**Teenage Dating in the 1950s  
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Teenagers in the 1950's are so iconic that, for some, they represent the last generation of innocence before it is "lost" in the sixties. When asked to imagine this lost group, images of bobbysoxers, letterman jackets, malt shops and sock hops come instantly to mind. Images like these are so classic, they, for a number of people, are "as American as apple pie." They are produced and perpetuated by the media, through films like *Grease* and *Pleasantville* and television shows like *Happy Days*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Leave It to Beaver*. Because of these entertainment forums, these images will continue to be a pop cultural symbol of the 1950's. After the Second World War, teenagers became much more noticeable in America (Bailey 47). Their presence and existence became readily more apparent because they were granted more freedom than previous generations ever were.

Teenagers like these were unique. They were given a chance to redefine the ways things were done in America. One of the conventions they put a new spin on, and consequently revolutionize, is the idea and practice of dating. The 1950's set up precedents in dating that led to what many consider "normal" dating today.

**ORIGINS OF DATING**

Dating is definitely an "American phenomenon." Few other countries carry on this practice with as much fervor as Americans do. Then again, few other countries have the same social conditions as America. Since the turn of the century, there has been a greater freedom between men and women, for example, both attend the same schools with the same classes. Both sexes become accustomed to the other at early ages which is very conducive to the practice of dating (Merrill 61). Dating essentially replaced the practice of calling which was the primary way of courtship before the mid-1920's. When a man "calls" upon a woman, he usually shows up at her house during an "at home" session and presents his card to the maid who then gives it to the young lady. She then is given the option of accepting his call by letting him in or rejecting it by making up an excuse as to why she cannot see him. Refreshments were often served (though not always), and the entertainment was primarily piano playing in the parlor. But because the lower classes were not so well-endowed so that they own pianos or even parlors, they started their own form of "courtship" which soon became known as dating. This practice was soon picked up by the upper classes, and from there it progressed into the middle class, with which it is still inherently associated today (Bailey 17).

Calling and dating are so intrinsically different it is hard to imagine how the transition from one to another was even made. Firstly, calling was practiced with the intention of finding a suitable husband for a young lady; whereas, in dating, this was, and still is, not the primary goal. People date because it is "enjoyable, pleasant, and valuable" (Merrill 62), and they thought that they could gain rewarding experiences from it. In the fifties and surrounding decades, handbooks and other books exploring relationships described dating as a fun activity in which teens are allowed to meet and mingle with many members of the opposite sex. Besides, dating allowed young people to be with each other without their parents interfering. Secondly, the control of the relationship changed hands as the transition was made. When calling was practiced, the female in the relationship held most of the power because men came to see *her* in *her* house with her parents present. But when dating replaced calling, the males held most of the power, for they paid for the date, drove the automobiles, and came by the girl's house only to pick her up.

Dating had actually been around for a while before the 1950's, but since the presence of the teenager became ever more prevalent and public, dating became more and more popular and routinized. Millions of teenagers in the 1950's went on one or more dates per week. These teenagers started dating at a young age too. If a girl of thirteen years had not started dating yet, she was considered a "late bloomer" by society’s standards (Bailey 48). After all, most children know about dating long before they are actually ready to participate in it (Merrill 61).

**COURTING IN THE 1950's**

During the 1950's, it was common knowledge, at least to girls, that there was a process to the whole courtship ritual -- that there were stages to a lasting relationship. First, when you are young, you associate with boys in the playground, and do not seriously form any romantic relationships with them. Then you progress to flirting and talking to them which leads into dating. The dating process usually is initiated by going out on double-dates. Double-dates were used to initiate the whole dating process because it created a more open environment conducive to easy conversation. So they initial shyness of young couple can be eased away by the presence of other company, especially if the double date was a "set-up" or a blind date for one couple. After double dating, you would naturally move onto single dating. And should the relationship move on, as they often do, it would move into the ubiquitous "going steady" stage (McGinnis 74).

**GOING STEADY**

This concept of "going steady" took on a new meaning in the fifties. Before the war, "going steady" was a stage young people took only if they were seriously on the path to marriage; however, after the war, the phrase was used more loosely. It no longer signaled that the couple was marriageable and ready to commit (Bailey 49). If a couple was said to be "going steady," they would date one another exclusively and feel as if the other "belongs" to him or her (McGinnis 74) but this occurred without any serious thoughts of marriage. In this stage, there were certain customs that were played out by the two people involved. The boy was required to give the girl a token which was to claim her as his, like his class ring, letterman sweater, or ID bracelet. If a ring was given, it had to be worn on the third finger of the left hand. Of course, these customs varied by region. Some places preferred rings over clothes, and others did not. Boys are also expected to call their steady girlfriend a certain number of times a week and take her out on a certain number of dates. Going steady also meant that the couple would reach a higher lever of sexual intimacy (Bailey 50).

