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# The 1939-1940 New York World's Fair: Typical American Families Build Tomorrow

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THE 1939-1940 NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR:  
TYPICAL AMERICAN FAMILIES BUILD TOMORROW

BY

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HIST 485: Historical Research  
Dr. Jess Rigelhaupt  
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"I pledge..." [Signed Deborah B. Shepherd]

## ABSTRACT

The 1939-1940 New York World's Fair held a Typical American Family contest during its second season. The contest ran in newspapers all over the country, and the winning families spent a free week living at the Fair, enjoying the latest products by corporate exhibitors. Because winners were chosen either by reader votes or by local panels of judges, the families represent prevailing conceptions of the ideal American family. The convergence of the winning families with a profit-driven world's fair reveals how America's domestic ideology influenced mass consumerism, and how advertisers saw the family institution as both a target and a valuable marketing tool. In addition to examining consumerism and the American family, this paper will discuss the Typical American Family contest's connection to the individual and national identity crises triggered by machine-age anxieties and the instability of the Depression years.

During the second season of the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair, a typical American family from Memphis experienced a multimedia spectacle called Futurama.<sup>1</sup> Leaving the August heat behind, Mr. and Mrs. Morris and their two children filed into the General Motors Building and sat in separate chairs equipped with individual speakers. The seats began to revolve above detailed dioramas that envisioned an America twenty years in the future. Designer Norman Bel Geddes had transformed the country into a series of streamlined cities, spiked with high-rise buildings, refreshed by open greenways and fed by the busy arteries of an extensive highway system.<sup>2</sup> Hovering over the metropolitan wonderland, fully immersed in the future, the Morris family could forget the present and the past. To sixteen-year-old William Morris, Jr., the narrator's voice might have seemed meant for him alone, drawing him into the vision, making him part of this latest incarnation of Manifest Destiny.<sup>3</sup>

Since General Motors sponsored Futurama, the future ran on four wheels. Futurama was "a dramatic and memorable amusement ride during which fairgoers experienced a utopian vision of the future predominantly defined by the automobile."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Morris questionnaire, New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Manuscript and Archives Division, Manuscript Collection 2233, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Box 890, Folder 9, "PR1.2: Typical American Family Contest (1940)." To be cited in following footnotes as "New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box X, Folder X."

2. Laura Burd Schiavo, "Modern Design Goes Public: A Photo Essay," in *Designing Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s*, eds. Robert W. Rydell and Laura Burd Schiavo (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 123.

3. Most of the personal information about the winning families comes from questionnaires they filled out after their week at the Fair, to enter the National Typical American Family contest. Of the forty-eight families, only fourteen questionnaires were available to study for this essay. A blank questionnaire is attached as Appendix A.

4. Lisa D. Schrenk, "'Industry Applies:' Corporate Marketing at A Century of Progress," in *Designing Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s*, eds. Robert W. Rydell and Laura Burd Schiavo (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 36.

This blend of utopia and consumerism characterized the entire 1939-1940 New York World's Fair. With a firm belief in the positive aspects of industrial technology, the Fair proclaimed the tangible benefits of a consumer society. The Morrises visited many exhibits that projected these themes, but nothing captures the Fair's credo better than Futurama's conclusion. It depicted a two-level downtown intersection, with vehicular traffic scurrying beneath an elevated pedestrian thoroughfare. As they exited into the sunshine, the audience walked into a life-size version of that intersection, with sculptured buildings above their heads and the newest General Motors cars on the lower level.<sup>5</sup> Had the bemused visitors shrunk to enter the diorama, or had the diorama, the fantastic future, expanded to embrace them? As is usual with world's fairs, fantasy merged with reality. The world of tomorrow was already here. Young Morris, who wanted to be a lawyer, was so impressed that he listed Futurama among his favorite exhibits. So did his mother.<sup>6</sup>

Their enthusiasm for Futurama was typical. According to a May 1939 Gallup poll, Futurama was the Fair's most popular exhibit.<sup>7</sup> But then, being typical was supposed to be the Morrises' chief characteristic. They were one of the forty-eight families that won the Fair's Typical American Family contest, held in 1940. Winning families spent a week at the Fair free of charge, living on the Fairgrounds in fully furnished bungalows

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5. Robert Bennett, "Pop Goes the Future: Cultural Representations of the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair," in *Designing Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s*, eds. Robert W. Rydell and Laura Burd Schiavo (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 180.

6. Morris questionnaire, New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 890, Folder 9, "PR1.2 Typical American Family Contest (1940)."

7. Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 218.

complete with maid service. “A millionaire couldn’t live better,” said one winner.<sup>8</sup> Newspapers across the country sponsored the contests, and winning families were chosen either by readers’ votes or by committees of local officials.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the winners represented a consensus across the United States on how a typical American family looked and acted. Yet this set of families—white, middle-class, with a working father and a stay-at-home mother—represented a little over half of actual American households, as recorded in the 1930 census.<sup>10</sup> The forty-eight families embody an ideal. They represent what their neighbors hoped they were themselves, or what they wanted to become. During a time of national instability, the Typical American Family contest tapped into a reassuring national myth formed at the birth of the Industrial Age.

The winning families and the Fair converged in a consumer-saturated atmosphere. During their week-long vacation, the families were shepherded not only by contest officials but also by corporate sponsors. The Ford Motor Company provided transportation from their homes to the Fair and chauffeured them during their stay, so each family received a royal reception at the Ford pavilion—and was photographed with a Ford tractor.<sup>11</sup> Photographers posed the families enjoying Sears’ bungalow furnishings

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8. Page 4 of article by Mary Francis Adams, attached to letter to Joseph Upchurch from Marguerite Young, August 21, 1940, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 7, “Ford Motor Co.”

9. Letter to T.J. White, March 12, 1940, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 4, “General: District Representatives.”

10. U.S. Bureau of the Census, table 1, *Types of Families in the United States by Number of Gainful Workers, 1930*, prepared by the Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 1.

11. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 7, “Ford Motor Co.”

and the meals supplied by Swift.<sup>12</sup> The contest brought American families to the Fair not just as guests, but also as marketing tools and marketing targets. While communicating a utopian agenda involving technology, industry, and interdependence, the Fair exploited the concept of family to create a bigger market for consumable goods. The interaction between the Fair and the Typical American Family contest suggests several lines of inquiry, such as how marketers attempted to boost consumerism by reshaping the consumer's world view; the role of world's fairs in American culture; and the roots of the ideal American family myth. The Typical American Family contest was one avenue the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair used to both idealize the American family, and reinvent it in terms of a market-driven consumer society.

### **Tomorrow is Today at the Fair**

Spread out over a reclaimed trash dump in Flushing Meadows Park, the New York World's Fair opened on April 30, 1939.<sup>13</sup> The ancient ancestors of world exhibitions were the European medieval markets, held on a saint's feast day.<sup>14</sup> This modern Fair honored George Washington, arguably America's secular patron saint, since 1939 was the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his presidential inauguration in New York City. Washington surveyed the crowds in the form of a statue sixty-five feet high, larger than any other figurative statue on the Fairgrounds.<sup>15</sup> The nod to Washington was

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12. New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2119, Folders 11-12, "Families: Burdin (Florida)."

13. Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 2000), 92.

14. Thomas Hine, *I Want That! How We All Became Shoppers* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 56-57.

15. Bill Cotter, *The 1939-1940 New York World's Fair*, Images of America (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 9, 23.

perfunctory, because reviving New York City's economy was the real motivation.<sup>16</sup> Shortly after the Fair's incorporation in 1935, planners placed the emphasis on America's future, not its past. "Building the World of Tomorrow" became the Fair's theme, coined by a leading industrial designer named Walter Dorwin Teague and architect Robert Kohn, and symbolized by the streamlined aesthetic associated with futuristic utopias.<sup>17</sup>

Robert R. Macdonald, director of the Museum of the City of New York, argues in a 1996 essay that the Fair "left an indelible imprint on the American psyche." He writes, "What is most remembered about the Fair today ... are the images of a futuristic city encompassing the familiar and the fantastic."<sup>18</sup> Fair historian Bill Cotter calls it one of the most fondly remembered fairs, perhaps because of its "style, beauty and, most of all the optimistic outlook it offered for the future."<sup>19</sup> The Fair may not have made money—in fact, it ended up costing \$18.7 million—but its lack of financial success was not unusual in the history of world exhibitions.<sup>20</sup> "Nearly all world's fairs lose money," writes Ed Tyng, who was commissioned by the World's Fair Corporation to write an official retrospective. Even so, Tyng says, world's fairs pay for themselves by introducing new industrial and scientific developments, and by stimulating public acceptance of advancing technology.<sup>21</sup> This Depression-era fair, where the home television debuted and people could make long-distance telephone calls, succeeded in this

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16. Susman, 215.

17. Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, 91.

18. Robert R. Macdonald, introduction, in *Drawing the Future: Design Drawings for the 1939 New York World's Fair*, (New York: Museum of the City of New York, 1996), 5.

19. Cotter, 7.

20. Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, 96.

21. Ed Tyng, *Making a World's Fair* (New York: Vantage Press, 1958), 114.



regard. At a time when people were losing jobs because of increased mechanization, the Fair's exhibits reimagined the machine as mankind's benefactor. One method of relieving the fear of technology was to use symbols and traditions from America's past to shape Fairgoers' vision of the future. The Typical American Family contest was part of this strategy.

To understand the interplay of the Typical American Family contest with the Fair, it is necessary to convey the Fair's ideology, which can be found in the theme of the first season, "Building the World of Tomorrow." The most obvious characteristic of this theme is its optimism. A sense of faith and expectancy permeates the phrase. In essence, it said that, despite ten years of Depression, and despite the escalating European war, tomorrow would come in all its endless possibilities. The world of tomorrow would be orderly, clean, and prosperous, based on an urban infrastructure. Domestic and community harmony would be tomorrow's hallmark, made possible by science and technology.

Beneath its almost defiant confidence, the Fair's theme has several layers of meaning. First, it expressed the planners' belief that science, technology, and architecture could create a harmonious society. Robert Bennett explains, "Everywhere fairgoers went, they encountered diverse demonstrations of the fair's quasi-religious faith in modern architecture, techno-rational urban planning, and progressive highway engineering. ... many of these exhibits either implicitly or explicitly suggested that rebuilding American cities would produce broader social benefits such as reducing pollution and crime or promoting greater social harmony and personal happiness."<sup>22</sup>

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22. Bennett, 178.

A second layer of meaning in the Fair's theme was the idea of unity implied by the word "build." Building anything requires faith in the future. Building also suggests a conscious effort by individuals and, in this case, the wider worlds of communities, states and nations. The concept of interdependence played a major role in shaping the Fair's ideology.<sup>23</sup> Interdependence characterized the modern world. Fairgoers watched Mrs. Modern order an entire house—from the foundation to the dining room table and the evening meal on it—to be delivered in one day. Such rapid acquisition of life's necessities required the efforts of thousands of people all over the world.<sup>24</sup> The fact that the Fair illustrated interdependence via the accumulation of material possessions reveals the centrality of consumerism in building the world of tomorrow. On a personal level, interdependence meant that each person needed to connect with his or her family, and with their neighbors. Here again, the Fair's message invoked consumption, this time by suggesting that technology would give working people more leisure time to establish these vital emotional connections. To build, then, implied unity not only among men, but unity between man and machine. In this context, the machine was not the eater of souls depicted in Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film, *Modern Times*; it was the facilitator of amity

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23. Stanley Appelbaum, *The New York World's Fair, 1939/1940 in 155 Photographs by Richard Wurts and Others* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977), xii. Morris Dickstein explores Depression-era popular culture in *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009); for his analysis of interdependence, see pages 523-524.

24. Joseph P. Cusker, "The World of Tomorrow: Science, Culture and Community at the New York World's Fair," in *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World's Fair 1939/40*, ed. Sara Blackburn (New York: The Queens Museum; New York/London: New York University Press, 1980), 8.

and prosperity.<sup>25</sup> Participating in modern interdependence meant accepting technology as a force for social good.

Accepting the machine was another facet of the Fair's ideology, and so the third and most seminal meaning of the Fair's theme sought to reconcile two contradictory points of view about the machine age. Americans were deeply unsettled by technology, regarding it as an apocalyptic beast that would consume humanity, but which also produced goods that enriched their lives. To manufacturers and industrialists—the Fair's exhibitors—machines increased profits by putting more consumer goods on the market at a lower cost to themselves. Caught between soothing the skittish American consumer and appeasing some of America's largest corporations, such as Ford and Westinghouse, Fair planners sought universal appeal by linking science and technology with tomorrow's ease and convenience. The tantalizing consumer goods displayed in the exhibits symbolized the machine's benevolent aspect; by purchasing the appliances, cars, and clothing they wanted, the consumer no longer felt alienated by the technology that produced them. The streamlining that characterized buildings, vehicles and everyday products during this era not only stylized the Fair, it boosted the Fair's consumerist agenda.<sup>26</sup> Essayist Eugene Santomasso writes, "The Fair visitor was to be thrust into the full-blown Age of Consumerism and the Age of the Machine. The most prominent features of these were streamlined form, fluorescent lighting, the automobile, and the roadway. It was their

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25. Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times*, special ed. DVD (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video and MK2 S.A., 2003).

26. For an analysis of consumerism and industrial design during the Depression, see Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company LLC, 1999), 204.

potential, the planners believed, that would transform and elevate American daily life.”<sup>27</sup> According to the authors of *Art Deco Style*, “The curved, almost organic aesthetic of the ‘machine age’ was in fact a stylistic device to minimize fear and suspicion of the machine as much as a revolutionary expression of speed.”<sup>28</sup>

In addition to trying to tempt Depression-scarred Fairgoers into thinking like consumers again, planners and exhibitors faced a phenomenon called cultural lag. Sociologist William Fielding Ogburn coined the phrase in the 1920s to explain the tension that afflicts modern societies when technological advances outstrip people’s ability to absorb them. Introducing material culture, such as the telephone and the automobile, into daily life requires an adjustment in the values, beliefs and institutions that make up nonmaterial culture. In periods of rapid scientific progress, the adjustment gap widens.<sup>29</sup> Cultural lag ripples through private lives as well as public institutions. Philosopher Georg Simmel’s 1950 essay on modern urban life is applicable to the Depression-era cultural lag. Simmel says, “... in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technology ... the personality, so to speak, cannot maintain itself under its impact.” The individual has become “a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality and value....”<sup>30</sup> Because, like all world’s fairs, this one focused on materialism, it brought the latest technological

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27. Eugene A. Santomaso, “The Design of Reason: Architecture and Planning at the 1939-40 New York World’s Fair,” in *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World’s Fair 1939/40*, ed. Sara Blackburn (New York: The Queens Museum; New York/London: New York University Press, 1980), 29.

28. Bevis Hillier, and Stephen Escritt, *Art Deco Style* (London: Phaidon Press, Ltd., 1997), 90.

29. Michael Hughes, and Carolyn J. Kroehler, *Sociology, the Core*. 8th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008) 435.

30. Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *Seeing Ourselves: Classic, Contemporary and Cross-Cultural Readings in Sociology*, eds. John J. Macionis, and Nijole V. Benokraitis (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1989), 406.

advances to the public's attention, and it did so in an environment of fun and fantasy in which progress was not threatening, but exhilarating. Describing the impact of cultural lag on the Fair, historian Joseph Cusker says Fair planners sought to narrow the adjustment gap by reinforcing the relationship between the swift current of technological progress, and improved homes, communities, and cultural expression.<sup>31</sup>

The Fair's ideology addressed the cultural lag from another direction that helps explain the Typical American Family contest. In the 1930s, the notion of cultural lag was widely discussed, and the concept of a usable past seemed to provide a remedy.<sup>32</sup> Cusker describes the usable past approach as "the search for a uniquely American culture that would integrate its best traditions with its machine environment."<sup>33</sup> As a country, America seemed to be suffering a severe identity crisis, stemming from cultural lag and exacerbated by the Depression's instability. Lewis Mumford, an influential historian of technology who sat on the Fair's Board of Design, was among contemporary cultural critics, writers and sociologists who sought a strong national identity by tying machine-age progress into American literature, folklore, art, music and architecture.<sup>34</sup> According to historian Warren I. Susman, one of the most influential movements of the 1930s was the effort "to find, characterize, and adapt to an American Way of Life as distinguished from the material achievements (and the failures) of an American industrial civilization."<sup>35</sup> By conforming to a mythical ideal family, the Typical American Family

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31. Cusker, 12.

