

Feeling Single, Seeing Double

In a world full of married couples, the single person is the odd man — or woman — out

BY RICK KARLIN

Each year around Christmas time, Dottie Smith goes through a simple routine shared by millions of other Americans. But in the eyes of some, it seems like a forlorn, almost pathetic, ritual.

"Why do you have a Christmas tree if you live by yourself?" people ask Smith, who has been divorced for 14 years but still decorates her Albany home each December. It seems like some people equate all single folks with Ebenezer Scrooge. Smith stifles the impulse to sneer at such questions and instead replies that she enjoys the Yuletide season as much as anyone else. "Christmas is a happy time,"

"Families are looked upon as something wonderful and something good and being single is looked upon with suspicion."

-- Susan Johnson,
program director of the
Capital District's Singles
Outreach Services Network

says Smith. So much for the image of holiday depression among those who live alone.

For Donna Hawthorne, the questions are different, but still odd. When she goes out on a date with someone new, she often gets a puzzled response when she mentions that, at age 36, she's never been married. "They're kind of shocked," she says of the way men react to the news. "They expect you to say you're divorced."

"A couple of them have said, 'How did you escape it?' That makes me wonder, gee, is something wrong here?"

Of course there's nothing wrong with Hawthorne, or with Smith. But if you're a

single person who has reached the age of, say, 30, people can give you plenty of reasons to wonder if you're some kind of misfit.

In a world full of married couples, the single person is the odd man — or woman — out. It doesn't matter if one is single through divorce, death of a spouse, or from never having tied the knot in the first place: Single people face constant reminders of their solo status.

The slights are everywhere, ranging from social conventions tilted wildly in favor of married couples, to the hard-number worlds of finance and business.

Listen to any politician and sooner or later you'll probably hear a remark about "The American Family." You'll never hear politicians talk about "The American Single Person," even though nearly half of the nation's households are occupied by single people.

When Supreme Court Justice David Souter came up for nomination in 1990, his bachelor status became cause for speculation. What was wrong with him? Was he emotionally unstable? Did he lack a sense of commitment? Was he gay? Did he beat his dog? Such questions resulted merely from the fact that he was unmarried.

Go to a large family wedding by yourself and chances are you'll sit somewhere in the back, along with your 9-year-old third cousin from Toledo and your aging Aunt Anita, who never got married.

It's tough seating a single person at a party of couples since it breaks up the traditional man-woman-man-woman seating arrangement.

Enter a fancy restaurant alone and see where you end up. Unless you ask to be seated elsewhere, there's a good chance you'll be steered toward the table under the air conditioning duct or next to the swinging doors leading to the kitchen.

Single women are particularly peeved by people who assume they are married.

When telephone solicitors call Mary Berger with sales pitches for insurance policies, investment schemes, discount phone services, or some other offering, they almost always address her as "Mrs." — even though she's been divorced for 11 years.

"I resent the automatic assumption that I'm a 'Mrs.,'" says Berger.

Phyllis Fortin recently attended a local health seminar on dealing with stress. The woman conducting the seminar told her audience that one way to reduce stress is to have the kids do some of the housework. "I don't have any kids and my cats refuse to do housework," says Fortin.

It's true that the pressures and prejudices against singles are not as great as they used to be. Soaring divorce rates, increased longevity, and a trend toward marrying later in life have caused the ranks of single people to swell.

According to the 1990 Census, about 25 percent of all Americans live alone, up

"Single people aren't providing the same stability to our country. They're not providing offspring, they carry more diseases."

-- Beverly Sheldon, of the Traditional Values Coalition in Irvine, California, as quoted in the Los Angeles Times.

from 23 percent in 1980 and 17 percent in 1970. By contrast, the number of married couples is shrinking. The 1990 Census found 56 percent of all American households were occupied by married couples. That's down from 61 percent in 1980 and 71 percent in 1970.

The stereotypical family of yesteryear — a husband and wife and 2 children — is giving way to any number of combinations today: blended families in which divorced parents have remarried; single-parent families; grandparents who raise their grandchildren; gay or lesbian couples; empty nesters; couples with no kids and so on.

And some of the pejorative terms to describe singles have faded from our vocabulary. Single-parent families used to be called "broken homes," but that expression is rarely used anymore. And the terms "spinster" or "old maid," describing women who never married, have all but vanished from our lexicon. The description of an unmarried man as a "swinging bachelor" also seems to have lost popularity.

Nonetheless, divisions between married couples and their unattached counterparts still remain. "It's the tyranny of the culture," says Gregg Millett, executive director of the Singles Outreach Services (SOS) Network, a singles group based in the Capital District.

Millett says that some negative stereotypes about singles persist — that they're lonely, or unable to find a spouse. But they are vast oversimplifications when one considers how many single people are out there. SOS, for instance, has more than 4,000 members.

SINGLEHOOD IS EXPENSIVE

Biases about singlehood extend beyond our cultural and social concepts. They also extend into the world of finance, even though this may not be readily apparent. The fact is, living alone can be an expensive proposition.

