

The American Dream in the Fifties

MAIN IDEA

During the 1950s, the economy boomed, and many Americans enjoyed material comfort.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The “American dream,” a notion that was largely shaped by the 1950s, is still pursued today.

Terms & Names

- conglomerate
- franchise
- baby boom
- Dr. Jonas Salk
- consumerism
- planned obsolescence

One American's Story

Settled into her brand new house near San Diego, California, Carol Freeman felt very fortunate. Her husband Mark had his own law practice, and when their first baby was born, she became a full-time homemaker. She was living the American dream, yet Carol felt dissatisfied—as if there were “something wrong” with her because she was not happy.

A PERSONAL VOICE CAROL FREEMAN

“As dissatisfied as I was, and as restless, I remember so well this feeling [we] had at the time that the world was going to be your oyster. You were going to make money, your kids were going to go to good schools, everything was possible if you just did what you were supposed to do. The future was rosy. There was a tremendous feeling of optimism. . . . Much as I say it was hateful, it was also hopeful. It was an innocent time.”

—quoted in *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History*

After World War II ended, Americans turned their attention to their families and jobs. The economy prospered. New technologies and business ideas created fresh opportunities for many, and by the end of the decade Americans were enjoying the highest standard of living in the world. The American dream of a happy and successful life seemed within the reach of many people.



▲ The dream woman of the 1950s was depicted in advertising and on TV as doing constant housework, but always with a smile.

The Organization and the Organization Man

During the 1950s, businesses expanded rapidly. By 1956, the majority of Americans no longer held blue-collar, or industrial, jobs. Instead, more people worked in higher-paid, white-collar positions—clerical, managerial, or professional occupations. Unlike blue-collar workers, who manufactured goods for sale, white-collar workers tended to perform services in fields like sales, advertising, insurance, and communications.

CONGLOMERATES Many white-collar workers performed their services in large corporations or government agencies. Some of these corporations continued expanding by forming **conglomerates**. (A conglomerate is a major corporation that includes a number of smaller companies in unrelated industries.) For example,

one conglomerate, International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT), whose original business was communications, bought car-rental companies, insurance companies, and hotel and motel chains. Through this diversification, or investment in various areas of the economy, ITT tried to protect itself from declines in individual industries. Other huge parent companies included American Telephone and Telegraph, Xerox, and General Electric.

FRANCHISES In addition to diversifying, another strategy for business expansion—franchising—developed at this time. A **franchise** is a company that offers similar products or services in many locations. (*Franchise* is also used to refer to the right, sold to an individual, to do business using the parent company's name and the system that the parent company developed.) **A**

Fast-food restaurants developed some of the first and most successful franchises. McDonald's, for example, had its start when the McDonald brothers developed unusually efficient service, based on assembly-line methods, at their small drive-in restaurant in San Bernardino, California. They simplified the menu, featured 15-cent hamburgers, and mechanized their kitchen.

Salesman Ray Kroc paid the McDonalds \$2.7 million for the franchise rights to their hamburger drive-in. In April 1955, he opened his first McDonald's restaurant in Des Plaines, Illinois, where he further improved the assembly-line process and introduced the trademark arches that are now familiar all over the world.

MAIN IDEA

Comparing

A How were conglomerates and franchises alike and how were they different?

NOW & THEN

FRANCHISES

In the decades since Ray Kroc opened his first McDonald's restaurant (shown below), franchising has become all but a way of life in the United States. Today, nearly 3,000 franchised companies operate over 500,000 businesses throughout the country. Officials estimate that franchises account for nearly one-third of all U.S. retail sales. American franchises today provide a wide array of goods and services, from car maintenance, to tax services, to hair care.

In an attempt to tap into the international market, hundreds of U.S. companies have established overseas franchises. The franchise with perhaps the greatest global reach is the one that started it all. In addition to its more than 13,000 U.S. franchises, McDonald's now operates over 18,600 franchises in dozens of countries around the world.



A PERSONAL VOICE RAY KROC

“It requires a certain kind of mind to see the beauty in a hamburger bun. Yet is it any more unusual to find grace in the texture and softly curved silhouette of a bun than to reflect lovingly on the . . . arrangements and textures and colors in a butterfly's wings? . . . Not if you view the bun as an essential material in the art of serving a great many meals fast.”

