

Slatington in the World Wars: The 1917 and 1941 High School Classes

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Classes of 1917 and 1941: introduction

This project comparing the experiences of the Slatington High School classes of 1917 and 1941 grew out of two other research efforts on which I am presently working: a study of the impact of World War I in Slatington, and a study of Thanksgiving football games between Slatington and Palmerton from 1935 to 1974.

While looking at the 1941 Palmerton High School yearbook for information on the Palmerton football team and that year's Thanksgiving football game, it occurred to me that probably a high proportion of that class of 135 men and women had seen military action during World War 2.

I decided to investigate further by looking at the 1941 Slatington High School class. That's the year that my dad graduated, and I knew that a lot of his friends and acquaintances had served in the war. The Slatington 1941 class consisted of 51 men and 62 women (113 total).

I then thought to compare the Slatington class of 1941 with the class of 1917, since those were both classes graduating just as the United States was entering a war. That seemed to be a straight-forward research task.

In terms of demographics, I wanted to examine the overall number of students in both classes and how the student characteristics fit with Slatington's overall population. While I began this project with the intent to focus on the military experiences of the men and women in these two classes, I also wanted to look at other demographic details such as the number of marriages, the types of occupations, the number of children, life expectancy, and geographical mobility. My intent was to answer the question, what could the data tell us about the classes of 1917 and 1941, in Slatington? What changed or remained the same over twenty-five years?

And so, I have broken down my comparison of the two classes into these categories.

- overall numbers
- marriages
- children
- life expectancy
- mobility
- military service

I should note that in many cases the data on the men and women in the classes is incomplete, especially with regard to occupations and even something as important as marriages. Obituaries and other online sources and databases often did not provide detailed information.

Marc, one of my colleagues, made some important comments about the project.

I like the data analysis and comparison, but I'm always a sucker for the personal stories and connections.

Can you see if any of the 1917 soldiers, came back home, started a family, and then their kids (or even nephews) graduated in 1941 and went on to serve too?

Can you tease out any other family connections between 1917 and 1941?

Have you looked to see if there were any high school reunions that were mentioned in the local press? That might shed some light on what happened to the graduates.

Is there a way to tell who came back home and who moved away from both of those graduating classes?

Unfortunately, what you won't really find in this analysis are any personal stories. Most of the men and women from both the 1917 and 1941 classes are already deceased. Records and personal histories evaporate quite quickly on a local level. Families forget; people forget; a town forgets.

What's kind of amazing about history, and especially local and/or family history, is how quickly the actors, in this case the 1917 and 1941 graduates, disappear into the mists of time. Knowledge about them becomes more and more distant and blurry as they die and then their families die. Before long facts, details, information or stories are pretty much gone within a generation or so. Very occasionally some letters, perhaps a newspaper clipping or a photograph, maybe even a diary linger, but in most cases, it's all just thrown out in the trash.

Furthermore, trying to track down information about the military experiences of the men and women who served in World War 1 (class of 1917) and World War 2 (class of 1941), was also problematic. First there is the issue of documentary sources. The 1973 fire at the National Personnel Record Center in St. Louis destroyed the personnel records of just about everyone who served in the army during the two world wars. Second, the state of Pennsylvania pension and service records that are publicly available are far more complete and informative for veterans of World War I than for those of World War II. ([See blank examples and information about Pennsylvania's compensation applications.](#)) Finally, those who participated in the war, for example, my dad and my uncles in World War 2, never really spoke about their experiences except for an occasional offhand comment every once in a while. I also get the impression that my grandfather never spoke at all about his World War 1 experiences. If he did, neither I nor any of my cousins ever heard of those experiences. No one recorded any of that.

So, on one hand, the members of the classes of 1917 and 1941 who are now part of the past never really spoke about being part of that past because they didn't really understand that they were part of history. They were just living their lives. And so many of the details about their roles in history, like the kind of questions that Marc asks, are simply unanswerable. The graduates of Slatington High School in 1917 and 1941 generally didn't tell anyone anything, or the people that they did tell something to are also dead or have forgotten what they were told.

So, what's left are the legal documents, the death certificates, the marriage licenses, the pension applications, the obituaries, the occasional newspaper mentions. It is with that documentary evidence that we can try to understand the experiences of these two high school classes on the eve of a world war. That's only a total of about 150 people.

History at the micro level (the Slatington level, and all the small towns like Slatington) is all about erasure. The participants get erased from the historical record pretty quickly, and specific details about those participants often disappear even before the participants themselves! But we can still piece together and discover some important generational experiences and some bits and pieces about their individual lives.

Classes of 1917 and 1941: numbers

Slatington High School (SHS) held its 1917 graduation in the old Opera House on Thursday, 26 June 1917 at 8 PM. The opera house, later renamed the Arcadia Theater, was located on the southwest corner of Middle Alley and East Church Street. It burned down on 22 March 1969.

There were 29 graduates in 1917 That was the largest graduating class since the high school opened in 1897. (For complete information on the sizes of all the graduating classes of the high school, see www.ctevans.net/Nvcc/HIS218/Documents/Slatgrad.html.)

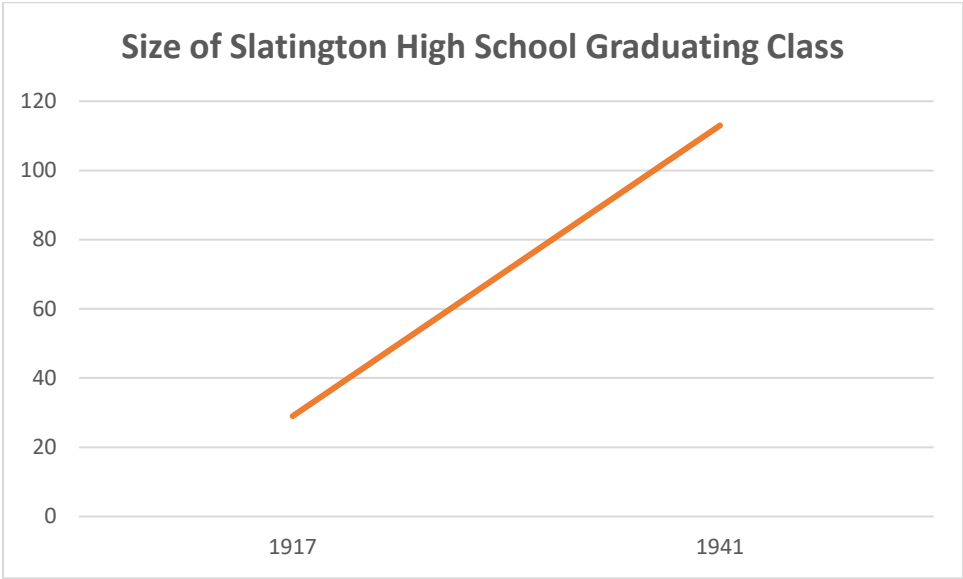
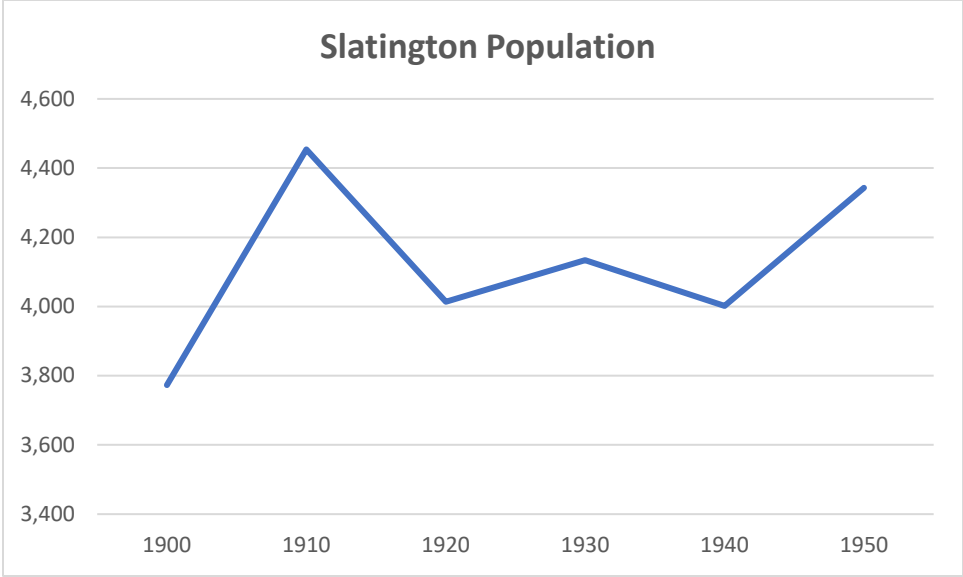
This growth in the high school graduating class by 1917 coincided with a rising population in Slatington itself, which had reached a recorded census population of 4,454 in 1910.