Many saw this stage as a kind of "play-marriage" for the young couple (Bailey 49). Their exclusiveness made them seem almost as if they were married to each other. Not only was this stage a source of security for the couple, for they needed to have dates to all the social functions in their lives, they also were signs of popularity around their schools. In a 1953 survey, many of the students polled agreed that the most popular students had gone steady. After "going steady," a young couple could get engaged and, then after that, married (49). Knowing the process of courtship, was and pretty much still in common knowledge for teens, but all that does not matter if you cannot get a date...

**HOW TO GET A DATE**

Getting a date has always been complicated. In the 1950's, it was unheard of for a young lady to ask for a date or to initiate the dating process. The men were supposed to do the asking and calling. One young man as a guest writer to the February 1959 issue of *Seventeen* magazine wrote: Growing up has taught me one thing: there is an infinite number of ways by which a boy can meet a girl. I've also found that once he meets a girl -- and becomes interested in her -- a boy must indulge in a sly, artful practice called pursuit. (72) But those first few moments of "pursuit" are always hard to start, so an emphasis on "lines" was created during this time period. "Lines," much like the pick-up lines heard today, were used like testers to gauge the relationship's future. It all depended on how the girl responds and reacts to the line given to her. These pieces of heavily saturated compliments were cast at women, and the women were supposed to nit-pick them and -- not believe what was said but -- be flattered by them (Merrill 64).

Another way of getting a date is to be set up on a "blind" one where each end of the relationship has never met the other before. This method is especially useful and practical if a guy is shy and bashful about asking a girl out on a date. It might help him feel more adequate in the dating scene by blind dating especially if it is his first dating experience. The same could be said about girls. Blind dates could also have the same effect on them as it had on boys (Sadler 20-21). Many handbooks for young ladies were published in the postwar time period that addressed the issue of how to attract boys and how to obtain a date. One handbook entitled *Always Say Maybe* suggests ways in which a girl can lure a boy's fancy toward her. Some of the chapters focus on how to approach a man, how to earn a date, how to start interesting conversation, and how to be interested in what they are interested in, like sports in particular. The book is written in a somewhat comical manner; however, it does instruct its readers on how to act around boys. One chapter reads, "Be gay, be charming, be thinking." Continuing on, it says for girls to be "surefooted, silver-tongued, and stout-hearted" in conversation with men (Gould 30).

**DATING AND THE CLASSROOM**

One reason that dating was an important factor in the 1950's is that it is present almost everywhere, even in the classroom. Many schools were equipped with educational films which were intended to help teenager’s live good clean lives. The films about dating in the fifties were real gems of cinema. These films were simply representations of adult views and adult preferences but created with teenage actors. They served as reminders to teenagers that there were customs and certain boundaries in dating, and if they violated them, there could be serious consequences. Many films choose to depict the results of sexual intercourse by showing severe cases of syphilis and unwanted pregnancies. More innocently though, these types of films showed how one gets a date and what to do on a date, according to the mores of adults. Most dates ended with a friendly handshake which shows that these movies were created by adults for their children to watch and hopefully follow (Smith 47-51).

**WHERE TO GO ON A DATE**

In the fifties, there were many options for a young couple looking for a good time. The most popular places to go were those that were cheap yet fun, much like dates of today. The September 1959 issue of Seventeen pointed out that the most popular places were ice cream parlors, pizza parlors, drive-ins, bowling alleys, coffee houses and record shops (135). The most popular and economic activity available for teenagers was watching movies. There they could be immersed in the dark with their date, enjoy a snack, and be entertained for a while. Perhaps, if the movie was played in a drive-in, you would not even have to watch the movie to be entertained! Many movies were released during this time period that would appeal to teenagers too, like *Pillow Talk* starring the talented Doris Day and handsome Rock Hudson.

Other places teenagers went for fun were dances, school sporting events, sock hops, malt shops, and amusement parks. Dances, in particular, made up a large part of dating. There were not only school supported dances, such as the sock hop (appropriately named because patrons were to take off their shoes so as not to scuff the basketball floor), but there were proms and sorority dances to attend as well. In more modern times, girls who attend these kinds of functions usually stay with the date that brought them or whoever they invited to come. But it was perfectly normal, even preferred (by older generations at least) if a young lady was "passed around" the dance floor. If you were not cut in on, you were a social disgrace. This practice was actually apparent in the times before the 1950's, but by the early first few years of the decade, it had pretty much disappeared. In 1955, one teenager attending Texas Christian University disclosed that "to cut in is almost an insult" (Bailey 32). This is where the modern idea of going to dances emerged from.

**ECONOMICS OF DATING**

Back in the fifties, it was pretty much understood that boys pay for the expenses of the date. They take their girls out and show them a good time, but all of this costs money. Girls were, and some would insist still are, expensive to please especially if one takes them out frequently. The concept of Dutch dating was not acceptable back in the fifties. Both boys and girls were embarrassed by the idea. It was suggested that if a young man needed help paying for the date then the girl should give him some money before the date so the boy can still look like he paid for the meal and entertainment. This method was suggested but rarely ever practiced (Bailey 59). Of course, today Dutch dating is quite normal.

