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Oral History Review, Volume 42, Issue 1, Winter/Spring 2015, pp. 50-69 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



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# A “Very Innocent Time”: Oral History Narratives, Nostalgia and Girls’ Safety in the 1950s and 1960s

*Jennifer Helgren*

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the oral histories of a multiracial group of women who grew up during the 1950s and 1960s when social concern about suburban and urban crime was rising. The women nostalgically remember growing up during an “innocent time,” but their memories of violence and vulnerability interrupt their idealized narratives. The article argues that nostalgia serves several purposes. It enables women to critique the present, especially the loss of protective institutions such as girls’ organizations and tight-knit communities. Nostalgia also illuminates women’s negotiation of gender identity with respect to safety and respectability and may anchor their identities in gendered and class-based descriptions of protected, sheltered girlhoods.

**Keywords:** Nostalgia, girlhood, safety and crime, post-World War II America

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This article is based on fifteen interviews with a multiracial group of middle-class women born between 1937 and 1964 who remember their youths nostalgically as a “very innocent time” when girls were safer than they are today.<sup>1</sup> As Sharon, a white woman from rural Oakdale, California, who was born in 1950, says, “You kind of had the freedom to roam.” She explains:

We would just, in the summertime, throw the horse’s rein, bridle into the basket of the bicycle, and ride out for the day and ride the horse for a

The author gratefully acknowledges Andreea Boboc, Marcia Hernandez, Traci Roberts-Camps, Amy E. Davis, Kathryn L. Nassstrom, and two anonymous readers for their valuable suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> “Deborah,” interview by author, June 6, 2011, Santa Rosa, California; “Betty,” telephone interview by author, June 7, 2011, Bakersfield. All interviews were completed under University of the Pacific IRB approval. Recordings and transcriptions are in the author’s personal collection. Narrators’ names are changed in compliance with IRB recommendations.

couple of hours and ride back, you know, through all the back roads and cut through the dairy and back down into town. And we were probably gone the better part of the day.

Yet even as Sharon and the other narrators speak about safety, recollections of vulnerability interrupt their memories. Sharon continues:

But you might be a little nervous if a strange car slowed down or pulled up a little too close, and you didn't really talk to strangers. If we saw creepy men walking on the side of the road, we would avoid them, you know, that kind of stuff. We used some common sense with that, but it's kind of sad that kids really cannot go off and have those adventures.<sup>2</sup>

This article explores such disjunctures and asks why women remember adjusting behavior to avoid "creepy men" even as they persistently idealize their childhoods as safe. This exploration is especially significant for the 1950s and 1960s, decades that witnessed crime rate increases and greater public awareness of crime.

Specifically I investigate what purposes nostalgia, the expression of an idealized and often longed-for past, fills for these women. In doing so, I advocate greater attention to oral history within girls' studies—a field that too often dismisses oral history in favor of other girl-centered research strategies such as ethnographies and photo-voice, which are assumed to uncover more authentic girls' voices.<sup>3</sup> In addition, oral historians can learn from women remembering their girlhoods. Because nostalgia is often regarded as "a set of misty-eyed myths found among the old and weak minded," scholars are quick to dismiss it.<sup>4</sup> But the study of women's narratives illuminates what scholars are beginning to

<sup>2</sup> "Sharon," interview by author, July 18, 2011, Sonora, California.

<sup>3</sup> *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, for example, regularly publishes scholarship that incorporates interviews as a research strategy, but no articles since its 2008 launch expressly address oral history methods. For girl-centered research methods, see Jackie Kirk, Claudia Mitchell, and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, "Towards Political Agency for Girls: Mapping the Discourses of Girlhood Globally," in *Girlhood: A Global History*, ed. Jennifer Helgren and Colleen A. Vasconcellos (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); and Mary Celeste Kearney, "Coalescing: the Development of Girls' Studies," *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2009), 13. Susan Armitage, et al., *Women's Oral History Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002) recommends questioning narrators about their girlhoods in oral history interviews, but the essays in the reader do not explicitly analyze girlhood. Exceptional oral history studies of girlhood include Rebecca C. Haines, Shayla Thiel-Stern, and Sharon R. Mazzarella, "We Didn't Have Any Hannah Montanas': Girlhood, Popular Culture, and Mass Media in the 1940s and 1950s," in *Mediated Girlhoods, Mediated Youth: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*, ed. Mary Celeste Kearney (New York: Peter Lang, 2011); and Vicki Ruiz's "'Star Struck': Acculturation, Adolescence, and Mexican American Women, 1920–1950," in *Small Worlds: Children & Adolescents in America, 1850–1950*, ed. Elliott West and Paula Petrik (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 68–80.

<sup>4</sup> Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 10.

theorize as the productive uses of nostalgia. The women I interviewed did not simply misrepresent the past, but rather their nostalgic reflections critique the present, especially with regard to the perceived loss of institutions and communities that made positive differences in their lives, and may anchor their current identities in gendered and class-based descriptions of middle-class girlhoods where protection and shelter signify status. These women recognize the limits of memory mixed with longing and the “complex, ambivalent feelings” reflected in their nostalgic narratives; these narratives resemble the “reflective nostalgics” that theorist Svetlana Boym discusses. Idealized versions dominate, however, since these preserve identity and provide space to critique contemporary society.<sup>5</sup>

## Productive Nostalgia and Women’s Memories

The women I interviewed all identified themselves as middle-class when they were growing up, although several families struggled to maintain that status.<sup>6</sup> Their parents included engineers, college professors, car salesmen, and restaurant owners. Only three mothers worked—two as secretaries and one as a nurse—while the girls were young. The group was geographically diverse. Thirteen grew up in suburbs or cities surrounded by rural areas such as Bakersfield, California. Two were from large cities, Los Angeles and St. Louis. Nine lived at least part of their childhoods in California but also lived elsewhere. Other places the girls lived at various points were Washington, Oregon, Indiana, New Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana. Twelve of the women identify as white, one as Hispanic, and two as African American. Even this small oral history sample produced rich narratives that can further the study of how and why nostalgia complicates women’s memories of violence in the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>5</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 49; Molly Brookfield, “From American Girls into American Women: A Discussion of American Girl Doll Nostalgia,” *Girlhood Studies* 5, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 57. On oral history narrators’ identity performance, see Rhonda Y. Williams, “‘I’m A Keeper of Information’: History-Telling and Voice,” *Oral History Review* 28, no. 1 (2001), 41–63.

