REBELS WITHOUT A CAUSE?
Teenagers in the 50s

'That's the matter with kids today?' Beth Bailey looks at the teen dreams of America's golden post-war years and finds ambivalence about their attitudes to affluence, competition and 'going steady'.

The United States emerged from the Second World War the most powerful and affluent nation in the world. This statement, bald but essentially accurate, is the given foundation for understanding matters foreign and domestic, the Cold War and the Age of Abundance in America. Yet the sense of confidence and triumph suggested by that firm phrasing and by our images of soldiers embracing women as confetti swirled through downtown streets obscures another post-war reality. Underlying and sometimes overwhelming both
bravado and complacency were voices of uncertainty. America at war’s end was not naïvely optimistic.

The Great War had planted the seeds of the Great Depression. Americans wondered if hard times would return as the war boom ended. (They wouldn’t.) The First World War had not ended all wars. Would war come again? (It would, both cold and hot.) And the fundamental question that plagued post-war America was would American citizens have the strength and the character to meet the demands of this new world?

Post-war America appears in stereotype as the Age of Conformity — smug, materialistic, complacent, a soulless era peopled by organisation men and their (house)wives. But this portrait of conformity exists only because Americans created it. Throughout the post-war era Americans indulged in feverish self-examination. Experts proclaimed crises, limned the American character, poked and prodded into the recesses of the American psyche. Writing in scholarly journals and for an attentive general public, theorists and social critics suggested that America’s very success was destroying the values that had made success possible. Success, they claimed, was eroding the making of the self-made man — the process of entrepreneurial struggle — was the stuff of that dream. Fulfillment, in this vision, was not only through material comforts, but through the prominence, social standing, and influence in the public sphere one achieved in the struggle for success.

The new-style post-war American dream seemed to look to the private as the sphere of fulfillment, of self-definition and self-realisation. Struggle was not desired, but stasis. The dream was of a private life — a family, secure, stable, and comfortable — that compensated for one’s public (work) life. One vision highlighted risk; the other security. Many contemporary observers feared that the desire for security was overwhelming the ‘traditional’ American ethic. In the dangerous post-war world, they asserted, the rejection of the public, of work and of risk would soon destroy America’s prosperity and security.

The focus for much of the fear over what America was becoming was, not surprisingly, youth. Adult obsession with the new post-war generation took diverse forms — from the overheated rhetoric about the new epidemic of juvenile delinquency (too many rebelling causes) to stringent attacks on the conformity of contemporary youth. These critiques, though seemingly diametrically opposed, were based on the shared assumption that young people lacked the discipline and get-up-and-go that had made America great.

Perhaps nowhere in American culture do we find a richer statement of concern about American youth and the new American dream than in the debates which raged over ‘going steady’, an old name for a new practice which was reportedly more popular among post-war teenagers than ‘bop, progressive jazz, hot rods and curiosity (slight) about atomic energy’. The crisis over the ‘national problem’ of going steady is not merely emblematic — an amusing way into a serious question. ‘Going Steady’ seemed to many adults the very essence of the problem, a kind of leading indicator of the privatisation of the American dream. Social scientists and social critics saw in the new security-first courtship patterns a paradigm for an emerging American character that, while prized affluence, did not relish the risks and hard work that made it possible.

Certainly the change in courtship patterns was dramatic. And it was not hard to make a connection between the primary characteristics of teenagers’ love lives and what they hoped to get out of American life in general. Before the Second World War, American youth had prided a promiscuous popularity, demonstrating competitive success through the number and variety of dates they commanded. Sociologist Willard Waller, in his 1937 study of American dating, gave this competitive system a name: ‘the campus rating complex’. His study of Pennsylvania State University detailed a ‘dating and rating’ system based on a model of public competition in which popularity was the currency. To be popular, men needed outward, material signs: an automobile, proper clothing.
the right fraternity membership, money. Women's popularity depended on building and maintaining a reputation for popularity. They had to be seen with popular men in the 'right' places, indignantly turn down requests for dates made at the 'last minute', and cultivate the impression they were greatly in demand.

