

The myth of the "Fabulous Fifties"

I've just talked to a friend who is in her late sixties. We talked about being brought up in those supposedly idyllic 1950s and what wonderful childhoods we had, when things seemed to be so clear and simple. We agreed there were many problems under the surface of that apparent, chipper, clean-cut picture of white middle class America. We know that an African-American, for example, would not have the same cheery version of life in those days.

We talked about ourselves as women, how society has changed in the last 50 years, as did our lives. My friend told me she dreamed of being a doctor when she was young. No one, not even her college counselors, considered that a possibility for her. Even her parents told her that was a silly idea. Like most of the rest of us, she became a housewife with children and wove her life around them and her husband. That, many women have discovered, can be a mistake.

Both my friend and I have been single, she for a long time. Without going into detail, she told how she was and is treated in Galesburg as a single woman. There are still business people who think a woman needs a male back-up in a business

transaction. Even a married friend of mine who had an excellent career was asked by a car salesman to have her husband co-sign for the car. I'm not talking about the 60s, 70s or 80s, this is in the last decade and now.

Having been on the cutting edge of women entering the man's world, I've collected a ton of ridiculous stories of discrimination and prejudice. As the first woman on the Knox County board, visitors to committee meetings often assumed I was a reporter or a secretary. (I've been both.) I was the first woman appointed to the Knox County Board of Review, and when I walked into my first meeting, a man I had known for years wouldn't even look at me or speak to me, he was so angry I was there. This was in about 1994. I can assure you, it wasn't long-time board member Keith King, one of the nicest gentlemen I've ever known, who always treats me with kindness and respect and whom I consider a good friend.

When I was elected to the county board in 1992, I was assigned to the highway committee, and of course, was the first woman to serve on that committee. When I walked into my first meeting at the highway department out on Route 150, all the guys had been there for some time, drinking

coffee and eating doughnuts. When I entered the room, all talk stopped and the men looked amused and annoyed. We're talking only 10 years ago, folks. That committee used to meet twice a month, (paying \$35 per diem for committee members) and one of my first questions was, "Why?" Every other committee of the board met only once a month. Committee members were infuriated. Most of them acted like a bunch of 4th graders.

After the next election two years later, I was one of only three on that committee still there, others either retired, were reassigned or lost the election. The highway committee has met only once a month for years now.

One of my important roles was to make motions to accept the lowest bid on highway machinery, since most of the committee members were either John Deere or Caterpillar machinery owners and the company reps were staring them in the face. Our former highway commissioner, Francis Griffin, God rest his soul, had a twinkle in his eye more than once when I helped facilitate a bid process.

I was on the landfill committee for four years in the 1970's during the time we were

trying to close down the Steagall landfill, open the new one, and were being sued by the EPA, so I wasn't exactly a novice.

For two years (1968-70) I was chair of a feasibility study for a new public safety building in Rockford in Winnebago County. When it was time to elect officers for the committee of the whole, I was told by a male newcomer, who expected to be chairman, that "they" wanted me to be the secretary, (assuming I would really be thrilled.) I responded that I didn't want that job. He asked, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to be chairman." He was stunned, and luckily for him, shortly after that conversation I moved out of town.

My friend and I agreed that the fight for dignity and equality for women will never end. And some of the worst situations are among our college and university professors. But that's another column.

In the mean time, it's never too late for dreams. Fourteen years ago a former board member of the Illinois League of Women Voters was elected Mayor of Jacksonville when she was 80 years old.

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April 4, 2002