<sup>6</sup> I identified narrators through snowball sampling. Women I interviewed through research on the Camp Fire Girls recruited other Camp Fire alumnae. To increase the research scope beyond women who had belonged to youth organizations and to include women from diverse backgrounds, I interviewed six more, including colleagues in a diversity seminar and family members of students who had completed preliminary interviews (as interviewers) for this study. I met with seven in person, conducted six telephone interviews, and corresponded with two interviewees who preferred to use e-mail. Telephone interviews tend to be shorter. Participants are known to share less detailed information than they do in person. See Annie Irvine, “Duration, Dominance, and Depth in Telephone and Face-to-Face Interviews: A Comparative Exploration,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 10, no. 3 (2011): 202–220. E-mail more closely approximates the written forms of a questionnaire or survey with brief answers. Still, including telephone interviews and e-mail correspondence provides a geographically diverse sample. Similar themes emerge across the interviews.

Historians have long recognized and problematized the fabrication of the past. Nostalgia especially has been the focus of critique.<sup>7</sup> Historian Stephanie Coontz, for example, shows that collective nostalgia for the past has distorted understandings of American family life and children's safety in the 1950s, burying "the actual complexity of our history . . . under the weight of an idealized image."<sup>8</sup> Boym adds that individual recollections "intertwine with collective memories," making it difficult to tease out authentic experience from collectively constructed popular memories that idealize the 1950s.<sup>9</sup>

"Unscrambling" memory from "the dominant historical representation" presents a special challenge in women's oral history. As feminist scholar Kathryn Anderson and psychologist Dana Jack find, some women narrators subordinate their own experiences to normative discourses about the past, making it all the more important to "listen in stereo" to both the women's stories and to the way those stories may alternately reflect and question patriarchal structures. Women may mute their personal experiences or disrupt the narrative's logic by offering statements that contradict one another.<sup>10</sup> Nostalgic narratives are particularly rife with such contradictions.

Oral history's factual accuracy, however, should be of less concern to scholars than the meanings that emerge from its "errors, inventions, and myths," oral historian Alessandro Portelli writes. Tellings reveal the narrators' interests and desires.<sup>11</sup> Indeed nostalgia provides what education professor Barbara Schircliffe calls a "starting point for social commentary," and the disjunctures in women's oral histories reveal their gender identity negotiation with respect to safety and protection.<sup>12</sup> The women I interviewed use nostalgia to criticize society's failure

<sup>7</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, "Dimensions of Nostalgia," in *The Imagined Past, History, and Nostalgia*, ed. Shaw and Chase (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 1. Selma Leydesdorff, "The Screen of Nostalgia: Oral History and the Ordeal of Working Class Jews in Amsterdam," *International Journal of Oral History* (June 1986): 109–115, similarly regards the memories of European Jews before World War II as false "screen memories" that stand in for those that are too painful to remember.

<sup>9</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> On unscrambling popular and individual memory, see Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," in *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, (London: Routledge, 2006), 45–46 and Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 11–26.

<sup>11</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Shirliffe, "We Got the Best of That World": A Case for the Study of Nostalgia in the Oral History of School Segregation," in *The Oral History Review* 28, no. 2 (2001): 59–84. Shirliffe assesses African Americans' nostalgia for segregated schools. Her narrators critique the desegregation process that devalued African American communities and educational traditions. See also Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and*

to protect girls and to champion protective institutions such as girls' organizations and tight-knit communities to which they attribute their girlhood safety. In this way, nostalgia may provide for narrators "an alternative, nonteleological history that includes conjectures and contrafactual possibilities." The narrators long not for the actual past but for the anticipatory moment, often in childhood, when they could maintain idealized expectations about future guarantees of safety and protection.<sup>13</sup>

Nostalgia, then, offers a glimpse into women's negotiation of gender expectations as they reflect on girlhood ideals of innocence and freedom but confronted vulnerability and limitation as they grew. In literature childhood itself has become a trope for "reconstructing, and to some extent mourning" the lost expectations of the past.<sup>14</sup> Returning to moments before expectations foundered may be part of these narrators' "search for [a] core identity."<sup>15</sup> As sociologist Fred Davis writes, nostalgia is "one of the more readily accessible psychological lenses we employ in the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities." It helps people positively value themselves as they create coherent life narratives.<sup>16</sup>

The longing for real and imagined safe spaces may be especially significant for women. To fully grapple with women's oral histories about their childhoods requires understanding that historically as well as today men and women, and boys and girls, encounter and relate to issues of safety, public spaces, and protection differently. "Girls," social geographer Mary Thomas writes, "encounter unique burdens as they use and produce public space." Girls "must also deal with gendered ideals of femininity that further restrict their public behavior."<sup>17</sup> Especially among the middle class, adults closely monitor girls' spatial access and set behavioral norms that are enmeshed with cultural perceptions of female respectability, or the constellation of precepts regarding appearance, behavior, and sexual standards that associate women with domesticity and

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Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 351. Peter Glazer, *Radical Nostalgia: Spanish Civil War Commemoration in America* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2005) similarly addresses how the nostalgic commemoration of volunteers who fought unsuccessfully against Francisco Franco's dictatorship has kept untold histories alive.

