

PART FOUR: THE ELDERLY

**An Analysis of Life Histories
of the Elderly in a
Retirement Home**
Tracy Williams

In American society a phrase that is often heard is, "I don't want to get old." Old age in most circumstances is comparable to a terminal illness or a prison sentence. As one elderly man stated, "Old age is a hell of a long sentence with no time off for good behavior" (Curtin 1972). With this viewpoint towards aging, how do the elderly survive in American society?

The focus of this field project involves the residents at a retirement home. Old age is a well-studied topic, yet most people refuse to face its problems. By studying the various life histories of the elderly I was able to discern their basic values and attitudes towards their society. As seen in the life histories, American society gears its population to be goal-oriented in marriage, family, and occupation. The vital American values of the era in which these people were most active embody being a good and patriotic citizen, having a strong religious orientation, doing one's work well, and raising a good family. What then happens to these people when they can no longer fulfill these goals? Will the values that were so important when they were actively involved in society sustain them in their old age? Does life end at sixty-five? Seemingly society revolves about youth and offers very few alternatives to the aged. One of the main alternatives is the retirement home which has become a subculture of the mainstream of society. This study hopes to answer how the retirement residents view society's solution. In essence: is retirement a good conclusion to one's life or merely an easy way to deal with a difficult problem?

Physical Description of the Retirement Home

The retirement home studied is located on a hill across the street from a newly-developed apartment complex in Berkeley. Two hundred people, mostly women, reside in the home. It is fairly isolated from other residential areas and from shopping centers. Many of the retirement home residents enjoy getting out but the steep hill makes walking feasible only for the fairly hardy.

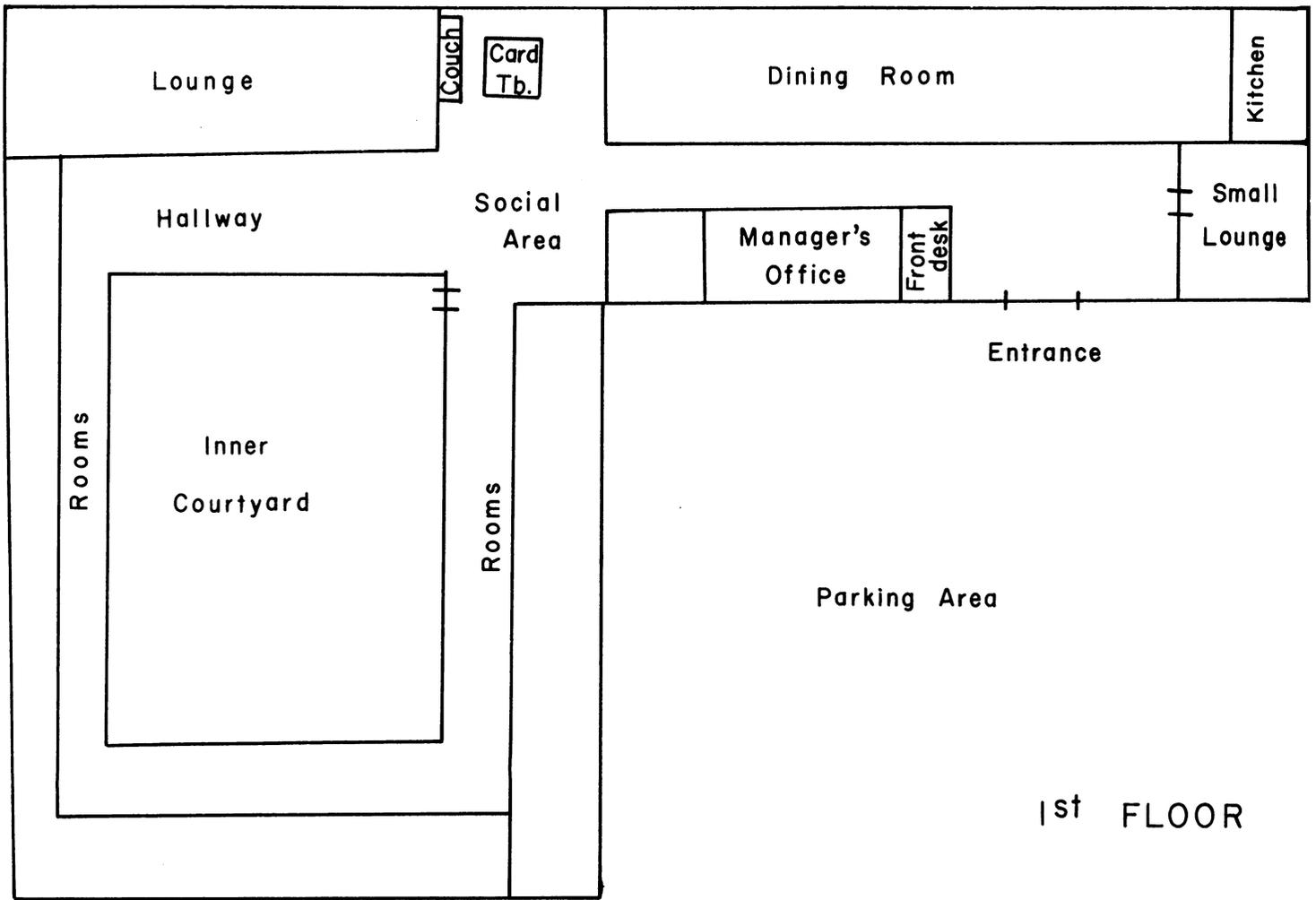
The architecture of the home is a type of modern California adobe and is built in the shape of a square surrounding a small walkway or courtyard. The first floor has a front desk with the manager's offices located near it. When one enters the home, one can page whomever he/she wishes to speak to by asking the front desk operator to use the intercom. Directly to the right as one enters the home is a small television and waiting room. The room has one large couch with

