

## UPS AND DOWNS: THREE MIDDLETOWN FAMILIES

by Howard M. Bahr

*Middletown*, published in 1929 by Robert and Helen Lynd, was the nation's first sociological bestseller. Together with a sequel, *Middletown in Transition* (1937), written during the Great Depression, it secured a reputation for Muncie, Indiana, as the archetypal middle American city. Muncie, rhapsodized the editors of *Life* in 1937, was "every small U.S. city from Maine to California," a place where pollsters and market researchers could flock to take the pulse of America.

*Life* claimed more for Muncie than the Lynds did. They said only that Muncie was not demonstrably *atypical*. Their cautious proposition still holds: When compared to the national population, Middletown's people still turn out to be fairly average.

*Middletown* was about work and the way it defines one's life. Middletown, said the Lynds, had two relatively static classes. About two-thirds of its people were working-class, laboring with their hands and backs, while members of what the Lynds called the "business class" earned their livings as clerks, salesmen, managers, and teachers.

"The mere fact of being born upon one or the other side of the watershed roughly formed by these two groups," the Lynds wrote in 1929, "is the most significant single cultural factor tending to influence what one does all day long throughout one's life; whom one marries; when one gets up in the morning; whether one belongs to the Holy Roller or Presbyterian church; or drives a Ford or a Buick; . . . whether one belongs to the Odd Fellows or the Masonic Shrine; whether one sits about evenings with one's necktie off; and so on indefinitely throughout the daily comings and goings of a Middletown man, woman or child." When the Lynds revisited Middletown in 1937, they found that the Great Depression had nudged the classes even further apart.

Fifty years have wrought enormous changes in Middletown, and in the United States. The city's population has nearly doubled, to 74,000. Blue-collar work is cleaner, safer, and better paid; many married women have joined the labor force; and the economy has created whole new varieties of white-collar jobs, many of them highly paid.

Today, Middletown's traditionally black neighborhoods are still black, and the old South Side remains a working-class haven. But even Middletown's "better" neighborhoods now have at least a sprinkling of



*A Middletown clan of the "business class" in 1924. One comfort enjoyed by such residents then, a short (40-45 hour) work week, is now nearly universal.*

black residents, and a few homes there are owned by plumbers rather than doctors. We do not know whether, overall, upward *mobility* in Middletown has increased since 1929. But, partly because of the increasing affluence of wage earners, there are fewer social barriers between the classes and more social contacts across class lines than there were during the Lynds' time.

Consider, for example, the families of Henry Franklin and Robert Michaels,\* two men whom the Lynds might have met 50 years ago. Henry Franklin was a crack salesman who sold paper during most of a long career. Robert Michaels worked as a farm-implement mechanic. His son, Tom, and Henry Franklin's daughter, Margery, both attended Central High. They dated, and in 1948, they married.

The marriage of Tom and Marge Michaels, now both in their late fifties, is a "mixed" marriage in several senses. She grew up in the business class, he in the working class; her family was Catholic, his Protestant; she has been a white-collar professional since 1975, while he has been a blue-collar worker during much of his working life.

Tom Michaels' career shows how misleading a simple answer to a social scientist's query—"Occupation?"—can be. He has often held two, sometimes three, jobs at a time, a burden imposed in part by the need to

\*All names in this essay are pseudonyms.

---

support the eight children the couple raised together. He has hopped back and forth across the class divide several times. He drove a truck for a stock rendering plant, worked as a mechanic, owned his own service station, built and sold houses in a business with his father, ran a fleet of school buses, and, after 1960, served in the city police department. He now teaches at the state law enforcement academy.

Tom Michaels exemplifies the optimistic "Middletown spirit" described by the Lynds, the belief that "hard work is the key to success." The rewards for the Michaels are a big, rambling, white frame house in one of Middletown's respectable old neighborhoods, a late model Buick and a new Ford light truck, occasional dinners out, the prospect of retirement and travel, and the satisfaction of a close family, although the children now have families of their own.