32. Susman, 157.

33. Cusker, 11.

34. Ibid.

35. Susman, 156, 213.

winner exemplified a usable past with which the public could identify. Seeing these families enjoying the labor-saving devices produced by machines, other Americans could imagine themselves doing the same. This would build a bridge from the past, through the present, and into the future. The contest therefore represents one way Americans tried to adapt to rapid societal changes and technological advances. A letter from the *Hartford Times* (Connecticut) reveals the era's fascination with finding and imitating the average American. The newspaper participated in the Fair's Typical American Family contest because, "Last year [1939] we ran a Typical Father contest which was extremely successful and created a great deal of interest in this whole section. The father selected certainly was an ideal [A]merican father if there ever was one."<sup>36</sup>

To burnish the machine's metallic gleam with a glow of nostalgia, the Fair referenced usable American traditions, retooling the ideals of home, family, and the American Dream in terms of merchandising. In a 1939 promotional film, *The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair*, a trio of mother, daughter and granddaughter tour the Westinghouse Building.<sup>37</sup> The older woman is the ideal grandmother, sweet-faced and comfortably plump. An earlier scene has established how much her family relishes her cooking. Now the three women stop to admire a display of new kitchen appliances. Instead of scorning the new-fangled gadgets, Grandmother applauds them, exclaiming, "It's a paradise. No one who hasn't cooked over a woodstove by the light of a kerosene lamp can really appreciate what it all means." She likens housework to slavery. "If there

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36. Letter to Joseph Upchurch, March 11, 1940, New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 3, "PR1.2: General Correspondence."

37. Note that "Middleton" references "Middletown," a "typical" American town (actually Muncie, IN) studied by sociologists Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd in the 1920s and 1930s. They published their field research in two influential books, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (1935).

was one thing a woman in my day never had enough of, it was time. That's why I like electrical engineers. They signed *my* Emancipation Proclamation.” (There is unintended irony here, for Grandmother is assisted at home by a black woman modeled on Aunt Jemima.)<sup>38</sup> Here is a traditional figure of family authority, putting her seal of approval on modern technology. When this living link to the past steps cheerfully into the future, she bridges the cultural gap and takes everyone with her, blessed by her wisdom and foresight.

The stylistic and ideological heart of the Fair was the Theme Center. The Trylon and the Perisphere, which together made up the Theme Center, became the Fair's icons. Towering above the other structures, these simple geometric shapes perfectly embodied the Fair's ideology of modernity. Santomaso says their “striking modernity ... was effective because unadorned basic shapes are associated with stripping away the superfluous in order to get at the essence—a synonym for the modern age of the machine.”<sup>39</sup> Inside the Perisphere, which measured 180 feet in diameter, was the premier expression of the Fair's pro-science, utopian stance, the exhibit Democracity. Designed by Henry Dreyfuss, Democracity was an enormous diorama depicting America in 2039. Several suburban Pleasantvilles and light-industrial Millvilles connected, via superhighways, to the urban Centertron. Like Futurama, Democracity was a multimedia spectacle. During the six-minute show, day changed to night, a choir of voices swelled, and “the specter of one thousand marching people (presumably in defense of democracy)

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38. *The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair*, directed by Robert R. Snody, Audio Productions, Inc., 1939, on *The 1939 New York World's Fair*, DVD, PRS, 2010.

39. Santomaso, 34.

was ... seen in the sky through an image projected on the ceiling.”<sup>40</sup> Fairgoers looked down upon this thrilling display from two circular moving sidewalks that surrounded the diorama. Fair historians write, “Visitors were transported from present reality into a cosmic sphere of future possibilities...”<sup>41</sup> Democracy was another bridge over the cultural gap, but the symmetry of its landscape exposed another endemic social gap. It was a middle- to upper-class world, with no room for regional or racial preferences. As art historian Francis V. O’Connor writes, “It seemed to deny the existence of the poor, the incompetent, and the racially and ethnically dispossessed along with that midden of industrial and human waste dumped at the edges of any lived-in city.”<sup>42</sup>

The past, the present and the future co-existed at the Fair. In that beautiful make-believe world, the present stimulated all the senses; severed from their real lives, Fairgoers surrendered eagerly to each moment. Then, exhibit after exhibit often used the past to highlight the brighter future promised by electricity, the telephone, or a new Chrysler. Much has been written about the Fair’s striking Beaux Art Moderne architecture; its importance here is that the style referenced the past, the present, and the future. Paradoxically, the futuristic style was not new to Fairgoers. Science fiction magazines and film had offered American audiences a streamlined future since the mid-1920s. Cover art on these magazines featured “colorful, eye-catching views of futuristic cities, colossal machines for world domination, and wildly improbable, streamlined

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40. Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, 94; Bennett, 180.

41. Santamasso, 33.

42. Francis V. O’Connor, “The Usable Future: The Role of Fantasy in the Promotion of a Consumer Society for Art,” in *Drawing the Future: Design Drawings for the 1939 New York World’s Fair*, (New York: Museum of the City of New York, 1996), 62.



flying fortresses” writes culture critic Norman Brosterman.<sup>43</sup> Some Fairgoers might have seen the movie *Things to Come* in 1938, set-dressed in the same futuristic style. An earlier silent movie, the classic *Metropolis*, “was highly influential as a paradigm of twentieth century futuristic imagery, with its soaring skyscrapers and Deco embellishments. ... From the nineteenth century on, writers of popular fiction and engineers of modern life were joined in symbiotic embrace—a give-and-take romance of dream and invention....”<sup>44</sup> The authors of *Art Deco Style* also note the relationship between the Depression and this distinctive look, saying that the futuristic streamlining of everyday products such as appliances, and of larger products such as cars, “were the symbols of a new post-Depression age that aspired to an almost science fiction aesthetic.”<sup>45</sup> Thanks to popular culture, Fairgoers found the future familiar.

The Fair’s design offered a visual clarity that industrial designers believed would define the American society of tomorrow, as well as settling fears about progress. Fairgoers were meant to connect the products and processes inside the buildings with the stark beauty of the buildings themselves and perceive, not a threat, but a strategy for graceful living. Moreover, science and technology was making such a life available to every American. Cusker writes, “From the Fair planners’ point of view, the elements for creating a new culture and designing an American way of life were already visible. The forms of modern aircraft, the construction of parkways and bridges, the shape of domestic and office appliances, experiments in housing and regional planning, were all

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43. Norman Brosterman, “Drawing the Future,” in *Drawing the Future: Design Drawings for the 1939 New York World’s Fair*, (New York: Museum of the City of New York, 1996), 11.

44. Brosterman, 11.

45. Hillier and Escritt, 84.

manifestations of the search for an American culture.”<sup>46</sup> In a speech to dedicate the Theme Center in 1939, Fair president Grover Whalen said, “How can mankind work and live in peace and harmony? How can life be made more secure, more comfortable, more significant, for the average man and woman? This Fair, your Fair, is determined to exert a social force and to launch a needed message.”<sup>47</sup>

By October 1939, the first season’s disappointing attendance forced Fair officials to make important decisions as they faced the May 1940 opening. According to the 1939 Gallup poll, of the Americans who did not come to the Fair, sixty-three percent felt they could not afford it, so admission was lowered from seventy-five cents to fifty cents.<sup>48</sup> Banker Harvey Dow Gibson replaced master promoter Grover Whalen as president, and made significant changes. The vaunting rhetoric about an ideal society was toned down in favor of a folksy, small-town carnival feel. Exhibits and amusements were retooled to appeal to broader tastes. A new outdoor stage show, *American Jubilee*, debuted in 1940, with a cast of three hundred depicting pivotal moments in American history.<sup>49</sup> The war in Europe affected the second season, reducing the number of foreign exhibits. The Soviet Pavilion became the American Common, where a bandstand hosted concerts. A new theme, “For Peace and Freedom,” replaced the protean “Building the World of Tomorrow.”<sup>50</sup> Overall, a more populist air pervaded the Fair’s second season, telescoping from a world-embracing social vision to one that emphasized America.

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46. Cusker, 12.

47. Tyng, 26.

48. Susman, 217, 226-227; Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, 95.

49. Cotter, 120.

50. Brosterman, 10.

The Typical American Family Contest fit the new scheme perfectly. Conducted through the newspapers, it generated reader interest and participation all over the country. The Fair, the newspapers, and the contest's corporate sponsors reaped tangible benefits through the free publicity, which began with the contest itself and continued through the season as the families arrived at the Fair. For example, the *Columbus Dispatch* reports that the contest "...happens to be the biggest good will promotion this newspaper has conducted in recent years. From those in the know, the contest had a greater pulling power than any other single promotion since 1907."<sup>51</sup> Rewards for the winning families, of course, were the free week at the Fair, including a chauffeured sightseeing trip from their homes to New York and back again. One contest satisfied many different expectations, which speaks to the power of world's fairs, the importance of the family as a consumption unit, and the widespread fascination with the average American.