<sup>14</sup> Kate Douglas, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 86; Chris Jenks, *Childhood* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 106–109.

<sup>15</sup> Brookfield, "From American Girls into American Women," 61.

<sup>16</sup> Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 11, 31, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Mary E. Thomas, "Girls, Consumption Space and the Contradictions of Hanging out in the City," *Social and Cultural Geography* 6, no. 4 (August 2005): 587–88. See also Doreen Massey, "The Spatial Construction of Youth Cultures," in *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Culture*, ed. Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine (New York: Routledge, 1998), 121–129. Barrie Thorne, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993) confirms that "larger structures of male dominance" produce gendered spaces even in schoolyards (83, 159). Thus, men and women may remember space and safety differently.

purity.<sup>18</sup> Feminist critic Colette Dowling explains that, in the 1950s and today, "women constrict their lives" for safety and respectability. "It's considered normal—even womanly, reflective of a certain demure sensibility in which one doesn't live too public a life."<sup>19</sup> These feminine standards overlapped with middle-class efforts throughout the twentieth century to offer youth an extended, sheltered adolescence.<sup>20</sup> Although the women I interviewed ascribe their sense of protection to a general innocent time, upon deeper reflection they note agents such as parental restrictions and community supervision that monitored their behavior outside the home. None mention the irony that the men whom women depend on for protection are nearly twice as likely to harm them as are the strangers that women are warned to fear, although one narrator's sister experienced date-rape.<sup>21</sup> Invoking a mythic innocent time and idealizing the freedom to roam obscures the protective gender work of restrictions, adjustments, and tight supervision that were part of these women's girlhoods. When adults declared spaces to be dangerous, the women in this study rarely resisted but instead accepted limitations as typical to girlhood. This acceptance has costs: it limits girls' achievements, and society becomes complacent about gendered violence.<sup>22</sup> Nostalgia both critiques ongoing violence and glosses over the price of women's acquiescence to respectable limits by suggesting that protection was not really necessary (since it was an innocent time) and that adjustments were a minor inconvenience (girls still had some freedom to roam).

<sup>18</sup> Beverly Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: Sage, 1997), 13. Although Skeggs's focus is England, Estelle Freedman and John D'Emilio, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) establish that middle-class Americans also located sexual purity and respectability within the home and the confines of marriage (86, 173). See also Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, "Passion and Power: An Introduction," *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Peiss and Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 3–13. Although respectability manifests differently across racial lines, African American parents also sought respectability as a child-rearing strategy. See Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing up Jim Crow: How Black and White Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Colette Dowling, *The Frailty Myth: Redefining the Physical Potential of Women and Girls* (New York: Random House, 2000), 232–33.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of protected, extended childhoods as a marker of middle-class status and respectability, see Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Sixty-four percent of women who report being raped, physically assaulted, and/or stalked since age eighteen were victimized by a current or former husband, cohabiting partner, boyfriend, or date. Moreover, 40 percent of surveyed women and 53.8 percent of surveyed men said they experienced some type of physical assault by an adult caretaker as a child. US Department of Justice, "Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women," 2000, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf>, accessed December 19, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Dowling, *Frailty Myth*.

## Changing Attitudes toward Girls and Stranger-Danger after World War II

The women's nostalgia obscures present safety improvements as well as postwar alarm about rising crime rates. In 2010 and 2011, when the interviews took place, crime rates, according to the FBI, were actually declining, though they remained higher than when the women were girls. Although the women remember an innocent time, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed increasing crime with a 16 percent jump in the crime rate between 1950 and 1955. By 1960 the crime rate was 24 percent above the previous five-year average and the rates continued to climb in the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> American law enforcement, the press, and citizen groups expressed great concern about eroding safety.

Moreover, by the late 1940s, Rachel Devlin argues, the social context within which American families tried to raise girls was rife with anxieties. This resulted in part from the domestic social transformations wrought by World War II, especially the changing roles and attitudes of girls and young women. During the war, journalists and experts from government and education noted the strength of the young women who served the nation in the work force even as they worried over their fragility. The concept of innocent girlhood seemed threatened when girls pursued relationships with soldiers near military camps,

<sup>23</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Report (UCR) for 1955, vol. 26, no. 2 (printed January 1956), 69–70, <https://archive.org/stream/uniformcrimerepo1955unit#page/n5/mode/2up>, accessed December 29, 2013; Federal Bureau of Investigation, UCR for 1960, (Washington, D.C., 1961), 2, <https://archive.org/stream/uniformcrimerepo1960unit#page/n5/mode/2up>, accessed December 29, 2013. In 1965, the crime rate was 1434.3 per 100,000 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, UCR for 1965 (Washington, D.C., 1966), 3, <https://archive.org/stream/uniformcrimerepo1965unit#page/n5/mode/2up>, accessed December 29, 2013). While violence against children remains a significant problem, perceptions of safety often exaggerate actual crime reports. Parents tend to fear strangers and random crime more than the more likely familial and neighborhood perpetrators. Although many parents today are so “racked by predator panic” that they do not allow children to venture outside the home without tight supervision, national crime rates (including violent crime) are at a forty-year low (Lenore Skenazy, “Are Your Kids Safe Alone at the Park?” *Time*, May 17, 2012, <http://healthland.time.com/2012/05/17/are-your-kids-safe-alone-at-the-park/#ixzz21pUocEU6> [accessed July 28, 2012]). See also Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, “America’s Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2012,” <http://childstats.gov/americaschildren/phenviro.asp>, accessed July 27, 2012). Boys’ sexual crime victimization has fallen, but rates for girls have remained stable for decades. Adolescents continue to have the highest victimization rate of any age group. (See Crimes against Children Research Center, “Childhood Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet,” 2005, <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/factsheet/pdf/childhoodSexualAbuseFactSheet.pdf>, accessed July 31, 2012; Howard N. Snyder, “Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: Victim, Incident, and Offender Characteristics,” US Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, 2000, <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/saycrl.pdf>, accessed July 31, 2012; and National Institute of Justice, “Rape and Sexual Violence,” 2010, <http://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/rape-sexual-violence/welcome.htm>, accessed July 31, 2012). Including all deaths, America’s children are safer than ever. “An infant was four times more likely to die in the 1950s than today. A parent then was three times more likely than a modern one to preside at the funeral of a child under the age of 15, and 27 percent more likely to lose an older teen to death.” Stephanie Coontz, “The American Family: Where We Are Today,” *U.S. Society and Values, U.S. Department of State Electronic Journal* 6 (2001), <http://www.stephaniecoontz.com/articles/article32.htm>, accessed July 31, 2012.