Slatington High School held its 1941 graduation in the old Smith Hall on Thursday, 26 June 1941 at 8:15 PM. Smith Hall was located where the parking lot for the George Dillard Manor is today on Kuntz Street. The gymnasium opened in 1937 and was demolished in 1982.

There were 113 graduates in 1941. That was the second largest graduating class since the high school had opened in 1897; the largest class to that date was in 1938 with 115 graduates.

Slatington's population had decreased to 4,002 in 1940 from a high of 4,454 in 1910, yet the overall school enrollment and size of the graduating class had steadily increased since 1910. Between 1917 and 1941, the size of the graduating class had increased fourfold.

By 1941, the growing size of the high school graduating class was a good indication of how quickly graduating from high school had become a norm, even if a student did not have any plans to attend college in the future.



Classes of 1917 and 1941: some more numbers

There were 15 men and 14 women in the 1917 class. The 1910 census recorded a population of 4,454 in the town, pretty evenly divided between male / female (2,265 / 2,178), and that borough gender breakdown was reflected in the high school class gender division.

The 1941 class comprised 51 men and 62 women. I am not sure about the gender breakdown of Slatington in the 1940 census. But it is interesting to me that by this point in time, women outnumbered men in the high school in Slatington.

44 students had entered high school in the fall of 1913, which means that 66% ended up graduating in 1917. That's a fair retention rate, and it indicates that many of the students who were in high school had some sort of post-high school educational plans, making it important to stay in school and graduate. That is borne out by the occupational data which we'll look at shortly.

According to the 1938 yearbook, the freshman class, the future class of 1941, numbered 146 students. That means that 113/146 or about 77% ended up graduating in the spring of 1941, marking an improvement in secondary school retention since 1917.

I tried to get a rough idea of the proportion of the local population that attended the high school. The 1910 census for Slatington recorded a total of 116 boys for ages 10, 11 and 12 which gives a total of 116 boys, but there would also have been additional boys available to attend the high school from the surrounding areas, such as Washington and Lynn townships to the south and west of Slatington, and from Walnutport and Lehigh township to the east. So, maybe, at the very best, 15-25% of the local age cohort went to high school in the late 1910s? That's not all that surprising.

Let's look at a few statistics about high school enrollment in the United States in the 1910s, gathered by Claudia Goldin, and see how Slatington fits in.

High school graduation rates were not very high in 1917. Goldin states that in the Middle Atlantic region, the number of high school graduates per the number of seventeen-year-olds was perhaps about 15%. (Goldin, "America's Graduation from High School, Figure 2, page 359) Slatington was probably roughly in agreement with that figure. Goldin, in another instance, showed that in 1917 there were 14.48% graduates as a percentage of all 17-year-olds in the entire country (TABLE Bc258-264 Public and private high school graduates, by sex and as a percentage of all 17-year-olds: 1870-1997) Again, that pretty much agrees with Slatington's statistics in 1917. Remember that, in general, by 1917 high school enrollment in the United States was still not very high.

Unlike the case for the class of 1917, I do not have detailed census data for Slatington in 1940, and so it is a bit difficult to get a rough idea of the proportion of the local population that attended high school. But, in general, in 1940-1941, the rate of graduates as a percentage of all 17-year-olds in the country stood at 50.81%, which was quite a bit higher than the 1917 rate of about 15%. (TABLE Bc258–264 Public and private high school graduates, by sex and as a percentage of all 17-year-olds: 1870–1997)

But what about women attending high schools in 1917? Goldin states that generally “the female graduation rate was higher than that for males ... A high school education for a young woman meant entree to office jobs.” (Goldin, “America’s Graduation from High School, Figure 4, page 361) We don’t have much data to support exactly how high the female graduation rate was in Slatington in 1917, but there were more female graduates than male graduates in the class.

Matthew Sobek notes that in 1940, the white male – after all Slatington was entirely white in this time frame - expected completion rate for high school was 28.2%, while for white women, it was 32.8%. (TABLE Bc806–813 High school noncompletion rate, by sex, nativity, and race: 1940–1971)

I did not investigate how many of the Slatington students were born outside the U.S.- my guess would be few, if any, in both the 1917 and 1941 classes. I also did not check how many Slatington students were first generation students. The chances were a bit higher for first generation students to have been part of the 1917 high school class because immigrants were still coming to Slatington through the 1890s and early 1900s. There would have been few, if any, first generation students in the class of 1941 since immigration to Slatington had practically stopped after World War I. (See, my data on the Percentage of Slatington’s Population Born in PA, <https://www.ctevans.net/Nvcc/HIS218/Documents/Slatpoppa.html>)

What was the point of completing high school? Goldin notes that “in the 1910s about 50 percent of all public high-school graduates said they intended to continue to college or another institution of higher learning without delay.” (Goldin, “America’s Graduation from High School, page 350) In the Slatington case, at a minimum, we know that those graduates who went on to become teachers all went to a college, which was the case for 8 of the 29 graduates, and 2 or 3 others also went to college. That means that at least 11 of 29 (38%) went on to college.

But, in time, that expectation of going on to college after high school changed. Goldin notes that the flood of students who entered high school by 1930 to 1940 often sought an education that would lead directly to employment, not college. (Goldin, “America’s

Graduation from High School, page 3502). That will be apparent when we look more directly at the occupations of Slatington's 1941 class.

Finally, let me add one cautionary note that for this analysis of Slatington's 1917 class, we are dealing with a very small statistical sample.

Classes of 1917 and 1941: life expectancy

Of the 1917 cohort of 29 (born about 1900), the average age (mean) reached was 74 with the median age of 77.

