

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions – The Impact of the Fifties on America**

1. Give two examples of how the economic boom of the 1950s changed the way Americans lived.

A.

B.

2. How did the size of the middle class change during the Eisenhower era?

3. What was the attraction of life in the suburbs?

4. Describe two effects of the new technology and affluence of the 1950s.

A.

B.

5. Describe two ideas expressed about middle-class America by Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg.

A.

B.

6. How did the baby boom during the postwar period change America?

## 6. THE IMPACT OF THE FIFTIES ON AMERICA

**B**y the middle of the Eisenhower years, the United States was enjoying an extraordinary economic boom which changed the face of the nation. By the end of Ike's second term, most of the nation's white population lived free of material want. With Europe and Japan still recovering from the war, the United States, with only 6% of the world's population, produced half of the world's manufactured goods.

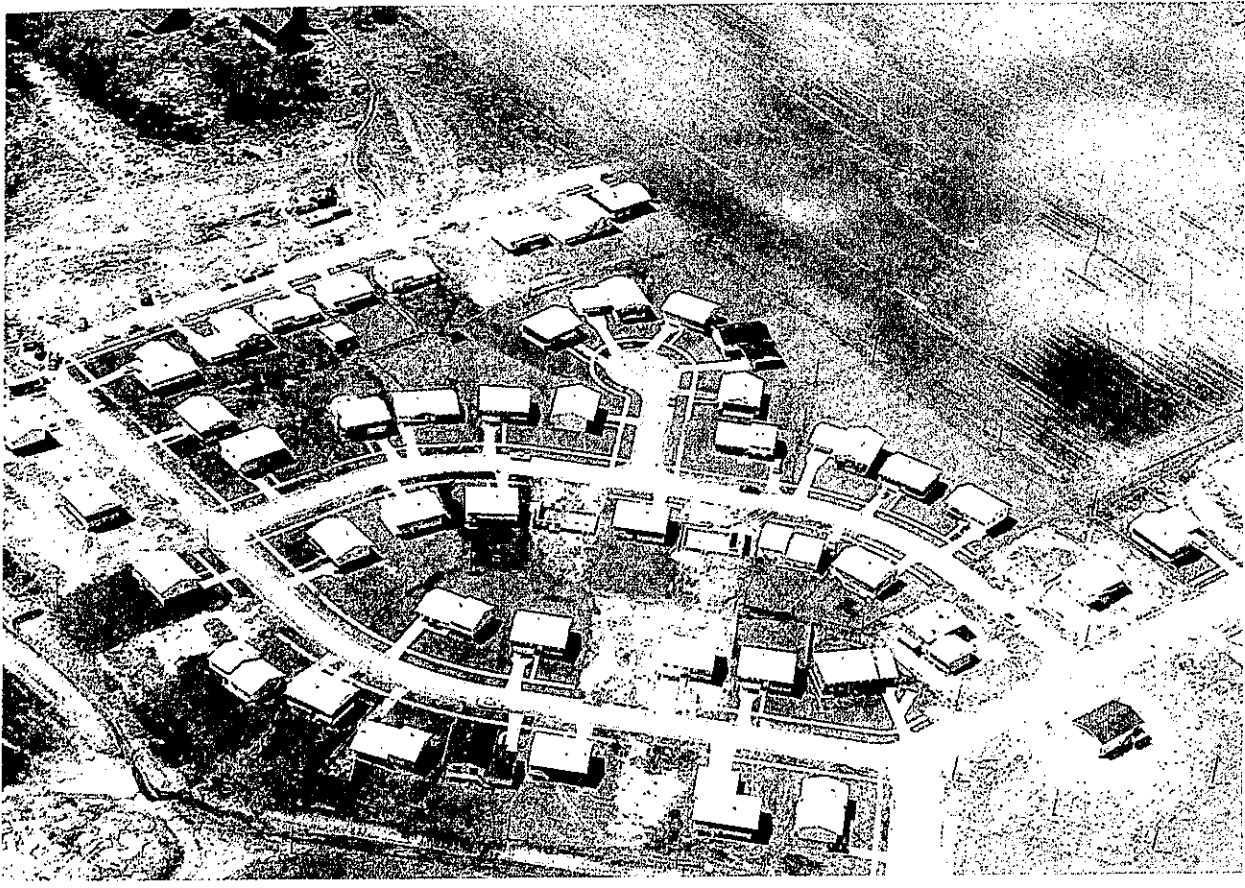
### Real Income Increases

The enormous burst of productivity in America after World War II increased real income (income adjusted for inflation) by a third between 1947 and 1956. At the same time, the number of families owning homes grew by some 50%. Disposable income more than tripled. This boom greatly increased the size of the American middle class.

