Mother's Day

And other days

©1999 PhotoDisc, Inc.

By Daphne Spain and Suzanne M. Bianchi

"One Hundred and Six-Year-Old Won't Reveal Her Secret."

This tantalizing headline appeared in a May 9, 2000 Associated Press story, followed by the lead, "If there's a secret to living more than 100 years, to seeing three centuries and nearly half of US history, Ruth Kelley isn't telling… because then everyone will know." Mrs. Kelley remembers President William McKinley's assassination and the sinking of the Titanic; she saw the Hindenburg explode over New Jersey. She cast her ballot in the first national election in which women could vote, she was 69 when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and she was 75 when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon.

Daphne Spain is professor of urban and environmental planning, University of Virginia, and Suzanne M. Bianchi is professor of sociology, University of Maryland.

Mrs. Kelley's life encompasses significant changes for women. Her generation gained the vote as a direct consequence of the Woman's Suffrage Movement. She is still alive today partly because of technological innovations that resulted from research on ships, dirigibles and rockets. Her brother died of diphtheria as a baby, an all too common occurrence when infant mortality was high; her sister died at age 24 and her husband at age 55. By comparison, Mrs. Kelley has an 83-year-old daughter and a 56-year-old granddaughter who are living testaments to improved public health.

Mrs. Kelley herself has defied the odds. A woman born at the end of the nineteenth century had a life expectancy of only 48 years. A woman born today can expect to live nearly 80 years. The typical woman today will still probably outlive her husband, but by far less than the fifty years that Mrs. Kelley has outlived Mr. Kelley.

Ruth Kelley was the subject of a newspaper article because of her age, but she was atypical in another way as well. Earlier in life, she was employed as a postmistress and as a bookkeeper. She would have had few role models as a child, since only 20% of women worked outside the home in 1900. Today, when 60% of women work for pay, her experience would be less remarkable.

The article omits reference to her education, but if Mrs. Kelley was like other women of her generation, it is unlikely she would have attended college. Fewer than 5% of women held college degrees in 1920, compared with approximately 20% today. Among women aged 25 to 34, college completion rates are even higher. One of every four young women now completes college. In fact, for the first time in American history, young women are slightly more likely than young men to have a college degree.

Some things haven't changed much, though. One of them is that, for most women, a core

component of life is motherhood—just as it was in Ruth Kelley's day and for innumerable generations of women before her.

There are differences of detail, of course. Today motherhood comes for American women at later ages, and increasing proportions of them are bypassing it altogether. In 1980, according to Current Population Survey data, 10% of women aged 40 to 44 were childless. By 1994, 18% of women in the same age category were still childless, although the magnitude of this increase is somewhat deceptive because these data refer to biological children only. Many women today have stepchildren or adopted children, and hence fulfill the social obligations of motherhood regardless of their own biological experience. But the bottom line is that the vast majority of women—at least 80%—are mothers at some point in their lives.

The slogan "Every mom is a working mom" was popularized in the 1970s to remind Baby Boom feminists that mothers who stayed at home were as gainfully employed as those who entered the labor force. Combining full-time paid work and childrearing was relatively rare thirty years ago. In 1970, only one in ten mothers of preschoolers worked full-time, year-round; now it is closer to one in three. Public opinion has moved in sync with demographic reality. In the 1970s, about two-thirds of Americans thought preschoolers suffered if their mothers worked; by the 1990s a smaller share (still one-half) of Americans held this view. A January Peter Hart Research poll for the Shell Oil Company reported that one-half of women and men say it's acceptable for a mother with young children to work if she can handle the obligations to her family and to her job.

It is important to note, though, that while more public support exists for employed mothers now than in the past, it is evenly divided enough to make both employed *and* non-employed mothers feel guilty. Despite the rapid changes for women during Ruth Kelley's lifetime, the idealized cultural image of the "two-parent family with husband as primary breadwinner" has had amazing staying power as a standard for the American family and women's roles in it.

"We tend to inflate nostalgically the hours mothers in the past had available to spend interacting with their children and forget about all the adjustments working mothers today make in order to find time for their children."

How do women's lives today differ from those of their counterparts who stayed home to rear the "Baby Boom"? Time use data suggest that the mix of women's work time has shifted—in the mid-1960s it would have been one-quarter devoted to paid work, half devoted to housework, one-eighth to shopping and errands, and one-eighth to child care.

Now, the division is half paid work and one-quarter housework, with the remaining one-quarter evenly divided between child care and errands. There has been almost an even trade between the increased hours in paid work and declining hours of housework. Women today average twice as many hours on the job (about 30 hours a week). As women have added market work, they have shed housework (down to 15 hours per week in 1998, compared with closer to 30 hours in the mid-1960s). What hasn't changed is the time women devote to child care and shopping for their families—the average (across all women) for each activity was about an hour a day in the 1960s, the same as today.

