In the summer of 1951, Kemmons Wilson traveled with his family from Memphis, Tennessee, to Washington, D.C. He noticed that some of the motels they stayed in were terrible. Each added a $2 charge per child to the standard room price, and many were located far from restaurants, forcing travelers back into their cars to search for meals.

Frustrated, Wilson decided to build a motel chain that would provide interstate travelers with comfortable lodgings. They would be located near good family restaurants and allow kids to stay free. Together with a group of investors, Wilson began building the Holiday Inn motel chain. Families loved his motels, and soon Holiday Inns were sprouting up all over the country.

Wilson said he never doubted the success of his endeavor. "I like to think that I'm so . . . normal that anything I like, everybody else is going to like too," he said. "The idea that my instincts are out of line just doesn't occur to me." His prosperity mirrored a growing affluence in the nation. This time of prosperity made the shortages of the Great Depression and World War II a distant memory.

—adapted from The Fifties

American Abundance

Wilson’s motel chain proved successful largely because the 1950s was a decade of incredible prosperity. In 1958 economist John Kenneth Galbraith published The Affluent Society, in which he claimed that the nation’s postwar prosperity was a new phenomenon. In the past, Galbraith said, all societies had an “economy of scarcity,”
meaning that a lack of resources and overpopulation had limited economic productivity. Now, the United States and a few other industrialized nations had created what Galbraith called an “economy of abundance.” New business techniques and improved technology enabled these nations to produce an abundance of goods and services for their people—all of which allowed many of them to enjoy a standard of living never before thought possible.

The Spread of Wealth Some critics accused Galbraith of overstating the situation, but the facts and figures seemed to support his theory. Between 1940 and 1955, the average income of American families roughly tripled. Americans in all income brackets—poor, middle-class, and wealthy—experienced this rapid rise in income. The dramatic rise in home ownership also showed that the income of average families had risen significantly. Between 1940 and 1960, the number of Americans owning their own homes rose from about 41 to about 61 percent.

Accompanying the country’s economic growth were dramatic changes in work environments. Mechanization in farms and factories meant that fewer farmers and laborers were needed to provide the public with food and goods. As a result, more Americans began working in what are called white-collar jobs, such as those in sales and management. In 1956, for the first time, white-collar workers outnumbered blue-collar workers, or people who perform physical labor in industry.

Multinationals and Franchises Many white-collar employees worked for large corporations. As these businesses competed with each other, some expanded overseas. These multinational corporations located themselves closer to important raw materials and benefited from a cheaper labor pool, which made them more competitive.

The 1950s also witnessed the rise of franchises, in which a person owns and runs one or several stores of a chain operation. Because many business leaders believed that consumers valued dependability and familiarity, the owners of chain operations often demanded that their franchises present a uniform look and style.

The Organization Man Like franchise owners, many corporate leaders also expected their employees to conform to company standards. In general, corporations did not desire free-thinking individuals or people who might speak out or criticize the company.

Some social observers recognized this phenomenon and disapproved of it. In his 1950 book, *The Lonely Crowd*, sociologist David Riesman argued that this conformity was changing people. Formerly, he claimed, people were “inner-directed,” judging themselves on the basis of their own values and the esteem of their families. Now, however, people were becoming “other-directed,” concerning themselves with winning the approval of the corporation or community.

In his 1956 book *The Organization Man*, writer William H. Whyte, Jr., assailed the similarity many business organizations cultivated in order to keep any individual from dominating. “In group doctrine,” Whyte wrote, “the strong personality is viewed with overwhelming suspicion,” and the person with ideas is considered “a threat.”

The New Consumerism The conformity of the 1950s included people’s desires to own the same new products as their neighbors. With more disposable income, Americans bought more luxury items, such as refrigerators, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and air conditioners. Americans also bought a variety of labor-saving machines. As *House and Garden* magazine boasted in a 1954 article, coffee makers, blenders, and lawn trimmers “[replaced] the talents of caretaker, gardener, cook, [and] maid.”
Accompanying the nation’s spending spree was the growth of more sophisticated advertising. Advertising became the fastest-growing industry in the United States, as manufacturers employed new marketing techniques to sell their products. These techniques were carefully planned to whet the consumer’s appetite. The purpose of these advertisers was to influence choices among brands of goods that were essentially the same. According to the elaborate advertising campaigns of the time, a freezer became a promise of plenty, a second car became a symbol of status, and a mouthwash became the key to immediate success.

