

## The Evolution of Professions for Women from Occupations for Women in the 1950s

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. . [Y]ou will be amused that when Mr. Dulles said goodbye to me this morning he said 'I feel I must tell you that when you were appointed I thought it terrible & now I think your work here has been fine!' So - against the odds the women inch forward, but I'm rather old to be carrying on the fight . . . .

Eleanor Roosevelt to Joseph Lash, February 13, 1946<sup>1</sup>

The chief responsibility of the Caucasian American middle-class 1950's woman was to endeavor to be, in both appearance and comportment, the perfect housewife. This included being an omnipotent mother, facilitating their son's education and encouraging curiosity and hard work while molding daughters into unassertive, mild mannered and socially mediating behaviors. As the children matured, men were able to attend well-funded schools and pursue any occupation they wished, while women's pursuit of employment in the professional sphere was not encouraged. This patriarchal ideology resulted in a narrowed set of expectations and opportunities for women. Despite the distinct separation between women and men, women remained indispensable and made significant progress towards equality during the later half of the decade.

A 1950's education in proper behavior for young girls began at home. Mothers instructed their daughters in much the same fashion that they themselves had been raised,

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph P. Lash Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

with emphasis on being cute and non-threatening. Women were expected to limit their topics of conversation and not to demonstrate much intellectualism. Although people in general were admittedly more decorous in the 1950s than they are today, with this came a kind of compartmentalization that was so restrictive people were limited first by gender and then by other criteria. A woman's role was clearly defined:

Have dinner ready. Prepare yourself. Touch up your makeup, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people. Be a little gay, a little more interesting. Clear the clutter, run a dust cloth along the tables.

Prepare the children: Take a few minutes to wash the children's hands and faces, comb their hair, and if necessary change their clothes. They are God's creatures and he would like to see them playing the part.

Minimize all noise... Eliminate the noise of the washer, dryer, dishwasher or vacuum. Try to encourage the children to be quiet.

Some Don'ts: Don't greet him with problems or complaints. Don't complain if he is late for dinner. Arrange his pillow and offer to take off his shoes.

Speak in a low, soft, soothing and pleasant voice.<sup>2</sup>

By the time young girls reached school-going age, much of what was to be their routine as an adult had already been modeled to them, and so the foundations for the perpetuation of this type of social arrangement had been laid. Young women did not question their position as a matter of etiquette. They did what they could to please their parents, and expected that their lives and duties would proceed in a most traditional manner. That the woman's place was in the home went unchallenged for much of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although during World War II women had entered the workforce to fulfill the responsibilities of men who were in the military, the positions that the war had created had been made redundant by the mid 1950's, and the returning male workforce also

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<sup>2</sup> Housekeeping Monthly May 13<sup>th</sup> 1955.

needed jobs. When soldiers returned home they resumed their usual occupations if able, and for the most part, women resumed theirs. Additionally, the postponement of having children during the war resulted in a huge population increase afterward, which dubbed the children of this era the “baby boomers”. During the escalation to war, the presence of women in the workforce had been welcomed. Indeed, their contributions had been recognized as invaluable. However, postwar attitudes towards women were indefatigably limiting, with an increased focus on childrearing. Despite these fluxes in societal opinion, in 1948 about twenty five percent of married women had jobs, this number steadily rising to nearly forty percent of the same population at the end of the 1950s. Even though women had proved their marketability, society still defined the ideal mother as one who did not work outside of the home, and dedicated herself to raising children<sup>3</sup>.

Despite the obstacles that faced them, women of this era displayed the kind of tenacity and resiliency required to start a revolution. Encouraged by wartime propaganda, nearly eight million women began working during the war<sup>4</sup>. Rosie the Riveter was constructed as an attractive yet strong working woman with a can-do attitude. While men fought the war abroad, women ran their households on rations, sending their children to federally funded daycare programs so that they were able to do both their husband’s work and bidding. The changing nature of women’s roles led to separation and a culture of women who came together, united in their disorientation. Popular magazines illustrated women as rushing home after work to put on the ruffled gingham printed dress and high heels which symbolized the quintessence of femininity in middle class America during the 1950s. The image of Rosie the Riveter was decidedly

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<sup>3</sup> John M. Murren , et. Al., Liberty, Equality, Power A History of the American People p. 1033-1034

<sup>4</sup> David Halberstam, Summer of '49. p 588

contradictory to the pinup images that the soldiers had plastered on the walls of their overseas barracks. Rosie stood, the empowered female caricature, able to assist the United States in its pursuit of foreign victory. Interestingly, the American political wartime machine propelled both the men away at war and the women who supported them with such bravado and propaganda that both sides were rather disoriented and not sure of their identities by the end of the war.

