



◀ Baby-boomer fads were often based on popular television shows.

WITNESS HISTORY AUDIO

The Latest Fad

As baby boomers went to school, new fads came and went with amazing speed. One such fad revolved around a popular television show about the American folk hero Davy Crockett. Steven Spielberg, who later would become one of Hollywood's most successful movie directors, recalled the craze.

“I was in third grade at the time. Suddenly, the next day, everybody in my class but me was Davy Crockett. And because I didn’t have my coonskin cap and my powder horn, or Old Betsy, my rifle, and my chaps, I was deemed the Mexican leader, Santa Anna. And they chased me home from school until I got my parents to buy me a coonskin cap.”

—Steven Spielberg, recalling the Davy Crockett craze of 1955

Mass Culture and Family Life

Objectives

- Explain why consumer spending increased.
- Discuss postwar changes in family life.
- Describe the rise of new forms of mass culture.

Terms and People

consumerism
median family income
nuclear family

Benjamin Spock
rock-and-roll
Elvis Presley

Why It Matters During the 1950s, the ideal family was one in which men worked and supported their families and women stayed home and reared their children. Television and other forms of mass culture suggested that this ideal was the norm. Whether most American families actually lived like the ones they saw on prime-time television, however, remains unclear. The family values of the 1950s still affect who we are and who we want to be. **Section Focus Question:** How did popular culture and family life change during the 1950s?

The Culture of Consumerism

For much of our history, Americans had been taught to save their money. “A penny saved is a penny earned,” advised Benjamin Franklin. However, as the U.S. economy began to boom in the postwar era, Americans were caught up in a wave of **consumerism**, buying as much as they could, much of it on credit. What accounted for this spending spree?

Spending Is Easy One reason Americans spent more was that they had more money to spend. During the 1950s, **median family income**, or average family income, rose from \$3,319 to \$5,417. The average American family now had twice as much real income as the average family had during the prosperous years of the 1920s. Consumer-oriented companies found new and innovative ways to encourage buying on credit. For example, General Motors advertised

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas Identify postwar changes in daily life and popular culture.

- | |
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| <p>I. The Culture of Consumerism</p> <p>A. Americans spend more</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increased family income 2. |
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its cars with the slogan “Buy Now, Pay Later.” The Diner’s Club introduced the first credit card.

Buying New Conveniences Home appliances topped the list of the goods that Americans bought. Families purchased electric washing machines and dryers, refrigerators and ranges. These labor-saving appliances helped transform housework, lessening the physical demands of everything from washing clothes to preserving foods.

With money to spend, easy credit, and new goods to buy, shopping became a new pastime for Americans. Supermarkets, where customers could buy everything from milk to mops, appeared. Shopping centers sprouted all over suburbia.

One product that Americans bought in record numbers was a television. In 1946, manufacturers produced fewer than 6,000 TV sets. Seven years later, Americans purchased 7 million sets and by the end of the decade, 90 percent of all households owned a television.

✓ **Checkpoint** What were some reasons why consumer spending skyrocketed in the postwar era?

Family Life in the Fifties

During World War II, many women—including married women with children—had gone off to work in factories. In 1943, women made up 25 percent of the workers in the wartime auto industry. With the war’s end, however, most of the women who had entered the workforce returned to being homemakers. Now, a more traditional image of the family took hold, one in which women stayed home and men served as “breadwinners.” Women who wanted a career outside the home faced social pressures to rethink their decisions.

Portraying the “Ideal” Family In the popular magazines of the postwar era, social scientists and other opinion makers described the **nuclear family**, or a household consisting of a mother and father and their children, as the backbone of American society. For the nuclear family to function smoothly, experts claimed, women had to accept their role as homemakers. Television shows and movies made similar assertions. For example, in the 1955 Hollywood movie *The Tender Trap*, actress Debbie Reynolds declared, “A woman isn’t a woman unless she’s been married and had children.”

As the 1950s progressed, however, more women were willing to challenge the view that a woman could not have a career outside the home. By 1960, women held one third of the nation’s jobs. Approximately half of these women workers were married.

Children Are the Focus More so than in the past, family life revolved around children. Not surprisingly, the best-selling book of the era was Dr. **Benjamin Spock’s** *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*. Parents bought and read his book because they wanted expert advice on how to raise their children. Spock emphasized the importance of nurturing children, from their earliest days as infants through their teen years. Mothers, Spock suggested, should not

The Homemaker

The ideal housewife stayed at home and raised the children. She used the latest appliances, dressed well, and took advantage of faster ways to prepare meals. The ad is for a convenience food—rice that can be prepared in a few minutes.



Vocabulary Builder

nevertheless—(nehv er thuh LEHS)

adv. in spite of that; however

Vocabulary Builder

recur—(rih KUHR) *v.* to happen or

occur again, especially after some

lapse of time

worry about spoiling their children because children could not get too much comfort and love. Some criticized Spock for promoting what they called “a permissive culture.” **Nevertheless**, Spock’s book remained extremely popular for several decades.

