The 1950s

The 1950s was a decade of wealth. New businesses and technology produced many new goods and services. Americans earned more money than ever before, and they spent it on new goods such as refrigerators. Advertising increased as businesses pressed Americans to buy their goods. Much of it was aimed at people living in new mass-produced suburbs that grew around large cities. As people left the crowded cities, the population of the suburbs doubled. The suburbs offered inexpensive homes that people could buy with low-interest loans and money from income tax deductions. Many new homeowners and others started families between 1945 and 1961. This period is called the baby boom, and more than 65 million children were born.

Fewer blue-collar workers, or laborers, were needed to work on farms or in factories. More Americans took white-collar jobs, or office jobs, in large corporations. Many corporations became multinational corporations by moving overseas, often near important resources. Franchises also sprung up across the nation. In a franchise, a person owns and runs one of several stores of a chain operation.

The United States witnessed many advances in electronics and medicine after World War II. In 1947, American scientists developed a small tool called a transistor. This led to the invention of small portable radios and calculators. Scientists created one of the earliest computers in 1946. Soon after, newer models were being used by businesses. The computers and other changes helped people work quickly and efficiently. Americans began to enjoy more free time for leisure activities.

Advances in medicine ended or reduced the threat of many diseases. New treatments for cancer and heart disease, such as chemotherapy and CPR, helped patients survive. New antibiotics cured deadly diseases. Polio, however, was still a large problem. The disease attacked the young and caused death. Then Jonas Salk and later Albert Sabin created a vaccine. The threat of polio almost disappeared in the years that followed.

Televisions were popular household fixtures by the end of the 1950s. Approximately 40 million television sets were in use by 1957. Television programs included comedy, action, adventure, and variety shows. In 1953, Lucille Ball starred in the popular show, “I Love Lucy”. Americans enjoyed the action show, “The Lone Ranger” and the police show, “Dragnet”. Television news became an important source of information. Variety shows, quiz shows, and televised sports were also popular. However, as people watched more television, they stopped watching movies.

One-fifth of the nation’s movie theaters had closed by 1960. Hollywood tried to make films more exciting. They tried contests, prizes and even 3-D films. These plans did not bring people back to the theaters. Full-colored movies shown on large, wide screens brought people back. These kinds of movies were expensive to make, but they drew in audiences and made large profits.

Television also took away radio listeners. The radio industry looked for new ways to draw listeners. Many radio stations began to broadcast music, news, and talk shows for people in their cars. Radio stations survived and the industry grew. The number of radio stations more than doubled to more than 3,600 between 1948 and 1957.

In the 1950s, the sounds of African American rhythm and blues music was the basis for a new type of music called rock ‘n’ roll. American teens loved the music and its themes. They rushed to buy records from Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, and other artists. Many parents thought rock ‘n’ roll was loud, mindless, and dangerous. This music, along with new types of clothing and literature, united teens. The result was a generation gap, or a cultural separation between children and their parents.

During the 1950s, white artists who called themselves “beats” criticized American life. The beats used poetry and literature to attack American popular culture and values saying that they promoted conformity. African American artists looked for acceptance in a nation that still segregated them based on their race. Instead, they were mostly rejected by television and mass media while finding some acceptance through their music.