

The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society, 4th Ed., Gary B. Nash, Julie Roy Jeffrey, John R. Howe, Peter J. Frederick, Allen F. Davis, and Allan M. Winkler, NY: Pearson-Longman, 1998. [13-]

[932-933, 936-937]

Back to the Kitchen

World War II had interrupted traditional patterns of behavior for both men and women. As servicemen went overseas, women left their homes to work. After 1945, there was a period of adjustment as the men returned, and many working women were told that they were no longer needed in their jobs. In the 1950s, traditional gender roles were reaffirmed and women faced tremendous pressure to conform to accepted prewar patterns, even though, paradoxically, more women entered the work force than ever before.

Men and women had different expectations in the postwar years. Most men expected to go to school and then find jobs to support their families. Viewing themselves as the primary breadwinners, they wanted their jobs waiting for them after the war. It was fine for women to have worked during the conflict, but now men wanted things the way they had been before. For women, the situation was more complex. While they wanted to resume patterns of family life that had been disrupted by the war, many had enjoyed working in the military plants and were reluctant to retreat to the home, although the government and their employers persistently encouraged them to do so.

In 1947, Life magazine ran a long photo essay called "The American Woman's Dilemma" that summed up the problem. The essay observed that women were caught in a conflict between the traditional expectation to stay home and the desire to have a paid job. A 1946 Fortune magazine poll also captured the discontent of some women. Asked whether they would prefer to be born again as men or women, 25 percent of the women interviewed said they would prefer to be men. That dissatisfaction was strongest among white, well-educated, middle-class women, which was understandable, since family economic circumstances usually required black and lower-class white women to continue working outside the home.

By the 1950s, doubts and questions had largely receded. The baby boom increased average family size and made the decision to remain home easier. The flight to the suburbs gave women more to do, and they settled into the routines of redecorating their homes and gardens and transporting children to and from activities and schools.

In 1956, when Life produced a special issue on women, the message differed strikingly from that of nine years before. Profiling Marjorie Sutton, the magazine spoke of the "Busy Wife's Achievements" as "Home Manager, Mother, Hostess, and Useful Civic Worker." Married at 16, Marjorie was now involved with the PTA, Campfire Girls, and charity causes. She cooked and sewed for her family, which included four children, supported her husband by entertaining 1,500 guests a year, and worked out on the trampoline "to keep her size 12 figure."

Marjorie Sutton reflected the widespread social emphasis on marriage and home. Many women went to college to find husbands; if they succeeded, they dropped out. Almost two-thirds of the women in college left before completing a degree, compared with less than half the men. Women were expected to marry young, have children early, and encourage their husbands' careers. An article in Esquire magazine in 1954 called working wives a "menace."

The traditional view of women extended throughout American society. Adlai Stevenson, Democratic presidential candidate in 1952 and 1956, defined the female role in politics, telling a group of women that "the assignment for you, as wives and mothers, you can do in the living room with a baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hand." As in much of the nineteenth century, a woman was "to influence man and boy" in her "humble role of housewife" and mother.

Pediatrician Benjamin Spock agreed. In 1946 he published *Baby and Child Care*, the book most responsible for the child-rearing patterns of the postwar generation. In it, he advised mothers to stay at home if they wanted to raise stable and secure youngsters. Working outside the home might jeopardize their children's mental and emotional health. Subsequent editions argued much the same thing.

Popular culture highlighted the stereotype of the woman concerned only about marriage and family. Author Betty Friedan described these patterns in her explosive 1963 critique, *The Feminine Mystique*. Through an exhaustive examination of women's magazines and other publications, she provided a profile of women in the 1950s and early 1960s. They "could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity.... All they had to do was to devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children." Their role was clear. "It was unquestioned gospel," she wrote, "that women could identify with nothing beyond the home -- not politics, not art, not science, not events large or small, war or peace, in the United States or the world, unless it could be approached through female experience as a wife or mother or translated into domestic detail."

Movies likewise played upon on conventional images. Doris Day, charming and wholesome, was a favorite heroine. In film after film, she showed how an attractive woman who played her cards right could land her man -- the assumed goal of every woman.

