

Chapter 14

More Americans, Living Longer

DURING the year 1932 a huddle of social scientists put the finishing touches on a massive study of American life which they called *Recent Social Changes*, and in this book some of them made cautious estimates of the probable increase in the future population of the country. Noting that the rate of growth appeared to be slowing down, they figured that a "continuation of present trends" would produce a 1940 population of 132 or 133 millions. In the event they were not far wrong; when the year 1940 rolled round, the actual figure proved to be a trifle smaller—presumably because of the discouragements of the Great Depression—yet only a trifle: it was 131,669,275. But on the same tentative basis the social scientists made a prediction for 1950, and on this one they were spectacularly wrong. Their prediction: between 140½ and 145 millions (which, you will agree, allowed considerable leeway for error). The actual 1950 figures: 150,697,361 people—more than five millions more than their outside estimate! There had been a huge, unexpected, and altogether astonishing increase.

The chief reason for the increase was a big jump in the birth rate during the nineteen-forties. To ascribe this flatly to "war and prosperity," as some people have done, seems a little oversimple; for World War I had brought no such big bulge, and during the reasonably prosperous nineteen-twenties the birthrate had not risen but had declined a little. Yet undeniably the draft regulations, deferring

husbands with children, were a factor. Another was the natural tendency of young people facing the prospect of being separated for months or years—or perhaps forever—to plunge into marriage in a hurry. Still another was the eagerness of young men returning from the notably undomestic life of the armed services, and of girls who had been waiting for them, to want to begin to enjoy domesticity just as soon as possible, with terminal pay and in many cases the G.I. Bill of Rights to help finance the venture. And at a time when wars and rumors of wars seemed to jeopardize one's career and threaten one's very life, there was not only a human need for seizing whatever satisfactions were within reach but also, perhaps, a desire to make some sort of contribution to the future, to perpetuate one's blood—or if not an outright desire (since most births are in some degree accidental) at least a slackening of the resolution not to perpetuate it for the time being.

In any case the birth rate, which—after a long decline—in the nineteen-thirties had hovered in the neighborhood of 17 or 18 per thousand of population, went to 20.9 in 1942 and 21.5 in 1943; declined a trifle to 20.2 in 1944 and 19.6 in 1945 (when a good many million potential fathers were in Europe or on Pacific islands or at sea); and then rose abruptly to 23.3 in 1946 and 25.8 in 1947—after which it declined, but only very slightly, to 24.2 in 1948, 24.1 in 1949, and 23.5 in 1950.

Surely here was a very interesting reaction to the dislocations and carnage of war. It came at a time when many of the more articulate intellectuals appeared to have reached the conclusion that the hazardousness of life, the helplessness of the individual in the grip of blind destiny, and the general decline of firm convictions as to the value of human effort, were reducing mankind to despair. What happened to the birth rate would seem to give grounds for wondering whether the population in general was not taking a cheerier view of the future. Even among American college graduates as a group (who for a long time had been reproved for not reproducing themselves) the trend in the birth rate was upward; records of the alumni and alumnae of 167 colleges showed that the class of '41 had produced, by 1951,

more children per graduate than the class of '36 had done when ten years out.

Was the institution of the family taking on a new lease of life in America? This notion may seem odd to one who notes that while the marriage rate, which had lagged during the Great Depression, rose during and after the war to a lofty peak in 1946, so did the divorce rate. But the large number of divorces at that time was surely due in part to repentance at leisure from hasty wartime alliances. For if it is true, as a cynic has said, that proximity and opportunity are responsible for most marriages, so a lack of proximity and a variety of opportunity will break up many marriages. And even though during the rest of the nineteen-forties the divorce rate remained higher than in prewar years—2.6 per thousand population in 1949, for example, as against the high figure of 4.3 in 1946 and a mere 2 in 1940, 1.6 in 1930, 1.6 in 1920, 0.9 in 1910, and 0.7 in 1900—this gave evidence, perhaps, of a declining conviction that marriages should be durable, but not of any doubt that they were desirable.

