Lost in the Fifties: A Study of Collected Memories

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LOST IN THE FIFTIES: A STUDY OF COLLECTED MEMORIES

by

Janelle L. Wilson

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Sociology

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
April 1995
LOST IN THE FIFTIES: A STUDY OF COLLECTED MEMORIES

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Western Michigan University, 1995

This is a study of ordinary people's recollections of the decade of the nineteen fifties. The theoretical concepts of collective memory and collected memories guide design and analysis. Unstructured interviews with 33 individuals who grew up in America in that decade were conducted. The snowball method identified potential informants. The data from these interviews, combined with secondary sources on that time period, served to reconstruct this decade. A number of themes emerged from the data; the decade was seen: as an apolitical time, as fun and innocent, as fearful with respect to atomic weaponry and Communists, as problematic for race relations, and as the pre-cursor to the revolutionary decade which was to follow. It was found that this decade is not the monolith that the dominant American ideology portrays through the media. The recollections of African Americans, for example, are systematically different than the memories of whites. It was concluded that, while concepts such as dominant ideology guide sociological thought, care needs to be exercised, lest such ideas become reified.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many individuals behind this dissertation to whom I am greatly indebted. I especially wish to thank Gerald Markle for serving as my advisor. His interest in my work has been inspirational to me. I thank him for his guidance and for believing in me.

Many thanks also to my committee members, Ron Kramer, Douglas Davidson, and Lewis Carlson, for their interest in my dissertation and their insightful suggestions and comments.

Special thanks to Karen Rice for preparing this manuscript for submission. Her careful processing of the dissertation is commendable.

I would like to thank all of my informants for sharing their recollections of the 1950s with me. Their participation made possible this dissertation. I recognize these wonderful people as my co-collaborators.

This project represents not only a completed dissertation, but the end of my occupancy of the graduate student role. As such, I am filled with gratitude toward many key individuals who have been so central in my life at Western Michigan University these past five years; in addition to those already mentioned, people like Lewis Walker, Subhash Sonnad, Bob Wait, Pat Martin, and Lois Carl. Thank you, my Departmental family.

Janelle L. Wilson

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Differing Memories of the '50s

My father (Class of '57) remembers the 1950s as truly being the good old days: drive-in movies and drag races and driving a '57 Chevy, "the prettiest car ever built." He can produce "I like Ike" pins and voice his trust in and admiration for President Eisenhower. He identifies real heroes like Joe Dimaggio, Al Kaline, Bobby Lane, and Jumpin' Johnny Green. The fifties were a time when there was "somebody you could really look up to." To him, the fifties were the conservative calm before the radical storm of the 1960s.

My advisor (Class of '60) remembers the 1950s as a difficult, embarrassing decade in our nation's past. The images he retains from the period include McCarthy persecutions, rampant racism and sexism, bomb drills in school, the execution of the Rosenbergs, and the hypocrisy of the United States government. To him, the troubled fifties were washed away in the liberation of the 1960s.

My story is caught between these two. Though I had "not even been thought of" (as my mother, Class of '56, would say) in the '50s, I definitely have conceptions of what living during that decade was like. I grew up watching "Happy Days," a 1970s situation comedy set in the 1950s. The title alone is indicative of the
picture of the '50s it painted for me: Those were happy days with Fonzie, Richie, and the gang. Hanging out at Arnold's, going to Inspiration Point with your steady on a Friday night, competing in dance marathons--this was the picture.

When I was in high school, we had "Fifties Day" each year. This was a day when we girls dressed in bobby socks, skirts (or jeans, rolled up at the bottom), and our mother's old high school sweater. Guys wore leather jackets (with the collar up), black high-top basketball shoes, and they greased their hair back.

Fifties' music has survived. I grew up knowing many of the old songs--both through my dad and through "Golden Oldies" radio stations. One of the main reasons I have had a positive image of this decade is because of the rock music from that time. Its unintelligible words and its beat are uplifting and catchy. As an undergraduate student, I recall frequenting a restaurant called "Flips," where the walls were covered with '50s items--e.g., old Coca Cola signs and the old Coca Cola bottles, old albums, guitars, etc. Waiters had names like Potsie or Richie, and waitresses had names like Gidget or Susie. The music playing was from the '50s and sometimes the employees performed dance routines to the songs. Also, on weekends, hoola hoops were provided on the dance floor for patrons to use.

I seem to have a nostalgia for this decade I never actually experienced. Yet, on the other hand, my academic training has given me the gift of critical thought. History teaches not just the good
side of the '50s, but the other side as well. I understand and re­spect both my advisor's and my father's views on the '50s. Neither story is more true than the other. I believe that both are true. Yet, I realize that, in trying to characterize a decade, both of these pictures are, and necessarily so, simplified. In reality, each of these men have layers of memories and meanings of the decade in which they grew up. Indeed, each individual's recollection of the '50s is a complicated matter. History, life events, personal memories all combine to produce particular remembrances.

This study is an attempt to expose and explore such layers of meaning. By talking with individuals--like my father and my advisor--who grew up during the '50s, I attempt to reconstruct that decade.

Research Questions

The proposed research is a study of memory. More specifical­ly, it is a study of how people recollect their past--that is, a study of, to use James Young's (1980) phrase, collected memories. With this concept of collected memories, Young emphasizes the point that memories vary from person to person. Taken together, individuals' "discrete memories constitute the collected, not collective memory" (p. 70). What Young does here is, theoretically, of para­mount importance. He rejects the functional conception of collective memory as a set (or system) of shared, cultural symbols. To treat memory as this kind of collectivity is to reify it, to
objectify it, and to simplify it. A more accurate, and complete view of memory is captured in the term collected memory. Young's work guides my research on how people recollect the past. My empirical focus is how a cohort of individuals who grew up in the 1950s remember this decade. As is typical in qualitative research, my research questions evolved during the process of conducting research. How do individuals recollect—or reconstruct—the 1950s? How do individuals mediate the complex relationship between the past and the present? And further, of what relevance is history in understanding the present? How are the past and the present related? How individuals use the past?

Such questions are especially relevant and interesting as we approach the 21st century. Landscape architect David Lowenthal (1989) calls for analysis joining personal memory with collective history. This study is, in part, such an analysis.

Central to my conceptualization of memory and the past is that the past is not some static, objective entity. Rather, as sociologists Gerald Markle and Fran McCrea (1990) say, "the past is in constant flux" (p. 144). Yet, the conventional view is that of memory and the past as fixed entities, as described, for example, by Shils. Markle and McCrea succinctly state Shils's conventional position: "Past has a causal relationship with present; the obverse is not considered" (p. 145).

However, both memory and past are increasingly being described by contemporary theorists with active, rather than passive words.
Indeed, memory is both noun and verb. Consider feminist literary critic Gayle Greene’s (1991) description of memory: "Memory revises, reorders, refigures, resignifies; it includes or omits, embellishes or represses, decorates or drops, according to imperatives of its own" (p. 294). Further, she says, "[b]oth ‘re-membering’ and ‘re-collecting’ suggest a connecting, assembling, a bringing together of things in relation to one another" (p. 297).

Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright (1982) point to the media as promulgators of the view that "‘the past’ is really there to be visited" (p. 298). They write: "much television history is premised upon a valuation of the scene of past events: through the medium of television the viewer can ‘visit’ the past" (p. 298). I view both the past and memory as dynamic processes. I turn now to sociological and sociohistorical perspectives on memory.
CHAPTER II

THEORY AND LITERATURE

In this chapter, I present various theoretical approaches to the sociological study of memory. I especially focus on the concept of collective memory and discuss how the major theoretical approaches in sociology conceptualize the term. That is, I consider functionalist, conflict, symbolic interactionist, and feminist approaches. Finally, I present the findings of relevant studies of memory.

Perspectives on the Social Production of Memory

Memory: Private and Public

The concept of memory has, for the most part, been studied by psychologists. Historically, interest in memory centered on the mental processes involved in remembering words, names, or events. In this way, and conceptually, memory is viewed as an individual domain. Indeed, as Lowenthal (1985) states, "memory is wholly and internally personal" (p. 194).

The sociological conception of memory, however, brings into consideration the influence of the social world on individual memory, thus broadening the concept. The term, collective memory, for example, suggests that it is impossible to regard the individual and society as strictly separated. Thus, micro and macro are conjoined. Lowenthal (1985), in his discussion of why people revise the past,
suggests that we conform the past "to our self-images and aspirations. Rendered grand or homely, magnified or tarnished, history is continually altered in our private interests or on behalf of our community or country" (p. 348). Hence, memory is both a micro and a macro process.

The complex relationship between individual (or personal) memory and collective memory is explained by Holocaust scholar Arno Mayer (1993) this way: "Personal remembrances are singular to individuals at the same time that they intersect with the impersonal memories of the larger group to which every individual necessarily belongs" (p. 9). Here, collective memory seems to envelop individual memory.

Franco Ferrarotti (1990) states that memory is "not simply an individual question." Memory has a base in and a link with the community: "It involves the group, the collective unconscious, a stream of consciousness which links everything and travels in the interior of everyone at variable speeds and with its own images without, thus, exclusively belonging to anyone" (p. 30). In considering the collective or community aspect to memory, Ferrarotti describes memory as a complex process which involves not only the individual, but the context surrounding the individual: "The complexity of memory and its operations essentially derive from the fact that in reality memory is two things, corporeity and consciousness" (p. 32).

Richard Johnson and Graham Dawson (1982) note that academic
history-writing is only one way that the past is constructed:

Academic history has a particular place in a much larger process. We will call this 'the social production of memory'. In this collective production everyone participates, though unequally. Everyone, in this sense, is a historian. (p. 207)

In their discussion of the means by which social memory is produced, they paint a similar picture of the memory as both private and public. They identify public representations and private memory as the main ways in which social memory is produced. With regard to private memory, however, they note that this, too, may be collective and shared. They comment on the complex relationship between private memory and history. "Private memories cannot, in concrete studies, be readily unscrambled from the effects of dominant historical discourses. It is often these that supply the very terms by which a private history is thought through" (p. 211).

This view of memory, as put forth thus far, calls for a conception of remembering and forgetting as types of social action. As the binary opposition between history and memory has been dissolved (Porreca, 1994), questions about the past can take the following form:

Instead of looking at the past and asking the traditional historian's question of what really happened, we can ask, what do various groups, societies, and peoples think happened? What versions of the past have they constructed and what meanings have they articulated to those constructions? Why do they--and we--remember some things and not others? What goes into the social construction of a past? And, how are social memories struggled over, how are they used, and what effects do they have in the present? (pp. 8-10)

Bommes and Wright (1982) view memory as both social and historic. Their argument is that memory exists "in the world rather
than in people’s heads" (p. 256). Its basis is not only in "con-
versations, cultural forms, personal relations, [and] the struc-
ture and appearance of places," but also, they say, "in relation to
ideologies which work to establish a consensus view of both the past
and forms of personal experience which are significant and memor-
able" (p. 256).

Collective memory is in academic vogue these days. The frame-
work in which my study of collected memories is nested is indeed the
study of collective memory. There are various approaches to the con-
cept of collective memory. I begin with the originator of the con-
cept, Maurice Halbwachs.

Collective Memory as Social Fact

Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), considered by Lewis Coser
(1992) "the most important figure of the second generation of Durk-
heimians in the interwar years" (p. 1), made the social structure
central to his conception of the collective memory. For Halbwachs,
the past is kept alive via membership in various social groups. He
identifies collective memory as arising from our inclusion in social
groups. Memories that individuals have, then, are not actually
individual. Rather, they are a part of—and shared with—the other
members of the social group that experienced the given event. As
Harry Barnes and Howard Becker (1952) illustrate, "we localize an
individual memory by relating it to the history of our family, by
placing it in relation to some of the important episodes, births,
marriages, deaths, and the like, which have occurred in it" (p. 843). Communication theorist Kurt Lang (1993) states his argument thus: "Halbwachs argues that memories hang together less because they are contiguous in time than because of their place within some structure or framework" (p. 596). Following Halbwachs, Ferrarotti (1990) makes an important sociological point when he says:

Memory is never a purely individual gift. Memory connects us along the chain of the generations through language, usages and customs, with both collective history and the history of those without history. Halbwachs's example is notably revealing: When I go to London I see at the same time the London my eyes bring me and the London of Dickens. In other words, there is no memory that is not also an inter- and contextual reconstruction. (p. 64)

Locating collective memory as deriving from one's membership in groups, it follows, as Coser (1992) says, "that there are as many collective memories as there are groups and institutions in a society" (p. 367). Lowenthal (1985) echoes Halbwachs when he says, "unlike dreams, which are wholly private, memories are continually supplemented by those of others" (p. 196). Mayer (1993), too, seems to echo Halbwachs when he says that, unlike history, memory "originates and develops within a distinct group, to which it remains confined" (p. 9). Yet, Mayer's focus seems to be less on the mythic notion of a truly individual, personal memory, and more on the way memory is used for present purposes.

To be sure, individuals have remembrances that are direct, literal, and tangible--like those my maternal grandmother relayed to me about her infernal life in Theresienstadt. But even such distinctly personal recollections, in addition to being shared, are swayed, not to say adulterated, by the present, which conditions the way they are articulated. (p. 9)
This is consistent with Halbwachs's conceptualization of collective memory.

As a student of Durkheim's, Halbwachs took a functional approach. Indeed, Halbwachs's focus on the social structure forces the conception of collective memory as a social fact. Such a focus lends itself to a static view of social life. This is a rather limited approach to the concept. In this study, the focus on collected memories allows for a more dynamic view of memory and time.

**Collective Memory as Ideology**

Like Halbwachs, neo-Marxists approach collective memory from a macro perspective. But, rather than viewing social structure as a social fact, as Halbwachs does, neo-Marxists view the social structure as reified. A major focus for the neo-Marxist is dominant ideology. For, it is dominant ideology which makes possible the reification of social life. Though neo-Marxists would not use the term collective memory, their conception of dominant ideology encapsulates the notion. From this perspective, the collective memory is used as a vehicle for maintenance of the status quo. Michael Billig (1990) suggests that ideology constitutes what is collectively remembered and forgotten. Memory is a part of ideology. David Porreca's (1994) discussion of a critical approach to social memory suggests that such an approach views collective remembering and forgetting as enmeshed in shifting relations of power. Thus, "social memories and lapses of memory are seen as continually being
constructed and reconstructed as material circumstances and interests change" (p. 8).

Collective memory, then, is a tool deliberately used for class or group purposes. Mayer (1993) says this: "Memory is certainly very much in fashion these days. Surely this rage for memory is neither politically innocent nor historically fortuitous" (p. 7). His prime example is the memory of the Judeocide, which he feels "is angled and mediated to aid and abet the fugitive present as it encroaches on the uncertain future" (p. 13). He identifies, as the purpose of heralding a collective memory, the readjustment of the past for use in "arguments over policies for today and tomorrow;" indeed, "to deny or minimize the instrumental aspects of collective or social memory is to misconceive it" (p. 13).

