attended school and played football, baseball, and Wiffle ball. Residents lined Old Clairton Road for the festive Memorial Day and Pleasant Hills Day parades. Men and women married. The adults (men mostly) went to work. Families picnicked in their backyards or at Mowry Park. Many attended one of the churches located in Pleasant Hills, either the Bethany or Prince of Peace Lutheran churches, or the
Community Presbyterian Church — no Roman Catholic parishes or synagogues were located in the borough.

Until 1957, when the McClelland School was built, nearly all the borough’s school-age children attended Pleasant Hills Elementary School. Built in 1941, the two-story, red brick building housed grades one to six and had its own playground and ball field. Most of the students walked to school, and many went home for lunch. Those who lived too far away were driven, not bused. After lunch, in good weather, students played dodge ball, basketball, or swung on the monkey bars at the school’s playground.

The low-key interest in the Cold War did not mean that students were unaware of current events. In fact, the author remembers a song that circulated among the students at Pleasant Hills School: You’ll wonder where your father went if he talks about the government. Sung to the tune of the then-current Pepsodent toothpaste commercial, this rhyme was jokingly known as the Russian national anthem. On a more serious level, students regularly engaged in air raid drills, sitting quietly in school hallways, backs to the walls. After a while though, these drills simply became part of a school-day routine.

Why did the residents of Pleasant Hills seem to disregard civil defense and any overt interest in Cold War topics? There are several possible explanations. One is that while recognizing the need for civil defense, the borough’s elected leaders had more immediate local concerns to deal with. A 1959 newspaper article claimed that the borough became “the first governmental body in the area south of Pittsburgh] to back a polio shots clinic.” Four vaccination clinics were held that year. “Pleasant Hills Boro opens rodent war,” declared a South Hills Record headline in September 1959. The accompanying article claimed that this extermination plan was the “first coordinated municipal rodent control program” in the nation.

Instead, the wars in Pleasant Hills were of a different kind, for the enemies were closer to home and posed a potentially direct, daily threat to the lives of people.

It is possible, too, that the citizens simply refused to be afraid. And, it is probable that they were so caught up in the “good life” of American consumerism and upward mobility that Cold War concerns were not on their minds. This is the conclusion reached by Peter Filene in his article “Cold War Culture’ Doesn’t Say it All.” It’s his view that for non-elite Americans — the elite being government officials and social scientists — economics, work, and family concerns were more important. According to his analysis, “the Cold War was fought primarily at an elite level. It pervaded and shaped the experience of ordinary Americans far less than historians would have us believe.”

Derek Leebaert, author of The Fifty-Year Wound: the True Price of America’s Cold War, agrees with this assessment. “The Cold War was not preoccupying most Americans... People went about their business.”

This explanation perhaps best explains why the people of Pleasant Hills did not take the Cold War and civil defense seriously. One resident stated that she felt like she was living in paradise in those days because the events of the Cold War seemed so far away. The truly everyday life of the community (the new, the material) was more important than government concerns about communism and nuclear war, fallout shelters and air raid drills. The “business” of the residents of Pleasant Hills was expressed in the inspirational, creative, and family-related programs of the PTA and the women’s and men’s clubs, in work, sports, civic activities, and worship. The people of Pleasant Hills were more in touch with the optimism, prosperity, family, and consumer culture of the period. This focus on popular, material culture suggests that life in Pleasant Hills was exemplary of post-war America. Indeed, this prosperity was the Cold War in Pleasant Hills.

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4 Members of various history classes at SUNY Oswego have conducted several oral history projects with individuals who lived during the Cold War: Cold War and Testimonies, The Chilling Effects of the Cold War, Fear and the Cold War, Cold War Collaboration, and Cold War: A Bridge between Fronts. http://www.oswego.edu 22 January 2005.


8 Fred I. Greenstein and Raymond E. Wolfinger list the three main hypotheses to explain suburban Republican Party registration: Republicans moved from the cities to the suburbs; moving to the suburbs was followed by a switch to the Republican Party; moving to the suburbs is part of a change of attitudes including becoming Republicans. Fred I. Greenstein and Raymond E. Wolfinger, “The Suburbs and Shifting Party Loyalties,” Public Opinion Quarterly, 22, no. 4 (Winter 1958-1959): 473-474.

9 Beachler, “Pleasant Hills Borough.”

10 Personal recollection of the author.


12 Ibid. p. 76.


15 South Hills Record (Mt. Oliver) 18 March 1959.

16 South Hills Record (Mt. Oliver) 13 July 1957.


22 A letter to the editor in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on October 2, 1962 expressed the view that “in the atomic age civilian defense is an illusion.”


24 Member of the West Jefferson Hills Historical Society, interview by author, 26 March 2003.

25 Author’s personal recollection.

26 South Hills Record (Mt. Oliver) 17 June 1959.

27 South Hills Record (Mt. Oliver) 23 September 1959.

28 Peter Filene, “‘Cold War Culture’ Doesn’t Say it All,” in Rethinking Cold War Culture (Minneapolis, MN., Paradigm Press, 1988): 156-174.

29 Ibid., 157.

30 Derek Leebaert, The Fifty-Year Wound, 140.

31 Member, West Jefferson Hills Historical Society, 26 March 2003.