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American Women in the 1950s: The Years Between the War and Liberation

Corinne Fox

When World War II ended with the dramatic explosions of the atomic bombs, the United States emerged as a world super power vowing to fight oppression and spread democracy. In an effort to accomplish this colossal feat, the United States first had to prove to the rest of the world that its people deserved the envy they sought. Civilians, desperate to reestablish a sense of normalcy, took this opportunity to create a citadel of domestic conformity. The shift from cramped city living to spacious suburban life began as early as the 1920s but encountered significant challenges in the 1930s and early 1940s. In 1945, American women were finally able to refocus their efforts and continue their pursuit of the American Dream that their parents had craved during the previous decades. The ingrained desire to create the idealistic family with a male breadwinner, female homemaker, and several children with a piece of land to call their own sprouted during the post World War I economic boom of the 1920s and came to fruition following the Allied victory of World War II.¹

The history of women in the 1950s became a popular topic for research in the 1980s. Joanne Meyerowitz notes in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* that prior to the 1980s, historians focused more on working women during World War II and the women who led the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 1970s than on the years between the two.² As the subject of women in the 1950s grew in popularity, many historians claimed that housewives were mostly acquiescent to their domestic plight despite the timeless marital issues that tend to vex couples of any era. While most acknowledge that the iconic picture of the perfect family in a Levittown-like community applied to white middle-class Americans, historian Elaine Tyler May argues in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* that this era also showed remarkable conformity among African American and Jewish women as well.³ Historians also tend to agree that housewives' lack of intellectual stimulation from stifled careers spurred many of them and their daughters in the 1960s and 70s into revolting against the accepted norms of conformity.

Historians May and Laura Miller set the stage for 1950s history by tracing its roots back to the earlier parts of the century. Miller notes in her article, "Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal," that the economic prosperity of the 1920s put the first waves of suburbanization into motion.⁴ Transportation technologies like the railroad and

automobile made it possible for Americans to move to more remote patches of land and still have transportation access to their jobs in the cities. The number of housing construction projects skyrocketed thanks to the higher wages of prospective homeowners.⁵ Miller then acknowledges that during the Great Depression and the subsequent war, nearly all new housing efforts came to an abrupt halt.

Elaine Tyler May especially dedicates a substantial section to identifying how the 1950s were cultivated by the unique environment of the 1930s and 1940s. Marriage rates reached record lows in the 1930s due to the Great Depression. May claims that young men were reluctant to marry if they felt financially unprepared to support a wife and children.⁶ Society encouraged women to work and to help boost the overall family income provided they never earned higher wages than their husbands or fathers. This all changed with the Pearl Harbor attack when America plunged into World War II. Marriage rates suddenly spiked in 1942 buoyed by many young couples rushing to marry before the boys soldiered off to war as Emily Yellin points out in *Our Mother's War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II*.⁷ May and Yellin agree that the Second World War opened a new door for women in the workplace. As men fought in the European and Pacific theaters, women rose to the occasion and helped the war effort in every way from growing vegetables in their own personal victory gardens to joining the Women's Army Corps.⁸ After the sudden end of the war, instead of seeing a continued female presence in traditionally male-oriented jobs, men and women were eager to recapture the prosperity of the 1920s and reverted back to previously held standards of gender separation.

A favorite theme of 1980s and 1990s historians is the actual "suburban sprawl" that occurred during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Couples fled the cities in droves searching for their own little piece of suburban heaven. Glenna Matthews acknowledges in *"Just a Housewife": The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* the dire need for housing during the immediate postwar years and claims that two and a half million families shared homes in the late 1940s.⁹ Miller rightfully attributes the ability of young married couples to purchase new homes to the GI Bill and government mortgage assistance.¹⁰ Between 1948 and 1958, Kristina Zarlengo notes in her article, "Civilian Threat, the Suburban Citadel, and Atomic Age American Women," that 64 percent of population growth occurred in the suburbs, and out of the thirteen million new home construction projects, eleven million were located in the suburbs.¹¹

Housing trends also underwent a stylistic transformation. Victorian-style homes with several stories and multiple partitioned rooms gave way to single-story ranchers with a more open layout. The open floor plan eased the housewife's ability to tend to her culinary responsibilities while still keeping a close eye on her young children playing in the adjacent living room.¹² Dolores Hayden, another prominent 1980s historian who authored, *Redesigning the American*

Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life, wrote that this quintessential home typified the American Dream complete with its white picket fence, television set, and electric washing machine.¹³

Historians across all decades recognize the implications for women in this patriarchal panorama of the American Dream. A new home in a new community came with the expectation that women would surrender their wartime work and pay to returning servicemen. Many women gave up careers altogether for the life of a wife, mother, and fulltime homemaker. May and historian Douglas Hurt, author of *The Great Plains during World War II*, equally purport that women who held wartime industrial jobs traditionally filled by men accepted massive layoffs and returned to the home or to lower wage, lower skilled jobs.¹⁴ Hayden concurs, adding that most wartime employers immediately terminated their day-care programs, and that the one-time riveters who remained in the workforce became supermarket check-out clerks, maids, and cafeteria workers.¹⁵

