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*The 1950s Cold War Housewife and Tupperware:
A Vehicle for Her Individual and Socioeconomic Change*

by Leah Stanton

Historically in the United States the social norms of the middle class dictated gender roles for the entire society, in which the male was the breadwinner and the female cared for the family and home. However, traditional gender roles shifted during the years of the Depression and World War II. Women, both single and married, worked to help support both their families and the war effort. It was not always socially acceptable or preferable that women be included in the paid labor force. Though it was a necessity until the 1950s when, during the Cold War years, it became a popular social trend to marry, move to the suburbs, and start a family. This domesticity worked well for the husband but was not always favorable for the housewife.¹ She lived solely through the successes and achievements of her husband, and was therefore socially and economically dependent upon him. Fulfillment as a mother and homemaker were the expected norms, but she had no achievements and successes to call her own. Her home was her refuge with its suburban comforts and luxuries, but for some women it was also their prison.

Consumerism was an important factor in the 1950s household and housewives regularly sought employment outside the home. However, that job search often proved difficult as husbands often offered minimal support as the housewife's priority was her responsibilities at home. Additionally, low-wage jobs with no significant measure of praise and/or recognition dissuaded many housewives from seeking paid work. However, the housewife's social sphere improved when she found herself among friends while attending the newest place to be in suburbia – a Tupperware Home Party (THP). Many women would become THP demonstrators as the opportunity offered employment, money, self-esteem, and time to socialize with other housewives. Selling Tupperware as a THP demonstrator in the 1950s changed the housewife's life personally, economically, and socially, all by selling plastic.

To understand how this home party phenomenon happened, it is helpful to know what the gender roles and the domestic responsibilities were in the two decades

¹ Marie Richmond-Abbott, *The American Woman: Her Past, Her Present, Her Future* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 166.

leading up to the 1950s. According to Anna Garlin Spencer, author of, *Woman's Share in Social Culture*, found in the 1925 Lippincott's Family Life Series, there were certain things that a woman must never do, must always do, and other things she "may attempt or should if possible accomplish," within her social class.² Furthermore, a lady must be responsible for the well-being of her family, securing it when possible, through the manual labor of others such as the common woman. Spencer's audience considered the definition of a lady as the head of the household in which it was considered unladylike to earn money or produce value not included in her domesticity and high social practices.³ However, changes in this domestic perception of the early twentieth century woman would shift as the economic and social fabric of the nation would go through drastic changes.

The traditional role of women shifted from managing the household and family to that of the working woman who helped to support her family while also still maintaining her household. The role of men changed only slightly as over time they gained a certain amount of freedom from the mundane domestic responsibilities to which the housewife tended.⁴ Men in the 1930s had already been working outside the home and found themselves working frequently with women in the labor force; often due to family economic circumstances. There were noticeable increases in the number of women in the paid workforce with twenty-one percent in 1900 increasing to twenty-three percent in 1920 and increasing further still to twenty-five percent by 1930.⁵

It was this rise in women's paid labor during the economic crisis of the 1930s which paved the way for two different types of households; one in which the family had two breadwinners who shared family responsibilities, and the other comprised of a division in responsibilities dictated by society's suggested gender roles.⁶ The eras of both the Depression and World War II were thought of, according to author and historian Elaine Tyler May, as "...profoundly domestic" despite the abundance of middle-class women who joined the labor force during the 1930s and 40s. Married and single women alike experienced a small amount of economic independence, even while

² Anna Garlin Spencer, *Woman's Share in Social Culture* (Chicago: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1925), 27.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview* (New York, The Feminist Press, 1981), 4.

⁵ Hayghe, "Family Members in the Work Force," 15. See Appendix Figure 1 - White, Middle-Class, Working Women employment percentages from 1900 to 1950.