### **Families Meet the Fair**

Who were the contest winners? According to the questionnaires and newspaper articles studied for this essay (see Appendix A for a sample questionnaire), they came from small towns, farms, and big cities. In a nation of immigrants, they were English-speaking, native-born Americans, in most cases dating back several generations. Although the questionnaire does not ask for race, photographs show that all the families were white. The husbands' occupations included postal workers, an insurance salesman, a mechanic for Boeing, an executive for Boy Scouts of America, a school bus driver, a couple of small business owners, and at least three farmers. The majority of the adults were in their early to mid-forties, with only a few years' difference between the ages of

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51. New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 11, "General: National Typical American Family Selection."

the wife and the husband. Children's ages ranged from barely three months to nineteen years old. There were a few children under the age of ten, but most of the winning couples had started their families during the mid- to late-1920s, when they themselves were in their early to mid-twenties. They may have waited to start a family until the male returned from World War I. Of the families studied, only one man's war service is confirmed, but their ages, and the fact that several men belonged to the American Legion, support the conclusion that more than one was a military veteran.

Despite the fact that the Depression forced many wives to work outside the home, a strong undercurrent of public disapproval accompanied this necessity.<sup>52</sup> Only two of the wives studied for this essay said they held jobs outside the home. Eva Blanche Woods of Utah, mother of two, earned \$650 a year as a registrar for graduate nurses. Lest anyone think this makes her a neglectful spouse or parent, she takes care to write on the questionnaire that she works part-time, at home. She earned a nursing degree in 1921, the year she married Herbert Woods, and it is reasonable to assume that she turned from a nursing career to become a full-time wife. It is interesting to note from her community activities, the associations to which she belongs, and the periodicals she reads, that she tries to remain current in her field. Nevertheless, she self-identifies primarily as "housewife" on the questionnaire. The other working wife was Olive Farmer, a substitute schoolteacher married to a Wisconsin truck driver. She, too, lists "housewife" as her primary occupation.<sup>53</sup>

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52. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 51-53.

53. New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 890, Folder 9, "PR1.2: Typical American Family Contest (1940)."

The contest results clearly communicate a national consensus on what made a family ideal. It was white and middle-class, comprising a father/wage-earner, a mother/housekeeper, and their children. With a few exceptions, the families enjoyed the benefits of urban living (such as electricity) even if they were small-town through and through. Either they were still dedicated to the land, or the father earned a living with a set of skills, not by pushing levers. They did not live in apartments, but in cottages or Colonials they either owned, had inherited, or expected to pay off in a few years. They owned a car and a radio. Their children were in school, achieving academic and social success. None were atheists or agnostics. The majority was Protestant; the Utah family was Mormon. Not only did they attend church services regularly, they were active members—they sang in the choir, and were Sunday school teachers or lay leaders. Likewise, every member of the family was a joiner. Fathers were in the Rotary Club, the PTA or on the town council. Wives belonged to garden or book clubs, and their children's extracurricular activities ranged from band to drama to sports, or they were Boy or Girl Scouts.

The Fair's contest officials did not dictate this uniformity. According to Joseph Upchurch, the contest's director, editors had a free hand in devising the contest rules and the standards for choosing the winners.<sup>54</sup> Many newspapers did not specify what traits they were seeking. That is illuminating because it starts from the notion that everybody, on a continent with significant regional differences, agrees on the qualities that make a family typically American. The typical American family, apparently, would be as recognizable as the Statue of Liberty. A second, and even more telling, assumption is that

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54. Letter to Howard G. Mayer, March 21, 1940, New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 4, "General: District Representatives."

there is only one acceptable version of Americanism. That version excluded blacks, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans, as well as single-parent households. As it turns out, the assumption was correct—the winning families are remarkably similar in lifestyle and even appearance. A photograph of multiple families looks like a family reunion.<sup>55</sup>

Some newspapers left it up to the readers to decide the characteristics of a typical family. Others, such as the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, developed a list for its judging panels to follow. J.M. North, Jr., explained to Upchurch how that newspaper handled the details. “...In this contest we had associated with us the West Texas Chamber of Commerce, the largest regional Chamber of Commerce in the United States. Separate contests were conducted in each of its ten areas and from the ten winners the Leathers family was chosen.”<sup>56</sup> Attached to the letter were the standards by which the contestants were appraised:

1. Longevity, permanency of residency in West Texas and Americanism of name and ancestors;
2. Typically West Texan in size, colorfulness and physical appearance;
3. Exemplifying in interests, work and environment the major economic resources, production, activities, and prevailing viewpoint of West Texas; and
4. Cultural, religious, civic and moral attainments that best exemplify the West Texas high and progressive standards.<sup>57</sup>

The Leathers family fit this criteria, for North concludes by assuring Upchurch, “They are fine people, typical in every respect of the citizenship that has built and is building Texas.”<sup>58</sup> The father, D.E. Leathers, was a rancher, tall, lanky, and a bit Lincolnesque in features. Photographs show him in a black suit, but he wears cowboy

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55. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2119, Folder 1, “Publicity.”

56. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 890, Folder 9, “PR1.2: Typical American Family Contest (1940).”

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

boots instead of dress shoes, and one pant leg is always hiked up to show off that classic Texas footwear. His son does the same.<sup>59</sup> (See Illustrations, page 41). The Leathers family wound up winning the National Typical American Family contest, chosen from among the forty-eight winning families by a panel of New York City officials.<sup>60</sup>

The contest aroused some criticism. The publisher of *The New York Times*, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, declined to sponsor both the Typical American Family contest and the National Typical American Family contest, saying it was “a bit beyond the pale for us.” Sulzberger adds a postscript, “I am wondering how long a ‘Typical family’ can remain typical in such an environment.”<sup>61</sup> Two months earlier, Sulzberger’s wife had condemned the contest in a letter to the chair of the National Advisory Committee on Women’s Participation, an ad hoc committee organized by the Fair. Her attitude toward publicity is interesting, given her husband’s occupation. Mrs. Sulzberger writes, “Frankly, I think this idea is fantastic and wasteful of the Fair’s funds. The families chosen will no doubt consider it a privilege, but to live at the Fair under the glare of publicity will be demoralizing, I am sure, and it will give them a notoriety that would be difficult for any family to live down. I also think that this plan would cheapen the

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59. “Leathers Family in Front of Car,” New York World's Fair 1939-1940 records, 1935-1945, bulk (1939-1940)/VIII. Promotion & Development Division/VIII.B. News Dissemination/VIII.B.6. Photographs /Typical American Family/L; digital ID 1685391; <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=1801420&imageID=1685391&word=Leathers&s=1&notworld=&d=&c=&f=&k=0&lWord=&lField=&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&sort=&total=228&num=0&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=1> (accessed November 8, 2011).

60. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2121, Folder 10, “Families: Leathers (Texas).”

61. Letter from Arthur Hays Sulzberger, April 19, 1940, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 11, “National Typical American Family Selection.”

atmosphere of the entire Fair.”<sup>62</sup> The committee chair forwarded her letter to the Fair’s representative and, given Mrs. Sulzberger’s probable influence on the editorial policy of *The New York Times*, Upchurch answers her with a lengthy explanation of the motives behind the contest. Mrs. Sulzberger’s reply reveals her class prejudice and stereotypical view of the world outside her social circle. “I appreciate your good intentions, and I suppose in every community there are people who like to be flagpole sitters or live at the Fair. ...it is easier to show people that homes are being constructed within the price of practically all groups without cluttering up the houses with people who are trying to live in them.”<sup>63</sup> Clearly, she thinks it is not the contest but the winners themselves who would “cheapen the atmosphere of the Fair,” presumably by reducing the FHA bungalows to squalor. One can almost hear the unspoken “with *those* people” when she talks about winners “cluttering up the houses.”

A New Yorker named James H. Shipley objected to the contest itself. He rebuked the World’s Fair Management, “There *is* no typical family and there is no sensible way of choosing one if there were—those who came might be subjected to ridicule and thousands would likely ask, ‘How did they happen to pick *them* out?’ What with the Down-East Yankee, the New York Jew, the Minnesota Norwegians, the Deep-South Negro, the F.F.Vs [First Families of Virginia], and the “Amerinds,’ you have a nice job on your hands....”<sup>64</sup>

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62. Letter from Mrs. Arthur H. Sulzberger to Mrs. Oswald B. Lord, March 22, 1940, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 3, “PR1.2: General Correspondence.”

