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The "Beats"

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NOTE: The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

Other than the hidden pockets of subterranean narcotic use described in other posts on this section of the website, the 1950s were to a very real extent the calm before the polydrug storm of the 1960s. The decade of the fifties was a period of conformity and complacency--a period of patriotism and "red" paranoia that gave America Joe McCarthy, HUAC hearings, spy trials, and bomb shelters. The only people who seemed to want to make ripples were a rebellious assortment of artists and writers who were called "beats" or "beatniks." The names most associated with this pocket of youthful rebellion included Jack Kerouac,

Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Norman Mailer. Some site the public reading of Ginsberg's poem Howl in 1955 as the beginning emergence of the "beat Generation" while others site the publication of Kerouac's *On the Road* in 1957. The beats were a white band of chain smoking, occasionally dope smoking, hard drinking non-conformists who distinguished themselves by their eccentric ideas (self-indulgence, sexual liberation, drug legalization), beards, speech (Black argot), and musical (jazz) and literary (poetry) tastes.