—quoted in *The Fifties*

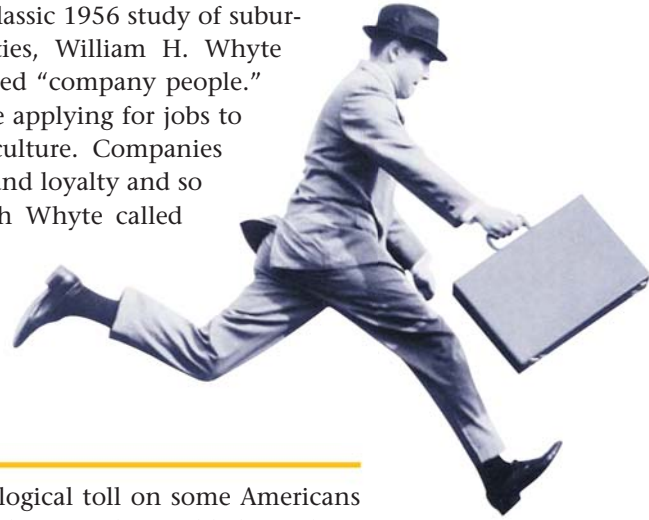
SOCIAL CONFORMITY While franchises like McDonald's helped standardize what people ate, some American workers found themselves becoming standardized as well. Employees who were well paid and held secure jobs in thriving companies sometimes paid a price for economic advancement: a loss of their individuality. In general, businesses did not want creative thinkers, rebels, or anyone who would rock the corporate boat.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

B What effects did the climate in many corporations have on some workers?

In *The Organization Man*, a book based on a classic 1956 study of suburban Park Forest, Illinois, and other communities, William H. Whyte described how the new, large organizations created “company people.” Companies would give personality tests to people applying for jobs to make sure they would “fit in” the corporate culture. Companies rewarded employees for teamwork, cooperation, and loyalty and so contributed to the growth of conformity, which Whyte called “belongingness.” Despite their success, a number of workers questioned whether pursuing the American dream exacted too high a price, as conformity replaced individuality. **B**



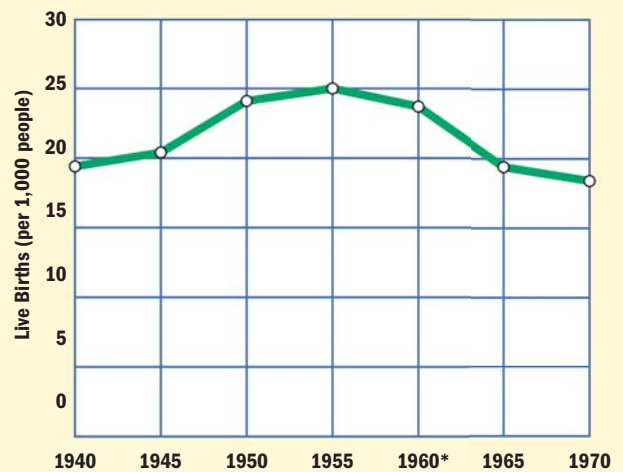
▲ The “organization man” had to step lively to keep up with the Joneses.

The Suburban Lifestyle

Though achieving job security did take a psychological toll on some Americans who resented having to repress their own personalities, it also enabled people to provide their families with the so-called good things in life. Most Americans worked in cities, but fewer and fewer of them lived there. New highways and the availability and affordability of automobiles and gasoline made commuting possible. By the early 1960s, every large city in the United States was surrounded by suburbs. Of the 13 million new homes built in the 1950s, 85 percent were built in the suburbs. For many people, the suburbs embodied the American dream of an affordable single-family house, good schools, a safe, healthy environment for children, and congenial neighbors just like themselves.

THE BABY BOOM As soldiers returned from World War II and settled into family life, they contributed to an unprecedented population explosion known as the **baby boom**. During the late 1940s and through the early 1960s, the birthrate (number of live births per 1,000 people) in the United States soared. At the height of the baby boom, in 1957, one American infant was born every seven seconds—a total of 4,308,000 that year. The result was the largest generation in the nation’s history.

American Birthrate, 1940–1970



*First year for which figures include Alaska and Hawaii.

Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*

SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Graphs

1. What was the overall trend in the birthrate at the start of World War II, and after the war ended?
2. What was the difference in the birthrate between 1960 and 1970?



◀ Some of the 40 million new Americans who were born during the baby boom.

KEY PLAYER



JONAS SALK 1914–1995


One of the most feared diseases in the 1950s was polio, the disease that had partially paralyzed President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Polio afflicted 58,000 American children in 1952, killing some and making others reliant on crutches, wheelchairs, or iron lungs (machines that helped people with paralyzed chest muscles to breathe).

In the early 1950s, Dr. Jonas Salk (at right in photo above) developed an effective vaccine to prevent the disease, and the government sponsored a free inoculation program for children. The vaccine was extremely effective. By 1974, thanks to Salk's vaccine and a new oral vaccine developed by Dr. Albert Sabin, only seven new polio cases were reported in the country.

Contributing to the size of the baby-boom generation were many factors, including: reunion of husbands and wives after the war, decreasing marriage age, desirability of large families, confidence in continued economic prosperity, and advances in medicine.

