



A Nice House on a Lake

“When we were married, my husband earned \$30 a week. We rented a five-room flat, . . . had a baby, etc. Now we have five children and an income of over \$25,000 a year. We own our eight-room house—also a nice house on a lake.”

—Lucille Windam, 1950s housewife

◀ In the 1950s, television became a popular pastime.

A Time of Prosperity

Objectives

- Identify the problems of the postwar economy.
- Explain the effects of a changing society on the lives of Americans during the 1950s.
- Contrast life in the suburbs with life in the cities.

Reading Skill

Analyze Long-Term Effects Many events in history cause long-term effects. For example, World War II had lasting effects on the American economy and culture. Think about the difficulty of living through these times as you identify long-term effects in this section. Also, note how some of these effects may become the causes for the next effects.

Key Terms and People

closed shop	rock-and-roll
productivity	Elvis Presley
standard of living	inner city
baby boom	

Why It Matters As America’s leaders waged the Cold War all around the world, important economic, social, and political changes were occurring at home. Many Americans enjoyed a new burst of prosperity. However, not all shared the benefits of the economic boom.

Section Focus Question: How did the American economy and society change after World War II?

Adjusting to Peacetime

On the home front, Americans faced important economic challenges after the war. Defense industries had closed or had scaled back employment. Millions of soldiers would have to be absorbed into the postwar economy. The nation faced a serious problem—how to change back to a peacetime economy.

To help meet these needs, Congress had passed an act in 1944 that became known as the GI Bill of Rights. (GI, which stands for “government issue,” was the name given to any member of the U.S. armed forces.) The bill gave veterans money to spend on business, homes, and schooling. The GI Bill helped more than two million former soldiers attend college to prepare for new careers.

Inflation During World War II, consumer goods had been in short supply. With the war’s end, Americans were ready and eager to buy. Because demand far exceeded the supply of goods, the result was soaring inflation.

As prices rose, workers demanded large pay increases. When employers refused, a wave of strikes swept the nation.

Although President Truman supported labor, he feared that wage increases would lead to even higher prices. In May 1946, he ended a United Mine Workers strike by taking over the mines. When railroad workers struck a month later, Truman threatened to order them back to work. That angered union members. When the President encouraged industries to raise salaries, inflation resulted. That made consumers angry.

During the 1946 elections, Republicans asked voters, "Had enough?" Voters seemed to agree. The election gave Republicans a majority in both the House and the Senate.

Armed with the power to cancel many New Deal programs, Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act. The act let the government get a court order to delay a strike for 80 days if the strike threatened public safety. The act also forbade unions to contribute to political campaigns. Also, the act banned the closed shop. A **closed shop** is a workplace in which only union members can be hired. Truman vetoed the Taft-Hartley Act, but Congress passed the act over Truman's veto. Eventually, President Truman would try to expand the goal of the New Deal with his Fair Deal reforms.

Analyze Long-Term Effects

What was one long-term effect of the shortage of consumer goods after the war? How do you think Americans felt about it?

Vocabulary Builder

expand (ek SPAND) *v.* to make bigger

The Railroad Strike

Speaking before Congress in 1946, President Truman presented his proposal to end the railroad strike.

"I request . . . legislation [that] after the government has taken over an industry and . . . directed men to remain or return to work, the wage scale should be fixed . . . and . . . it shall be retroactive [effective from a particular date in the past]. This legislation must be . . . fair to capital and labor alike. . . . As part of this legislation, I request Congress to authorize the president to draft into the armed forces . . . all workers who are on strike against their government."



Reading Primary Sources

Skills Activity

(a) **Apply Information** What role would the government have in Truman's plan?

(b) **Draw Conclusions** Do you think the workers would be pleased with the plan? Explain.



A Truman Victory

Harry Truman holds an early edition of the *Chicago Tribune* that mistakenly declares Dewey the winner of the 1948 election.

Critical Thinking: Apply Information What does this headline indicate about the election results?

The Election of 1948 In early 1948, President Truman's chances for reelection looked slim. Two out of three voters disapproved of the way he was leading the country. Even Truman's own Democrats were split. Angered by Truman's support of civil rights for African Americans, white southern Democrats nominated their own candidate, South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond. Liberal Democrats, unhappy with Truman's policy of challenging Soviet expansion, formed the Progressive Party. They nominated former Vice President Henry Wallace to run for President.