Doreen Kossove was a student at Syosset High School, located on Long Island, New York, in 1958. In present day, Syosset High School is known as an academic high school where the SAT scores are higher than the state and national average, forty students are admitted to the Ivy League each year and a reported ninety-nine percent of students there pursue higher education upon graduation<sup>5</sup>. It is also the only high school for residents of the Syosset Central School District. In 1958, New York allowed select public high schools to accept or reject potential students on the basis of academic ability. This not only resulted in an influx of brighter students, but, “got the brighter or more academic kids congealed in one class<sup>6</sup>”, and the faculty started developing extra matter for the accelerated classes. The increased academic fervor among the students led to the formation of various clubs, one of which was the foreign policy panel. When the students involved in this panel were required to set up an activity, a foreign policy conference seemed to be the most engaging idea, and students started organizing it. One of the local benefactresses to the high school was also somewhat of a socialite, since she had been born into an established family who had money. The benefactress’ family was

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<sup>5</sup> On-line, Available from Internet, <http://syosseths.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Doreen Kossove, 2007, *My Dinner with Eleanor Roosevelt*, 1958.

also responsible for the burgeoning suburbs that were taking the place of dilapidated potato farms. This woman was a personal friend of Eleanor Roosevelt's, and when asked to attend the conference, she not only accepted the invitation, but brought Sir Senerate Ratnakiriti Gunawardene with her. Sir Senerate was the Ambassador of Ceylon to the United States and Chairperson of the United Nation's Commission on Human Rights at the time. Eleanor Roosevelt was the wife of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, President of the United States of America from 1933-1945. The sudden announcement of the creation of the United Arab Emirates the week before the conference made it timely, and the announcement that Eleanor Roosevelt was to attend drew a large crowd.

Doreen Kossove, along with the other members of the foreign policy panel, was invited to have dinner with Roosevelt, Sir Senerate, and an unnamed benefactress to the school. The dinner was elegant, and was held at the benefactress' house. Roosevelt, the former Founding Chairperson of the United Nations' Commission on Human Rights, was also the author of the newspaper column, "My Day", which was nationally syndicated with an audience of 4,034,552<sup>7</sup>. Kossove's account of the evening is titled "My dinner with Eleanor Roosevelt, 1958" and it explicitly illustrates how women were still being groomed to create a family but not a career in the late 1950's. She describes how women were rigidly groomed for marital success in the 50's, how not much emphasis was placed on professions for women, and that while it seemed that women were being politically empowered, they were in fact not being taken seriously. Regardless of women earning the right to vote and other groundbreaking achievements championed by the women's

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<sup>7</sup> On-Line, available at <http://www.nps.gov/archive/elro/who-is-er/q-and-a/q30.htm>. Accessed April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

suffrage movement, society still recognized women for their reproductive potential and little else.

I do remember very vividly what I had to have through my mother – The Dress, I had to dress appropriately. I had to have The Right Shoes and The Handbag and these were assembled and I had a Beauty Parlor appointment for The Hairdo... No one said, ‘Eleanor Roosevelt is coming, let’s find out about the woman’, No, it was more like you’ve got to be dressed appropriately, behave properly, and have your hair set.<sup>8</sup>”

The 1950s Beauty Parlor was a place where teenage girls were taken two or three times a year to have their hair permed. Having a “hairdo” styled was a special occasion, and Doreen remembers this one clearly. She had been dropped off only to be ignored, at length, by the hairdresser and his client. She was a loud, large woman, completely self-absorbed, obviously lower middle class, a ‘matron’. He was a portly man, gushing over her, and she was gushing back, and the whole incident was sickening because it was quite clear that each was attempting to garner some sort of favor with the other. It got later and later, and eventually Doreen demanded to be attended to, she proclaimed, “I am having dinner with Eleanor Roosevelt and I am going to be late”, quite firmly. Suddenly, she became visible. The other client remarked that she had a grandson who she would like to introduce, and at the mention of this Doreen excused herself, saying that she was busy right now, meaning forever, but not saying it explicitly because being female, “You had to be nice and sweet<sup>9</sup>”.