In the same way that social scientist Paul Connerton (1989) stresses the difficulty of establishing a shared memory across generations (because of different background narratives, etc.), a shared or collective memory in America may be quite difficult to establish during these pluralistic times. As sociologist Herbert Gans (1974) says,

America is culturally pluralist, made up of a number of subcultures which coexist around a common core, American culture, even though that core is so vague and so limited both in content and adherents that no one has ever succeeded in delineating it satisfactorily. (p. 13)

In today's multi-cultural America, the concept of dominant American ideology may be problematic in a practical sense. Postmodernists would claim that there is no one dominant ideology
anymore; rather, there a number of ideologies, each struggling to gain acceptance and adherence. The breakdown or absence of a dominant ideology may negate the notion of a collective memory. It may, indeed, be more accurate not to claim a collective memory, but rather, many collective memories in contemporary American society (just as Kenneth Dolbeare and Linda Medcalf (1988) talk about many ideologies--rather than a dominant ideology).

Another element which may make collective memory a problematic concept is that ours is a nation that seems to deny its history. A present- and future-orientation characterizes the American's sense of time. The past, it seems, does not exist. Jose Ortega Y. Gasset (1932/1985) lamented the dissociation between past and present, viewing it as characteristic of a lack of respect for the past. He associates this with barbarism, writing that, in the last third of the nineteenth century, a retrogression toward barbarism began--i.e., "toward the ingenuousness and primitivism of those who have no past, or have forgotten it" (p. 80).

Social scientist Ernest van den Haag (in Rosenberg and White, 1971) links this country's rejection of the past with people's immigrant backgrounds, the melting-pot nature of the school system, and the rapid rate of change which "makes the experience of the old seem old-fashioned and diminishes their authority" (p. 90). David Blight (1989) holds the dominant American value of individualism responsible: "The overweening force of individualism in an expanding country had ever made Americans a future-oriented people, a culture
unburdened with memory and tradition" (p. 1172).

Sociologist Peter Berger (1963) offers at least a partial explanation. He alludes to the geographical and social mobility that characterize American life. He writes: "People on the move physically are frequently people who are also on the move in their self-understanding" (p. 58). And, further, with respect to social mobility, "we change our worldviews (and thus our interpretations and re-interpretations of our biography) as we move from one social world to another" (p. 64). Oral historian Studs Terkel (in Grele 1991) commented on Americans' sense of history. He said that people don't have a sense of history because they "were conditioned not to have a sense of history" (p. 43). "It doesn't mean they're stupid, it means they've been denied it" (p. 20).

Neo-Marxists and sociologists of knowledge also consider the role of the mass media—both in shaping individual and cultural memories, as well as accounting for this seeming abolishment of history. Because the mass media are inescapable promulgators of dominant ideology, their role in the collective memory is significant. As Lowenthal (1985) points out, the technologically advanced media of today make the past readily and easily accessible, as well as compelling: "Movies and snapshots plunge us into a vivid past—or bring that past directly into the present—seemingly without mediation" (p. 367). Television programs (such as "Happy Days" in the 1970s, for example), commercials, and the music played by certain radio stations paint a definite picture of the 1950s. Thus, the
media create (to a degree) what we remember, but also, the contemporary forms of the media make more possible the abolishing of the past.

Moreover, the great societal and global changes that characterize the past couple of decades increase dependance on the media. As Michael Cole (1990) says,

historical events occur with such rapidity on such a mass scale that they cannot be adequately assimilated into everyday experience individuals have no direct experience of the events affecting them, learning about them only through the selective screen of centrally controlled media. (p. vii)

George Lipsitz (1990) considers the influence that the mass media in general (and popular culture in particular) have upon collective memory. He suggests that historical memory is a crisis "in this age of electronic media and its focus on the present" (p. viii). Yet, he also points out that electronic media "make collective memory a crucial constituent of individual and group identity in the modern world" (p. viii). His position is not wholly pessimistic, for he says,

this capacity of electronic mass communication to transcend time and space creates instability by disconnecting people from past traditions, but it also liberates people by making the past less determinate of experiences in the present. (p. 5)

Lipsitz looks at popular culture texts as providing a sense of shared memory and a sense of identity. Popular music, for example, is "the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or the last word" (p. 99). He views popular culture as dialogic. That is to say, our engagement with popular
culture texts places us as participants in a conversation with historical forces. In this way, people's memories may resist being shaped or manipulated by the dominant group.

Lowenthal (1989) also comments on the impact of the media on collective memory: "The omnipresence of history in media and marketplace encourages the public to vacillate between nostalgic compulsion and self-protective amnesia" (p. 1279). He cites, from our popular culture, an example: "the popularity of [the movie] Back to the Future reflects the prevailing penchant for reliving, and remaking, one's personal past" (p. 1279).

Like Halbwachs's functional approach, the Marxist approach views collective memory more as some static element within the culture. The Marxist would say, for example, here is the collective memory of the 1950s, as presented by dominant ideology. Do people's recollections of the 1950s coincide with this collective memory? In turning to George Herbert Mead, I present the theoretical perspective which, I feel, is most appropriate and useful in dealing with the topic of memory from an interpretive sociological standpoint.

Collective Memory as Situational

George Herbert Mead's view of the past, in some ways, bridges Halbwachs's more positivistic approach and the more critical neo-Marxian approach. Mead does not treat social life or memory as a social fact, and neither does he view collective memory as
necessarily related to dominant ideology. Rather, he carves out an intermediary approach between personality and social structure; he focuses on social situations. Furthermore, Mead is ever the Pragmatist. He thus asks a very pragmatic question: How do people use the past?

Mead (1929) begins by locating the present as "the locus of reality." Yet, he holds that the present implies both "a past and a future." His more micro view of collective memory emphasizes the way in which reconstructions of the past are used in interaction for various purposes in creating meaning and maintaining continuity. According to Mead, the past is not necessarily left as past, for individuals carry their pasts around with them. "They are in great part thought constructs of what the present by its nature involves, into which very slight material of memory imagery is fitted" (pp. 237-38). Mead's symbolic interactionism, then, not only says that individuals create and recreate present reality through an interactional process, but also that the past is re-created in the same manner, according to the given situational demands/purposes. Just as we negotiate meaning concerning the here and now, then, we also negotiate the meaning of the past.

Following the work of Mead, Patrick Baert (1992) identifies three different ways in which an individual can use the past. First, "past-as-sequence" refers to a descriptive use of the past. Here, the past is viewed as a sequence of particular events. Second, "past-as-categorised" refers to assigning meaning or value to
past events. It is "a re-assessment of the categories for which the past events belong and which values (e.g., positive versus negative, reasonable versus unreasonable) one should attribute to them" (p. 87). Third, "past-as-order" refers to reconstructing the past. This use of the past goes beyond mere descriptive sequencing of events to why and how particular events occur together. To use Baert's own example, if an individual were to say that someone's past accounts for his or her deviant behavior, then one is here using the past "not merely as a sequence of phenomena, but also as an answer to a why-question concerning past, present and future conduct" (p. 87).

Thus, Baert's interpretation of Mead takes us beyond the basic notion that individuals use the past for present purposes, for Baert describes types (levels) of the use value of the past.

Also relevant is Baert's distinction among various views of the past. An "eternal permutational world view" derives from positivism and conceives of reality as immutable: "the real is fixed and unchangeable, and the temporal flux is nothing more than an imperfect reflection of an eternal world of forms" (p. 84). Second, a closed historical world view is a deterministic view which holds us in bondage to either the past or the future. This view visualizes past, present, and future as mechanistically determining each other. Baert favors an open historical view, which is consistent with themes running through Mead's Philosophy of the Present.

Berger's (1963) conception of memory is consistent with
Mead's. He uses the term "selective perception" in a broader sense than is typically done, for he argues that we selectively attend not just to certain present stimuli, but also to experiences from the past: "in any situation, we notice only those things that are important for our immediate purposes, the past is malleable and flexible, constantly changing as our recollection reinterprets and re-explains what has happened" (pp. 56-57). Again, Lowenthal (1985) is relevant:

Memories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic, selective reconstructions based on subsequent actions and perceptions and on ever-changing codes by which we delineate, symbolize, and classify the world around us. (p. 210)

As Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) recognizes, "[p]art of what makes it possible for people to keep pushing forward is the selection of what gets remembered and revealed" (p. 612). Ferrarotti (1990) not only emphasizes the selective nature of remembering; he asks difficult, penetrating questions about this selectivity.

Man is a remembering animal, but memory is selective. What to remember? To forget? And why? Memory recalls the crucial moments on which the person is built, the experiences deeply experienced by the person, more exactly, by the personality of the person. (p. 29)

Memory filters and selects. How? On the basis of what criteria? And how can life already lived, experienced, and empirically worn through be recalled to consciousness? Be truly reactivated? We are speaking of an effective human experience. It is not a story, nor a mythos. It is life really lived. (p. 46)

I endorse Berger and Luckmann's (1966) dialectical vision:

Each person is born into an existing social system. But each person also can influence and act upon this system. Such a view would
suggest that a collective memory (or memories) resides within the social structure, but people may edit this collective memory differentially. And, indeed, people may even choose a new collective memory altogether. Following Mead, I attempt to identify particular use-values of the past.

**Feminist Approach: Past as Construct**

Feminist scholars see memory as important in emphasizing women's worth, as well as their past struggles. Feminist scholar Catharine Stimpson (1987) advocates searching for a past that "we might use in the present in order to imagine a future that serves women better" (p. 263). For example, in artist-photographer Esther Parada's (1987) analysis of the work of particular female artists, she expresses the hope that, in presenting the specific works she does, the lives and energy of other women are restored to a place in public memory and we are connected to "the living energy of the artists and to their sense of the complexity of reality" (p. 216).

Greene (1991) states that "memory is of particular importance to feminists" (p. 291). She analyzes feminist fiction from such authors as Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Lawrence, and Toni Morrison. The novels she studies address "memory as a means to liberation" and explore this at "the level of narrative form" (p. 291). In these novels, Greene notes that, though protagonists begin with a longing for "the true story," they come to opt for a view of the past as "ever-changing and open to
revision—a view they find enormously liberating, for if the past is a construct, it can be reconstructed” (pp. 305-306).

Viewing the past as construct is consistent with Mead’s symbolic interactionist perspective. It is somewhat consistent, too, with postmodernist approaches. Yet, the latter take a more extreme position: Postmodernists say that "our memories, like all our putative representations of reality, were simply fictions" (Stimpson, 1987, p. 264). Such a radical view of the past will not be adhered to in this study. Yet, it is acknowledged that the past lies somewhere between objective fact and pure fiction.

While all of these various perspectives on memory have influenced my own conception of what memory means to a sociologist, I am most guided by Mead’s interpretive framework and the contemporary feminists’ work. My approach would most aptly be labeled cultural studies (to be revisited in the following chapter).

Previous Sociological and Socio-historical Studies of Memory

Interest in the social nature of memory is found in a number of disciplinary areas, such as oral history, folklore, museum studies, historical geography, social theory, sociology, and communication studies (David Middleton & Derek Edwards, 1990). A number of studies have been done which attest to the existence and the power of collective memory. Though the terminology may not be consistent (e.g., social memory, historical memory, conversational remembering, etc.), the following studies have explored the nature and
implications of the social production of memory.

Sociologist Barry Schwartz is a scholar who has done much in this area. In *The Reconstruction of Abraham Lincoln*, Schwartz (1990) presents a picture of the nineteenth-century image of Lincoln and then shows how this image was reconstructed in the first two decades of the twentieth century. From depictions of Lincoln in the popular media, Schwartz notes that different personal qualities are emphasized, depending upon the ideological and emotional issues of the time. For example, the image of Lincoln as a common man was consistent with the turn of the century, when such symbols of commonness and simplicity could be considered "a restatement of democracy's rediscovery making it known to the people in a concrete way" (p. 96).

Schwartz did a similar study a year later, focusing on another of America's heroes. Drawing on essays and commentaries in popular magazines, newspaper articles, literature, and the like, Schwartz (1991) compares images of Washington before and after the Civil War. Two images appeared: the common Washington who affirmed democratic values and the genteel Washington. His findings led to the conclusion that both the retention and the construction of the past are rooted in the present.

Barry Schwartz, Yael Zerubavel, and Bernice Barnett (1986) conducted a study of the 1927 remembering and commemoration of the battle of Masada, which occurred in 73 A.D. A poem written by Yitzhak Lamdan in 1927, *Masada* constituted their text for study. There
was great reception of the poem, explained by these authors thus: the poem helped Jews better understand the present. In this sense, Mead's notion of "the use value of pasts" is demonstrated. In this poem, Lamdan described his own feelings and, in so doing, described the "feelings and reactions of the community at large" (p. 152).

The poem is inspirational. The battle of Masada was unsuccessful for the Jewish people, but Lamdan, through his poem, offers hope. He calls for a break from the past. Masada, though a dead end, can be symbolic of a new beginning, reassurance for the future.

Schwartz et. al put forth a theory of historical selectivity which bridges the gap between history as an objective fact and history as completely malleable according to present conditions.

James Young (1990), in his discussion of Yom ha-Shoah ve-ha-Bvurah (Day of Holocaust and Heroism), points to similar uses of the past via this commemorative day. The events and rituals surrounding this day are reminders of the heroic fighters. Young says, "in fact, after being twinned with heroism for so many years, the Shoah itself no longer signifies defeat in the eyes of many of the young soldiers, but actually emerges as an era of heroism, or triumph over passivity" (p. 67). This day of remembrance highlights, as the primary use of the past, the unification of a nation. "For the very act of commemoration provides a common experience for a population otherwise divided by innumerably disparate lives" (p. 71).

It is in this context that Young introduces the term collected memories, as opposed to Halbwachs' collective memory. Hence,
we return to a concept discussed in Chapter I. Young identifies a danger in "a day that creates a single meaning in such memory" (p. 71). It is a myth that there exists a single memory. The reality, he says, is that memories vary from person to person. It is the act of a commemorative ceremony produces the sense that there exists a shared past.

A study conducted by Middleton and Edwards (1990) demonstrated the importance of the communicational setting (or discursive frame) on remembering. A group of undergraduate students were asked to recall together something that they had all recently witnessed: the movie E.T. This group of students attempted to reconstruct the narrative order of events in the movie. But, in addition, at the end of their session, they "spontaneously carried on reminiscing about what had obviously been a pleasant and interesting experience," as they referred to different points in the movie so as to recall what were, for them, "particularly poignant, or significant 'bits'" (p. 31). Hence, communicational setting is shown to be important in determining what is remembered. The authors suggest that this finding goes beyond this study. They stress the need to study versions of events in their social, conversational context.

