

Featured Artifact: Family Fallout Shelter

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Era 9: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)



Look at the artifact presented to you. In a few sentences, respond to the following questions:

Describe: Objectively describe the artifact. What do you think it is made of? What does it look like? Does it look old or new? Is it intact, or is it damaged in some way?

Analyze: When, where or how do you think this item was used? What kind of person may have created or used this item? What significance do you think the object held, either for the creator or the user? Do you see words or images on the artifact that connect it to others (besides the creator and user)?

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Share your conclusions with a partner, then discuss the following:

Evaluate : Justify why you came to those conclusions about the artifact. What further questions do you have about the object? Of those questions, which could you solve by observing the object in person and which would you need to solve with research?

Background Information

The family fallout shelter represents the public policy assumptions of the atomic age, namely, that with enough preparation, the American family and with it the nation's social and political fabric would survive a nuclear attack. This free-standing, double-hulled steel shelter was installed beneath the front yard of Mr. and Mrs. Murland E. Anderson of Ft. Wayne, Indiana. The Andersons purchased their shelter from J. L. Haverstock, a Ft. Wayne realtor who began selling family fallout shelters as a sideline in early 1955 after reading a promotional Life magazine article.

The Andersons maintained the shelter from its installation in 1955 through the 1960s, a period spanning the development of the hydrogen bomb and the Cuban missile crisis. Insufficiently anchored against Ft. Wayne's high water table when first installed, the shelter popped to the surface of the Anderson front yard in time for the Cuban missile crisis and was quickly reinterred in a frenzy of shelter building activity in 1961.

After reading and considering the background information, compose a response to the following:

Analyze: Address the following object-specific questions:

- After a nuclear attack, life on earth would be literally impossible. Why, then, did people build fallout shelters like this one?
- What do you think it might be like to live in a fallout shelter like this one?

Synthesize: What does this object tell us about the era in which it was created, or the American experience as a whole? How would you describe the social, economic, or political climate of America during this time? What connections can you make between this object and other things that you have seen, read, or experienced?

Era-Specific Essential Questions

How did the postwar era change the political, social, and economic climate of the United States?