Chicago HISTORY

Coming of Age in Chicago

The history of the city's teenagers reveal there is more to teens than meets the eye.

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From clean-cut bobbysoxers to rebels without a cause, from bell-bottom-wearing youngsters to today's techno-savvy Generation Y, teenagers have inspired both fear and fascination. Often recognized both as the hope of the future and proof of civilization's decline, teenagers sometimes bear the burden of adult society's expectations for and doubts about the future. While everyone knows who teenagers are, few understand them as historical participants shaped by and shaping history.

Despite their emergence as a major cultural force and demographic group, historians ignored teenagers for the better part of the twentieth century. While sociologists and psychologists began studying young people in the early 1900s, historians did not do so until the 1960s. Traditional historical studies generally focused on power and the powerful so it is not surprising that youth were

Curator Joy Bivins (far right) with Teen Council member Erin Vaughn and Teen Council Coordinator Ray Yang at the opening of Teen Chicago.

Teen Chicago *combined innovative scholarship, artifacts, and multimedia presentations in a dynamic exhibition.*

ignored. Generally associated with French scholar Philippe Ariès, early work on youth attempted to trace historic patterns of childhood and adolescence. Scholars, including John Demos and Joseph Kett, brought these concerns to American scholarship.

Since that time and amidst great debate, historians have developed a framework for tracing the history of twentieth-century youth. This framework identifies four major social transformations, which affected patterns of growing up: a shift to a modern economy that transformed teens from workers to consumers, the reorganization of families around child rearing and consumption, the rise of families with fewer children whose dependency increases while parental supervision decreases, and the rise of institutions—most notably high school—that recognize teens as fundamentally different from adults. Even though this framework led to great insight, scholarship on youth is plagued by bias and myth and rarely reveals the diversity of growing up, particularly in urban society.

Decorated with yearbook-style portraits, the CHS lobby welcomed teens of the past and present.

Perhaps no symbol signifies high school identity more than the yearbook. Sanctioned by the school but given meaning by the student body, yearbooks show that the more high school changes, the more it remains the same.

One looming myth is that teenagers were "discovered" in the past century. A similar notion is that youth, as we know it today, did not exist before the twentieth century. Yet the most powerful myth—the one that strips teens of their individuality—is the belief that over time teens are most like other teens in their problems, isolation, alienation, relationships with peers, and participation in a peer-driven youth culture. Such claims help foster the belief that adolescence is marked by personal crises and stark conflicts between generations—commonly known as the "generation gap." The popular notion that teenager is a synonym for problem simply feeds these negative assumptions.

The tendency to homogenize teenagers' experiences—ignoring class, ethnicity, race, gender, and geography—has led difference to be interpreted as negative and fuels the fear that delinquency must surely follow. Similarly, the scholarly myths and popular notions associated with adolescence do not illuminate multiple histories of growing up, especially within complex urban environments, such as Chicago, that came to dominate twentieth-century American society.

In 2001, the Chicago Historical Society's Teen Chicago project set out to look at the diversity in youth experience over the past century to reveal that there is more to teenagers than meets the eye. For the exhibition, we examined existing scholarship on teens and fused it with the artifacts and the voices of Chicagoans. The existing scholarship influenced the exhibition's organization around the public and private spaces of teenage life—work, school, home, and play. The memories of those who grew up in the city helped to combat the myths, both popular and scholarly, associated with teenagers to reveal the diversity of teenage experiences in the complex urban environment of Chicago.

A century ago, Chicago was a magnet for young workers. Many foreign-born immigrants and first-generation Americans spent their teenage years working in the city's numerous industries. Above: Women fill salad dressing bottles at a Chicago factory. CHS, ICHi-15111.

The exhibition began by introducing visitors to the newsies (above) of early twentieth-century Chicago.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, teenagers led dramatically different lives from those of today's youth. Although this is not a surprising revelation, the pace of the change in expectations and expressions in youth's lives over the past century is almost stunning. Educators may have used the word "teenager" loosely in the early 1900s, but only in reference to age. The teenager was not yet culturally and historically defined. Today, the term, which came into common usage during and after World War II, describes far more than a young person's age. It suggests a set of shared experiences, psychological and physical changes, and marketing demographics, among other things. Fueled by iconic and omnipresent media representations and several generations of life with teenagers, most everyone now knows what it means to be a teen.

