**1950s America Illustrative Notes**

1. You can complete this assignment by either using Google Docs. or pencil/paper. You can choose to work with a partner if you like and share the Google Doc.

2. Read through each topic on the attached pages.

3. For each topic, copy-paste using Google images or draw a COLORED medium-size picture in the center of the page that is reflective of the 1950s topic.

3. Around the outside of the picture, NEATLY type or write bullet point notes IN YOUR WORDS on the topic.

4. Each illustrative note drawing is on half of a page & titled with the named topic from the attached pages.

5. Print out illustrative notes and secure into spiral.

Example

1950s: Television



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**The 1950s: The “Idolized” American Family**

In American memory, the postwar 1950s have acquired an idyllic luster. Reruns of 1950s TV shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* leave today's viewers with an impression of unadulterated family bliss. Social expectations of the 1950s focused on an orderly, stereotypical, conformed society following rules and obeying authority.

New middle-class families of postwar America became suburban families. Eighty-five percent of new homes were in the suburbs. Suburbs offered affordable single-family homes with good schools, congenial neighbors, and a safe, healthy environment for the children. This population shift is sometimes referred to as the “white flight” – middle class white Americans leaving cities for suburbs taking with them precious economic resources. The economic gap between the middle and poor class grew wider as a result of more Americans living in the suburbs. Inner cities lost people, businesses and also property and income taxes the middle-class paid. City governments could no longer afford to properly maintain or improve schools, public transport and police/fire departments all contributing to the deterioration of inner cities.

New families of the postwar era created a baby boom resulting in the largest generation in United States’ history. The birth rate soared from 1946 to 1964 and peaked in 1957, when a baby was born every 7 seconds. Overall, more than 76 million Americans were part of the baby boom generation.

Popular culture (magazines, movies and television) glorified women’s role as suburban homemakers and social expectations looked to women leaving their jobs and to stay at home and have babies and take care of the home. Those that did work were discriminated against in the workplace with limited job opportunities and paid less than men.

Overindulged middle-class suburban children grew up in a spoiled and conformed society. Child-focused parents wanted to protect them from what they experienced and made up for the hardships from their past by spoiling their children. As teenagers, some wanted to rebel against the rigid conformity, yet the spoiled teens were limited with what they could complain about. They used “improper” dress to express their rebellion in the form of clothes, haircut and makeup.

The silver screen also had a hand in promoting rebellious behavior in teens. Perhaps the most controversial and influential of these films is 1955's Rebel without a Cause - not set amid inner-urban decay, but rather in an affluent suburb. The film, starring James Dean, was particularly scandalous because the main characters "came from good families."

**1950s: Politics**

Elected president by big margins in 1952 and 1956, Dwight D. Eisenhower enjoyed immense popularity. President Eisenhower's campaign slogan "I Like Ike" epitomized the swell spirit that defined American culture in the 1950s. Ike, as he was nicknamed, walked a middle road between the two major parties. A pragmatic, centrist Republican, President Eisenhower believed in smaller government, fiscal conservatism, and a businesslike administration sometimes referred as “Modern Republicanism.” He expanded social security, raised the minimum wage, and backed a huge public works program, the Federal Highway Act of 1956 which provided funds for the Interstate Highway System. He also cut defense spending and presided over an era of peace and prosperity.

**1950s: Economy**

Between 1945 and 1960, the median family income almost doubled. Rising income doubled the size of the middle class. The growth of the middle class reflected full employment, new job opportunities, and federal spending which contributed mightily to widespread prosperity.

As productivity rose, the labor market changed. Fewer people held blue-collar jobs (industrial/manufacturing jobs; manual labor), and more did white-collar work which includes sales work, office/clerical work, professional, managerial and government jobs. Businesses expanded by swallowing weaker competitors and companies offering similar products or services in many locations, known as franchises, increased. White-collar businesses began to standardize their employees, using “The Organization Man” as a basis looking for conforming white men. Business would give personality tests to potential applicants to make sure they “fit in” and promoted a team mentality. Employees were rewarded for teamwork, cooperation and loyalty to the company.

**1950s: Consumerism**

A booming economy helped shape the blissful retrospective view of the 1950s. Conveniences that had been toys for the upper classes such as fancy refrigerators, range-top ovens, convertible automobiles, and televisions became middle-class staples. The pent-up demand for consumer goods unleashed after the Great Depression and World War II sustained itself through the 1950s. Consumers chose among a wealth of new products, many developed from wartime innovations. Manufacturers urged new models on consumers through mass advertisements where Americans were truly living in a material world. Americans acquired more debt as a result as credit and installment plans made buying easier.

Television played a pivotal role in consumption – both as a product to be bought and a mode of selling more products. Nearly two-thirds of American households had a television. In 1955, the adorable cartoon characters Snap, Crackle, and Pop leapt around and sang about the joys of eating Rice Krispies. Advertisements were an integral part of television viewing just as they are today. With more and more American families owning televisions, manufacturers now had a new way to sell their products, and the television commercial was born. By late 1948, over 900 companies had bought television broadcast time for advertising. By 1950, sponsors were leaving radio for television at an unstoppable rate. Cartoon characters were common in '50s commercials, representing everything from lightbulbs to beer. In 1950, Coca-Cola launched its first television ad campaign using a combination of animation and celebrity endorsement. By 1954, television commercials were the leading advertising medium in America. A child-centered and family-focused society brought new consumer products. New toys such as Barbie, Play-Doh, Mr. Potato Head, Plastic Army Men, Match Box Cars, Hula Hoops, and Tonka Troops found their ways onto store shelves and suburban homes. Boardgames such as Yahtzee, Clue, Life and Risk became popular. Dr. Seus’s The Cat in the Hat, Lord of the Flies and 3-D comics made their debut in the 1950s.