The family was all important in this scenario. Fewer than 10 percent of all Americans felt that an unmarried person could be happy. A popular advice book declared: "The family is the center of your living. If it isn't, you've gone far astray." A healthy family strengthened the nation in its Cold War struggle against the Communist menace. In the pattern pictured in many of the popular television programs mentioned earlier in this chapter, the family was meant to provide all satisfaction and contentment. The single-story ranch house that became so popular in this period reflected the focus on the family as the source of recreation and fun. No longer were kitchen and den private, as they had been earlier in a reflection of the notion of separate spheres. Now houses, with far more shared and open space, stressed livability and family comfort.

Sexuality was a troublesome if compelling topic in the postwar years. In 1948, Alfred C. Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Kinsey was an Indiana University zoologist who had previously studied the gall wasp. When asked to teach a course on marriage problems, he found little published material about human sexual activity and decided to collect his own. He compiled case histories of 5,300 white males, analyzed their personal backgrounds, and recorded patterns of sexual behavior.

Kinsey shocked the country with his statistics on premarital, extramarital, and otherwise illicit sexual acts. Among males who went to college, he concluded, 67 percent had engaged in sexual intercourse before marriage; 84 percent of those who went to high school but not beyond had done the same. Thirty-seven percent of the total male population had experienced some kind of overt homosexual activity. One out of every six farm boys in America, he claimed, had copulated with animals. Five years later, Kinsey published a companion volume, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, that detailed many of the same sexual patterns. Although critics denounced Kinsey for his methodology and his results, both of his books sold widely, for they opened the door to a subject that had previously been considered taboo.

Interest in sexuality was reflected in the fascination with sex goddesses like Marilyn Monroe. With her blonde hair, breathy voice, and raw sexuality, she personified the forbidden side of the good life and became one of Hollywood's most popular stars. The images of such film goddesses corresponded to male fantasies of women, visible in *Playboy* magazine, which first appeared in 1953 and soon achieved a huge readership. As for these men's wives, they were expected to manage their suburban homes and to be cheerful and willing objects of their husbands' desire.

Despite the reaffirmation of the old ideology that a woman's place was in the home, the 1950s were years of unnoticed but important change. Because the supply of single women workers was diminished by the low birthrate of the Depression years and by increased schooling and early marriage, older married women continued the pattern begun during the war and entered the labor force in larger numbers than before. In 1940, only 15 percent of American wives had jobs. By 1950, 21 percent were employed, and ten years later, the figure had risen to 30 percent. Moreover, married women now accounted for more than half of all working women, a dramatic reversal of pre-World War II patterns. Although the media hailed those women who primarily tended to their families, some magazine articles, in fact, did stress the achievements of women outside the home.

Although many working women were poor, divorced, or widowed, many others worked to acquire the desirable new products that were badges of middle-class status. They stepped into the new jobs created by economic expansion, clustering in office, sales, and service positions, occupations already defined as female. They and their employers considered their work subordinate to their primary role as wives and mothers. The conviction that women's main role was homemaking justified low wages and the denial of promotions. Comparatively few women entered professions where they would have challenged traditional notions of a woman's place. As Life magazine pointed out in 1956, "Household skills take her into the garment trades; neat and personable, she becomes office worker and sales lady; patient and dexterous, she does well on competitive, detailed factory work; compassionate, she becomes teacher and nurse."

African American women worked as always but often lost the jobs they had held during the war. As the percentage of women in the Detroit automobile industry, for example, dropped from 25 to 7.5 in the immediate postwar period, black women who had held some of the jobs were the first to go. Bernice McCannon, an African American employee at a Virginia military base, observed, "I have always done domestic work for families. When war came, I made the same move many domestics did. I took a higher paying job in a government cafeteria as a junior baker. If domestic work offers a good living, I see no reason why most of us will not return to our old jobs. We will have no alternative." These jobs, however, did not pay well at all. In the 1950s, the employment picture improved somewhat. African American women succeeded both in moving into white-collar positions and in increasing their income. By 1960, more than a third of all black women held clerical, sales, service, or professional jobs. The income gap between white women and black women holding similar jobs dropped from about 50 percent in 1940 to about 30 percent in 1960.

