The Great Depression and World War II placed strong limits on the degree to which “proper” family life could be lived out by large numbers of people. It was not until the post-World War II period that the ideal became a real possibility for the masses. Most basically, the great economic boom of the 1950s made for an increase in real wages. It made also possible substantial amounts of government spending: on the GI Bill\(^1\), on sewer\(^2\) and highway construction, and on the extensive subsidization\(^3\) of home mortgages\(^4\). These factors, combined with the savings that many Americans had been able to generate during the war years, contributed to massive housing constructions; the idea of a “home of one’s own” containing only one’s spouse and children came to seem highly desirable to many. 

What was new was not only that wide segments of the population were coming to believe in the desirability of living only with spouse and children; also new were many of the expectations people held about such a family was to be about. While the Victorian ideal of domesticity included wife and mother at home, it portrayed her household activities in very different ways from the ideal of the 1950s. A notion of woman as moral guardian of the hearth\(^5\) who left her more practical tasks to servants gave way to an ideal of woman who was morally and psychologically fulfilled throughout housework and child-rearing. The family became seen as the site of leisure and consumption where, ideally, leisure activities were carried out together.


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1 GI Bill: government programme helping WWII veterans to get access to higher education and find jobs.
2 Sewer: égout
3 Subsidization: subventionnement
4 Mortgage: crédit immobilier
5 Hearth = home
Traditional Families
GROUP TWO

Kathy Henry, a native of Chicago, mother and freelance writer, draws a portrait of the 1950s American nuclear family.

When looking back at past eras, the 1950s is looked upon by some as an idyllic time in American history. The nuclear family headed by a male breadwinner was the desired norm and television shows such as Father Knows Best and I Love Lucy were popular. However there was a dark underside during this era. Women were treated like second-class citizens and some were living unhappily married because their financial and educational options were limited. [...] Several factors led to the forming of the nuclear family. By the end of the 1940s, the divorce rate dropped sharply; the age of marriage fell to a 100-year low; and the birth rate soared. Women dropped out of the workforce as soon as they became pregnant and some young women had two or more children in diapers at once. Also during this time, the education gap between young middle-class men and women increased and job segregation for working women and men peaked. Limited educational and job opportunities for women made them more dependent on marriage for their financial well-being.

Young, newly married couples were encouraged to sever their family ties and put all their emotional and financial eggs in the small basket of the immediate nuclear family. Women were told by experts that all their energies should be used for their husbands and children, not aging parents and other relatives. [...] The role of the “real” woman was to have no interest in a higher education or a career and women were taught by these experts to pity women who had the nerve to want a life beyond being a wife and mother. [...] The concept of family has changed and sometimes it was for the best, sometimes for the worst. Although women have more rights, divorce is commonplace in our current society and many children live in one-parent households. Women are still discriminated against in American society and some of us still do the majority of household work regardless of how many hours we work per week or if we have a house-husband. But we now have opportunities that would not have been imagined fifty years ago. Children do not have to see their mother treated like chattel and we almost had a female President of the United-States. Nothing remains the same -- ever. The constantly changing landscape of the American family owes a lot to the women of the 1950s.


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6 Soar (vb)= go up rapidly
7 Diaper= couche
8 sever (vb)= cut
9 Chattel = possession
10 Owe (vb)= devoir
An American woman is looking back on the education she received from her Japanese mother and her American father, who was a G.I.

Like any good girl, I wore dresses when I wanted to wear jeans. [...] When the boys in my class yelled out answers, I stayed quiet. I tried as hard as I could not to be an inconvenience to anyone, at least not in a way that anyone would find out about.

In my memories of childhood, I remembered my mother always being present, whether she had really been there or not. It was her voice that was always there, whispering or shouting in my subconscious, tenacious as Jiminy Cricket. Even now, I always paused before I acted, to hear what she had to say, sometimes not hearing her until it was too late. “That no good. You baka-tare or what?” (baka-tare means “stupid”). Or more rarely, “Good girl, Suiko-chan”.

When I was a child, I would do anything to hear the latter. I tiptoed\(^{11}\) around my mother and her constant exhaustion. I feared if she got angry enough, her heart would stop. Clean the bathroom while she was gone, diet down to sylphlike\(^{12}\) size, play the perfect sonata on the piano. “I wish I play\(^{13}\) the piano”, Mom would sigh, and I felt victorious. I only wanted to see her approving nod and hear that statement. Finally I had done something right.

When I was fourteen, our relationship began its shift, a moving of tectonic plates that never fit together correctly again. It began with my subscription to *Young Miss* magazine. *Young Miss* sounded prim and proper\(^{14}\), my parents thought. But eventually Dad began looking at the magazine covers and what was inside. He tore out the pages I wasn’t allowed to read. “This is censorship!” I said to my mother on the afternoon I discovered the deceit.

“Daddy knows what’s bad”, Mother said, indifferent to my red face and indignant tone. How could she calmly stand in the kitchen, drying dishes with a too-wet dish towel, when her own daughter was being discriminated against? [...] “It’s not fair”, I said, unable to articulate any better at that age. What else could I expect? My father wouldn’t let me join Girl Scouts -- he said they promoted feminist values. He probably wished women still wore girdles\(^{15}\) and gloves and left calling cards when they drove around in their horse-drawn carriages. But my mother -- why wouldn’t my mother take my side?

Margaret Dilloway, *How to be an American Housewife*, 2010

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\(^{11}\) Tiptoe (vb)= *marcher sur la pointe des pieds*

\(^{12}\) Sylphlike (adj)= slim

\(^{13}\) I wish I played

\(^{14}\) Prim and proper (exp)= appropriate and sensible

\(^{15}\) Girdle (n)= corset