In the early 1900s, economic demands meant that most young people contributed to the family's income. Chicago offered youth many low-level employment opportunities, from newsies and office boys to seamstresses and domestics. The city drew youth from overseas and surrounding rural areas precisely because of these prospects. Even in the earliest part of the century, however, young people began to realize that even basic jobs required advanced skills. New technology, from the cash register to the telephone, made some jobs obsolete or required new levels of training. At the same time, local and national regulation of youth work increased and became better enforced. Such legislation culminated in 1938, when Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which made provisions for a minimum wage and defined the boundaries governing

Top: In the early twentieth century, most young workers held jobs that required little skill, which made them easy to replace. Workers make candy at the Charles F. Gunther store. CHS, ICHi-20412.

Between 1900 and 1920, thousands of newsies worked in Chicago. These boys, usually ages eleven to fifteen, peddled papers for the city's dailies. Right: Newsies crowd in front of the Municipal Court building after being arrested in a riot, 1908. CHS, DN-0006067. Above: Chicago Daily News apron, c. 1929.
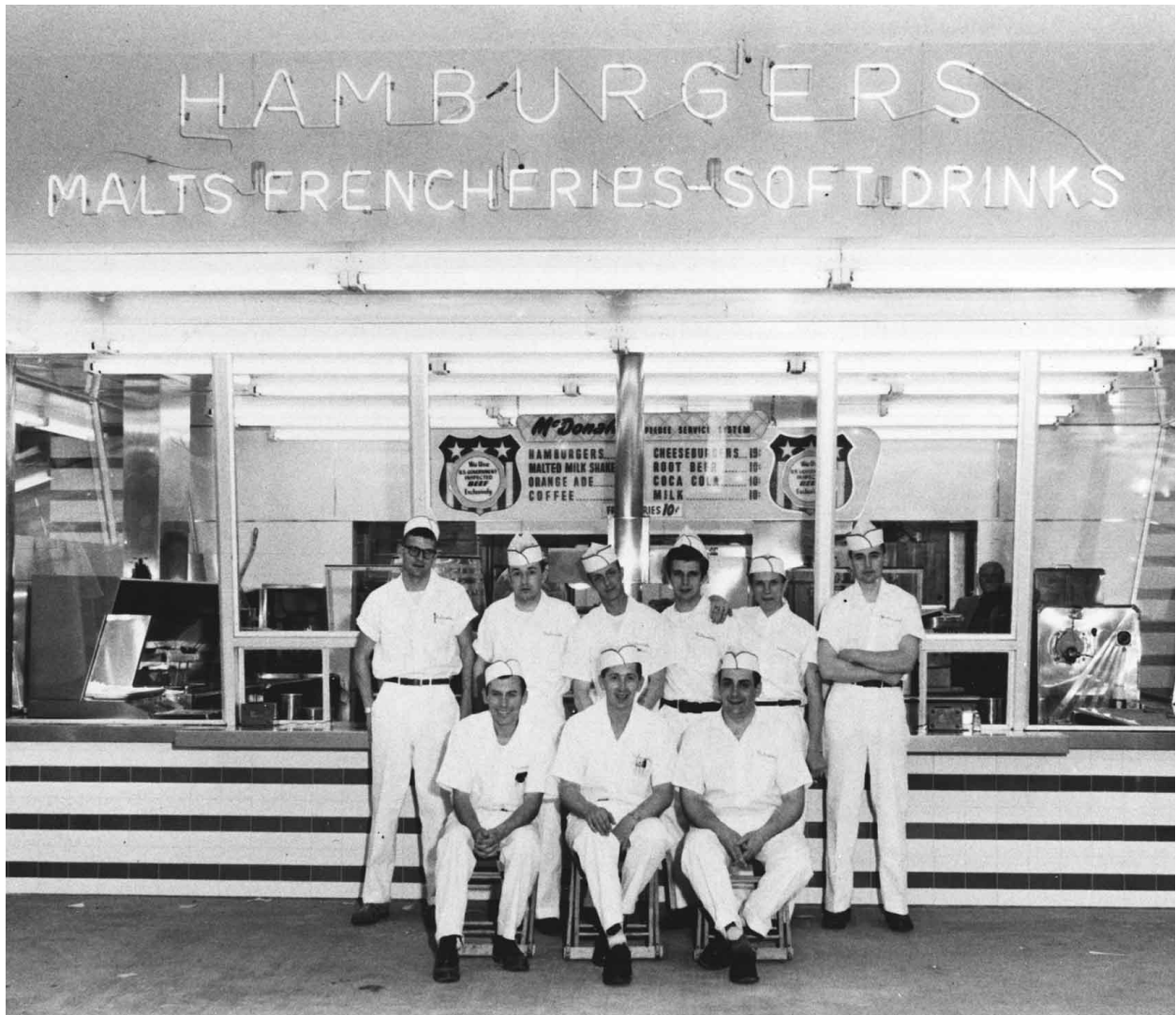
After World War II, teens began to take part-time jobs in the service sector, particularly at places such as McDonald's. Above: Restaurant workers in front of one of the first McDonald's, c. 1958. CHS, ICHi-36310. Right: Gail Peters's McDonald's uniform, c. 1968.

