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American Society

The 1960s and 1970s saw a breaking away from the sameness in behavior, attitudes, and beliefs that had marked the 1950s. The signs were everywhere: from changed hairstyles and clothing to loud rock music; from different ideas of morality to experimenting with drugs. At least some of the changes were related to the desire of the young to declare their independence from the old. But the changes were related to something more. A sizable minority of young people, and some older ones, rejected what they saw as the bigness, impersonality, and hectic pace of modern life. They also turned their backs on materialism and on the idea of success through disciplined hard work. These people experimented with different life-styles. They declared that feeling and emotion were as important paths to truth as was reason. Some talked about reshaping American society through revolutionary change. Others were content simply to "do their own thing."

By the early 1980s there were strong indications of at least a partial return to older values and ways on the part of the young. There was also evidence of adjustment to newer ways by their elders. Young Americans, for example, were again concerned with achievement, and they pursued their education with a new seriousness. One reason lay in important shifts in the job market. At the end of World War II, one third of all jobs could be performed by untrained people. By 1980 the percentage was hardly more than one eighth.

Meanwhile, during these same decades there were important steps in the direction of greater openness and equality. The cry of black power was joined by cries of red power (by American Indians), Chicano power (by Mexican Americans), gray power (by older citizens), and Women's Liberation, among others.

Population trends. The sixties, seventies, and eighties saw the continuation of three population trends of the recent past and the sharp reversal of another. The movement to the Sunbelt continued, with states in the West and South gaining population at the expense of the colder Northeast and Midwest. By 1980, California, with 23.6 million people, was home to more than 10 percent of all Americans. Florida, the Gulf Coast states, Arizona, and New Mexico were among other states that showed hefty increases. With increased population came greater political power in the form of more seats in Congress and more electoral votes. Another continuing trend was the decline in the farm population. By 1980, fewer than 4 percent of Americans lived on farms. And within metropolitan areas suburban populations continued to rise, while those of the central cities declined.

On the other hand the birthrate declined sharply. Although the population increased to 228 million in 1980, the rate of increase slowed. Further, for the first time since the 1920s, an important part of the increase came from immigration.

The "graying" of America. Meanwhile, the average life span of Americans continued to increase. Life expectancy, only 47 years in 1900, reached 70 for males and 77 for females in 1980. Some scientists predicted a rise to 85 years by the turn of the century. Combined with the falling birthrate, this meant that America was getting older. In 1900, fewer than 5 million Americans (4 percent of the population) were 65 and older: by 1980, more than 25 million (11 percent) were. By the year 2020, the percentage of those over 65 was expected to rise to 15 percent. With this "graying" of America, questions about retirement, leisure, health, and living costs were taking on new importance.

Changes in the family. A fall in the birthrate reflected important changes in the American family. Changes in life-styles, doubts about the economy, and worries about

bringing children into a nuclear world all figured in the decisions of married couples to have few children, or even none at all. So too, apparently, did doubts about the permanence of marriage in the modern age. In the year 1978, 2.2 million American couples got married, but another 1.1 million got divorced. At the turn of the century, 1 in 12 American marriages ended in divorce; by the early 1980s, more than 1 in 3 did -- the highest rate in the world. Most divorced people married again, but there was a 700 percent rise in the number of single-parent families between 1960 and 1980.

The changing position of women. To some extent changes in the family were related to the changing position of women in American society. The feminist movement, quiet since the 1920s, came to life again in the 1960s. It was not just the old matter of women receiving less pay than men for the same work, although that was part of it. Nor was it only that women's opportunities for advancement were still limited, although that was part of it too. The challenge raised by feminists in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, dealt with the basic subject of the roles assigned to women in a male-dominated society. Females were conditioned from childhood, it was argued, to think of themselves only as wives and mothers. Males were taught to believe that they would do "man's work" and become the leaders in business and politics. Such conditioning, wrote Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), limited women's chances to achieve their full potential as human beings.

Led by Betty Friedan, a group of 300 Americans -- men as well as women -- formed the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. This organization's aim was to eliminate sex stereotypes and to open the way to political and economic power for women. NOW and similar organizations were aided by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This law, you will recall, forbade discrimination on the grounds of sex as well as race and religion. Another law in 1968 led businesses, schools, and universities to set Affirmative Action goals for bringing qualified women and minorities into the labor force.

Some changes came quickly, others slowly. The number of women in politics increased dramatically. So did the numbers in the professions and in the work force generally. As in the 1950s, the wish to add to the family income was one of the reasons. But there were additional reasons, as one mother of four explained: "I wanted some adult companionship, a feeling of accomplishment; having the cleanest floor on the block isn't the greatest thing that can happen to you." At the same time, it must be noted that not all women agreed with all the goals of the Women's Liberation movement. Many said they felt entirely fulfilled as wives and mothers and did not wish to change.

In 1972, Congress approved and sent to the states the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). It reads: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." Discussion and debate about this amendment helped keep the issue of women's rights before the public during the 1970s and into the 1980s. However, thirty-eight states were needed to approve the amendment in order to make it part of the Constitution. With only a few months remaining before the deadline of June 30, 1982, ERA forces were still three votes short. (photo) In 1981, Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman to be appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States. She had previously served as a judge in Arizona.