Some of these patterns that dominated in the 1950s persisted in the next decade. By the middle of the 1960s, however, the roots of what became a powerful women's movement were visible. Women challenged stereotypical patterns of behavior and patterns of dress. They demanded and seized greater control over their own lives, in a story we will take up in much greater detail in Chapter 29.

(photo) Film star Doris Day was enormously popular in the 1950s. She was pert and pretty, with a winning smile and a captivating charm, and she looked like the special girl next door many men dreamed of marrying. (Archive Photos)

(photo) Sex goddess Marilyn Monroe -- shown here in *Gentlemen Prefer Blonds* -- stirred the fantasies of American males in the 1950s. Despite the family orientation of suburban America, millions were captivated by her seductive appeal. (UPI/Corbis-Bettmann)

[934-935]

RECOVERING THE PAST

Clothing

Clothing can be an important source of information about the past. The clothes people wear often announce their age, sex, and class, and frequently transmit some

sense of their origin, occupation, and even their politics. The vocabulary of dress includes more than garments alone: hairstyles, jewelry, and makeup all contribute to the way people choose to present themselves. Clothing can signal strong emotions; a torn, unbuttoned shirt, for example, can indicate that a person who seldom dresses that way is really upset. Bright colors can demonstrate a daring sense and a willingness to make a strong statement. By examining clothing styles in a number of different decades, we can begin to understand something of the changing patterns of people's lives.

In the 1920s, flappers and other women often dressed like children, with loose dresses usually in pastel colors ending just below the knee. Large trimmings, like huge artificial flowers, accentuated the effect. A "boyish" figure was considered most attractive. The clothes conveyed a feeling of playfulness and a willingness to embrace the freedom of the young. Men's suits in the same period were now made out of lighter materials, and looked less padded than before. As the tall, stiff collar of an earlier age disappeared and trousers became more high-waisted, men too had a more youthful look.

The Great Depression of the 1930s brought a change in style. Flappers now looked silly, especially as millions of people were starving. Advertisements and films promoted a new maturity and sophistication, more appropriate to hard times. Men's suits became heavier and darker, as if symbolically to provide protection in a breadline. Trousers were wider, and jackets were frequently double-breasted. Overcoats became longer. Women's clothes were likewise made out of heavier fabrics and used darker colors. Skirts fell, almost to the ankles on occasion, and were covered by longer coats. Clothes indicated that there was no place for the playfulness of the decade before.

As conditions improved during and after World War II, styles changed once more. In the 1940s, young teenage girls frequently wore bobby socks, rolled down to their ankles. Working women wore overalls, but with their own adornments to maintain their femininity. Rosie the Riveter drawn by noted artist Norman Rockwell, wore her overalls proudly as she sat with a riveting gun in her lap and an attractive scarf around her hair. In the postwar years, the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit looked serious, sober, and well-tailored, ready to go work for corporate America. His female partner wanted to look equally worldly and sophisticated, and wore carefully tailored adult clothing, with the waist drawn in (often by a girdle) and heels as tall as three inches, when going out. The fashion industry helped define the decorative role women should play in supporting men as they advanced their business careers.

Then came the 1960s and an entirely new look. Casual clothing became a kind of uniform. The counterculture was a movement of the young, and clothing took on an increasingly youthful look. Skirts rose above the knee in 1963 and a few years later climbed to midhigh. Women began to wear pants and trouser suits. Men and women both favored jeans and informal shirts and let their hair grow longer. Men broke away from the gray suits of the preceding decade and indulged themselves in bright colors in what has been called the "peacock revolution."

Look carefully at the pictures on these pages. They show fashions from different periods and can tell us a good deal about how these people defined themselves. Examine first the photo of the three black women from the 1920s. What kinds of adornments do you notice? What impression do these women convey?

Look at the photograph of Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor in the 1930s. What kind of dress is she wearing? How do her clothes differ from those of the women in the 1920s? In the picture, she is talking to a number of working men. What do their clothes tell you about the kind of work they might be doing?

In the picture of two drill press operators during World War II, the women are dressed to handle the heavy machinery. Are their clothes different from those of the laborers in the preceding picture? How have the women accommodated themselves to their work, while still maintaining their individuality?

Now look at the picture of a woman in the 1950s. What kind of work might she do?

What kind of flexibility do these clothes give her? What do the stylistic touches convey?

