DOCUMENT PROJECT 25

Teenagers in Postwar America

"There are many different opinions about just what is the most exclusive club in America these days," observed Dick Clark in his 1959 book *Your Happiest Years* (Document 25.5). But for Clark, the most exclusive and important club was the one he called "Teenagers of America, Inc." Still, for Clark and most other Americans that club was exclusively white—African American, Latino, and Asian teenagers rarely appear in a positive light. Indeed, Clark's appraisal of American society in 1959 may have been self-serving—after all, his career hinged largely on appealing to teen audiences—but he was not alone in his belief in the significance of teenagers in postwar American society.

Even now, pop culture often portrays the 1950s as a simpler time when girls wore poodle skirts and swooned over Elvis Presley (Document 25.6), while boys raced hot-rod cars and took their dates to the malt shop. In this vision, teens were concerned with little more than increasing their popularity, "going steady," and watching *American Bandstand*. As the following documents illustrate, there is much to support this interpretation of postwar teen culture. *Young people made rock 'n' roll into an enduring* and lucrative entertainment industry, shaped the advertising and manufacture of products, and were the focus of numerous television shows and movies.

But there are other, more complicated images of teen life in this era. For one, juvenile delinquency was seen by many as a serious problem. Actor James Dean's *Rebel without a Cause* competed with singer Pat Boone's squeaky-clean haircut and white shoes. In 1959 actor Sandra Dee portrayed both a perky Malibu surfer in *Gidget* and an unwed pregnant teen in *A Summer Place*. Teens also grew up under the looming threat of the Cold War, the Korean War, and McCarthyism. African Americans helped popularize rock 'n' roll, but in Little Rock, Arkansas, and elsewhere in the South, black teenagers risked their lives to desegregate public schools (Document 25.7).

The following sources consider different aspects of teen life and postwar culture in the 1950s. They also illustrate teenagers in the 1950s who had more on their minds than just dating and having a good time (Documents 25.8 and 25.9).

Document 24.5

Dick Clark | *Your Happiest Years*, 1959

By 1959 Dick Clark was a nationally popular disc jockey and host of television's *American Bandstand*. Always seen in a suit and tie, Clark, with his clean-cut good looks, projected a more wholesome vision of rock 'n' roll than did many of his contemporaries, such as Alan Freed. Clark's advice book for teenagers includes instructions on manners, makeup, and getting along with parents and other teens, as well as advice on romantic relationships.

We've mentioned before that it is very important to build a wide circle of friends, both fellows and girls. There are two reasons for this, but one is basic to dating. That is, the more fellows or girls you meet, the better the possibility that one or two might consider you what we called "date bait." The other reason, and it's a long shot, is that having a wide circle of friends, you meet more different types of people and learn how to adjust to them. This pays off after the teen years are past and you are either at work or away at school. But in order to get yourself into this teenage world of dating, let's just say you'll grow very lonely if you lock yourself away from eligible fellows or girls.

You've joined the staff of the school paper, or you are a member of a crowd of fellows that seem to attract a liberal following of the fair sex to your athletic contests. Or, on the distaff [female] side, you've a fine collection of girl friends—they're especially fine if they have at least one or two brothers of dating age. If you haven't quite reached that stage of teenage paradise yet, there are such events as community dances, or mixed school or church activities, that bring manly blips on your radarscope. In other words, you've gotten out of your shell and into the teenage swim. Don't be shy. You know that all the other fellows and girls your own age feel the same way you do. Remember, no self-pity. Braces on your teeth can't dim the glow of a sparkling personality, and neither can a shortage of new dresses or suits be an alibi for what is really a lack of effort on your part. Your fellow teenagers are eager to find sincere friends, and if you can prove that you are one then you definitely classify as "date bait." There is a phrase that I heard from General Carlos P. Romulo, the Philippines' famed patriot and Ambassador to the United States, and I think it applies here. "A stranger," the General said, "is a friend that I haven't met." It's a wonderful application of the Golden Rule, and it's one sentence that can carry a teenager through a lot of embarrassing uncertainty.

