The Manor House and the Evolution of Dignified Living

Michael J. Eula, Ph.D., Genesee County Historian

Introduction

In the fall of 2019, the *Daily News* published an article about the open house at the Manor House in Batavia. Entitling the article "seniors have options for aging," it signified both a continuation of, and a departure from, the history of aging in the United States.[1] Throughout much of the history of the United States, what was considered "old age" was something based upon chronology alone.[2] On the eve of the twentieth century, physical decline justified the removal of the elderly from the workforce. Americans over the age of sixty-five were arbitrarily categorized, with some exceptions, as people incapable of remaining productive. This line of thinking used chronological age as the moment of physical decline.

The significance here is the use of one's body as the sole site for defining who was elderly. Organized medicine played a significant role in this determination. But so too did academia (especially in the formation of the gerontology discipline), and the media.[3] This strictly chronological approach denied individual differences not conforming to the arbitrary stereotype. It also ignored changing cultural expectations regarding aging not associated with the body. As more recent scholarship in disability studies have stressed, the term "able-bodied" is not accurate, as people who are in their youth could also experience a deterioration of their body. For example, this is true for young, disabled veterans. Therefore, some have proposed a more accurate term: "temporarily able-bodied.[4]

As we move closer to our own day, it has become clear that there has been an historical change in the way American society defines advanced years. This turning point is apparent by the s1970s, though there are precedents even before this time. Two areas of the body are crucial here – appearances and cognitive abilities. "Appearances" concerns just that. In this view, the bodily image that a person projects to the world is one that could be shaped by that individual. As early as 1890, the *Ladies' Home Journal* spoke of the desire to see a "youthful woman."[5] This early precedent became increasingly common in American culture. By the 1970s, a host of advertisements in magazines and on television promoted

products that could erase a woman's actual age. Combined with the growth of plastic surgery, age ceased to be anchored solely to chronology. Instead, it was a condition of life that could be managed – at least by those who could afford the costs involved. Men too could manage age, as advertisements for health supplements and fitness centers attests. The idea of "old age" became a flexible one, unlike an earlier America in which chronology alone determined when "old" began.

Along these lines, the *Los Angeles Times* published a seminal article in 1982. In "'As Old as you Think? 'It's Really True," the neuroanatomy scientist Marian Cleeves Diamond spoke of evidence suggesting that chronological age does not necessarily provide insight into how old a person's cognitive abilities are. The "course of aging is not time-locked," the article explained, for "it's possible for an 80-yeard old to have a 30-year-old brain." As long as one continued to engage in challenging mental and emotional projects, one stood a good chance of retaining the mental vigor of a much younger person. Diamond thus concluded that one should study subjects, play tennis, or learn a new skill. If that fails, she said, "fall in love."

Therefore, by our own day, the Manor House promotion of seniors having options for change is one consistent with America's shift from a chronological definition of age to one more fluid, more managed by the individual. It is not surprising that the history of Manor House is one featuring young dancers from Suzanne's School of Dance in the spring of 2018. Children as young as two and three delighted residents attending the performance. Instead of new subjects, these young dancers introduced new songs to the audience; songs that many may have not heard of before. Then there was the appearance of Jon "Bowzer" Bauman, who had been the lead singer of the group Sha Na Na. He sang alongside then Congresswoman Kathy Hochul in the fall of 2012. These entertainments were in keeping with the idea of continual mental stimulations. 80-year-olds – and those older – became teenagers upon hearing the "Bowzer." Residents who were veterans in 2023 enjoyed the recognition conferred by the gift of "Quilts of Valor." There is great joy in the feeling of recognition as expressed by the veterans receiving these quilts.

To move into the Manor House many residents, formerly home owners for many years sold belongings owned for decades. To go on with their lives and to not stay rooted in earlier years through mental association with these belongings, they voluntarily shed both possessions and the emotional attachments they embodied. They were now able to more enjoy the moments they were in. As one resident said in 1998, "when people get older they tend to hang onto their possessions . . .they get too attached to them for their own good."[6] The Manor House even orchestrated Diamond's recommendation that cognitive abilities remain strong when one falls in love. In 2023 Pastor Jim Gardner and Jackie Deatcher, both ofwhom had come to the residence at different times, eventually fell in love. They were eventually married, and as the groom said, "I'm a 77-year-old teenager."[7]

When I was asked to write a history of the Manor House for a presentation, it struck me almost immediately that I wanted to do something more than a mere rendition of when it began operations, the age of the building, and other aspects of its purely institutional life. Instead, I thought of its place in the ongoing redefinition of aging in American life. As I read through its history, it became evident that the Manor House is much more than a residence. It is in fact an embodiment of contemporary understandings of aging in America, and it plays a central role in removing the notion of elderly from a purely chronological framework. It promotes the kind of mental vigor spoken of in that 1982 *Los Angeles Times* article. Regardless of actual age, you are only as old as you think you are. And therein lies one's ultimate dignity.

---

[1] *Daily News*, 25 October 2019, n.p. There is a fascinating literature on the history of aging in the United States. Examples here include Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); and John Demos, *Circles and Lines: The Shape of Life in Early America* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[2] Some examples of the scholarship here are Carole Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and William Graebner, *A History of Retirement: The Meaning and Function of an American Institution, 1885-1978* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

[3] See Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

[4] Bill Hughes, "Being Disabled: Towards a Critical Social Ontology for Disability Studies," *Disability and Society*, 22, Number 7, December 2007, pp. 673-684.

[5] *Ladies' Home Journal*, October 1890, p. 10.

[6] "Seniors find a 'new beginning' at Trocaire," *Daily News*, 9 January 1998, p. 20.

[7] "Matter of Love: Manor House couple ties the knot," *Daily News*, 7 November 2023, n.p.