When Doreen finally did arrive at the dinner, the other guests were already seated. For a woman of the time, being delayed at the Beauty Parlor was apparently an acceptable excuse for tardiness, even in such distinguished company. The students were

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<sup>8</sup> Kossove. 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

all very well middle class cultured and on their best behavior. Doreen was completely in awe, noticing that the company provided such a stark contrast to the hairdresser and the matron, “It was just so different from listening to the hairdresser. And they weren’t fat, either.”<sup>10</sup> The adults at the dinner were courteous and conducted a light conversation that did not call upon any of the students individually, yet it did not exclude the students, either.

The announcement that the Ambassador to the United States from Ceylon, Sir Senerate Ratnakiriti Gunawardene, was to be addressed simply as “Sir Senerate”, was decidedly nontraditional. This proved to be an eye opening window into another world for Doreen. This illumination of another culture was inspiring. This was a culture where she was not bound by 1950s middle class upbringing that felt so restrictive and had been so unrelenting. Doreen acknowledges that in many ways, she felt that meeting Eleanor Roosevelt in this circumstance had had a profound affect on her.

It was a combination of many things, including Sir Senerat, and the growing appreciation of a wider world where The Dress, The Hairdo and The Handbag are not a reason nor a necessity of a Ritual for a life, or even a significant action. It was the beginning of acknowledging a different world, one in which how things are done and why things are done and where the actions came from are important and one whose motives are less tawdry<sup>11</sup>.

The notion of women contributing in such a meaningful way to society was presented in a very real, tangible and accessible portrait that evening. And while Doreen Kossove began her thinking about the roles that women were assigned, it becomes clear that Eleanor Roosevelt had already had many of these thoughts. Thirty years prior to this

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<sup>10</sup> Kossove. 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

meeting, in her 1928 publication, “Women Must Learn to Play the Game as Men Do”, Roosevelt wrote that while women had been voting for ten years, they have not achieved actual political equality with men. Though women are somewhat included in the political stage, they are never employed as efficacious human beings, but rather as subordinates who should be humored. She notes that only if a political party is met with stiff opposition would they allow a female representative to campaign, so that when the inevitable loss came, it could be blamed on her sex. Most of the women involved in politics in the early twentieth century are voluntary, unpaid workers who were able to, “find in their labor their own reward”<sup>12</sup>. She notes that women had no power over national political affairs. As if fulfilling a quota, women were assigned the “detail work”, the work which bored the men. In this way they were excluded from any real participation, simply going through clerical motions in support of a male agenda. The same was true for women at home. In the same article, Eleanor Roosevelt speaks of the popular conception of the time that men did not marry women who displayed their intelligence.

However, “Eleanor Roosevelt was not a pretty woman, although she photographed worse than she looked in person.” And yet Roosevelt was the former first lady, she had been married to the former President of the United States! By 1958, Eleanor Roosevelt was famous for her humanitarian efforts and achievements; she was an institution in her own right. Doreen gives an opinion about the former first lady’s marriage in retrospect:

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<sup>12</sup> Roosevelt, Eleanor, 1928. Women Must Learn to Play the Game as Men Do. The Red Book Magazine, April 1928, no.6.

Eleanor Roosevelt was probably an unbelievable effective helpmeet for Franklin Roosevelt in terms of her thoughts and her abilities – in terms of their loving each other I think she had an incredible amount of strength to deal with what was their personal life which I will not get into, and which I didn't know about then but know more of now"<sup>13</sup>.

In her articles, Eleanor Roosevelt recalls that in her youth she knew women who hid their degrees from their suitors as if they were an extension of some humiliating character flaw, that somehow by denying their education the women might marry. She furthers the cause of the women's suffrage movement by noting that any potential female political candidate must outperform her male counterparts, because her audience is reflecting on her entire gender, and consequently alert to perceived inadequacies, when she acts.