left school, and faced a violent world. So-called patriotutes or khaki wackies, girls who established sexual relationships with soldiers and thought of their actions as furthering the war effort, "set off a wave of alarm" that caught even FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's attention. Moreover, the adolescents of the 1950s, treated as a special age group by educators, the media, and marketers, seemed to enjoy a new cultural authority that encouraged them to shun their parents and carve out their own paths. Waning paternal authority and rising female juvenile delinquency rates, even in the white middle class, convinced many Americans that girls were too often exposed to danger.<sup>24</sup>

The concerns of the 1950s built upon earlier portrayals of girls' vulnerability. At the turn of the twentieth century, stories of girls' sexual vulnerability appeared regularly when the press published pieces on white slavery. Although the press, medical experts, and juries often discounted women's accounts of sexual assault as sexual liberalization granted adolescent girls greater sexual agency, legal and public concern for chaste girls continued. Beginning in the 1930s and accelerating after World War II, historian Estelle Freedman has shown, the media, citizens groups, and law enforcement turned their focus to violent crimes against children, fueling a sex crime panic that exaggerated the extent of heinous violent crimes being reported and attributed them to sexual psychopaths and homosexual men.<sup>25</sup> In 1947, Hoover announced a "war on sex criminals," calling sex offenses "the most rapidly increasing type of crime."<sup>26</sup> Media crime portrayals in the 1950s increasingly described strangers as dangerous to children and women, with the mainstream press running stories of middle-class suburban girls who had disappeared and suggesting that sex crimes threatened all children. In 1959, Hoover released an FBI report showing an 8 percent increase in crime in the U.S., with the largest jumps occurring in medium-sized communities such as suburbs.<sup>27</sup> As the media highlighted girls' vulnerability in the 1950s, some adults responded with alarm. When a nine-year-old Spokane Camp Fire girl was raped and murdered while selling Camp Fire mints in 1959, one

<sup>24</sup> Rachel Devlin, *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters, and Postwar American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Lisa Ossian, "Fragilities & Failures, Promises and Patriotism: Elements of Second World War English and American Girlhood, 1939–1945," in *Girlhood*; and Marilyn E. Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); and Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-Vice Activism, 1887–1917* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 20. Estelle B. Freedman, "'Uncontrolled Desires': The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920–1960," *Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (1987): 83–106 and *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 161–67, 188, 275; Paula Fass, *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) discusses the media's coverage of sex-related kidnappings in the twentieth century.

<sup>26</sup> J. Edgar Hoover, quoted in Wayne A. Logan, *Knowledge as Power: Criminal Registration and Community Notification Laws in America* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> "Crime Increase Noted by Hoover," *Bend Bulletin* 72 (March 2, 1959): 7.

community member wrote to the local paper demanding an end to sales by girls in public spaces.<sup>28</sup>

## Learning about Danger

Youth organizations and schools responded by increasing the stranger-danger lessons that they taught youth. The women I interviewed explain that they rarely learned about danger from news reports.<sup>29</sup> Instead, they say, children learned of danger, both real and imagined, through local gossip and increasingly from schools and girls' organizations. Deborah, seven years old in 1955, and her Los Angeles peers convinced themselves through "the rumor mill [of] children" that a neighbor was a "kidnapper."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, a white girl, just a bit older, learned of sexual assaults that occurred in a field near her Bakersfield school through kids' gossip.<sup>31</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s, however, schools and girls' organizations grappled with what and how to teach girls about stranger-danger. By developing so-called common sense guidelines, youth leaders would permit girls what Sharon from Oakdale calls the "freedom to roam" even as they warned girls to be continuously on guard.<sup>32</sup> A 1959 article in a *Camp Fire Girl* periodical urged leaders to teach stranger-danger as they would familiar forms of safety awareness such as traffic safety, an approach that normalized guardedness. Leaders recommended that girls contact adult authorities immediately if they felt uncomfortable: "Report at once to a police officer or to the first older person you see, any stranger who talks to you, offers you candy or toys, invites you into a car, or bothers you in any way."<sup>33</sup>

Alongside their nostalgic memories of innocent and secure childhoods, the women reflect on how this new information about vulnerability intruded upon their sense of safety. Deborah explains that leaders' lessons about staying safe during candy sales increased her awareness of vulnerabilities:

Not to talk to strangers. I think it included door-to-door. So maybe we had a choice of what we wanted to do. I don't remember. But yeah, it was

<sup>28</sup> Clipping in *Camp Fire USA*, Roganunda Council Scrapbook, 1959, Yakima, Washington.

<sup>29</sup> See Jennifer Helgren, "Sensible Safety Rules: Class, Race, and Girls Sexual Vulnerability in the US Print Media, 1950–1970" in *Girls' Sexualities and the Media*, ed. Vera Lopez and Yasmina Katsulis (New York: Peter Lang, 2013). As Haines, Thiel-Stern, and Mazzarella, explain in "We Didn't Have Any Hannah Montanas," girls were exposed to rock and roll, movies, and books, but as women they emphasize the unimportance of media in their childhoods (119). Only one of the women I interviewed mentions violence as depicted in an entertainment crime show as an information source. None mention movies or books.