⁶ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York, Basic Books, 1988), 31.

helping support their struggling families.⁷ However, more economic change was on the horizon as good wages and patriotism were incentives to fill wartime jobs.⁸

The increasing trend continued when by 1950 the number of middle-class women sixteen years and older in the paid workforce had increased to thirty-four percent.⁹ But despite good wartime jobs and pay, the postwar years often proved difficult for women. They faced unemployment when returning war veterans went back to their jobs.¹⁰ With the end of wartime factory production, women migrated back to the home. The desire to continue working did not dissuade employers from stereotyping women as they were continually cast in the role which dictated that the woman's place was in the home.¹¹ With limited options, women found themselves gravitating to married life in the suburbs.¹² The domestic vision shifted from productive patriotic working woman to that of the Cold War housewife, whose actions were dictated by society.¹³

After World War II and into the Cold War, suburban family life became a symbol of security for Americans who were Depression and war weary.¹⁴ The Cold War housewife was an integral part of the family, and it was her job to help the economy by spending her husband's money while also protecting her growing family against the evils of liberalism, socialism, and communism.¹⁵ Social norms dictated that the housewife live and function within the prescribed domestic ideal. The male provided for his family with his secure and stable career while the female supported her husband's achievements, and as breadwinner, he did not often concern himself with the domestic responsibilities of the household.¹⁶ Author Marie Richmond-Abbot states that the 1950s ideal man/husband was successful solely by his own merits and was measured in riches even though his success often depended upon his wife's efforts to

⁷ Ibid., 33

⁸ Ibid., 50

⁹ Howard N. Fullerton, Jr., "Labor Force Participation: 75 Years of Change, 1950-98 and 1998-2025," *Monthly Labor Review*, (December 1999): 3, assessed March 5, 2015, <http://www.bls.gov/mlr/1999/12/art1full.pdf>.

¹⁰ Annegret S. Ogden, *The Great American Housewife: From Helpmate to Wage Earner 1776-1986* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 172.

¹¹ Susan Estabrook Kennedy, *If All We Did Was Weep at Home: A History of White Working-Class Women in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 200-201.

¹² Annegret S. Ogden, *The Great American Housewife*, 172.

¹³ Ibid., 171

¹⁴ Elaine Tyler May, (Elaine Tyler May 2000) *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, ed. Nancy F. Cott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 492.

¹⁵ Annegret S. Ogden, *The Great American Housewife*, 171.

¹⁶ Eileen Appelbaum, *Back to Work: Determinants of Women's Successful Re-entry* (Boston: Auburn House Publishing Company, 1981), 12.

promote him through her domestic achievements. His career advancement often depended upon her organization of social gatherings in the home as well as her maintenance of a proper social image.¹⁷ While carrying the weight of responsibility as a wife, mother, and homemaker, women would often experience a lack of energy to pursue social connections outside the home¹⁸

The social lives of women were segregated from those of their husbands. Consequently, social contacts often consisted of family members and small neighborhood social circles, and though their social lives were limited, it was in the home that many housewives gained a bit of freedom through maintaining their homes and caring for their families. Their homes often became a refuge from the harsh realities of the working world.¹⁹ Of course, there was a trade-off for being a housewife.²⁰ Her self-fulfillment was not a major concern in society as both her happiness and fulfillment were expected to be obtained by making sure those around her were happy and well cared for.²¹ Often fulfillment came when she sought part-time employment outside the home for various reasons.

Despite the fact that it was more socially acceptable to stay at home to fulfill her duties, families frequently found it necessary for the housewife to seek part-time employment to supplement her husband's income in order to help maintain the family's lifestyle. Keeping up with the Jones' was a must in 1950s suburban American. However, society was not always sympathetic towards working mothers.²² Job opportunities were limited and women's wages were small. However, working outside the home often provided self-fulfillment.²³

Seeking employment often began with checking the Help Wanted ads in the newspapers. Housewives would frequently find ads such as the one placed in the Council Bluffs, Iowa newspaper on October 15, 1955. It read, "Need extra cash? Supplement the family income demonstrating Tupperware on the home party plan; flexible hours." Or another ad placed in the Irving News Record in November of 1957 which asks the reader – "Looking for Money? If so --- then Tupperware is looking for you! Have part time and full time; Earnings high – Short hours."²⁴ There were even ads promoting Tupperware, such as the one in *House Beautiful* which claimed that

¹⁷ Marie Richmond-Abbott, *The American Woman*, 72.