In Mademoiselle's 1938 college issue, for example, a Smith college senior advised incoming freshmen to 'cultivate an image of popularity' if they wanted dates. 'During your first term', she wrote, 'get “home talent” to ply you with letters, invitations, telegrams. College men will think, “She must be attractive if she can rate all that attention.”' And at Northwestern University in the 1920s, competitive pressure was so intense that co-eds made a pact not to date on certain nights of the week. That way they could preserve some time to study, secure in the knowledge they were not losing ground in the competitive race for success by staying home.

In 1955, the Massachusetts Collegian (the Massachusetts State College student newspaper) ran an editorial against using the library for 'datemaking.' The editors proclaimed: 'The library is the place for the improvement of the mind and not the social standing of the student.' Social standing, not social life; on one word turns the meaning of the dating system. That 'standing' probably wasn't even a conscious choice shows how completely these college students took for granted that dating was primarily concerned with competition and popularity. As one North Carolina teenager summed it up:

Going steady with one date
Is okay, if that's all you rate.
Hanging out: (above) a drive-in movie of the 1950s — their double-bills targeted very much to teenage audiences. In some cases 'flashlight patrols' checked that youthful patrons were actually watching the films when away from parental supervision. 

(Below) Milkshakes and meaningful glances by the jukebox.

Rating, dating, popularity, competition: catchwords hammered home, reinforced from all sides until they seemed a natural vocabulary. You had to rate in order to date, to date in order to rate. By successfully maintaining this cycle, you became popular. To stay popular, you competed. There was no end; the competitive process defined dating. Competition was the key term in the formula — remove it and there was no rating, dating, or popularity.

In the 1930s and 1940s, this competition was enacted most visibly, on the dance floor. There, success was a dizzying popularity that kept girls swirling from escort to escort, 'cut in' on by a host of popular men. Advice columns, etiquette books, even student handbooks told girls to strive to be 'once-arounders,' to never be left with the same partner for more than one turn around the dance floor. On the dance floor, success and failure were easily measured. Wallflowers were dismissed out of hand. But getting stuck — not being 'cut in' on — was taken quite seriously as a sign of social failure. Everyone noticed and everyone judged.

This form of competitive courtship would change dramatically. By the early 1950s, 'cutting in' had almost completely disappeared outside the Deep South. In 1955, a student at Texas Christian University reported, 'To cut in is almost an insult.' A girl in Green Bay, Wisconsin, said that her parents were 'astonished' when they discovered that she hadn't danced
with anyone but her escort at a ‘formal’. ‘The truth was’, she admitted, ‘that I wasn’t aware that we were supposed to’.

This 180-degree reversal took place quickly – during the years of the Second World War – and was so complete by the early 1950s that people under eighteen could be totally unaware of the formerly powerful convention. It signalled not simply a change in dancing etiquette but a complete transformation of the dating system as well. Definitions of social success as promiscuous popularity based on strenuous competition had given way to new definitions, which located success in the security of a dependable escort.

By the 1950s, early marriage had become the goal for young adults. In 1959, 47 per cent of all brides married before they turned nineteen, and up to 25 per cent of students at many large state universities were married. The average age at marriage had risen to 26.7 for men and 23.3 for women during the lingering Depression, but by 1951 the average age at marriage had fallen to 22.6 for men, 20.4 for women. And younger teens had developed their own version of early marriage.

As early as 1950, going steady had completely supplanted the dating-rating complex as the criterion for popularity among youth. A best-selling study of American teenagers, Profile of Youth (1949) reported that in most high schools the ‘mere fact of going steady was a sign of popularity as long as you don’t get tied up with an impossible gook’. The Ladies’ Home Journal reported in 1940 that ‘every high school student…must be prepared to fit into a high-school pattern in which popularity, social acceptance and emotional security are often determined by the single question: does he or she go steady?’ A 1959 poll found that 57 per cent of American teens had gone or were going steady. And, according to Cosmopolitan in 1960, if you didn’t go steady, you were ‘square’.