<sup>30</sup> "Deborah," interview, June 6, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> "Betty," interview, June 7, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> "Sharon," interview, July 18, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> "Child Safety: Our Responsibility," *Camp Fire Girl* 39, no. 1 (September 1959): 5.

very much stressed. And I always was surprised, because I didn't think—like our parents didn't lock our doors back then. And I don't think it was an issue like it is now. We certainly didn't have shootings and things like that. Very innocent time. [The school lessons on stranger-danger] made us—it made me feel less secure. I mean, anytime you become educated, I think, about something you didn't know was a problem. . . . Back in the second grade when our neighbor was a "kidnapper," we always [thought], "Oh no! There aren't really kidnappers." And so to have [adults] really say, "Watch out for kidnappers" a couple years later, I thought, "Why are we supposed to be afraid? Why are we supposed to be afraid?" But it's a shame children have to be afraid.<sup>34</sup>

Deborah's narrative demonstrates her contradictory memories of an innocent time clouded by increasing awareness of threats.

Sharon remembers that adults restricted girls from venturing into certain spaces. The school forbade children from walking home via "bloody alley," an area where older boys fought. When asked to provide more detail on who went there or what went on, Sharon chuckled and responded, "I don't know, I was a good girl and I never went out bloody alley."<sup>35</sup> Her reflective retort acknowledges that she accepted adults' limitations on her access to public space and correlated acceptance of those limitations to respectable girlhood, being good. Her laugh, however, hints that she is not always comfortable with that acquiescence. Coming from girls' organizations and teachers, stranger-danger rules became part of the make-up of a good girls' social identity. Presented as consistent with traffic safety, however, protective measures seem minor and simply part of the normal girlhood experience.

## Nostalgia as Contemporary Critique

Even as women accept stranger-danger as a normal part of girlhood, they critique the present through nostalgic narrative frameworks. Education researcher Stuart Tannock explains, nostalgia readily "invoke[s] a positively evaluated past world in response to a deficient present world."<sup>36</sup> Nostalgia produces a critique not merely of perceived rising crime rates but also of the loss of social spaces that the women believe offered protection during their girlhoods. Women remember all-girl social spaces as locations where girls felt safe to experiment with new activities and learn about themselves, and they recall favorably communities

<sup>34</sup> "Deborah," interview.

<sup>35</sup> "Sharon," interview.

<sup>36</sup> Stuart Tannock, "Nostalgia Critique," *Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (1995): 454.

that disciplined and looked out for children. Thus nostalgia allows women to focus on “what they remember making a difference in their lives” growing up.<sup>37</sup>

### *Safety and All-Girl Spaces*

Despite the role of girls’ organizations in teaching about potential dangers, the women remember these all-girl spaces as providing security. This is especially noteworthy given recent scholarship detailing the volatility and pressure within girls’ cultures.<sup>38</sup> Although several of the women that I interviewed note that as girls they worried about their popularity, and one cites school as a particularly trying environment, these women see girls’ organizations as a refuge, or as one recalls, “Camp Fire to me was that safe haven of just female friends.”<sup>39</sup> Women talk about the importance of having safe spaces to learn and grow, spaces free from humiliation, competition, and sexual pressure from boys and they criticize the loss of those spaces since the 1970s as organizations such as the Camp Fire Girls have lost prominence in girls’ socialization or have become coeducational.

Summer camps are remembered among the places where girls felt safest. Most narrators recall believing that all-female environments were free from violence; animals and storms posed the biggest threats. Although one woman gratefully reflects that fathers came to camp to protect the girls from animals, most women remember the absence of boys and men at the summer camps of the 1950s as reassuring.<sup>40</sup> Girls felt safe at camp, Sharon says, because only a few handymen worked there, and women ran the camp.<sup>41</sup> Karen, who grew up in Corvallis in the 1950s, believes that “there was real safety in that” and appreciates that Camp Fire was all girls.

In addition to describing camp as safe from violence, the women point to the importance of their ability to try new things, learn leadership skills, and build confidence. Karen, who says she was a shy girl, remembers

being happy that there weren’t boys around and I think that’s what upsets me the most about them allowing boys to join because for so many girls it gave you that chance to not be self-conscious about having a boy around and not worrying about how you acted around them. You know, all the silly things that you just grow up with or we grew up with. You know that

<sup>37</sup> Shircliffe, “We Got the Best of That World,” 60.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Rosalind Wiseman, *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> “Karen,” telephone interview by author, July 12, 2011, from Vancouver, Washington. Joan Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage, 1997) also calls girls’ organizations protective.

<sup>40</sup> “Elizabeth,” e-mail correspondence with author, June 15, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> “Sharon,” interview.

it was okay to be just a little girl out playing and being dirty and whatever and just giggly without that feeling that the boys were around.<sup>42</sup>

These narrators, idealizing camp spaces as secure and nurturing, articulate the value of all-girl spaces, free from male and heterosexual societal pressure, in which to grow.

The protection of all-girl spaces, however, evaporated when boys intruded. One woman who attended a New Mexico camp in the 1960s speaks of "some scary camping experiences" when boys disrupted the girls' refuge. "A group of teenage boys found out that there was a group of teenage girls in the campground, chaperoned only by two women. They buzzed our campsite throughout the night, with some of the girls (the ones we called 'boy crazy') encouraging them."<sup>43</sup> While the narrator's overriding memory is of fear for her physical safety, that some girls became "boy crazy" shows that even the idea of boys could undermine the all-girl unity.