Accepting your fellow teenagers as friends, known or unknown, is another step toward that all-*important phone call or whispered conference in the* hall at school. You know the one I mean. It may begin, "Uh, Margie . . . uh, this Saturday night . . . uh, well, some of us were . . ." And a date is born.

Source: Dick Clark, *Your Happiest Years* (New York: Random House, 1959), 100–101.

Document 25.6

Charlotte Jones | Letter on Elvis, 1957

Nothing highlighted the growing generation gap more than rock 'n' roll. When Elvis Presley burst onto the music scene in the mid-1950s, adults criticized his music and gyrating hips, while teenage boys dressed to imitate his style, and teenage girls screamed and fainted at his concerts. In 1957 Charlotte Jones, an admiring fan, wrote the following letter to the conservative newspaper columnist George Sokolsky in response to Sokolsky's criticism of Presley's *popularity*.

There are too many people saying that Elvis is going to die out. When Elvis dies out is when the sun quits burning.

You say everybody is forgotten that is once great; George Washington has never been forgotten and nobody can be as great a president or as long remembered as he. Nobody can ever take his place or do what he did. Well, it's the same with Elvis. He'll always be remembered and nobody has ever [done] or ever will do the same thing as Elvis has.

Elvis is the king of popularity and we (teens of America) love him and we'll see he lives forever. Not his body but his name. Adults won't admit he's so great, because they're jealous! They know that their top singers weren't as great as Elvis. They're mad because their taste isn't quite as good as ours.

Look at James Dean, been dead for a year and he's bigger now than he ever was.

God gifted Elvis to us and you oughta thank him, not tear down the greatest thing the world has ever known: Elvis Presley!!!!!!

Scornfully yours,
Charlotte Jones

P.S.: And if you're over 30, you're old. You're certainly *not young*.

Source: George E. Sokolsky, "Teenager Puts Rap on Suggestion Elvis on Way Out," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 11, 1957, 5.

Document 25.7

The Desegregation of Central High School, 1957

In 1957 nine black teenagers attempted to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, pursuant to a federal court order. This photograph captures fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, surrounded by an angry white crowd on the first day of school. The photo also shows an enraged white student, Hazel Bryan, shouting at her to go home. Neither Eckford nor the other black students managed to attend school that day, but they entered Central High after President Eisenhower sent in federal troops to protect them.

Lloyd Dinkins/The Commercial Appeal /Landov

Document 25.8

Gloria Lopez-Stafford | A Mexican American Childhood in El-Paso, Texas, 1949

Born in 1937, Gloria Lopez-Stafford grew into her teenage years in the 1950s. While African Americans were fighting for integrated schools in neighboring Arkansas, Lopez-Stafford and her friends attended interracial schools. Still, as she relates in the following excerpt from her memoir, attending classes with whites did not necessarily satisfy Mexican American youths.

"Remember the Alamo!"

The banner slogan was draped across the blackboard of my social studies class in El Paso, Texas. The black letters jumped off the white background. The slogan on the banner was appropriate because the elementary school was named after Sam Houston, first president of the Texas Republic. . . .

It was September and we were going to the auditorium to see the movie, *The Battle of the Alamo.* Texas history was the course of study for the year and the whole week before the film we made salt maps of the state. I was very proud of my carved Ivory soap model of the Alamo. . . .

That year, my class at Houston School was about half Anglo and half Mexican. . . . *The Battle of the Alamo* was an old film, very dark and gray. The battle brought together small, overdressed Mexican men and big white men dressed in buckskins. As you probably know, the battle was fierce and it was won by a villain named Antonio López de Santa Anna. He was portrayed as a small ruthless man who made martyrs of the Anglos that day at the Alamo. There were 187 Anglos killed and 600 Mexicans killed.

After the film was over, the dark shades on the windows were lifted and the lights turned on. I felt uncomfortable as I looked around the auditorium. . . . I avoided the looks of my friends because I couldn't understand my confused feelings. I felt sick. I was painfully aware of being Mexican. And it wouldn't be the last time that year.

. . . I walked back quietly until my friend Linda ran up to me. Linda's family was from Monterrey [Mexico] and she didn't live far from me.