The new protocol of going steady was every bit as strict as the old protocol of rating and dating. To go steady, the boy gave the girl some visible token, such as a class ring or letter sweater. In Portland, Oregon, steadies favoured rings (costing from $17-820). In Birmingham, Michigan, the girl wore the boy’s identity bracelet, but never his letter sweater. In rural Iowa, the couple wore matching corduroy ‘steady jackets’, although any couple wearing matching clothing in California would be laughed at.

As long as they went steady, the boy had to call the girl a certain number of times a week and take her on a certain number of dates a week (both numbers were subject to local convention). Neither boy nor girl could date anyone else or pay too much attention to anyone of the opposite sex. While either could go out with friends of the same sex, each must always know where the other was and what he or she was doing. Going steady meant a guaranteed date for special events, and it implied greater sexual intimacy – either more ‘necking’ or ‘going further’.

In spite of the intense monogamy of these steady relationships, teenagers viewed them as temporary. A 1950 study of 565 seniors in an eastern suburban high school found that 80 per cent had gone or were going steady. Out of that number, only eleven said they planned to marry their steady. In New Haven, Connecticut, high school girls wore ‘obit bracelets’. Each time they broke up with a boy, they added a disc engraved with his name or initials to the chain. In Louisiana, a girl would embroider her sneakers with the name of her current steady. When they broke up, she would clip off his name and sew an X over the spot. An advice book from the mid-1950s advised girls to get a ‘Puppy Love Anklet’. Wearing it on the right ankle meant that you were available, on the left that you were going steady. The author advised having ‘Going Steady’ engraved on one side, ‘Ready, Willing ’n Waiting’ on the other – just in case the boys could not remember the code. All these conventions, cheerfully reported in teenager columns in national magazines, show how much teenagers took it for granted that going steady was a temporary, if intense, arrangement.

Harmless as this system sounds today, especially compared to the rigors of rating and dating, the rush to go steady precipitated an intense generational battle. Clearly some adult opposition was over sex; going steady was
widely accepted as a justification for greater physical intimacy. But more fundamentally, the battle over going steady came down to a confrontation between two generations over the meaning of the American dream. Security versus competition. Teenagers in the 1950s were trying to do the unthinkable – to eliminate competition from the popularity equation. Adults were appalled. To them, going steady, with its extreme rejection of competition in favour of temporary security, represented all the faults of the new generation.

Adults, uncomfortable with the 'cult of happiness' that rejected competition for security, attacked the teenage desire for security with no holds barred. As one writer advised boys, 'To be sure of anything is to cripple one's powers of growth.' She continued, 'To have your girl always assured at the end of a telephone line without having to work for her, to beat the other fellows to her is bound to lessen your powers of personal achievement.' A male adviser, campaigning against going steady, argued: 'Competition will be good for you. It sharpens your wits, teaches you how to get along well in spite of difficulties.' And another, writing in Esquire, explained the going steady phenomenon this way: 'She wants a mate; he being a modern youth doesn't relish competition.'

As for girls, the argument went: 'She's afraid of competition. She isn't sure she can compete for male attention in the open market; "going steady" frees her from fear of future failures.' The author of Jackson's Guide to Dating tells the story of 'Judith Thompson', a not-especially-attractive girl with family problems, who has been going steady with 'Jim' since she was fourteen. Lest we think that poor Judith deserves someone to care for her or see Jim as a small success in her life, the author stresses that going steady is one more failure for Judith. 'Now that Judith is sixteen and old enough to earn money and help herself in other ways to recover from her unfortunate childhood, she has taken on the additionally crippling circumstance of a steady boyfriend. How pathetic. The love and attention of her steady boyfriend are a substitute for other more normal kinds of success. What should Judith be doing? A good deal of the time she spends going steady with Jim could be used to make herself more attractive so that other boys would ask her for dates.'