Girl-centered spaces, many former campers lament, are far less prevalent for today's girls. Deborah explains that in her twenties when Camp Fire became co-educational, "I didn't like it. I suppose I should have. But I felt like they were invading a sacred thing. It could never be the same when it included the boys." She reflects that the change might promote male/female partnerships, but for her personally that safe space was critical.<sup>44</sup> The women's nostalgia recalls the positive value of girls' spaces as a protective space that the women believe our society has lost.

## *Community*

In addition to all-girl organizations, many of the women centered their nostalgic memories on the communities that they grew up in, which they describe as unified and neighborly. Like the women who miss all-girl spaces, these women bemoan the loss of community. Shirley, an African American woman who was born in 1951 and grew up in the San Francisco Bay area, considers her childhood to have been secure. She describes her close-knit community, saying "I was always in a structured environment. I had my church activities, because I was real actively involved in my church." She struggles, however, to raise two grandchildren in the same neighborhood she grew up in and believes it has been overrun by crime. She explains:

From the '60s up until now, times have changed. Boys are getting molested just as much as girls and back in my era, you only heard about girls.

<sup>42</sup> "Karen," interview.

<sup>43</sup> "Charlotte," e-mail correspondence with the author, June 29, 2011.

<sup>44</sup> "Deborah," interview.

You didn't hear about the boys. So yes, I do fear for their safety, so yes, I am aware. I don't let them go to places that I don't know. . . . They can't spend the night over at people's houses. I'm just very rigid when it comes to that.<sup>45</sup>

Shirley's example is startling because it simultaneously idealizes a neighborly community that protected children and regards girls as victims in that community. Still, nostalgia produces a useful critique; her youthful expectation of protection has fallen short in her adulthood when she is the protector.

As an African American woman, Shirley's narrative fits within a pattern of reminiscences that valorize the collective, and although as I describe below, white women express similar feelings about the importance of community for raising children, race shaped how women express memories about safety. One African American narrator, Connie, who was born in 1944 and grew up in Shreveport, Louisiana, was victimized by and witnessed violence as a girl. She describes safety issues primarily in terms of racism and fears of racial violence. She first encountered violence when, as a small child, she was kidnapped while walking home from school with her brother. She maintains that she has only the vaguest recollection of the event, but her interview indicates the racial subtext of the horror: "I remember some terrible memories. I was kidnapped. I just remember being tied up on a bed. I guess I was about 5 or 6 years old. He was a white man."<sup>46</sup> The racial significance is magnified by her testimony in the same interview that she was vividly aware as a child of the racial violence that affected those around her. Her father and uncle had had urine thrown on them as they walked home from work. She had friends who were attacked and said she had a constant awareness that "they would drag people out of their houses and beat them."<sup>47</sup>

Along with the prevalence of violence during her girlhood, she describes with nostalgic longing the black community's provision of a reassuring sense of security. Connie, like Shirley, emphasizes how black communities worked together to supervise the behavior and protect the physical safety of youth. Connie recalls being allowed to go to clubs as an adolescent but points out that

<sup>45</sup> "Shirley," interview by author, June 18, 2011, Concord, California.

<sup>46</sup> "Connie," interview by author, June 13, 2011, Sacramento, California. Connie's forgetting may be a coping mechanism or connected to her young age at the time of the kidnapping. She did not directly indicate that she was sexually assaulted. In saying that she has forgotten the details, however, that remains a possibility. See Jennifer Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) and Charles L. Whitfield, *Memory and Abuse: Remembering and Healing the Effects of Trauma* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2002).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. Connie also uses a civil rights framework to narrate her experiences. She emphasizes that violence ensued when Southern African Americans stepped out of their assigned social space, but describes violence as sparking greater activism. See Kim Lacy Rogers, "Oral History and the History of the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75, no. 2 (1988): 567–576.

this was in a town filled with extended family members, where the entire community watched adolescents' behavior. "Yeah, yeah, the people who owned the clubs knew our parents. If you got out of line, or if one had too many beers, or something like that, they would say, 'You need to move on or I am going to call your dad.' Yeah, and half of us was related to each other from some distance." Even though Shreveport was a "big city," Connie explains, "Nobody ever left hardly." This increased the watchfulness of neighbors who knew one another.<sup>48</sup> Shirley similarly recalls, "A lot of the neighbors knew me, knew my mom. So, in that era, community . . . there's an African proverb that 'It takes a village to raise a child,' meaning that the community parents could correct your behavior and once they corrected your behavior they would always back it up with telling your parents."<sup>49</sup>

These stories match those of other African American women who detail childhoods in communities that protected children. Civil rights activist Gwendolyn Robinson (Zoharah Simmons), for example, recounts that although her 1950s girlhood involved daily indignities, "For the most part, growing up was joyful. I lived in my all-black world, surrounded by a loving family and wonderful teachers and church members."<sup>50</sup> Similarly the women narrators Anne Valk and Leslie Brown interviewed, born several decades earlier, recount "tight bonds of family" and childhoods that were "closely protected—often severely so" by adults in their communities. The black women's interviews contain nostalgia, not for Jim Crow, but for a lost sense of community, its "vigilance" and "common concern." Like Shirley who described "double-spankings," first from a neighbor and then a parent, these women remember harsh discipline for ignoring limitations, even as they "express gratitude for sacrifices made on their behalf."<sup>51</sup> Parents aimed, through strict discipline, to teach children to control themselves, a lesson especially important in encounters with whites where disruptive behavior could lead to racist retaliation.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the women remember with nostalgia the discipline that they associate with a tight-knit protective community.

White women, too, express longing for neighborly communities where people knew and looked out for each other. Sharon returns to the idea that

<sup>48</sup> "Connie," interview.

<sup>49</sup> "Shirley," interview.

<sup>50</sup> Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, ed. Faith S. Holsaert, et al. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 10.

<sup>51</sup> Anne Valk and Leslie Brown, *Living with Jim Crow: African American Women and Memories of the Segregated South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4, 17–18.