### Fathers and Sons

Like many American couples, the Michaels won their piece of the American Dream partly by means once considered unorthodox. During the 1920s, almost half of Middletown's working-class women had jobs, but other married women generally stayed home to look after their children and husbands. Today, in Middletown, as throughout the United States, women of all classes work—by 1980, almost half of the employed people were women. Like many women of her generation, Marge Michaels spent more than 20 years as a homemaker before returning to work part-time, later full-time, as a university librarian. She also returned to school, earning an undergraduate and a master's degree.

The Michaels' children and their spouses exemplify the progressive erosion of class divisions in Middletown. This single generation includes professionals and laborers, blue-, pink-, and white-collar workers. Overall, the story of the Michaels' family is one of upward mobility: salesman and mechanic in the first generation; police officer and university librarian in the second; and in the third, police officer, accountant, attorney, bank trust officer, technician, and warehouse worker.

There is also downward mobility in Middletown, but it is less common. Some movement upward has been built into the U.S. economic system: As the number of higher status jobs as clerks or service workers has grown, the fraction of the city's population employed as menial laborers and domestic help has shrunk.

---

*Howard M. Bahr, 49, is professor of sociology at Brigham Young University. Born in Provo, Utah, he received a B.A. from Brigham Young University (1962) and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas, Austin (1965). He is co-author of Middletown Families (1982), Life in Large Families: Views of Mormon Women (1982), and All Faithful People (1983). Research for this article was conducted with the cooperation of the Center for Middletown Studies at Ball State University. The assistance of its director, Dwight W. Hoover, is acknowledged with thanks. Copyright © 1987 by Howard M. Bahr.*

It is still fairly common for sons to grow up to do the same work their fathers did. But sometimes a closer look reveals that the nature of the job has changed, even when the title remains the same, or that a father and son who do the same job differ sharply in educational achievement or general outlook.

Take, for example, the Winslows. Great-grandfather Winslow worked in Middletown's factories, rising to foreman in an auto parts company. Grandfather Winslow followed him, eventually becoming a supervisor in a plant that made tire recapping equipment. His three sons are all blue-collar workers. Two are skilled tool and die makers, and one, Duane, is a welder at Middletown's Westinghouse plant.

Duane Winslow, now 53, grew up on Middletown's South Side, at a time when working-class families were separated from those of the business class by the great gulf the Lynds described. He attended the prestigious Burriss High School, but as one of only three boys from blue-collar families in his class, he chafed at his inferior status. "It was a stigma in my life when I was young, up until I graduated," he says, and his account of a recent 30-year class reunion demonstrates that his sense of injury lingers. Most of his classmates, he says, are now college-educated, professional, even prominent men. And yet, "I'm as good as any of 'em," he says. "I'm as wealthy as any of 'em . . . I live *here*."

"Here" is a fashionable West End area. When he was growing up, it was among the most affluent neighborhoods of the city. By 1935, the Lynds said, subdivisions like his had supplanted the "aristocratic old East End" in prestige, and the "ambitious matrons of the city" were moving their families there. When Duane was in high school, many of the boys who snubbed him lived there. If the neighborhood is less distinguished today, it retains enough of its eminence to give him a sense of personal progress. The Winslows live in a brick ranch-style home, unassuming on the outside, well furnished within.

### No 'Working Stiff'

"Back when I was a kid," Duane says. "I used to think, 'I'll never live here. I could never attain that.' But I live in a country, and work for a corporation that thought enough of me that I could do it."

After graduating from high school, Duane followed his father to the firm that made recapping equipment, and, in 1960, moved to Warner Gear, a plum of a job in Middletown's manufacturing economy. It did not last long. After the company laid him off during a business downturn, he sold insurance for a year. He liked the work but not the travel, so, in 1962, he jumped at the chance to join Westinghouse. He has worked there ever since, in a variety of shopfloor and management positions, and will retire in five years, at 58, as a supervisor of welders.

"As a working man," Duane says, "I am proud of what I have attained. I'm not a poor man. My wife [who also works at Westinghouse]

---

and I live here, and my home is paid for. I have money in the bank.”