Finally, examine the photograph of the man and woman at an outdoor music festival in the 1960s. What does their clothing remind you of? Where might it come from? What impression are these people trying to create by their dress?

(photo) Harlem women in the 1920s. (Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library)

(photo) Frances Perkins with laborers in the 1930s. (Brown Brothers)

(photo) World War II women at work. (Oregon Historical Society, Portland)

(photo) A woman and child in the 1950s. (From the negative by Dorothea Lange, collection of The Oakland Museum, California)

(photo) Countercultural dress in the 1960s. (Ken Heyman)

[1042-1047]

Pressure from the Women's Movement

The black struggle for equality in the 1960s and 1970s was accompanied by a women's movement that grew out of the agitation for civil rights but soon developed a life of its own. This struggle, like the struggles by Hispanics and Native Americans, employed the confrontational approach and the vocabulary of the civil rights movement to create pressure for change. Using proven strategies, it sometimes proceeded even faster than the black effort.

Attacking the Feminine Mystique

Many white women joined the civil rights movement only to find that they were second-class citizens. Men, black and white, held the policy positions and relegated women to menial chores when not actually involved in demonstrations or voter drives. Many women also felt sexually exploited by male leaders. Stokely Carmichael's comment only underscored their point. "The only position for women in SNCC," he said, "is prone."

Although the civil rights movement helped spark the women's movement, broad social changes provided the preconditions. During the 1950s and 1960s, increasing numbers of married women entered the labor force (see Chapter 26). Equally important, many more young women were attending college. By 1970, women earned 41 percent of all B.A. degrees awarded, in comparison with only 25 percent in 1950. These educated young women held high hopes for themselves, even if they still earned substantially less than men.

Just as in the civil rights movement, reform legislation played a part in ending sexual discrimination. Title 7 of the 1964 Civil Rights bill, as originally drafted, prohibited discrimination on the grounds of race. During legislative debate, conservatives opposed to black civil rights seized on an amendment to include discrimination on the basis of gender, in the hope of defeating the entire bill. But the amendment passed, and then the full measure was approved, giving women a legal tool for attacking discrimination. They discovered, however, that the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission regarded women's complaints of discrimination as far less important than those of blacks.

In 1966, a group of 28 professional women, including author Betty Friedan, established the National Organization for Women (NOW) "to take action to bring American women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now." By full participation the founders meant not only fair pay and equal opportunity but a new, more egalitarian form of marriage. NOW also attacked the "false image of women... in the media." By 1967, some 1,000 women had joined the organization, and four years later, its membership reached 15,000.

NOW was a pressure group. It sought to reform American society by promoting equal opportunity for women. To radical feminists, who had come up through the civil rights movement, NOW's agenda failed to confront adequately the problem of gender discrimination. Jo Freeman, a radical activist, observed, "Women's liberation does not mean equality with men... [because] equality in an unjust society is meaningless."

These feminists wanted to educate millions of discontented but unpoliticized women about the oppression they faced. They tried, through the technique of consciousness raising, to help women understand the extent of their oppression and to analyze their experience as a political phenomenon. They wanted to demonstrate, in their phrase, that the personal was political.

They gained the attention of the mass media at the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in September 1968. There, in the words of activist author Robin Morgan, they "announced our existence to the world." On the boardwalk, a hundred women nominated a sheep as their candidate for Miss America. They also set up a "freedom trash can," and placed in it "instruments of torture": bras, girdles, hair curlers, high heels, and copies of Playboy and Cosmopolitan magazines. In the pageant hall, they chanted "Freedom for women" and unfurled banners reading "Women's Liberation."

Feminism at High Tide

In 1971, Helen Reddy expressed the energy of the women's movement in a song called "I Am Woman" that rose to the top of the charts:

I am woman, hear me roar
In numbers too big to ignore
And I know too much to go back and pretend
'Cause I've heard it all before
And I've been down there on the floor,
No one's ever gonna keep me down again.
Oh, yes, I am wise
But it's wisdom born of pain.
Yes, I've paid the price
But look how much I gained
If I have to
I can do anything.
I am strong,
I am invincible,
I am woman.

Reddy's song reflected a new militancy and sense of self-confidence among women.

