



As times keep changing ...

'American' family defies definition

By Michelle Paulman
Staff Reporter

Father, mother, sister, brother.
My family.
The nuclear family.
But not the American family.
I used to believe my situation — similar to but not nearly as sugary as "Leave It To Beaver" — was the norm.
As it turns out, there is no norm.
Just look at Webster's definition of "family":

1. All the people living in the same house; household; 2. (a) a social unit consisting of parents and the children they rear ... (b) the children of the same parents (c) one's husband (or wife) and children; 3. a group of people related by ancestry or marriage; relatives; 4. all those claiming descent from a common ancestor; tribe or clan ...

Whether it be a household or tribe, the American family is simply a network, shaped and reshaped by marriage, childbirth, death and divorce.

Herb Lingren, a professor in the family and consumer sciences department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, defines a family as "people who have undergone a social, religious or legal connection." And the direction the family will take is determined one connection at a time.

Most Americans make that connection with two words: "I do."

While the words haven't changed through history, people's expectations have. What the American family was, is and will be depends on how each person finishes this popular question: "Do you take this person to be your spouse ..."

"As long as you both shall live?"

From colonial times through World War II, when two people were married, they stayed that way until one of them died, Lingren said. Serious social and religious sanctions held even the worst of marriages together.

The family was the core unit of society, and anyone not in a network was a "black sheep." Divorce was unheard of, as was any sexual relation or childbirth out of marriage.

Within the network, the father was the central figure. His children inherited his religion, his beliefs and his occupation, Lingren said. The mother's role was to take care of the home and raise the children. Little changed in the white American family from generation to generation.

The black American family was an entirely different story.

As slaves, whatever had existed of the African family structure was torn apart on American shores, Lingren said. Husbands, wives, children and mothers were separated and sold off the boat and on the plantations. Marriages, performed informally, held no merit with the landowners.

Not until emancipation could the

black American family settle down. After the Civil War, many former slaves tried to find their parents and grandparents. A few did reclaim their old ties, but many families had to start from scratch.

While divorce was rare, disruption of the family was not. Until the 1900s, Lingren said, many children could expect to lose one or both parents to wars, accidents, disease or childbirth. Often the child was reared by a single parent, relatives or someone in the community.

Until recent times, family roles stayed the same generation after generation. But the 20th

would not be hurt by divorce and that they would even benefit from it. Even if one support network was disrupted, kids would find a better one with stepparents or a single parent.

But 20 years down the road have shown that unless the marriage is abusive, children have little to gain from family breakup.

Children in single-parent families are more likely to be poor, and those who aren't have an uncertain economic future. The child loses a close link to one parent, usually the father. If the parent re-

But we're working on it.

"As long as you think you're ready for this?"

Living together, unheard of before the 1970s, is now a frequent practice that crosses economic, religious and cultural boundaries. And this trend will probably grow in years to come.

Plus, people are waiting longer before tying the knot. In the 1950s, the average age of marriage was 21 for men and 19 for women, Lingren said. Now it's 28 for men and 26 for women.

Since people are waiting longer, they are more likely to stay married. They get an education and "find out who they are" and what they want, Lingren said, before they settle down and start a family. Because of this "waiting period," he predicts the divorce rate will level off in future years.

On the economic front, businesses are becoming more attuned to family needs, not only to please their employees but also to increase profits. Employers who offer parental leave, flexible hours, job sharing and day care increase productivity and command greater loyalty from their workers.

The government is also taking a bigger role in strengthening the American family. The Family Support Act of 1988 requires that both parents' Social Security numbers be put on a birth certificate, so the

father cannot remain anonymous and skip out on his responsibilities. Plus, the faces of "deadbeat dads" — fathers who constantly are negligent in their child-support payments — are plastered on evening newscasts in Massachusetts.

