

An Investigation of Southern Women in Southwest Florida and Their Suburban Houses

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The common perception of the American suburban experience as monolithic, stereotypically white and middle class existed prior to the advent of television. Nonetheless, the construction of a profoundly nostalgic view of the suburbs was created and aided through television. This view of the existence and encounters of the suburbs has entered popular understanding and become deeply embedded in the American consciousness through multiple re-runs of many different television shows. However, the daily lives of suburban women in the southern United States was markedly different. Many changes in architectural design and the American social system have been attributed to the elimination of household help. Although this occurred in Northern states, the system of inexpensive and easily obtainable household help, almost completely composed of African American women, remained in place in Southern states until the late 1960s and early 1970s. This resulted in significant differences in the post war years in these geographic areas. The suburban experience of the American South and the meetings it engendered was one of white women, their black women employees and children.

Six women who had lived in the Fort Myers/Labelle area of Florida during the 1950s and 1960s were interviewed. Their ages ranged from early seventies to mid-eighties. All the women were asked similar questions, such as "Which door did you use to enter someone else's house?" "When invited to another woman's home, where did you have morning coffee?" "On social occasions involving couples, which rooms were used for entertaining?" "When only women were present, which rooms did they use?" Their answers were almost identical. In the course of questions and answers, all women offered spontaneous opinions and statements. These

women all requested anonymity but in the course of conversation it was obvious these women derived much pleasure in reminiscing about this period of their lives.

Interviews with these women would indicate their ability to delegate daily household tasks plus childcare allowed them to create lives and interests outside their homes. This is in direct contrast to the experience of other 1950s housewives. Although their identities and social status was in large measure derived from their husbands, they did not report feelings of dissatisfaction or a lack of fulfillment. For the most part, upper class and upper middle class suburban white women in Fort Myers remembered the 1950s and early 1960s with nostalgia and affection.

Their suburban houses, which were typically built during the Land Boom period, functioned as major facilitators for their social status. The living room and dining room were the two most important social spaces within the house for women. The living room was referred to as the "front" room, never "parlor" and was used as a formal space for entertaining guests. However, the dining room had special significance as it was used to display items, which most strongly indicated social status. At minimum it was expected the dining room should hold a dining room table, a breakfront or china cabinet and a sideboard. The items on display conveyed signifiers as to these women's identities and social status. For example, as was explained by a woman who was an active participant in this social sphere, a five-piece sterling silver tea service was an expected minimum on display. A tea service purchased by or for the women of the house indicated a lesser status than one that had been inherited, regardless of age or value. A tea service inherited through the woman's

family conveyed more status on the woman than one inherited through her husband's family. Another woman who had also been an active participant in this social world commented on china patterns and services and suggested that during this period a woman should have had multiple complete sets of china (ranging in service from eight to twelve) to fully participate in entertaining (the word participate has been used, although "compete" might be more accurate). This also presumes a corresponding collection of flatware, stemware, serving pieces and table linens. Although typically not centrally located within the plan of the house, the dining room and its corresponding storage services were a central dynamic of the house and social rank. Fifty years later, these women could remember their dining rooms and past parties, luncheons and teas with astonishing detail. These elaborate social functions and rituals were predicated on the existence of household help.

Fort Myers and Labelle, as was the South, were rigidly segregated. Household help did not "live-in" but instead commuted from the section of the city or town reserved for blacks. The commute for these black women contained its own social codes. One of these white women explained that it was understood a hierarchical status was attached. Commute by bus conveyed the least status; commute via a taxi was next while the most status was implied if the black woman was driven in a private car by her employer to work and back home. While discussing their relationships with their black employees, a strikingly similar story was told by a number of these women. Each woman related it as a personal anecdote with relevant personal details but the basic structure of these stories contained enough parallels that it began to appear apocryphal. In its rudimentary details, these women told of being dressed and ready to leave for a social function. Their black household help noticed they were not wearing stockings, and in various ways informed their white employers this was *not correct attire* for a public appearance and suggested they "go back upstairs and put on stockings". Each woman then stated they did as told. These stories are interesting to compare to historical data on the social conditions and treatment of African Americans in the pre-Civil rights era. There were rare occasions when white women would enter these women's homes, although on occasion the white children would spend the day at the black woman's house,

as part of childcare. A white woman told of visiting an employee who was extremely ill at home. It was her opinion that if the black woman had been well, she would not have been taken to a bedroom but the black woman was so ill she did not truly comprehend the circumstances. Of note was her reaction to the poverty of the house, "The windows only had paper." She stated how staggered she was by the conditions and yet this woman arrived at her home always clean and well groomed. The bewilderment still reads nearly fifty years later. It is difficult to reconcile these attitudes and recollections with newspaper and historical accounts of the period. The poverty, discrimination and sub-standard housing endured by the African American community were common knowledge. A profession of ignorance of these conditions speaks volumes of the privileged and insulated lives these women enjoyed.