ADVANCES IN MEDICINE AND CHILDCARE Among the medical advances that saved hundreds of thousands of children's lives was the discovery of drugs to fight and prevent childhood diseases, such as typhoid fever. Another breakthrough came when **Dr. Jonas Salk** developed a vaccine for the crippling disease poliomyelitis—polio.

Many parents raised their children according to guidelines devised by the author and pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock. His *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, published in 1946, sold nearly 10 million copies during the 1950s. In it, he advised parents not to spank or scold their children. He also encouraged families to hold meetings in which children could express themselves. He considered it so important for mothers to be at home with their children that he proposed having the government pay mothers to stay home.

The baby boom had a tremendous impact not only on child care but on the American economy and the educational system as well. In 1958, toy sales alone reached \$1.25 billion. During the decade, 10 million new students entered the elementary schools. The sharp increase in enrollment caused overcrowding and teacher shortages in many parts of the country. In California, a new school opened every seven days. 

WOMEN'S ROLES During the 1950s, the role of homemaker and mother was glorified in popular magazines, movies, and TV programs such as *Father Knows Best* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. *Time* magazine described the homemaker as “the key figure in all suburbia, the thread that weaves between family and community—the keeper of the suburban dream.” In contrast to the ideal portrayed in the media, however, some women, like Carol Freeman, who spoke of her discontentment, were not happy with their roles; they felt isolated, bored, and unfulfilled. According to one survey in the 1950s, more than one-fifth

of suburban wives were dissatisfied with their lives. Betty Friedan, author of the groundbreaking 1963 book about women and society, *The Feminine Mystique*, described the problem.

A PERSONAL VOICE BETTY FRIEDAN


“For the first time in their history, women are becoming aware of an identity crisis in their own lives, a crisis which . . . has grown worse with each succeeding generation. . . . I think this is the crisis of women growing up—a turning point from an immaturity that has been called femininity to full human identity.”

—*The Feminine Mystique*

The number of women working outside the home rose steadily during the decade. By 1960, almost 40 percent of mothers with children between ages 6 and 17 held paying jobs.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

 How did the baby boom affect American life in the 1950s?

Background

The percentage of women college students in the 1950s was smaller than in the 1920s.

MAIN IDEA

Contrasting

D How did women's roles and opportunities in the 1950s differ from women's roles today?

But having a job didn't necessarily contribute to a woman's happiness. A woman's career opportunities tended to be limited to fields such as nursing, teaching, and office support, which paid less than other professional and business positions did. Women also earned less than men for comparable work. Although increasing numbers of women attended four-year colleges, they generally received little financial, academic, or psychological encouragement to pursue their goals. **D**

LEISURE IN THE FIFTIES Most Americans of the 1950s had more leisure time than ever before. Employees worked a 40-hour week and earned several weeks' vacation per year. People owned more labor-saving devices, such as washing machines, clothes dryers, dishwashers, and power lawn mowers, which allowed more time for leisure activities. *Fortune* magazine reported that, in 1953, Americans spent more than \$30 billion on leisure goods and activities.

Americans also enjoyed a wide variety of recreational pursuits—both active and passive. Millions of people participated in such sports as fishing, bowling, hunting, boating, and golf. More fans than ever attended baseball, basketball, and football games; others watched professional sports on television.

Americans also became avid readers. They devoured books about cooking, religion, do-it-yourself projects, and homemaking. They also read mysteries, romance novels, and fiction by popular writers such as Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Daphne du Maurier, and J. D. Salinger. Book sales doubled, due in part to a thriving paperback market. The circulation of popular magazines like *Reader's Digest* and *Sports Illustrated* steadily rose, from about 148 million to more than 190 million readers. Sales of comic books also reached a peak in the mid-1950s.

3-D comics and 3-D movies were two of the many fads that mesmerized the nation in the 1950s. ▶