<sup>52</sup> Ritterhouse, *Growing up Jim Crow*, 85–89.

Oakdale in her early girlhood was safe because of community:

Oakdale was still a very small town when I grew up, it was a very small town and I think that helped with the feeling of safety because you knew so many people and you knew everybody's parents and you would, you know, see them regularly just walking down the main street and so you had a little bit more sense of safety because you kind of felt like they were looking out for you too, like they cared.

Betty, a white woman who spent most of her childhood in Bakersfield, also believes family and community protected her. She recollects "an innocent era by and large." She details how the community assumed a protective responsibility when her mother worked:

I never felt scared really too much and my parents protected me. I lived very close to the school. I went home for lunch every day by myself with a key. I was a latchkey kid. I went home after school by myself. The people in the neighborhood knew us. There were women who didn't work outside the home, and we knew everybody on our end of the street. They all had kids. We all played together, boys and girls. . . . I don't remember boogey-men. I don't remember being frightened like that.

The community in 2011, by contrast, seems inadequate to the task of protection. Betty explains that she believes she is "not that safe." She depends on prayer to protect her but worries about "crazy people" and finds community watchfulness lacking.<sup>53</sup>

## Nostalgia and the Negotiation of Gender and Protection

In addition to providing a critique of the present and producing specific memories about institutions that made a positive difference in girls' lives, nostalgia provides a glimpse into the women's ongoing attempts to negotiate the gendered concepts of safety, protection, respectability, and access to spaces outside the home. The nostalgic lens enhances positive, if exaggerated, childhood memories of the freedom to roam and glosses over women's acceptance of limitations. Nostalgia equates safety with the era rather than with the girls' efforts to adhere to good-girl behaviors. In this group's interviews, nostalgia generated positive memories that mark these women's childhoods as middle-class, protected, and respectable. These women effectively identify as the girl with the

<sup>53</sup> "Betty," interview.



freedom to roam even as they restrained themselves for safety and respectability's sake.

Nostalgia masks the gender-related work of maintaining safety. For example, multiple incidents shook Betty's sense of safety growing up, but she minimizes the dangers by viewing those instances as aberrations and accepting certain limitations as normal to girlhood. She remembered the rape and murder of a migrant farm girl. Although she said her memory was vague, offering her no images, because the crime was barely reported, Betty recalls vivid details of the crime. She sees the crime as aberrant, one of the "bad things" that could happen even in the 1950s, a framing that distances her own girlhood experience from danger and permits the narrative's overarching nostalgic framework to hold. Betty states:

Now, there were bad things that happened and one of them was a little girl. When I was about eight . . . She lived in a farm labor camp in Shafter. Her name was Rose Marie Riddle. You can tell that this is something that I'm remembering from eight years old. I remember the girl's name. She was abducted by a man and his wife who was pregnant, and raped and left dead out on the desert by Blackwell's Corner. So that was a bad thing, but there's no picture there. I didn't have anything to picture that. It wasn't all over the news with the body or anything like that. It wasn't like news is today with graphic things, where you can have the picture of it.

Rather than a story about real danger, Betty's narrative again critiques the current situation, this time how the media overexposes criminal activity and makes it difficult to maintain a sense of safety. Betty distances herself from other crimes that she heard about by casting those episodes as aberrations as well. During another incident, at which Betty was present, a younger classmate of Betty's same social status and with a similar background was molested at the movies. Betty interprets this incident, too, as "something bad that happened in that family" and retains her outlook that family and community protected her in the 1950s.<sup>54</sup>

Even though Betty tries to isolate danger in aberrant situations and thereby maintain her memory of a tight-knit protective community that allowed her some freedom to roam, Betty describes how she altered her use of public space. After hearing rumors that an older boy had forced two girls during separate incidents to perform oral sex when they were walking through a dirt field to get home from school, Betty made sure she caught the bus and avoided walking home. Thus, new knowledge changed her approach to certain spaces, but she still remembers her girlhood as an "innocent time" that she was "privileged to

<sup>54</sup> "Betty," interview.

have grown up in.”<sup>55</sup> Her gender-modified behavior, she says, seems reasonable and does not cloud her idealized memory, a framing that helps her shape a coherent identity that retains the memory of the freedom to roam consistent with a protective community despite the limitations that were part of growing up female.

Sharon similarly relates evidence that as a girl she changed her behaviors as she became aware of dangers even as she expresses longing for a safer, idealized past. Sharon explains that her family was cautious—they locked doors when many in their community did not. Yet despite this familial protectiveness, Sharon was exposed during her teens to violence that challenged her perception of safety and ultimately changed her behavior. During her ninth grade year, a stranger pulled over a group of seniors by flashing his headlights. He raped one girl and murdered the boy who was driving. Her recollections shift between a nostalgic sense of safety and a clear-eyed recognition of actual horrors. She says, “I think I grew up overall feeling very safe and secure, but being raised to be intelligently cautious. You know, don’t be stupid about it—and that worked.” But then, without a break in the narrative, she says, “Although my sister did get raped, but she was out of high school.” When Sharon was in high school, her older sister was raped by a man with whom she had gone on a date, suggesting that caution was not always enough. Asked if the experience affected Sharon’s sense of safety, she replies, “Oh yes, you just didn’t want to date guys you didn’t know well, [you went] out in groups or something.”<sup>56</sup> Sharon had altered her interactions with other young people so as to avoid her sister’s fate but clings to the nostalgic view of Oakdale in the 1950s. Betty and Sharon’s nostalgia subordinates the uncomfortable memories of violence to the idyllic memories of the freedom to roam. Although further research is needed, the contradictions suggest that nostalgia operates to obscure the profound loss of the hoped-for freedom to roam as girls came to accept limits.

