Frequently we hear of conservative groups who long for, and actively seek, what they term a "return to traditional American values." Members of such groups usually are unable to articulate the specific time period in which these values are thought to have existed, but can list the alleged "values" nearly verbatim. They consist of the following.

- A two-parent family in which the husband provides financial support while the wife manages home life and childrearing activities. Gender roles are absolute.
- Most (preferably all) members of the family attend some type of Christian church on at least a weekly basis.
- Children are attentive, respectful, bright, and responsible.
- Families live in the same town, or at least the same vicinity, for generations. Everyone knows their neighbors.
- Divorce is unheard of, and is considered shameful.
- Homosexuality, nonconformist behavior, child abuse, abortion, and domestic abuse do not exist.
- Unmarried couples are extremely rare, and frequently are shunned.
- The number of never-married men ("confirmed bachelors") and women ("spinsters") is extremely low.

This "traditional" mythos recalls the closing lines used by humorist Garrison Keillor at the end of his Prairie Home Companion monologues, when he describes his Lake Wobegone community as a place “where all the women are strong, the men are good looking, and the children are above average.” It also smacks of an episode of The Waltons as well as the movie Pleasantville, for reasons that will become apparent.

However, the myth of the “traditional family” is just that – a myth. This “traditional” model has no direct parallel in early US history, and only existed in a limited form during roughly the first two decades of the post World War II era when returning soldiers married and raised families in the Baby Boom. No such two-parent “nuclear” model can be found during earlier periods. While Colonial and later family experiences certainly included mainly two-parent households, they only superficially resembled this wistfully recalled “tradition.”

Upon examination, the closest approximation we can find to the family model found so desirable by conservative groups is in 1950s TV shows such as Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver, and Ozzie and Harriet as well as the 1970s The Waltons. The first three examples idealized the so-called nuclear family, presenting it as a strongly bonded group managed by a patriarch whose authority was usually absolute. The Waltons created the myth of the happy, extended family living together in relative harmony in what was essentially an agrarian paradise. Later, the 1990s movie Pleasantville held the “golden age” of the 1950s up to closer inspection, criticizing it as a period when conformism and convention stifled creativity and freedom of expression. This is a more accurate representation of the reality of that decade.

The 1950s are usually depicted in history as an era when everyone worked together for a common goal, society was stable or moving in a positive direction, and dissent was uncommon. Women were said to be happy in their full time homemaker roles, and deferred to their husbands except in matters involving child rearing. Likewise, it was believed that
homosexuality, divorce, premarital sex, abortion, and illegitimate birth did not exist, or were minor problems experienced only by “bad” families. Such topics were never discussed in an open forum.

This decade was atypical in terms of American family life. A great deal of the cohesiveness and family orientation was largely a reaction to fear created by the Cold War. This was also a very unusual, tumultuous period, which saw millions of returning servicemen suddenly raising families during an enormous, sustained economic boom. In the 1950s “for the first time in more than one hundred years, the age for marriage and motherhood fell, fertility increased, divorce rates declined, and women’s degree of educational parity dropped sharply.”

Further, “the legendary family of the 1950s...was not, as common wisdom tells us, the last gasp of ‘traditional’ family life with deep roots in the past.” The Great Depression had created conditions under which several generations or branches of a single family shared living space in order to save money. Many Americans who grew up during this period tell stories of aunts, uncles, and grandparents sharing space with other members of their family due to the tight economy and a lack of jobs. With the end of the Depression and the start of the Baby Boom, this trend reversed itself. New families were encouraged to purchase and move into their own homes.

The “Father Knows Best” family is largely the creation of the 1950s. Prior to this period, and after it as well, families were far less cohesive and geographically static.

For example, during earlier decades husbands frequently left home to seek work, or embarked on trades requiring extended travel. In the Colonial and Federal periods trappers such as Daniel Boone, whose experiences were later massively embellished by biographers to the point where they only vaguely resembled reality, often spent long periods away from home. During the expansion Westward, men might journey to a newly opened frontier area in order to establish a farm or business, only sending for wife and children once the new venture was operating and stable. Additionally, sailors and others whose business involved travel were away from home for extended periods of time. During these absences, women ran the household and maintained the family’s finances. With no means of rapid communication available (letters might take months to reach home, if they arrived at all), the wife and children relied on their own wits as well as assistance – when it was available – from neighbors and community. Periods of separation during this era were often measured in months or years.

This model persisted even as the nation developed. During the Victorian period in both the US and England, husbands often were away from home on military or business journeys. Sailors and businessmen involved in trade frequently traveled for years at a time, with no contact with their families except via occasional letters or money sent home.

People often married at a significantly later age than we now find common; in Victorian England it was not uncommon for lovers to part company at a young age (perhaps as teenagers) to allow a man to travel to India or another far-flung region of the British Empire. Here he would attempt to make his fortune. The couple would only marry much later, once he was financially secure. Often this required upwards of twenty years, which meant some betrothed couples did not actually marry until their mid thirties or even later.

Additionally, high mortality rates due to warfare, illness, and inadequate nutrition resulted in numerous single parent households. Surviving spouses frequently remarried to produce “Brady Bunch”-like family conglomerates. If they did not, they often gave some or all their children to relatives or charitable societies. These children might or might not have contact with their birth parents and siblings later in their lives.