Social clubs were another important feature of this suburban life. Each social club had different rules for membership. In all cases social clubs used their members' homes to varying degrees for meetings and socializing. One woman, a long time member of different local organizations, suggested a means to maintain control within these clubs was through members' houses. Membership in the Fort Myers Community Club was nominally open to all whites. In actual fact, social class and financial assets played a role in acceptance. This woman suggested prestigious social functions and meetings were held in each other's houses by invitation only as a means to exclude the unwanted. Different opinions were offered about functions held in private clubs. Some women did not report being made to feel unwelcome by male membership at either the Country Club or Yacht Club. Other women reported that male membership did make them feel uncomfortable at these clubs and that this was a factor in holding social events in their homes. In any case, significant social events and important club meetings were held in private houses. Women who did not have a suitable home or adequate paraphernalia entertained at one of the private clubs. Interviews with women indicate that during this time period a suburban woman's social rank and influence was instituted in her house.

Inconsistencies exist as to attitudes towards the influx of families from the north and their influences which began in the late 1960s. Northern women, typically referred to as "Yankee women," were variously described by some as "arrogant," "off-putting,"

and "condescending." Other women remembered that the Northern arrivals felt excluded and unaccepted. Interviews reveal cultural differences and tensions between these groups of women. Of note, is a comment that "Yankee women did not want black maids" and only hired other white women for household help. It is impossible to determine whether this occurred or was even true. It was suggested this was either a Northern prejudice against blacks in their homes or a refusal to participate in this system. Women from the north were regarded as informal and were noted for their preference for *open floor plan houses*. One woman interviewed categorized this lack of definition of spaces as part of the "Yankee I can go anywhere or do anything I please without thinking about it". This was not meant as a compliment. One of the women in a separate comment on segregation stated, "We all knew our boundaries. There was a structure that integration destroyed." These boundaries and this structure was clearly a part of their lives and were manifested in their homes.

The suburban social season was attuned to the semi-tropical climate and operated in high gear from October to March and was designed to accommodate a pre-air-conditioned Florida. Most women remembered the installation of window units in the late 1950s with the expectation of central air conditioning being standard by the mid 1960s. Although air-conditioning was a welcome addition, many women regretted the loss or sensation of openness as the windows and doors were closed to seal the house against air loss. Women's formal entertaining was done in the front rooms and dining room but the women interviewed all reported that informal and intimate gatherings with friends, morning coffee for example, was usually shared in a screened room or porch room at the side or back of the house. This space was usually referred to as a Florida room, sun porch or screen porch, usually offering a view of the children's play area.

The kitchen was a defined separate space. Typically, the black women would be given a space within the kitchen, usually a part of a broom closet or cupboard to store their personal items during the working day. They generally shared the same food as the white family but ate their meals separately in the kitchen.

Guests at formal functions, strangers and salespeople used the front door. Houses had a back door

and occasionally, a second "side" door. The side door was most common in houses built during the 1920s and was typically associated with a *porte cochere*. Friends on informal occasions, household help and children used either of these entrances. Women could not recall special emphasis being placed on the means of egress, either side door or back door, used by their black employees.

Daily household help in present day Labelle, Florida is no longer routinely provided by African American women. Unfortunately, the growth of the citrus industry has enabled another group of people to experience routine discrimination. Hispanic (typically Mexican and Central American Indian) men and women are part of an invisible underclass that now provides menial labor in southwest Florida. In particular these Hispanic women are not even afforded the limited and marginal status once offered to black women.

In a continuation of interviews, six women, ages ranging from mid thirties to late forties, were questioned about their use of their suburban homes and current entertaining patterns and habits. Four women were Southerners, two were from Northern states but one was married into a local family of long standing. All the women were asked similar questions, such as "Which door to you use to enter someone else's home?" "When invited to another woman's home, where did you have morning coffee?" "On social occasions involving couples, which rooms are used for entertaining?" "When only women are present, which rooms do they use?" The answers were almost identical with the exception of the woman who was recently arrived to Labelle and the South. In the course of questions and answers, all women offered additional statements and opinions, which were recorded and have been included as relevant.

All the women, with the exception of the recent arrival, answered they used the front door when invited for a special occasion to a friend's home otherwise; they used the back door at friend's houses. The front door was used by strangers or when visiting someone who was not a close friend. One woman noted the proliferation of garage door entrances and said she felt rude going through the garage. Accessing a house through the back door was an indicator of friendship. The recent arrival said she used whatever door she noticed others using.

The elimination of the back door from the suburban houses presently being built in southwest Florida has also eliminated a small social custom denoting friendship between Southern women.

When questioned about sharing coffee, most women had to stop and think. A few remembered their mothers having had a spot within their homes, for example a screened porch, and then realized they generally only had a small nook within the kitchen. On occasion, they remembered having coffee in a living room but these were typically more formal events or not with women they knew well. Generally, most women in modern suburban houses do not have a dedicated space within the house, as the previous generations had, to talk with close friends.