Michael Billig (1990) employed the method of discourse analysis in demonstrating the important link between collective memory and ideology. As part of a larger project involving an examination of the way in which ordinary people talk about the Royal family, he interviewed a British family on the topic of the monarchy. Billig's
following statement illustrates the relevance of ideology to ordinary discourse. "As people talk about royalty, they are talking, directly or indirectly, about the nature of society and family, privilege and equality, morality and duty, and so on" (p. 65). Indeed, the concept of "collective memory" is not distinct from ideology. Billig responds to the problem of representativeness in this kind of research: "Obviously if ideology and social representations are to be studied, the analyst hopes to study aspects of discourse which are widely shared, rather than being the peculiar property of the speakers in question" (p. 65). With the topic of monarchy, he achieved this end.

Sociologists Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott (1989), in their study, "Generations And Collective Memories," demonstrated the important link between cohorts and memories, as they found that different cohorts recall different national or world events/changes considered by them to be especially important. Their memories especially emanate from adolescence to early adulthood. The authors distinguish between two meanings of collective memory: a large part of the population remembering a common object (this, they feel, is the more superficial) and a large part of a generation remembering an event or a period in a similar way (e.g., the Vietnam period remembered as one of distrust and division).

Social historian John Bodnar (1989) conducted oral interviews with people who formerly worked at the Studebaker Corporation plant in South Bend, Indiana. He describes the individuals' memory during
the pre-war period as hegemonic. Though, in reality, the company and union exercised repressive, tight control, that repression was submerged because "it had been suppressed in the past and because the overall era seemed to produce a more orderly world than the one that followed" (p. 1219). Memories of the Studebaker project were "tied intimately to structures of power" (p. 1202). Institutions, then, could be seen as operating at a personal level, influencing people's memories.

Yet, after WWII, "[w]hen the interests of powerful institutions were at odds and when workers were less certain of where to direct their loyalties, memories revealed a place that was in greater disorder" (p. 1215). "Other stories" were revealed by subjects. For example, some interviewees recalled the post WWII era as a time of dissatisfaction in the plant, as manifested by people coming to work drunk, 'doggin it on the job,' being disobedient. Memories of the plant in the 1950s were less consistent with the needs of dominant institutions because those institutions were "unable to exert the same amount of influence over consciousness" (p. 1220).

Bodnar's results, then, indicate that dominant, collective memory becomes individualized in times when the dominant institutions have relatively unequivocal authority. Perhaps more genuine, authentic, accurate personal memories, though, are possible (or likely) during those less consensual times.

David Blight (1989), in an article focusing on Frederick Douglass's attempt to keep alive the meaning of the Civil War,
demonstrated that historical memory is "the prize in a struggle between rival versions of the past" (p. 1159). Douglass's desire was to keep the Civil War in people's memory of emancipation; indeed, he wanted emancipation to have a mythic quality. Blight's article gives credence to the Marxian (or critical) approach to memory. According to Blight, Douglass came to realize that "[t]he historical memory of any transforming or controversial event emerges from cultural and political competition, from the choice to confront the past and to debate and manipulate its meaning" (p. 1159). The use value of the past is recognized: "Douglass understood that winning battles over policy or justice in the present often required an effective use of the past" (p. 1160).

There have been studies of the ways in which objects, or iconography, create--or better, maintain--collective memories. For instance, Radley (1990) focuses on how people engage with the material world. He points to collective remembering via museums when he says, "people do not remember a serious of personal events which touched their own lives but enjoy a sense of the past through the understanding of a history which other people appear to have created" (p. 47). Radley identifies different kinds of objects which are made specifically so that they help us remember--e.g., tombstones, plaques, flags. In addition to evoking our memories, objects can sustain myths and ideologies, thus maintaining people's collective memory of the past.

In a similar vein, Schwartz (1982) takes as data events and
persons commemorated in the United States Capitol. Iconography is used here to demonstrate collective memory created via symbols and icons.

Sociologists Stanford Gregory, Jr. and Jerry Lewis (1988) studied the building of the memorial at Kent State University. They consider monument and memorial building as an especially dramatic form of symbolic expression—an expression which represents aspects of collective history. Such monuments serve to build consensus and social solidarity in a community. The social aspect of building an appropriate physical artifact as a memorial involves linking past community events with the present, and thereby "establishing meaning for the collective memory, and thus enhancing community moral unity" (p. 216).

Connerton (1989) comments on the significant role that commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices play in the shaping of communal memory. He identifies commemorative ceremonies as preeminent instances of the preservation of versions of the past via works and images.

The extant work which most closely mirrors my study substantively and methodologically is writer Benita Eisler’s Private Lives: Men and Women of The Fifties (1986). Eisler herself was a teen in the 1950s. She talked with "sixteen contemporaries," the majority of whom she found through snowball sampling. Her attempt, in this book, seems to be to give a voice to the "silent generation." Indeed, she suggests that "[w]e were not so much a 'silent generation'"
as a secretive, private one; a cohort of closet individualists, our 'real' lives were lived underground" (p. 7). I will return to the work of Eisler in Chapter IV.

In her book, The Fifties: A Women's Oral History (1993), Brett Harvey interviews 92 women who came of age in the '50s. Excerpts from her interview data will also be referred to in Chapter IV.

Such analyses, as those discussed in this chapter, suggest the theoretical importance of studying memory from a sociological standpoint. Further, particular studies demonstrate political and ideological implications of the way memory is "constructed" and maintained. Yet, there seems to be a lack of research which involves real person's recollections--i.e., the memories reconstructed by actual individuals who themselves experienced particular events. The present study takes this as its focus.
CHAPTER III

METHODS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

This study represents an attempt to reconstruct the '50s--not simply by consulting history books or other sources of official record, but rather, chiefly by talking with individuals who grew up during that decade.

In this chapter, I explain my method of research. Within this context, I return to--and more fully elaborate on--the theoretical approach that underlies not only my conceptualization and statement of the problem, but the way in which I investigate the phenomena as well. I show how my study is a qualitative cohort analysis. Then, discuss the criteria used in selecting my sample. I introduce my informants, providing basic demographic information. Next, I discuss my interviewing approach.

Meta-Methods

My approach is consistent with cultural studies, which is an interdisciplinary approach that studies cultural texts and practices in an attempt to reconstitute or reconstruct people's experiences. This, indeed, is what my interviews, as described later in this chapter, accomplished.

The cultural studies approach considers those groups or areas which have been left out of analysis. Feminist methodologies, too,
value such an approach. As Stimpson (1987) says, "we must recover the stories of those whom official memory has excluded" (p. 263). Consistent with this, the individuals I interviewed were not specifically selected because of special attributes or because they are well known. Rather, they are "ordinary" individuals who, like all of us, have insights to offer. A number of participants felt that they had nothing to offer; after all, they were just ordinary folk. It is unfortunate that individuals feel this way, but it is understandable if we consider how history is typically done (from the top down).

A major tenet of cultural studies is the rejection of culture as a monolith. Scholars in this area emphasize the lack of consensus about common values and meanings. They stress their conflictual nature which are inherent in societies divided by sex, race, and class. This is consistent with the postmodernist's rejection of the "grand narrative." Both approaches suggest that there are multiple agencies in society that struggle for domination. Such an approach makes the question of a "collective memory" of the '50s ever more interesting and important. A cultural studies approach is, in essence, an ethnographic approach. Even Herbert Hyman (in Hubert O'Gorman, 1988), though a positivist, recognized that survey research is ethnographic. He suggested that survey research was ethnographic in two senses: its roots were in the ethnography of everyday life, and the procedure is much like that followed by anthropologists conducting field studies.
In effect, a major objective of mine is to listen for the unheard voices. We all have heard the dominant voices via the mass media. But what other stories are out there? I invite the discordant voices to be heard. As Stimpson (1987) aptly states,

"[w]e must realize that no single memory of anything is sufficient, any more than any single method for the study of memory is adequate. Even to begin to represent the past, we must create a collage of recollections, which overlap and collide with each other." (p. 263)

A collage, by definition, juxtaposes fragments of disparate realities.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) describes the interpretive study of culture as representing an attempt to "come to terms with the diversity of the ways human beings construct their lives in the act of leading them" (p. 16). Interpretive explanation is also directed toward studying "cases or sets of cases, and toward the particular features that mark them off" (p. 22). Geertz claims that its aims are as far-reaching as "those of mechanics of physiology: to distinguish the materials human experience" (p. 22).

Cohort Analysis

A cohort is a group of individuals who experienced the same event. As demographer Norman Ryder (1965) says, "[i]n almost all cohort research to date the defining event has been birth, but this is only a special case of the more general approach" (p. 845). As an analytical tool, the cohort is especially useful in the type of research I am proposing. As Ryder notes, "the cohort is a
structural category with the same kind of analytical utility as a variable like social class" (p. 847). That is to say, the cohort, like a variable such as social class, has explanatory power because it is an index "for the common experiences of many persons" (p. 847). Cohort analysis is especially suited to a study like this one because "[t]he cohort record, as macro-biography is the aggregate analogue of the individual life history" (p. 859).

Sample

Americans in their mid-fifties, roughly, those between the ages of nine and 12 in 1950, are the theoretical population for this study. People of this age grew up in the fifties. In their study, "Generations And Collective Memories," Schuman and Scott (1989) demonstrated that "events and changes that have maximum impact in terms of memorableness occur during a cohort's adolescence and young adulthood" (p. 360). Indeed, in addition to the personal development during this time, it is also during the adolescent years that individuals begin to become more aware of larger political and social events. Schuman and Scott showed that "adolescence and early adulthood is the primary period of generational imprinting in the sense of political memories" (p. 377).

According to developmental psychologist Eric Erikson (1968), youth is an important time in one's personal and social development. It is during youth than there is the "interplay of individual growth and social structure" (p. 233). In a study of college students'
memories of childhood, Samuel Waldvogol (1948) asked subjects to approximate what age they were when they experienced certain childhood events. Results showed that the number of memories recorded for ages 0 to eight increases from year to year, such that the greatest number of memories is recalled for ages seven to eight. This indicates increased meaning assigned to events as one approaches the teen years.

In her book, *I’ve Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation*, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) searches for an authentic and subtle rendering of African-Americans of privilege by talking at length with six individuals, all between their early forties and mid-fifties--"a developmental place from which we tend naturally to look backward and forward" (p. 10). She suggests that, in addition, to providing a "wide-angle view of generational contrast," the middle years are also a "propitious moment for reflection and reinterpretation of a life story" (p. 11). It is significant, too, to note that Lawrence-Lightfoot found that the reshaping of core sources of identity "seems to be a critical developmental task for people in their middle years" (p. 604).

The principal method I used in creating a sample was the snowball sample. To supplement this method, I also used alumni lists from local high schools, thereby identifying persons who graduated from high school in the late '50s. I interviewed 33 individuals. I sought some reasonable diversity on the basis of gender, race, and social class. In the service of seeking diversity, I interviewed a
few individuals who fall out of the theoretical population.

I share the oral historians' creed: "We are not testers of memory or recall [rather] we want to know what the events under discussion meant to those who recall them" (Grele, 1991, p. 249). Interviewees are selected not because they represent "some abstract statistical norm, but because they typify historical processes" (p. 131).

Brief Introduction of Interviewees

Let me introduce my informants. True to the promise of anonymity, none of the interviewees' real names are used. I give them fictitious names.

Emma Brooks (Class of '57)--Black female, married, employed at a university library, Pentecostal, grew up in Kalamazoo.

Larry Fields (Class of '55)--White male, married, a school administrator, Catholic, grew up in Mattawan.

Joan Weber (Class of '53)--White female, married, a college professor, Protestant, grew up in Holland, Michigan.

Brian Marcus (Class of '61)--Black male, married, a college professor, childhood years were spent in Mississippi and teen years in Cassopolis, Michigan.

Tony Robinson (Class of '62)--Black male, divorced, a clinical psychologist, Taoist, grew up in Michigan City, Indiana.

Cheryl White (Class of '58)--White female, divorced, administrative assistant, grew up in Battle Creek.
Raymond Baker (Class of '54)--White male, married, community college instructor, Congregational, grew up in Ostego.

Joni Wells (Class of '60)--White female, married, vice-president and controller of a business, Protestant, grew up in Kalamazoo.

Roy Stevens (Class of '57)--White male, single, college assistant professor, grew up in Battle Creek.

Luther Parker (Class of '48)--Black male, single, college professor, who was in Louisiana in the '50s.

Matt Lawson (Class of '52)--White male, married, a retired campus minister, Protestant, grew up in the Grand Rapids area.

Louise Brown (Class of '57)--White female, married, self-employed in a blue collar position, Catholic, grew up in Kalamazoo.

George Myers (Class of '58)--White male, married, owner and operator of an automobile shop, Baptist, grew up in Kalamazoo.

John Spencer (Class of '59)--White male, married, retired General Motors worker, Baptist, grew up in Mattawan.

Maureen Hunter (Class of '61)--White female, divorced, child care provider, Presbyterian, grew up in Kalamazoo.

Sarah Owens (Class of '59)--White female, divorced, housekeeper, Baptist, grew up in Grand Rapids.

Marge Scott (Class of '60)--White female, married, legal secretary, Baptist, grew up in the Detroit area.

Marilyn Hamilton (Class of '57)--White female, married, administrative assistant, Presbyterian, grew up in Muskegon.
Donna Wood (Class of '56)--White female, married, works in real estate sales, Church of Christ, grew up in Virginia.

Rachel Anderson (Class of '65)--White female, married, cosmetologist, non-denominational, grew up in Kalamazoo.

Shannon Norton (Class of '60)--White female, divorced, realtor, Baptist, grew up in Kalamazoo.

Cindy Rogers (Class of '62)--White female, divorced, registered investment advisor, Catholic, grew up in Stockton, California.

Sharon Weiss (Class of '60)--White female, divorced, rancher/ditch tender, grew up in Merced, California.

Mary Sanders (Class of '57)--White female, married, middle school teacher, Protestant, grew up in Fresno, California.

Doris Rice (dropped out of high school at age 15)--White, female, married, health care analyst, Protestant, grew up in Clare, Michigan.

Howard Conrad (Class of '58)--White male, married, disabled (but used to work in a factory), Protestant, grew up in Clare, Michigan.

Gary Simmons (Class of '50)--White male, married, veteran of the Korean War, retired chemical process operator, grew up in Farwell, Michigan.

Carrie Barkley (Class of '53)--White, female, married, housewife, grew up in Farwell, Michigan.

Gail Powers (Class of '54)--White, female, married, reading tutor, grew up in South Haven, Michigan.
Al Shattuck (Class of '53)--White, male, married, manager at Terminex, Episcopalian, grew up in Midland, Michigan.

Lynette Cole (Class of '54)--Black, female, married, typist clerk, grew up in Cassapolis, Michigan.

Susan Curtis (Class of '54)--White, female, married, Nurse, grew up in Lake Odessa, Michigan.

Betty Richards (Class of '54)--White, female, married, Director of Nursing, grew up in St. Clair Shores, Michigan.