several easy chairs which, due to the positioning of the furniture, facilitate watching television rather than socializing. The dining room is located next to this room and occupies roughly half of the first floor. Small tables with seating for six are interspersed throughout the room. All of the meals are eaten here. Meal times are important social events and high points of the day. Other activities are held here such as bingo, poker and parties. To the left of the dining room is another small lounge. Here the furniture is spaced about the outskirts of the room leaving the center open. This again seems to discourage friendly interaction. Everytime I have entered this room people have been quietly sitting rather than talking to each other. Outside of the lounge in the hallway is a small nook. Here is one small couch and a card table set up with a few chairs. This area appears to be one of the major social zones. Located in the hallway it encourages passers-by to stop and chat. The other half of the first floor consists of the living accommodations of single and double rooms with private baths. These surround a cement walkway or courtyard which appears to be rarely used.

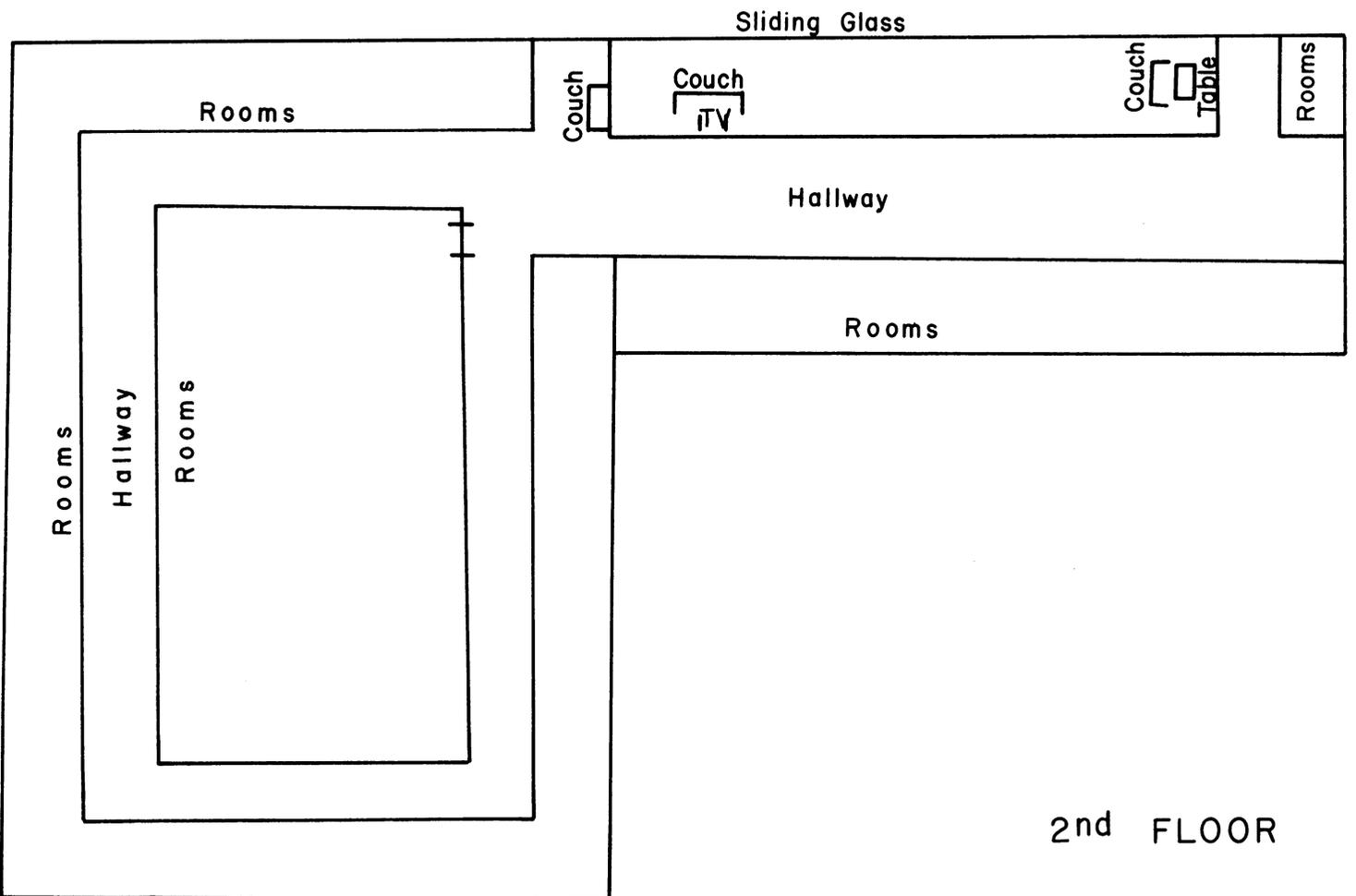
The second floor of the building has living accommodations and a large lounge comparable to the size of the dining room. The lounge has two large tables with chairs, a large sofa in front of a television and a large sofa and coffee table area to the left. Along one side of the room are sliding glass windows with a view of the unlandscaped hill. This room seems much more conducive to socializing due to the placement of the furniture in various groupings throughout the room. On this floor there is also a beauty salon frequented by the women.

Staff

Two managers direct the operation of the retirement home. One manager is an efficient older woman and the other is a young man. The woman appears to have a more formal business-like relationship with the residents while the man has a great rapport, especially with the women. He treats everyone as his personal friend and is interested in all of their activities. The assistant-manager is a woman in her mid-thirties. She pages the residents when guests arrive, signals everyone to dinner, and announces various activities. She tends to treat the residents as small children with low intelligence levels which causes much resentment against her. For example, one man was late to dinner



1st FLOOR



2nd FLOOR

one evening. She proceeded to signal him on the intercom consistently for twenty minutes in a tone resembling a mother calling a naughty child home for dinner. The rest of the staff includes a cook, maids, the beauty salon operator, a janitor, and a handyman.