Duane calls himself a “working man,” like his father, but when asked if that means he identifies with blue-collar workers or labor unions, he is adamant: “I’m middle-class.” Trim and energetic, he jogs, plays racquetball, and reads three newspapers a day, including the *Wall Street Journal*. He is not a stereotypical “working stiff.”

Like many fathers of his generation, Duane worries that his children have had it too easy. Duane’s daughter, 24, is married to a house painter and works as a receptionist; his bachelor son Don, at 27, recently landed a job as a tool and die maker at Warner Gear but still lives at home. “Don looks at what I’ve attained, and thinks, ‘Why in the hell can’t I do that?’ Well, I didn’t have that when I was 27 either. That’s what I try to get through to him [but] it’s never sunk in.”

### Where the Grass Is Greener

Don meanwhile, is trying to “get his time in” (i.e. six months without a layoff) so that he can gain a measure of job security under the union contract. He first applied for a job at Warner Gear nine years ago, and was hired at last, he thinks, because he “knew someone.” The money is good (about \$23,000 annually) and “the job’s not all that hard.” He hopes to stay at Warner Gear until he retires.

Duane admits that his son faced a far more difficult job market than he did. During the recession of the early 1980s, many local plants closed or cut back, and unemployment rates soared to half again as high as the national average, peaking at 14 percent in 1982. By 1985, Middletown’s jobless rate was still nine percent.

Reflecting a growing skepticism among Middletowners, Duane does not have much faith that a college education would have been the answer for his son. “Many people I work with have college educations. They have master’s degrees, they have B.A. degrees . . . and they cannot find a job in their field.”

In contrast to Tom Michaels, Duane is gloomy about the future. He hopes above all that his son will secure a safe berth at Westinghouse or Warner Gear: In the end, security and stability mean more to Duane than upward mobility.

For one group of Middletown workers, opportunities clearly have blossomed since the Lynds’ time. “The cleft between the white and the Negro populations of Middletown,” they wrote in 1937, “is the deepest and most blindly followed line of division in the community.”

Before 1950, blacks were almost entirely excluded from Middletown’s business class; racial discrimination was overt. By 1980, however, one-sixth of Middletown’s employed black men and half the working black women held sales, clerical, managerial, or professional positions. Still, the black-white split is closing much more slowly than the class divide. In Middletown, it appears that bridging the gap will be a matter



*A crowd gathers downtown to cheer the 1986 Veteran's Day Parade. Despite Middletown's appearance of settled contentment, more than half of its citizens move every decade, often to seek opportunities in other cities.*

of six generations, or perhaps nine, rather than three.

"Across the tracks," in southeast Middletown, is one of the city's two black districts. Ada Jackson and many of the other black domestic servants who served what the Lynds called the "ambitious matrons" of the West End used to live there. Now their children and grandchildren do. Ada cleaned house for white people for over 40 years. Her husband, Lucas, had a good job as a wire drawer at Indiana Steel and Wire, but even during the best of times the family needed both incomes to make ends meet.

Ada and Lucas were high school graduates, and their daughter Lila, now in her sixties, remembers that they valued education. "There was always books, there was always newspapers," she says. But Lila only got as far as the 10th grade before, in 1937, she dropped out, married, and began working as a part-time domestic. Her husband was an auto body mechanic, and also a high school dropout. In 1945, he left Lila and their four children, and she began working full-time as a maid. Lila had two more children under circumstances she does not discuss.

During the mid-1960s, both of Lila's parents and one of her grown daughters died within two years. It was a turning point. "I went back to school and went back to church," Lila says. In 1967, three decades after dropping out, she graduated from high school.

Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty was in full swing, and Lila was hired under the auspices of her Methodist church, as a federally funded outreach "volunteer with a stipend" while she continued to work part-time as a maid. Finally, in 1971, she was able to quit cleaning houses for good. Ever since, she has been a full-time counselor to adult university students and to young blacks seeking schooling. She has also found time to help herself by working toward a bachelors degree in political science and social work at Ball State University, a thriving (enrollment: 17,513) branch of the state system in Middletown. She will graduate this year.