In terms of the aggregate demographics of my informants, I talked with 12 men and 21 women. Twenty-eight of the participants are white, and five are African-American. Twenty-four of these individuals are married (nine men, 15 women), seven are divorced (one man, six women), and two are single (men). Fourteen informants have occupations which the sociologist would label professional; six have skilled jobs; another six have semi-skilled jobs; and seven work (or have retired from) unskilled occupations. The majority of my respondents (26) were in Michigan during the 1950s. I also talked with three people who grew up in California, one in Virginia, one in Louisiana, one in Indiana, and one who spent part of the decade in Mississippi before moving to Michigan.

Interviewing

The social sciences have been characterized by two broad approaches to collecting verbal data. One orientation seeks to discover or describe an objective world. Those with this orientation
believe they are obtaining truth. The other approach is more phenomenological. Researchers with this orientation (most often working in the disciplines of cultural anthropology, ethnography, and ethnomethodology) take a phenomenological point of view in their insistence that "social science should be interested in how human beings 'experience' their worlds rather than how physical events impact upon one another" (Foddy 1993, p. 14). This is the approach I take.

My interviews are semi-structured (or semi-standardized). As Bruce Berg (1989) says, questions in this kind of an interview reflect an "awareness that individuals understand the world in varying ways" (p. 17). Consistent with taking a phenomenological approach, then, the researcher views the world from the subject's perspective. This can be accomplished through "unscheduled probes that arise from the interview process itself" (p. 17).

My questions are open-ended. Advocates of open-ended questions stress the cultural relativity of meanings--i.e., as William Foddy (1993) says, "respondents' acts must be understood in terms of the meanings that the respondents themselves assign to them" (p. 126). Among the advantages of open-ended questions, respondents are allowed to express themselves in their own words, answers are not suggested, and format effects are avoided.

My interviewing approach closely follows Elliot Mishler (1986), who makes problematic the gap that exists between research interviewing and naturally occurring conversation. He offers a
critique of the way interviewing is conducted in the mainstream and suggests that interviewing should be viewed as a discourse. I view interviews as does Mishler: as jointly produced discourse. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) describes her role as an interviewer this way: "I am the companion on the journey, bringing my own story to the encounter, making possible an interpretive collaboration" (p. 13). She does not view herself as "the interviewer," for she says, "[r]ather than being 'interviewed' these six people are 'collaborators' or 'cocreators' of their life stories I am both audience and mirror, witness and provocateur, inquirer and scribe" (p. 620).

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) uses the metaphor of an archaeologist to describe her role: "the human archaeologist who uncovers the layers of mask and inhibition in search of a more authentic representation of life experience" (p. 12). I, too, would like to view my "interviewer" role more as that of the "human archaeologist." Like Lawrence-Lightfoot, I am searching for authenticity and patterns, not accuracy or truth.

I was very aware that, in "collecting my data," I was interacting with individuals; it was a social affair. I was in face to face contact with real people, asking them to share their recollections, their experiences, and their understandings. A key advantage of this approach is that it "works against any tendency to 'objectify' the material" (Johnson & Dawson, 1982, p. 222).

My objective was not to glean facts, but rather, to obtain individuals' recollections of the 1950s. In a discourse, Terkel
and Benison commented on the problematic aspect of truth or fact. Terkel said, "sometimes the fact may not be literally so and yet be a truth to that person." Benison's reply: "You know the question of truth is not really the issue. It's not something that you can specify like a date" (Grele, 1991, p. 57). Similarly, historian David Thelen (1989) says, "in a study of memory the important question is not how accurately a recollection fitted some piece of a past reality, but why historical actors constructed their memories in a particular way at a particular time" (p. 1125). This, indeed, is theoretically consistent with the idea of collective memory, and the notion of the use value of the past. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) states that, in her indepth interviews, her search was not for objective truth or replicable evidence, but rather, for "the reconstruction and reinterpretation of experience" (p. 612).

I ask informants general questions which assess the way in which both the past and present are viewed, in an attempt to measure the social meaning of time. More specific questions deal with the 1950s in particular--e.g., "What did you do for fun as a teenager?" I ask respondents to talk about what they were doing during the fifties. I inquire about the kinds of things they did for fun and ask them to describe personal, social, or political events during the 1950s which stand out in their memories. If they don't touch upon social or political issues on their own, I probe and ask about notorious '50s events (e.g., The Rosenbergs, McCarthyism, atomic bomb, Korean Conflict). (See Appendix B for a copy of the interview.
The historian would label the interviewees' responses "popular memory," which refers to "commonly held representations to be found in the oral accounts people give of past events, traditions, customs and social practices" (Cole, 1990, p. 3). Cole adds a point especially relevant in this study: "Discussions of popular memory immediately extend beyond a conceptualization of memories as the property of individuals" (p. 3). That is, the information gleaned from respondents in this study will not merely constitute what a specific individual remembers about the '50s; responses will lend themselves to a broader, more encompassing interpretation. Indeed, interviewees' responses (or rather, the narratives that are constructed) will link micro and macro concerns. As communication theorists David Middleton and Derek Edwards (1990) suggest,

> It is not only that conversation affords examination of the micro-processes of collective remembering, as these unfold with talk. Larger, societal themes are also available for examination, including historical, ideological and political ones. (p. 24)

A major issue in a study such as this is the confounding of effects of aging and life experiences on the individual. For example, if I had interviewed these same people fifteen years ago, I would undoubtedly get quite different responses. As Ferrarotti (1990) aptly states: "we are what we have been--more exactly, what we remember being. But how is memory possible? The lived is at once mediated by the already experienced" (p. 28). And, as Conner-ton (1989) says: "Hence the difficulty of extracting our past from
our present: not simply because present factors tend to influence--
some might want to say distort--our recollections of the past, but
also because past factors tend to influence, or distort, our exper-
ience of the present" (p. 4). Another possibility, however, is that
"different responses" may be indicative of changes in the collective
memory. This latter possibility would suggest that people re-write
their own history.

Reflexivity

Cultural studies calls for reflexivity. As sociologist Ben
Agger (1992) says, "[c]ultural studies systematizes this attitude of
reflexivity, attempting to learn from our own experience of watching
history" (p. 7). In both the collecting of my data and my subse-
quent attempt to make sense of it all, I was ever mindful of how my
own notions of "the '50s" and my interpretations of what informants
shared with me affected--and in a very real way, created--the con-
cclusions drawn. Similarly, Eisler (1986), a member of the cohort
she was studying, acknowledged that "[I]t is commonly said that re-
searchers share a strange tendency to find what they are looking
for. Setting out to give voice to our silent generation, I heard
myself in every story told" (p. 20).

I have literally let my informants speak for themselves, quot-
ing them at length, so as to consciously avoid too much researcher
intervention.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS: LETTING INFORMANTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

Introduction

In this chapter, I combine interview data and secondary analysis and thereby reconstruct the 1950s. Thus, I intersperse secondary accounts with "a collage of recollections" (Stimpson's 1987 phrase). Both my informants and informants in other similar studies describe what it was like to grow up in the 1950s. From cruising and dancing to fearing the atomic bomb, these individuals remember, reconstruct, and re-live the 1950s. Consistent with the cultural studies approach, I quote extensively so as to truly "tell it in their own words."

Ever mindful of the influence that my own notions of the '50s could have, I follow sociologist Todd Gitlin's example in his book The Sixties (1987), in which he stated: "Plunging into a tumult of memory, documents, interviews, I have tried to skirt the pitfalls of nostalgia and cheap second-guessing" (p. 7).

I begin this chapter by discussing informants' responses to a hypothetical question that I began each interview with. From this backdrop, I describe the good and the bad of the '50s, as recollected by those who grew up then.
In The Revolt of the Masses, José Ortega Y Gasset (1932/1985) alludes to a game played in the nineteenth century in the "literary salons." Cultured ladies and domesticated poets would ask one another the question: 'In which age would you have chosen to live?' Ortega notes that, in response to this question, they would "wander in imagination through the highways and byways of history in search of a time in which they might most happily pitch their tents" (p. 26). Ortega's interpretation is that nineteenth century individuals, though living in a time of plentitude, still felt linked to the past; "[t]heir gaze was turned backward, they looked to a past now being fulfilled in themselves" (p. 26). He identifies the nineteenth century as a time that "saw itself as the culmination of the past" (p. 26).

Ortega then queries what a twentieth-century individual would say in response to such a question. He makes the assertion that there would not be a looking back to the past; in fact, there would be disdain for the past because it would be viewed as "a restricted space, a narrow redoubt wherein he could not breathe" (pp. 26-27). With such a view, the twentieth-century individual would instead look to the present and the future and thereby fail to ground him or herself to the past in any way. Ortega says that "the man of the present believes that his own life is more of a life than all former lives in the past" (p. 27). The past, then, is rejected, ignored, deemed unworthy and unrespectful. A statement from Schwartz (1990)
is consistent with Ortega’s observations: "As the twentieth century approached the orientation changed from past to future, from preservation to growth" (p. 93).

In a similar fashion, I asked my informants this hypothetical question: If you could step into a time machine and press any year to go to--forward or backward in time--and you would stay in that year, that era, forever, what year would you pick? My findings are not consistent with Ortega’s (1932/1985) predictions. Only one of my participants chose to go to the future--and, in this case, the future was "tomorrow." Shannon Norton responded this way:

I had a lot of fun in school, but I am excited about where I am right now because I don’t have a lot of responsibilities. My sons are all grown, my ex-husband is not in my life; I’m free to do whatever I want to do. I will never choose to go backwards; I will always want to go forward.

Another informant, Tony Robinson, said "I wouldn’t do it; I wouldn’t go forward or backward." I probed further into his reasons for this, and he said that

there is so much opportunity right now to do some things, that I need to take full advantage of where I’m at right now. There’s not much that can be done about the past, but by focusing our consciousness on what’s on hand, we can formulate a future that’s much more positive.

Among the respondents who did pick a year, the two most popular decades were the 1950s and the 1960s--in that order. Common reasons for wanting to go back to the 1960s included the meeting of one’s spouse, the beginning of one’s own family, and the idealism of the ‘60s. Brian Marcus would choose

1967 or ‘68 because there was a political movement--a very
idealistic time. There was a sense that we could organize to make things happen; make things change. And lots of change had occurred. It was animated and energetic. Lots of turmoil; battles were being won and lost, but there was movement; issues were being discussed; people were being challenged with respect to where they stood on certain vital issues: racism, sexism, politics.

Rachel Anderson chose 1963 because

it was the Kennedy years there was something about that time that is probably gone—a close-knit feeling. Those things are gone; they're never going to be back. It's kind of sad to think that way. Those were the last of the good feelings. From then until now it seems like everything's come unraveled.

The most common reasons for choosing to go back to the '50s revolved around being in school and feeling safe. Donna Wood picked 1956 because

that was my freshman year in college. I had very strict parents, and even though in the '50s you had all kinds of rules, it was more freedom and excitement than I ever had. People were innocent and refreshing; everyone was going with the same program.

Al Shattuck would go back to 1956, his last year at college, because "it was a time when you didn't have all the responsibilities. It's an idyllic world—truly, it's not real." Howard Conrad chose the 1950s because "things were modern, but they weren't too fast; people were still neighborly; you didn't have to lock your house or car. You could trust people." Joni Wells' reasons for wanting to go back to the '50s captures other informants' reasons as well:

I had the best times of my life in high school. That was a time where the armory downtown used to have canteens after games, and everyone went to all the games; everyone supported the teams, and then we went to Schwartz's [drive-in restaurant]. We did slumber parties, we did parties at Lake
Michigan. We smoked cigarettes, but no one was into drugs. The majority of the girls did not drink beer; the boys occasionally drank beer. That just wasn’t part of what we were about. It was clean, good fun.

The 1950s: "Happy Days"

The fifties: the decade that introduced the hoola hoop and 3-D movies; that had Americans rooting for Mantle, Mays, and Marciano; rocking with Bill Haley, Chuck Berry, and Elvis Presley; and wearing leather jackets and circle skirts. Indeed, the fifties were quite a time. I asked participants what immediately comes to their mind when they think of the "the '50s." Some responses include: "Carefree, dances, hayrides, house parties. Drag races were big. You couldn't hardly stop at a red light without there being a drag race" (Maureen Hunter); "it was a time of finding pleasure in the very simple things--for example, taking kids to the library, the fire station, the park, for a walk. It was a time of endless health and exuberance!" (Emma Brooks); "classic cars like the '57 Chevy, duck tail hair" (Larry Fields); "Ozzie and Harriet; Dad worked, Mom was always home" (Marge Scott); "fun, fun, fun!" (Shannon Norton); "the last good decade" (Carrie Barkley).

The Economy

The United States enjoyed post-war prosperity in the '50s. Personal consumption increased, big business grew, and the unemployment rate went down considerably. Indeed, America was embracing capitalism and the good fruits it seemed to be producing. Sociolo-
gist Thorstein Veblen's concept of "conspicuous consumption" fits well with the scene in the fifties. More Americans were able to buy televisions, cars, and other, more luxurious items (Miller & Nowak, 1977). One participant, Larry Fields, stated that he viewed the '50s as a time when there was greater opportunity:

If you were interested in making money and getting ahead in the world, it seems to me that there were more opportunities in those days because houses and property were still inflating in value, whereas right now it seems to me if you buy property for the purpose of having a return on investment, you have to be pretty shrewd, or you're going to lose your shirt. You didn't have to be a stock market analyst to be able to discern opportunity.

Many individuals voiced concerns about the uncertainty of jobs for today's young people. In doing so, they contrasted their own opportunities and options as young adults in the '50s with the situation today. Raymond Baker stated that when he graduated from high school, if he had wanted to, he could have gotten a decent job without any further education. Today, however, that is not nearly so likely. Similarly, Gary Simmons said that the first thing that comes to mind when he thinks of "the 1950s" is that it was "easy to get a job--and they were good jobs." A couple of women I talked with mentioned that, when they finished college, employers were seeking them out. Joan Weber, for instance, says, "in the '50s, there weren't enough college grads to fill the job market."

The economic conditions during this decade constitute a major reason for the demographic phenomenon, the Baby Boom. There was a strong demand for labor, and young people had an educational advantage over older workers. Hence, they were quick to marry and start
families. Though economic conditions were unfavorable for fulfilling the two-child family norm in the 1930s, the 1950s presented a much better economic situation (Bouvier & De Vita, 1991). One mother of five described the '50s as "a time of early marriage and babies; a time of being at home and enjoying babies."

Not in My Back Yard

Though this phrase is hardly original, it aptly describes many of my informants' reactions when particular topics were broached. I asked Matt Lawson: "Do you remember feeling that the bomb was a real threat?" His reply:

I think we felt that we were pretty isolated from it happening in our back yard, though it was during that time that people were building bomb shelters. I wouldn't have dug a shovel full of dirt to build a bomb shelter. I'd ride around and see these things in people's back yards, but I thought they were kind of dumb. It was sort of that grandiose thing of, it's not going to happen here.