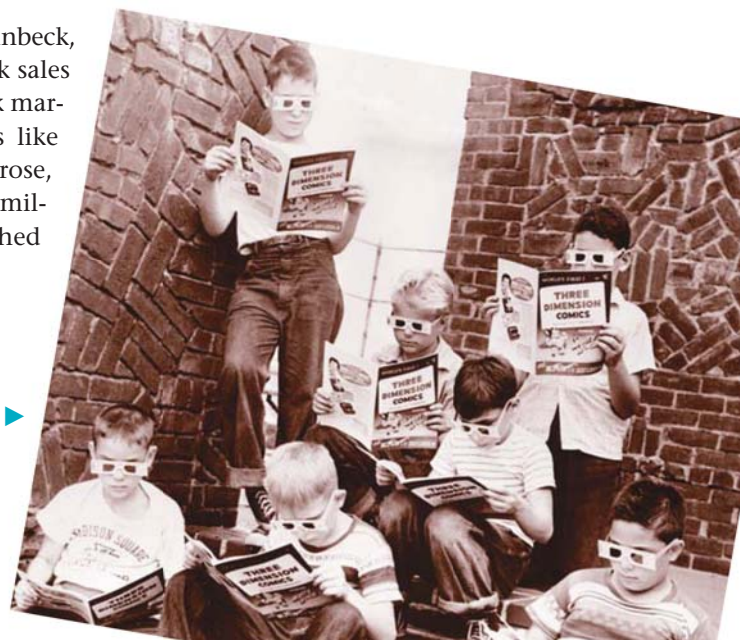
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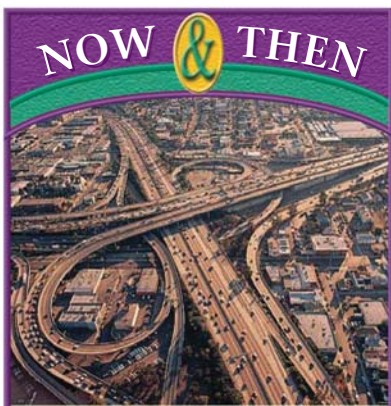
Art

AFTER THE PROM (1957)

The artist, Norman Rockwell, chose an innocent junior-high couple to illustrate the easy emotions and the ordinary events of postwar America.

What does this painting convey about life in the 1950s?





SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AND THE AUTOMOBILE

No state has exemplified automania in the U.S. more than California. By the late 1990s, Californians owned more cars, held more driver's licenses, and traveled more miles on their roads than the people of any other state. The center of this automobile culture is the metropolitan area of Los Angeles.

Contributing to the importance of the automobile is Southern California's suburban lifestyle. This dependence on cars has contributed to problems of air pollution and traffic jams. But, California is addressing these problems by reviving public transportation systems and promoting the use of electric cars that produce no pollution.

The Automobile Culture

During World War II, the U.S. government had rationed gasoline to curb inflation and conserve supplies. After the war, however, an abundance of both imported and domestically produced petroleum—the raw material from which gasoline is made—led to inexpensive, plentiful fuel for consumers. Easy credit terms and extensive advertising persuaded Americans to buy cars in record numbers. In response, new car sales rose from 6.7 million in 1950 to 7.9 million in 1955. The total number of private cars on the road jumped from 40 million in 1950 to over 60 million in 1960.

AUTOMANIA Suburban living made owning a car a necessity. Most of the new suburbs, built in formerly rural areas, did not offer public transportation, and people had to drive to their jobs in the cities. In addition, many of the schools, stores, synagogues, churches, and doctors' and dentists' offices were not within walking distance of suburban homes. **E**

THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM The more cars there were, the more roads were needed. "Automania" spurred local and state governments to construct roads linking the major cities while connecting schools, shopping centers, and workplaces to residential suburbs. The Interstate Highway Act, which President Eisenhower signed in 1956, authorized the building of a nationwide highway network—41,000 miles of expressways. The new roads, in turn, encouraged the development of new suburbs farther from the cities.

Interstate highways also made high-speed, long-haul trucking possible, which contributed to a decline in the commercial use of railroads. Towns along the new highways prospered, while towns along the older, smaller roads experienced hard times. The system of highways also helped unify and homogenize the nation. As John Keats observed

in his 1958 book, *The Insolent Chariots*, "Our new roads, with their ancillaries, the motels, filling stations, and restaurants advertising Eats, have made it possible for you to drive from Brooklyn to Los Angeles without a change of diet, scenery, or culture." With access to cars, affordable gas, and new highways, more and more Americans hit the road. They flocked to mountains, lakes, national parks, historic sites, and amusement parks for family vacations. Disneyland, which opened in California in July 1955, attracted 3 million visitors the next year.

MOBILITY TAKES ITS TOLL As the automobile industry boomed, it stimulated production and provided jobs in other areas, such as drive-in movies, restaurants, and shopping malls. Yet cars also created new problems for both society and the environment. Noise and exhaust polluted the air. Automobile accidents claimed more lives every year. Traffic jams raised people's stress levels, and heavy use damaged the roads. Because cars made it possible for Americans to live in suburbs, many upper-class and middle-class whites left the crowded cities. Jobs and businesses eventually followed them to the suburbs. Public transportation declined, and poor people in the inner cities were often left without jobs and vital services. As a result, the economic gulf between suburban and urban dwellers and between the middle class and the poor widened. **F**

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Causes

E Why did auto sales surge in the 1950s?

