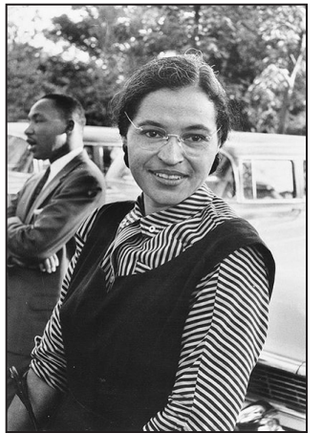
## The nuclear age and the nuclear family

The "fab '50s" are often thought of as a carefree era, but thought-provoking, anxiety-producing, and world changing events and trends contributed to the cultural reality, too.

This was the nuclear era with the then-Soviet Union starting the space race by launching the satellite "Sputnik I" into orbit. NASA was formed in the 1950s, and even home decor, architecture, and product design reflected a preoccupation with rockets, planets, and other worlds beyond the eye's view. Nuclear testing on a large scale and perceived nuclear threats from rival governments were enough to cause thousands to create fallout shelters in their basements, or build underground bomb shelters in their back gardens.



In the United States, the early Civil Rights Movement and struggles over equality reached the United States Supreme Court. In 1954, the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka Kansas, et al* tore down the former legal basis for segregation of schools and other public places. In 1956 the Supreme Court ruled segregation on public transportation was unconstitutional as a result of Rosa Parks refusing to relinquish her seat on a bus, and the efforts of many others to bring attention to the injustice of prejudice. Struggles around the world including the Korean War, the Cuban Revolution, and the creation of North and South Vietnam from the former French Indo-China along with the de-colonization of Africa and the creation of new, distinct African nations made this a global era of change.

After many years of research conducted by various scientists, Dr. Jonas Salk's injection vaccine for the polio virus was announced and tested in 1955. In 1957 Dr. Albert Sabin's oral vaccine was tested, and by the early 1960s, both vaccines were in use to combat this devastating disease responsible for killing and crippling thousands. Soon after the vaccine was made available for use, the numbers of cases of the disease dropped rapidly in the United States, from approximately 35,000 in 1953, to 161 in 1961. Today, as a result of world-wide vaccination campaigns, it is thought to be eradicated except in only a very few developing countries.

Artists like Jackson Pollack and Willem de Koonig embraced modernism in their work. The Beat Generation, or beatniks as they were sometimes called, led by poets and authors like Jack Kerouac fueled the anti-establishment movement, producing works that are classics today. Many children's fantasy books published in the 1950s still resonate. The film developed from author Mary Norton's series *The Borrowers* has recently been released. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was first published in the 1950s. Today it is a classic piece of literature, and an iconic movie. Books of the era like the novella *Breakfast at Tiffany's* by Truman Capote and *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, a standard right-of-passage reading for teenagers and young adults, have timeless appeal. The magical stage musical creations of Rodgers and Hammerstein including *South Pacific* and the *King and I*, along with stage dramas like *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* have become old favorites for generations of theater-goers.

Technology, communication and culture merged with the proliferation of televisions in the home, and transistor radios made music and radio programming mobile. Former radio serials like *The Guiding Light* became television soap opera hits. Television variety shows like the *Ed Sullivan Show* introduced performers, personalities, and public figures to viewers like no radio program or newspaper had ever done before. The first coast-to-coast broadcast by television was a speech given by President Harry Truman, and color television became available in the 1950s, making the wonder-box even more intriguing.

The struggles in the greater world and the "ideal" world of your own home in the 1950s were quite a contrast. This "ideal" home life, as reflected in popular television shows and advertising copy, placed an emphasis on modernity, leisure, and happiness. Much of that advertising was focused on women and teens, two emerging focus demographics who were potential consumers of goods that might contribute to this idealized home life. The concept of the "ideal" woman/child/teen/family was a creation of this new media push.

In the perfect home everyone should strive for, the mother of the home (because every home should have one) was a perfectly coifed, beautifully dressed woman using the most modern appliances to clean her attractive home, and then serve up the latest homemade delights to her adoring family. Popular women's magazines of the day contained recipes featuring these key cooking techniques for family meals: drown it in cream, stuff it with a dairy product, glaze it with a sugary substance, pour melted butter on it, bread it with things like potato chips, add the word "casserole" or "surprise" to the end of it, and then wash it down with a nice glass of whole milk! Dairy products are known to have a sedative effect, something that might just be needed to live up to these lofty home-life goals.