Go into any supermarket and compare the prices of single-serving foods with jumbo family-size products. If you regularly buy the smaller size — and most solo people do — you're not getting the most for your money.

There are other costs as well.

A University of Michigan survey conducted in 1990 found that married men earned considerably more than their single counterparts. This was true in a dozen countries including the United States, where, on the average, married men earned 31 percent more.

Researchers speculate that married men earn more because family responsibilities motivate them to work harder — or that married men may simply appear to be more stable than their single counterparts and are financially rewarded for it.

Either way, U.S. Census figures bear out the wage differentials, especially for men. The median income for married men aged 18-24 is \$14,937. For men in the same age group who have never married, the median income is \$7,240. Between the ages of 24 and 44, the median income for married men rises to \$27,156 while it increases to only \$17,661 for those who haven't married. (Median is the point at which half the numbers are higher and half are lower). Unmarried women, though, tend to earn more than their married counterparts, possibly because most of them don't interrupt their careers to have children.

Being single may even work *against* someone in hard times when job layoffs are imminent. "It's a behind-the-scenes issue," says Thomas McKenna, a local employment counselor. When layoffs come, McKenna says, some firms may think twice about jettisoning those employees who have a wife and kids to support. "There's a lot more sensitivity to the individual who is married and has children and a spouse who is not working," he says.

"It's like somebody has an image of a 1950s TV program," says Apuzzo. "We hook into a perception of reality and we are reluctant to give it up no matter what."

People are still clinging to the image of "Leave it to Beaver," as the typical American family. But the Fox cable TV network's "Married with Children," a show depicting a vulgar, dysfunctional family that barely stays together week after week, may be closer to the mark.

JOKES AND COMEBACKS

Until society catches up, single people will have to cope. Some do it with humor. Dino Billings, a 39-year-old bachelor, jokes about bringing a blow-up life-size rubber doll to parties as way of dealing with questions about his single status. "You may call her an air-head, but she's flexible," he says with a smile.

Sometimes the humor turns to quick comebacks. If a divorced person asks him why he has never gotten married, Billings asks the questioner why he or she is divorced.

And when Phyllis Fortin senses a slight against her single self, she turns her thoughts toward the two master's degrees she's earned and the time she has spent in places like Arizona and Wyoming. Had

she been married, she might not have had those experiences, she says.

Dottie Smith, who fields the funny questions about her Christmas tree, seems to revel in her singlehood. It means freedom to do exactly as she pleases, without someone tagging along or moping about how he doesn't want to do this or go there.

If she wants to waste her money on installing cable TV in three rooms of her home, she can do so without answering to anyone. If she feels like staying home all weekend and watching old movies on her VCR, she can do that, too.

And when Donna Hawthorne gets to worrying too much about her single status, she thinks of all her carefree winter ski trips and the spur-of-the-moment windsurfing expeditions she enjoys each summer. She might not have been able to do that if she'd had a husband and children to tote along.

Overall, the personal freedom that comes from being single can be one of the biggest antidotes to any cultural stigmas or costs. SOS's Millet agrees. "With personal freedom, the tyranny of marriage isn't so strong." ■

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Rick Karlin is a staff writer for PERSONAL.

Let's Hear It for Tax Reform

By Susan M. Barbieri

Poets through the ages have expended untold buckets of ink waxing rhapsodic about spring's newborn foliage, lazy breezes, and operatic bird songs. Poets were positively giddy in spring.

That's because poets didn't pay taxes. The Bard knew the true meaning of bliss — he never had to fork over a pound of flesh to help bail out bankrupt S&Ls.

At tax time, us single folk are punished financially if we don't own a house, don't single-handedly support a non-profit organization (say, a large ballet company), and don't have any little dependents that spit upon us or demand to see Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movies. It's a cowabunga of a bummer.

Obviously, we single people need more Schedule A tax deductions. With this in mind, I've created Susan B.'s Tax Reform Plan for Singles. This plan has zero chance of being approved by Congress, but I'll exercise my constitutional right to express goofy ideas anyway.

Deduction for Miscellaneous Chocolate Expenditures. This deduction covers expenses incurred while the single taxpayer is in the throes of heartbreak and indulging in grief-stricken pigouts. We're talking chocolate-chip cookies, chocolate mousse, chocolate cake, truffles, and sampler boxes.

The Good Impression Deduction (also known as the Investment-Dressing Tax Credit). This covers expenses incurred while trying to impress someone with whom you'd like to live happily ever after and make little drooling deductions. (I like the flawless logic behind this one.) Covers all killer outfits, seduction music, scented candles, hair and nails, condoms (and etc.), four-star meals, gas and mileage.

Deduction for Miscellaneous Mate-Hunting Expenses. Take this deduction for the thousands of dollars spent on dating services, personal ads, and watered-down happy-hour concoctions. This deduction has a sub-clause covering any medical expenses resulting from bad happy-hour hors d'oeuvres.

The Critter Maintenance Deduction. This provision offers single taxpayers credit for each dependent critter. Pets are like kids but don't drool as much. (Unless they're Irish setters.) Provision covers cats, dogs, birds, guppies, hamsters, and the like. Covers the smelly gorp they eat and the gravelly stuff that goes in their boxes/cages/aquariums.