The general consensus among these individuals was that war only happened in far off places, and other events of the '50s, such as the execution of the Rosenbergs and the McCarthy hearings did not affect their lives. Lawson comments on McCarthyism:

My wife and I didn't agree with him [McCarthy]; it's a bunch of crock. But we wouldn't have stood up and said, that's crock, man, go back into your corner and do what you got to do, but don't do it in the middle of our lives, because we think you're off on this one.

Susan Allen Toth (1981), in her book Blooming: A Small-Town Girlhood, says, "In Ames [Iowa], in the 1950s, as far as we were concerned, nothing happened" (p. 8).
Eisler (1986), who, as alluded to in Chapter II, also grew up in the '50s, states,

to my shame, I recall a classmate trying to induce a group of us to come to a lecture on apartheid by a government professor recently returned from South Africa. As I would do so often later in life, I paid my two dollars for a benefit ticket—in order not to 'waste' an evening hearing about it. (p. 8)

She also recalls, in the mid-seventies, a former student activist asking her what she had been doing when he was occupying college administration buildings. Her reply to him: "pushing a swing." She writes:

Were there really mothers sitting in playgrounds in those days of rage and confrontation? Even while cities burned, civil rights workers and national leaders were murdered; while a far-off war moved closer to home? You bet. Vast numbers of us peered at those events on television screens in disbelief and horror—tempered by distance (p. 250).

Eisler quotes one of her contemporaries whose Midwestern college town was still (in 1959) a Southern-sympathizing place, where restaurants didn't serve blacks: "I was mad about that. I almost went to a sit-in organized by the local Y" (p. 264). But, she never did go. Another of her contemporaries said:

The pied pipers of the sixties did more than release the life-affirming impulses of uptight elders. Suddenly "rebellion and defiance" were in. In the fifties I learned to sit on those feelings. Because to express them was a death sentence, almost literally (p. 264).

In her book, The Fifties: A Women's Oral History (1993), Brett Harvey quotes one of her interviewees:

I was so aware of not fitting in. I'd been in Europe when McCarthy got started and had a different slant on him from the people around me. I thought he was a joke, despicable. I was also beginning to be aware of the Civil Rights movement, enough to get involved with Urban League kind of stuff. But I
was afraid to go down to the John A. Brown company and sit in
on the lunch counter because I know that would offend my fam-
ily and friends. I'm ashamed of that now. (pp. 204-205)

Regarding McCarthyism and the Red Scare, one of my informants,
Louise Brown, had this to say: "I probably was not smart enough to
pay attention to it back then. We were so involved with our friends
and getting a job or getting married that we really didn't pay much
attention." Similarly, Joan Weber remembered that the '50s were a
"very social time. We read the news, but we were not out there
working for political parties. We were young; we were in school.
If you had things that you enjoyed doing, it was a nice time." She
reflects on the Korean Conflict:

It was a decision that was made by the government, and it was
a war that was out there, over there. It was the thing to do.
We were always very pro-military and pro the government. We
just never questioned during that era. We had very little
news, just papers. It seemed to be off in a little country.
I have to be very honest: it was a country that didn't mat-
ter, terrible to say, but that's the way it was. Who were
they?

Weber says this of the '50s, "we hadn't become political; that
was why it was such a good time."

When I asked Raymond Baker if there were social or political
events of the '50s that stand out in his memory, he discussed Brown
vs. the Board of Education, McCarthy, and the Rosenbergs. Then, he
acknowledged:

However, I don't want to sound like I was overly sensitive to
it. This was when I was still in high school, and I was mostly
concerned about the dance on Saturday night. I wasn't that
politicized at that time.

Joni Wells remembers the '50s as just a wonderful time in her
I don't remember how the state of the nation was in the '50s--whether it was a bad time or a good time. I just remember, for me, it was a good time. I had a lot of fun, a lot of friends, not a lot of tension in my life.

Many of my informants express that they lived sheltered lives in the '50s. They acknowledge this not to indicate that they didn't do much or go out and have fun, but rather, that they were protected from "the real world," or anything that did not directly affect their lives. Rachel Anderson recalls:

I was really a sheltered kid as far as world experiences--what was going on. It seems like I can remember seeing pictures on tv and talks of war. I guess I always had the feeling that wars were in a different world; couldn't be around where I lived. If I remember, my mom and dad would say, 'oh, you don't have to worry about that over here.'

Matt Lawson described the '50s as a conventional time: "you do things because this is just kind of the way it's done. That's what the '50s was all about: going along, functioning." As he talked, I immediately thought of Kohlberg's theory of moral development. According to Kohlberg, there are three levels of moral development: "preconventional, conventional, and post-conventional." The conventional level is characterized by one doing one's duty, obeying authority. Perhaps an accurate way of viewing the '50s is that it was a decade stuck at level two morality.

Though many of the interviewees recall their life in the '50s as an apolitical time for them, a few individuals talked about John F. Kennedy. Raymond Baker, who teaches Political Science at a community college, says, "I think Kennedy's presidency might have turn-
ed me onto politics. He raised our expectations; you could see the power of what politics could do through him." Shannon Norton had this to say:

John F. Kennedy being elected president was just a big thing, because he was like a sex symbol—to be president? He really appealed to young people and made you want to identify with government. He brought fun into the White House. I remember his inauguration speech; I remember sitting there with tears in my eyes, being very impressed with that. When he was shot, that was awful. That was probably the most traumatic political event. The wars were nothing compared to that, because you felt like, 'what are we going to believe in now? If someone in that elevated position could be shot and killed, what does that say for the rest of us?'

Similarly, Sarah Owens recalls:

The first thing I remember politically was probably the assassination of Kennedy. I remember just being blown away over that one. That really scared me. For the first time, I became political. Shivers just went up and down my body and I'm going, 'oh my God, who's handling the country?' And that was a fear for me.

When I asked Susan Curtis about any social or political events that stand out in her memory, she reflected:

The most terrible thing to realize was that a person could shoot our president. You had so much respect for authority, and to think that that could happen in our country, that was really mind-boggling to me. It's where we went from little kids to grown ups to think that something like that could happen.

Among those who mentioned Kennedy and the assassination, there seemed to be a sense that, at that time, as Donna Wood says, "the nation really was together." Thus, the fear and tragedy of the event itself is stored in these people's memories, but these negative emotions seem to be joined with a nostalgia for a time when the United States was really united.
Why so Apolitical?

In her important book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan (1963) states that, after World War II, Americans escaped facing problems: "It was easier, safer to think about love and sex than about communism, McCarthy, and the uncontrolled bomb" (p. 178). After commenting on the Korean Conflict, McCarthyism, and the explosion of the hydrogen bomb, Marjorie Rosen (1973) then writes, "still, we chiefly remember the fifties, not for the horror of civil defense drills or witch-hunts, but for kitschy fads like hoola hoops and poodle cuts and crinolines. For Lucy and Miltie and Howdy and Kukla" (p. 245).

Similarly, Eisler (1986) explains her generation's political apathy this way:

Atomic stalemate told us that the world could be blown up at any minute. Exposure of spies, foreign and homegrown, signaled 'subversion from within. It was an unsteady world out there, over which we could look forward to having no control. The promise: 'I'll be his and he'll be mine/We'll love until the end of time/and we'll never be lonely anymore,' might be the only certainty. (pp. 110-111)

In Harvey's (1993) oral history of women coming of age in the '50s, she describes the fearful scene:

Blackouts, air raids, warning sirens in the night, first aid courses in how to bandage the wounded, and, more than anything else, newreels showing ruined cities, exploding buildings, endless lines of haunted-looking people trudging down muddy roads with their suitcases on their backs--these things created fear, uneasiness, a sense of vulnerability. (pp. xii-xiii)

In a 1972 issue of *Newsweek*, Rodgers quotes a twenty-nine year-old photographer who decorated his duplex with old pictures of fifties'
stars: 'There were plenty of problems in the world but nobody cared. All we worried about were cars, records, and who broke up with whom' (p. 78).

Matt Lawson laments his lack of activism but, in retrospect, understands it:

I never took a Saturday and went to Detroit, I never took any time and stood along side of and did things, because it just did not enter as legitimate within the life of my social set, and it didn't cause us to be affected by these things. It was kind of a distant sort of thing. There were some people who were speaking about it, nationally; some people were, thank God, on top of it and aware--quiet sort of voices that were speaking out--but never got to where I was living in the southwest side of Grand Rapids.

He closed the interview--i.e., our conversation--with this significant reflection: "When I think back to the fifties, I feel a lot of anger. Where were the people who could have been instruments of change for the oppressed?"

Conservatism, Conformity, and Eisenhower

There was a strong emphasis on conformity in the fifties. This reflects the conservative political scene. Americans felt the need to stick together, to be unified against outside, evil forces, such as communism. Eisenhower was a national hero during these fearful times. Miller and Nowak (1977) make this observation about the president:

His boyish grin and downhome homely face, his simple sincere platitudes about home, mother, and heaven, his circumlocutions when difficult issues came up, all these things endeared him to millions and made him a symbol, not of party, but of national consensus. Americans, tired of constant crises and the hysteria of the age of fear, found in Ike a symbol of hope and
confidence. (p. 14)

The participants in my study had fond memories of Ike. Among many of the people I talked with, Eisenhower was regarded as a public figure whom they looked up to. Even those who wanted Stevenson to win the presidential race had good things to say about Eisenhower. For example, Raymond Baker said:

I liked Stevenson a lot. The trouble was, he was too damn smart; he came across as too polished. As far as I'm concerned, he's the best candidate we've had in this century. But I didn't dislike Eisenhower, and when he won it wasn't the worst of all disasters to me. He was a wonderful father figure; he made you feel comfortable. He could have been elected on either ticket.

In our discussion of social and political events of the '50s, Gary Simmons, a veteran of the Korean War, said this: "I remember Eisenhower getting elected. He said that he would end the war, and he did. I was only there for 14 months."

The conservative political climate (or, perhaps even more apt, the apolitical climate) is reflected in the decade's intellectual position. The theoretical perspective in sociology called functionalism reigned. This approach views society like a living organism and all structures in society as functional—i.e., as contributing to the maintenance of the whole society. Change is viewed as disruptive. Hence, consistency is most desirable. "The status quo was accepted as the norm and sociology became the tool to teach groups to adjust to the existing structure" (Miller & Nowak, 1977, p. 226).

Paul Goodman's Growing Up Absurd (1957) offered a critique of American society in the '50s. Goodman states, "our abundant society
is at present simply deficient in many of the most elementary ob-
jective opportunities an worth-while goals that could make growing up possible" (p. 12). He criticizes corporations, administration, and "organization man": "the Organization does butt in everywhere" (p. 156). He saw, as a result of the influence of the organized system, "a new generation of dependent and conformist young men without high aims and with little sense of a natural or moral com-

munity" (pp. 156-157). Goodman raised a sympathetic voice to the youth in the '50s. He considered it natural that young people (e. g., the Beats) stared to raise "a contrasting banner" (p. 241).

Some intellectuals felt that the fifties represented an end of ideology. Sociologist Daniel Bell is associated with the "end of ideology" thesis. This, again, reinforced conservatism, for it ad-
vocated consensus while denying the real existence of differences and of conflict. Intellectuals following this line of thinking failed to acknowledge that democracy is an ideology, much like com-
munism, for example, is an ideology. Viewing ideology pejoratively, these intellectuals believed that America was beyond it.

Philip Rahv, writing in 1952, accounted for intellectuals' shift from opposition to acceptance. He links this shift to pro-

perity and the consequent rise in status that intellectuals experi-

enced. "It [prosperity] has at long last effected the absorption of the intellectuals into the institutional life of the country, their status has been strikingly improved by the phenomenal expan-
sion of the economy" (p. 306).

Theologian James Dobson (Class of 1954) refers to Dwight Eisen­nhower as grandfatherly, and recalls that "congressmen, even those who professed no particular faith, understood and defended the Judeo-Christian system of values" (p. 4). He compares the condi­tions in his school to the conditions in schools today: "students did not bring guns and knives to schools because they didn't need to. There were no drugs in my racially mixed high school. Morality was fashionable" (pp. 4-5).

Such a comparison between today's youth and the youth of yester­year was very common in the responses of my interviewees. The majority of these people said that they would not want to be bring­ing up kids today. Drugs and violence were the two main reasons for this. Marge Scott said this about life in the '90s: "It's fright­ening sometimes; you don't know when you're out and about if the next face that you see will be a friendly one or if it will be some­one who, for whatever reason, will take exception to you." Shannon Norton said: "There is a climate of violence in the schools today that really bothers me. I don't know what the solution is. I think somehow we have to teach kids themselves that there's a better way."


When I asked Shannon Norton what first comes to her mind when she thinks of the 1950s, she said, "fun, fun, fun!" What did these teenagers do for fun? Well, Norton remembers, "there was a restaur­
ant called Schwartz's Drive-In on Westnedge and you could park outside and scream and yell at all your friends. We had hamburgers and a Coke. It was just a fun thing to do." Most everyone I talked with who grew up in the Kalamazoo area mentioned Schwartz's. It was the place to go after football games; a place to cruise, a place to hang out.

For many of my informants, going to school was fun. There were a lot of activities to be involved in, and most of the people I talked with were really involved. Joni Wells recollects,

I think of my fifties years--junior high and high school--as really, one of the best times of my life. I have tried to tell my kids that, and they say, 'oooh Mom!' But it was not like you got up in the morning and didn't want to go to school. We wanted to go to school. We had a good time in school.

Luther Parker, who grew up in the South, remembers some pranks he and his friends did for fun:

We went to cafes and bus stations and changed the 'colored seating' and 'white seating' signs. At that time, we couldn't go to the drive-in theaters, because we were black. Many of the students were Creole, but they looked white. So we would take the back seat in the car out, and we dark boys would get in the trunk and put the seat up, and once we got into the drive-in movie, we'd watch it.

Another African American respondent, Brian Marcus, remembers:

"On Halloween we would steal apples from orchards and put them on people's porches. They wouldn't know they would be there." He comments that, in a way, this could be viewed as a nice gesture, the giving of fruit. But, on the other hand, if the police see the stolen apples on someone's porch, the people in that home would be held responsible. He says, though, that the biggest entertainment was
going to the movies. Another big event was the weekend dances:

The girls used to have their little, white bobby sox; we’d be listening to Elvis; we’d have it in the gym. The black kids would be at one end of the gym and the white kids at the other. It would be a real big thing if a white kid and a black kid danced together.

Toth (1981) remembers rinking:

'Rinking' meant cruising aimlessly around town, looking for friends in their cars, stopping for conversations shouted out of windows, maybe parking somewhere for a while, ending up at the A & W Root Beer Stand or the pizza parlor or the Rainbow Cafe. (p. 52)

By and large, the fun things that these individuals remember doing in the '50s are the typical things that our culture associates with the '50s: drive-in movies, house parties, cruising, and dancing. And, of course, there was the novelty of television. Every interviewee remembered when their family got a television set. In the majority of cases, individuals recalled the family in their neighborhood who first got a television--these were the neighbors to visit, as everyone gathered around to watch this magical black box--even spending time watching the test pattern!