Confident of victory, the Republicans nominated New York's governor, Thomas Dewey. Dewey did not campaign hard. Truman, on the other hand, campaigned tirelessly. He traveled more than 30,000 miles and made hundreds of speeches. Everywhere Truman went, he attacked what he called the "do-nothing" Republican Congress.

On election night, people still expected a Dewey victory. In fact, the *Chicago Tribune* printed its first edition with the headline "DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN."

The election was one of the biggest upsets in American history. Truman squeaked past Dewey to victory. The Democrats also regained control of both the House and the Senate.

President Truman saw his narrow victory as a chance to act on his Fair Deal program, which he had proposed during the campaign. Congress approved a few of the President's Fair Deal proposals. For example, lawmakers increased the minimum wage and provided funds for flood control and low-income housing. However, Congress refused to fund education and national health insurance. It also voted down Truman's proposals to reduce racial discrimination.

Eisenhower's Middle Way In 1952, Truman decided not to run again. In the election of 1952, the Democrats nominated Adlai Stevenson, governor of Illinois. The Republicans chose General Dwight D. Eisenhower, nicknamed Ike. A war hero, Eisenhower won a landslide victory.

In contrast to Roosevelt and Truman, Eisenhower believed that the federal government should play a smaller role in the economy. He called for cutting spending, though not for ending programs that helped people. In fact, he increased the number of people who could receive Social Security benefits.

Generally, Eisenhower followed a middle-of-the-road policy in his two terms as President. Running on a record of "peace, progress, and prosperity" won him another huge victory in 1956.

Perhaps Eisenhower's greatest achievement was the Interstate Highway Act of 1956. It provided funds for a vast system of freeways to link all parts of the United States. Increasingly, Americans used highways instead of railroads for traveling and for transporting goods.

Checkpoint How did inflation affect the postwar economy?

A Changing Society

The Eisenhower years were prosperous ones for many Americans. Inflation slowed and employment soared. New technologies such as the use of computers helped increase American productivity. Productivity is the rate at which workers produce goods. Increasing it meant that workers were able to work more efficiently and produce more goods.

New jobs put money in consumers' pockets. Americans responded by spending money on homes, furniture, and cars. Shoppers also bought new products like televisions and air conditioners.

Throughout the 1950s, the American standard of living rose steadily. The standard of living is a measure of how comfortable life is for a person, group, or country. By the end of the decade, 6 out of 10 American families owned homes, and 3 out of 4 had cars. Americans manufactured and bought nearly 1 out of every 2 products produced anywhere in the entire world.

The United States was in the midst of change. After the dangers of war, Americans were looking for security. Many found it in their homes and families.

Baby Boom In the postwar years, Americans married earlier than their parents had. They also raised larger families. The increased birthrate became known as the **baby boom**. The baby boom increased demand for food, housing, and manufactured goods.

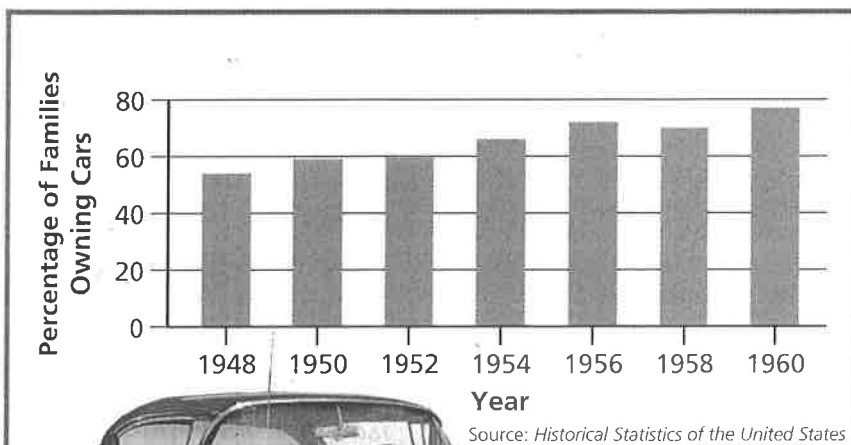
Meanwhile, people were living longer thanks to new medicines that became popular in the 1950s. For example, antibiotic medicines could now cure many serious infectious diseases. A new vaccine kept adults and children safe from the crippling disease of polio.



