

# DOCUMENTING THE AMERICAN FAMILY

JANICE REIFF

Nearly ten years ago, historians “discovered” the family as a valid field of historical inquiry. During the ensuing years, two aspects of family history have combined to make it a popular topic. First, it provided issues interesting to students that also allowed them to do both extensive and meaningful primary research. Second, historians at last realized what psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists had long known — that the family was the fundamental unit of social organization. If they were to understand the dynamics of the societies they studied, they needed to understand this most basic institution.

Despite the relative newness of the field, historians of the family have systematically searched out and used a wide variety of sources to document their subject. From these records, researchers have been able to sketch the contours of the family’s function and significance in past times.

For the nineteenth and parts of the twentieth centuries, the most important of these sources have been the various censuses that federal, state and local governments have used to enumerate their inhabitants. Dedicated genealogists have, for decades, known the value of these censuses in tracing individual families back through the generations. With them they have located grandparents and great-grandparents, lost uncles and sometimes the secrets of the family’s “black sheep.” They have followed their families from Germany to New York to Pennsylvania and on to Illinois, and from jobs as teamsters and domestics to vocations as bankers and teachers. Through the censuses, those people interested in particular families or individuals have been able to reconstruct the lives of their subjects.

Now historians, by modifying and expanding the techniques of genealogists, are studying the experiences of many families within

the broader American population. These studies have focused on families in given communities, families of particular social, racial and ethnic groups, and even sample families for the entire nation. With them, scholars have been able to investigate the structure of the American family at given periods of time. We can now, as a result of existing research, make tentative statements regarding the historical evolution of the nuclear family and the changing nature of the extended family. Work in progress will allow us to speak decisively to such questions as the treatment of the aged in earlier America, at least as reflected by their status within families.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the manuscript census returns allow historians to investigate the actual living conditions of other specific family members like children, adolescents and women. Equally important, the censuses allow us to relate the family to broad historical trends—urbanization, industrialization and, more recently, modernization.<sup>2</sup>

Despite their extraordinary usefulness, censuses cannot present the complete picture of the family that many historians have tried to draw with them. Not all censuses are of equal quality. Not until 1900, for example, does the United States census include the information necessary to answer a question so basic as the absolute fertility of American women. Other federal and local enumerations do not provide data on relationship to head of household of persons reported, a mistake which the 1980 United States Census will repeat. Still others, such as school censuses, contain information only on the families of school-age children.<sup>3</sup> Even more critical for the use of the census for family studies is the fact that most censuses are taken on a given day at widely-spaced intervals. The federal censuses, for example, present a static picture of the family on one day, usually June 1, at ten-year intervals from 1790 to 1970. Necessarily such data severely restricts the study of changes within and the impact of specific events upon the family.

To overcome and circumvent this problem, historians have attempted to trace families and individuals through a series of censuses. Problems implicit in this approach have led scholars to use other records to reconstruct their families. Birth certificates and baptismal records tell when a child was born and to whom. From that information it is possible to answer such questions as the rate of marital fertility and pre-marital pregnancy. Other more imaginative historians have even utilized these records to document broader family ties by

isolating the friends and relatives after whom the children were named.<sup>4</sup> By connecting the birth records, family birth patterns emerge that are suggestive of women's work habits and contraceptive practices.

Marriage records, both religious and civil, provide insights into another phase of the individual's and family's life cycle. From them, one can determine at what age the man or woman chooses to wed. It is also possible to find out if a member of a particular ethnic group marries within or outside of his nationality or whether the daughters of working class families marry working class husbands. The marriage licenses, therefore, offer much in the way of an outline of how new families begin.

Just as families begin, so too do they end. Death provides family historians with a wide range of sources. Prominent among these are obituaries. In most obituaries, the deceased's entire family is listed, as well as a brief life history, his or her favorite clubs and pastimes, and places of previous residence. Death certificates and burial records by themselves are suggestive of certain facts of family life. For example, in early America, death was a common fact of life for families. Parents could not expect each of their children to survive to adulthood, nor could they anticipate living with each other until they reached a "ripe old age." Men and women, as a result, frequently experienced widowhood, remarriage and the joining of once-separate families.<sup>5</sup>

Dead men also left wills that were probated and inventoried. Their use for family history has been widely proven. From the provisions a man made for his widow and children, historians have been able to infer much about the authority of the head within the family and the socially prescribed obligations he had for his wife and offspring.<sup>6</sup> Inventories offer a look at the household wares and furniture a family owned and the home in which it carried out its daily life. They also allow the ambitious scholar to recreate such detail as the food a family ate and to chart, within some limitations, the social status which the family occupied.<sup>7</sup>

Each of the above vital records provides the opportunity to study in detail certain aspects of the families' existence. By combining all of them and incorporating data from such other sources as city directories, church membership lists, tax rolls, and town and county histories, historians have reconstituted lives of many families throughout

several generations. Reconstitutions like these have given a dynamic picture of family changes from America's earliest settlement. Yet, they too exclude basic and crucial aspects of the history of the American family.