Another sign of the degree to which family life revolved around children was the amount of money parents spent on their children. Some parents even defended their spending by arguing that such spending guaranteed against the **recurrence** of another depression.

As baby boomers became teens, their impact on the economy and American culture became even more noticeable. While as children they received toys, such as Davy Crockett caps and Barbie dolls, as teens they purchased very expensive items. As *LIFE* magazine observed:

Primary Source


“The time is past when a boy’s chief possession was his bike and a girl’s party wardrobe consisted of a fancy dress worn with a string of dime-store pearls. . . . Today’s teenagers surround themselves with a fantastic array of garish and often expensive baubles and amusements. They own 10 million phonographs, over a million TV sets, 13 million cameras.”

—*LIFE*, August 31, 1959

Celebrating a Religious Revival The 1950s also witnessed a revival of religion in the United States. Organized religious groups became more powerful and more church buildings were built. Regular church attendance rose from about 50 million in 1940 to about 80 million in 1958. The increased number of churches in suburban communities across the country helped to strengthen community ties. The evangelist Billy Graham attracted millions to religious revivals that he held around the nation. Roman Catholic bishop Fulton Sheen effectively used television to reach audiences estimated at 10 million a week. During the 1950s, Congress added the words “In God We Trust” to the dollar bill and “under God,” to the Pledge of Allegiance. These additions were aimed at making clear the contrast between the centrality of religion in American society and the atheist basis of communist societies.

Improved Healthcare Benefits Baby Boomers During the 1950s, American families benefited from numerous advances in medicine. In 1954, Dr. Jonas Salk developed a vaccine against polio, the disease that had struck down Franklin Roosevelt and that, in 1952 alone, had crippled tens of thousands and killed 1,400, mostly children. By 1960, the widespread distribution of Salk’s new vaccine and an oral vaccine developed by Albert Sabin had nearly eliminated the disease.

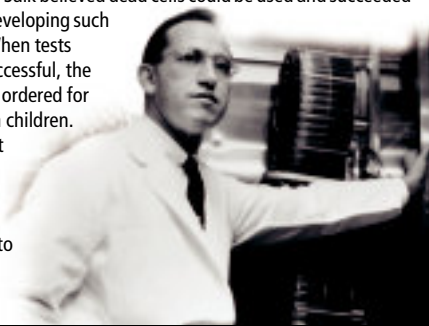
At the same time, antibiotics, such as penicillin, came into widespread use. The antibiotics helped control numerous infectious diseases caused by bacteria, such as whooping cough and tuberculosis. As a result of these medical advances and a better understanding of the importance of diet, children born after 1946 had a longer life expectancy than those born before 1946.

 **Checkpoint** In what ways did family life revolve around children during the 1950s?

HISTORY MAKERS

Jonas Salk (1914–1995)

As a doctor, Salk showed early interest in developing vaccines. In the late 1940s, he turned his attention to polio, which was becoming an alarmingly serious problem. Some researchers thought a polio vaccine would have to use live virus cells, which carried risks. Salk believed dead cells could be used and succeeded in 1952 in developing such a vaccine. When tests proved it successful, the vaccine was ordered for all American children. Eventually, it was used around the world and contributed to eliminating polio.



Television Takes Center Stage

In 1938, when television was still just a curiosity, E. B. White, author of *Charlotte's Web*, wrote that it “is going to be the test of the modern world. . . . We shall stand or fall by the television.” While White’s view may have been exaggerated, clearly television has had an enormous impact on American society.

Between 1945 and 1960, Americans purchased television sets at a faster pace than they had bought either radios or cars during the 1920s. The popularity of this new technology threatened the movie industry because families stayed home to watch TV rather than go out to watch movies at the theater.

● INFOGRAPHIC

BABY-BOOM KIDS

Unlike families in past generations where children were supposed to be seen but not heard, many baby-boom families centered around the children. Dr. Benjamin Spock advised parents to “trust themselves” and not to spank or scold their children. The economy responded to the needs of growing families for housing, clothing, food, and child-friendly entertainment.

▼ *Captain Kangaroo* was a popular children’s television program, while a vacation at Disneyland was a treat for the whole family.

First published in 1946, Dr. Spock’s book on child care is still available.

▲ These parents happily cater to the needs of their child.

▼ Toy sales rose during the 1950s.

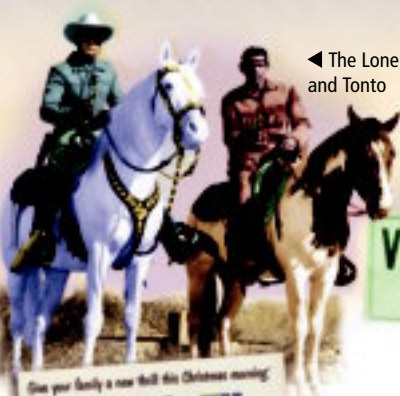


Thinking Critically

- 1. Analyze Information** Why do you think the book by Dr. Spock was a bestseller in the 1950s?
- 2. Draw Conclusions** How did the baby boom affect American society and economy?