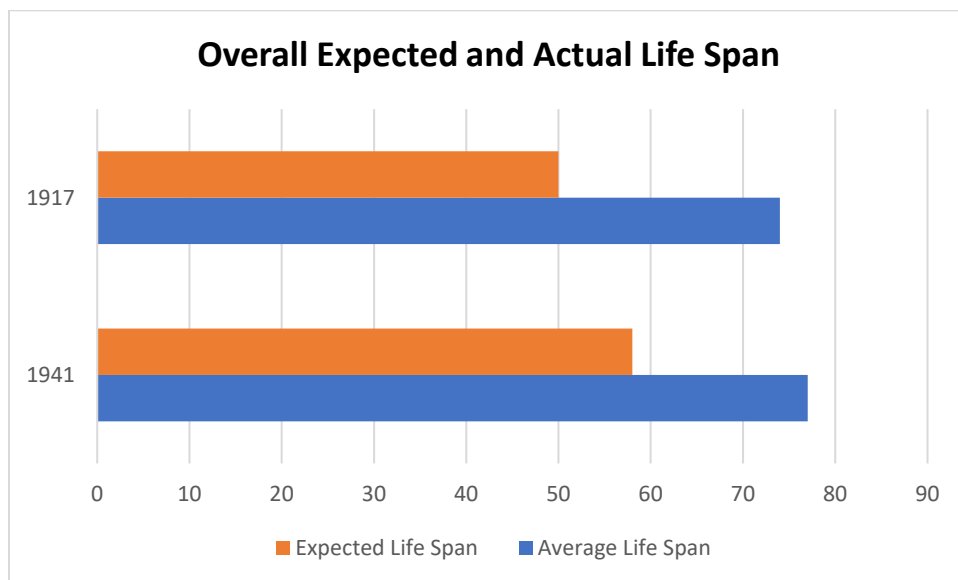
Michael Haines notes that the life expectancy (average) for a white person born in 1900 was 49.6 (TABLE Ab644–655 Expectation of life at birth, by sex and race: 1850–1998). The longer life expectancy for these 1917 high school graduates was probably due to socio-economic differences, i.e., meaning they had better jobs. [Note: It is very important to note that the difference is also partly due to the fact that I have a small statistical sample that {1} does not include those from the 1900 cohort who had died before 1917 and (2) does not include those from the 1900 cohort who did not attend high school.]

Of the 1941 cohort of 113 (born about 1923), the average age (mean) reached was 77.3 with the median age of 79.

Michael Haines notes that the life expectancy for a white person born in 1923 was 58.3 (TABLE Ab644–655 Expectation of life at birth, by sex and race: 1850–1998). The Slatington residents lived much longer than expected by average.

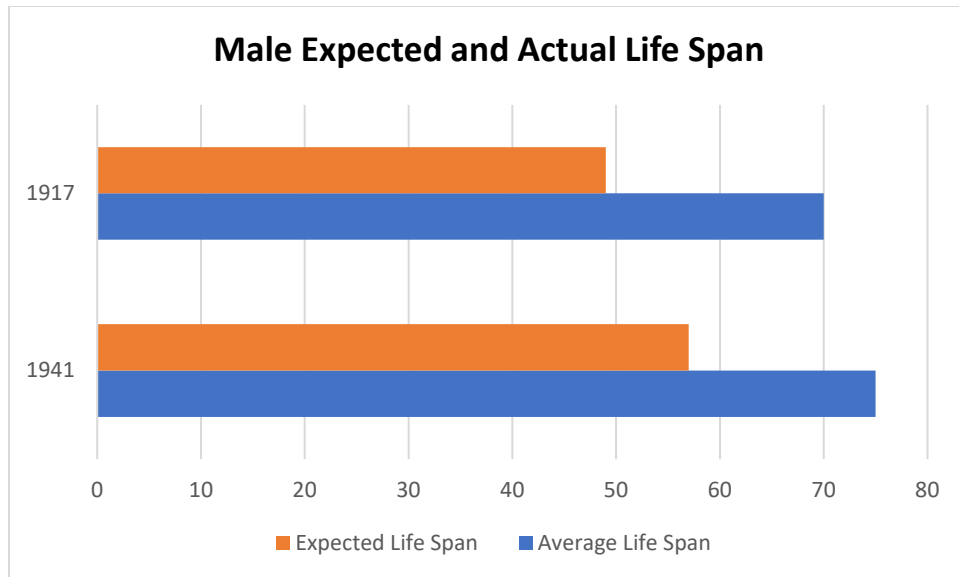
Note that in both cases the Slatington graduates exceeded national averages.

These are pretty extraordinary numbers. For a comparison, the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that the life expectancy for someone born in 2000 is 76.9 years (male - 74.8, female - 79.1). That's less than the average age reached by the class of 1941, which was 77.3.



For men of the 1917 class, the mean (average) was 69.6 with a median age of 74. The life expectancy for men at that time was only 48.5 (TABLE Ab644–655 Expectation of life at birth, by sex and race: 1850–1998).

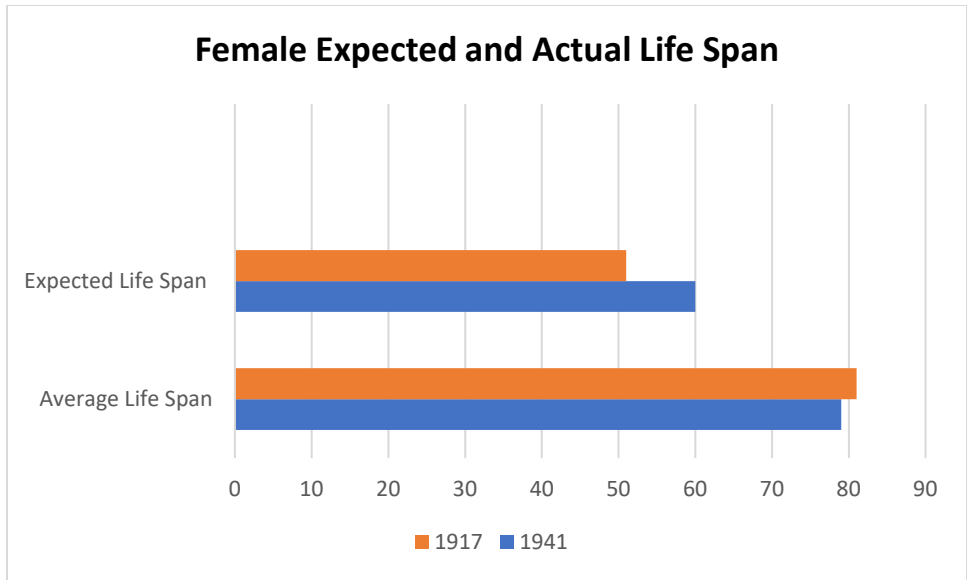
For men of the 1941 class, the mean (average) was 75 with a median age of 79. According to that same table, the average life expectancy for a male born in 1923 was 57.1.



For women of the 1917 class, the mean (average) was 81 with a median age of 88. These women sure lived a long time! The life expectancy for women at that time was only 50.7 (TABLE Ab644–655 Expectation of life at birth, by sex and race: 1850–1998).