Activities

Activities are geared to the residents' desires which (see calendar) include bingo, prayer meetings, television and current event sessions. Many of the people also enjoy brief scenic tours to places such as Foster City, Pacifica and Half Moon Bay, and shopping trips. There were complaints concerning the scenic tours because apparently once the bus driver arrives at the destination, he immediately turns the bus around and drives back. Many would prefer to get out, stretch their legs and look around.

There are also special events such as the Hawaiian Luau night. A special meal was served resembling Hawaiian food. It must be remembered that the food has to be bland in order to accommodate many people's diets. There are many complaints regarding the inadequacies of institutional food.

The most prominent continuous daily activity is television viewing. People favor game shows, talk shows and soap operas. While two lounges have televisions, most of the private rooms also have them. Television seems to be of central importance in entertainment. The residents have regular visits from their children, most of whom live fairly near the home. They also usually spend a day or a weekend with the

families enabling them to have a change of scenery and see the families who are so very important in their lives.

The Study

When I first attempted to conduct life history interviews I came upon two uniform answers:

- (1) "My life isn't worth talking about."
- (2) "I don't want to delve into old memories."

People seemed either suspicious of my purpose or ashamed of their lives. My first interview was unfortunate since the woman told her entire history in three minutes.

Gradually, however, I began to know the people and feel comfortable with the residents. The male manager introduced me at one evening meal and explained my status as a student who needed life histories for a class. Once the people realized that he approved of me I was able to achieve a much better rapport with everyone.

After my second interview, I was able to ask the informant to introduce me to other potential people who would be interested in recounting their life histories. I was able to work in a type of network system in which people introduced me to their friends. The life histories began to increase from three minutes to three-six hours. People were much more willing and eager to recount their lives. At this point I realized that possibly people were competing in "Who could tell the best and longest life history." Overall I found that I had become more relaxed and my role changed from

MONTHLY ACTIVITY CALENDAR

MAY 19 76
MONTH

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	<i>Start each week with a smile on your face... and a song in your heart.</i>	DOCTOR DAYS TUESDAY AND FRIDAY		BEAUTY SHOP OPEN TUESDAY-FRIDAY 9-5	 HAPPY MAY DAY!	9:30 COMMUNITY SING! 1:30 BINGO 3:00 SCENIC DRIVE (SERRAMONTE)
CHURCH SERVICES 2 CATHOLIC 9:30 PROTESTANT 10:30 SUNDAY BUFFET 12:30-2:00	10:00 BIBLE CLASS 3 1:00 ART CLASS 6:00 YAHTZEE	9:30 CURRENT EVENTS CLASS 4 1:30 CRIME PREVENTION WITH DALY CITY POLICE DEPT. 6:30 MOVIE FILM	9:30 BINGO! 5 1:00 "SERRAMONTE TIMES" NEWSPAPER TOUR 6:30 ICE CREAM SOCIAL	10:00 SENIOR CITIZENS 6 SHOPPING AT: SERRAMONTE 1:30-2:00 6:30 CRAFTS WITH LUCY 7:00 PHYSICAL FITNESS CLASS	10:00 CATHOLIC MASS AND CONFESSIO 7 3:00 HAPPY HOUR 6:00 POKER	9:30 COMMUNITY SING! 8 1:30 BINGO 3:00 SCENIC TOUR (GOLDEN GATE PARK)
MOTHER'S DAY 9 CHURCH SERVICES SUNDAY BUFFET 12:30-2:00	10:00 BIBLE CLASS 10 1:00 ART CLASS 6:00 YAHTZEE	9:30 CURRENT EVENTS CLASS 11 1:30 CRIME LECTURE #2 5:00 HAWAIIAN DAY LUAU!	9:30 GAME TIME 12 2:00 BINGO 6:00 POKER	10:00 SENIOR CITIZENS 13 SHOPPING AT: SERRAMONTE 1:30-2:00 6:30 CRAFTS 7:00 PHYSICAL FITNESS CLASS	2:00 MOVIE FILM 14 2:30 HAPPY HOUR 6:00 GAME TIME	9:30 COMMUNITY SING! 15 1:30 BINGO 3:00 SCENIC DRIVE (PALO ALTO)
CHURCH SERVICES 16 CATHOLIC 9:30 PROTESTANT 10:30 SUNDAY BUFFET 12:30-2:00	10:00 BIBLE CLASS 17 1:00 ART CLASS 6:00 "NIGHT AT THE MOVIES WITH LINDA FARRELL'S ICE CREAM	9:30 CURRENT EVENTS CLASS 18 1:30 CRIME LECTURE #3 6:30 HAPPY BIRTHDAY PARTY!	9:30 GAME TIME 19 2:00 BINGO 6:30 ROOT BEER FLOATS	10:00 SENIOR CITIZENS 20 SHOPPING AT: SERRAMONTE 1:30-2:00 6:30 CRAFTS WITH LUCY 7:00 PHYSICAL FITNESS CLASS	2:00 MOVIE FILM 21 2:30 HAPPY HOUR 6:00 POKER	9:30 COMMUNITY SING! 22 1:30 BINGO 3:00 SCENIC DRIVE (RICHMOND AREA)
CHURCH SERVICES 23 BUFFET CHURCH SERVICES 12:30-2:00 SUNDAY BUFFET 12:30-2:00	10:00 BIBLE CLASS 24 1:00 ART CLASS 6:00 YAHTZEE MEMORIAL DAY! 10:00 BIBLE CLASS 1:00 ART CLASS 6:00 YAHTZEE	9:30 CURRENT EVENTS CLASS 25 1:30 BLACK JACK 6:30 MOVIE FILM	9:30 POKER 26 2:00 BINGO 3:00 "FOUNTAIN TOUR"	10:00 SENIOR CITIZENS 27 SHOPPING AT: TAINFERAN 1:30 SERRAMONTE 2:00 6:30 CRAFTS WITH LUCY 7:00 PHYSICAL FITNESS CLASS	3:00 HAPPY HOUR 28 6:00 GAME TIME	9:30 COMMUNITY SING! 29 1:30 BINGO 3:00 SCENIC DRIVE (PACIFICA)

that of an interviewer to that of an interested listener.

