

MIDDLE AGE BEGINS AT 40

But Youth Gets More Youthful Year by Year

[In this talk, given in the BBC's Home Service, Alistair Cooke, Washington correspondent of the BBC, discusses recent American trends]

THERE is a lively belief among middle-aged people that people in their early twenties look on them as being just as young but more experienced. This notion has now been blasted with hollow laughter by a Gallup poll just taken in the United States. Dr. Gallup evidently had noticed that most of us who use the term "middle age" do so very confidently, until we check with other people of doubtful age. So he took a national poll on it. From this it appears that most Americans, young and old, think of middle age as beginning, like life, at 40. There were extremists who thought it started at 30, and some bare-faced optimists who thought 60 would be about right. Young people, however (by which I had better say I mean men and women of 20 and 21) had more or less the same ideas

that in twenty years of treating all sorts of groups and individuals, he could not help remarking that unhappiness is no respecter of income groups. Exactly the same kind of emotional troubles afflicts the rich and the poor, the successful and the unsuccessful, the talented and the ungifted, the town and the country-dweller. It would be interesting now if the British branch of Dr. Gallup's pollsters would ask the same question in Britain. There would be rich fodder for the columnists, I imagine, if, for instance, British women saw themselves declining into middle-age sooner than American women. For it is something that many observers of American life have noticed, that American women put up a terrific—often alarmingly successful, and often ludicrous—resistance to the notion of middle-age.

Magazines Tell the Story

This topic reminds me of another trend in American life just under way that it is possible to take too obviously at its face value. It is the sudden violent play that magazine publishers are making for the attention of the young and the very young. The newsagents' shops are bulging these days with more new magazines than any magazine addict can ever remember. Now, any editor or publisher will tell you that putting out a new magazine is always a risky proposition. But in the past six months a whole flock of new magazines have come out devoted almost entirely to what the editors hope are the glamour needs of 'teen-age girls. There is now not only a *Harper's Bazaar*, but a *Junior Harper's* for smart young women in their late 'teens. There is a magazine called *Deb* for 16-to-18-year-olds. There is *Madoiselle*, aimed at young women between the ages of 15 and 19, and there is one called *Seventeen* with an obvious audience. These magazines are not brave strained efforts to mimic the elegance of the two pioneer fashion magazines started over here—*Vogue* and *Harper's*. In make-up, in lay out, in photographic succulence, they are just as lush and just as rarefied. I bought a copy of *Deb* the other day and it ran to more than two hundred pages of smooth, high quality paper with hundreds of exquisite photographs of exquisite young sophisticates of 16 and 17—junior models, already scampering (or should it be gliding?) between the schoolroom and the advertising agency's studio.

Soaring Circulations

This whole trend may be a by-product of reckless inflation, but not one of these magazines is having circulation trouble. I talked the other day with a young advertising executive (oh, well, he's on the edge of middle-age) who was thought of as something of a wizard 10 years ago when he managed to boost the circulation of a national news magazine from 250,000 to 350,000. He confessed ruefully that now he feels like

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THE OSLO BREAKFAST ARGUMENT IN THE CLUB

There was a bit of a discussion in our club as to whether the Health Meal was the same thing as the Oslo Breakfast.

"I can tell you," I said, "because we've been having the Health Meal at home for quite a while now. The Health Meal is an improved Oslo Breakfast. This supplied most of the vitamins and minerals needed, but not quite all of them. So to the original meal of salad, fruit, cheese, milk and wholemeal bread, scientists suggested the addition of a portion of herring or kipper (or fish of similar nutritive value if the former unavailable) to increase the Vitamin D."

"There's one other thing to remember," I said. "Add a tablespoonful of Bemax, too. It doubles the Vitamin B1 in the meal and also the iron. And there's a whole group of other vitamins and minerals it supplies as well."

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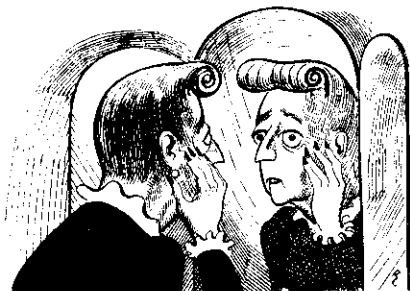
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"She has just one person in mind and it's not Clark Gable"

about middle-age as old people. They, too, thought it started around 40, though there were a few rude youths who suggested 35.

There were one or two very interesting by-products of this poll. White-collar professional men, for instance, arrived at the baffling figure of 41, evidently giving themselves one final twelve-month fling before agreeing to be their age. And there was a triumphant note sounded in the revelation that most American women think of middle-age as starting at 45. Obviously this means middle-age for women. For if you ask a woman in any country when middle-age starts, she has just one person in mind, and it's not Clark Gable. Working people tended to think that middle-age started sooner than the rest of the people. And I suppose it is natural that people who all their lives have done heavy manual work, and rarely had the sense of real security that comes from a healthy bank balance, should notice themselves age sooner and expect middle-age earlier than people who are lucky enough to take their exercise by choice.

However, it appears that you cannot be too careful in drawing generalisations from economics about the feeling of health and security. I was discussing this poll with a friend of mine, an American psychiatrist of long experience who said

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