**The Growth of Suburbia** Advertisers targeted their ads to consumers who had money to spend. Many of these consumers lived in the nation’s growing suburbs that grew up around cities.

*Levittown, New York,* was one of the earliest of the new suburbs. The driving force behind this planned residential community was Bill Levitt, who mass-produced hundreds of simple and similar-looking homes in a potato field 10 miles east of New York City. Between 1947 and 1951, thousands of families rushed to buy the inexpensive homes, and soon other communities similar to Levittown sprang up throughout the United States.

Suburbs became increasingly popular throughout the 1950s, accounting for about 85 percent of new home construction. The number of suburban dwellers doubled, while the population of cities themselves rose only 10 percent. Reasons for the rapid growth of suburbia varied. Some people wanted to escape the crime and congestion of city neighborhoods. Others viewed life in the suburbs as a move up to a better life for themselves and their children. In contrast to city life, suburbia offered a more picturesque environment. As developers in earlier periods had done, the developers of the 1950s attracted home buyers with promises of fresh air, green lawns, and trees.

Affordability became a key factor in attracting home buyers to the suburbs. Because the GI Bill offered low-interest loans, new housing was more affordable during the postwar period than at any other time in American history. Equally attractive was the government’s offer of income tax deductions for home mortgage interest payments and property taxes. For millions of Americans, the suburbs came to symbolize the American dream. They owned their homes, sent their children to good schools, lived in safe communities, and enjoyed economic security.

Nevertheless, some observers viewed the growth of such plain and identical-looking communities as another sign of Americans’ tendency toward conformity. “You too can find a box of your own,” one sarcastic critic wrote about Levittown, “inhabited by people whose age, income, number of children, problems, habits, conversations, dress, possessions, perhaps even blood types are almost precisely like yours.”

### The 1950s Family

In addition to all the other transformations taking place in the nation during the 1950s, the American family also was changing. Across the country, many families grew larger, and more married women entered the workforce.

**The Baby Boom** The American birthrate exploded after World War II. From 1945 to 1961, a period known as the baby boom, more than 65 million children were born in the United States. At the height of the baby boom, a child was born every seven seconds.

Several factors contributed to the baby boom. First, young couples who had delayed marriage during
World War II and the Korean War could now marry, buy homes, and begin their families. In addition, the government encouraged the growth of families by offering generous GI benefits for home purchases. Finally, on television and in magazines, popular culture celebrated pregnancy, parenthood, and large families.

**Women in the Fifties** Many women focused on their traditional role of homemaker during the 1950s. Even though 8 million American women had gone to work during the war, the new postwar emphasis on having babies and establishing families now discouraged women from seeking employment. Many Americans assumed that a good mother should stay home to take care of her children.

“Let’s face it, girls,” declared one female writer in *Better Homes and Gardens* in April 1955, “that wonderful guy in your house—and in mine—is building your house, your happiness and the opportunities that will come to your children.” The magazine advised stay-at-home wives to “set their sights on a happy home, a host of friends and a bright future through success in HIS job.”

Despite the popular emphasis on homemaking, however, the number of women who held jobs outside the home actually increased during the 1950s. Most women who went to work did so in order to help their families maintain their comfortable lifestyles. By 1960 nearly one-third of all married women were part of the paid workforce.

**Reading Check** Evaluating What were three factors that contributed to the baby boom?

**Technological Breakthroughs**

As the United States underwent many social changes during the postwar era, the nation also witnessed several important scientific advances. In medicine, space exploration, and electronics, American scientists broke new ground during the 1950s.

**Advances in Electronics** The electronics industry made rapid advances after World War II. In 1947 three American physicists—John Bardeen, Walter H. Brattain, and William Shockley—developed the transistor, a tiny device that generated electric signals and made it possible to miniaturize radios and calculators.

The age of computers also dawned in the postwar era. In 1946 scientists working under a U.S. Army contract developed one of the nation’s earliest computers—known as ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer)—to make military calculations. Several years later, a newer model called UNIVAC (Universal Automatic Computer) would handle business data and launch the computer revolution. The computer, along with changes and improvements in communication and transportation systems, allowed many Americans to work more quickly and efficiently. As a result, families in the 1950s had more free time, and new forms of leisure activity became popular.

**Medical Miracles** The medical breakthroughs of the 1950s included the development of powerful antibiotics to fight infection; the introduction of new drugs to combat arthritis, diabetes, cancer, and heart diseases.
disease; and groundbreaking advances in surgical techniques. Polio, however, continued to baffle the medical profession.