The figures seem to bear out one's impression that most American young people of the nineteen-forties had no such cynical or disillusioned reservations about marrying and bringing up a family as had possessed many of the bright young people of earlier decades. They did not want to prolong indefinitely the delights of single adventure. They did not regard marriage as a bourgeois expedient for enforcing a conventional monogamy upon free spirits. Nor did they, despite many warnings of the forthcoming collapse of civilization, regard with undue dismay adding to the number of human creatures who must allegedly confront that collapse. No, they wanted to marry and have babies, preferably in a ranch-type house with a dishwashing machine for the joint use of husband and wife, and with a TV set which would entertain them right beside the conjugal hearth. They had been around a lot and had decided that east, west, home was best.

II

Another reason why the population of the country grew so startlingly during the nineteen-forties was that fewer people were dying. The nation had never before been so healthy.

Indeed the cumulative change in this respect since 1900 had been prodigious. The death rate for a number of diseases which in 1900 had struck dismay into people's hearts had been cut way down: for influenza and pneumonia, from 181.5 (per 100,000 people) to 38.7 in 1948; for tuberculosis, from 201.9 to 30; for typhoid and paratyphoid, from 36 to 0.2; for diphtheria, from 43.3 to 0.4; for scarlet fever, from 11.4 to a small fraction of 0.1—a figure which in 1948 represented only 68 deaths in the entire country. Since immortality is denied to mankind and in the end people usually die of something, it was natural that startling reductions such as these should have been accompanied by increases in the death rate from degenerative diseases, notably heart diseases and cancer, which took the places formerly occupied by pneumonia and tuberculosis as the leading causes of death. But the net change in an American's expectation of life between 1900 and 1950 could hardly have been more impressive: it went up from 49 years to 68 years!

What had brought this miracle about? An interlocking series of advances in medical knowledge, medical training, medical practice, sanitation, public health measures, and general popular understanding of the principles of health. According to Dr. Alan Gregg, "The Harvard biological chemist Lawrence J. Henderson once remarked that somewhere around 1910 the progress of medicine in America reached the point where it became possible to say that a random patient with a random disease consulting a physician at random stood better than a 50-50 chance of benefiting from the encounter." Since then the medical profession had not only learned a vast lot about the treatment of numerous ailments, but had acquired for use such extraordinarily effective drugs as sulfanilamide (dating from 1935), penicillin (discovered in 1929, but not put to clinical use until the early forties), antibiotics such as aureomycin (even more recent), and the revolutionary ACTH and cortisone (not clinically used until 1948). So effective were public health measures such as mosquito control for the prevention of malaria that in 1950 the State of Mississippi offered a bonus of \$10 to any doctor who could find a new case of malaria, and not a single case was reported. Nor should one over-

look the contribution to general public health made through the discovery of the vitamins (beginning with vitamin A in 1913) and through popular education about them; by the mid-century it was a rare family which had not yet heard that there were special virtues in tomato juice, fruit juices, green vegetables, and salads, to say nothing of milk.

Let Brigadier General Simmons, dean of the Harvard School of Public Health, produce a neat statistical comparison of the gain in the effectiveness of the medical services of the armed forces since the days when young Dr. Harvey Cushing, meeting at Baltimore a trainload of typhoid victims of the Spanish-American War, was horrified by the dirt and squalor that he witnessed: "In the Spanish-American War the rate for deaths from disease among our troops was about 25 per thousand per annum. . . . In World War I the rate was reduced to about 16. . . . In World War II . . . [it] was only 0.6 per thousand per annum."

The increasingly successful war against infectious diseases had brought about during the nineteen-forties a great increase in the number of old people, a new interest in pension plans, and—since the tendency of business concerns to lay off employees at sixty-five or even sixty was still gaining headway—an acute question whether pensions beyond that age would not constitute a burden too heavy for most companies to carry. Meanwhile the jump in the birth rate was beginning by 1950 to swamp an already overcrowded elementary school system, and threatened to do so increasingly for many years to come. So it was that as the nineteen-fifties began, Americans in their wage-earning years were faced with the prospect of having to support, in one way or another, more human creatures senior and junior to themselves than ever before in recent history.