A New Entertainment

Each week, families gathered to watch their favorite television shows. Viewers followed the adventures of a masked Lone Ranger and his Indian companion Tonto. The beloved sitcom “I Love Lucy,” starring Lucille Ball, ran for nearly six years. “Beat the Clock,” a popular game show, challenged participants to engage in unusual stunts. Ads such as the one below urged Americans to keep buying televisions.



◀ The Lone Ranger and Tonto



◀ Lucille Ball

▲ Beat The Clock



Although television attracted viewers of all ages, it had a special influence on children. Baby boom children rushed home from school to watch the *Howdy Doody Show* or the *Mickey Mouse Club*. Children also watched hours of cartoons and shows featuring their favorite superheroes, such as the Lone Ranger. Westerns were especially popular during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Among the most memorable shows were sitcoms about families. Fifty million Americans tuned in each week to watch the *I Love Lucy* show, starring the comedic actress Lucille Ball. Other popular family sitcoms included *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Father Knows Best*.

These shows reflected and reinforced the ideal of the 1950s family. None of the family sitcoms had important African American characters. None of the major characters got divorced. Major real-life problems, such as mental illness, alcoholism, and personal depression, rarely, if ever, appeared. Writes David Halberstam, “No family problem was so great that it could not be cleared up within the allotted twenty-two minutes.”

Even before television emerged in the 1950s, a mass national culture had begun to develop in the United States. Nationally broadcast radio programs, Hollywood films, and other forms of popular culture had helped erode distinct regional and ethnic cultures. Television sped up and reinforced this process. Americans in every region of the country watched the same shows and bought the same goods they saw advertised.

Television changed political campaigns. During the 1952 presidential campaign, Americans could see the candidates in action. Usually, candidates with more money could buy more advertising time. The impact of television on elections continues today.



Checkpoint How did television reflect and reinforce the ideal of the nuclear family in the postwar period?

Rock-and-Roll Shakes the Nation


In the summer of 1951, a relatively unknown white disc jockey named Alan Freed began broadcasting what commonly had been called “race” music to listeners across the Midwest. Renaming the music **rock-and-roll**, Freed planted the seed for a cultural revolution that would blossom in the mid-1950s.

Drawing on African American Roots Rock music originated in the rhythm and blues traditions of African Americans. As African Americans began to move north, they brought their musical traditions with them. Independent recording companies began recording rhythm and blues (R&B) music. Rock-and-roll borrowed heavily from rhythm and blues. As Chuck Berry, known as the pioneer of rock-and-roll, put it, “It used to be called boogie-woogie, it used to be called blues, used to be called rhythm and blues. . . . It’s called rock now.”

Attracting a Wider Audience Live performances of rhythm and blues music was long kept separate from whites by Jim Crow laws in the South or by more subtle forms of segregation in the North. Through the radio, it began to attract a wider white audience in the postwar era. For example, a young **Elvis Presley** listened to a Memphis radio station that played African American gospel tunes. He began to integrate those tunes into the music he played. Meanwhile, in the early 1950s, Sam Phillips set up a recording studio in Memphis to record and play the music of some of Memphis’s best African American blues performers, such as B. B. King. One day Phillips heard Presley and almost immediately recognized that he had found the person he had been looking for.

Presley’s arrival set off the new rock craze. His first hit, “Heartbreak Hotel,” sold in the millions and his success sparked popularity for rock music.

Yet, not everyone liked Elvis or the new rock craze. When Ed Sullivan, the host of a famous TV variety show, invited Elvis to sing on his show, he directed cameramen to show Elvis only from the waist up, because many parents objected to Elvis’s gyrating hips and tight pants. Ministers complained about the passions that rock music seemed to unleash among so many youngsters. Congress held hearings on the subversive nature of rock music. Nonetheless, it became a symbol of the emerging youth culture and of the growing power of youth on mass culture.

 **Checkpoint** How did rock-and-roll gain popularity?

Popular Music

The record business boomed during the 1950s. Phonograph records, such as the one shown here, were made from vinyl, a plastic material. Listeners could enjoy nearly 30 minutes of music on each side.



SECTION 3 Assessment

Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice
Web Code: nea-1304

Comprehension

1. Terms and People For each item below, write two or three sentences explaining its significance.

- consumerism
- median family income
- Benjamin Spock
- Elvis Presley

2. **NoteTaking** Reading Skill:

Identify Main Ideas Use your outline about changes in daily life and popular culture to answer the Section Focus Question: How did popular culture and family life change during the 1950s?

Writing About History

3. **Quick Write: Create an**

Annotated Bibliography Choose one topic from this section, such as family life in the 1950s or the impact of suburban growth on the nation. Using the library or the Internet, find three or more sources on your chosen topic. Use these sources to prepare an annotated bibliography in which you record the information each source provides.

Critical Thinking

- 4. Make Comparisons** In what ways was the mood of the 1950s different from the mood of the 1930s?
- 5. Identify Point of View** Why do you think the nuclear family became more important during the 1950s?
- 6. Identify Central Issues** Why was television a better medium than radio for consumerism?