Most of the above sources underrepresent minority groups, fail to include them altogether or distort the information provided on them. The early United States censuses for Seattle, Washington, for instance, list the native American population only as Indian Joe, Indian Charlie and Indian Sally. To remedy this situation, persons interested in minority families have turned to other sources. Most famous of these is the oral tradition tapped by Alex Haley to write his own family's history in *Roots*.<sup>8</sup> Herbert Gutman, in his study of the black American family, used such widely divergent sources as the records of the Freedman's Bureau, plantation records and the Archives of the American Missionary Association to revise significantly the image of the black family which has dominated academic thought for several decades.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to their limitations regarding certain groups within American society, the sources cited above fail to document the family's broader impact within society, both in the social and economic spheres. Except for elite groups, we have little sense as to what family connections meant for entry into jobs or communities or whether families served as a primary conduit for social contact and even social activity. Employment records for certain companies are beginning to be used to show both how family ties introduced individuals to a job and how the family, through its other needs, influenced the time they spent on the job.<sup>10</sup> Dun and Bradstreet archival records, for example, have been used to outline the financial support systems members of families gave to each other and to show the strength of family business ties.<sup>11</sup> Title insurance records provide similar data on home buying. Even bank compilations of savings account activities can be used to suggest the priorities a family had in spending the fruits of its labors.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the family's social aspects can be explored through church and club records. Church holdings not only document vital events such as baptism, confirmation, marriage and death, but also offer insights into familial participation in religious activities and the role of the church in maintaining family bonds. Club records allow family networks to be isolated and studied for their impact on marriage

and residence patterns. Activity logs for such groups as the PTA or earlier parents' clubs clearly illustrate how family relationships can and do influence social relationships in the larger community.

While all of these sources do point to various aspects of family life and activity, few of them can speak to the actual attitudes and emotions individuals had toward their families. To explore that domain, we need to turn to a totally different type of source. For more recent years, one has the option of asking persons to describe their experiences. Oral histories have provided historians glimpses into past meanings of family life which no other sources can afford. In certain instances, it has been possible to extend the period of reminiscences back beyond persons no longer living through previously recorded conversations like the WPA slave narratives or through stories passed from one generation to another. A second avenue for studying attitudes toward the family lies in public opinion polls that have survived throughout the twentieth century. In them, Gallup, Roper, Harris and other more obscure pollsters asked men and women how they felt about family roles and needs.<sup>13</sup> Interviews conducted by sociologists from the 1920s on offer the same kinds of information on the meaning of the family.

It is in this realm that the "traditional" historical sources have great value. Letters and diaries spell out day-by-day family experiences and put them in their own precise context. They also describe family ties that censuses and related documents cannot show. A diary can explain summers spent at the home of grandparents or uncles or discuss a surrogate family network wherein close friends or neighbors become "Uncle Joe and Aunt Jane" to children without nearby relatives.<sup>14</sup> Popular novels of various periods also present a picture of the ideal family life. How-to books from *Godey's Lady's Book* to Spock's *Baby and Child Care* explained to generations of Americans how to achieve that ideal. Family historians need these sources as much as they need those sources which are easily and frequently quantified.

This brief paper on documenting the American family has, I hope, accomplished two things. First, it should have provided a quick summary of sources now used by historians to research the topic. More importantly, it ought to suggest the potential for family history hidden in sources one might not immediately consider. As the family is the basic social institution of our society, its influence does pervade

all aspects of our lives, both in the past and in the present. To document its history, then, we need to have records from all aspects of life — from home to work to school. As they are located and saved, the task of writing the history of the American family will become easier and more fruitful.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Research underway on NIA grant, Aging in America: A Demographic History, 1880-1900, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.
2. Modernization has recently become quite popular for historians of the family. A session at the 1977 Social Science History Association meeting held in October dealt exclusively with that topic.
3. Howard Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), uses school censuses as one important source.
4. Daniel Scott Smith, "Child-naming Patterns and Family Structure Change: Hingham, Massachusetts, 1640-1880," unpublished paper presented at the Clark University Conference on the Family, Social Structure, and Social Change, 1972.
5. Richard Jensen, comments presented at the 1975 Bicentennial Perspectives on the Family conference, Seattle, Washington.
6. Daniel Scott Smith, "Population, Family and Society in Hingham, Massachusetts, 1635-1880," unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1972.
7. Sarah F. McMahon, "The American Diet, 1850," dissertation in progress, Brandeis University.
8. Alex Haley, *Roots* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1976).
9. Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).
10. Tamara K. Hareven, "Family Time and Industrial Time: Family and Work in a Planned Corporation Town, 1900-1924," *Journal of Urban History*, I (May 1975), 365-389.
11. Clyde and Sally Griffen, "Family and Business in a Small City: Poughkeepsie, New York, 1850-1880," *Journal of Urban History*, I (May 1975), 316-338.
12. Stephen Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964).
13. D'Ann M. Campb ell, "Women at War: The American Home Front in the 1940s," dissertation in progress, University of North Carolina.
14. McMahon, *op. cit.*

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