There is nothing subtle in these critiques of going steady. The value of competition is presumed as a clear standard against which to judge modern youth. But there is more here. There is a tinge of anger in these judgments, an anger that may well stem from the differing experiences of two generations of Americans. The competitive system that had emerged in the flush years of the 1920s was strangled by events of the 1930s and 1940s. The children had come of age during decades of depression and world war, times when the competitive struggle was, for many, inescapable. Much was at stake, the cost of failure all too clear. While youth in the period between the wars embraced a competitive dating system, even glorified in it, as adults they sought the security they had lacked in their youth.

Young people and their advocates made much of the lack of security of the post-war world, self-consciously pointing to the 'general anxiety of the times' as a justification for both early marriage and going steady. But the lives of these young people were clearly more secure than those of their parents. That was the gift their parents tried to give them. Though the Cold War raged it had little immediate impact on the emerging teenage culture (for those too young to fight in Korea, of course). Cushioned by unprecedented affluence, allowed more years of freedom within the protected youth culture of high school and ever-more-frequently college, young people did not have to struggle so hard, compete so ferociously, as their parents had.

And by and large, both young people and their parents knew it and were genuinely not sure what that meant for America's future. What did it mean — that a general affluence, at least for a broad spectrum of America's burgeoning middle class, was possible without a dog-eat-dog ferocity? What did that mean for the American Dream of success? One answer was given in the runaway best seller of the decade, The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, which despite the title was not so much about the deadening impact of conformity but about what Americans should and could dream in the post-war world.

The protagonist of the novel, Tom Rath (the not-so-subtle naming made more explicit by the appearance of the word 'vengeful' in the sentence following Tom's introduction), has been
through the Second World War, and the shadow of war hangs over his life. Tom wants to provide well for his family, and feels a nagging need to succeed. But when he is offered the chance at an old style American dream — to be taken on as the protégé of his business-wise, driven boss, he says no. In a passage that cuts to the heart of post-war American culture, Tom tells his boss:

I don't think I'm the kind of guy who should try to be a big executive. I'll say it frankly: I don't think I have the willingness to make the sacrifices... I'm trying to be honest about this. I want the money. Nobody likes money better than I do. But I'm not the kind of guy who can work evenings and weekends and all the rest of it forever... I've been through one war. Maybe another one's coming. If one is, I want to be able to look back and figure I spent the time between wars with my family, the way it should have been spent. Regardless of war, I want to get the most out of the years I've got left. Maybe that sounds silly. It's just that if I have to bury myself in a job every minute of my life, I don't see any point to it...

Tom's privatised dream — of comfort without sacrifice, of family and personal fulfillment — might seem the author's attempt to resolve the tensions of the novel (and of post-war American society). But the vision is more complex than simply affirmative. Tom's boss responds with sympathy and understanding, then suddenly loses control. 'Somebody has to do the big jobs!', he says passionately. 'This world was built by men like me! To really do a job, you have to live it, body and soul! You people who just give half your mind to your work are riding on our backs!' And Tom responds: 'I know it.'

The new American Dream had not yet triumphed. The ambivalence and even guilt implicit in Tom Rath's answer to his boss pervaded American culture in the 1950s — in the flood of social criticism and also in parents' critiques of teenage courtship rituals. The attacks on youth's desire for security are revealing, for it was in many ways the parents who embraced security — moving to the suburbs, focusing on the family. The strong ambivalence many felt about their lives appears in the critiques of youth. This same generation would find even more to criticise in the 1960s, as the 'steadies' of the 1950s became the sexual revolutionaries of the 1960s. Many of the children of these parents came to recognise the tensions within the dream. The baby-boom generation accepted wholeheartedly the doctrine of self-fulfillment, but rejected the guilt and fear that had linked fulfillment and security. In the turbulence of the 1960s, young people were not rejecting the new American Dream of easy affluence and personal fulfillment, but only questioning the fears that had hung over a generation raised with depression and war. It turns out the 1950s family was not the new American Dream, but only its nurturing home.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Beth Bailey is Professor of Modern British History at the University of Kansas and author of the forthcoming Crime and Society in England 1880-1980 for Longman.