With a boom in the automobile industry and surbanization creating urban sprawl, automobiles increased in demand and popularity. More Americans were driving for work and pleasure. American businesses and culture embraced the increased popularity of automobiles and created car-centered businesses like drive-ins, road-side motels, and fast food restaurants. The abundance of cheap gasoline, easy credit terms and extensive advertising contributed to the “automania” of the 1950s. The federal government also responded to this automania by building the interstate highway system.

**1950s: Television**

Perhaps no phenomenon shaped American life in the 1950s more than television. During the 1950s, few households owned more than one television, so viewing became a shared family event. Even the American diet was transformed with the advent of the TV dinner, first introduced in 1954. The first nationwide color television broadcast came on January 1, 1954, when NBC beamed the Tournament of Roses Parade across America.

Americans loved situation comedies — sitcoms. In the 1950s, *I Love Lucy* topped the ratings charts. The show broke new ground by including a Cuban-American character Ricky Ricardo, played by Desi Arnaz. Shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, created an ideal view of what the perfect family life should look like.

Television's idea of a perfect family was a briefcase-toting white-collar professional father who left daily for work and was the stern, advice wielding parent; and a pearls-wearing, nurturing housewife who raised their mischievous boys and obedient girls. With rare exceptions (such as Desi Arnaz) members of minorities rarely appeared on television in the 1950s. Television programming of the 1950s portrayed a middle-class homogeneous society and reinforced traditional roles for women and conformity to a narrow, conservative view of America. Television programs promoted racial discrimination and sexism by omitting references to poverty, showing stereotypical roles for husbands and wives and minorities rarely appeared.

Westerns were also television programming that garnered large audiences and popularity in the 1950s. *The Lone Ranger* was one of the earliest TV Westerns, making the jump from radio in 1941. America's fascination with the Wild West was nothing new, but television brought Western heroes into American homes and turned that fascination into a love affair. Cowboys and lawmen such as Hopalong Cassidy, Wyatt Earp, and the Cisco Kid galloped across televisions every night drawing a clear line between the good guys and the bad guys; and good always triumphed in the end.

Understanding that the population of children was in greater numbers than in previous generations due to the baby boom, television producers developed a host of children's programs. Shows such as *The Mickey Mouse Club* and *Howdy Doody*, entertained millions of American tykes. The *Roy Rogers Show* and *Rin Tin Tin* brought the West to children on Saturday mornings, and Davy Crockett coonskin caps became popular fashion items.

Because most early television was live, the producers of major networks found their talent among experienced people already familiar with live performances: vaudeville. Television and vaudeville combined to create the form of entertainment known as the variety show. Variety shows were made up of short acts — musical numbers, comedy sketches, animal tricks, etc. — usually centered around an engaging host. Former vaudevillians Bob Hope, Milton Berle, and Ed Wynn all hosted popular programs. But perhaps no variety program had a greater effect on American culture than *The Ed Sullivan Show*, which ran for 23 years. By securing rock-and-roll acts, Sullivan won the adolescent market, truly making the variety show a whole-family event. Ed Sullivan's variety show provided entertainment ranging from the rock and roll of the Rolling Stones to the goofy hijinks of trained animals.

**1950s: Music**

The roots of rock and roll lay in African American blues and gospel. As the Great Migration brought many African Americans to the cities of the north, the sounds of rhythm and blues attracted suburban teens. Due to segregation and racist attitudes, however, none of the greatest artists of the genre could get much airplay. Disc jockey Alan Freed began a rhythm-and-blues show on a Cleveland radio station. Soon the audience grew and grew, and Freed coined the term "rock and roll." Record producers saw the market potential and began to search for a white artist who could capture the African American sound.

Rock and roll records were banned from many radio stations and hundreds of schools. But the masses spoke louder. Rock and roll was everything the suburban 1950s were not. While parents of the decade were listening to Frank Sinatra and big bands, their children were moving to a new beat. In fact, to the horror of the older generation, their children were twisting, thrusting, bumping, and grinding to the sounds of rock and roll. This generation of youth was much larger than any in recent memory, and the prosperity of the era gave them money to spend on records and phonographs. Rock and roll sent shockwaves across America. A generation of young teenagers collectively rebelled against the music their parents loved and challenged conformity. In general, the older generation loathed rock and roll. Appalled by the new styles of dance the movement evoked, churches proclaimed it Satan's music while others used the music as a scapegoat for why some youth were rebelling. By the end of the decade, the phenomenon of rock and roll helped define the difference between youth and adulthood.

After the door to rock and roll acceptance was opened, African American performers such as Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, and Little Richard began to enjoy broad success, as well. The new genre of music was considered the first integrated racial setting. White performers such as Buddy Holly and Jerry Lee Lewis also found artistic freedom and commercial success. Elvis Presley brought rock-and-roll music to the masses during the 1950s with hits such as "Love Me Tender" and "Heartbreak Hotel."