

Growing Up In Gaithersburg

Mothers

By Marien Helz



Nearly all mothers, when I was growing up in Gaithersburg, were *stay-at-home-moms*—well before the term was coined. Few women who happily occupy the position today have any concept of what the station entailed traditionally. They referred to themselves, in the 40's, 50's, and 60's, as housewives or homemakers, and the profession—which it truly was—grew out of that of *farm wife* when all but a small percent of the population were farmers. There were expectations by society, by their husbands, and far more important by themselves of what the honorable tradition entailed. If they were neglectful in their jobs, they could hide it from society, even from their husbands, but never from themselves.

The idea was generally accepted that the wife should have dinner ready when her husband stepped in the door at night—and it would be a hot dinner with all the food groups. There were no microwaves, so nothing was very fast. Homemakers had to learn how to time things so that the vegetables and meat would be ready simultaneously. They expected their homes to be neat when their husbands arrived: vacuuming and picking up would have been done. Dusting and window washing had been taken care of. Shopping was completed—without the aid of a car. That meant walking to the store with a stroller that had a carrier on back for groceries, and later when the children could walk that far or were old enough to stay home by themselves, wheeling a shopping cart made for carrying several bags of groceries. Frozen foods were few and freezers small, so shopping was done several times a week.

The laundry was done in an electric machine with a washing section and a spinning section. The cycles had to be moved by hand from one section to the other. Then the clothes were carried outside to be hung on the line to dry; then they were taken off the line, put back into baskets (much lighter to carry now that they were dry) and taken indoors to be ironed. Most things were ironed—no permanent press until the 60's. The homemaker spread newspapers on the floor to keep the clothes clean (no ink rubbed off in those days) and spent several hours each week ironing while the kids played nearby.

Many of those clothes, of course, were made by hand on the mother's portable Singer sewing machine.

Mothers would hardly ever ask the fathers to watch the children. They considered that to be their job, and they would pay the price of guilt if their husbands had to watch the children often. The exception was if they were going to a meeting. Men worked all day and rarely had time to join organizations other than professional ones. It was an important credit for most men to have a wife who participated in community affairs in their stead. Leonard Hoyle might be too busy to attend PTA meetings, but if Mrs. Leonard Hoyle were president of the PTA, that was a credit for her husband.