63. Correspondence between Joseph Upchurch and Mrs. Arthur H. Sulzberger, April 11-12, 1940, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 3, “General Correspondence.”

64. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 890, Folder 11, “PR1.2: Typical American Family Contest—Criticisms (1940).”



What usable past were American newspaper readers and panels of judges drawing on when they chose these particular forty-eight families? The model of the ideal family first appears as a strong influence in American culture during the nineteenth century. The nature, roles and responsibilities of real American families are constantly evolving, and ever since colonial times, familial changes have usually been linked to economics and production. Naturally, families differed from region to region, reflecting religious and social as well as economic requirements. It is possible, however, to trace general changes that led to the American domestic ideology.<sup>65</sup> This ideology, this cult of domesticity, became so firmly internalized that it defined men's and women's view of themselves despite their circumstances.

The first root of the ideal-family myth, which began in the 1600s when America's economy was based on agriculture, is family interdependency. Parents and children worked closely together on the farm, even though some tasks were considered gender-specific. Two more roots of the myth appeared in colonial times. The first was the unquestioned authority of the father; the second was submissive obedience from the wife.<sup>66</sup> Yet another root of the myth had grown strong by the middle of the eighteenth century. Historians Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg write that, by the end of the eighteenth century the family "began to acquire new emotional significance as a place of peace and a repository of higher moral and spiritual values, a haven in a heartless world."<sup>67</sup>

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65. The following discussion refers to white families.

66. Judith Stacey, *Brave New Families* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1990), 7.

67. Steven Mintz, and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 20-23.

In the 1800s came the familial evolution that completed the ideal American family myth. Again, economics triggered the evolution in real American families. The Industrial Age recast family roles into separate and distinctly defined areas. The new factory- or office-driven lifestyle divided man and wife, truncating the time they spent together and changing the way each regarded the other's duties. Men and women began to inhabit separate spheres. Men left their families every day to enter the competitive economic sphere. Women remained at home within the domestic sphere, keeping house and caring for the children.<sup>68</sup>

As the productive roles of industrialized men and women solidified, society began to glorify the separate-sphere concept. Culturally created images of fatherhood, motherhood, and gender roles soon became viewed as “traditional, or even as biologically and theologically ordained,” writes Marilyn Dell Brady.<sup>69</sup> In Mintz and Kellogg's description of this cultural construction of family, the mythic family emerges. The model husband and father was solely responsible for earning the family's livelihood. Although his role in the household diminished, due to his daily absence, the father “had a duty to provide love and affection to his wife and moral and religious training to his children, and he had ultimate responsibility for putting down disobedience or disrespect on the part of his offspring.”<sup>70</sup> As for the ideal wife and mother, she was “expected to run an efficient household, provide a cultured atmosphere within the home, rear moral sons and daughters, display social grace on public occasions, and offer her husband emotional

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68. Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1982), 5-6.

69. Marilyn Dell Brady, “The New Model Middle-Class Family (1815-1930), in *American Families: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook*, eds. Joseph M. Hawes and Elizabeth I. Nybakken (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), 83.

70. Mintz and Kellogg, 54-55.

support.”<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, the home acquired almost magical properties. Men were increasingly thought to be contaminated by the ambition and struggle for power required in the economic sphere. The only way the husband could remain the family’s benevolent governor was through the wife, whose purity was untainted by the world. “...[T]here was a growing consensus that only women, through their uplifting influence over the home and children, could be a source of moral values and a counter-force to commercialism and self-interest.”<sup>72</sup>

Placing the myth’s origins in the context of a commercialized world’s fair, it is interesting to note the growing role of consumerism in mid-nineteenth century family life. In terms of domestic ideology, holidays were opportunities for family gathering and bonding. At the same time, Christmas became more commodified and Thanksgiving meals more lavish, requiring more food as well as more cooking utensils and serving ware. As parents focused more time and attention on their children, merchandizers began to produce toys and books for their entertainment and mental stimulation.<sup>73</sup>

The contest winners offer concrete proof that the ideal American family myth still exercised considerable influence on American culture. People’s desire, or need, to be perceived as having the ideal family qualities is also evident in responses to the contest itself. For instance, even though local newspapers ran the contest, some people wrote directly to the Fair and nominated their families. One letter reveals what traits were considered typical. A Detroit woman writes, “We have been married twenty years. Both

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71. Mintz and Kellogg, 53.

72. *Ibid.*, 55.

73. *Ibid.*, 49.

quite nice looking, neat, and young looking for our ages.” (He was forty, she was thirty-six.) The mythic family not only involved a long-lasting marriage such as theirs, it also included owning a home, which this couple does. Although they and their two sons had lived in the house for fourteen years, “it looks just like the new ones because we keep up with the times on improvements. In other words it’s a real home.” She might be reciting from an ideal helpmeet handbook when she describes herself in the domestic sphere. “I’m known as a grand hostess and a good cook. I also do all my own work and love it. My husband deserves all the credit because he is a grand person. ... We live on a budget. Have good taste and like nice things.” Likewise, her husband fits the ideal breadwinner and father image: “He holds a responsible position as credit manager for a furniture concern. He has worked for them twenty-one years.” They and their sons, “both grand boys.” do things as a family, another demand of the domestic ideology: “We all drive and play golf.” She concludes, “We are working to make a home for our children and their children to come home to and be proud we are their parents.”<sup>74</sup>

The characteristics highlighted in the Detroit letter—traditional gender roles, child centrality, family togetherness, an attractive home—are all present in the contest winners. These are also characteristics of the ideal mythic family, which means that, in the context of the Typical American Family contest, the words typical and ideal (or mythic) are interchangeable. The usable past represented by the winning families is a particular domestic arrangement created by economics, cultural influences, and societal pressures. Throughout the nation’s history, especially during crises such as the Depression,

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74. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 2, “General: Contestant Interest.”

nostalgia for a mythic ideal family seems to ease prevailing insecurities, even as it obscures the diversity of real families.

Sociologists, historians, and cultural critics agree that America does not see or understand its actual families. Even a cursory look at American life during the Depression undermines the myth. Job losses and wage reductions damaged a family's financial, social and emotional status, and each household coped differently. Often families were splintered, as men left home to find work and desperate parents sent children to custodial institutions or to live with relatives; some 200,000 children became homeless vagrants, completely separated from family life.<sup>75</sup> As couples wrestled with debt anxieties and lower living standards, America's divorce rate hit its highest mark in the mid-1930s, and many more couples split informally because they could not afford a divorce.<sup>76</sup>

The family myth swells and recedes in American social discourse, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, and it influences politics, economics, and education as well as the marketplace. Perhaps the explanation for its endurance lies in an essay about mythology by anthropologist Franz Boas. He finds one consistent trait in mythologies, "the idea that what happened once has determined the fate of the world."<sup>77</sup> In the context of the modern myth of the ideal family, the phoenix-like power of the American domestic

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75. Mintz and Kellogg, 136.

76. David E. Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004), 227.

77. Franz Boas, "Mythology and Folklore," in *General Anthropology*, ed. Franz Boas (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1938), 617.

ideology possibly rises from the subconscious belief that one perfect family can remake all other families in its own image.

Susman has suggested that the 1930s' search for the average person and the average family was a response to a national identity crisis.<sup>78</sup> The Depression's devastating impact on family life was another crucial factor driving that search. Most men regarded unemployment as a personal failure—an unfortunate legacy of America's rags-to-riches folklore in which the plucky hero pulls himself up by his own bootstraps. Male breadwinner guilt deepened when wives, whom many employees paid less than men, left the domestic sphere for an outside job.<sup>79</sup> A 1939 Gallup poll indicated that nearly 90 percent of the men surveyed believed that married women should not work outside the home. Both men and women believed that wives should contribute by spending money more wisely, or by doing such extra chores as making clothing or keeping a vegetable garden. Therefore, in addition to the friction it caused at home, wives with outside jobs had to endure public disapproval as well.<sup>80</sup> The shift in traditional domestic roles not only strained familial bonds, it further eroded personal identity. Susman describes middle-class America as “frightened and humiliated, sensing a lack of any order they understood in the world around them...”<sup>81</sup> Everything was topsy-turvy

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78. Quantifying “typical” and “average” also reflects the widespread impact of America's eugenics movement. Although a discussion of eugenics lies outside the scope of this study, it was a race-betterment philosophy that influenced America's laws, immigration policies, and education in the early twentieth century. Eugenics is tied to world's fairs by state fairs and small-town agricultural festivals, during which teams of eugenics advocates displayed charts with body measurements of people, and races, deemed either fit or unfit to reproduce. Many fairs held contests in which people were sorted and judged. Robert W. Rydell writes about eugenics, and its ties to world expositions, in his book *World of Fairs*.