I interviewed about 30 people on the average of three or four times. Because of the varying length and openness, I have selected five of the most complete. They reflect the range of backgrounds, interests and perspectives on aging that characterized the home's residents.

The Life Histories

The life histories are printed here as they were told. The informants gave themselves anonymous names. The fact that the five women recalled their childhood experiences in vivid detail is significant. This period emerged as one of the most important to all five. They also uniformly described their courtship, marriage and homelife which seemed to provide continuity despite migration, deaths and hardship. The life histories will be compared after all have been recounted.

Mary Sullivan

Mary Sullivan was born in 1909 in St. Louis, Missouri. She was the youngest child in a family of one sister and one brother. Her family was very poor and of Irish background. Her father was a streetcar motorman. To conserve money he even sewed their own shoes. Her mother cared for the children and the house. In the summertime she would can the fresh peaches and tomatoes that the farmers brought in. She also raised chickens in the backyard. When money was especially tight she took in boarders.

Mary emphasized that however little money her family had, there was a solid foundation of love and Catholic religion in her home. She believes that her strong stable homelife was due to the deep religious values of her family. The parents often stressed the value of prayer and the practice of attending church. Her sister later entered a convent and her brother was ordained as a priest.

Everything in Mary's childhood centered about the home. Often relatives would congregate at their house for family get-togethers or holidays. The children would have friends in for dances in the basement. By having dances in the basement the parents were able to keep an eye on the children. Mary remembers her parents as having the door always open to welcome visitors.

Her parents were very disciplinary yet always cooperated. The father was considered the "boss." Mary's mother tried to teach her daughters to be good homemakers. She interested Mary in sewing in order to make her own clothes. Later she learned to knit and crochet. She also had a strong interest in music and her mother arranged piano lessons for her.

Mary attended school until the eighth grade which at that time was the usual point that education ended for people of their social standing. Mary, however, then entered business school at the age of sixteen to be trained for office work. She emphasized her continuing strong attachments to home even after she began

doing office work. She always brought the paycheck home to her family.

At twenty-two, in 1932, she married. Her parents had known her husband for quite awhile and approved of the match. Her husband had often visited her at her home before the marriage in order to get to know her family. He was a clerk at the railroad. She remembers him as a very athletic man who played tennis and golf. Mary looked for stability in a husband and disapproved of drinking and smoking. These became major points in her selection of a husband.

The wedding was quiet because they were married during the Depression which accentuated her family's normally poor existence. After the wedding the young couple rented a one-bedroom flat for twenty-five dollars per month. Mary stayed at home instead of working in order to create a homelife comparable to her mother's home.

For entertainment her husband tinkered with a radio he had made. Later her husband and she attended night school together. During the Depression era, however, they had to watch every cent and many activities were curtailed. In 1934, they had their first daughter.

In 1936, they moved to California hoping for better prospects for work. Mary was also eager to leave the cold winters of Missouri. Her last winter there had been eight degrees below zero. They went off to California with no idea of what they would encounter. Their faith in God and their excitement of entering a "new land" diminished any fears they might have harbored. When they arrived at the Ferry Building in San Francisco, they sat on a bench and wondered what to do next. Mary's husband then saw a big sign with *Southern Pacific* printed on it. He immediately inquired about it and obtained a job. They then caught a streetcar, got off at California Street and rented an apartment for eighty-eight dollars. Mary was sure God was with them at that time.

Mary, her husband and daughter lived in San Francisco for two years. During that time, Mary often sat in the park and had met a woman there who had told her about the Peninsula. Mary longed to have a house there and eagerly talked with the woman about it. One afternoon they took a bus down the Peninsula and looked about. Mary then gathered her strength and asked the woman to loan her five hundred dollars for a down payment on a home. The woman looked askance at her and said that she hardly knew her. Mary then said she only had her daughter and no other assets or she wouldn't have asked. The woman was so impressed by Mary's "gumption" that she lent her the money. Again things worked out for the best. Mary refers to the luck of the Southern Pacific sign which helped her husband get a job and the woman who lent her the money as typical of her life. A quote she often used was, "If there was a dull side, a bright side would show up."

After the move down the peninsula, Mary's husband worked at another railroad. Mary gave birth to her two other daughters in 1939 and 1942. She said that being together with her family were the most important memories. She sent her children to parochial school for eight years and then to public high school for four years giving them a good balance. Mary feels she taught her daughters basic values and created the foundation that her mother had given her. Two of her daughters are now married and she has two grandchildren.

Mary talks of her marriage as being good yet quiet. She married because she felt she was compatible with her husband. She remarked that she was never "passionately in love with him." She felt that marriage was the expected thing to do and that her husband would be a good partner.

Mary was always an ambitious woman and being a mother and homemaker did not take all of her time. While her children were at school and by attending night school, she was able to enter the real estate business. She stressed that this was secondary to her role as a mother. She felt that it was a "wonderful stepping stone for acquaintances." She loved meeting all sorts of people and the job was a challenge to her. She failed the real estate exam three times. The fourth time, she told the test operator that unless they passed her she would keep taking the tests until eternity. She passed, sold for two years, became a broker and eventually opened her own office. She feels that the extra stimulation that her job brought her made life more exciting. Mary views people as challenges and sources of stimulation. An "inner drive," as she terms it, led her to develop a career. When asked why she had a job in addition to being a mother and wife, she said, "My husband was contented with the quiet life. He never joked. I needed more."