Real changes were under way. A 1970 survey of first-year college students showed that men interested in such fields as business, medicine, engineering, and law outnumbered women eight to one; by 1975, the ratio had dropped to three to one. The proportion of women beginning law school quadrupled between 1969 and 1973. Women gained access to the military academies and entered senior officer ranks, although they were still restricted from combat command ranks. According to the Census Bureau, 45 percent of mothers with preschool children held jobs outside the home in 1980. That figure was four times greater than it had been 30 years before. To be sure, many employers systematically excluded women from certain positions, and women usually held "female" jobs in the clerical, sales, and service sectors, but the progress was still unmistakable.

Legal changes brought women more benefits and opportunities. Title 9 of the Education Amendments of 1972 broadened the provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The new legislation, which barred gender bias in federally assisted educational activities and programs, made easier the admission of women to colleges and changed the nature of intercollegiate athletics by requiring schools to fund sports teams for women. By 1980, fully 30 percent of the participants in intercollegiate sports were women, compared with 15 percent before Title 9 became law.

A flurry of publications spread the principles of the women's movement. In 1972, journalist Gloria Steinem and several other women founded a new magazine, Ms., which succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. By 1973, there were almost 200,000

subscribers. The New Woman's Survival Catalogue provided useful advice to women readers. Our Bodies, Ourselves, a handbook published by a women's health collective, encouraged women to understand and control their bodies; it sold 850,000 copies between 1971 and 1976.

These new books and magazines differed radically from older women's magazines like Good Housekeeping and Ladies' Home Journal, which focused on domestic interests and needs. Ms., in dramatic contrast, dealt with abortion, employment, discrimination, and other feminist issues, such as the Equal Rights Amendment.

Women both in and out of NOW worked for congressional passage, then ratification, of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution. Passed by Congress in 1972, with ratification seemingly assured, it stated simply, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

More radical feminists became increasingly vocal. Legal changes were not enough, they argued. Traditional gender and family rolls would have to be discarded to end social exploitation. Socialist feminists claimed that it was not enough to strike out at male domination, for capitalist society itself was responsible for women's plight. Only through the process of revolution could women be free.

Black women frequently viewed the women's movement with ambivalence. Some became feminists; others felt that the struggle for racial equality took precedence, and they were reluctant to divert energy and attention from it. Race, more than gender, was the source of their oppression. They were also suspicious of the middle-class orientation of many white feminists. Members of NOW and similar organizations, they claimed, "suffered little more than boredom, gentle repression, and dishpan hands," and were hardly confronting the most important issues when they burned their bras and insisted on using the title Ms. rather than Mrs. or Miss.

Not all women were feminists, to be sure. Many felt the women's movement was contemptuous of women who stayed at home to perform traditional tasks. Marabel Morgan was one who still insisted that the woman had a place at home by her husband's side. The wife of a Florida attorney, she argued that "it is only when a woman surrenders her life to her husband, reveres and worships him, and is willing to serve him, that she becomes really beautiful to him." In her book *The Total Woman* (1973), she counseled others to follow the 4A approach: accept, admire, adapt, appreciate. As of 1975, some 500,000 copies of the hardcover volume had been sold.

In politics, Phyllis Schlafly headed a nationwide campaign to block ratification of the ERA. "It won't do anything to help women," she said, "and it will take away from women the rights they already have, such as the right of a wife to be supported by her husband, the right of a woman to be exempted from military combat, and the right, if you wanted it, to go to a single-sex college." The ERA, she predicted, would lead to the establishment of coed bathrooms, the elimination of alimony, and the legalization of homosexual marriage.

Schlafly and her allies had their way. Within a few years after passage of the ERA, 35 states had agreed to the measure, but then the momentum disappeared. Even with an extension in the deadline granted in 1979, the amendment could not win support of the necessary 38 states. By mid-1982, the ERA was dead.

Despite the counterattacks, the women's movement flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. In the tenth anniversary issue of Ms. magazine, in 1982, founding editor Gloria Steinem noted the differences a decade had made. "Now, we have words like 'sexual harassment' and 'battered women,'" she wrote. "Ten years ago, it was just called 'life.'" She also observed that "now, we are becoming the men we wanted to marry. Ten years ago, we were trained to marry a doctor, not be one."