young people's work. For the first time, teenagers were firmly established as part-time workers.

If youth work early in the century was marked by diversity, by the second half of the century, it exhibited a kind of uniformity—service sector, after-school, or seasonal work. Many teens began to use their income to purchase the items and participate in the activities associated with being a teenager. This is not to say that all young people stopped contributing to their families financially—many still do today—but most scholars agree that teens' participation as consumers, as opposed to producers, helped to define the distinctive category of teenagers in the post–World War II era.

Unlike adolescent workers in the early 1900s, today's teens are protected by measures to ensure compensation and their safety while at work. Above: Teenage grocery baggers at Dee-Jay Foods in Glencoe, Illinois, 1985. Photograph by David Weinberg. CHS, ICHi-34943.

Of all of the developments that led to the creation of a separate teenage culture, none is more important than increased and prolonged high school attendance. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, high school enrollment exploded. In Chicago alone, public high school enrollment skyrocketed from 10,241 in 1900 to 98,182 by 1930, an increase of more than 900 percent. The need for laborers to acquire complex skills, the passage of compulsory school legislation, and the necessity to remove young people from the labor force, a factor exacerbated by the Great Depression, stimulated this increase. Grouped with other young people for a finite, but extended, period of time, teenagers created complex social systems that formed the basis of a separate, peer-based youth culture. In this culture, the approval of one's peers often superceded or replaced the approval of other people or institutions, including the family. Beyond its social function, public high schools helped prepare young people for modern urban life—young men for jobs in the city's industries and factories, and young women for rearing children and running households.

Teen Chicago *explored the evolution of high school from Lucy Flower students in the 1940s (above left) to today's students. Below: Boys learn to work on automobiles at Harrison Technical High School, c. 1920. CHS, ICHi-36355.*

Learn a trade, study science, or pursue art? Since 1900, electives have enabled Chicago Public School students to customize their education. Above: Lake View High School student's grade book, c. 1930. Courtesy of Lake View High School.

For some, athletics are as much as part of high school as classes. Top: "Mr. Megaphone" used at Lane Tech High School, c. 1932. Courtesy of the Lane Tech Alumni Association. Above: Letterman sweater from Harlan High School, c. 1962. Courtesy of Bill Tuggle.

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to the Board
of Education

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Chicago's neighborhood high schools also reflected the city's social order and reinforced class and ethnic boundaries. Through the 1950s, racist housing practices crowded most African American students into two high schools, Wendell Phillips (opened in 1904) and DuSable (opened in 1935), both located in Chicago's Black Belt on the South Side. In the 1960s, student activists rallied to change injustices, such as inadequate resources and overcrowded classrooms, which still have resonance today. High school remains a central and defining aspect of the teenage experience.

While high school is a critical part of the teenage experience, many common myths about teenagers revolve around their uneasy relationships at home, specifically with parents. The concept of the generation gap, however, surfaced in the second half of the twentieth century hand-in-hand with the teenager. Conflict, whether minor or severe, between parents and teenagers is thought to be part of the