Despite this shift in the type of work performed by women during the war's aftermath, historians are careful to acknowledge that the actual number of women in the workforce continued to increase. Meyerowitz notes that the rate of married women in the workforce grew by a staggering 42 percent during the 1950s.¹⁶ Historian Eugenia Kaledin, author of *American Women in the 1950s: Mothers and More*, claims that many women worked to supplement the overall household income and help improve their family's standard of living in connection with the growing consumerist society.¹⁷ Although Kaledin's and May's books vastly differ from each other, May also comments on America's increased spending, primarily on automobiles, recreation, and household appliances, that she attributes to the overall higher median family income.¹⁸ Yet women remained mindful of the fact that their domestic responsibilities trumped any involvement outside the home. Society accepted women workers so long as they never posed a threat to their male breadwinners.

Most historians acknowledge the reversal of women's freedom in the public sector though not all agree on how conscious the women themselves were of the change. Matthews argues that women felt deceived about the rewards of housewifery. She uses the analogy that men who dig ditches are not told that their line of work is glamorous, so they do not hold unrealistic expectations. Housewives, on the other hand, maintained that they were misled into believing falsehoods about the joys of a professional homemaking career, but instead found themselves trapped in a domestic web, disillusioned by their mundane routines.¹⁹ Though Matthews then goes on to discuss the influence of Betty Freidan's *Feminine Mystique*, she is careful to also note Freidan's overall lack of historical analysis and practical implications of female liberation.²⁰

Kaledin dedicates a portion of her book to the stifled education of many women who dropped out of college to get married or those who married immediately after college without time to use their

newly earned degrees for a career. These women claimed that they instead married who they wanted to become; if they studied law in college, they married a lawyer. If they studied medicine in college, they married a doctor.²¹ Still, despite the fact that women in the 1950s suffered from gender discrimination from both the government and society, Kaledin argues that those same women who donned new hats, starched white gloves, and pushed baby carriages, continued to become more aware of their own potential.²²

Other historians are more forgiving of 1950s middle-class women who accepted their plight as subordinate housewives to the male head of household. May and authors Eliza K. Pavalko and Glen H. Elder Jr. draw on primary source responses provided by women who participated in longitudinal studies in the 1950s. May references the Kelly Longitudinal Study (KLS) while Pavalko and Elder dissect the Terman Longitudinal Study (TLS) conducted by Stanford University every five years from 1936-1960 in their article, "Women Behind the Men: Variations in Wives' Support of Husbands' Careers."²³ In both studies, high percentages of women who provided written responses to the open-ended questions indicated that they viewed motherhood and being a loyal and obedient wife as their primary life goal. In the KLS, May observed that women who gave up careers for their families claimed that what they had gained through motherhood far outweighed their career aspirations.²⁴ Interestingly, Pavalko and Elder specifically note one individual in the TLS who chose to have a childless marriage in order to focus on a career in epidemiology but later expressed regret in sacrificing a family.²⁵ Women who chose married life and motherhood over a paying profession not only believed their sole purpose was to raise babies and put dinner on the table, but that their contribution to the American family helped ward off threats to national security.

Immediately after the Allies won World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union plunged into a Cold War that plagued national security with the imminent threat of nuclear war and the spread of communism. A new wave of conservatism swept over national politics. Landon Y.R. Storrs, in his article, "Attacking the Washington 'Femmocracy': Antifeminism in the Cold War Campaign Against 'Communists in Government,'" claims that these new conservatives attacked women by claiming unhealthy and immoral synergies between feminism and communism.²⁶ To contain growing Red Scares on the home front, propagandists supporting the civil defense strategists gave women a new challenge. Instead of working outside the home, they encouraged women to prepare their home and family for an atomic attack. May notes how many women described the professionalization of their homemaker career by learning first aid, fire-fighting, and the art of stocking a bomb shelter with supplies, yet not all women found complacency in homemaking and child rearing.²⁷

Revisionists revisited this same time period over the last two decades of the century. They narrowed in on the women who defied

the norm, or they limited their focus to a single aspect of 1950s women's history, helping to create a more well-rounded and balanced history. The aforementioned Joanne Meyerowitz offers a history unique from the tale of the white, middle-class American housewife. Meyerowitz acknowledges that most other historians emphasize the influence of domestic conformity, the sexist treatment of women in the workplace, and the overall prejudice against their presence in the public sector.²⁸ She argues to the contrary, however, suggesting that, "experts and opinion leaders not only recognized and approved of women's increasing employment but also sought to adjust public opinion and public policy to accommodate women's greater participation in the public sphere."²⁹