79. Mintz, and Kellogg, 138-139.

80. May, 51-53.

81. Susman, 196.

inside the home, while outside, America's foundations seemed to be crumbling, and Europe was aflame with war.

Although Fair officials downplayed the war, in the second season the issue could not be avoided. Several of the winning families allude to it in interviews. For example, the Roberts family of Houston made nearly \$2,000 a year in the oil industry and started their family at the height of the Depression, but despite their financial stability, Mrs. R.J. Roberts' sense of security was fragile. Asked for her views on the future, she replied, "A year or two ago I felt my country and my family were secure. ... Now the things that seemed stable are no longer so—now I would do anything to keep my man and my boy out of war, but it seems sort of hopeless. My husband's in the oil industry, which would be first to feel a shock from the loss of world trade. It's like facing a dark wall."<sup>82</sup>

Despite undercurrents in the world and in their personal lives, the families reveled in the Fair. Near the end of her family's week, Elizabeth Burdin of Miami told *The New York World-Telegram*, "You can't imagine what this is like. Just like a dream where people hand you everything and say, 'There, take it.' I think we're the luckiest people in the world. Sometimes I'm sorry for the ones outside, walking around the Fair grounds."<sup>83</sup> The Burdins were one of the first two winning families to arrive at the Fair, in May 1940. Two winning families came every week through October. In addition to the extravaganza of the Fair itself, with its exhibits, stage shows, and the Coney-Island style amusements in the Great White Way, the families enjoyed first-class amenities. They were introduced

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82. Article by Mary Francis Adams attached to letter to Joseph Upchurch from Marguerite Young, Press Department, Ford Exposition, August 21, 1940, New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 7, "Ford Motor Co."

83. Frederick Woltman, "Typical American Family at World's Fair Resents Having Home Viewed as a Fishbowl," *New York World-Telegram*, May 18, 1940.

to the luxuries that awaited them when a chauffeured Ford sedan arrived at their front door to drive them across the country to the Fair. Along the way, they visited as many American landmarks as time allowed, and stayed in fine hotels—again, courtesy of the Ford Motor Company.<sup>84</sup> For many families, the cross-country trip rivaled the Fair as their best memory. Mrs. Carl Sanders and her farm family rode from Kansas, and she told the Ford publicist, “It makes you mighty proud of home, of your country, to see so many wonderful and beautiful things and so many people really interested in living.”<sup>85</sup>

Once in New York, their week officially started when Gibson ceremoniously handed them the keys and leases to their bungalows, and personally raised their state flags in their front yards. Each week, two families lived in two bungalows adjacent to one another on Rainbow Drive in the Fair’s Town of Tomorrow. The two families hailed from widely separated regions of the country, according to Fair president Harvey Dow Gibson’s desire for “the bringing together in neighborly friendship, representative families of far-flung sections of our nation, for interchange of ideas and ideals and better mutual understanding.”<sup>86</sup> In addition to seeing and doing everything at the Fair for free, the families toured New York City. Families who lucked into good weather cruised aboard Gibson’s personal yacht, the *Mystery*.<sup>87</sup> Before they left, Gibson gave the children

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84. Letter from Joseph Upchurch to W.F. Dagon, April 3, 1940, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 3, “General: Correspondence.”

85. Article by Mary Francis Adams attached to August 21, 1940 letter to Joseph Upchurch from Marguerite Young, Press Department, Ford Exposition, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 7, “Ford Motor Co.”

86. Press release to building trade publications, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 9, “General: House Construction and Disposal.”

87. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2119, Folder 2, “PR1.2: General: Schedules.”



parting gifts. Each boy got a baseball autographed by Babe Ruth, and each girl received a bracelet.<sup>88</sup>

Quite apart from the wonders of the Fair, living in the bungalows was, for at least one family, a sharp contrast with real life. The Kings were a farming family from Arkansas. Zelma King ran her household without electricity, although she did have a washing machine and a kerosene-powered refrigerator. Their bathroom at home is described as “partially equipped,” so the completely plumbed bungalow bathroom must have felt luxurious.<sup>89</sup> At home they listened to a battery-operated radio, whereas their Fair bungalow had a radio in the living room and one in each bedroom. Working their 160-acre farm consumed all of Fay King’s time and energies—he was the only husband among the winners who listed no hobbies and belonged to no outside organizations. Under “Recreation,” he writes, “None.” One wonders whether he managed to relax and enjoy what could have been the only vacation he had ever taken.<sup>90</sup>

Gibson had to walk a careful line in structuring the families’ time. On one hand, he had to respect and protect their privacy; on the other hand, contest managers and exhibitors were always looking for ways to tie the families into their advertisements. Each family signed waivers allowing them to be photographed and interviewed.<sup>91</sup> A draft press release on the bungalows’ ground-breaking has Gibson’s public views. “Gibson

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88. Memo from Joseph Upchurch to Leo Casey, May 22, 1940, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 10, “General: Memoranda.”

89. Letter to J.N. Heiskell, editor, *Arkansas Gazette*, August 15, 1940, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2121, Folder 9, “Families: King (Arkansas)”; New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 5, “Federal Housing Administration.”

90. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2121, Folder 9, “Families: King (Arkansas).”

91. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2124, Folder 4, “Families: Williams (Oklahoma).”

said it was no part of this program to make exhibits out of the visiting families,” the unnamed Fair publicist writes. “Once installed in the houses, they are free to come and go as they please and are expected to lead perfectly normal lives. ‘The sole idea,’ said Mr. Gibson, ‘is to give at least one family from various sections of the country an opportunity to enjoy the Fair without cost to itself.’”<sup>92</sup> In a form letter sent to participating newspapers, Upchurch said that the families’ enjoyment “will not be hampered by any fixed routine.”<sup>93</sup>

The reality is that the families were as much an exhibit as Elektro the robot in the Westinghouse building.<sup>94</sup> Although each family was treated with solicitude, they were celebrities on display. Photographers were on hand every Monday when the Ford sedans pulled up to the bungalows with that week’s family, snapping group shots as Gibson handed out keys and raised the state flags.<sup>95</sup> (See Illustrations.) The week’s agenda is filled with public appearances that were standard for each family, such as calling their hometown newspapers long distance, visiting their state exhibit (if there was one), receptions at the Ford and the Swift pavilions, and being televised at the RCA building.<sup>96</sup>

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92. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 3, “General: Correspondence.”

93. Letter from Joseph Upchurch, April 3, 1940, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 890, Folder 9, “PR1.2: Typical American Family Contest (1940).”

94. Cotter, 90.

95. “Williams Family Receiving Lease,” New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 records, 1935-1945, bulk (1939-1940)/VIII. Promotion & Development Division/VIII.B. News Dissemination/VIII.B.6. Photographs /Typical American Family/V-Z; digital ID 1685537; <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=1801759&imageID=1685537&word=Typical%20American%20Family%20Williams&s=1&notword=&d=&c=&f=&k=0&IWord=&lField=&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&total=4&num=0&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=1> (accessed November 8, 2011). See Illustrations, page 41 of this essay.

96. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2119, Folder 2, “General: Schedules.”

A film crew came right to the Petersen family's bungalow and filmed them live outside their front door; Fairgoers watch from behind the film cameras as if this was another exhibit.<sup>97</sup> The families took their responsibilities as Typical American Families seriously. People who had never been in the public eye were suddenly meeting executives, posing for photographs, and giving interviews, yet they pose and smile obligingly. At times, a cinematic charisma even shines through the artificiality. For example, a photo of the Spielman family of Washington, D.C., shows them in their bungalow, looking at *Family Circle* magazine. (See Illustrations.) Harry Spielman, a Patent Office employee, and his wife sit on the upholstered sofa with the magazines in their hands, while teens John and Mary look over their shoulders. Mr. Spielman is caught joking with his wife, and all four are grinning.<sup>98</sup> Although it was obviously posed, the moment seems spontaneous, the family perfectly at ease. The mutual affection evident in this photograph is yet another trait the winning families share, as shown by other family photographs.