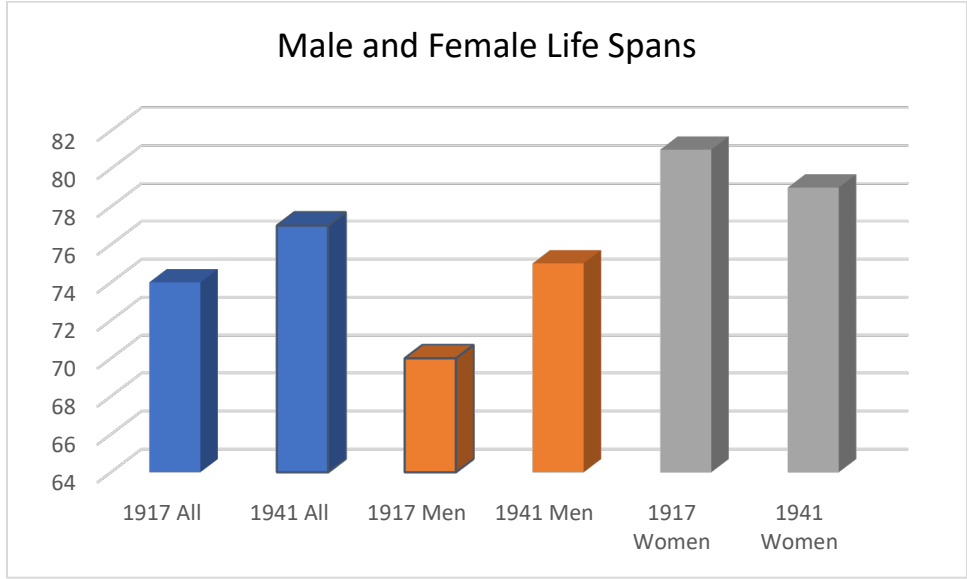
For women of the 1941 class, the mean (average) was 79 with a median age of 79. These women also lived a long time, but shorter than the 1917 women. According to that same table, the average for a female born in 1923 was 59.6.

In all cases the average lifespan of women exceeded that of men.



Interestingly, in the case of someone who was born in 1900 (the class of 1917) and made it to age 40 (1940), a white male could be expected to live another 26.9 years while a white female - another 28.2 years (TABLE Ab656–703 Expectation of life at specified ages, by sex and race: 1850–1998).

In the case of someone who was born in 1921 (That’s close enough to 1923 for those in the class of 1941.) and made it to age 40 (1961), a white male could be expected to live another 29.6 years while a white female - another 30.6 years (TABLE Ab656–703 Expectation of life at specified ages, by sex and race: 1850–1998).



Classes of 1917 and 1941: marriages

How many in these two classes married?

Of the 29 graduates in the 1917 class, 26 got married. (2 women and 1 man did not get married.) That seemed like a pretty high percentage of 90% who married.

Of the 113 graduates in the 1941 class, 105 got married (3 women and 5 men did not get married.). That's also seemed like a pretty high percentage of 93% who married. Overall, in 1941, 46/51 (90%) of the men married while 59/62 (95%) of the women married.

On a national level, 4.1% of women and 4.8% of men in the 1940-1944 birth cohort had never been married as of 2021. Now that does not exactly line up with those in the 1917 and 1941 classes, but it is close, and it does give some semblance of a comparison that the Slatington marriage figures were close to the national average. (Brittany King, When and How Often People Marry Changes by Birth Cohort, 31 August 2022

<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/08/does-marrying-younger-mean-marrying-more-often.html>)

Another way of calculating marriage rates is to look at the marriage rate per 1,000 population. (Michael R. Haines, TABLE Ae507–513 Marriage and divorce rates: 1920–1995).

1920 marriage rate per 1,000 population – 12.0

1940 – 12.1

1950 – 11.1

That doesn't tell me much other than the fact that the marriage rate really didn't change much between 1920 and 1950.

But let's look at the marriage rate per 1,000 unmarried females

1920 - 92

1940 - 82.8

1950 - 90.2

In this case, the data shows that the Slatington marriage rate was a bit higher than the national average.

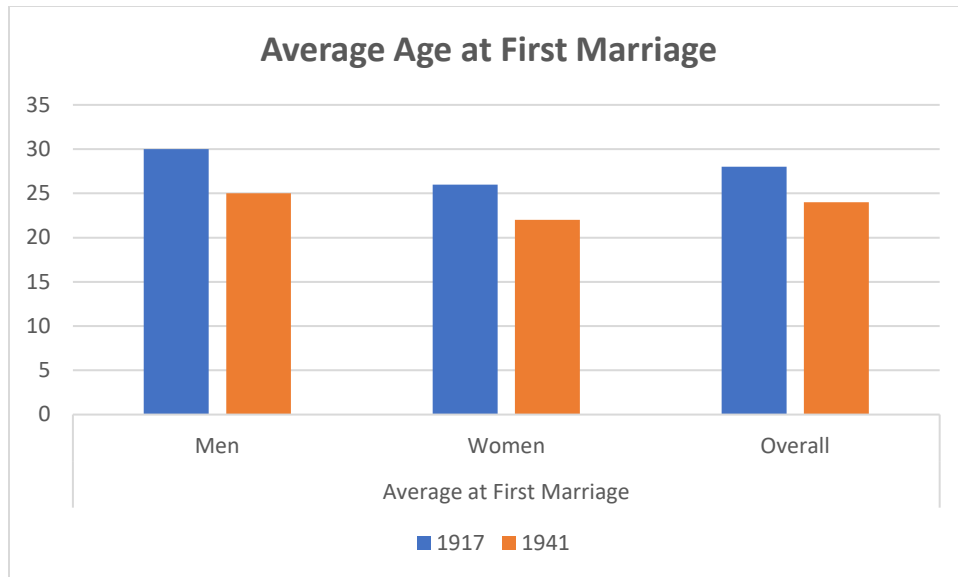
What about the average age when married?

For the 1917 cohort, the average age at marriage was 28 (about ten years after high school graduation) with the median age at 25. The men's average age was a bit older at 30 with the median age at 28. While the woman's average age was 26, a few years younger than the men, with the median age at 23.5.

For the 1941 cohort, the average age at marriage was 23.75 (almost six years after high school graduation) with the median age at 22. The men's average age was 25.5 with

the median age at 25. While the woman's average age was 22.5 with the median age at 22.

By 1941, both men and women were getting married earlier than their counterparts from 1917. By 1941, while some went on to college, far more went right into the workforce and thus were ready for marriage at an earlier age. It's also possible that the war impelled some to get married more quickly, before entering military service.

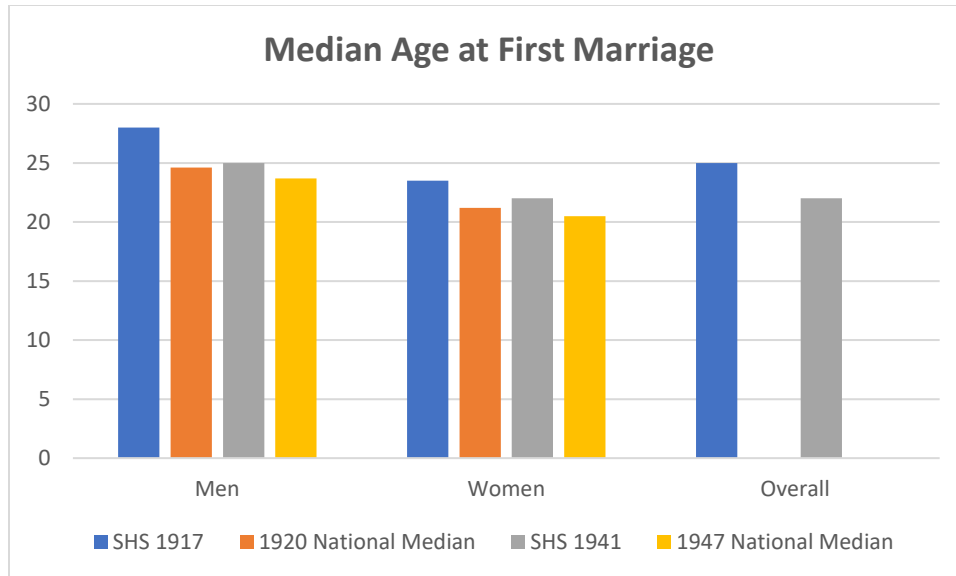


To compare with national data, we need to look at data for the median age at first marriage.