Teenage activists explore alternative ideas and confront issues that go beyond the classroom. Left: In October 1963, hundreds of thousands of Chicago students skipped class to demonstrate for civil rights. Copyrighted 1963, Chicago Tribune Company. All rights reserved. Used with permission.
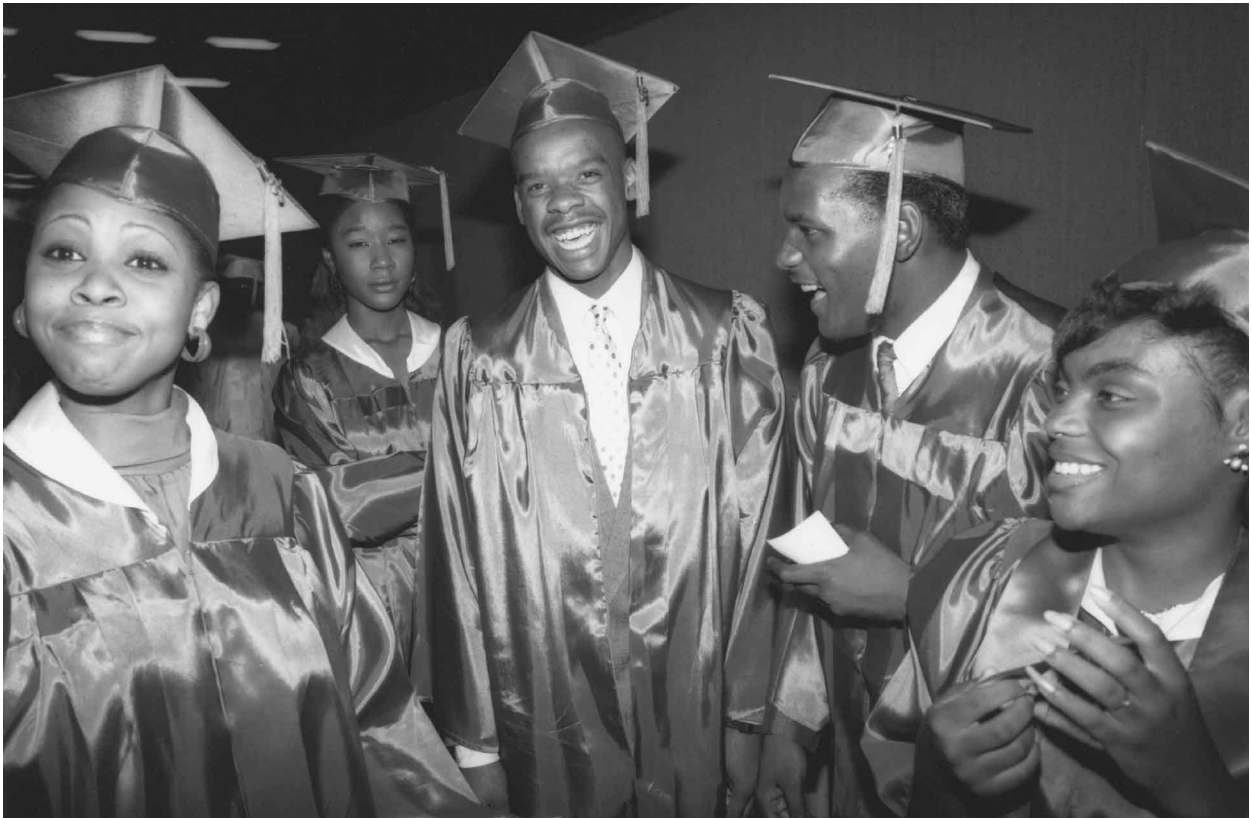
Graduation is the pinnacle academic event of high school and a celebration of the achievements of the student and the school. Above: South Shore Community Academy commencement, 1988.

Prom has evolved into a celebration of the school year's end and a highlight of high school life. Above: Lane Tech seniors enjoy their prom, 1978. Photograph by Matina Petrakis. CHS, ICHi-36328.

process of growing up. Popular media—especially film, television, and music—often explores this conflict and has made it seem a normal, expected part of teen life.

Generation gap aside, the American home, in all its diversity, and young people's role within it has changed significantly. The change revolves around shifting notions of personal space and the home as a center of consumption: all illustrated by the evolution of the teen bedroom. A largely post–World War II development, the private teen bedroom is often associated first with increased suburbanization and later with the emergence of consumer products targeted specifically at the age group. Teenagers' bedrooms reflect personal identities and their changing status within the family, but they also speak to their participation in a larger


In the beginning of the twentieth century, young people often shared close quarters with extended family—living, working, eating, and sleeping in cramped one- or two-room apartments. Above: Family living in a one-room tenement, Chicago, c. 1900. CHS, TC-1285.