Vocabulary

homogenize: to make the same or similar

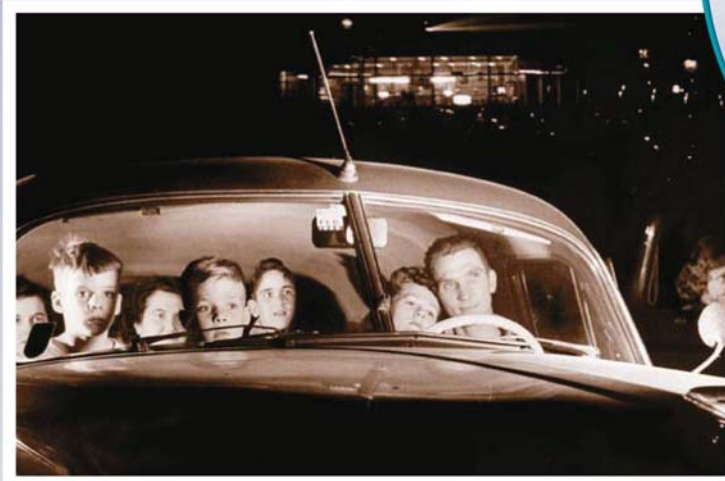
MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

F What positive and negative effects did the mass availability of the automobile have on American life in the 1950s?

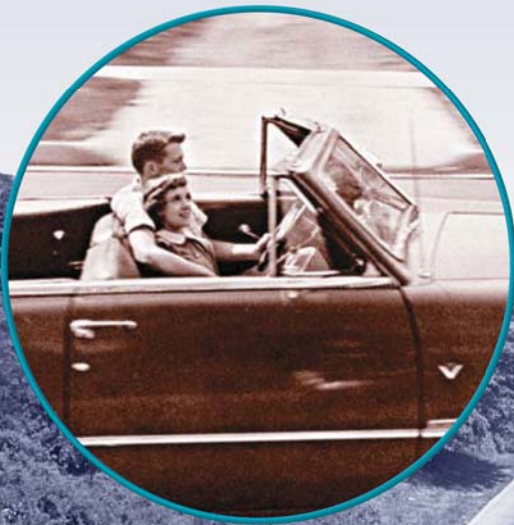
Americans Hit the Road

In the 1950s Americans loved their cars—big, powerful, and flashy. Some car owners spent their leisure time maintaining their automobiles for the daily commute to work or for the annual family vacation on any one of the nation's 22 new interstate highways.



▲ The Drive-In

Young suburban families piled into their cars to see a movie at one of the country's 5,000 or so drive-in theaters.

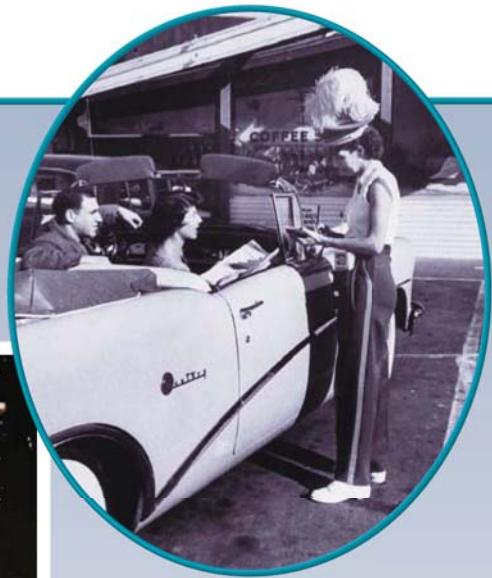
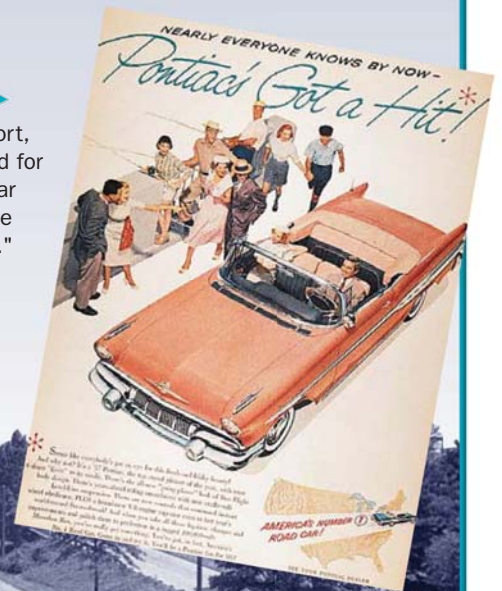


◀ Cruising Teens

Often teenagers drove around familiar neighborhoods ending up at popular teen meeting places to see and be seen.