The lack of change in child care time is surprising, since lore would have it that Baby Boom mothers were always there for their children, while working moms today supposedly drop their children at day care in the morning and don't look back as they head for the office. The reality is that with smaller families, childbearing that is more planned and voluntary, and increasing education, women today who become mothers probably spend *more time* per child than was possible for mothers of the Baby Boom.

We tend to inflate nostalgically the hours mothers in the past had available to spend interacting with their children and forget about all the adjustments working mothers today make in order to find time for their children. Mothers today often work part-time or take some time off when their children are young, accept dirtier houses, buy prepared foods, and look for other ways to free up time for their families. Women report as much sleep as in the past (about 8 hours a night, on average), but they are averaging an hour less a day on other personal care (such as exercise).

Where they can, employed women appear to be shaving minutes on tasks they consider nonessential. Women's total work time (in the home and outside the home) has increased about three hours a week as their free time or "leisure" activities have decreased by about half an hour a day. In addition, dads, at least in two-parent families, are increasing the time they spend with children, counterbalancing the time mothers spend away from the home. Consequently, most research on mothers' employment continues to find few negative effects on children.

It is a mistake to view women's experience as mothers today in monolithic terms, as it tends to vary somewhat across groups. "Women of color" is a term used now to include African Americans, Latinas, Asian Americans, and anyone else who is non-Caucasian. The distinction between race and ethnicity becomes somewhat blurred in practice, since Latinas can be either white or black. Be that as it may, although general trends in marriage, childbearing, and employment outside the home are similar for all groups of women, differences among women by race and ethnicity in a number of respects are quite pronounced.

The majority of all women, for example, become mothers, but Asian American and white women have the fewest average number of children (about 2.0 each), while blacks average slightly more children per woman (2.4). Latinas, many of whom are immigrants from countries with higher fertility norms, have the largest families (averaging almost 3.0 children).

In 1970, approximately one in ten births occurred to an unmarried woman. Today, that figure is one in three. The rate of births occurring to unmarried women—though now higher for all groups than in the past—differs by race and ethnicity. The rate is lowest for Asian Americans (16%) and highest for blacks (71%). Forty-three percent of Latino births and 21% of white births occur out of wedlock. This figure is important because a single mother and her children are at greater risk of falling into poverty than married mothers and their families.

According to the US Census Bureau, 30% of female-headed families lived in poverty in 1998, compared with only 5% of married couples. Differences by race and ethnicity are significant: 21% of white families headed by women were in poverty in 1998 compared with 41% of black and 44% of Latino families headed by women (there were too few Asian American female-headed families in the Current Population Survey sample to calculate accurate percentages).

Asian American women have established themselves at the top of the educational and labor force hierarchy, with the highest percentage of college graduates and the highest labor force participation rate of any racial or ethnic group. Their median annual income is also greater than that of other women who work full-time, year-round.

Latinas and black women—and their children—tend to be at the bottom of this socioeconomic ladder, with white women positioned midway between Asian Americans and blacks/Latinas.

Women now celebrate a number of other days in addition to Mother's Day. They attend college graduations as degree recipients in unprecedented numbers, and, as they increasingly work outside the home, they "Take their daughters to work" on the day promoted by the National Organization for Women. Some are even living long enough to observe their one-hundredth birthdays.

One of the reasons more mothers live to be grandmothers and even great-grandmothers is because their health issues became a priority during the twentieth century. Childbirth became less dangerous with improvements in hospital sanitation. Medical research once conducted only on men (like studies of heart disease) now incorporates women. The consequences of menopause are warranting investigation, and osteoporosis is the subject of public education campaigns that urge women to consume more calcium.

Federal policies have also played an important role in improving women's health. Legalized contraception and abortion have made it possible for women to time births more effectively. Title IX of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, ensuring women's access to sports, has introduced new generations of girls to healthy physical activities that can benefit whole families. According to a recent article in *The Washington Post*, "soccer moms" are realizing what their kids enjoy about the game and are forming their own leagues.

On the economic front, women became increasingly independent during the second half of the twentieth century. They bore more children outside of marriage and entered the labor force in greater numbers. The number of women elected to public office increased as more women earned law degrees and gained political experience. Finally, women made significant gains in closing the wage gap with men. Between 1970 and 1994, for example, the ratio of women's to men's earnings among full-time, year-round workers rose from .59 to .72.

What challenges remain for women in the wake of these gains? Narrowing the wage gap even further continues to be an important goal. And, of course, balancing family and employment responsibilities is the most daunting challenge of all. But is this really a new concern? We seem to have come full circle within a century. During America's agricultural era, women were expected to raise children and work on the family farm. Now they are expected to raise children and work outside the home. As Ruth Kelley could probably attest, the locales for motherhood have changed, but the balancing act remains.

Endnote

The information for this article is drawn primarily from the monthly Current Population Survey of 60,000 nationally representative households. The time-use data are from the "Americans' Use of Time" project at the University of Maryland.