Tony Robinson, an African American informant, recalls:

I remember 'Amos and Andy.' I remember my mother getting real upset about my liking that show. My mom would get real mad, and say, 'do you know anybody that talks like that?' and I'd say, 'no.' But it was funny.

Brian Marcus grew up in Mississippi, and that's where he first saw a television:

I remember looking through this hardware store window. There would be a crowd of people looking through the window; there was this little movie thing happening. Everybody was just sort of laughing--'that's going to be different!'
Watching television in the '50s was, more or less, a family affair. George Myers has this memory:

Saturday and Sunday evenings our family would be there by the tv. My dad would get out the big old iron skillet, put it on the gas stove in the kitchen, and pop up a couple of big bowls of pop corn, and get the Pepsi out. We watched 'Ed Sullivan.'

Sharon Weiss remembers "black and white tv--getting our first one. They were so new and such a novelty, that we all watched it all the time--the test patterns and everything else."

While watching television was "big," these individuals, teenagers in the '50s, seemed to be more interested in going to watch a movie. As Brian Marcus said, "we spent a lot of time with other teenagers, and going to the movies was a lot more fun--you were away from parents."

A Time of Innocence

A prime example of just how innocent and naive a time the 1950s were is Sarah Owens comment that "until I got to college, I didn't even realize there was a difference between the male and the female, body-wise."

Joan Weber describes the '50s as a time of "naivete, parochialism, and fun." Donna Wood feels that the best thing about the '50s was the innocence and the trust that you could have in people; the trust in the safety of the world--your own immediate world; the freshness. The image of the '50s today makes it look silly and nonsensical, but people were more real and genuine.

The majority of the people I talked with lamented the loss of
innocence among today's youth. In her book, Toth (1981) says some-
thing, the message of which was evident in most of my informants'
words as well:

Does any girl today have the chance to grow up as gradually
and as quietly as we did? In our particular crucible we were
not seared by fierce poverty, racial tensions, drug abuse,
street crime; we were cosseted, gently warmed, transmuted by
slow degrees. (p. 3)

Yes, I saw provincial smugness, but I didn't realize what it
was. I can report its effects now, but I didn't suffer from
them then. (p. 5)

When her young daughter asks her what it was like in the old days,
Toth describes in her book how her mind begins to spin with images:

I want to describe for her the tension of the noisy, floodlit
night we won the state basketball tournament; how sweat drip­
ped down my dirty bathing suit as I detasseled corn under a
July sun; the seductive softness of my red velveteen formal;
the marble hush of the Ames Public Library; the feeling of
choking on the cold chlorinated water of Blaine's Pool when a
boy cannonballed on top of me. (p. 4)

If there was a world outside Ames, it was easy to forget about
it. The world, I knew, was out there all right. It would
just take a long time, a long way, to find it. I was in no
hurry. (pp. 191-196)

The majority of my informants said that they lived sheltered
lives. The '50s, indeed, were the era of overprotective parents.
But this protection or sheltering of young people from what was go­
ing on seemed to be an outgrowth of a national obsession rather than
a family's style of raising children.

It is significant to note that one of the informants, Cheryl
White, stated, as the best thing about the fifties, the innocence,
"the whole country was somewhat innocent." But, when asked what the
worst thing about the '50s was, she gave the same answer: "Inno-
cence. Absolute denial that anything was wrong. You didn't make waves."

The Other Side of the '50s

Most of the media and popular cultural portrayals certainly depict the '50s as an innocent, carefree, wonderful time. Many of the recollections of my informants, too, portray the '50s this way. Yet, the seeds for the tumultuous '60s were planted in the '50s. In The Sixties, Gitlin (1987) looked upon the Fifties as "a seedbed as well as a cemetery. The surprises of the Sixties were planted there" (p. 12). Rosen (1973) commented on the contradictory nature of this decade: "There were suburbia/teen gangs, a spirit of conformity/the Beat generation. The first era of prosperity and 'peace' since the twenties rippled with undercurrents of anxiety and alienation and rebellion" (p. 245).

The Fear of the Bomb

Historian Peter Carroll (1990) grew up in the 1950s. He recalls teachers reminding he and his peers that theirs was the first generation never to know of peace. Indeed, they were the "war babies." He writes:

The mushroom cloud became a cliché before it was a metaphor. Visions of annihilation were never far from play or conversation: take cover; be first on the block to drop the atom bomb. I still own the dogtag from my second grade air-raid drills, and I recall doubting, even then, its usefulness in identifying the corpse. (p. 40)

Carroll notes that for his generation the future was always precar-
ious. The feeling of impermanence, he suggests, may explain their tentative attitude toward social institutions (e.g., religion, marriage, family). "Unlike our parents and grandparents, we've always known the possibility of extinction. We've lived with the knowledge that history could come to an end" (p. 40).

Eisler (1986) reflects on what it was like to live in the Atomic Age:

The end of World War II ushered in the Atomic Age: the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki closed the last chapter of the last 'good war' we would ever fight. From wartime air raids to civil defense drills, our parents had to debate new ethical questions, such as, should neighbors be allowed into the family bomb shelter, stocked with condensed milk and canned peas. (p. 28)

Individuals I talked with, too, voiced a real concern about the atomic bomb. Shannon Norton remembers it being very frightening: "I was worried because we didn't have a bomb shelter--where would we go?" Louise Brown said that it was "probably the only thing that really scared me to death." Cheryl White worked for the Civil Defense, and thus was very aware of the threat of the bomb. Her superiors there thought that the bomb was going to drop. Above ground tests of nuclear weapons were going on at that time. She recalls that she could have gone to a testing site on one occasion, but her boss wouldn't let her because of all the work she had to do. She remembers being disappointed at the time, but now very lucky that she wasn't exposed. Betty Richards recalls, "when I was first married, we built a bomb shelter--a lot of neighbors did. We were always afraid of war."
Al Shattuck grew up in Midland, Michigan, the home of Dow. He says, "they were always talking about Midland being one of the strategic targets if war broke out. Quite a few people built bomb shelters."

Gitlin (1987), who was a teenager in the late '50s, identified the Bomb as "the grimmest and least acknowledged underside of affluence" (p. 22). He recalls taking cover in school drills. He refers to his generation as "the first American generation compelled from infancy to fear not only war but the end of days" (p. 22). He also saw the Bomb as drawing "a knife-edge line between generations."

The parents of the kids in his generation remembered WWII as "The Good War" because it had drawn the country together and had resulted in prosperity. He says that they associated the bomb "not so much with war as with the end of war" (p. 23). For his own generation, the future was necessarily more salient than the past. The Bomb threatened that future, and therefore undermined the ground on which affluence was built. Rather than feel grateful for the Bomb, we felt menaced. The Bomb was the shadow hanging over all human endeavor. (p. 23)

Some individuals recalled directions given in civil defense manuals and in advertisements on television: What to do if there is an atomic attack. As J. Ronald Oakley (1986) reports, "[p]eople were told that they might get radiation sickness and experience vomiting and loss of hair, but that with proper treatment they would recover and their hair would grow back" (p. 47).
The Fear of the Communists

According to Eisler,

In the atmosphere of the Cold War, with witch-hunts and purges of suspected Communists or even fellow travellers from school faculties, trade unions, and the media, a child's wrong answer in a classroom could lead to suspicions of the wrong political atmosphere at home. (p. 36)

She recounts an experience that one of her contemporaries had as a seventh-grader in 1950:

[Sue's] junior-high-school assembly was shown a movie about Soviet children. The film was supposed to illustrate how terrible it was to grow up under Communism. But in the class discussion that followed, Sue raised her hand and said, I don't see what's so awful about their lives. They just look like ordinary kids who go to a different kind of school than we do. (p. 36)

That evening, the school principal called Sue's father, urging him to find out where she got such ideas.

Toth had a similar experience. When she was in sixth grade, her teacher described communism, warning the students about its dangers. Yet, Toth remembers that when he described the meaning of the political system; owning everything in common, sharing resources; she thought it sounded sensible. That night, she wrote a question to her teacher on the blackboard: 'why is communism so bad? Sue Allen.' This message galvanized her teacher. She recounts it this way:

He began class with a stern lecture repeating everything he had said about dangerous Russians and painting a vivid picture of how we all would suffer if the Russians took over the city government in Ames. We certainly wouldn't be able to attend a school like this, he said, where free expression of opinion was allowed. (pp. 202-203)
She recalls that at recess that day a boy asked her if she was a "dirty Commie," two of her best friends shied away from her on the playground, and she saw her teacher talking low to another teacher and pointing at her. She says, "I cried all the way home from school and resolved never to commit myself publicly with a question like that again" (pp. 202-203).

When asked about McCarthyism and the Red Scare, many of my informants indicated that they now look at it more critically than they did at the time. Shannon Norton, for example, says, "looking back, I think: how could they have done that to people? Innocent things were misinterpreted as Communist." Brian Marcus remembers seeing news about McCarthy when the newsreels were shown at the movie theaters. He says,

I knew that the communists were supposed to be our enemies and Russia was a big evil nation. I had some sense of that. I watched the newsreel with mixed reactions: it looked like the way people were being treated by that committee [the House of UnAmerican Activities] was horrendous, but on the other hand, because you're still young and patriotic, nobody's giving you any kind of critical perspective on these things. You felt that maybe they were getting what they deserved. But it still seemed like there was something fundamentally wrong with that -- the way it was done.

When I asked Raymond Baker about any social or political events of the '50s that he remembered, he said: "I remember the McCarthy Era when I was in high school; I thought: 'I wonder what in the world is going on here.' There seemed to be so much panic. McCarthy seemed like a maniac to me." He remembers that the superintendent of his school ended up teaching the Civics class because the regular teacher was scared that he might do or say something
that would result in the communist label being pinned on him.

Larry Fields states that, "in those days, I really thought he [McCarthy] was a hero and he was going to bat to make this country better, safer. I guess now, with what I read, he was probably off the deep end."

Joan Weber says that the worst thing about the 1950s was that it was the beginning of a conservative era, and the beginning of mistrust. She remembers that five people from Calvin College (in Grand Rapids) were fired because they were pinkos. "One of the persons," she says, "was hired at Western, and became one of the leading figures in the area of social work at this university." As an educator herself, Weber also laments the way that schools and religious organizations dealt with McCarthyism and the Red Scare. "McCarthyism was not openly discussed and really thoroughly dealt with. It's something they tried to shove under the rug as quickly as possible. Plus, a lot of people got on the bandwagon as supporters."

Tony Robinson remembers that his grandfather thought that it was a "real dangerous constitutional issue." According to his grandfather, Robinson recalls, "it violated fundamental human freedoms. It reminded him of things like terrorism of the Klan."

The Issue of "Color"

The majority of white informants remember the '50s as a time of relative racial harmony. Many of these respondents could cite as least one, specific instance of a black being treated especially
well or having done real well. For example, Roy Stevens says,
most people were accepted. There weren't any black people in
power, but they were allowed free movement in the city [Bat-
tle Creek]; I mean it wasn't sit in the back of the bus or
anything like that from in the South. I don't think the Civil
Rights Movement did much for those people because it was al-
ready integrated.

Larry Fields offers this commentary:

If you were poor, you were poor; if you were black, you were
black. There weren't a lot of black people fighting for
equality. We lived next door to a black family, and it was
no problem. We got along well. There just didn't seem to be
the issues.

He also recalls that "one of the more popular cops in town was a
black cop." There was also a popular restaurant/niteclub that was
run by "a black fella."

There seemed to be a general acceptance of "the way things
were." It sounds as if racial harmony was the result of the sepa-
rate races leading separate, albeit unequal, lives. Rachel Anderson
explains:

It was like the blacks kept to themselves and we kept to our-
selves. They had their own way of living and we had our own
way of living. I don't really think that anyone felt that the
whites were better than the blacks. I don't remember there
being any tension. I think our Homecoming king was a black
person--and a very nice black person. They all seemed to be
very thoughtful and kind.

Marge Scott put it succinctly: "they were on their side of
town; we were on our side." Shannon Norton says that there were no
racial problems in her high school: "Friday night after a game, we
didn't go to a black person's home--didn't party together." Donna
Wood, who grew up in the South, says that she only now is finding
out what happened in the South: "I did not grow up with that feel-
ing of prejudice. I didn't know that was an issue." She knew that her black friend went to an all-black school instead of her school, but "that was just the way it was."

Maureen Hunter recounts a job she had in 1966 in Georgia: she worked at a motel which wouldn't give rooms to blacks. She was told that when she answered the phone, if the voice sounded like that of a black person's, then she was to say that they had no vacancy. If she made a mistake, and someone called who was black but she guaranteed them a room, then she was to put them in the back room. She also was instructed to try to keep them from using the pool! This job really bothered her, and she finally ended up quitting. She recalls, too, that she grew up (in Kalamazoo) with black neighbors—the only blacks in the area. When her family was ready to move, they were told not to sell the house to a black family. Yet, no white people would buy it because of the black family next door. Finally, because otherwise it would not sell, they did sell it to a black family, and they had to hide their heads in shame because of this.

Hunter also talked with me about the marriage of her cousin to a black man in 1957. She remembers that they weren't allowed to visit her or have anything to do with her. Furthermore, when this couple went to the court house to get married, they weren't given a marriage license. "The racism," she says, "was supposed to be in the South. There was subtle racism here, but it wasn't talked about." Her mother had told them to be nice to the one black boy in
Marilyn Hamilton says that there were several blacks in her school, but she doesn’t remember there being any problem. She recalls a specific instance:

When I was a sophomore, there was a black girl trying out for cheerleading; she was just a little doll, and she had said, ‘I won’t get it because I’m black.’ The thing is, she made it because she was black. She wasn’t very good. I think the school was just trying to make a point by letting her on the squad.

There was one respondent who said that there were racial problems in her school (Battle Creek). Cheryl White says that there were race riots in the ’50s: "we had a terrible race problem." She was scared to death of people with black skin.

A couple of white women I talked with indicated that this issue of race relations has become a very personal one. Sarah Owens confided in me with this:

Two of my grandchildren are mixed, and if it hadn’t been for my friend helping me get through that whole thing, I probably would not have handled that well at all. My sisters and brothers have not accepted it. We don’t talk about it.

When I asked Rachel Anderson about race relations in the ’50s, she said:

This is a really hard issue to separate for me right now because my daughter dates black guys. It’s hard for me to see my daughter with a black person, but then I think, if it’s a person who is warm and loving and wants to make something out of their life, that’s the main thing. But it’s hard because there are people who just will not accept it.

A few of my informants grew up in areas where there were no African Americans. When I asked Doris Rice about racial relations, she said, "None. We did not think of it." She went on to tell me
the story of her trip down South just after she had gotten married:

They had two water fountains: one said 'colored' and one said 'white.' And this is how ignorant I was, I thought, oh, colored water! So I went over there, and the water wasn't colored! My husband yelled at me, 'get over here.'