In addition to the limits on movement that these women recall setting for themselves, teachers and parents, whose worries about safety overlapped with concerns about daughters’ respectability, restricted them. As with the community’s watchfulness, in their narratives the women see as appropriate, and even idealize, their parents’ rules. Accepting protection and following rules in the name of protection became markers of middle-class behavior. The women’s comments highlight the gendered nature of the restrictions and therefore show how they negotiated feminine respectability and came to accept limits as part of a feminine “demure sensibility.”

While Sharon laughingly questions her good-girl willingness to obey teachers who told her to stay away from “bloody alley,” Shirley describes her mother’s

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> “Sharon,” interview.

restrictions in positive terms, reflecting her current understanding that her mother sought to keep her safe. She also recounts how the tight control she experienced was related to gendered ideas about the need to protect girls' respectability as much as their bodily safety. Shirley explains that her mother worried about "Respectability, fear for my safety, yeah. . . . She was just one of these mothers that, you know, my brothers had a lot more freedom of movement of going out, more so than I did. After I became of age and they became my age, they had a lot more liberty." In high school, Shirley sang in an all-girl band but was always tightly supervised. "I didn't actually go out a lot at all," Shirley says, "because my mother was one of these disciplinarians that, the party life, no, that was taboo. The singing was different because we were chaperoned, but as far as just going to parties, no, that wasn't allowed." Shirley adds, "I believe that was because of gender." She continues, "I did not have a problem with it because I understood her seriousness [that] girls sometimes can be put in a vulnerable position. So I understood that, so that stuck with me because of . . . girls can be raped. Not saying boys couldn't, but boys were a little more safe during that era than girls were, so I understood that."<sup>57</sup> Her narrative reflects her current understanding that her mother's choices were wise and kept her safe; they also reflect class-based efforts to maintain respectability by not going out too much. As a girl, Shirley negotiated the meaning of respectability and protection in ways that her brothers did not.

One woman remembers that parental restrictions surprised her and increased as she entered adolescence in the mid 1960s. Teresa, a Mexican-American girl who grew up in southern California, experienced few behavioral restrictions but she recalls her mother's attention to maintaining middle-class respectability, a preoccupation that led to regular moves to larger houses and distance from less wealthy, Spanish-speaking cousins. One day in junior high, Teresa returned home late from a school dance, an offense for which her mother took the unusual punishment of spanking her. "That was the only time I got a spanking because she was so mad she didn't know where I was, she actually, started spanking me with a hairbrush." Teresa relates that her mother had often left her and her siblings alone at home but that this was different: "She was like 'you could have been anywhere; someone could have taken you, someone could have . . . I didn't know where you were.'" In Teresa's recreated dialogue, her mother's anger and incompletely articulated fears are clear. "Someone could have taken you" might refer to abduction but it also alludes to rape or the loss of respectability that followed sexual promiscuity at that time. Fears of violence and lost respectability intertwine in Teresa's memory of her mother's anger. When asked if she thought her mother's response had anything to do with her being on the cusp of womanhood, Teresa says, "I don't really know" because

<sup>57</sup> "Shirley," interview.

her mother, though a school nurse, “never really talked to us [her and her sister] about that [becoming women, dating, or puberty].” Although the specific thoughts of Teresa’s mother cannot be known, in Teresa’s interview, silences regarding intimacy and sexuality mingle and merge with larger concerns about respectability and safety. Teresa struggled to negotiate issues of safety and sexual modesty largely on her own.<sup>58</sup>

Overall, these women see their freedom to roam as part of an inherently innocent era, but their deeper reflections reveal that restrictions on behavior made that possible. The protection adults provided in the form of restrictions, in the estimation of the women in this group, created secure environments. Nostalgia helps the women normalize the restrictions and minimize their significance. Their idealization of the freedom to roam mitigated the boundaries that they adopted. In other words, these women focus on the sense of safety that they enjoyed and, as a result, the ways they hemmed in their movements are easily forgotten.

## Conclusion

Scholars have been appropriately cautious regarding nostalgia in oral history. The memories analyzed here idealize the past and may represent larger collective inventions. Nostalgia, however, should not be viewed merely as a way that oral history respondents falsify or forget the past. My analysis of women’s narratives about safety during their girlhoods suggests that women use nostalgia productively for a variety of purposes. Through nostalgia in oral history, narrators connect the past and the present to criticize social conditions and the process of change. Moreover, in minimizing negative past experiences, women reflect on what positively influenced their lives. They long for all-girl institutions and neighborly communities that protect girls and grant them the freedom to roam. They refuse to allow parents’ restrictions to encroach on idealized memories, regarding them instead as consistent with sheltered, middle-class girlhood.

Nostalgia reveals women’s negotiation of gender standards with respect to safety and protection. By casting the era of their childhoods itself as innocent and by minimizing the gender work that girls and their parents did to achieve respectability and physical safety, women’s nostalgia obscures the costs of acquiescing to limits on women’s and girls’ movements. By probing nostalgia, however, research makes visible the moment in the past when alternatives, especially the freedom to roam, seemed possible and thereby exposes the pain of that loss.

The nostalgic narratives of women oral history respondents provide insights into how individual women remember vulnerability and protection growing up in the 1950s and 1960s and suggest further avenues of research regarding the

<sup>58</sup> “Teresa,” interview by author, Stockton, Calif., June 8, 2011.

complex and sometimes contradictory ways that women make meaning out of their girlhoods. Nostalgic memories, my analysis suggests, help women acquiesce to the loss of the freedom to roam that learning about stranger-danger and feminine respectability asked from them. More research, including a broader sample of working-class, crime victim, and nonheterosexual women may yield greater insights into the class and gender specificity of this phenomenon. Further research may also illuminate other issues for which nostalgia produces critiques, thereby spotlighting other lost dreams.

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