¹⁸ Susan Estabrook Kennedy, *If All We Did Was Weep at Home*, 226.

¹⁹ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked*, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹ Annegret S. Ogden, *The Great American Housewife*, 178.

²² *Ibid.*, 172.

²³ Susan Estabrook Kennedy, *If All We Did Was Weep at Home*, 231.

²⁴ Help Wanted Female, *Council Bluffs NonPareil*, October 15, 1955, accessed March 27, 2015, http://www.newspapers.com/clip/2091116/help_wanted_female_tupperware/.

Tupperware's designs were "Fine Art for 39 cents."²⁵ The Tupperware Home Party had arrived on the scene and it swept across the country like a "flash fire."²⁶ It was later (in 2008) that the company could boast that its Home Party Plan was a world-wide success because every 2.5 seconds a Tupperware Home Party was being hosted.²⁷

The Tupperware products inventor, Earl Silas Tupper, dabbled in different inventions during the Depression and WWII, and was largely unsuccessful until he began working at the DuPont chemical company. He asked for, and was given, a piece of material and told that he could do anything he wanted with it as it was just a worthless by-product.²⁸ Tupper gave the worthless by-product the name Poly-T.²⁹ He would later realize that he had just struck it rich with this throw-away material; it was "translucent gold."³⁰ After much trial and error, in 1949, Tupper developed his Poly-T product, a revolutionary container which he named for himself, Tupperware.³¹ The postwar economy was thriving with a strong demand for consumer goods and Tupper aimed to capitalize on it.³² This capitalization, a slow learning process for the Tupper Corporation, relied on mail-order catalogs and department store demonstrations to market the containers to housewives as useful household aids and gift giving items. However, during this thriving market economy, and despite his best efforts to capitalize on mail-order, catalog, and department store sales, Tupper's business was not as successful as he had hoped it would be.³³ It was evident that Tupperware was failing to penetrate the domestic market and he found himself needing outside help to turn things around.³⁴

While searching for a solution, Earl Tupper noticed the above average sales totals reported by a group of amateur direct selling agents in Detroit, Michigan, who sold various items door-to-door which included Tupperware.³⁵ Tupper became intrigued by the possibility of the new home market as a means of introducing Tupperware products

²⁵Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America*, 2.

²⁶ Bob Kealing, *Tupperware Unsealed: Brownie Wise, Earl Tupper, and the Home Party Pioneers* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 7.

²⁷ Christina E. Bax, "Entrepreneur Brown Wise: Selling Tupperware to America's Women in the 1950s," *Journal of Women's History* 22, no.2 (Summer 2010): 171.

²⁸ Slag is waste matter separated from metals during the smelting or refining and is the by-product of polyethylene which was used to make war-time plastics.

²⁹ Bob Kealing, *Tupperware Unsealed*, 56.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

³¹ Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware*, 44.

³² *Ibid.*, 77.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Bob Kealing, *Tupperware Unsealed*, 29.

³⁵ Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware*, 81-82.

by physically demonstrating them within the home.³⁶ This marketing solution showed promise as the large purchasing history of one particular independent sales agent stood out among the rest. It was this agent who would help revolutionize the Tupperware Corporation.

Brownie Wise, a young divorced mother living in Detroit would not let the absence of a formal education and chauvinistic attitudes towards working women stifle her ambitions. She had to succeed— she had a young son to support.³⁷ Initially, she supplemented her income as a secretary by demonstrating Stanley Home Products. While expanding her product line, she began adding Tupperware products to her inventory base in order to promote her “Patio Parties.”³⁸ She recruited a sales team which she named the Go-Getters³⁹ and together they demonstrated the Tupperware products at their home Patio Parties. As the Go-Getters sales continued to grow, they would later call these patio party gatherings, “Tupperware Parties.”⁴⁰

By late 1950, Earl Tupper was impressed with Wise’s record sales numbers, which reached approximately eighty-six thousand dollars.⁴¹ After meeting Wise and learning of her Home Party Plan business strategy, Tupper was convinced that she was the right person to head up the Tupperware Corporation’s newest division – Tupperware Home Party (THP). He recognized Wise’s keen business sense and insight of the “feminine popular culture,” and decided to promote her to THP Vice President.⁴² In this new prominent position Tupperware, Wise found herself in rare company. In 1950, ninety-five percent of the working women in America worked low-paying jobs which were limited to light manufacturing, retail, clerical, health, and education. The remaining five percent were in professions and management.⁴³ Wise had built a better life for her and her son and she wanted to help other women succeed as well.