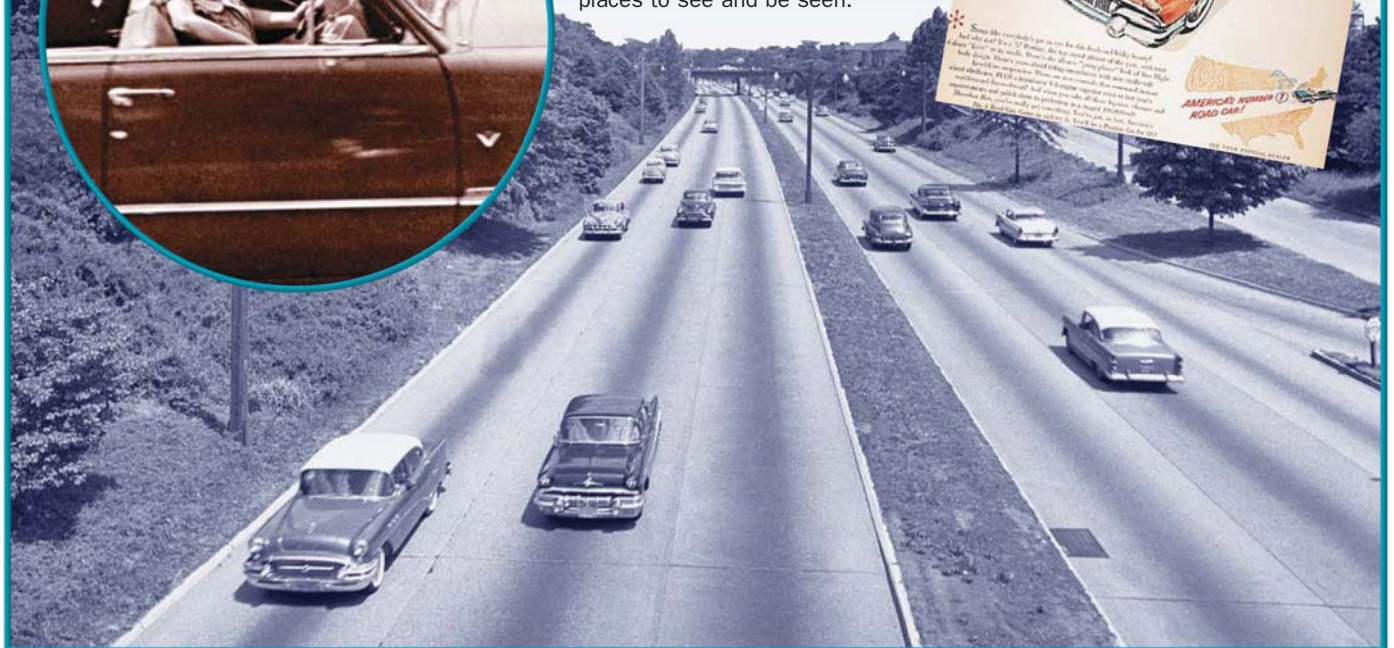
▶ Car Ads

Not just for transport, cars were marketed for fashion and fun. Car ads used words like "fresh" and "frisky."



▲ The Drive-Thru

Fast-food restaurants catered to the car culture by offering drive-up service. Waitresses wearing fancy uniforms or roller skates added to the fun of front-seat dining.



Consumerism Unbound

By the mid-1950s, nearly 60 percent of Americans were members of the middle class, about twice as many as before World War II. They wanted, and had the money to buy, increasing numbers of products. **Consumerism**, buying material goods, came to be equated with success.

NEW PRODUCTS One new product after another appeared in the marketplace, as various industries responded to consumer demand. *Newsweek* magazine reported in 1956 that “hundreds of brand-new goods have become commonplace overnight.” Consumers purchased electric household appliances—such as washing machines, dryers, blenders, freezers, and dishwashers—in record numbers.

With more and more leisure time to fill, people invested in recreational items. They bought televisions, tape recorders, and the new hi-fi (high-fidelity) record players. They bought casual clothing to suit their suburban lifestyles and power lawn mowers, barbecue grills, swimming pools, and lawn decorations for their suburban homes.

PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE In addition to creating new products, manufacturers began using a marketing strategy called **planned obsolescence**. In order to encourage consumers to purchase more goods, manufacturers purposely designed products to become obsolete—that is, to wear out or become outdated—in a short period of time. Carmakers brought out new models every year, urging consumers to stay up-to-date. Because of planned obsolescence, Americans came to expect new and better products, and they began to discard items that were sometimes barely used. Some observers commented that American culture was on its way to becoming a “throwaway society.” **G**

BUY NOW, PAY LATER Many consumers made their purchases on credit and therefore did not have to pay for them right away. The Diner’s Club issued the first credit card in 1950, and the American Express card was introduced in 1958. In addition, people bought large items on the installment plan and made regular payments over a fixed time. Home

mortgages (loans for buying a house) and automobile loans worked the same way. During the decade, the total private debt grew from \$73 billion to \$179 billion. Instead of saving money, Americans were spending it, confident that prosperity would continue.