Families wrote charming letters to Gibson and Upchurch, thanking them for their unflinching courtesy and saying, in essence, that the week would remain an unparalleled event in their lives. The Burnette family of Georgia writes, "After leaving your office at 10 o'clock last Monday, we felt as we imagine Cinderella must have, when her coach

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97. "Petersen Family Being Filmed," New York World's Fair 1939-1940 records, 1935-1945, bulk (1939-1940)./VIII. Promotion & Development Division/VIII.B. News Dissemination/VIII.B.6. Photographs/Typical American Family/N-P; digital ID 1685459; <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=1801587&imageID=1685459&word=Petersen&s=1&notword=&d=&c=&f=&k=0&lWord=&lField=&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&total=15&num=0&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=8> (accessed November 8, 2011).

98. "Spielman Family Reading *Family Circle*," New York World's Fair 1939-1940 records, 1935-1945, bulk (1939-1940)./VIII. Promotion & Development Division/VIII.B. News Dissemination/ VIII.B.6. Photographs/Typical American Family S-U; digital ID 1685509; <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=1801612&imageID=1685509&word=Spielman&s=1&notword=&d=&c=&f=&k=0&lWord=&lField=&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&total=5&num=0&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=3> (accessed November 8, 2011).

was changed to a pumpkin on the stroke of twelve.”<sup>99</sup> John Coleman of New Orleans tells Gibson, “It had always seemed to me that Aladdin’s Lamp was a myth until that week at the Fair.”<sup>100</sup> Mariam Maddison’s thank-you letter to Upchurch concluded, “Once more our deepest appreciation—and with it the hope that the coming years will find us as truly as typically American as your faith in us expressed.”<sup>101</sup>

One correspondence is worth noting at length, for its emotion and detail are characteristic of the winners’ Fair experience. Mrs. David Williams of Oklahoma wrote two letters to Upchurch during her family’s stay. Each letter is headed “At home in the Typical American Home.” On the Wednesday, midway through their week, she sat down at 11:30 p.m. to describe their experiences thus far. Her husband David loved Billy Rose’s show *Aquacade* because “he was thrilled beyond words to see Buster Crabbe.” The letter takes a sober turn when she talks about seeing the popular stage show *American Jubilee*. “Somehow the patriotic touch to it made us feel proud to be a part of America, in these war times, when our foreign neighbors are suffering in this horrible war forced upon them.” The letter is also filled with gratitude. “We are a family from a small town and have undergone many hardships—both financially and physically. For this reason, I believe that we are receiving so much more from your splendid hospitality than you might believe.” Mrs. Williams wrote the second letter on her last night in the bungalow, and makes a poignant confession. “Tomorrow, or rather since it’s now a new day, we say good-bye to our little home here. We shall miss it for we have been so happy

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99. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2119, Folder 4, “General: Thank You Letters.”

100. *Ibid.*

101. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 11, “General: National Typical American Family Selection.”

here. Honestly, this trip has given me a new inspiration and I believe that when I return, I shall be able to lick any depression.” Although she shares personal thoughts, Mrs.

Williams does not share her first name. The first letter closes with, “Sincerely, Mrs. David Williams, Typical American Family.” The second signature reads, “Sincerely, The Typical Oklahoma Wife, Mrs. David Williams.”<sup>102</sup>

Eventually, though, they all had to return home. In contrast to the Williams letter is one that reveals the grim realities outside the Fair’s bright and fragile bubble. The Cramer family of Syracuse, New York, spent the week of July 15 at the Fair. On July 25, they sent a handwritten thank-you to Gibson that reads, in part, “Our turkey business has brought so many disappointments this spring and early summer that it would have been impossible for us to take any kind of a vacation. Now, after our wonderful week at the fair, we have gained new strength and courage to face the remainder of the summer until Thanksgiving when we hope things will look brighter.”<sup>103</sup> Less than two months later, a conscience-stricken Alice Cramer writes Upchurch that their financial circumstances had deteriorated, and she fears that the information about home ownership on their questionnaire is misleading. She writes, “When we purchased the house, it was with the hope that within a year, our income from the turkey business would be increased to the extent that we would be able to carry it. However, the business has proved a great disappointment and instead of increasing our income has depleted it. Now, after managing by using our savings to hold on to it for two years, we are faced with the strong

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102. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2124, Folder 4, “Families: Williams (Oklahoma).”

103. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2119, Folder 4, “General: Thank You Letters.”

possibility of losing it.” In fact, their interest payment had been due July 1, barely two weeks before they came to the Fair; how heavily must that have weighed upon them, despite the Fair’s delights. The Cramers suffered the fate of many small-business owners in those years: “Mr. Cramer has given up hope of continuing the business and is trying to find a job,” Alice Cramer writes. The first note, written in the Fair’s glow, looks to the future with renewed hope. In the second letter, the hopeful note has vanished, but Alice Cramer holds onto the Fair like a talisman. “We are still thinking of our wonderful vacation and each time we finger thru [sic] the pictures brings back happy memories of a glorious week.”<sup>104</sup>

### **Families Boost Consumerism**

The winning families and the Fair converged in a marketplace atmosphere dedicated to exciting desire. A photograph of the Continental Baking Company building illustrates the relationship between the advertiser and the American consumer. Architects Skidmore & Owings and John Moss reproduced the playful Wonder Bread wrapper on the building’s exterior. In the foreground, a father, mother, and two children walk past, their attention caught by the colored circles so familiar from advertisements and grocery store aisles.<sup>105</sup> To capture the entire building, the shot is taken from a distance. Consequently, the people in front are small; faces are indistinguishable and, since most of the men wear hats and the women are in dresses or skirts, the tiny figures seem

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104. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 890, Folder 9, “PR1.2: Typical American Family Contest (1940).”

105. Paul M. Van Dort, *1939 New York World’s Fair Photo Collection* (Sparks, NV: Bear Printing & Publishing, 2002), 85.

interchangeable. The symbols are potent: faceless, miniscule consumers overshadowed by a product—an instantly recognizable icon reproduced on a scale worthy of a cathedral.

People who were either children or adult shoppers during the Depression might find this photograph reassuring, even if they cannot explain why. It captures two images associated with wholesome American life: the family, and Wonder Bread. An insightful advertising strategy connected the two, so that when consumers saw the dotted bread wrappers, they felt the same comfort they experienced at home with their families. Scholars have not been the only ones to realize the power of the mythic ideal family. Marketers rely on it, pitching to families by using families. In a way, the mythic family and mass consumption serve society in the same way. When the myth is ascendant in society, it represents what people hope their families are like—or, perhaps, how people want their peers to perceive them. The mythic family is a standard to be met, an example of how to be American. Likewise, mass consumption gives American families a common vision of how life should be lived.<sup>106</sup> This was true even in the Depression; few people had disposable income, but thanks to radio and magazine ads and the products they saw in the stores, they knew what they *should* buy. There in the ad was the average, the typical American family, a symbol to trust and a beacon to follow. For people struggling to rediscover their place and purpose, consumerism planted solid landmarks. Mass consumption and mythic families also shared another trait. They masked the racial and class inequalities among real American families. As Roland Marchand writes, “The

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106. Kyvig, 196.

illustrations in American advertising portrayed the ideals and aspirations of the system more accurately than its reality. They dramatized the American dream.”<sup>107</sup>

Although the Depression was the major contributor to America’s national identity crisis, another factor was at work. The personal loss of identity widened into a national phenomenon partly because, by the 1930s, mass culture had begun to standardize American life. As David Kyvig notes, “Evidence cropped up repeatedly that American activities and aspirations were becoming increasingly similar across the country.”<sup>108</sup> Advertising and consumerism created a growing commonality of social and material expectations, uniting people across the boundaries of urban and rural regions. Despite radio’s popularity, newspapers and magazines were the most commonly consulted information venues during the 1920s and 1930s, so print advertising reached a wide audience.<sup>109</sup> Thanks to the *Saturday Evening Post* (widely read among the contest winners), consumers in widely divergent regions were introduced almost simultaneously to the new General Electric refrigerator, and their husbands could admire the latest De Soto.<sup>110</sup> Another popular periodical, the *Woman’s Home Companion*, carried ads for the beauty products considered indispensable.<sup>111</sup> The homogenization of taste did not

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107. Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (London: University of California Press, 1985), xviii.