As Wise bettered her situation, she was determined to help others find success, and devised a sales method. The method required the belief in the product as well as a true following of the training methods she had developed, which stressed the philosophy that with anything, in this case sales, you get out of your business what you put in to it.⁴⁴ By becoming a THP demonstrator, women with a limited amount of

³⁶ Ibid., 82.

³⁷ Bob Kealing, *Tupperware Unsealed*, 14.

³⁸ Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware*, 96.

³⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁰ Bob Kealing, *Tupperware Unsealed*, 31.

⁴¹ Ibid., 33.

⁴² Alison J. Clark, *Tupperware*, 96.

⁴³ Bob Kealing, *Tupperware Unsealed*, 33.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 110.

education, were offered a shot at success.⁴⁵ Considered self-employed, THP demonstrators and dealers did not receive a paycheck from Tupperware - their money was drawn from the goods they sold and the key to Tupperware's success was its knack for empowering those who did not possess professional sales knowledge. Becoming more successful than they could have imagined, THP demonstrators and dealers were encouraged by the advancement potential and the growing sales teams. Sales success was promoted via training, demonstrations, and recruiting as demonstrators were encouraged to share their successes with others by offering them the opportunity.⁴⁶ According to historian Alison J. Clarke these opportunities were plentiful in the 1950s, and estimated ninety percent of American homes owned at least one piece of Tupperware.⁴⁷

Housewives who attended Tupperware Parties went to both purchase Tupperware products and socialize and while there, they were encouraged to host parties of their own or to also become THP planners. Recruiting was not difficult with Wise's business plan because in the demonstrators new business kit, was a how-to instruction guide. Homebound mothers were excited about learning how they could earn extra income and become more socially active by becoming Tupperware Home Party planners like their friends.⁴⁸

Suburbanites still did the majority of their shopping downtown. However, the popular new trend of home shopping was quickly becoming a significant consumer market in which it was not difficult to find a party to attend.⁴⁹ By 1951 the Tupperware parties were promoted as home shopping in a time saving, comfortable and relaxing, formal and informal social atmosphere. These parties gave women the opportunity to gather with friends and share recipes, tips, and undoubtedly a bit of gossip.⁵⁰ It was a common occurrence for Tupperware home parties to be mentioned in the social pages of the newspapers along with the hostess's names and her party guests.⁵¹ Being comfortable around friends at a Tupperware party was one thing but getting up in front of your friends and selling a product was another thing altogether. Brownie Wise understood the appeal of earning extra money – even for the timid. According to the trade journal *Specialty Salesman*, which Wise used in helping to develop her party plan

⁴⁵ *Tupperware!* directed by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt (PBS American Experience, 2003), accessed January 26, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/tupperware/player/>.

⁴⁶ Bob Kealing, *Tupperware Unsealed*, 7.

⁴⁷ Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware*, 1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵¹ Tupperware Valentine Party, *Syracuse Post-Standard Pictorial*, Feb. 27, 1955, accessed March 26, 2015, http://www.newspapers.com/clip/2090743/tupperware_parties_are_fun_have_you/.

system, the party plan never called for going door-to-door as guests would come to you where the party was scheduled and each party provided an opportunity to earn money. The party plan even had a cartoon booklet with party tips, know-hows, and scripts to guide the new party demonstrator.⁵² The home party aspect of Tupperware was appealing and as home parties were being hosted in suburbs around the country, one might question whether the family and home responsibilities were being met during attendance at these THP parties.