"Gloria, who did you cheer for?" she asked in a quiet tone. I looked at her and looked around before I answered. "The Mexicans," I replied softly. Linda shrieked, "Me too." . . .

When we were back in the classroom, the teacher stood in front of the room directly beneath the banner. She was a slender, very white woman with sky blue eyes. . . . "The men at the Alamo were heroes—true Texans," she said in a soft voice. . . .

"Yeah. And Texas is for Texans," yelled a voice at the back of the classroom. . . . Even though I was born in Mexico, I had been a Texan since I was two years old. I am also a Mexican. Joe pushed me from behind and uttered a chant of mockery. My friend José across the aisle slugged him. He gestured to Joe with his fists to leave me alone. . . . Angry and confused, I put my head down so that no one could see me cry.

Source: Gloria López-Stafford, *A Place in El Paso: A Mexican American Childhood* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 3–5.

Document 25.9

"Why No Chinese American Delinquents?" 1955

Asian Americans had faced a great deal of prejudice from whites, especially on the West Coast. However, after World War II, the hard work and striving of Japanese and Chinese Americans to succeed reversed the traditional prejudices of many white Americans toward them, especially the younger generation. As the following magazine article shows, whereas teenagers in general were a source of concern for older Americans, Chinese teenagers were perceived as a "model minority."

Not long ago, a New York City judge wrote to the *New York Times* saying that not in the seventeen years he had been on the bench had a Chinese-American teen-ager been brought before him on a juvenile-delinquency charge. The judge said that he queried his colleagues on the matter and they, too, expressed their astonishment. They said that not one of the estimated 10,000

Chinese-American teenagers, to their knowledge, had ever been haled into court on a depredation, narcotics, speeding, burglary, vandalism, stickup, purse-snatching or mugging accusation. A check with San Francisco, where there is a large colony of Chinese-Americans, tells the same story. The same holds true of Chicago, where the police report "excellent" behavior on the part of Chinese-American youngsters.

P. H. Chang, Chinese consul-general in New York City, was asked to comment on this warm and amazing return. He said simply, "I have heard this story many times from many judges. They tell me that none of our people are ever brought before them for juvenile delinquency. They were surprised, but I was not. Why?

"I will tell you why I think this is so. Filial piety, the love for parents, is a cardinal virtue my people have brought over from the China that was once free. A Chinese child, no matter where he lives, is brought up to recognize that he cannot shame his parents. To do so would relegate him to worse than oblivion, for his parents would disown him and he would be cast free and alone from our traditions that go back many, many centuries.

"Before a Chinese child makes a move, be stops to think what the reaction on his parents will be. Will they be proud or will they be ashamed? That is the sole question he asks himself. The answer comes readily, and thus he knows what is right and wrong.

"Above all other things, the Chinese teen-ager is anxious to please his parents before he pleases himself. Our family households work on the theory that the parents are wise and seasoned, and if the children follow the same course, they can do no wrong."

Today, there are some 100,000 Chinese-Americans in the United States, of whom 90 per cent live in New York City, Chicago and San Francisco. Most are small businessmen in the import trade who deal with their own people in their own communities. Most, no matter whether wealthy or poor, maintain a strict, family-style home. Mealtimes are ceremonial affairs which must be attended by every member of the family. Holidays are celebrated in family style. Schooling, the reverence for religion and decorum, plus reverence for elders and family tradition, are the prime movers in developing the child from infancy.

Source: "Why No Chinese American Delinquents? Maybe It's Traditional Respect for Parents," *Saturday Evening Post*, April 30, 1955, 12.

Interpret the Evidence

1. What information in these documents confirms commonly held beliefs about teenagers in the 1950s?
2. What information in these documents challenges the conventional wisdom about teenagers in the 1950s?
3. Compare the assumptions about adults and teenagers in Documents 25.5 and 25.9. How do they differ, either in tone or in content, from those written *by* teens (Documents 25.6 and 25.8)?
4. What do Documents 25.6 and 25.9 tell us about generational differences?
5. How much do these documents tell us about racial and ethnic differences among teenagers in the postwar era?

Put It in Context

How do these documents show the way teenagers shaped the larger post–World War II society?