THE ADVERTISING AGE The advertising industry capitalized on this runaway consumerism by encouraging even more spending. Ads were everywhere—in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television, and on billboards along the



▲ In the 1950s, advertisers made “keeping up with the Joneses” a way of life for consumers.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Causes

G How did manufacturers influence Americans to become a “throwaway society”?

highways—prompting people to buy goods that ranged from cars to cereals to cigarettes. Advertisers spent about \$6 billion in 1950; by 1955, the figure was up to \$9 billion. Since most Americans had satisfied their basic needs, advertisers tried to convince them to buy things they really didn't need.

A PERSONAL VOICE VANCE PACKARD

“On May 18, 1956, *The New York Times* printed a remarkable interview with a young man named Gerald Stahl, executive vice-president of the Package Designers Council. He stated: ‘Psychiatrists say that people have so much to choose from that they want help—they will like the package that hypnotizes them into picking it.’ He urged food packers to put more hypnosis into their package designing, so that the housewife will stick out her hand for it rather than one of many rivals.

Mr. Stahl has found that it takes the average woman exactly twenty seconds to cover an aisle in a supermarket if she doesn't tarry; so a good package design should hypnotize the woman like a flashlight waved in front of her eyes.”

—*The Hidden Persuaders*

More and more, ad executives and designers turned to psychology to create new strategies for selling. Advertisers appealed to people's desire for status and “belongingness” and strived to associate their products with those values.

Television became a powerful new advertising tool. The first one-minute TV commercial was produced in 1941 at a cost of \$9. In 1960, advertisers spent a total of \$1.6 billion for television ads. By 2001, a 30-second commercial during the Superbowl cost an advertiser \$2.2 million. Television had become not only the medium for mass transmission of cultural values, but a symbol of popular culture itself.

SECTION 2

ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- conglomerate
- franchise

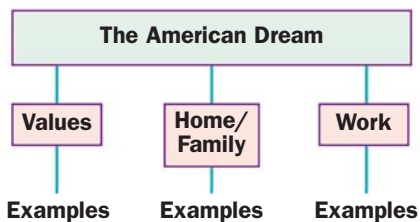
- baby boom
- Dr. Jonas Salk

- consumerism
- planned obsolescence

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

In a graphic organizer like the one below, list examples of specific goals that characterized the American dream for suburbanites in the 1950s.



What do you think the most important goal was?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. ANALYZING EFFECTS

In what ways do you think current environmental consciousness is related to the “throwaway society” of the 1950s? Support your answer.

Think About:

- the purchasing habits of 1950s consumers
- the effects of planned obsolescence
- today's emphasis on recycling

4. EVALUATING

Do you think that the life of a typical suburban homemaker during the 1950s was fulfilling or not? Support your answer.



5. INTERPRETING VISUAL SOURCES

This ad is typical of how the advertising industry portrayed housewives in the 1950s. What message about women is conveyed by this ad?

The Road to Suburbia

“Come out to Park Forest where small-town friendships grow—and you still live so close to a big city.” Advertisements like this one for a scientifically planned Chicago suburb captured the lure of the suburbs for thousands of growing families in the 1950s. The publicity promised affordable housing, congenial neighbors, fresh air and open spaces, good schools, and easy access to urban jobs and culture. Good transportation was the lifeline of suburban growth a half century ago, and it continues to spur expansion today.



Chicago's COMPLETELY PLANNED Suburb

SHARED PRIVACY ▶

By 1952, development in Park Forest, Illinois had expanded to include both low-cost rental units and single-family homes. All the streets were curved to slow traffic, present a pleasing sweep of space, and give residents maximum privacy and space for yards.

