Courtship in the 1950s

American Decades, 2001

Younger Marriages

During the 1950s Americans were marrying at a younger age than they had in generations. As Brett Harvey reported in The Fifties: A Woman's Oral History, "the median marriage age dropped from 24.3 to 22.6 for men [during the decade], and from 21.5 to 20.4 for women." Women were more likely to marry in their teens than were men: by 1959, 47 percent of all brides were younger than nineteen. This trend was a continuation of the marriage boom of the late 1940s, which was originally thought to be a temporary response by young Americans to the end of the war. By the 1950s, however, the trend seemed to be longer-lived, and it had the endorsement of many of the nation's experts. As Dr. David R. Mace, professor of human relations at Drew University, wrote in Woman's Home Companion in 1949, "When two people are ready for sexual intercourse at the fully human level they are ready for marriage—and they should marry. Not to do so is moral cowardice. And society has no right to stand in their way." The trend toward earlier marriage tended to reinforce itself: young people who waited longer than everyone else to marry might miss their chance.

Early Courtship

As Americans married at an earlier age, it was necessary for them to get an earlier start on dating. By 1956, as Phyllis McGinley wrote in Good Housekeeping, younger dating had gotten a little ridiculous: "pushed and prodded and egged on by their mothers or the PTA or scoutmasters, sixth-grade children are now making dates on the telephone and ineptly jitterbugging together every weekend evening." Earlier, in 1949, anthropologist Margaret Mead suggested that parents supported preteen dating so that they could influence their child's choice of a mate. In any event, as Beth L. Bailey noted in From Front Porch to Back Seat, "Thirteen-year-olds who did not yet date were called 'late bloomers.'"

Going Steady

As teenagers reached high-school age they tended to pair off into "steady" dating partners. This contradicted the dating practices their parents followed when they were young. The popular young people of the preceding few generations "played the field" more, having many dates with a variety of their peers. "Going steady" symbolized an intention to marry. But by the 1950s, as a poll in 1959 indicated, nearly three-quarters of all high-school students supported the idea of dating only one person at a time, and most of them probably had no serious intention of marrying their current sweethearts.

Dating Rules

Most communities of teenagers had precise rules of conduct for "steadies" to follow. Boys were expected to call and see their girlfriends a certain number of times a week. Neither boy nor girl could date anyone else, and each had to inform the other of any plans. In most places steadies were expected to make some sort of outward show of their commitment to each other, as with a ring in marriage. Rings for steadies were popular too; other popular tokens were ID bracelets and matching "steady jackets."

Generation Gap

Going steady contributed to the generation gap that widened increasingly during the decade. Parents feared, probably correctly, that steady dating led to a greater degree of sexual familiarity between partners. In direct contrast to their children's attitudes, two-thirds of adults in 1955 felt that high-school students should not limit themselves to dating one person. Written agreements—compacts—between groups of parents and groups of teens in communities around the country were popular ways to calm parents' concerns about unchaperoned socializing. Teens would agree to rules of proper and improper behavior for parties or dating, and parents would agree to be supportive with allowances, transportation, and respectful attitudes.

Sources:

Beth L. Bailey, From Front Porch to Back Seat (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988);