One year ago Mary walked into her bedroom and saw her husband dead on the floor having suffered a heart attack. From that point on she had complete amnesia. Her daughter later informed her that during that time she had sold their home, bought an apartment, and closed her business. She had remembered none of these events and was subsequently placed in a sanatorium by her daughter. Three months later she was sent to the retirement home.

Mary dislikes the life at the retirement home. She feels most of the people at the home are "wealthy and non-thinking." She recalls with disgust that earlier that day she had walked into the lounge and had seen a group of people watching "Mickey Mouse." She participates little in activities. She lives in a double room with a roommate "who has been dead for years." Her only saving factor in her situation is her strong belief in Catholicism and God's will. She then remarked, "I have to push God's will a little though. I'll have to do just that so I can leave here. My life isn't over yet!"

Ida Vagabond

Ida was born in New York City in the Bronx on April 15, 1909. She was an only child. Her parents and she lived in a small apartment. Ida considered her childhood to be very ordinary. She attended grammar school until the eighth grade. She then tried the commercial high school but soon tired of taking a streetcar daily to it and dropped out. She then enrolled in a business school within walking distance where she learned the skills of typing and shorthand.

When she was sixteen, she obtained work at the *World Newspaper* in downtown New York on lower Broadway. Here she was a billing clerk who handled the typing of newspaper ads which then went to the press. Ida has always had as she termed it, "the travel bug." By saving \$18 a week she was able to take small trips down the coast to Atlantic City and Virginia. On her first two week vacation she went to Mexico. Further trips were made to Cuba where she remembers the old regime and the perfume and cigar factories. She also remembered Morro Castle in the Carribean off Cuba. These trips tended to make Ida dissatisfied with her daily existence. She longed for excitement and escape from the cold New York winters so she took the Greyhound bus to California and saw 38 states. On this trip she met her husband on the bus. He was a salesman and was 12 years older than she. However, Ida was 28 years old by that time and figured marriage had better enter the picture and for that reason she took a chance.

Ida and her husband first moved to Los Angeles in the 1930's but soon moved because even then the smog was hard to live with. They then moved to San Francisco where Ida worked as a billing clerk at Phillip Morris Tobacco, while her husband continued his saleswork. They rented an apartment on Ocean View and later bought a house which they lived in during their entire married life. It was sold in 1975.

Ida explained that she did not marry for love or romance. She described her marriage as "comfortable." The age difference gave their marriage a quiet atmosphere. Ida couldn't have children. This, however, did not bother her as children would have interfered in her traveling. Even married, her husband and she took quite a few trips. Eventually they bought land and built a cottage at Clear Lake. Ida's husband died 10 years later at the age of 50 from diabetes. Ida referred to this era of her life as "fate." She was baptized a Catholic but religion played nothing in her life. "Fate" seemed to be the controlling factor.

She then worked at the Bank of America Headquarters where she did typing, clerical work and eventually worked on the computers. On her vacations she looked forward to travel. One trip to Nova Scotia, she remembers the excitement of traveling

by boat through Yarmouth. She described the primitive fishing people and the eery oil lamps in their cabins. She also enjoyed the amethyst mines. Later she traveled to Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti and Fiji. Her favorite place was New Zealand where she described the blue-green landscape with the sheep. She also described at length the outback of Australia where World War I refugees made settlements. As Ida said, "I was born with itching feet and wanted to see the world."

Ida believes that money is an important necessity of life. Without it, her travels would have been curtailed. She also feels the strong need to get along with people. Often on her trips she made lasting friendships but overall she felt that, "It was hard being a single woman. Couples didn't want to associate with me."

Ida was a widow for fifteen years. She steadily was assigned more difficult computer work at the Bank of America. No one noticed that she was gradually breaking down under the load. Eventually she had a nervous breakdown and was sent to a sanatorium, later to a rest home and eventually to the retirement home, by doctors' orders. She sold her house and remarked bitterly that "colored had moved in the neighborhood." She could no longer afford the property taxes.

Ida had wanted to visit Europe but felt that fate had directed her against it. She is comfortable at the home. Often she felt lonely living by herself but no longer has to contend with that. She feels that she is different from most women at the home who long for their families, home and deceased husbands. She never actually had a close relationship with her husband, she did not have children and her home eventually became too lonely to live in. Ida feels much more content now. She says that she no longer wishes to travel. That part of her life is over. I did sense some regret, however, in her voice when she talked of Europe. She compensates by saying that communism has overtaken Europe and she doesn't wish to see that.

Ida participates in the Civic Affairs Discussions at the home. She enjoys reading about current events, watching television, playing bingo and walking. She believes that she will always live in a retirement home. She says that she is very contented. She is also strongly interested in astrology. She is Aries which she describes as "restless personalities." Ida is possibly still restless but accepts her position. As she says, "My time is over; I can't go anywhere else."

Lena Manderson

Lena was born in Harden County in the town of Hubbard in Iowa in 1889. She had two sisters and two brothers. One brother died at the age of fourteen. Her parents were immigrants from Germany and married in the U.S. Her father worked at the railroad

for \$1.00 per day when he first married. Later he bought a wagon and team of horses and began to farm.