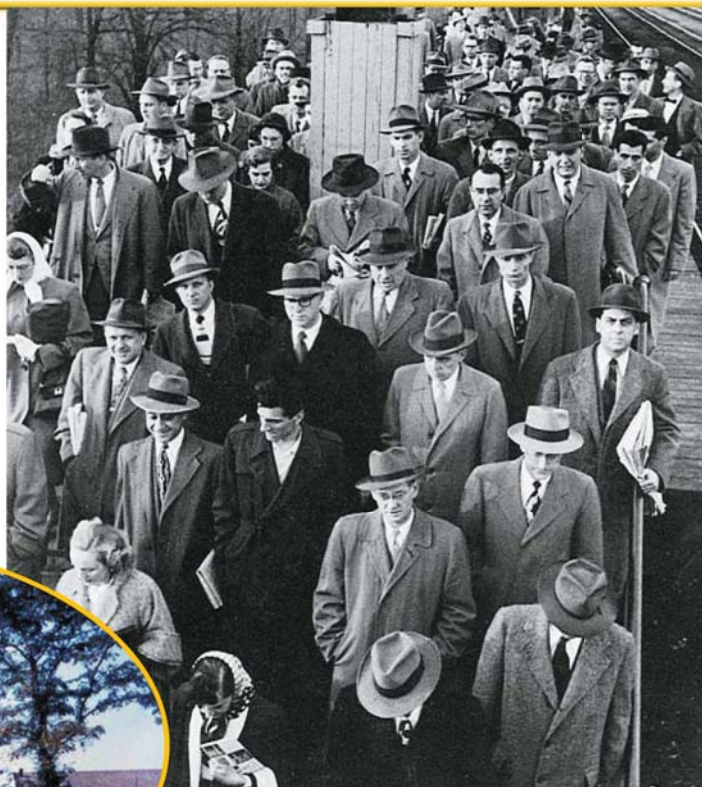


1 WHERE THE 'BURBS ARE

Park Forest was planned from its conception in 1945 to be a “complete community for middle-income families with children.” The setting was rural—amidst cornfields and forest preserves about 30 miles south of Chicago. But it was convenient to commuter lines, like the Illinois Central (IC) Railroad, and to major roads, such as Western Avenue.

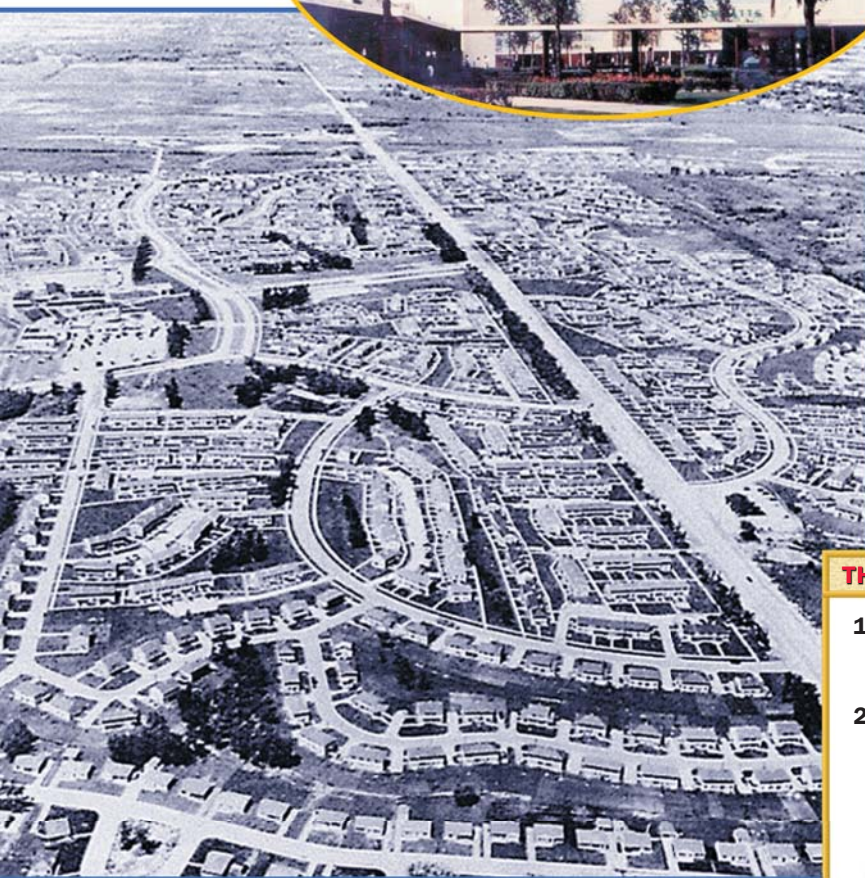
2 THE COMMUTER CRUSH

Men commuted to work on the IC railroad, while their wives usually stayed home to take care of the children, who thrived in Park Forest's safe, wholesome family environment.



3 SHOPPING CENTERS

Consumerism became a driving force in the 1950s, and Park Forest kept up with the trend. The central shopping center served the community well until the late 1960s. When Interstate 57 was built, a mammoth mall, built just off the highway, caused the original shopping area to decline. Park Forest is still struggling to revive its central shopping area.



THINKING CRITICALLY

- Analyzing Patterns** How did the availability of transportation influence the creation and ongoing development of Park Forest?
- Creating a Database** Pose a historical question about a suburb near you. Collect statistics about changes in population, living patterns, income, and economic development in that suburb. Use those statistics to create a database that will help answer your questions.



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R33.



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