Women in the 1950's were stereotyped as being meek and unmotivated and had been deeply conditioned to emulate the acceptable representation of femininity that society had created. Women were groomed for marriage and to this end, acceptable behaviors were applauded, other types of behavior deplored. Although young people have always been busy, "With whatever has been around that isn't the most terribly self-destructive thing possible"<sup>14</sup>, premarital sex was simply not supposed to happen. The Pill was only introduced as a reliable form of birth control in 1960, and since premarital sex *did* happen, despite society's impingements; unwed pregnant girls who did not immediately marry were shipped off to homes for unwed mothers where they were cared for by Catholic nuns. Commonly practiced methods of birth control of the time were the Rhythm and Withdrawl Methods. Kossove recounts how one of her friends from college

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<sup>13</sup> Kossove, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Kossove, 2007.

was caught stealing a diamond engagement ring from another one of the students, and when questioned said that she needed the money for an abortion<sup>15</sup>.

The ideal appearance of a woman was that they were always impeccably groomed with their hair set, clothes pressed. Women should always display a mild-mannered temperament and impress others with a sweet disposition.

Female film stars of the 1950s defied the stereotype of women as fragile and complacent. Marilyn Monroe was the antithesis of a typical 50's housewife, there was no mention of domesticity made, and she flaunted her talents and basked in the attention that they garnered. Monroe clearly showed that femininity was not defined by the apron, unless one was nude underneath. The music business had been mostly male dominated, but women like Patti Page and Connie Francis helped mold an industry that accommodated women. There were few successful female authors at the time. Edna Farber's "Giant" is the only bestseller written by a woman in the 1950s.

Fuelled by the insurgence of pressure for girls to look a certain way and behave predictably, Hollywood's popularity created a new set of pressures for young women of the time,

It was a time when girls were supposed to look like Tuesday Weld, one was supposed to have a figure like Tuesday Weld, hair was to be curled, one should have a nice short nose, even skin tone, be blonde and blue eyed if possible and have a nice hourglass figure"<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Kossove, 2007.

Ironically, although Tuesday Weld symbolized the ideal American female in appearance, her family claims that she suffered a nervous breakdown at age nine and attempted suicide in her teens. She walked barefoot and displayed public behavior that was then considered uncouth, shocking and abrasive. She had a public relationship with Elvis Presley and gossip columnists criticized her for her behavior, later declaring that she was not a fitting representative for the motion picture industry<sup>17</sup>. In this way, Weld operates as a parallel to the common American housewife ideal. On the surface, everything appears as if it is all right, but underneath broods a powerful storm. The rigid social mechanisms that girls were raised in did keep them as shy creatures, and in some way the preconceptions about women may have been drafted to fulfill this purpose. Men held illimitable dominion over everything in civilized society, and this reign would only be challenged by their equal, no doubt. What better way to prevent an uprising but to render the offensive group helpless, by constructing stigma that prevent these individuals from being taken seriously. If women are kept on a tight leash, with just enough time to dress for an occasion before being interrupted countless times by the nagging of her offspring, they will not have the time or the resources to advance themselves or to ask the questions which have been begging for generations.

The Tuesday Weld types, the cheerleaders in high school and those girls who get by with just their looks, made up the portion of, “Gals who wore the letter sweaters [who] were going steady with football players.”<sup>18</sup> There is a distinction made between the academic, ambitious girls and those who were more concerned with matters of the home.

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<sup>17</sup> On-Line, available at <http://www.emanuellevy.com/article.php?articleID=3281>. Accessed April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Kossove, 2007.

Wearing a letter sweater, which displays the high school's initial and resembles an athletic bomber jacket, was considered an honor among the students. The inclination to go out and earn one's own honor bears a stark contrast to the type of personality that is content to substitute another person's success for what might be their own. The former is the revolutionary female, not affected by unsubstantial boundaries. The latter is the conditioned female, born to procreate and make this procreation as pleasant as possible for those around her.