Handling their domestic duties was not an issues. As the party planner was self-employed and could schedule flexible parties to meet the needs of her schedule or that of her hostess, parties were scheduled for both day and night. The daytime parties tended to be less formal in the mornings with casual attire, and coffee with cake after the kids went off to school. Evening parties were a more formal affair as a stylish dress and make-up were acceptable. The THP plan created a way in which the housewife could balance her family and work life. At parties it was not uncommon for the demonstrator, hostess, and guests to have their children with them. In fact, the older kids were often paid babysitters for the younger children while the adults enjoyed the Tupperware demonstration. Additionally, party planners often bartered their own Tupperware stock products for babysitting services; the children also had fun at the Tupperware parties.⁵³ The party planner's work usually paid off and she was well prepared to not only pay the sitter in Tupperware products and provide her hostess' with earned product prizes. She was also able to celebrate what Tupperware had done for her; with self-confidence and positive thinking, she experienced success.

As a housewife's business grew, often the support from home did as well as many husbands participated in their wife's work. They worked behind the scenes in the distribution side of her business and more and more often, THP became a family business.⁵⁴ However, there were still those homes in which the housewife did not receive help or even the recognition she desired. A woman's magazine article in the mid-1950s quoted Brownie Wise as saying that people, and especially women, did not get "enough recognition" in their lives. In that same article she expressed her fulfillment in her work stating that it enabled her to give other women in financial trouble the same chances she had. She stressed that Tupperware was a serious career option and could be so much more than part-time work making small money while pushing housewives beyond thrifty homemaking.⁵⁵ The rewards were great and Wise offered many, from small to extravagant, at the annual Jubilee celebrations in Florida. During the year,

⁵² Ibid., 108.

⁵³ Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware*, 123.

⁵⁴ *Tupperware!* directed by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 131-132.

recognition was given in the monthly newsletters but it was the recognition and rewards at the annual Jubilee that was the coveted prize that all THP planners worked towards. At Jubilee fun, extravagance, motivation, praise, and recognition were the highlight of the year. The THP planners carried that enthusiasm and their prizes back home with them and let them work for their business.⁵⁶

Housewives who attended Tupperware Parties went to not only purchase Tupperware products, they were there to socialize and be bombarded with giveaways and prizes that encouraged them to host parties of their own or to become THP planners as the demonstrator would go through the recruiting process. Outside the parties, women would see ads like the one in the Help Wanted section of the Lebanon, Pennsylvania's Daily News on June 16, 1954 which stated, "Win a trip to Paris and Rome. Earn extra money. Be a Tupperware Home Demonstrator - Few evenings, earnings large - with advancement."⁵⁷ Recruitment was not difficult with both the ads and Brownie Wise's business plan.

The THP plan worked simply because helped women balance home and work during a time when women struggled with their prescribed gender roles as both care giver and homemaker. THP offered her the solution of being both housewife and working women as she became an entrepreneur. During the Depression and war years, women had joined the workforce for economic survival and to support the war efforts for the fighting men overseas and it was socially acceptable at that time for women to be in the labor force. However, social acceptance of the working women, wife, and mother shifted in the post war years as the majority of women lost their jobs, left them for marriage, or found jobs despite low wages. Many women opted for marriage and the suburbs where the Cold War housewife struggled to maintain family, home, and happiness in a society which dictated she be the shadow of her husband. Becoming a housewife did not quell the desire to work while she obtained a modicum of fulfillment as well as a bit of social and economic independence. She would find the opportunity to change her circumstances via two individuals who both stumbled upon a product and an idea that changed both their lives as well as the lives of millions of women.

Just like Tupperware was the right product at the right time for both Earl Tupper and Brownie Wise, so it was for the 1950s Cold War housewife. THP offered the working housewife what most companies could not - an employment opportunity that offered the possibilities of success, promotion, and self-fulfillment. Aside from earning money to help her and her family, the successful 1950s Cold War housewife took care of her family and home while gaining confidence within the business world. Through her

⁵⁶ *Tupperware!* directed by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt.

⁵⁷ Help Wanted Female, Lebanon, Pennsylvania Daily News, June 16, 1954, accessed March 23, 2015, http://www.newspapers.com/clip/2105463/win_a_trip_to_paris_and_rome/.

efforts, she received the fulfillment, and recognition she had desired. Tupperware changed her