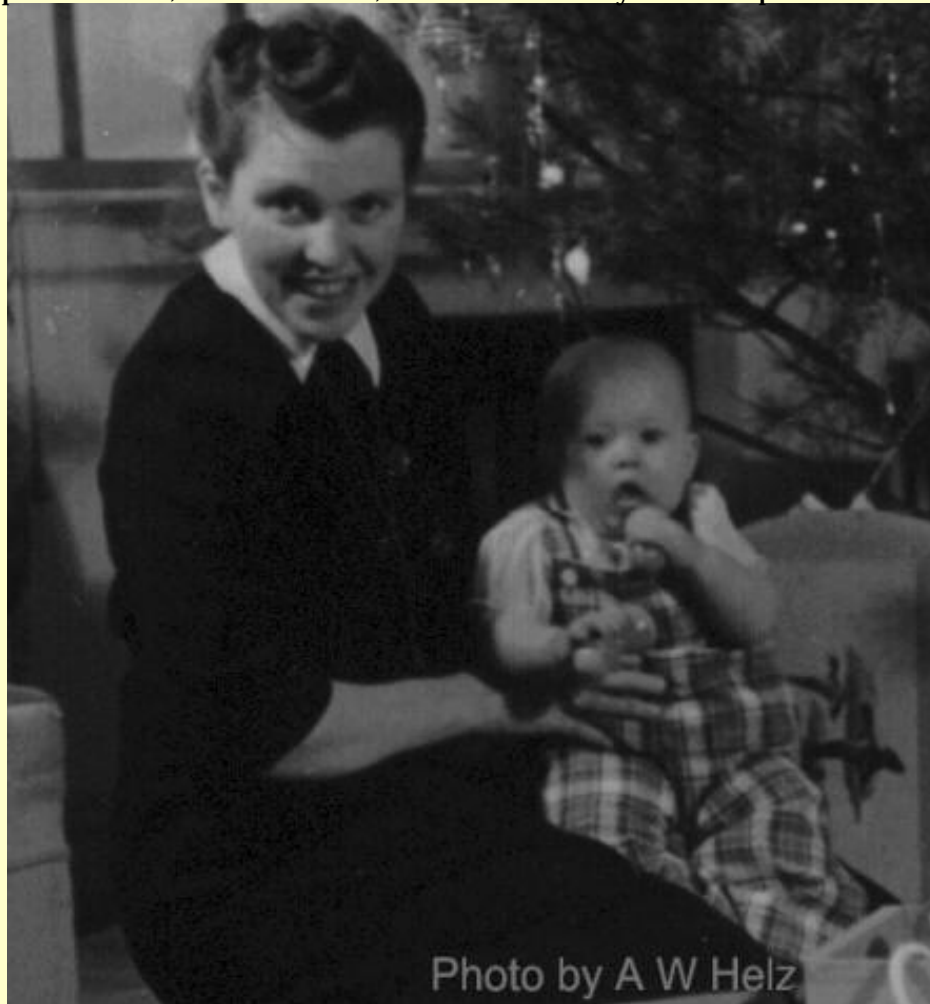


Photo by A W Helz

Even though my father was a scientist, not a businessman who definitely needed that kind of credit, my mother belonged to church committees, PTA committees, The League of Women Voters (a prestigious organization at the time), and political party committees. I remember my mother cooking dinners for hundreds of Lions Club members to raise money for the PTA. Mothers made pies, cakes, and cookies for bake sales to raise money for organizations and schools. While I was in junior high school, my mother made

a kind of strawberry pie for us and for these events that was a phenomenon. The problem my mother had, however, was that she could not tolerate tedium. She could not stand following a recipe, and when she had made something too many times, she could not bear to make it again. Years later, she would have no idea of how to make it.

The problem of tedium and isolation was an insoluble one for homemakers of the 50's and 60's. Their predecessors, the farm wives, were in an entirely different position. They were part of a small business.



They worked in the house with their daughters while their husbands and sons worked in the fields and barns and came in on a regular basis. There was constant interaction during the day, and there were fairs in which the expertise of their sewing, canning, and cooking was appraised and admired. The home and business were a unit with fairly equal participation and contribution. In the second half of the 20th century, most husbands tended to be very supportive of their wives and rarely complained unless a warm dinner was not ready when they came home, but both parties tended to feel that the husband's position was the crucial one because they earned the money that kept the family alive. Both marriage partners tended to subconsciously feel that the money was the husband's who was magnanimously sharing it with his wife.

Unlike the position of farmer and wife who shared similar needs for interaction, the 50's and 60's homemakers had opposite requirements from that of their husbands. The men were at work in typically competitive jobs. They wanted to come home, read the paper, and relax after a hectic day of interaction with co-workers. The women had been isolated all day doing monotonous jobs and supervising the activities of children. They craved conversation and interaction. The needs of the marriage partners were at odds.

This, their daughters observed. Daughters saw the isolation; they marked the tedium; and they withdrew as quickly as though they had touched the hot coils of a stove.

Pre-teen children of the time generally saw their mothers as forces who had to be obeyed. Teenagers tended to see them as nuisances who could often be ignored, but occasionally had to be placated. Mothers constantly uttered foolish platitudes like: *this will hurt me more than it will hurt you, this is for your own good, some day you will thank me for this, you have to clean your plate, children in China are starving* (and they got very angry when you replied, "Well, send this to them!").

You knew that life didn't depend on all their edicts. It was possible not to eat vegetables and survive quite well, thank you.

What you didn't know was that violating the edicts could go only so far. One can, in fact, not eat a balanced diet for days, even weeks, without harm. One can go without sufficient sleep for months. What you didn't know was that when you broke the rules too often and too long, the penalties were greater than visualized. The resultant imbalances brought illnesses which took longer than the violations to correct and were far more inconvenient than eating vegetables and sleeping on a regular schedule.

Mothers seemed irrelevant to adolescents. They nagged. They demanded. They were always there. I remember a neighbor asking me where I was going to college, and upon learning that it was far away responding, "But won't you miss your mother?"

The question seemed absurd to me—first, because in my family, we were all expected to go into the world to seek our fortunes just as in the fairy tales of bygone eras, and second, because—well—she was a mother: impossible to shake.



What we didn't know—children of that time—was that although our mothers would be always around, residing permanently in the core of our minds, we would marvel in years to come at how anyone could have been that constant, how anyone could have been that enduring and steadfast. We would wonder how those mothers could have been that dedicated, that sagacious, that devoted. We would miss them in ways we could have never even fathomed.