Analyze Long-Term Effects

What caused the economic recovery of the prosperous 1950s? What long-term effects did the recovery cause?

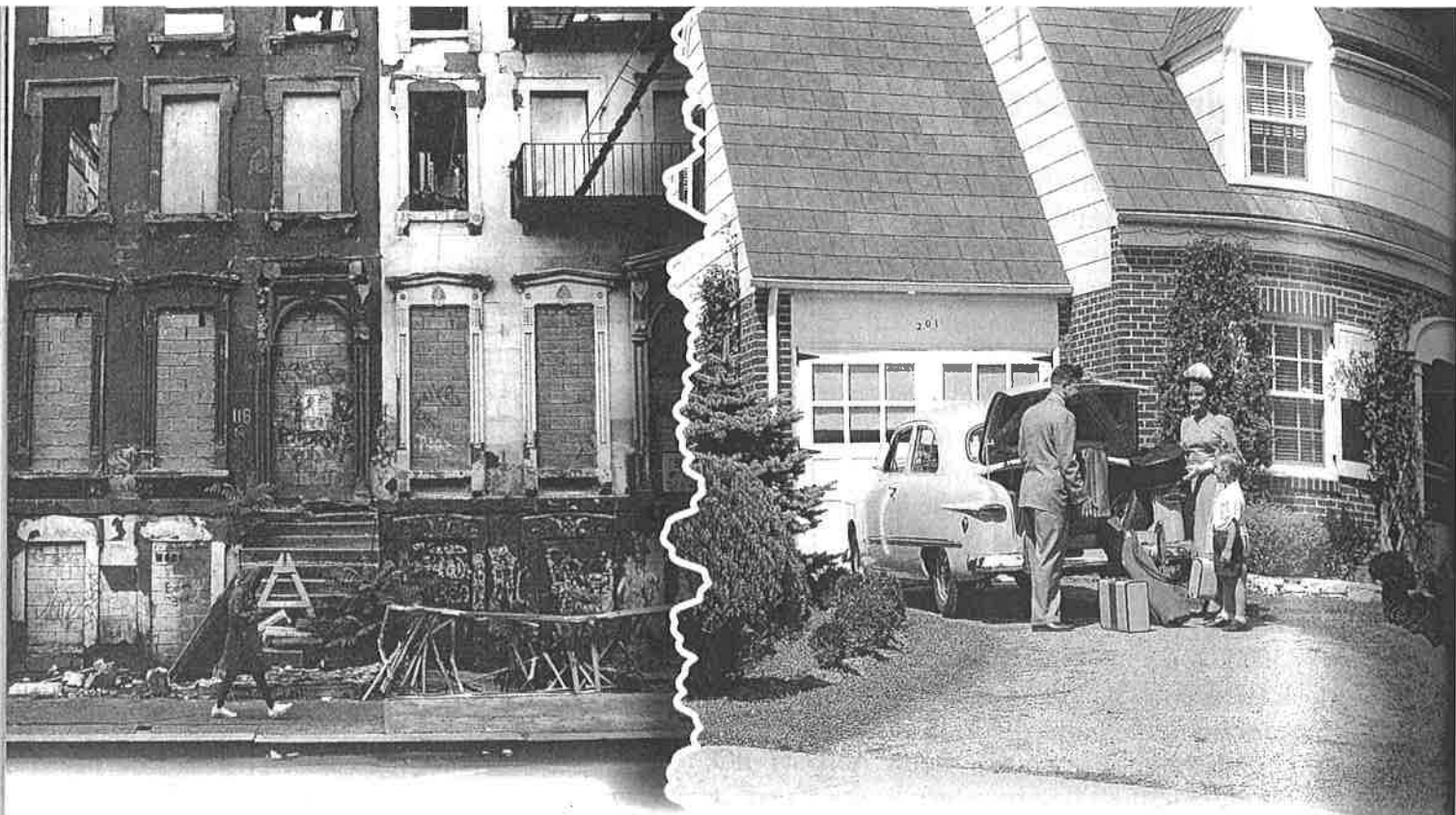
Increase in Car Ownership, 1948–1960



Reading Charts Skills Activity

With the move to the suburbs, people depended more on automobiles. Manufacturers pushed to meet the demands.