Periodic polio epidemics had been occurring in the United States since 1916. The disease had even struck the young Franklin Roosevelt and forced him to use a wheelchair. In the 1940s and 1950s, however, polio struck the nation in epidemic proportions. Officially known as infantile paralysis because it generally targeted the young, the disease brought a wave of terror to the country. No one knew where or when polio would strike, but an epidemic broke out in some area of the country each summer, crippling and killing its victims. People watched helplessly while neighbors fell sick. Many died, and those who did not were often confined to iron lungs—large metal tanks with pumps that helped patients breathe. If they eventually recovered, they were often paralyzed for the rest of their lives.

Because no one knew what caused the disease, parents searched for ways to safeguard their families each summer. Some sent their children to the country to avoid excessive contact with others. Public swimming pools and beaches were closed. Parks and playgrounds across the country stood deserted. Nevertheless, the disease continued to strike. In 1952 a record 58,000 new cases were reported.

Finally, a research scientist named Jonas Salk developed an injectable vaccine that prevented polio. Salk first tested the vaccine on himself, his wife, and his three sons. It was then tested on 2 million schoolchildren. In 1955 the vaccine was declared safe and effective and became available to the general public. The results were spectacular. New cases of polio fell to 5,700 in 1958 and then to 3,277 in 1960. American scientist Albert Sabin then developed an oral vaccine for polio. Because it was safer and more convenient than Salk’s injection vaccine, the Sabin vaccine became the most common form of treatment against the disease. In the years to come, the threat of polio would almost completely disappear.

Conquering Space After the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the world’s first space satellite, in October 1957, the United States hastened to catch up with its
Cold War rival. Less than four months later, on January 31, 1958, the United States launched its own satellite from Cape Canaveral, Florida. Reporter Milton Bracker described the jubilant scene:

“As the firing command neared, a deadly silence fell on those who were watching. In the glare of the searchlights, a stream of liquid oxygen could be seen venting like a lavender cloud from the side of the seventy-foot rocket . . . At fourteen and one-half seconds after time zero . . . the main stage engine came to life with an immeasurable thrust of flame in all directions . . . With thousands of eyes following it, the rocket dug into the night and accelerated as its sound loudened. Spectators on nearby beaches pointed and craned their necks and cried, ‘There it is!’ and began to cheer.”

—quoted in Voices from America’s Past

Meanwhile, engineers were building smoother and faster commercial planes. Poet Carl Sandburg wrote about taking the first American jet flight from New York to Los Angeles. The trip took only five and a half hours. “You search for words to describe the speed of this flight,” wrote an amazed Sandburg.

“You are whisked . . . from an ocean on one side of the continent to an ocean on the opposite side in less time than it takes the sun to trace a 90-degree arc across the sky.”

Reading Check Examining What medical and technological advances met specific needs in the late 1940s and 1950s?

Examining What medical and technological advances met specific needs in the late 1940s and 1950s?

Profiles in History

Dr. Jonas Salk
1914–1995

The man who developed the vaccine for one of the nation’s most feared diseases almost did not go into medicine. Jonas Salk enrolled in college as a pre-law student but soon changed his mind. “My mother didn’t think I would make a very good lawyer,” Salk said, “probably because I could never win an argument with her.” Salk switched his major to premed and went on to become a research scientist.

Salk initially directed the search for a cure to the dreaded ailment of polio at the University of Pittsburgh’s Virus Research Laboratory. Every so often, Salk would make rounds in the overcrowded polio wards of nearby Municipal Hospital, where nurses described their feelings of pity and helpless rage as paralyzed children cried for water. As one nurse said, “I can remember how the staff used to kid Dr. Salk—kidding in earnest—telling him to hurry up and do something.” Salk became famous for his breakthrough vaccine. The shy doctor, however, did not desire fame. About his becoming a celebrity, Salk observed that it was “a transitory thing and you wait till it blows over. Eventually people will start thinking, ‘That poor guy,’ and leave me alone. Then I’ll be able to get back to my laboratory.”

“Boom

Effects

Causes

Boom

Analyzing Photographs Study the photograph on page 818 of children suffering from polio. What do you think it was like to live in such an environment? Do Americans today face similar medical fears?

Critical Thinking

5. Interpreting What caused the advertising industry boom in the 1950s?
6. Organizing Use a graphic organizer similar to the one below to list the causes and effects of the economic boom of the 1950s.

Writing About History

8. Descriptive Writing Write an article for a magazine such as Better Homes and Gardens describing changes the American family underwent during the 1950s.