108. Kyvig., 187-188.

109. *Ibid.*, 190.

110. Richard E. Clear, *Old Magazine Advertisements, 1890-1950* (Paducah, KY: Collector Books, 2007), 135, 101.

111. *Ibid.*, 104.



exclude children; both *Boys' Life* and *American Boy* advertised electric trains and Boy Scout accessories.<sup>112</sup>

Standardized culture, added to the robust post-World War I economy, fueled mass consumption in the interwar years. Although America had been morphing into a marketplace economy since the late nineteenth century, Americans were still learning to live in a consumerist society. Cultural analyst Lizabeth Cohen writes that during the 1930s, women's organizations dedicated energy and resources to consumer issues such as food purity and product safety. Cohen quotes Dr. Kathryn McHale, who was at the time general director of the American Association of University Women. Dr. McHale told President Franklin Roosevelt, "There is no interest that is more fundamental than that of consumers. All residents of our nation are consumers in a large or limited way. No matter what our other interests, we have in common one function—that of consumption."<sup>113</sup>

The Typical American Family contest was designed to boost consumption. The Fair's own domestic ideology, touting home and family as the center of modern life, was exclusively communicated via consumer goods. Even when the families were tucked in their bungalows, sheltered from public view, they were still agents of consumerism, because the two bungalows were sites of conspicuous consumption. The bungalows were designed not just to house the families, but also to serve as living advertisements for the Federal Housing Administration, which sponsored the construction, as well as for the corporate sponsors who supplied paint, appliances and furnishings. (See Appendix B for a list of each bungalow's contents and amenities.) According to an FHA brochure about

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112. Richard E. Clear, *Old Magazine Advertisements, 1890-1950* (Paducah, KY: Collector Books, 2007), 107, 117.

113. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 34.

the two Fair bungalows, “Both homes are designed for family living, for family comfort ... and for the average family budget.”<sup>114</sup> The four-room model cost \$2,500 and the five-room model cost \$3,100. Financing on the FHA plan would mean monthly mortgage payments of, respectively, about fifteen dollars, and eighteen dollars. In a press release, Gibson connects the bungalows with the Fair’s 1940 theme, “For Peace and Freedom,” saying that the FHA homes “fulfill a vital need and serve a real and patriotic purpose. ... The families who come to live in them will return home to speak with intimate, first-hand knowledge of their comfort and low cost.”<sup>115</sup> According to Upchurch, articles about the families and the bungalows were slated to appear not only in building trade periodicals such as *Plumbing and Heating Journal*, and *American Builder*, but also in popular magazines such as *House Beautiful*.<sup>116</sup>

Publicity for the contest and the family visits was simply another method of tapping into American-family mythology to overcome Depression frugality and machine-age anxieties. If mass culture and consumerism helped create the national identity crisis, mass consumerism seemed to be the cure. The Typical American Family contest, tied so closely with consumerism, reveals how advertisers linked buying with a personal identity. The hidden message of the bungalows, the furnishings, and publicizing each winning family’s favorite exhibits, was that everyone could call their family typical—could find their American identity—if they bought the same products. “Participation in a culture of consumption was not only possible but also proper and, in fact, what others

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114. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 9, “General: House Construction and Disposal.”

115. New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 9, “General: House Construction and Disposal.”

116. Letter from Joseph Upchurch, Oct. 3, 1940, New York World’s Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2119, Folder 1, “General Publicity.”

were happily enjoying,” writes Kyvig. “Only personal flaw or failure kept consumption and its enjoyment out of reach.”<sup>117</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Effect of Timelessness**

When a utopian vision of the future and the commercial nature of a world’s fair converged with the Typical American Family contest, it created a powerful vortex of optimism and desire. Time itself altered. Winning the contest lifted families out of the present into the future, yet required them to play roles based on the past. By building a world of tomorrow in yesterday’s landfill, Fair planners enfolded Fairgoers in a perpetual fantasyland, where only *this* moment mattered. To make tomorrow seem less threatening, designers, promoters and advertisers selectively mined the past for reassuring images and values. Scientific and technological advances were transformed into non-threatening, excitingly streamlined consumer goods that would unite families, communities and nations. Given the promises made by the 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair, its two themes—“Building the World of Tomorrow” and “For Peace and Freedom”—can be read as a complete sentence, an offer to all American families of salvation through mass consumption.

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117. Kyvig, 188.

ILLUSTRATIONS<sup>118</sup>

## CONTEST WINNERS AT THE FAIR



**Figure 1. Leathers family (Texas)**



**Figure 2. Williams family (Oklahoma) receiving lease**

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118. Citations appear in the text upon first reference. Note the exposed cowboy boots and the Deluxe Ford V-8 sedan in the Leathers family photograph.



**Figure 3. Petersen family (Minnesota) being filmed**



**Figure 4. Spielman family (Washington, D.C.)**

## APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR SELECTING THE  
NATIONAL TYPICAL AMERICAN FAMILY<sup>119</sup>

Family Selected by (Name of Newspaper Sponsoring Contest)

Name of father: Age:

Name of mother: Age:

Names of children: (1) Age:

(2) Age:

Address:

Birthplace of father:

Birthplace of mother:

Birthplace of children: (1)

(2)

Tell briefly the origin of the family:

Occupation of father:

Occupation of mother:

Occupation of children: (1)

(2)

Home owner or tenant:

Type of home:

Value of home:

Average yearly income:

Any outside income:

Ambition of father:

Ambition of mother:

Ambitions of children: (1)

(2)

Church Affiliations:

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119. New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 890, Folder 9, "PR1.2: Typical American Family Contest (1940)."

## Social, fraternal and Welfare Organizations:

Father:

Mother:

Children: (1)

(2)

Own a Car?

What make?

What year?

Hobbies of father:

Hobbies of mother:

Hobbies of children: (1)

(2)

Books preferred:

Father:

Mother:

Children: (1)

(2)

Magazines preferred:

Father:

Mother:

Children: (1)

(2)

Favorite radio programs:

Father:

Mother:

Children: (1)

(2)

Recreation preferred:

Father:

Mother:

Children: (1)

(2)

What impressed you most enroute to the World's Fair of 1940 in N.Y.?

Father:

Mother:

Children: (1)

(2)

What impressed you most at the World's Fair of 1940 in N.Y.?

Father:

Mother:

Children: (1)

(2)

What impressed you most in N.Y.C.?

Father:

Mother:

Children: (1)

(2)



## APPENDIX B

FURNISHINGS OF THE TYPICAL AMERICAN FAMILY HOMES  
AT THE NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR, 1940<sup>120</sup>

**The \$2,500 Bungalow, 25 Rainbow Drive**

Four rooms—kitchenette, living room, two bedrooms—and a bathroom. Vestibule has linen closet. Closet in each bedroom. Radio in each bedroom. Bathroom, with linoleum floor, has tub and shower (Crane Co.). Hot water heat and domestic hot water system (Crane Co.). Venetian blinds and wallpaper throughout (Sears, Roebuck and Co.).

Furnishings supplied by Sears, Roebuck and Co.:

- Kitchenette: Gas range, gas refrigerator; sink, cabinets; utensils, flatware, dishes; various small appliances
- Living room: Rugs, drapes, furniture; radio; portable lamps
- Bedrooms: Rugs, drapes, furniture; bedside radios; lamps; bedding
- Bathroom: Hamper, scales; towels, bathmat, shower curtain

**The \$3,100 Bungalow, 31 Rainbow Drive**

Five rooms—kitchen, dinette, living room, two bedrooms—and a bathroom. Vestibule has linen closet. Closet in each bedroom. Radio in each bedroom. Bathroom has tub, shower, and tile floor. Hot water heat and domestic hot water system (Crane Co.). Venetian blinds and wallpaper throughout (Sears, Roebuck and Co.).

Furnishings supplied by Sears, Roebuck and Co.:

- Kitchen: Electric range, electric refrigerator; sink, cabinets; utensils, flatware, dishes; various small appliances
- Living room: Rugs, drapes, furniture; radio; portable lamps
- Bedrooms: Rugs, drapes, furniture; bedside radios; lamps; bedding
- Bathroom: Hamper, scales; towels, bathmat, shower curtain

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120. Letter to Joseph Upchurch, April 17, 1940, New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 9, "General: House Construction and Disposal"; press release to building trade publications, pp. 3-4, New York World's Fair 1939-1940 Incorporated Records, Box 2118, Folder 9, "General: House Construction and Disposal."

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