Previously, the country's social structure had been shaped like a pyramid. The pyramid had a very broad base of poor people at the bottom with very few wealthy people at the top. In the Eisenhower years, however, the growing number of people in the middle class made the social structure look like a diamond, bulging at the center.



*A house wife working in a 1950s dream kitchen*



*A suburb being built on farmland in the 1950s*

The proportion of families and individuals with annual incomes of \$10,000 or more steadily increased throughout the decade. At the same time, the number of families or individuals whose income was \$3,000 or less declined. These changes helped to make America the richest nation on earth. Yet, as you shall see, these developments also had negative effects on American society.

#### **Many Americans Move to the Suburbs**

The new prosperity produced new ways of living. In the prosperous 1920s, the average industrial worker labored 10 hours a day, 6 days a week, and worked year round without a vacation. During the 1950s that same worker was working approximately 8 hours per day, 5 days a week, and had 2 weeks' paid vacation.

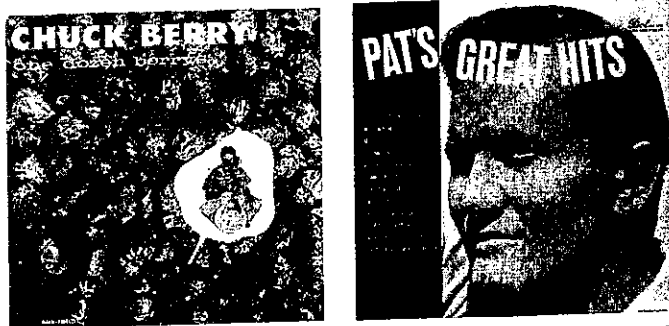
Many of these well-paid workers used their earnings to buy a home. One out of every four houses standing in 1960 had been built after 1950. These new homes were likely to be equipped with indoor plumbing and refrigerators.

In 1925 less than 1% of American homes had an electrical refrigerator; most people relied on daily deliveries from the ice man. But by 1960, 98% of all American homes had electrical refrigerators.

These new homes were usually built outside the city limits in what came to be called the suburbs. Homes in the suburbs often had spacious lawns, large garages, and wide streets. "Suburbia," as the suburbs were sometimes called, seemed to beckon to many Americans, offering them the "American dream" of a happy life.

#### **Records and Televisions Increase in Popularity**

Americans used much of their new wealth and leisure time on recreational activities. Record sales, which had previously been counted in the thousands, were, in the mid-1950s, now tabulated in the millions. The records of the great jazz artists were popular, but they were overshadowed by a new music called rock and roll, which start-



Record albums by Chuck Berry and Pat Boone were among those popular with teenagers during the 1950s.

ed to become popular in 1954. The new music quickly became a craze among teenagers, who went wild over rock and roll stars such as Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley.

The new leisure in America was brought about by the new technology of World War II applied to consumer use after the war. The old, brittle 78 rpm records were replaced by smaller, flexible 45 rpm records which were far cheaper to produce and sell. But the biggest change came with the advent of television.

In 1945 television was a rarity. By 1953, however, two out of every three American homes had a television set. Older forms of entertainment, such as vaudeville and live theater, could play at most to a few thousand people at a time. Even motion pictures could accommodate only limited audiences in any one place at a time. Television, however, reached into millions of homes, and a farmer in Maine and a lawyer in New Orleans could watch the same program at the same time.

Although television tied the country together by giving people something in common, it also had undesirable effects. For example, it undermined live entertainment and local cultures, resulting in the loss of local differences and a growing homogenization of our culture.