III

Not only were Americans, by and large, much healthier; they were also physically bigger. This was not readily demonstrable by reference to the medical records of the two world wars, for the average height of registrants for the draft in the first two years of Selective Service

for World War II was exactly the same as that of recruits examined during World War I—5 feet, 7½ inches—though the men of 1941-1942 averaged 8 pounds heavier than those of 1917-1918—150 pounds as against 142 pounds. (Registrants classed by local boards as available for general military service in 1941-1942 averaged 5 feet 8⅞ inches in height and were heavier still—152 pounds.) Such comparisons were bound to be somewhat misleading, however, since they involved men selected under differing conditions and representing differing proportions of men of various ancestries. Comparisons made for reasonably comparable groups among well-to-do old-stock Americans indicated a lively increase in size. For instance, Harvard students of the eighteen-seventies and early eighties averaged 5 feet 8.12 inches tall and 138.40 pounds in weight; Harvard students of the nineteen-twenties and early thirties averaged over two inches taller—5 feet 10.14 inches—and over ten pounds heavier—149.05 pounds. And there was almost precisely the same degree of difference between the measurements of Vassar students of the class of 1885 and of the class of 1940: the younger girls averaged 5 feet 5.1 inches tall, as against 5 feet 3.1 inches for the earlier group; weighed 126⅓ pounds, as against 115.7 pounds for the earlier ones; and incidentally had slightly larger waists—25¼ inches as against 24⅞ inches. (The Vassar female waist, incidentally, reached its minimum in girth in 1905—23⅞ inches—and its maximum in the belt-around-the-hips era of 1927—26⅜ inches.)

Whatever may be the difficulty of securing precisely comparable statistics, it was certainly a common observation throughout the half century that sons tended to be taller than their fathers, daughters than their mothers, and that young girls especially, at the mid-century, were requiring shoe sizes that struck their mothers with dismay. During the nineteen-forties a graduate of an eastern preparatory school for girls, returning as a teacher, remarked with surprise to the school doctor on the dimensions of her young charges. "But they're so *big*!" she said. "Big?" said he. "That's the tomato-juice generation you're seeing. Wait till you see the grapefruit-juice generation!"

By the mid-century the population statistics showed an impressive drift westward—especially to California and the Pacific Northwest. They showed also a steadily continuing movement from the farms and the smaller towns toward the centers of population. However much devotees of the character-building value of homespun living might lament the urbanization of American life, there seemed to be no stopping it. Behind it was economic logic, for farm production was requiring fewer and fewer workers, and the service occupations flourished best in big communities; behind it, too, was the irresistible centripetal pull of opportunity—or fancied opportunity—for the talented. Did the automobile, the telephone, the popular magazines, the radio, and TV enhance the life of farmers and villagers by enabling them to keep in touch with the great world? Yes, but they also brought to the girl or boy in Hagerstown or Paducah or Grand Forks an almost irresistible invitation to taste the delights of Los Angeles or Chicago or New York, where the doings of people were news, where the lights were bright, and where glamour had its recognized headquarters.

Finally, the melting pot had long been successfully at work. Since immigration had been sharply limited in the early nineteen-twenties, the number of foreign-born Americans had been steadily shrinking as one by one men and women who had come across the seas by steerage during the flood tide from Europe came to the end of their lives. Less and less often did one hear foreign languages spoken in American cities and industrial towns. The sons and daughters of the immigrants had resolutely acquired American customs and manners; the third generation—who possessed, as one New Yorker of Italian parentage put it, the “great advantage of having English-speaking parents”—were as American as Mayflower descendants, though to the latter their names might still seem foreign. During the nineteen-twenties, sports writers had been wont to comment with amusement on the European names that were showing up more and more frequently in the lineups of winning football teams; but by 1950 the cosmopolitan origins of the American people had become so thoroughly taken for granted that one would have been uttering a cliché

to comment on, for instance, the interesting combination of names possessed by the men who played in the World Series of that most American of sports, baseball. Here is the batting order of the winning nine of 1950 in the first game of the Series: Woodling, Rizzuto, Berra, DiMaggio, Mize, Brown, Bauer, Coleman, Raschi—Yankees all!