- Read a Bar Graph** During which years did automobile ownership remain about the same?
- Identify Causes and Effects** Trace the change in car ownership between 1954 and 1960. List several events (political, social, and economic) that strongly affected the change in ownership at that time.



A New Prosperity

In the decades following World War II, huge numbers of Americans moved to newly developed communities in the suburbs (shown at right).

However, not everyone shared this good life. In the cities, housing was often run down (left), and many people were unemployed.

Critical Thinking:
Apply Information Why do you think a book called *The Other America* was written about American life during this time?

Vocabulary Builder

negative (NEHG ah tihv) **adj.** in opposition to an idea; not positive

Escaping the City Americans bought automobiles as fast as auto plants could make them. Nowhere were these cars more appreciated than in the growing suburbs. During the 1950s, the number of Americans living in the suburbs grew by 50 percent.

Suburbs grew around cities throughout the United States. The growth was most pronounced in the West. As a result, states such as California, Arizona, and Texas gained both people and political power.

Television Of all the new products of the 1950s, the one that had the greatest impact on American life was television. In 1946, only 8,000 homes had a television set. By the mid-1950s, three out of four American homes had one. By the early 1960s, almost every house had one television set, and many homes had more than one.

Television brought news and entertainment into people's homes. Early programs included original dramas by top writers and situation comedies, or sitcoms, about the ideal middle-class family.


There were, however, some **negative** effects from television. During the 1950s, watching television became the most important activity of family life. In fact, by 1956, Americans were spending almost as much time watching television every week as they spent at work. The first frozen dinners, introduced in the 1950s, were designed for families who wanted to combine mealtime and television viewing.

Rock-and-Roll Television also helped to make popular a new kind of music, rock-and-roll. Rock-and-roll was a blend of black rhythm-and-blues and country music. By far the most popular singer of rock-and-roll was Elvis Presley. With hips shaking and knees bending,

Presley soon became a teen idol and national star. Adults, on the other hand, were shocked at his music and his provocative dance moves. When he appeared on national television, the camera showed only his upper body.

Signs of Trouble Not everyone enjoyed this new prosperity. As jobs and people moved to the suburbs, cities lost important tax money. The inner cities, or centers of older cities, became home to poorer, less educated people. Cities could no longer raise enough tax money to repair old apartments, schools, and subways. City schools and other services declined. Crime rose. More and more, the people who stayed in the cities were those who could not afford to move.

Many social critics took note of this division between city and suburb. A small band of critics accused Americans of living in a closed society where differences were not tolerated. One critic, William H. White, wrote *The Organization Man* in 1956. It reported the ways Americans felt pressure to conform to group behavior. Others criticized what they saw as a growing emphasis on material possessions and spending.

 **Checkpoint** How did the changes of the 1950s improve the lives of most Americans?

 **Looking Back and Ahead** As the United States was poised to enjoy a new burst of prosperity, a conflict was brewing in a faraway corner of the world, the Korean Peninsula. It would draw the United States into a very “hot” and bloody war, and set off a period of self-doubt among Americans.



Analyze Long-Term Effects

How did postwar prosperity create long-term changes in American life? Explain how effects became causes that led to more effects.

HISTORIAN'S APPRENTICE ACTIVITY PACK

To further explore the topics in this chapter, complete the activity in the Historian's Apprentice Activity Pack to answer this essential question:

What major influences have helped shape American society and culture?

Section 2 | Check Your Progress

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Comprehension and Critical Thinking

- (a) Recall** How did Truman attempt to end the strikes by mine workers and railroad workers?
(b) Evaluate Information Truman claimed to be a friend of labor. Based on his actions, do you think that was true? Explain.
- (a) Apply Information** What impact did television have on the American family in the 1950s?
(b) Link Past and Present How is television different today from television in the 1950s?