Lena remembered Iowa as a beautiful country land with wooded areas. There were no bridges so the streams had to be forded. The roads were gravel. When the first Model T Fords roared down the narrow roads in 1900, the horses drawing the buggies became so frightened that they jolted off the road. In the winters Lena's father got the children a bobsled and they played in the snow drifts and sled across the fields. She remembers the snow as incredibly beautiful. She still remembers the sound of the timber wolves who howled in the winter. These wolves were feared because they killed cattle and were thus constantly hunted. In the spring during the thaw the ruts were so deep that it took weeks to get into the town. The spring wildflowers in the woods were beautiful and Lena often collected them. Summer-time on their dairy farm was strong in Lena's memory. She got up early to milk, feed the calves and chickens, and later run to the hayfield. The county fairs during July were important events. Lena's mother gave her a quarter which she immediately spent on food. She then never rode the merry-go-round and still regrets it. She enjoyed the harness races and the ostrich races (a race for children).

Lena remembers her home vividly. Their big kitchen was the focus of activity in the house. There was a cook stove with a door on the side with the shuttle on the front. The glow from this and the kerosene lamps made this room the favorite. There also was a living room with whitewashed bedrooms upstairs. She still remembers the valentines she pinned on the walls of her bedroom. Often in warm weather the family would sit on the porch in front of her house.

Lena's family was very close and "God-fearing." They attended church and Sunday school. She was raised as a Baptist and became a Methodist after she married. Her parents were disciplinary and emphasized honesty. Holidays were an important element in their family life. At Christmas time, the father stomped about the porch and talked in a low voice resembling St. Nicholas. In the tradition of Germany, the children were taught to believe that St. Nicholas rode on a white horse. The children left oranges, cookies, and apples on a plate for him. The children never had stockings nor received anything other than cookies and fruit yet the excitement of the holiday was important. Harvest time was another festive time. Neighbors came in for hot chocolate and cake. The whole town had small get-togethers.

Health was always at stake in this harsh climate. One cold winter her family had whooping cough and the doctor came every day. He made up his own medicines from herbs. Later that winter her father got diphtheria and was quarantined in the kitchen for

a month. He burned everything he ate off of and was able to avoid spreading the disease to his family. Other winters, Lena remembers bouts with scarlet fever and measles. Health was constantly worried about.

Often the family faced hard times. When the doctor's bills increased, the father would often take his crop in as payment. They always managed to eat fairly well. The mother always had meat and potatoes. She churned her own butter, butchered and cured meat, and had a small garden. Lena was given bread for her lunch at school. At lunch time in the winter it would be so frozen that she had to heat it at the stove. Her mother baked her own bread in a huge black pan. Lena lived on the farm in her childhood and went to a country school. She remembered one particularly naughty boy in her class who was whipped with willow switches. The fear of the switch made her behave. Respect towards teachers, parents, and elders was imperative. Her fondest memories of early school were when the children were allowed to cut pictures out of magazines. Lena attended school until she was sixteen. She liked to read but the four mile hike to school in the country discouraged her from attending regularly.

At eighteen, Lena went to do housework for an educated family in town. She liked her employers and worked there for ten years. During World War I, she met a man casually at church. She fell in love with him and still remembers their first date at the Ferris Wheel. After he returned to active duty, they corresponded regularly. At twenty-eight, in 1920, Lena married this man at home with a few friends present. They began married life in Iowa and her husband supported them as a cabinet-maker.

The first year they had a baby who was a stillborn. Lena was so distraught that when her brother's wife died, she cared for his two children. She found that this could not last though as she ignored her husband and thus had to send the children away. During the Depression, times were extremely hard. For months Lena's husband rode about the country looking for part-time jobs. Finally he found work in Topeka, Kansas. That didn't last long so he next found work in Des Moines at a factory for one year. From there they moved to South Dakota where he found temporary work in a planing mill. In Aberdine, South Dakota, their daughter was born. Finally he found full-time work at Fort Dodge and Lena was then able to make a home which she had desired for so long. They bought a house for five hundred dollars down and paid by the month. Misfortune came again when Lena's husband was fired. They couldn't keep the house and moved back briefly to Iowa to take care of Lena's sick father. Lena's husband got odd jobs but nothing adequate.

After her father's death, Lena's husband moved his family to Lincoln, Nebraska, where he worked at a

planing mill for Curtis and Company. This job lasted as briefly as the rest but Lena's husband was fired for a new reason. His health completely broke down. A complete mental breakdown overtook him. Doctors attributed the cause to shell shock he had received during the war. He had steadily through the years lost his ability to reason and function. Lena took the news in stride but her husband reacted with panic. "You see," said Lena, "he couldn't live without money yet his ego wouldn't let me support him." However, Lena's husband did not have much of a choice. He lived for ten years at the Veteran's Hospital.

Lena had a five year old daughter and had to support her. She rented a small apartment for fifteen dollars per month and as she said, "I was actually happy." She worked part-time at a lunch room, later at Penny's candy department, and finally at the pastry stand in the Student Union at the University of Nebraska. The wage hour law came into effect so her pay increased. Life went on happily for those years until the doctors decided that Lena's husband was ready for a trial visit at home. He spent the summer with his family in that small apartment and Lena described it as the "siege." She was going through as she termed "the change of life" and was especially sensitive to her husband's antics. "He was crazy. He wrote letters with no meaning. He met a man on the street and next thing I knew, he'd bought him expensive shoes. At that time we counted our pennies for our daily food." He resented Lena, too, and she tried to compensate by encouraging his delusion that he was the decision-maker and boss of the family. Lena later went and talked to the doctors at the hospital. They told her that her husband's reasoning power had been destroyed in the war. During one siege he had lain in a trench with continual shooting going on about him for two weeks. Later at the armistice, he had buried three hundred men in the trenches. After the war, he just couldn't adjust. Lena had noticed that something was missing yet always hoped that he would get better.