Statistics compiled by Catherine Fitch and Michael Haines show that in the United States overall in 1920 the median male age at first marriage was 24.6 (In the case of the Slatington 1917 class, it was 28.) and for females it was 21.2 (In 1917 Slatington, it was 23.5.). The graduates in Slatington married later than average, and that may have been a result of their socio-economic class and the fact that quite a few went on to college.

Fitch and Haines also show that the 1947 median male age at first marriage was 23.7 (In the case of the Slatington 1941 class, it was 25.) and for females it was 20.5 (In 1941 Slatington, it was 22.). (TABLE Ae481–488 Median age at first marriage, by sex and race: 1850–1999) In this case, these marriage ages were directly affected by the war.

In sum, in both 1917 and 1941 Slatington students married just a bit later than the national average.



Here is some additional information about marriage.

For the 1917 class, it appears that only 2 of the 26 (8%) who were married, married more than once. As far as I can tell for the 1941 class, at least 12 of the 105 (11%) who married, married more than once. I don't have national divorce rate data.

For the 1940-44 cohort (not exactly the same as the 1917 or 1941 classes), 28.6% of women married twice or more, while 34.1% of men married twice or more. (Brittany King, When and How Often People Marry Changes by Birth Cohort, 31 August 2022 <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/08/does-marrying-younger-mean-marrying-more-often.html>)

For the 1917 class, of the 26 who married, 10 married in Slatington, 1 in nearby Emerald, and 6 in Allentown (The county seat that was 16 miles away.). That means that 17 of the 26 (65%) who married did so locally.

For the 1941 class, I have only partial information about where these men and women married. Of the 105 who married, 42 married in Slatington, 10 in Allentown, 24 in nearby communities (Emerald, Slatedale, Palmerton, Walnutport, etc.). That means that 76 of the 105 (72%) who married did so locally.

In both cases, marriage remained pretty much a local affair.

For the 1917 class, only one married out of state.

For the 1941 class, there were 4 who married in Elkton, MD (the so-called marriage capital of the US), and there were 12 who married outside of Pennsylvania. (16/105 or 15%)

That was a pretty significant increase, showing that by the 1940s, there was a bit more mobility for the graduates in Slatington.

Classes of 1917 and 1941: children

Of the 1917 cohort, 22 of the 26 who married had children (85%), with the number of children in a family ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 4 with an average of 1.9.

Of the 1941 cohort, 90 of the 105 who married had children (86%), with the number of children ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 7 with an average of 2.43 (median = 2).

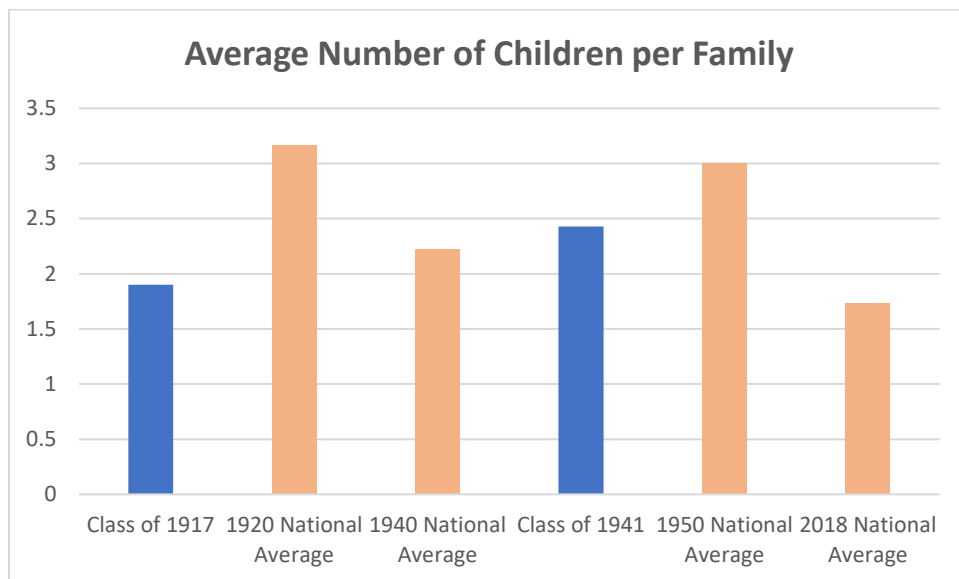
By 1941, family size had increased a bit since 1917. But in both cases, there was a significant proportion of married couples that did not have children.

Let's fit the 1917 and 1941 Slatington averages into the larger national picture.

Overall, in the United States in 1920, the average number of children per family was 3.17, but by 1940 (as a result of the Great Depression) it had fallen to 2.22.

Overall, in the United States in 1940, the average number of children per family was 2.22, but by 1950 it had risen to 3. By 1960, at the height of the baby boom, it was 3.62 children per family. And, to look even further, by 2018 the average had fallen to 1.73. (Average Number of Children Per U.S. Family (Historic))

So, in Slatington, in this small sample size, the average number of children per family was a bit under the national average for the class of 1917. This might be partly a result of the larger proportion of college graduates in the sample. The class of 1941 reflects the increasing family size that would peak in 1950.



Classes of 1917 and 1941: mobility

Of the class of 1917, 22/29 (76%) were born in Slatington. The others were born in nearby locales, just a few miles away, such as Neffs aka Newside, Emerald and Friedens.

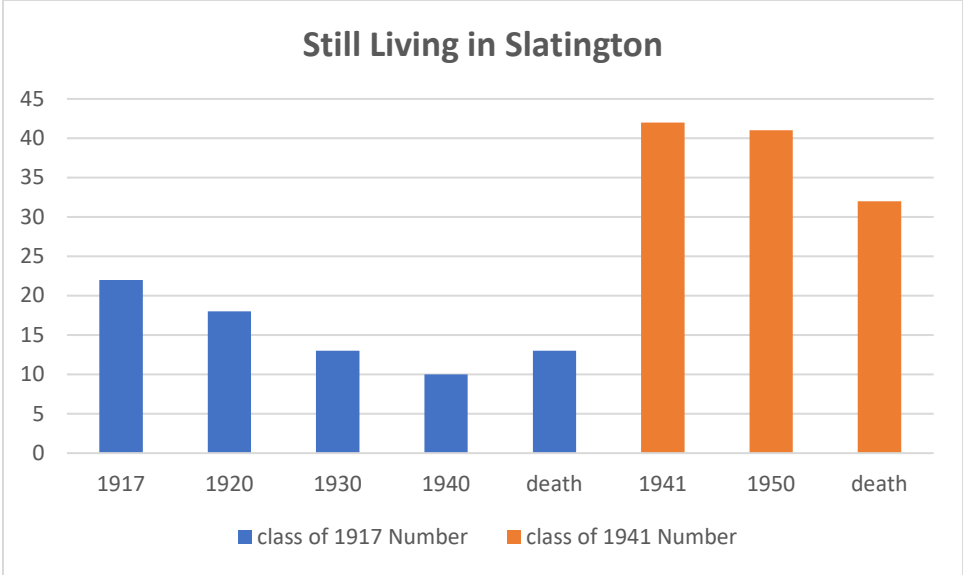
- At the 1920 census, 18 (62%) were still living in Slatington.
- At the 1930 census, thirteen years after graduation, 13 (44%) were still living in Slatington.
- And at the 1940 census, 10 (34%) were still living in town.
- 13/29 (45%) were recorded as living in Slatington, as a last residence, when they died.