Howard Conrad remembers when the Harlem Globetrotters came to his all-white town:

They went to the Dohorty Hotel afterwards, and they wouldn't let them stay there. They had to go to Mt. Pleasant. Everybody loved 'em, they were just the greatest thing that ever happened, they were thrilling, and yet, 'you can't stay here.'

The African Americans I talked with obviously painted me a picture of what it was like to be a black person growing up in the 1950s. When I asked Tony Robinson what first comes to his mind when he thinks of the '50s, he said:

1954--I was seven years old and I remember the decision of the Supreme Court, Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education. I wasn't sophisticated enough to know the details of it, but I knew how my family talked about it. It was also about that time that I began to have my first experiences of being called a 'nigger.'

Robinson grew up in Michigan City, Indiana, and he says that most of the black people in that town lived in a section which was called "the patch." He remembers that "in the mayor's office, there was a map of the city, and there was this black patch."

Brian Marcus grew up in Mississippi. He says that schools were very segregated. He remembers walking to school--about two and a half miles one way: "I remember seeing the white kids ride past us because they got picked up by school buses. They all went to school up town. Only the black kids went to school in the rural areas." He recounts an instance which really demonstrated to him
that blacks could be arbitrarily beaten and killed:

One of my memories was this guy we knew was dumped across the road from our house from a police car one night. He had been in a fight up town and had gotten his throat slit with a knife, and rather than the policeman taking him to the doctor, they just dropped him off on the side of the road. If we hadn't found him, he probably would have bled to death. If the police had dropped someone off like that, you weren't supposed to take him to the doctor.

Marcus remembers that his mother was constantly telling him that, if he were walking or hitchhiking, to never take rides from white people: "If I was walking down the road and saw a car load of white people making noises, I was to take off running to the woods because it was dangerous." He says that getting arrested was probably one of the worst things that could ever happen to a black person. "You feared white people, but the white people you feared most were the police, because of so many horror stories--people getting beat in jail, killed, people going to jail and nobody ever hearing about them again." Marcus had this to say about segregation:

Segregation never made sense to me, and I always thought it was something that was stupid. I thought it was fundamentally incorrect and, as far as I could see, fundamentally illegal. I never could figure out how it was that people could get away with it. No adequate explanations for these kinds of contradictions. You just realized that you had to live with them, but there was always a real sense that something was wrong. But it didn't appear that white people cared that much that something was wrong.

Regarding the Brown vs. Board decision, he said, "people finally decided they were going to start paying attention to what was going on between blacks and whites in the South."

Because Marcus moved from Mississippi to Michigan in the '50s,
I asked him about the degree of segregation in the North:

Of course [there was segregation] but we didn’t think about it. Like the school dances—the white end and the black end. I remember occasionally we would get some courage and go down to the white end and ask some white girl to dance. But we always thought white people danced funny, so we couldn’t figure out how we was going to do it; like how do you get in rhythm with ’em?

Luther Parker has this memory:

As a boy, growing up in Temple, I could not go to the public library. I could not try on a shirt in any store down town. I had to estimate. I couldn’t try on shoes; if I put my foot in a shoe, I had to buy it. Now, you can’t tell me that doesn’t do something to a person’s self-esteem.

He recalls efforts in the ’50s, albeit isolated, at de-segregation:

You read about them, and you wondered about them. There were never any protests or assemblies or militant stance taken in our schools. Anybody who did so was so severely punished until you just didn’t want to risk that. I can remember coming out of New Orleans, and the police would stop you if they could see that you were black. They would stop me and ask, ‘whose car is this?’ They’d push us around.

Resistance to integration was, he says, the worst thing about the ’50s: "It was very hurtful to find out that so many people resisted our very being. It puts a distrust inside you that’s not easily washed away. Parker did acknowledge that there was a comfort in segregation—"a comfort in being with people whom you feel comfortable with." However, "it taught you that you were inferior, and if you didn’t accept it, you were punished."

Emma Brooks grew up in Kalamazoo. She says that the segregation seemed worse here than in the South, because "down South it was open, and here it was under the surface." She laments the narrow range of jobs available to blacks. They never worked in positions
where they were seen by the public. Rather, they could work in factories, or stock shelves, etc. Supposedly, there was no segregation in the restaurants in Kalamazoo, but "it was there." She remembers going to lunch with a friend at a restaurant on the North end of town: "We sat there until we finally realized we wouldn't be served. You could walk in and buy something and then walk out, but you couldn't sit down and eat. And rather than open the counter up, they just closed the counter.

Lynette Cole grew up in the North. In 1959, she and her baby went to the South for the first time (to spend time with her mother-in-law). While they were there, her baby got sick. Cole recounts her experience of seeking medical treatment:

We went to the doctor. It was a nice office, but at that time, the blacks and whites were separated, and we went in the back door of this office, which was filthy. They had windows where you could look over in the white part. It was clean and plush. But they didn't even clean this little place. It scared me to death. I'd never seen anything like that. There was a sign over the door, 'Blacks Enter Here.' And the other door, 'Whites Only.'

Cole wouldn't let the doctor see her child. She figured that "if they can do this to you, he's not gonna care whether my baby is sick or not." She also remembers seeing "the little white kids in the other part, up on their knees, looking over and laughing at you, and the whites were snubbing their noses."

Among the African Americans I talked with, I got a real sense of how grounded they seem to be. They each grew up in an extended family which encouraged their growth and independence. The church was a central part of their lives. Their neighborhood was tight.
For example, my informants told me that if they misbehaved, it was not out of line for a neighbor to punish them—it was expected. As Brooks says, "the children were raised by the whole neighborhood."

Growing up Female in the '50s

Though some of the women I talked with recalled that there were more opportunities and activities available for men in the '50s than for women (e.g., in school), a very small minority could recall really feeling negatively about it. As women would tell me, for instance, about the limited sports activities in school for girls ("the only things we had were swimming and cheerleading"—Shannon Norton), they would also state that they didn't feel limited as women. A common statement was "you didn't think of it then." That is, these women accepted the sexism of the time because "that's just the way it was." A similar reaction was found among the African Americans I talked with. As they would recount particular instances of discrimination, they did not do so, it seems, with anger or rage. Because "that's just the way it was," individuals must have learned to accept it—or else.

Yet, there were a few women I talked with who had a bit more to say about being female in the '50s. Donna Wood had a job in the '50s that "women had not been allowed to do before": working for the Department of Defense. I asked her if men had trouble with her working there. Her response:

I think because we were young, they really didn't. It was male chauvinistic. Once I had gotten married and had a child,
I would get comments like, 'well, why aren't you home with your child?' After my divorce, I applied for jobs and employers would ask me if I would be able to work evenings, even though I had a child. There was a lot of discrimination. It's interesting when I see today that women fight those issues. I was really angry and frustrated about it, but I just never really dwelled on things. I just went to something else. I ended up working in the state library.

Betty Richards, a nurse, shared with me how structured the '50s were. I asked her if, as she looks back on the '50s now, she feels that she was overly restrained. Her reply:

Absolutely. I would have done things that you wouldn't have thought of. Let me just tell you how it worked: When I had children in '58, I had to quit my job, and I had to start back at the beginning--at the bottom salary--so every time after I had a child, I had to start back at the minimum salary, and then I was not guaranteed my job, and I had to quit each time. Doctors were like gods--you didn't question anything they did. Like if you thought that something they did was not ethically right, you didn't say anything. You had no avenue for questioning.

She goes on to talk about sexual restraint in the '50s, and shares a story:

I'm 59 years old, and have never used any form of birth control. This is very unusual in this day and age. [In the '50s], I wouldn't have intercourse--no way in hell. I'd be too afraid of losing my parents, the church, everything. We might go almost all the way, but we'd never have sexual intercourse; I mean, my God, we'd be struck down from heaven. I can remember [in '56] we had a lady admitted to the hospital who had a diaphragm. She had put it in the drawer. I called every nurse in the place, 'cause we had never seen one. We would sneak in at night with a flashlight to look at it.

Betty also recalled that a friend of hers got pregnant in high school, and she was going to give her a shower. She says, "I was called in and told that I would not graduate from high school if I gave that girl a shower."

Cindy Rogers, a registered investment advisor who grew up in
Stockton, California, views her generation as a "transitional or bridging generation from my mother’s generation to my children’s generation, when it comes to women’s rights." She continues:

I think it’s my generation that was the first generation to say, ‘I’m not going to stay in a marriage if I hate this person, and it’s not working; I am going to get out on my own.’ I think our mothers stayed in those relationships because they didn’t want to go out and be independent on their own, and I think our generation said, ‘that’s not good enough for us, and I’m going out on my own. I almost see in some of the older women who have stayed in relationships that they’ve not been happy in, resentment of the younger women because maybe they would have been happier people if they had done that, but because of the constraints of society at the time and where women were, not being able to have good jobs, maybe they settled to compromise in areas that they regret.

Two men also had comments on the sex discrimination in the '50s. At the end of our interview, Brian Marcus had this to say:

The thing that strikes me, as I stop and think about it, is the real emphasis on the old value of women being virgins when they got married; sexually conservative; the fact that women wore long dresses. Real strong emphasis on gender-specific roles.

And Matt Lawson said,

I think of the mindless injustices that were a part of the '50s--the male-female roles that were unquestioned, the inequities of sexual roles and identity. And, upon reflection, all that means is that there was just more work to do later--work which, in some places, has still never gotten done.

Thus, for at least a few of these women, the restraints they experienced because of their sex was important. Yet, the variable of sex did not emerge as a master status in the way I anticipated that it might. My interviews with African Americans demonstrated that race did emerge as a master status. The memories that African Americans had of the '50s were systematically different than the
memories of the white informants. The latter remembered racial relations in the '50s in a nostalgic fashion. The African Americans, on the other hand, remembered the segregation and the feeling of the color of their skin being a disgrace to others.

The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll and Revolutionaries

Because the collective memory of the 1950s depicts this time as a time of innocence, fun, and consensus, it is fitting to talk about the more revolutionary and dissenting side of the '50s in this section.

Rock 'n' roll and the cool, tough image of James Dean represented this generation's attitude toward the establishment—an attitude which would be more associated with the 1960s. Rebel Without A Cause (1956) touches upon topics which we may not typically associate with the '50s: dysfunctional families and adolescent angst. After a confrontation with her father, Judy (Natalie Wood), angrily leaves the room. Her mother tells her husband: "It's just the age when nothing fits." Similarly, when Jim (James Dean) is having problems, his dad says: "Every boy goes through it, there's a lot of others going through the same thing."

Bill Haley's hit, "Rock Around the Clock" (1955) was hailed as a genuine revolutionary phenomenon: "Whether or not they were aware of it, when teenagers bought this 45, they were taking a stand against the established order" (Pielke, 1986, p. 29). Belz (1969) claims that it was Haley's style that made "Rock Around the Clock"
revolutionary: He shouted his lyrics and the guitars and saxophones were allowed in the foreground (p. 37). The song has been called "an iconic fifties street gang anthem" (Eliot, 1989, p. 54). The 1955 movie, Blackboard Jungle, which featured this song generated youthful excitement. As Gillet (1972) says,

youngsters who had previously listened to the music only in places where they could dance proceeded to tear out the seats of the movie houses and to dance in the aisles. The excitement caused by the song was reinforced by the content of the film, which included several scenes in which school students defied or beat up their teachers. (p. 278)

The movie itself depicted youth as quite different from Richie, Potsie, and Ralph Malph. A police officer in the movie referred to youth as "problem kids" who grew up without direction. With "father in the army, mother in the defense plant, no church life, no home life, no place to go," the kids formed street gangs. "Gang leaders are taking the place of parents." The officer also said: "the kids today are like the rest of the world: mixed up, suspicious, scared." It is especially interesting to note that the mass media itself, through movies such as Blackboard Jungle and Rebel Without A Cause depicted the '50s as not such an innocent, fun time.

Gitlin (1987) identified rock and roll as "the opening wedge" of dissent, which hollowed out "the cultural ground beneath the tranquillized center" (p. 29). He referred to it as "the noise of youth submerged by order and affluence, now frantically clawing their way out" (p. 37). He provides an interesting interpretation of the nonsense syllables which characterize many of the popular '50s rock songs. He suggests that "these devices could be heard as
distrust of language, distrust of the correct, distrust of practicality itself." Gitlin writes convincingly, "with a catch in its collective throat, rock announced to unbelievers: Before your very ears we invent a new vocabulary, a generation's private language. Distrusting the currency, we coin our own" (p. 41).

Eisler writes about one of her contemporaries who talked with her about his love for race music in the '50s. He loved dancing to this music, which got him into trouble with his parents because, he says, "we were not allowed to listen to this music openly" (p. 69).

He elaborates:

I was always getting into trouble at school proms for 'suggestive dancing.' It all came from Elvis—all of his hip wiggling, pelvis gyrating. Our parents were scared that Elvis encouraged sexuality. But to the degree they disliked him, they emphasized the forbidden fruit aspect of both sex and Elvis. They were just telling us, if they thought it was so bad, it must be something great. (p. 72)

Cheryl White was a big Elvis fan. She remembers that his movies would be released at the theaters at midnight: "That was a big deal. Though that was past curfew, we were allowed to see opening Elvis movies."

Brian Marcus states that the best thing about the '50s was "the rebelliousness of it." He recounts what he remembers:

I can remember watching the Jimmy Dean movies; Elvis hitting the scene; the white cats wearing their shirt collars up the Ricky Nelson haircuts—ducktails. Even in small towns like Vandalia and Cassopolis [both in Michigan], this start of youth rebelliousness was there—at odds with authority figures; questioning why people had to do certain kinds of things. I think it was just that unfolding sense of rebellion against what we saw as arbitrary rules; people trying to tell you how to live your life. There was this arrogance of youth saying that we knew what was best. Movies like 'Rebel
Without A Cause' fed the rebelliousness; I remember we saw that movie not once, but several times. That was always one of my favorites.

Matt Lawson feels that the '50s were fun because in some ways, there was the beginning development of a kind of counterculture. People were starting to say, 'well maybe the way we're doing it isn't just always the best for everything and everybody.' There were some dissident voices.

Historian David Halberstam (1994) comments on this "other" side of the '50s when he says that "we've ended up remembering what is attractive about it and forgetting the rigidity, the narrowness." He adds that we've forgotten how much pain there was and how much less freedom. "There were vast parts of the United States where Blacks could not legally have the rights of whites." And further, "we've forgotten what women could not do then." Certainly a major reason for this condition of amnesia that Halberstam is talking about is what followed the Fifties. As Gitlin (1987) says, "[t]he Fifties were, in a sense, rewritten by the Sixties, as the Sixties have been rewritten by the Eighties" (p. 12).