Many years later when Lena's daughter had grown, married, and moved to Denver, Lena and her husband decided to also settle in Denver. They lived there for eighteen years. Lena bought a little house from money left over from her parents' estate. Her husband became ill again and was put in the state hospital but was discharged after a few months. He was on a heavy dosage of tranquilizers yet he still could not adjust. For years he lived in another world. Finally Lena reached her breaking point with him. "I just couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't socialize. He was a wonderful man. That's the only thing that kept me going." Lena's husband made her steadily more nervous. Lena's daughter who by that time had moved to San Francisco encouraged her to commit him to the Veteran's Hospital at Fort Lyon in Col-

orado where he still is. Lena hated the decision but had no choice.

After this Lena moved to California. She said, "I had reached old age. There are different stages to life and this perhaps is the easiest. I like it real well here." She participates in bingo, yahtzee, watches television, and goes on shopping trips. She likes most of the other residents. Her room has some of her old treasures such as an antique lamp, photographs, and a cherrywood table.

Most of her decisions in life have been aided by prayer. "I never could have lived without religion. One needs something to hold onto." Religion is still important to her. She regularly attends Bible study. Lena accepts a situation rather than fighting it and perhaps for this reason has made a better adjustment to the retirement home than many of the other residents. Her philosophy of endurance was summed up in one statement about the home; "Why waste time worrying; you can't change it."

Helen Peterson

Helen was born on June 10, 1896, in Brownsville, Nebraska, which had a population of 350 people. She was born into a family of two older brothers. Her mother died when she was six so her grandparents raised her. Her grandmother was considerate and "let her have a childhood." She was strict though and would switch Helen's leg with a peach sprout if she misbehaved. Her grandfather received \$12 a month pension from the Civil War. He also hunted, trapped, and fished in order to feed them. He raised chickens, cows, and churned butter. He also cultivated an orchard and garden. Helen remembers her years with her grandparents as very happy times.

She attended school through the tenth grade. She wanted to teach but instead married at seventeen to a man of twenty. They settled in Sidney, Iowa, and raised seven children. Two babies died of dyptheria and one girl died at twenty-one in a car accident. "We only planned for the first child. Next thing I knew there were seven."

Her husband was a salesman for Standard Oil. They lived in Sidney from 1914-1925 and later moved to Shanandoah from 1925-1933. In 1933, her husband got in a car accident and shot through the top of the cab. He was disabled but lived fourteen more years helping to raise the children. During the Depression, they sold dressed chicken and fish door to door.

Helen was always a strong Christian; a Methodist in childhood and a Baptist once she got married. Her main values revolved around her religion and her children. She thought her marriage was "good and stable." She always knew that she was loved and that he would care for her. During her married life she worked the night crew at a sweet corn canning factory.

One day in 1946, she walked into her bedroom and saw her husband seemingly asleep. She then saw that

he had died of a heart attack. She missed him but wasn't afraid of continuing alone. Her children had graduated from high school and she lived alone. Friends and neighbors brought her food and she worked in a nursery writing addresses on catalogues and shipping tags. Later she moved to Riverton, Iowa, where she canned chicken.

Eventually Helen remembered her desire to be a teacher. Taking the first big dare of her life, she enrolled at Nebraska State at the age of fifty. She lived in a dorm but found that she felt very out of place. She remembers that in her biology class she was so short that she had to kneel in her seat in order to see, with her bifocals constantly slipping off of her nose. After a couple of weeks Helen realized that "I just didn't fit in." She withdrew and "went home where I belonged."

In 1970, Helen came to California to live in an apartment under her daughter's kitchen. She couldn't continue to live there because she constantly fell and needed a walker and constant attention. In 1975, she moved to the home after she had surgery for arthritis.

Helen likes it at the home. She attends Bible class, current events, the senior citizen's club where they play cards, and bingo. She's very proud of her children and grandchildren and often shows photos of them. They are the greatest accomplishments of her life and she makes this known.

Helen seemed reluctant to discuss her attempt to receive a college education at the age of fifty. Her large family had thwarted her chance to get a teaching credential when she was younger and more able. After the age of fifty she felt she really had no place in society and while her children were her greatest accomplishments, they deterred her from obtaining what she desired most: an education. After asking her if she resented being in a retirement home with no alternative living situation, she said, "If my pictures are on the wall, any place is home. I only miss my orchard."

Kathy Nailer

Kathy was born on July 12, 1892, in Dublin, Ireland. Her family consisted of five boys and six girls. Her parents were from Russia and were devout Jews. Kathy's father had a dairy business in Dublin.

Kathy remembers her childhood as a tumultuous time. She went to St. Steven's Green Unitarian School until the seventh grade. Her family had strong resentments towards the English who had virtually taken Ireland over. Her parents often told her of the famine when all the cows died and there was literally nothing to eat. "The English didn't care. They divided Ireland up among themselves. The more people that died was better for them. The Protestants own everything."

During World War II, Kathy's father opened an antique business in Tipperary. He traveled to London and bought antiques. Many of the British elite bought them. Her father bought a nice corner house and brought Kathy and her sister to live there. They were

the only Jewish family. Tipperary had a huge hospital where wounded soldiers were sent. According to Kathy, the British had let many criminals out of prison (they were referred to as Black and Tans) who wandered about the villages and pillaged the homes and raped the women. Kathy thus became very withdrawn and stayed in her little home.

Meanwhile Kathy's mother lived with the rest of the children in Dublin. Kathy's father would visit on the weekends. Tipperary steadily became more of a military town and girls were worried about walking alone about town. Often the Canon (chaplain of forces) referred to Kathy and her sister as high examples of virtue. They hardly ever left home. Kathy vaguely remembers those early years. She remembers the strong IRA power and its force in the village. Life was highly regulated in those days.