These women did not have daily household help, although many did have weekly help. It was suggested the lack of daily help was not so much a function of racial, social or economic changes but changes in the payroll tax law. Employers are now responsible for payment of payroll taxes that has meant additional paperwork and expense. The women who had grown up in the pre-Civil Rights era of the South remembered growing up with at least one black servant. Comments were associated with the ambivalence of this generation. One woman stated she still corresponded with the black woman who had worked for her family and helped to bring her up. Although the women remembered these African American women from their childhood with fondness, there was also present the adult realization of the inequities of that period. There were comments that were part of a recurring theme, many of these women felt it important to explain life in the South as something people had to be born and brought up in to comprehend. Hispanic women typically do not work in Labelle homes. Language was suggested as a barrier to this employment. However, one woman averred these Hispanic women have no knowledge of American customs and consequently would be of little help in a household situation. Women of this generation function much as suburban women in other parts of the United States, without daily domestic help.

The barbecue remains the Southern social event of choice. Collective answers reported that barbecue is a man's domain, although women are responsible for preparation of all other foods. Barbecues typically take place on the screened area at the back

of the house, around the pool if the family has one. Usually a series of tables are set up in this area and food is eaten and served there. Some reported that genders mixed and others related that men sat together while women congregated in other areas. On only the rarest occasions did men and women use the dining room for entertaining. However, when women entertain each other in groups they use the dining room and living room.

While not unique to the South, the system of southern social Sororities has remained strong. One of the women in the older group of women explained that it grew out of the South's agricultural organization. Men had opportunities to meet and socialize while women were left at a distance from one another on remotely located farms. The convention grew out of the quilting bees and sewing circles of the past century and formalized into the system of service based social sororities. The sororities are distinct from the fraternal sororities which operate at Universities and colleges. The Sorority is a semi-secret society in Labelle and it raises funds for a college scholarship presented annually to a local girl. Membership is by invitation and election only and as with any exclusive society, this engenders many different opinions and attitudes.

For some membership is much coveted and enjoyed, others have little positive feeling for such restricted organizations. Perceptions of the Sororities' influence are wide-ranging. One woman believed it was not possible to be elected to a local political office without their implicit support. Another woman stated "Only in their minds." All Sorority social and organizational meetings take place in their homes. Any gatherings for these women take place in their front rooms.

In Southern women's homes, when they gather exclusively with each other, they use their living rooms and dining rooms. The diminishment of these rooms in current suburban houses is a diminishment of spaces women have understood as their own. Most women noted that the custom of acknowledging the front rooms as a woman's domain remains in place. For some women, this is critical. One woman asserted that someone could be dropped from a social circle for attempting to exert authority in another woman's home. Although on a much-reduced basis, the women interviewed noted the continuing trend of displaying objects in the dining room. Although in many cases, the display has been reduced to

a single shelf rather than an entire glass fronted cabinet. One woman noted the amount of work, in cleaning and polishing, this sort of display required. She said she had her grandmother's silver, in a kitchen cupboard, "turning green as we speak."

The women were all aware of racial divisions and segregation. The new arrival to Labelle remarked on noticing the divisions in the spatial organization of Labelle. She noted that while racial divisions existed in other towns and cities, how clear and severe the segregation was in Labelle. She further extrapolated the existence of segregation to the lack of public facilities and public spaces for people to meet and gather together. Further, while all these women were prepared to be interviewed about practical uses of houses, only the condition of anonymity prompted them to make spontaneous statements about race.

For all these women, a distinguishing feature of Southerners and Southern life is the importance of good manners. The attitudes towards this attribute of Southern behavior cannot be underestimated or exaggerated. Each woman mentioned this characteristic and the value of being polite and well behaved in Southern society. It was variously explained using words such as, "gentility", "formality", "a properness", "looks slow and easy, but underneath you just know, it's an underlying foundation, just certain things you do and don't do." Southern behavior for both the older women

and women of this generation was expressed as an underlying formal structure that was not articulated verbally but was understood. In interviews with women of each generation the word "structure" was used to describe Southern social arrangements and conduct. However, this structure was understood to be implicit and tacit within the performance of the rituals of daily life. *This formality is as an integral part of Southern life and conditions expectations of standards of behavior in others.*

All the women interviewed responded that the great room is now the central room in the typical suburban house. The great room is generally the largest room in the house and literally occupies a central space within the floor plan. This room usually includes the largest television and the principal collection of media equipment and increasingly specialized furniture for watching films and television. The older women commented on the loss of openness as the houses were sealed for efficiency when homes were air-conditioned. The younger women have all grown up in sealed houses. The suburban houses now being built in southwest Florida are closed, sealed and offer privacy. They are isolated units and spaces within the house previously used for meetings and encounters, especially among women, are disappearing. These rooms have been subsumed by a space dominated by electronic media, where the sense of encounter is provided by a television.