Of the class of 1941, 42/113 (37%) were born in Slatington. The others were born in nearby locales, just a few miles away, such as Neffs aka Newside, Emerald, Friedens and Palmerton. Already by 1941, as population growth had slowed in Slatington itself, the high school was drawing students from a growing population in the area around Slatington proper.

- At the 1950 census, ten years after graduation, 41 (36%) were still living in town.
- 32/113 (28%) were recorded as living in Slatington, as a last residence, when they died.

There was quite a bit more mobility for the 113 graduates of the class of 1941 as they moved out of Slatington at a rate slightly more quickly compared to the 29 graduates in 1917. But in both cases, most students did not remain long in town. In about ten years after graduation, only 35-45% were living in Slatington.

There's a caveat to consider, that while graduates may not have been in Slatington, they might have remained in the immediate area. (I just do not have enough data on where exactly people were living.). If we remember the marriage data discussed above, high percentages, circa 70%, married in the immediate area.



Classes of 1917 and 1941: occupations

It was rather challenging to determine the occupations of the men and women of these two high school classes. Mostly I looked at obituaries to try and determine the occupations. Of course, sometimes there was no information about occupations, and some had many occupations during their lives.

Of the 14 women in the 1917 class, I could find these occupations: 4 teachers, 2 secretaries, and 2 other jobs. There were six women for whom I could not determine an occupation or if they were housewives only. Thus, at least 8/14 (57%) were working women.

Of the 15 men in the 1917 class, I could find these occupations: 4 teachers, 2 general store workers, 2 employed by Pennsylvania Power & Light (PPL), 1 school administrator, 1 plumber, 1 funeral director, 1 railroad freight agent, 1 bookkeeper, 1 doctor and 1 worker at the Trojan Powder Co. That means that all 15 men in the 1917 class were working at one time or another.

Clearly, these 29 graduates went into occupations much different from the general population of the time, who largely ended up in jobs such as a “slater” in the local slate quarrying industry, laborer at the nearby Bethlehem Steel plant in Bethlehem, PA or the New Jersey Zinc Company in Palmerton, PA, or worker in one of the local silk or sewing mills.

Also, as a minimum, those who became teachers (8/29 = 28%) did attend college.

By 1920, the workforce in America was undergoing a huge transformation as industrial production continued to accelerate. In particular, the role of women in the workforce was changing. In 1910 about 20 percent of all workers were women, but by 1940 it was almost 25%. While that may seem like a small increase, women were no longer individual seamstresses or dressmakers as skilled sewing declined in favor of work in apparel factories and silk mills. (“Women’s Occupations through Seven Decades by Janet Hooks, page 32)

Of the 62 women in the 1941 class, I’ve been able to identify 39 occupations (39/62 = 63%) including:

sewing machine operator – 9

secretary – 7

sales or market clerk – 6

nurse (and nurse’s aide) – 5

bookkeeper – 2

bank teller – 2

beautician – 1

cafeteria mgr. – 1
candy maker – 1
domestic worker – 1
machine operator – 1
rug weaver – 1
stenographer – 1
volunteer -1

There are a couple of interesting notes about the women's occupations. First was the large number (23/62) of women for whom I could not find a defined occupation. So, many of the 1941 graduates were still primarily housewives. Second, of those women who worked, "traditional" jobs were most common, such as sewing machine operator, secretary, sales or market clerk. These jobs did not require a higher education (teaching and nursing did), It was striking that none that I could discover from the class of 1941 became teachers.

Of the 51 men in the class, I've been able to identify 49 occupations (almost 100%) including:

engineer – 6
Pennsylvania Power & Light (PPL) worker – 5
trucking – 3
farmer – 3
unknown – 3
Bethlehem Steel worker – 2
carpenter – 2
contractor – 2
maintenance – 2
teacher – 2
store owner – 2
agriculture – 1 (extension agent)
blacksmith – 1
bookkeeper – 1
chemist – 1
express agent – 1
insurance agent – 1
mechanic – 1
milk delivery – 1
pattern maker – 1 (clothing)
postmaster – 1
pilot -1
printer – 1
retail store – 1

steward – 1

Air Products worker – 1

Trojan Powder worker – 1

Mack Trucks worker – 1

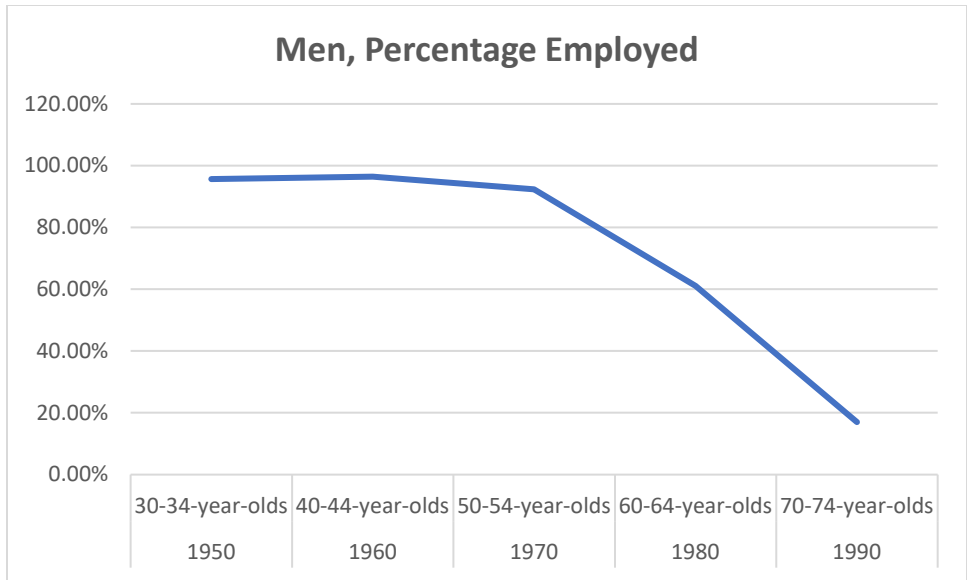
Two things are striking to me about the men's occupations. First, the variety of the jobs was quite broad, ranging from those requiring a higher education (chemist, teacher, engineer) to those identified as skilled labor (carpenter, mechanic, pilot) to those in factory work (Bethlehem Steel, Mack Trucks). The second striking feature was the general absence of men involved in typical factory work (There were only five.), and no one was noted as working at the New Jersey Zinc works in nearby Palmerton, PA.