Kathy married in her early twenties. Her aunt made the match as was traditional. Kathy also received a small dowry. They had a large wedding in Dublin. Her husband came from Russia and she hated him. "You had to do what your parents told you. I had to marry a Jew." Her father took him into his business in Tipperary. In addition to that they sold fruit in the summer. Kathy's husband also took photographs at the IRA camps. The British were constantly tracking and harassing him.

Later they moved to Belfast. Kathy had three children. Her husband opened a small snack bar which he named after one of his daughters: "Rita's Snack Bar." During World War II, there was extensive bombing in Belfast. Kathy's house was completely destroyed in one of these bomb attacks. The family then moved into an old barn in the country with other refugees. There were huge rats infesting the old barn and Kathy was frightened for her children.

When I visited Kathy a second time to continue her life history, she, in tears, told me that her daughter and son had forbidden her to continue. She said they had referred to her as, "an old woman who didn't know when to stop talking." I was able to find out that years later she moved to America when her husband died.

The situation that her children created presents an accurate portrayal of many elderly people's relations with their children. The elderly fear the children whom they raised. One woman supplied the answer to this phenomenon. "I can't displease them, they're all that I have left." Kathy is in almost the role of a child trying to obey and please. It seems highly ironic that the children who dominate her were once her dependents.

Kathy is at times very unhappy at the retirement home but has learned to adjust. Her main activities center about the television since she often feels too weak to join in the activities. She often misses Ireland but tries not to think about it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the residents of the retirement home have all had strong values and goals molding their lives. One can see how the traditional roles of husband/wife and mother/father affect and direct these people's lives. Marriage was the socially inevitable institution that then controlled and directed their lives. Marriage usually led to raising a family which then became the nucleus of their existence. The husbands were the main "bread-winners." The wives worked when there were hard financial times or when they were bored. Overall and more importantly they were mothers and wives, with any career considered secondary.

These people's lives formed a cyclic pattern:

- 1) childhood-involving education and the parents' religious and moral influence
- 2) adulthood-involving marriage, raising a family, passing values down to children, buying a home, occupations
- 3) old age-involving leisure, but overall defining the end of one's life

For some reason old age is the period in one's life which does not have any distinct features. Society has designated old age as a type of end. At one time people looked forward to old age as a time of relaxation after a life of hard work. This however has proved to be a burden rather than pleasure.

Old age does not fit into the scheme of our society. The elderly gradually do not belong to the culture that they perpetuated. The young do not want the burden of caring for the old so the retirement home was introduced.

The retirement home is a solution for the young rather than the old. People usually join one because of health reasons, loneliness, the counsel of younger family members, or because there is no other place to go. The activities are enjoyable but after a life of hard work and striving, this experience seems to be an anticlimax. The women miss their homes and children but the social life at the home is comforting to them. Most of the residents are also widowed which creates a further sense of loss. In essence, all responsibility, goals, and purpose have been removed and this is very difficult to accept.

The lives of the residents at the retirement home follow common patterns. First of all, their lives have been highly migratory. This is due to the fact that the husbands were in search of employment. A few eventually migrated to California in hopes of discovering a "golden land" of wealth and prosperity. Others followed the migratory route of their children. The diverse areas from which these people have come is a strong example of the highly mobile transient society in which we live.

Due to the fact that the residents have such diverse backgrounds, the retirement home has become a type of melting pot. Since people of so many backgrounds

are present, one would tend to think that the retirement home would lose the feeling of solidarity and central unity such as would be evident if the people had all been born and lived their lives in the same area. However, this is not true.

Age is an equalizing force. During one's adult life, money, status, background and education separate and divide classes of people. While most of the people I interviewed are from working class families and had little education, there are residents of all classes present in the home. Money, background, status and education are not brought up and do not matter in the retirement home. The residents are living in a subculture where any diversity is underplayed. Age then becomes the unifying factor. People of diverse religions, nationalities, and backgrounds (but not races) live side by side with no conflict.

The elderly confusedly accept the life of the retirement home. Their only voiced objections are mild resentment towards their children. In their eyes, their children are responsible for their welfare and should take them into their homes when they become too old to care for themselves. It is ironic to them that the children they devoted their whole lives to, should desert them when they need help. Thus the retirement home becomes a symbolic home for neglected and unwanted old.

Sooner or later everyone will be old and face the situation that these people are in. In America old age, however, defines the end of productivity, creativity and usefulness. Old age is then a type of death. It is truly the total antithesis of our youth-oriented culture.

While medical knowledge increases the age span of an individual and diminishes diseases, the social problem of old age merely increases. While science physically enables people to age less quickly, society has not allowed these physically and mentally capable people to participate fully after the age of sixty-five. This merely increases the feelings of futility and uselessness.

While the retirement home is one solution for the care of the elderly who cannot care for themselves, it is a compromising situation for those who can. The residents are isolated from society and their older values further alienate them from current events. Even with mass communication, it is difficult in the shelter of a retirement home to understand the confusing events of modern society. Perhaps it is a comforting buffer, but it reinforces the barrier between the elderly and those actively involved in society. As one woman stated, "Old age is obsolete."

In summary, these people have endured and adjusted to the various stages of their lives such as Depression, wars, mental breakdowns and their various roles in their culture. Perhaps the most essential point to stress is that these people all had strong values by which to live. Parents created strong guidelines and models while society carefully defined one's place in

the world. Few questioned the events in their lives. Religion created a stability that these people needed. Religion is also the one aspect of their lives that has not changed since they moved to the retirement home. While they may have lost money, status, homes and children, religion or a belief in a guiding force has given them a continued significance in their lives, even in the retirement home.

In conclusion, these people feel a diminished sense of dignity and self-respect in the retirement home. Society need not shun the people that helped form it. Old age thus needs to be re-evaluated in American culture.

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