Despite her own success, Lila does not believe that Middletown's blacks have made much progress during her lifetime, and her negative view is widely shared among the city's blacks. "Most black people who are educated have to leave," Lila says. "The opportunities just aren't here for black people."

Lila will admit to slight local gains. But she is sure that the prospects for Middletown's blacks are worse now than they were during the late 1970s, when there seemed to be many more local blacks attending Ball State. (Partly as a result of federal budget cutbacks, black enrollment fell from 808 in 1977 to 621 last year.)

### Backing Into the Future

Lila is a great-grandmother now, and she speaks from the experience of kin as well as clients. The jobs of her children and in-laws, now in their thirties and forties, support her dim view of the pace of black progress in Middletown: two males unemployed, the rest blue-collar workers, with the exception of a daughter-in-law who is an accountant.\*

In part, the fate of Lila's family, especially her sons, is a reminder of a larger social problem—the rise of female-headed families, especially among blacks. Hence, in Middletown, as in other American cities, black women bear heavier family burdens than white women, and the children suffer. In 1980, 34 percent of Middletown's black families were headed by women without husbands, compared to 14 percent of its white families. Middletown's black women are almost as likely to be employed as are the men. (In 1980, 44 percent of black women and 51 percent of black men were employed, compared to 44 and 62 percent, respectively, among whites.) The women tend to have higher status jobs.

While Lila's family may not appear to be an example of great occupational upward mobility, there are signs of progress. Lila's eldest daughter, May, 47, represents the third generation of Jackson women in domestic work, but she served as a maid for only two years. Over the years, she supplemented her husband's factory paychecks with various

\*The occupations of Lila's children and their spouses: 1.) May, a homemaker, married to a factory worker; 2.) Dolores, a utility company teller, married to a factory worker; 3.) Sandra (now deceased), was a hospital x-ray technician; 4.) William, a former bartender, now unemployed; 5.) Samuel, a factory worker; 6.) Edward, a former hotel clerk, now unemployed, married to an accountant.

---

other part-time jobs. The couple stayed together. In 1980, she passed the high school equivalency exam, and enrolled as a social work major at her mother's alma mater, Ball State. She will graduate this year.

Three of May's six children are grown. One daughter manages a public housing project in Middletown. Her first and second sons, both in their mid-twenties, have degrees from Ball State in telecommunications. They are, in part, victims of their own high expectations. "Neither one . . . wanted to work in the factory," May says. "They said the work was too hard. They had seen my husband drag in after work . . . . The children do have more alternatives than I had." One son is now an enlisted man in the Air Force; the other works in a fast food restaurant while he looks for another job.

Because of discrimination, May is not sure that education will be a key to the local job market for her family. But she has worked hard to get her own university degree, and has pushed her children to finish high school and go on to college. Unlike many of Middletown's whites, she remains convinced that education ultimately will make things better.

The Michaels, Winslows, and Jacksons have all "moved up" since the Lynds studied Middletown, but they have advanced unequally, and in different ways.

Only the Michaels followed the stereotypical path of fairly steady generation-to-generation improvement in income and status. But the Winslows seem equally satisfied, even though their gains have come chiefly through a rising standard of living. Crumbling class barriers have allowed Duane Winslow and his family to feel that they have moved up to become a part of the vast American "middle class," even though they remain, after three generations, a blue-collar family. By contrast, the Jacksons have, in a sense, come further than the Winslows, but they are still cut off from the larger community. And, despite their gains, they remain near the bottom of the economic ladder. Yet, as their commitment to education suggests, they are also aiming somewhat higher than some of their white counterparts.

To the Lynds, all of this might seem quite astonishing. By 1937, when they published *Middletown Revisited*, they had moved sharply to the political left, partly in reaction to the Great Depression. By then, they were impatient with Middletown's working class, unable to understand why widening inequality did not foster greater class consciousness and activism. They concluded their book with a quotation from R. H. Tawney, which seemed to apply to Middletowners: "They walked reluctantly backwards into the future, lest a worse thing should befall them." Viewed in retrospect, that walk has moved Middletown's people a considerable distance up the incline to "success."