I wondered how many of these men and women had graduated from a college or university? In general, in the United States in 1945 about 10% of the age 18-24 cohort attended college, as compared to about 5% in 1921 (Enrollment in institutions of higher education, by sex, enrollment status, and type of institution 1869–19951 Pdf-17A) But looking at the occupations of the men and women from the 1941 class, and assuming that some jobs like teacher, engineer or nurse required a higher degree, we have 9 + 5 at least 14/113 (12%) who attended college which roughly fits with the national average. In terms of percentages, that's far smaller than the figure for the class of 1917, which was 28% who attended college. Also, if I was able to look closer, I'd most likely find that many of those who did attend college attended after the war, not right out of high school.

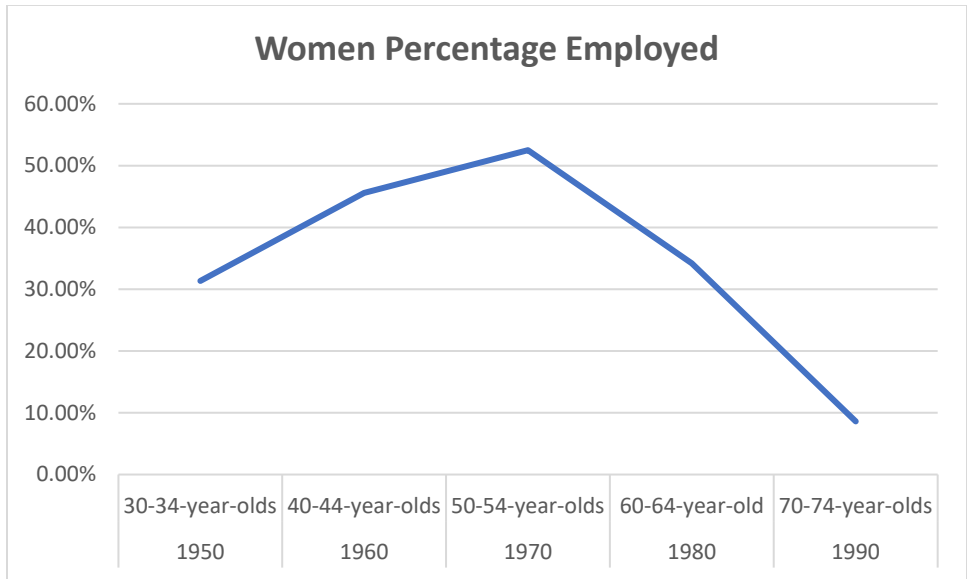
Matthew Sobek compiled some general statistics on labor force participation in the US for someone born between 1920 and 1925 (roughly Slatington's class of 1941). (TABLE Ba391–403 Male labor force participation rate, by age: 1850–1990 and TABLE Ba404–416 Female labor force participation rate, by age: 1860–1990₁ [Census estimates])

This data shows that a high proportion of men were still working into their 60s. That number working would have also been diminished by the men who died before reaching their 60s. The data for women shows that a rather small percentage were working in their 30s (Many would have been housewives dealing with a family.), but as their children aged up, more women went into the workforce, reaching a peak in their early 50s, before declining when women reached their 60s. The low employment rate of women in their 30s also goes back to the stereotyped image of the husband as bread winner and the stay-at-home wife managing the house and the family of the 1950s.

For men,
in 1950, 30-34-year-olds = 95.66% were working
in 1960, 40-44-year-olds = 96.45% were working
in 1970, 50-54-year-olds = 92.3% were working
in 1980, 60-64-year-olds = 61.1% were working
in 1990, 70-74-year-olds = 17% were still working



For women,
 in 1950 30-34-year-olds = 31.36% were working
 in 1960 40-44-year-olds = 45.6% were working
 in 1970 50-54-year-olds = 52.5% were working
 in 1980 60-64-year-olds = 34.2% were working
 in 1990 70-74-year-olds = 8.6% were still working



Classes of 1917 and 1941: military service

This was really the starting point for my research as I was interested to see how the men from the class of 1917 (start of World War I) and the class of 1941 (start of World War II) fared in military service.

In 1917 the men had no idea what a modern war involved, or how terrible it could be. It had been fifty years since the Civil War, and aside from the brief Spanish-American conflict or the punitive expedition carried out in Mexico in 1916-1917, there had been no widespread exposure to war for the citizens of the United States for a rather long time. The men who fought in World War I suffered mass casualties on a large scale and also witnessed the introduction of deadly weapons such as the machine gun, grenades, poison gas, airplanes and tanks.

For the men in 1941, less than a generation removed from the First World War, they had a much clearer idea of the destructiveness of modern war. They had read and watched movies about the war and learned first-hand from relatives and acquaintances of the realities of World War I.

Five men from the class of 1917 served in a Student Army Training Corps (SATC) detachment at a Pennsylvania college in the fall of 1918. The SATC was an early form of what later would become the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) intended to train future military officers while they were in college. One man from the class of 1917 served as an officer in World War 2. The men who graduated from Slatington High School in 1917 were just a bit too young to have served in France. The draft, as initially set up in 1917, targeted men between the ages of 21 and 31. The revised draft registration of September 1918 lowered the age to 18, and that's how these five men ended up in SATC units, but they did not go to France.

Of the 51 men in Slatington's class of 1941, 39 (76%) served in World War II and 2 (4%) served during the Korean War. This was a combination of men who enlisted and who were drafted. At this time, I do not have further details for the men who served about the specifics of their military service.

I also did not find any information on women who might have served as nurses during the Second World War. I also was not yet able to find any information on how many men served in the different branches of the military, for example, the navy or marines.



N. HAMM

1941 Slatington High School yearbook photo

One man from the class of 1941 (Nevin Irwin Hamm, 1923-1945) was killed while serving in Europe. Born in Lynnport, a few miles west of Slatington, he entered service in September 1944. In February 1945 he shipped overseas and joined the 101st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized), 101st Cavalry Regiment. On 15 April 1945, near Buchheim in Southern Germany he was killed in a friendly-fire incident. He was twenty-one years old and was buried in the Lorraine American Cemetery and Memorial, Saint-Avold, France. He was survived by his parents, three brothers and a sister.



Photo credit: https://images.findagrave.com/photos/2024/66/56655896_9d781f4f-7e22-4162-a390-a1cf6dd51b47.jpeg

Classes of 1917 and 1941: conclusions

Comparing these two classes is actually the story of comparing two completely different classes for several reasons besides the different sizes of the classes.

- The 1941 high school class was far larger than the 1917 class.
- The 1941 class was far more representative of all socio-economic strata in Slatington than the 1917 class.
- The 1941 class included students from the areas to the west and east of Slatington to a greater extent than the 1917 class. Slatington High School was more of a regional high school by 1941 than it had been in 1917.
- The wartime impact on the two classes was much different as none of the class of 1917 served overseas. Quite a few of the men in the 1941 class were directly involved in World War II.

Let's look at some of my overall conclusions.

I undertook this comparison of the two high school classes because I was interested in the military experiences of the students who were graduating at the onset of a world war. The high school class of 1917 had generally minimal contact with the First World War. The age for the draft was only lowered to eighteen in September 1918, so most of the students were not eligible for the draft until that date. It turned out that the only 1917 students with any military experiences were those who were in college as part of the SATC. For the class of 1941 it was a much different story that I'd like to investigate further. I know that my dad and a lot of my friends' dads saw military service in World War 2. We've seen above that 39/51 of the men in the class of 1941 were in the military. One man from the class of 1941, Nevin Hamm, was killed in Germany in 1945.

