

True Confessions

OF A POST-WAR TEEN BABYSITTER

What teeny-bopper girls got away with in the Good Old Days

In the leisurely times of post-World War II America, adolescent girls in the budding suburbs across the land formed something of a nation-wide cottage industry in offering themselves for hire as short-term caretakers of younger children for families other than their own.

The demand for their services in general wasn't because both parents were working or because there were a lot of families headed by struggling single mothers. This was the 1950s after all, when Mom likely stayed home and Dad worked at "the office," but his hours were fewer than in the past and his pay was better so there was more time and money for Mr. and Mrs. America to pursue adult social activity—going to cocktail parties or classy drinking establishments, seeing a Cinemascope epic that would bore the youngsters to tears, playing Bridge with friends—without the nuisance of rambunctious kids ruining everything.

"Since World War II 'sitting' has reached full status as a profession," proclaimed *Life* magazine in 1957. "Baby-sitting's boom is caused in part by the high postwar birth rate, the rise in individual earnings, the rarity and expense of full-time maids and the countrywide increase in leisure time...the teenager, now boasting new professional standards and training, still accounts for the majority of sitters in the U.S."

Jean Libman Block, writing in the *New York Times Magazine* of May 22, 1960 observed, "Baby-sitting was born the day one alert mother, on her way to a club

dance, invited the girl next door to come over and do her algebra for pay while the tots slept. It's rise has come about with higher incomes and shorter working hours, which entice young parents outside their homes for leisure pursuits at the very moment they find themselves tied down with small children—and not a grandmother, maiden aunt or sleep-in servant in sight."

Middle aged women were often in the business and even some teenage boys didn't see themselves above babysitting but it was primarily the domain of adolescent girls from about age twelve to the end of high school, giving them a taste of authority over littler kids along with some on-the-job training for their future lives as moms. It also sometimes gave them the opportunity to do things they might not otherwise be able to do at home, such as watch TV, eat up all the ice cream and leftovers, smoke, and talk for endless hours on the telephone, hopefully after the tykes were put to bed. If there was an unlocked liquor cabinet, all the better.