### A New Affluence Brings Problems

The dominant mood of the 1950s was probably best summed up by Eisenhower, the symbol of those years, when he told the country, "Everybody ought to be happy every day. Play hard, have fun doing it, and despise wickedness." But not everybody was happy. America's new affluence produced some unexpected problems. One was the enormous growth of giant corporations and the decline of small, independently owned businesses. This development meant that more people

than ever before were working for someone else, usually a large corporation. As a result, white-collar workers in these giant companies sometimes complained about being swallowed up by the large organizations which employed them. They felt they had no power, no ability to influence the decisions of the corporation.

Another unexpected problem arose when parents used their new affluence to cushion their teenage children from the concerns of adult society. In earlier generations, young people often had to work to help support their families. In the Fifties, they were freed from this obligation. Catered to by record companies and film makers and pampered by their parents, teenagers often lacked any sense of what to do with themselves. Lacking direction, they sometimes identified with screen heroes such as James Dean, who played a confused teenager in the hit motion picture *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Or, like the characters in the popular novel and film, *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955), they sometimes drifted into acts of senseless violence and hostility. Increasingly, teenagers became part of a distinct subculture.

### The Beatniks Criticize Cultural Conformity

The most vocal critics of Eisenhower's philosophy were a group of disillusioned young adults who came to be known as the "Beats" or "Beatniks." At first, the movement was centered in the North Beach section of San Francisco, California, and in Greenwich Village, New York. Soon, however, the movement gained a nationwide following.

The Beatniks were, among other things, critical of the conformity that marked the Eisenhower era. Most people looked at the rows of identical suburban houses and saw the fruits of hard-won affluence. The Beatniks only deplored the fact that these houses were filled with people who seemed to have lost all sense of individuality. The aim of the typical American family, they thought, was just to consume, to have what the neighbors had, only more—more TV sets, more appliances of every kind, more automobiles, more record players, and so on. The Beatniks turned away from this lifestyle, which they considered barren and stifling.

The Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg eloquently expressed this disenchantment with the middle-class values of the consumer society. Kerouac's novel, *On the Road*, which

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# LIFE IN AMERICA

## THE BABY BOOM

At the end of the war, many Americans resumed interrupted careers, got married, and started families. So many babies were born in the postwar period of 1946 to 1964 that it has come to be called a boom—the baby boom. The 76 million “boomers” (as babies born during this period have been called) have traveled through American society with some difficulty.

When they were born, there were too many of them in the maternity wards. When they entered grade school, they sat two to a desk and shared textbooks. They competed fiercely for limited college and job openings, experienced a housing shortage in the 1980s, and will pose a serious problem for the Social Security system when they reach retirement age.



“Diaper derby,” New Jersey, 1946

## A Child-Centered Society

The sheer number of the “boomers” gives them enormous power. As children, they were the first generation to grow up with TV, and advertisers have aimed many products at them. When they were teens the record industry prospered from their purchases. As young adults they were called the Pepsi Generation. “Never trust anyone over 30” they were told. Now, as some of them reach middle age, they are told, “You’re not getting older, you’re getting better.”

## The Future

The hopes and aspirations of the baby boom generation are important because the baby boomers are the generation now taking charge, and they will be at the center of power well into the next century.

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appeared in 1957, became required reading for the rebels of the Fifties. The book is an account of the author’s automobile journeys across America. Avoiding the mainstream, he concentrated in his travels on everyday problems and situations that gave pleasure and pain. He discovered the Eastern philosophy of Zen Buddhism and reveled in cool black jazz.

Ginsberg was a much harsher and more politically motivated critic of the status quo than Kerouac. In his poem “Howl,” Ginsberg totally rejected many of the key beliefs and assumptions of American society in the Fifties. American technology, abundance, and striving for material progress were held up to scorn. The poem became a kind of statement of the Beat culture.

In San Francisco and elsewhere, the bearded and sandal-shod followers of Ginsberg and Kerouac were met with disapproval by mainstream America. However, their social protest won converts from disillusioned teenagers, college students, and civil rights activists. In the 1960s the Beatnik’s disillusionment and the restless energy of American youth joined in a movement that

came to be known as the Counterculture, a total rejection of middle-class culture and morals. This movement took as its primary target the Vietnam War. Ginsberg and other Beatnik leaders of the Fifties would become regulars at antiwar demonstrations in the Sixties, providing a direct link between the Beatniks and later protest movements.

Land of Promise:  
A History of the  
United States