Top: A warning to anyone who dares to enter this teenager's bedroom, c. 1995. Courtesy of Isaac Alderson. Above: A teen bed created by the Teen Council for the exhibition.
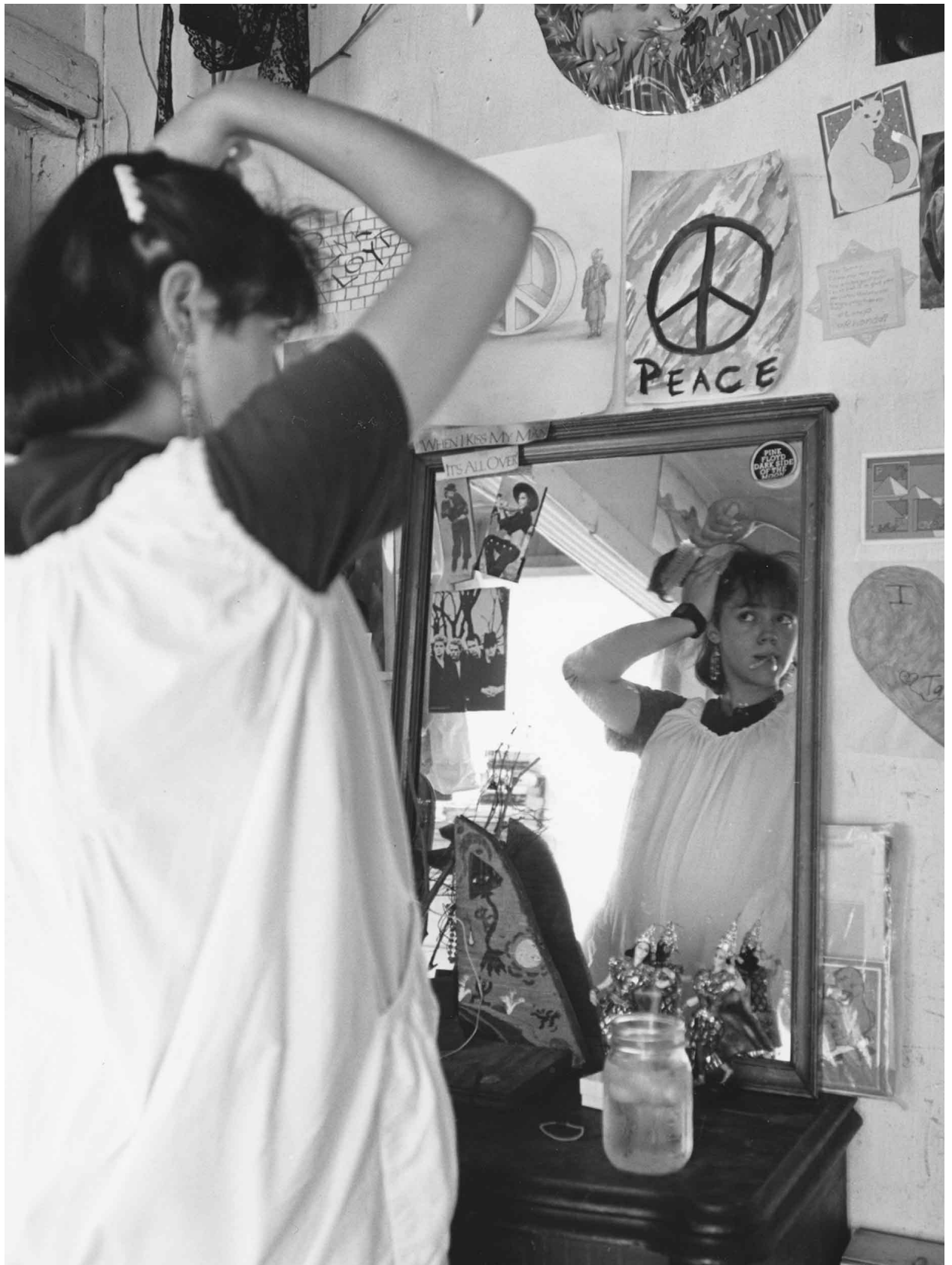
Teenagers use their bedrooms to prepare to face the outside world. Above: A Chicago teen fixes her hair in her bedroom, c. 1988. CHS, TC-0936.

youth culture and the products of that culture. Teens' signature belongings have ranged from portable record players in the 1950s to today's DVD and MP3 players. But the teen bedroom is more than a place to sleep and store belongings. It is often the only space in the home where teens have control, even if that control must be negotiated with parents or siblings.