Women were able to make significant advances notwithstanding the stiff opposition that society confronted them with. In the wake of the Second World War, women had expressed a great deal of anxiety that was not reserved for wartime conditions but that overflowed into more personal conflicts, such as their changing role as breadwinner and homemaker. Interestingly, in 1955 when pharmaceutical-grade tranquilizers first appear on the market, their main consumer is women. Although Kossove never took tranquilizers, in 1960, 1.15 million pounds are sold per year, mostly to women. During this time, Betty Friedan begins interviewing her 1942 Smith College Alumnae, and finds a great deal of dissatisfaction amongst them. This leads to the penning of "The Feminine Mystique", a book that theorizes about the consequences of being female in American society, written by a woman and for other women<sup>19</sup>, at a time when society at large would really rather that women didn't write, anyway. The book sparked immediate controversy with its suggestions that women had lost their individual identities to the greater identity of the family, and that this, by and large, was the greater reason for their discontent. The social climate among the fairer sex was becoming

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<sup>19</sup> Fox, Margalit. 2006. Betty Friedan, Who Ignited Cause With, "The Feminine Mystique", Dies at 85. The New York Times, February 2006.

restless, and women with ambition began to enter the workforce and actually competed with men for employment, albeit on uneven ground.

If women of the time did not marry by the age of twenty-five, they were considered “old maids”. Despite having the option to go to college, only certain groups of women from the middle and upper class actually went. Funding for women’s colleges was elusive, and so it cost more out-of-pocket to attend. Since there had not been much of an emphasis on education for women, college was often not even considered. The stereotypes of the period prevailed, and housewives were seen as constantly needing their husbands and being incapable of managing a budget. ‘Nice girls’ married and became housewives, and young ladies were cautioned against behavior that would lead them to being married with a ‘Bad girl’ reputation, which was often seen as a permanent punishment for improper behavior. Premarital sex was still not supposed to happen, reliable contraception and equally reliable sex education was not available, Intelligence was seen as a threat, and women were encouraged to be unchallenging, “You didn’t show that you had brains, if you had brains you didn’t marry, you went and got your Doctorate and you taught. Then you married.”<sup>20</sup> Teaching was considered an acceptable choice of occupation for young ladies because they would be able to be home when the kids were home, so even though a teaching education was somewhat liberating, it was permissible, since the familial obligations were fulfilled albeit in an untraditional way.

Eleanor Roosevelt writes about women who are “housewives” in her newspaper column, My Day. Although women were proud of their roles as wife and mother, she

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<sup>20</sup>Kossove, 2007.

says, they do have a strong dislike for the term “housewife”, and would like a more favorable title. Since women marry men, and not houses, the term is implicitly incorrect, although “housewife” is defined in the dictionary as, “The woman in charge of a household”<sup>21</sup>. Considering the title store-manger, where a person manages a store, when a house is managed, what is wrong with the title “house-manager”, or “housekeeper”, like storekeeper? She asks. The public response to this argument is indicative of the sentiment of the time: Women were not the number one priority, so why should their titles be? Women had been acquiescently catered to by men, and this behavior rooted its foundations in the ever popular notion that women were not much more than a by-product of creation. While some women yearned to branch out and discover their own lives, they were inhibited by a strong tradition that dictated otherwise and rigid moral upbringings, which reinforced the tradition.

Of all of the women who refused the labels that society attempted to impinge on them, Kossove remarks that Rosa Parks stands out. An African American woman, Parks was riding the bus home on December 1, 1955, in Montgomery Alabama, where legislation had been passed that allowed the allocation of seating on public transportation by the driver. When the driver approached her and asked her to move back so that a white man might have her seat, she refused, essentially starting the Civil Rights Movement<sup>22</sup>. For her contributions, Parks was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal in 1999.

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<sup>21</sup> Roosevelt, Eleanor. 1955. My Day.

<sup>22</sup>Academy of Achievement Website, Available On-Line, <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/par0bio-1>

Women continued to strive for political and sexual equality throughout the decade. It was as though their forced entry into wartime employment had created a new breed of woman who was not content with solely minding the matters of the home. The women of the sixties, the New Woman was purpose-driven, seeking contentment in a host of new avenues. Suddenly she could write and was literate, she could sing and people listened. The advent of the birth control pill in 1960 permitted the postponement of motherhood and a host of new and even skilled occupations became available to those who wanted to pursue them. Doreen Kossove, the awkward teenager who had dinner with Eleanor Roosevelt in 1958, went on to get her master's degree in Chemistry from Vassar University. After divorcing her first husband she put herself through medical school and abandoned all of the prestige and capitalism that comes with having a Medical Doctor certification, moving to South Africa where she did mostly pro-bono work with AIDS orphans. Women have come a long way, from humble beginnings, and it appears that they are here to stay.