Eugenia Kaledin, like Meyerowitz, also attempts to give a voice to the women who struggled to be defined by more than their legacy as mothers. Kaledin does not attempt to argue against the claims made by the above-mentioned authors, but she instead focuses on the women who defied the norm and are noteworthy exceptions to the stereotypes. In a time when many female historians focused on the suffocating housewife soon to be awakened by Betty Freidan's *Feminine Mystique*, Kaledin wrote about the women already liberating themselves. Kaledin does not refute the high marriage and fertility rates nor the limited employment options and wages available to women during the 1950s. Instead, she recognizes the women who struggled to work as authors, artists, and scholars, and fought not only against gender discrimination but also racial discrimination. She concludes that this work outside of the home helped these women maintain the sense of independence and power they once tasted during the war years.³⁰

Modern historians typically conclude their discussions of the 1950s with a foreshadowing of the imminent Women's Liberation Movement. Glenna Matthews mentions a book published in 1941 by Pearl Buck with similar content to that of Betty Freidan's though she attributes the escalating international conflict as an explanation for why the book failed to generate much of a response. By the mid-1950s, however, Freidan's definition of the *Feminine Mystique* as "the problem that has no name" catches the attention of American housewives who can relate on a personal level.³¹ May, on the other hand, concludes that the new wave of 1960s feminism is born not from the young mothers of the late 1940s and early 1950s, but instead from their daughters who rejected their mother's domestic confinement.³² Interestingly, each author presents compelling justifications for both sides, leaving the readers to find their own truths.

From the countless housewives and nameless mothers of the baby boom to renowned figureheads like Eleanor Roosevelt and Rosa Parks, the new voice of 1950s women is one of individualism and diversity. Historians in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s capture the essence of women living in the cities and suburbs during the post World War II years. For most, it was a time of raising children and

coping with common marital and family struggles while others refused to surrender the freedom they discovered while at work during the war. These women left a tremendous legacy for their daughters and granddaughters, and with the diligent work of modern historians, this history with its lessons and values will be preserved for the women of tomorrow.

Notes

- ¹Laura J. Miller, "Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal," *Sociological Forum* 10, no. 3 (September 1995): 401, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/684782> (accessed September 8, 2011).
- ²Joanne Jay Meyerowitz ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 2.
- ³Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 26.
- ⁴Miller, 401.
- ⁵Ibid, 401.
- ⁶May, 41.
- ⁷Emily Yellin, *Our Mother's War: American Women at Home and at the Front during World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 5.
- ⁸Ibid, 5.
- ⁹Glenna Matthews, *"Just a housewife": The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 203.
- ¹⁰Laura Miller, 401.
- ¹¹Kristina Zarlengo, "Civilian Threat, the Suburban Citadel, and Atomic Age American Women," in "Institutions, Regulation, and Social Control," special issue, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 936, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175598> (accessed September 10, 2011).
- ¹²Laura Miller, 401.
- ¹³Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 21.
- ¹⁴R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains during World War II* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 67.
- ¹⁵Hayden, 25.
- ¹⁶Meyerowitz, 86.
- ¹⁷Eugenia Kaledin, *American Women in the 1950s: Mothers and More* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 64.
- ¹⁸May, 158.
- ¹⁹Glenna Matthews, 195.
- ²⁰Ibid, 217-218.
- ²¹Kaledin, 43.
- ²²Ibid, 214.
- ²³Eliza K. Pavalko and Glen H. Elder Jr., "Women Behind the Men: Variations in Wives' Support of Husbands' Careers," *Gender and Society* 7, no. 4 (December 1993): 550-551. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189513> (accessed September 8, 2011).
- ²⁴May, 32.
- ²⁵Pavalko and Elder, 552.
- ²⁶Landon Y.R. Storrs, "Attacking the Washington 'Femmocracy': Antifeminism in the Cold War Campaign Against 'Communists in Government,'" *Feminist Studies* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 125, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20459124> (accessed September 8, 2011).
- ²⁷May, 101.
- ²⁸Meyerowitz, 3.
- ²⁹Ibid, 86.
- ³⁰Kaledin, 212.
- ³¹Matthews, 199.
- ³²May, 197.

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- When not pursuing her passions for history which include volunteering at the National Holocaust Memorial Museum, Corinne works at Orbital Sciences Corporation in Dulles, Virginia. Orbital designs, manufactures, and launches commercial satellites for both international and government customers.*
- When Shakespeare said that "all the world's a stage..." Corinne took him very literally. In her spare time, Corinne's other two passions are theater and traveling. From the glaciers of Alaska to the desert sands of Dubai, Corinne has traveled all over Western Europe and is beginning to explore the far reaches of Asia with Japan being her favorite destination so far. She is also actively involved in her local community theater performing with her husband of seven years in numerous productions.*