Home is just one place where teens express participation within a larger youth culture. A significant part of the concept of the teenager hinges on the idea that "just having fun" is central to the experience. From the earliest part of the twentieth century, young people embraced new media and entertainment venues in the city. From nickel films to baseball games, both especially popular among young males, teens' use of such attractions helped set them apart.

Chicago, like other cities, provided many opportunities for young people to socialize and experience a fledgling, but expanding, urban youth culture. This culture played on decreased adult supervision but increased adult suspicion. Groups of young men and women went to amusement parks, such as Riverview and Luna Park,

Top: Teen Chicago *examined the unusual balance of teenagers' life at home—a haven from outside pressures and a battleground where teens' views clash with parents' expectations. Post–World War II affluence enabled more Chicagoans to enjoy home as a place of leisure and entertainment. Above: Teenage boy talks on the telephone, 1951.*

to escape the watchful eyes of parents. Early twentieth-century youth also gravitated toward new developments in music—a phenomenon revisited often throughout the century—including early jazz. With jazz came dance trends, such as the turkey trot and grizzly bear, which encouraged close physical contact. Parents became alarmed, fearing that such behavior would awaken premature sexuality, especially in the case of young females.

The language, music, and fashion of teenagers have become increasingly powerful symbols of their difference, in media and on the streets of cities, including Chicago. As the twentieth century progressed, the way young people expressed that difference became more pronounced. Teens in the 1920s and 1930s were more likely to listen to music and dress in clothing similar to their parents than their counterparts in the 1960s or today. This difference influenced teens' increased visibility in American society. Today, language, music, and fashion remain markers of generational difference, as does youth's attraction to technological innovations, such as the web. Adults also fear the influence of a rapidly changing society on teenagers.

In every decade, adults have described certain teen behavior as problematic. Pool halls and nickelodeons caused alarm among parents in the early twentieth century. Above: Boys in a pool hall, c. 1910. CHS, ICHi-25432.

Top left: Teen Chicago investigated the many sides of play, from pop culture trends to the rules of sex and dating. Chicago's beaches and parks have always been popular hangouts. Top right: Chicago Park District sign from the 63rd Street Beach, 1956. Courtesy of Richard Rosenberg. Over the twentieth century, teens took advantage of Chicago's amusement parks—from Riverview to Great America—to escape the prying eyes of parents. Above: Girls eating hotdogs at White City Amusement Park, c. 1920. CHS, ICHi-24739.

Up to no good? Doing nothing in particular in alleys or on street corners was, and still is, misperceived as delinquent behavior. Above: Teens hang out at Clark and Division Streets, c. 1960. Photograph by Stephen Deutch. CHS, ICHi-36401. Below: Ralphie, "assistant VP" of the Viceroys, a Puerto Rican gang, on Division Street, c. 1965. CHS, ICHi-36254.

Across the twentieth century, Chicago teens embraced music and dance trends. From doo-wop to hip-hop, each style reflected teens' desire to have a sound and style all their own. Above: Teens dance at a local community center. CHS, G1980.164. Opposite: "School Day" was one of Chuck Berry's many recordings for Chicago's Chess Records. Courtesy of Bill Riordan.

Teens use their clothing to make a statement about who they are individually and among their friends. Right: Teen clothing, c. 2003.

Teenagers are so omnipresent in contemporary American society that it is difficult to imagine that they did not always exist as we know them today. Through film, television, music, literature, and our own experiences, we have come to develop expectations about teenagers. Yet the history of teens reveals how young people's interaction with transformations in American society created new expectations for growing up. Chicagoans' personal stories of the twentieth century reveal that even common patterns and expectations are often unevenly experienced and extremely diverse. In the end, the evolution of teenage life in the twentieth century offers new insight into the history of the nation and of Chicago.

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FOR FURTHER READING | For an overview of teenager history, see Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996). The compilation *Growing Up in America: Historical Experiences* by Harvey J. Graff (Detroit: Wayne Press University Press, 1987) contains essays by significant scholars of adolescence and youth. David Nasaw's *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* examines the effect public leisure had on early twentieth-century youth.