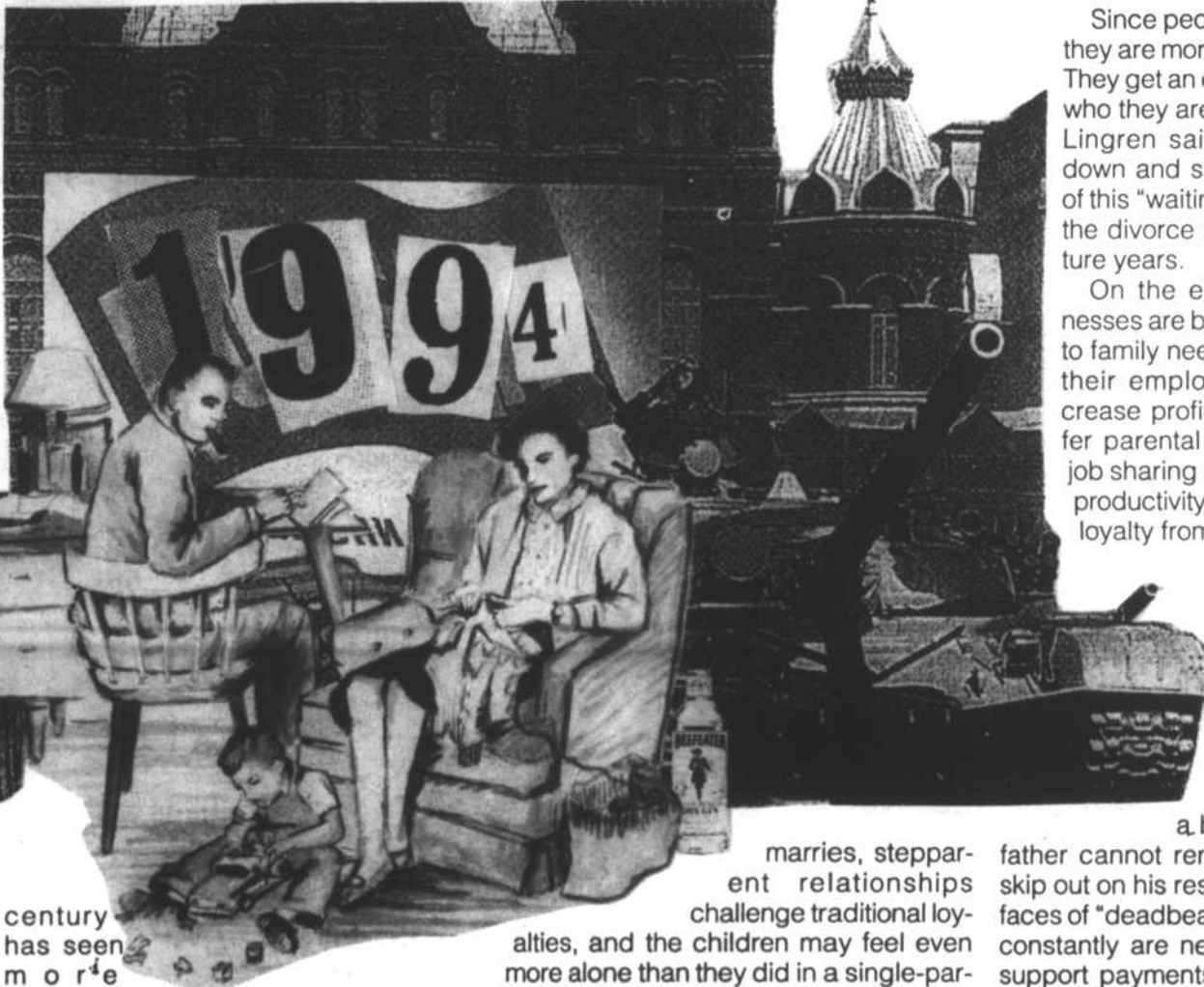
While children still have few rights, many judges are giving kids greater consideration in divorce cases. And youth organizations are working harder to pull kids off the streets and give them the direction they need but can't find at home.

But more work needs to be done. Since single moms and dads make up a good percentage of American families, they need as much support as they can get from relatives, friends, the community, the government and their workplaces — and their kids need support too. New varieties of families, like gay and lesbian couples and unmarried parents who live together, are gaining acceptance but still have a long way to go.

The structure of the American family is always changing with the times, Lingren says, but the premise remains the same. Family is where one finds support and compassion — where people share something in common.

This simple link is "the smallest democracy at the heart of society," the Year of the Family motto. While it's nothing like the Cleaver clan, the family is the place where America begins. We need to strengthen the ties that bind us all together, because the home of today builds tomorrow's world.

And that will never change.



century has seen more changes than any other, and the family has not been exempt.

After World War II, the average life expectancy improved dramatically, and parents began living long enough to raise their children and see them have kids of their own. Plus, families stayed together because social and religious sanctions made divorce rare before the 1960s.

To sum it up, the nuclear family — mom, dad, 2.5 kids and a dog under one roof — is a phenomenon of the 1950s, common mostly to white, middle-class Americans.

"As long as you both think it's a good idea?"

But in 1965, American values and norms began to shift. Divorce, which had been taboo, became not only acceptable but desirable. By 1974, death was no longer the leading cause of family disruption.

In the '70s, people began to see divorce in a positive light for three reasons, according to Barbara DaFoe Whitehead, author of "Dan Quayle Was Right" in the April 1993 issue of Atlantic magazine.

The first was economic. Women were breaking into the workplace like never before. They no longer needed or wanted a husband's income to support them.

Many also assumed that children

marries, stepparent relationships challenge traditional loyalties, and the children may feel even more alone than they did in a single-parent family.

The final assumption of the '70s was that new family structures would strengthen America by making it more diverse. But Whitehead calls divorce "a central cause of many of our most vexing social problems." The rise in child poverty, juvenile crime and delinquent behavior, she says, can be attributed to the dissolution of the familial support network.

Teen-age girls are having babies so someone will love them, but they are finding out that babies take much more than they give. Schools are called upon to meet children's needs and teach them values, because many families have failed in these duties. And even if the biological family is intact, often both parents must work to make ends meet and can't give their kids the attention they need. Abuse and neglect are on the rise.

The American family needs help.

So it's fitting that 1994 is the United Nations' International Year of the Family.

As President Clinton writes in his proclamation: "Families are fundamental to the lifeblood and strength of our world. ... We all must work toward the goal of preserving these ties, society's most valuable resource."

In seeking freedom from traditional constraints, we cracked the mold that built our society, and then we found that we had no ready substitute.

Illustration by Amy Schmidt