I was also interested in a general statistical comparison of the two classes to see how much had changed in twenty-five years (about a generation).

First, the **size of the graduating class** increased quite a bit from 1917 to 1941 even though the population of Slatington itself had not. That meant that the school was drawing from a larger, growing population around Slatington itself. You could interpret that as the "suburbs" of the town growing towards the east, south and west. That meant that more students from those areas attended the Slatington high school. This would eventually result in the creation of a new high school, Northwestern Lehigh High School, to the west of Slatington.

The size of the graduating classes also increased because a high school education had become the norm in much of the United States by 1941. We've seen that the national average was about 50% of 17-years olds graduated by 1940. A generation after 1917, it had become rather expected that you were going to graduate from high school.

Let me quickly note that there were no private school options in the immediate area for Slatington teens to attend. So, the public high school was the only real option for a high school education in these years.

Second, I wondered if there was a difference in **life expectancy** for the students of these two classes. There was a pretty substantial increase in average age from 64 for those in the 1917 class to 77 for the 1941 class. That was accompanied by an increase in the median age (77) to (79). Both substantially exceeded national averages. For men the average age went from 74 to 75, while for women average age actually slightly decreased from 81 to 79. In both the 1917 and 1941 classes, women tended to outlive men.

As I noted, these are pretty extraordinary numbers, as the life expectancy for someone born in 2000 is 76.9 years (male - 74.8, female - 79.1). That's less than the average age reached by the class of 1941, which was 77.3.

Third, I wondered if there had been a change in marriage rates between 1917 and 1941. In both cases, the marriage rate was high (1917 class - 90% married, 1941 class - 93%), showing little difference.

Fourth, having looked at marriages, I naturally wanted to know if there were any changes in family sizes, i.e., the number of children born? The most interesting fact that I learned from looking at this information was how much the average number of children per family has varied in the United States since 1900. Let me just repeat those numbers.

- 1920, the average number of children per family - 3.17
- 1940, as a result of the Great Depression - 2.22
- 1950, 3
- 1960, the height of the baby boom - 3.62
- 2018, 1.73

Of the 1917 cohort that married and had children (85%), the average was 1.9 children, which was a bit on the low side and is probably reflective of the higher socio-economic basis of the members of the class. Of the 1941 cohort that married and had children (86%), the average was 2.43, a substantial increase since 1917, but pretty much in line with national figures of the time.

But with both classes, there was a significant proportion of the married couples that did not have children, about 15%.

Fifth, I wondered if World War 1 (class of 1917) and World War 2 (class of 1941) had altered **mobility**, i.e., was there a difference in how many people remained in Slatington? Or did more or less people move away from Slatington?

In this regard, the first difference was that in 1917, 22/29 (76%) were born in Slatington; whereas in 1941, it was 42/113 (37%). As I said earlier, "Already by 1941, as population growth had begun to slow in Slatington itself, the high school was drawing students from a growing population in the area around Slatington proper." That is pretty clear that the school was becoming more of a regional school by 1941.

Was there a difference in how many high school graduates stayed in town? From the class of 1917, 13/29 (45%) were recorded as living in Slatington as a last residence before they died. Compare that to 32/113 (28%) for the class of 1941 who were in Slatington, as a last residence, when they died. That's just a slight decrease.

But, if we remember the marriage data discussed above, a high percentage of both classes, circa 70%, married in the immediate Slatington area. For the class of 1917 – 17/26 (65%) married locally, including 10/26 (38%) in Slatington itself; for the class of 1941 – 76/105 (72%) married locally, including 42/105 (40%) in Slatington. That doesn't look like much of a change, indicating that members of both classes ended up staying around in Slatington. But let's consider also that for the 1917 class, only one married out of state. (1/26 or 4%); while for the 1941 class, 16 married outside of Pennsylvania. (16/105 or 15%).

In other words, I'm not sure how much of a change there had been mobility wise, as students of both classes remained pretty tied to the Slatington area.

Sixth, was there anything different about the future **occupations** of the students from the two classes?

Roughly speaking, we saw that at least 8/29 (28%) of the class of 1917 did attend college to become teachers. For the class of 1941, I estimated that at least 14/113 (12%) attended college. That number fit with the national average of 1941, but it is far smaller than the figure for the class of 1917. That shows that high school in 1917 was clearly intended for a higher socio-economic class.

There was also a difference for women. Of the 14 women in the 1917 class, I could find that at least 8/14 (57%) were working women. For the women of the 1941 class, there was a large number (23/62) 37% of women for whom I could not find a defined occupation. Yes, many of the women 1941 graduates did work, but what differed about these women was that "traditional" jobs were most common, jobs such as sewing machine operator, secretary, sales or market clerk. These jobs did not require higher education, unlike teaching and nursing. It was striking that I could not find any women from the class of 1941 who became teachers.

In both cases, it's clear that being a high school graduate did influence a future job for both the men of 1917 and 1941. As I noted, the 29 graduates from 1917 went into occupations much different from the general population of the time which largely ended up in jobs such as a "slater" in the local slate quarrying industry, laborer at the nearby Bethlehem Steel plant in Bethlehem, PA or the New Jersey Zinc Company in Palmerton, PA, or worker in one of the local silk or sewing mills. With the class of 1941, two things are striking to me about the men's occupations. First, the variety of the jobs was quite broad, ranging from those requiring a higher education (chemist, teacher, engineer) to those identified as skilled labor (carpenter, mechanic, pilot) to those in factory work (Bethlehem Steel, Mack Trucks). The second striking feature was the

general absence of men involved in factory work (There were only five.), and no one noted as working at the New Jersey Zinc works in nearby Palmerton, PA.

Classes of 1917 and 1941: some more conclusions

I've gone through quite a few specific differences between the two classes. Let me just make a few, final points.

The main thing that I found out was that the 1917 and 1941 Slatington High School graduating classes clearly had different military experiences, with the 1917 class, unlike the 1941 class, not greatly participating in the war. But remember while the 1917 high school class was not much involved in the war, the circa 1900 cohort of those born around 1900 was very much part of the WW1 experience.

The big difference between the two classes is how much high school graduation had become normalized by 1941, as reflected by the increasing size of the graduating class. While my grandmother and grandfather had finished elementary school in the 1910s without going on to high school, by the time my dad was a teenager circa 1940, it had pretty much become expected that he was going to be a high school graduate. By 1941, high school was no longer focused solely on being a preparatory step to a professional or college career. It was just an act of passage into adulthood.

Additionally, by 1941 Slatington High School had become more of a regional high school, drawing more students from Walnutport and northern Lehigh County than just Slatington itself.

Finally, the entire high school experience was much different by 1941, and indeed you could probably say that many of the components of a contemporary high school experience were in place by 1941. There was a full sports slate – although, there was only women's basketball for girls - band, chorus, drama, dances, debating, a school newspaper and a yearbook. All of these activities were part of being a high school student in 1941.

Some sources:

- Slatington High School yearbooks
- The Slatington News
- The Morning Call
- Millenium edition online, *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Richard Sutch and Susan Carter et al, eds. Cambridge University Press, 2006-