Reading Skill

- Analyze Long-Term Effects** Reread the text following the subheading “Inflation.” Explain that an increased demand for consumer goods led to effects that, in turn, caused other effects. Include the emotions that played a role in the process and identify any long-term effects.

Key Terms

- Answer the following questions in complete sentences that show your understanding of the key terms.
- What would happen to a woman who wanted to work at a closed shop but refused to join a union?

- What are inner cities? What happened to them in the 1950s?
- What does a standard of living measure?

Writing

- Make a list of some materials you would use to prepare a multimedia presentation about American popular culture during the 1950s. (For suggestions, refer to the Life at the Time feature on the pages that follow). Write a few sentences introducing and explaining your choices.

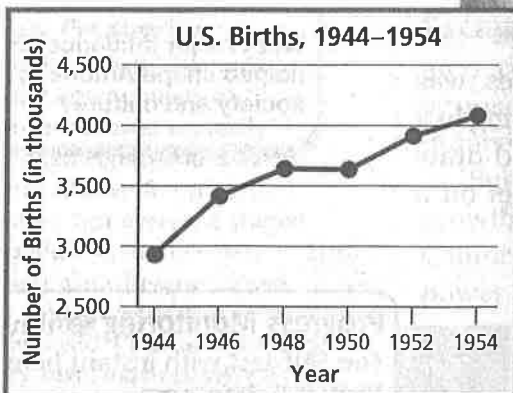
LIFE AT THE TIME

Growing Up in the 1950s

There were a lot of kids growing up in the 1950s. And they enjoyed themselves in ways that had never existed before. The changes that took place in American popular culture back then are still a part of our lives today.

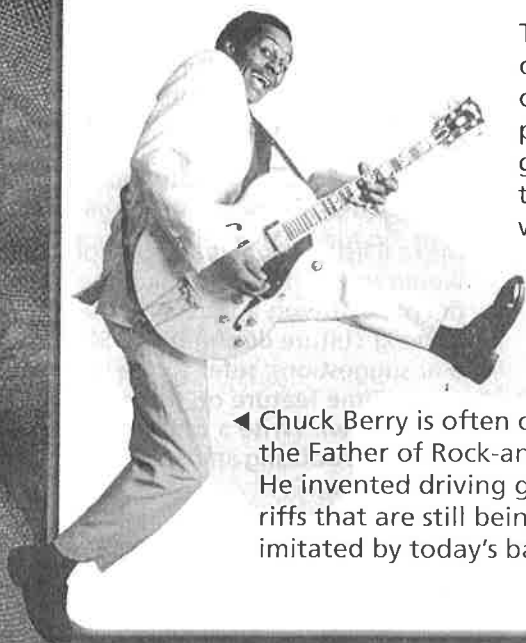
The Baby Boom

During the Great Depression and World War II, couples had fewer children. But after 1946, the birthrate soared.



Source: Historical Statistics of the United States

The kids at this 1950s soda fountain were part of this ▼ postwar baby boom.



◀ Chuck Berry is often called the Father of Rock-and-Roll. He invented driving guitar riffs that are still being imitated by today's bands.

The wild dancing of Elvis Presley outraged many parents. To a generation of teens, Elvis Presley was "The King."



Rock-and-Roll

The baby boomers were the first generation to grow up with rock-and-roll. The pulsing new music blended elements of rhythm and blues, country and western, and pop music. Concerts by artists such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard brought white and black teenagers together, enjoying the same beat.

Television

Television was invented in the 1920s. Not until the 1950s, however, did the TV set become a familiar feature in most homes. The baby boomers were the first generation to grow up watching "the tube."



◀ The most popular show of the 1950s was *I Love Lucy*, starring Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. The sitcom is still shown around the world.

The puppet Howdy Doody and his sidekick Buffalo Bob Smith starred in one of the best-loved children's programs of the day.



◀ The Chantels were the first of the "girl groups" to win national popularity.

◀ Perhaps the most familiar rock-and-roll recording of the 1950s was "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley and the Comets.



Analyze LIFE AT THE TIME

Prepare an interview with someone who grew up or went to school during the 1950s. Write 5–7 questions about television, music, or other topics of concern to teenagers.