

**Smithsonian Institution:
America's Post WWII Family Life**

Strengthen the museum's representation of the thematic area of aging in America. Document how major demographic changes since World War II impacted how Americans create and maintain family and home life with a focus on the elderly and their families. Begin to form a material record of America's aging population

Lead Agency:

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Division of Home and Community Life

Agency Mission:

The National Museum of American History dedicates its collections and scholarship to inspiring a broader understanding of our nation and its many peoples. We create learning opportunities, stimulate imaginations, and present challenging ideas about our country's past.

Principal Investigator:

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General Description:

The National Museum of American History collects artifacts to preserve for the American people an enduring record of their past. As part of the museum's effort to document the major historical developments in home and family life from 1945 to the present, the Division of Home and Community Life is conducting a case study titled, "The Population Ages: Remaking Home and Family Life." The aging of the American population is a demographic fact that reveals the intersection between home and family life, public policy, cultural and material change, science and other aspects of American life. Aging in America has differed according to gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Increasingly senior citizens have created an identity as a group that has been reflected both in policy and in the market for housing and consumer products for the home. This was reflected in the establishment of AARP that helped define an identity and influence policy in 1958, and the founding of the activist Gray Panthers in 1970. The project takes the following avenues for implementation:

-Documentation through Collaboration. This is an opportunity to go beyond artifacts to collect stories through oral history and photography by seeking a partnership with a group such as AARP and a university or other ethnographic project.

-Iconic Household Artifacts. Identify the significant artifacts that represent the stories of aging and their distinctive impact on American society. Although much research on the material culture of aging remains to be done, some iconic artifacts developed for an aging population may be identified. OXO good grips kitchen utensils reflect an important mainstream product that will be collected. Other objects designed for the health, safety and mobility of the aging in their homes have provided alternatives for the larger population.

-Retirement communities. The aging of the population has had a major impact on housing and housing types. The concept of retirement communities as a national phenomenon is a post-1945 development. The development of retirement communities should be documented with a collecting effort related to early residents of the first retirement communities in Sun City, Arizona and Leisure World. Recreation objects prevalent in these retirement facilities such as the Wii video game would serve as a lens for documenting social life, exercise, and the role of technology in our aging population.

-Public policy: Public policy decisions related to social security, employment opportunities and health care have increasingly reacted to the aging population's needs. How families cope with aging members in response to these policies, in the redesign of their homes, the accommodation of multigenerational families within one household, and long term care is an important area for oral history activity.

Excellence: What makes this project exceptional?

The project gives representation to how older Americans shaped history and were shaped by history in the course of their everyday lives.

Significance: How is this research relevant to older persons, populations and/or an aging society?

The project acknowledges the role of the elderly in American society and gives representation to their stories and actions.

Effectiveness: What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?

This project encourages a reinforcement of memory and recall with its emphasis on oral history and a response to objects. It encourages engagement and connection to the larger world.

Innovativeness: Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?

The research is accomplished while this generation's stories can be collected on tape and video. It is the first generation whose stories and points of view about home life and objects can be documented in this way.