The role of women prior to the 1950s was also very different. Women experienced a great deal of freedom and economic responsibility as a result of both World War II and the Depression. The war allowed millions of women to work in jobs that otherwise would have remained the realm of men for a much longer period, while the Depression’s hardships required both parents to seek employment whenever it was available. Even in the
pre-Depression period women experienced a great deal of social and economic freedom. Jobs were relatively plentiful in the 1920s and even earlier, though frequently limited in scope to classic roles such as the secretary, telephone operator, or clerk.

In the pre-Depression period, many women left home for large cities, attended universities, and established their own careers. Clear examples of such independent women include pilots Amelia Earhart and Amy Johnson, as well as suffragette Alice Paul. It should also be noted that the Equal Rights Amendment was passed during this era. In the 1920s, women earned 39 percent of the college degrees in the US, up from 19 percent at the turn of the century. Still earlier, women during the Victorian era were often not directly involved in raising their own children or running the home. Families that could afford them instead opted for governesses and maids who took on these roles.

As noted earlier, these gains were rolled back significantly during the 1950s. The tumult of the Depression, World War II, and perceived Communist threat seems to have produced a desire for “normalcy.” This took the form of a quiet, settled, defined family structure. If the outside world was chaotic and threatening, then the home could be made as relaxing and outwardly stress free as possible. Conformism and social stability were enforced as a bulwark against unpredictable, threatening outside forces. Citizens were expected to unite against the perceived outside threat of Soviet/Communist infiltration and attack. A set of “American values” was created, and was used as a gauge to measure an individual’s level of commitment to the nation and the government’s programs. Deviation was punished with social ostracism, official suspicion, and (in the case of the McCarthy witch hunt) legal action.

The perception of the role of children also experienced a significant transformation during the aberrant 1950s. Many scholars argue that the current definition of “childhood” is a modern invention, and only began to emerge among wealthy or privileged families during the 1700s when children began to be dressed or handled differently from adults. Indeed, in agrarian families children were (and are) largely seen as more hands to work the fields and were expected to take on work as soon as they were physically able to do so.

As Capitalism spread in Western Europe and America, more and more children were removed from adult society, treated as adults in development, and exempted from responsibility to the financial success of the family until they reached a specific age. The economic uptick of the 1950s allowed more parents to indulge their children, permitting them to avoid working until they reached the arbitrary age of 16, 18 or 21.

Likewise, the idea that most families stayed in one location is also largely a myth. Later generations often moved further West in order to take advantage of newly opened frontier lands where they might have a better chance of owning large plots of real estate. While some certainly stayed in the same location for generations, genealogical records also show many cases of families living in New England during one period, moving to the mid Atlantic states for a generation or two, then to a territory such as Kansas or the Dakotas, then winding up on the West coast by the early 20th century.

With all the above evidence, why do so many people still believe in the “traditional” family described earlier? No single answer can suffice, but several factors seem to be at work.

First and foremost, few people study history beyond the survey courses taught in public school. Such texts often gloss over whole periods in a chapter or two without offering any significant detail. History texts used in public education are frequently written by committee, and their content is non-controversial to avoid offending parents and others. They are also designed with simplicity in mind; the lesson is learned, tested for, and then students move on to the next unit. It is simpler to teach grade school youths that Columbus or Erik the Red “discovered” America than to open a protracted discussion about Viking voyages, the Irish, and others said to have touched the North American mainland at a much earlier date, or to discuss the difference between “discovery” and the establishment of a practical sailing route. Nuance and detailed study are necessarily discarded in favor of rapid lesson completion and adherence to an established schedule. Thus many otherwise educated people are left totally unaware of the realities of US or world history, having only been exposed to a pre-digested version wholly lacking in detail.
Another factor in this process is something I’ve termed “golden age thinking,” which describes a nostalgia-filled, often simplistic view of the past based on childhood memories. Many adults assert that “things were so much simpler when I was a kid.” And indeed they were, since children in the modern era are (ideally) cared for by their parents and are not concerned with the complexity of day to day life. Adulthood and life in general can appear very simple and straightforward to a child whose parents manage the family’s finances, maintain the home, and prepare meals.

In the past, societies often saw prior eras as “golden ages” in which people were stronger, wiser, more religious, longer lived, or otherwise “better” than in the present. Individuals can easily conjure the same vision regarding their own childhood, idealizing their personal past in the same manner. The Old Testament, Greek myth, and other traditions idealize the first generations of humans as being somehow closer to, or even descended from the divine. Such societies seek to explain modern woes by claiming more recent generations have fallen from grace, or are physically diminished in stature or vitality. Clergymen frequently use this imagery to convince members of their congregation that they have “fallen into evil” and can only be saved by returning to the allegedly more pious traditions of the past. It is easy to see how individuals who developed idealized visions of adult life as children could fall into the same trap later in life.

References

Coontz, Stephanie, The Way We Never Were, p. 25

May, Elaine Taylor, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, p. 11

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

Note: All information contained in these pages is © 2007 Richard E. Joltes. Excerpts may be used where proper credit is given and permission is obtained in advance. All rights reserved.