According to an article in the June 1959 issue of *Seventeen* magazine entitled "How much money Do Boys Spend on Girls," a typical boy who is economical with his money would spend an average of a little more than $7 per month on dates. However, this number may increase depending on the events of the month. Seven dollars a month pays for roughly two high school basketball games, six cokes, three movies, two bags of popcorn, gasoline for the car, and an unlimited amount of television dates (they are free!) (75). Most boys of the era agreed that dating itself is not so expensive, but as sixteen-year-old Ed Miller put it, from the same article, the "wallet-emptying experiences are birthdays and all the other special occasions when gift buying is necessary" (75). Special occasions could be any number of things, like dances. Items like corsages, which boys were always responsible for providing, were costly. Prices for the flowers ranged anywhere from $1.50 to $10 depending on the kinds of flowers of course (121). Orchids seemed to be all the rage in the fifties; however, these flowers were quite costly. They were roughly $7 per flower - almost equal to the amount spent by economical teens per month! Tuxedo rental cost roughly $10, and carfare, gas, and entertainment added up to $25-$35 as well (Bailey 62).

Dinner dates were also costly for young boys. In the same *Seventeen* magazine article, the range of dinner date bills was from $2.23 for two salads and two sandwiches to $7 for a steak dinner. Many boys found that most of their money was spent on food for his girl and himself. Strangely though, it was customary for girls to be fed at home before going out on their dates. Many boys knew this fact and even benefitted from it. Some report receiving anything from a glass of milk after a date to Sunday chicken at home with her parents (75). Girls also had expenses for their dates. They spent anywhere from $15-$45 on each prom of formal they attended just on their dress alone. Then they had to purchase hand bags and shoes which added up to be another $5-$10. Although their expenses seem minimal now, in reality, according to a 1957 poll, girls spend a great deal more on proms and formals than boys did perhaps because of the number of these functions they attended (Bailey 62).

**SEX AND DATING IN THE 1950's**

Sexual relations among teenagers in the fifties were another aspect the teen culture redefined. By this time, kissing, hugging and other mild physical forms of affection were done quite frequently in public -- in the hallways at school, in automobiles, and other local hangouts (Merrill 67). These outward expressions were almost accompaniments to most dates because of the increase in privacy the automobile and darken movie theaters lend. In fact, the ideas of "necking" and "petting" were prolific and understood by everyone who participated in dating. Definitions for these terms differed with every source though. But in general, necking was defined as "caresses above the neck," and petting are "caresses below" that (Bailey 80). In some cases, there was a difference between "petting" and "heavy petting" which would be even closer to intercourse (McGinnis 117). Kinsey, the researcher behind the infamous sex studies of the 1950's, defines petting as "any sort of physical contact which does not involve a union of genitalia but in which there is a deliberate attempt to effect arousal" (Merrill 68). "Necking" and "petting" were quite often expected while on dates. One boy wrote to some publication in response to a similar subject. He stated, "When a boy takes a girl out and spends $1.20 on her (like I did the other night) he expects a little petting in return (which I didn't get)" (Bailey 81).

Automobiles provided an excellent forum for sexual experimentation in the fifties. They provided the right amount of privacy for just that kind of "exploration," better known as "parking." Adults knew that "parking" happened, so instead of trying to stop the practice, which would be near impossible, they tried to contain it. For example, a police chief in New Jersey set up system where cars could park at night in county parks while patrol cars watched over them; however, the system required that the cars keep their lights on and must be parked legally. The goal of this system, which is similar to many others implemented throughout the nation, is not to control sex itself but to make it difficult for sex to occur. It manipulated times and locations so that sex was nearly impossible to happen (Bailey 87).

But despite all the pressures to fool around, virginity was still a virtue in the fifties (Merrill 70). There was still an emphasis on preserving it as stressed by magazine articles and handbooks for young ladies. And when some girls lose it, it is a major tragedy, as one girl expressed a letter published in the May 1959 issue of *Seventeen* magazine expressed. She writes in, "After several months of dating, matters got out of hand. Deep down I knew it was wrong, but I didn't have the courage to stop seeing him... I believe God will forgive if one truly repents, but I know there will always be the scar" (136). This girl here regrets her actions with a young man, and wishes she had not done what she did.

Teenagers in the fifties changed the rules of dating and, consequently, formed the basis of what today's teenagers consider normal dating. Aspects like the process of dating which included the redefined stage of "going steady" were so well-understood by all teenagers of the 1950's that information about these topics was quite prolific. Every aspect of each aspect was examined by different perspectives. Adults produced handbooks and films which served to guide their teenagers in acting the way they wanted them to during dates. Teen magazines seemed to reflect a more contemporary voice -- a voice closer to what actual teenagers felt during the fifties. All these sources show how this teenage generation in the fifties was important not only in altering dating but in all aspects of their lives. After the Second World War, teenagers grew a voice and became more publically visible. They drove cars and had money to spend. They were a new source of power, independent from their parents and ready for a change.

**Focus Questions:**

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