Finally, my plan features the **Bad-Date Write-off.** This allows us to literally and figuratively write off mental anguish and expenses resulting from every lousy, boring, pointless date we have. Happy itemizing! ■

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Susan Barbieri is a columnist for The Orlando Sentinel.

In the world of Fortune 500 companies, being single can help or hurt, depending on your age, adds McKenna. If you are young and just starting to climb the corporate ladder, it's a plus: It's assumed that you can pick up and relocate on a moment's notice and work those 80-hour weeks without fear of ruining your home life. But as you progress in your career or profession, you're expected to settle down with a spouse and children.

"It's generally an advantage when you're younger and a disadvantage when you're older," McKenna says of singlehood.

Consider how most corporate health insurance policies work. Even though single

"A growing number of single Americans are claiming, demanding, the same kind of benefits and respect given married people. I find that very disturbing."

-- Bryce Christensen, head of the Rockford, Illinois-based Center on the Family in America, a conservative think-tank.

people may actually use far fewer benefits than their married-with-children counterparts, they rarely get a break when paying their corporate premiums.

Being single can cost you more on your time off the job as well.

Timeshare resorts, which sell rights to use a vacation facility for certain weeks during the year, have offered inducements like free gifts to potential customers who submit to their sales pitches. But some of those pitches have been offered only to married couples.

"As single travelers, we have problems," says Marilyn Rudne, a Miami, Florida, marketing consultant who travels extensively. "The way the bias shows up is monetarily. All of the travel facilities are built for couples." Many hotels and resorts will charge a solo sojourner their two-person rate. Often, the price for a single guest will be one-and-a-half to two times what a couple would pay, says Rudne. "About the only place you don't pay extra is on a plane."

In an attempt to help solo travelers overcome this price bias, Rudne launched the Single Travelers Network, which organized trips for singles, earlier this year. She contacted TV stations and newspapers around the nation and started advertising planned trips. She even created a short, syndicated television show to dispense information to solo travelers.

Rudne got thousands of inquiries but only a handful of solid commitments to go on trips; the network eventually foundered. "It was an enlightening, disturbing experience," she recalls. "I got a lot of calls saying 'What have you got for next week?'"

It was, Rudne says, symptomatic of how single people keep waiting for a "better offer" or hedge until the last minute in hopes that they will soon be part of a couple.

"They are reluctant to make a life as a single because they are always so busy trying to be couples," says Rudne.

Society dictates — so some singles are convinced — that the unmarried should devote themselves entirely to finding a mate.

"There is an assumption that it is always better to be working on a relationship than not being in one," says Norman Goldman, Ph.D., a Schenectady psychologist. "The pressure can be very, very heavy."

Goldman knows one man who has arranged his whole life around finding a wife. Every activity he engages in or every trip the man takes is planned with the hopes of meeting that special someone to marry.

Goldman says he asks such people if they really want to marry or if they're simply caving into society's pressure.

"We live very much in a couples culture," says Susan Barbieri, a columnist for *The Orlando Sentinel*, in Orlando, Florida, who writes about issues of interest to single people. "There's an assumption that you make being single a career, that you are always out there looking."

SINGLES RIGHTS

In March 1990, with great fanfare, a group of people in Southern California heralded the start of the "Singles Rights" movement.

It began in Los Angeles when a special Consumer Task Force issued a 126-page report detailing instances of discrimination against unmarried people in Southern California.

Among the abuses that Task Force members identified: Landlords who didn't want unmarried tenants; health clubs that gave discounts only to married couples; airline frequent flyer programs that were limited to married couples. Some of those problems have since been corrected.

But the so-called singles rights movement has yet to catch on nationwide.

"There seem to be pockets of people fighting here and there. It hasn't formed a cohesive movement like the women's movement or the gay rights movement or anything like that," says Thomas F. Coleman, a University of Southern California law professor who chaired the Los Angeles task force.

Coleman theorizes that the singles rights movement hasn't taken off in part because so many single people see themselves heading, hopefully, toward marriage. If they are not married, they may then suffer from a low self-esteem that causes them to "suffer in silence."

"Almost everyone wants to be married," says Coleman. "If they are not married, they feel like there is something wrong with them. People with low self-esteem don't generally join together to fight."

When the Los Angeles study came out, Virginia M. Apuzzo, the deputy executive director of the New York State Consumer Protection Board, was quoted as saying the entire singles rights issue (particularly as it pertains to financial or economic discrimination) warranted close examination. She also said her agency planned to look into it.

But as of last week, Apuzzo says budget cuts have prevented any probes of the issue.

"It's not that we're not interested. It's one of the things that's on the back burner," says Apuzzo.

She believes Americans have not yet come to grips with the fact that the nucle-

"Call it singles rights... Most of us aren't living in traditional families anymore and the rights and privileges extended to a few should be extended to everyone."

-- University of Southern California law professor Thomas F. Coleman, as quoted in the Los Angeles Times.

ar family — the prototypical mom and dad with two kids and a picket fence outside — is no longer the norm.