(graph) Women in the Work Force, 1920-1980. This graph shows the dramatic increase in the number of women in the work force. Note particularly the rise in the number of working women 25-44 years old in the 1970s. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

(photo) "This healthy, normal baby has a handicap. She was born female." Awareness of racial discrimination led women to speak out against discrimination based on gender, as shown in this pointed advertisement sponsored by the National Organization for Women. (NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund)

(photo) The women's movement spawned a number of publications that attempted to give women greater control over various aspects of their own lives. The book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and *Ms.* magazine were two important sources in that effort. (*Ms. Magazine*)

(photo) Women marched to mobilize support for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, but the campaign failed, as opponents aroused public fears and blocked support in a number of key states. A decade after passage, the ERA was dead. (J. L. Atlan/Sygma)

(graph) Changes in Female Employment, 1940-1980 (Percent of all employed women) [1082-1083]

Obstacles to Women's Rights

Women had a similar experience in the 1980s and 1990s. They too made significant electoral gains. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan appointed Sandra Day O'Connor as the first woman Supreme Court justice, and in 1984, Geraldine Ferraro, a Democratic member of Congress, became the first woman vice presidential candidate for a major party.

Yet women still faced serious problems that were compounded by conservative social policies. Access to new positions did not change their concentration in lower-paying jobs. In 1985, most women still served as secretaries, cashiers, bookkeepers, registered nurses, and waitresses -- the same jobs most frequently held ten years before.

Even when women moved into positions traditionally held by men, their progress often stopped at the lower and middle levels. Interruptions of work -- to bear children or assume family responsibilities -- impeded advancement. A "glass ceiling" seemed to prevent them from moving up.

Wage differentials between women and men continued to exist. In 1985, full-time working women still earned only 63.6 cents for every dollar earned by men. Their concentration in the so-called pink-collar positions -- traditional women's jobs -- made further improvement difficult. Comparable-worth cases -- arguing that women should receive equal pay for different jobs of similar value -- met with conservative resistance.

Conservative activists also waged a dedicated campaign against the right to legal abortion. Despite the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, the issue remained very much alive. The number of abortions increased dramatically in the decade after the decision. In response, "pro-life" forces mobilized. Opponents lobbied to cut off federal funds that allowed the poor to obtain the abortions the better-off could pay for themselves; they insisted that abortions should be performed in hospitals and not in less expensive clinics; and they worked to reverse the original decision itself.

Though the Supreme Court underscored its judgment in 1983, the pro-life movement was not deterred. In 1989, a solidifying conservative majority on the Court ruled in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* that while women's right to abortion remained intact, state legislatures could impose limitations if they chose. With that judgment, a major legislative debate over the issue began, and numerous states began to mandate restrictions.

In 1992, in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, the Supreme Court reaffirmed what it termed the essence of the right to abortion, while permitting further state restrictions. It declared that a 24-hour waiting period for women seeking abortions was acceptable and required teenage girls to secure the permission of a parent (or a judge) before ending a pregnancy. The ruling clearly gave states greater latitude in the overall restrictive effort and made an abortion harder to obtain, particularly for poor women and young women.

In response to a conservative backlash, the larger women's liberation movement

became more inclusive, and more sensitive to issues of race. Black women still had their own concerns, but now found more common ground. While black women in the early 1990s still earned less, on a weekly basis, than white men and white women, that situation began to improve. The dramatic confrontation between Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas and lawyer Anita Hill during confirmation hearings in 1991 dramatized both racial questions and the issue of sexual harassment. In the aftermath, Americans in Congress, in the business community, and in the larger workplace all became more aware of inappropriate behavior that could no longer be tolerated.

(photo) Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman justice to sit on the United States Supreme Court. Her pre-Court career was similar to that of many other women, as she was denied numerous jobs when she emerged from law school. A decade later, Ruth Bader Ginsburg joined O'Connor on the nation's highest Court. (Tom Zimmeroff/Sygma) [1097, 1100-1101]

Growing Up

In the mid-1970s, the birthrate began to rise slowly after a decade and a half of decline. The baby boom, which had created a population explosion in the years after World War II, peaked in 1960 with a rate of 24 births per 1,000 people. In 1981, the rate stood at 16, then rose to nearly 17 in 1990, as demographers viewed the new increase in births as part of a long-term trend.