Joan Weber, at the end of the interview, said: "You picked the '50s, but the '60s is when everything happened!" It is significant to note that one of the participants, Tony Robinson, when asked what the best thing was about the '50s, said "the '60s." Though he laughed as he said this, it is very telling. That succinct response hints at what it must have been like to be a black teenager in the '50s.
Summary

This chapter began with a discussion of the findings from a hypothetical question that I asked my informants. In short, in what year would they like to live forever? The majority of participants chose the decade which is the focus of this study: the 1950s. These individuals have fond memories of being in school. They remember the 1950s in much the same way that the media have depicted the decade: a time of good, clean fun and innocence.

Yet, not every respondent remembers the same things. Juxtaposed to the memories of the carefree life in the '50s are memories of being fearful of the atomic bomb, of being outraged at McCarthy, and of being a victim of blatant racism.

The interspersing of my interview data with secondary accounts of the 1950s represented an attempt to reconstruct the 1950s by drawing upon the reconstructed memories of real individuals who grew up during that time. This reconstruction, as presented here, demonstrates that we cannot treat the '50s as a monolith--e.g., as a wonderful time for everyone. There are many sides to the 1950s. While many individuals talk of the innocence and fun, there is also mention of the fear (of communists, of the Atomic Bomb, etc.) and the racism. By letting informants speak for themselves, we gain insight into what life was like for them during that important decade in their lives.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter, I revisit the research questions that I posed in Chapter I. I draw conclusions, but also raise new questions. I discuss some unexpected—and perhaps significant—findings. I consider the utility of such sociological concepts as "collective memory" and "collected memory." I suggest that the Meadian perspective on memory is the most useful for interpreting the data in this study.

Research Questions Revisited

The research questions were as follows: How do individuals recollect—or reconstruct—the past? How do individuals mediate the complex relationship between the past and the present? And further, of what relevance is history in understanding the present? How are the past and the present related? How do individuals use the past?

First, how do individuals recollect—or reconstruct—the 1950s? The findings from my interviews indicate that this particular group of individuals recollect the 1950s by locating their position, which, for the majority, was a teenager, growing up in the 1950s. Two dominant characteristics were evident: the tendency to draw on popular images of the '50s—e.g., the music, the dancing, the cars; and constructing comparisons between then and now. Both of
these tendencies may work to re-construct people's memories.

It is significant to note that when I asked Raymond Baker if he would consent to an interview with me about the 1950s, he said, "you know, they weren't 'the '50s' then!" Certainly, the dominant culture has presented the '50s in a particular way. This presentation is bound to affect one's actual memory of that decade.

It is significant to acknowledge, too, that, in a sense, our interactional conversations helped to "reconstruct" the '50s. That is to say, my role as "interviewer" (and, specifically, the fact that I am white, female, 26 years old, etc.) must be taken into account in the interpretation of what my informants said.

The tendency to draw comparisons between the 1950s and the 1990s surely contributed to the preponderance of pleasant memories of the '50s. The majority of informants did not have many positive things to say about the '90s nor about the future. They were thankful both that they were not kids growing up in the '90s and that they were not bringing up kids in the '90s. Furthermore, when asked the "time machine" question about what year they would like to be able to go to, the majority of informants chose the past, specifically and primarily, the decades of the '50s and the '60s.

Overall, the responses of many of the individuals I talked with reflected a real sense of pessimism about the future. This attitude did not seem to be wholly the result of romanticizing the past. The respondents spoke about the present and the future as if they had really been thinking about these things, and were relieved to be able
to talk about their views. 

Over the past few semesters, I have asked students in my introductory sociology and social psychology courses to respond to the time machine question that I asked of my informants. The majority of my students are in the 18-22 age range, and even among this group, there seemed to be a preference for the past. The 1950s and the 1960s were popular decades among the students who participated. 

Such findings are revealing when we consider the social meaning of time. Historically, American culture has been characterized as a very future-oriented culture. Indeed, this future-orientation could be regarded as a component of the dominant ideology. Perhaps my findings suggest a major historic change in the way Americans conceptualize past, present, and future. 

Second, how do individuals mediate the complex relationship between the past and the present? And further, of what relevance is history in understanding the present? Many of these individuals regard the '50s as a totally separate reality from their lives in the '90s. They draw stark contrasts between life in the '50s and life today. For example, Rachel Anderson said that today, people are "aliens!" "They're not people anymore, they're not humans."

Cheryl White said something very social constructionist: "I don't look at my life as one life; I look at it as segments. The past is one segment." This is consistent with viewing the '50s, in particular, as a totally separate time in one's life. Though White was the only informant who articulated this so specifically, the
responses of the majority of my respondents hinted at this conclusion. It was common, for example, for participants to remark that the '50s seem like a totally separate reality to them now. One label we could attach to this type of finding is postmodernist—the notion that time is not necessarily linear; the acknowledgement of multiple realities. That is to say, the conventional (Western) view of time as linear (as opposed, for example, to the cyclical view of time) does not necessarily conform to individuals' actual experiences.

Life events and our dealing with these life events shape the way we experience life and the way we recollect. My informants were not apt to give "past as sequence" (Baert's phrase) accounts of their past. White's notion that her life is seen in segments also suggests the possibility of multiple realities—another Postmodernist theme. The segments that constitute one's life may or may not fit together. Each segment may be regarded as a separate reality.

Especially when discussing events of the '50s such as the Red Scare and the fear of the atomic bomb, respondents acknowledged how time and life experiences have altered their perspectives. As they account for their views or actions then, and describe life events that have contributed to changes in their views, or even remorse for past actions, they illustrate how the relationship between the past and the present is mediated.

Third, how do individuals use the past? In this instance, individuals seemed to use the '50s as a platform from which to criticize contemporary American society. In so doing, this may have
served to justify attitudes or actions they engage in today. They used it to reflect—and, in some cases, to be reflexive. Returning to Baert's discussion of different ways of using the past, my informants tended to either use the "past-as-categorised" or the "past-as-order." The former use was seen in the common occurrence of participants assigning meaning and value to past events. For example, the typical comments on how much fun high school was, how meaningful it was to be involved in a number of activities, etc. The more reflexive individuals used "past-as-order." For example, those who were not politically aware or active then and who feel "ashamed" of their inactivity, provided explanations for their lack of involvement with the issues of the time. In so doing, they also hurl a criticism of the '50s. For example, Matt Lawson said:

There were a lot of things that Eisenhower did that I thought, at the time, I was not having any difficulty with—as crazy as that sounds now, as I look back at it. I think, 'where was my head? What was going on? What did I see?

Collected Memories, Collective Memory: The Utility of Concepts

According to the neo-Marxists, the dominant culture has produced what we refer to as "the 1950s." This image could be referred to as the collective memory of the '50s. This is where I got my notions of what the '50s were all about. While there were a number of respondents who did not go so far as to say that the 1950s, as they experienced those times, were really like the way the situation comedy, X"Happy Days" portrayed them, the majority did recollect the
'50s as a time of fun, innocence, and rock 'n' roll. To what extent have these individuals internalized this collective memory, and to what extent did they really experience the '50s in the way they described? Though answering this question is beyond my scope, asking it is important.

The general tendency to romanticize the past—especially one's coming of age years—in combination with dominant media images of the '50s over the years, may, to a certain extent, re-create one's recollections. Yet, the people I talked with tended to be reflexive enough to note that what they were recollecting was most apt to be the "good stuff." As they recollected, many also acknowledged that other possibilities—other realities—were possible. For example, after reporting that there were no drugs in the '50s, many would typically add: "at least I didn't know of anyone taking drugs." Informants, in general, were quick to tell me that they were giving me "their version" or "their recollections."

Informants did not necessarily recognize themselves as part of history. Rather, they seemed to respond in such a way as to suggest that they were disembodied from history. This may be reflective of being a product of the 1950s. The conformity and homogeneity characteristic of the 1950s provoked some intellectuals from that decade to present what is referred to as the "mass culture critique." The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School launched perhaps the most notable attack on mass culture. Simply put, the critique suggests that mass culture exploits the masses, thwarts autonomy, alienates
the self, and promotes conformity and regression. The tendency for my informants to discredit their recollections (and thus discredit themselves) may be illustrative of these problems suggested as associated with mass culture.

If my informants' disclaimers represent typical condition or view that people have, the implications are serious. By not locating ourselves as historical actors, we feel powerless. How can ordinary people act in ways to provoke social change if they feel disembodied from the process of history? The relevance of the Marxian perspective is clear here. The dominant ideology not only presents particular views of the past for our consumption, but also works in a way to dissolve our own part as actors in that past.

Holding on to good memories and trying to forget the bad has positive functions. On the other hand, sometimes forgetting the bad stuff would be impossible and unthinkable. For example, how could one forget seeing white kids riding on a bus to go to school, while he walked to his school two and a half miles away? How could one forget a motel job where one of the responsibilities was to lie to members of a particular race and tell them there was "no room at the inn"? How could one forget feeling fearful every time a plane flew over, because it might be the dropping of the atomic bomb?

The realization that not everyone has the same recollections of the '50s is a significant one. This is where the utility of the concept "collected memory" is demonstrated. Young's point, in introducing this concept, was to draw attention to discrete memories
that may not "fit" with the collective memory. If one ignores these discrete or different memories (i.e., if we "collect" people's memories of an event), then we get a simplified, albeit incomplete, picture of the past.

I invited these too often unheard voices to speak out. Talking with males and females, white collar workers and blue workers, northern folk and southern folk, white people and African Americans, I was able to get a more accurate and complete--and different--image of the 1950s than our caricatured collective memory of that decade allows.

My study was guided, then, by both Halbwachs' concept of collective memory and Young's notion of collected memories. I began with collective memory and, as people gave me their local narratives, the concept of collected memories became every more useful and appropriate in understanding and interpreting their responses.

A Meadian, or social constructionist, framework is most appropriate for making sense of my findings. This is a framework which acknowledges that individuals reconstruct their pasts. While a particular collective memory of the 1950s may be presented by the dominant culture, individuals may selectively amend this collective memory in ways consistent with their local narratives. A more macro focus, such as the neo-Marxist approach, is useful but, in the end, may be futile, for by leaning too heavily on such concepts as dominant ideology--a sociological useful concept, no doubt--it becomes too easy to reify these ideas.
Summary

In this chapter, I returned to my research questions, as put forth in Chapter I. Drawing upon my findings, I attempted to respond to these questions in a meaningful way. I returned to the central theoretical concepts that guided the study, collective memory and collected memories, and demonstrated, through analysis of my data, the utility of these concepts for understanding how, why, and what people remember.

Like Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994), I found my informants to seem to be at a time in their life when reflection and commentary came naturally and, I think, was an enjoyable exercise for them. Among some of these individuals, it was almost as if they had been waiting for someone to ask them questions about their teen memories and their views on past, present, and future. The unfortunate aspect of this exercise is that it is difficult—and perhaps not appropriate in a scholarly format—to capture how valuable and meaningful it was for me to talk with these individuals. I owe a great deal to them for their allowing me to come into their homes (or meet them in restaurants) and talk with them about what it was like to be teenagers in the '50s. Through this project, I was able to meet many wonderful people. This study is the result of our collaborative efforts.

A discussion of my conception of the 1950s—caught between my father's and my advisor's conceptions—was my starting point. It is only fitting, then, that I return to this in closing.
My "Happy Days" vision of the '50s was a comfortable, inviting image to sustain. Listening to and making sense of recollections of the 1950s that fail to match that version complicates and casts doubt on the view I grew up with. Yet, even with a greater awareness of the troubles and fears that abounded in the fifties, it is difficult to eschew my quixotic vision. Part of the reasons for this is national tradition and romanticism, part of it is some seemingly natural urge to view the past as somehow better, part of it is an appreciation for popular trends from an earlier era, and a big part of it is the picture painted by the dominant ideology as well as people like some of my informants.

Yes, I hold onto this mythologized view, but now it is juxtaposed along side other, additional views. For me, the '50s will never be the same.
Appendix A

Letter of Permission From the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board to Conduct Research
Date: October 26, 1994

To: Janelle Wilson

From: Richard Wright, Interim Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 94-10-15

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "Lost in the fifties: A study of collective memory" has been approved under the exempt category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you must seek specific approval for any changes in this design. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: Oct. 25, 1995

xc: Markle, SOC
Appendix B

Interview Schedule
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Date: ____________

Time: ____________

1. If you could step into a time machine and punch any year to go back or forward to (as the same age as you are now), what year would you pick?

[PROBES]

What is appealing about living in that year?

What kinds of things would you be doing?

What kinds of feelings do you have about the future? (e.g., is it exciting? scary? etc.)

What do you think life will be like in the 21st Century?

Is the past nostalgic? distant? primitive? Does the past appeal to? or, is it something you try to forget?

What do you like about living in the '90s?

Are there things you don't like?

2. What images, thoughts, or emotions come to your mind when you think of the 1950s?

[PROBE: What were you doing in that decade? What was your family doing? Where were you living?]

3. What was it like to be a teenager in the 1950s?

4. What were your favorite things to do in the fifties? (what did you do for fun?)

5. Did your family have a television set?

Do you remember in what year your family purchased its first set?

What were your favorite radio shows? tv shows?

Did you watch tv alone, or with others?
6. What were your favorite songs?

7. What kinds of things did you like to read as a teenager?

8. Were there personal events during the 1950s which stand out in your memory?
   [If yes: Would you describe these events and discuss why they were/are important to you?]

9. Were there social and/or political events during the 1950s which stand out in your memory?
   [If yes: Would you describe these events and discuss why they stand out?]

10. Were social events or issues talked about in your home?
    [PROBE: If so, which ones? What was the family reaction?]

11. Were there any public figures you really looked up to in the '50s?

12. What, in your opinion, was the best thing about the fifties?

13. What, in your opinion, was the worst thing about the fifties?

14. Do you think that life was better or worse in the fifties than it is now?
    [PROBE: Why do you feel this way?]

15. Are you familiar with a television program popular in the 1970s called "Happy Days"--a program set in the '50s?
    [If yes]: Do you feel that this show presented an accurate picture of what life was like in the 1950s? Why or why not?

I have here a list of particular events of the '50s. When I mention each one, please talk freely about what, if anything, immediately comes to your mind; if you have nothing to say about a particular event, then we will just move on to the next one:

[For each of these, if comments, then ask: do you remember what you were doing and how old you were when you began to form such opinions and perceptions? Do you think that particular events since that time affected your views or perceptions? (e.g., Vietnam War, '60s...]

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counterculture, Star Wars, personal events, Desert Storm?)

If no comments, then ask: Have you developed any ideas or perceptions of this event over time?

McCartyism/Red Scare

Korean Conflict

Atomic Bomb

Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education Supreme Court Decision (1954)

Rock ‘n’ Roll

Sputnik

The Rosenberg’s

DEMOGRAPHICS

1. In what year were you born?

2. In what year did you graduate from high school?

3. What is your occupation?

4. What is the highest year of formal schooling that you completed?

5. In what city do you reside?

6. What is your marital status?

7. Do you have any children? If so, how many?

8. What, if any, is your religious affiliation?

NOTE: Gender:

Race:
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Dobson, J. (1994, June). The year was 1954 and we were all very young. *Focus on the Family Newsletter*, pp. 1-8.