But children less frequently lived in traditional homes. The Labor Department estimated that by the late 1970s only 7 percent of the nation's families matched the stereotypical pattern of the breadwinner father, the homemaker mother, and two children. Divorce shattered the mold. In 1980, the courts granted nearly 1.2 million divorces, the highest total in the nation's history. In 1990, the figure of 1.175 million was almost as high. For each 1,000 marriages there were 480 divorces, down slightly from 490 in 1980, but significantly higher than 328 per 1,000 in 1970 and 258 per 1,000 in 1960. The social stigma once attached to divorce disappeared; Reagan was the first divorced person to be elected president. "Nonfamily households" became increasingly common. Between 1980 and 1990, such households, which might be led by either a man or a woman, increased from 26 to 29 percent of the total number, while the percentage of family households declined. Single-parent families, particularly those headed by women, were now common. In 1960, 11 percent of all children lived in such homes; by 1990, the figure had reached 25 percent. For African Americans, the proportion of families headed by women was three times as great as for whites.

During hard times, particularly for members of the working class, new children could pose problems. An extra mouth to feed could make a difference to a family on the fringe. New children also required women of all classes to consider the relationship between family and career. Women entering the work force faced the daunting problem of juggling work and home schedules and finding adequate child care facilities.

The rising death rate among the young was disturbing. The Public Health Service reported in 1982 that the death rate for most Americans had dropped significantly over a 30-year period, and it continued to drop throughout the decade, but the rate for those between 15 and 24 rose steadily after 1976. Automobile accidents, murders, and suicides accounted for three out of four deaths for this group.

The discovery of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) in 1981 complicated the process of growing up. The sexual revolution of the 1960s had brought a major change in sexual patterns, particularly among the young, but now sexual experimentation was threatened by this deadly new disease. Although it seemed to strike intravenous drug users and homosexuals with numerous partners more than other groups at first, it soon spread to the heterosexual population as well. Babies with AIDS were born to mothers with the illness. AIDS became the leading cause of death in Americans between the ages of 25 and 44. The growing number of deaths -- more than 250,000 by 1995 -- suggested that the disease would reach epic proportions.

Advertisements in the national media advised the use of condoms, and the U.S. surgeon general mailed a brochure, "Understanding AIDS," to every household in the United States.

Growing Old

As concern with the problems of the young increased, awareness of the plight of the old also grew. Between 1900 and 1980, when the population of the country tripled, the number of people over 65 rose eight fold and continued to rise in the next decade. In the 1980s, the number of Americans over 75 grew by more than 27 percent. Underlying the rapid increase was the steady advance in medical care, which in the twentieth century had increased life expectancy from 47 to 74 years. Americans became aware of the "aging revolution," which promised to become the most lasting of all twentieth-century social changes.

The elderly raised new issues in a nation suffering periodic recession. Many wanted to continue working and opposed mandatory retirement rules that drove them from their jobs. Legislation in 1978 that raised the mandatory retirement age from 65 to 70 helped older workers but decreased employment opportunities for younger workers seeking jobs, a pattern that became even more problematical in the 1990s.

Generational resentment over jobs was compounded by the knotty problems faced by the social security system established a half century before. As more and more Americans retired, the system could not generate sufficient revenue to make the payments due without assistance from the general governmental fund. In the early 1980s, it appeared that the entire system might collapse. A government solution involving higher taxes for those still employed and a later age for qualifying for benefits rescued the fund. But many Americans in the 1990s wondered whether social security would survive.

As Americans lived longer, they suffered increasingly from Alzheimer's disease, an affliction that gradually destroyed a patient's memory and brought on infantile behavior. Diagnosis was difficult and there was no treatment to reverse the ailment's course. The illness gained exposure in 1995 when the family of Ronald Reagan disclosed that the former president was suffering from the incurable disease.

American families faced difficult decisions about how to care for older parents. In the past, the elderly might naturally have come into their children's homes, but attitudes and family patterns had changed. As women gravitated to jobs outside, they were less able to assist in the home care of an elderly parent. Retirement villages and nursing homes provided two alternatives, but the decision to place a parent under institutional care was often excruciating.