

Unattached, thank you, and loving it

By Martin Miller – Los Angeles Times – September 2, 2004

Jean Zartner had taken what seemed like a wrong turn.

The Denver resident was driving in an unfamiliar neighborhood with a friend and became lost. Then, the two women saw a freeway sign for Cheyenne, Wyo. about a two-hour drive.

"I half-joked we should go there right now," said Zartner, who writes corporate Web content. Then, they did — with no luggage, stops or plans. "We went to a Wal-Mart, bought toothbrushes and underwear, and then we danced all night at a cowboy bar."



The scenario sounds more like the spontaneous behavior of twentysomething college girls than the fiftysomething professionals it actually was. But then again when you're not married or otherwise attached, such spur-of-the-moment excursions become possible, said Zartner, 54, who has never been married and edits an online magazine, the Upside of Being Single.

Only a couple of decades ago, Zartner would have been considered a sad case, a solitary person, missing out on the joys of marriage and family. But today, she's part of a growing number of men and women reveling in their single status and rejecting the often-frenzied and sometimes-desperate search to "complete" themselves with a partner. In so doing,

they are just beginning to assert their influence culturally, politically and economically.

"A lot of companies don't understand this market yet," said Faith Popcorn, a New York-based trend forecaster and marketer. "They still think everyone wants to get married."

Thanks to high divorce rates, increased longevity and the rising age for first marriage, more Americans than ever are expected to have the opportunity to explore much of their adult life as a single person. In this expanding singles universe — around 86 million, according to the last U.S. census — women now actually spend more of their adult lives single than married. Men, by only a couple of years, are close to crossing the same threshold, demographers say.

Quite distinct from being lonely, singles comfortable with their status report having dynamic social lives with time for frequent engagements with family and friends. Far from being overwhelmed by loneliness and longing, they find that their lifestyle choice affords an obvious independence and spontaneity unknown to most couples.

The marketplace is just waking up to the vast and largely untapped pool of singles who, after all, account for a quarter of all travel and a third of home purchases. This year, De Beers, the world's top diamond producer, launched an ad campaign to sell diamond rings for the right hand.

"Your left hand says we; your right hand says me. Women of the world, raise your right hands," said the print ads.

"This is an example of what I call indulging in the perks of marriage without the marriage," Popcorn said. "Women don't need someone else to 'provide for them.' We're going to see more of this kind of ad."

Singles are also being encouraged by a batch of recent cookbooks to celebrate meals, instead of dreading them. Old stereotypes of a single glumly eating a frozen dinner in front of the television are giving way to sophisticated but manageable recipes for one. In books like Joyce Goldstein's "Solo Suppers" (2003, Chronicle Books) and even John Ash's "Cooking One-on-One Lessons From a Master Teacher" (2004, Clarkson Potter Publishers), one of the underlying messages is for singles to take the time to care and nurture themselves with healthful foods.

Such marketing reflects an initial, but still limited, recognition of the growing sea of singles.

"It often takes a while for society to catch up to an idea," said Barbara Feldon — best known for playing Agent 99 on the 1960s television series "Get Smart" — who wrote a book last year titled: "Living Alone and Loving It: A Guide to Relishing the Solo Life" (Fireside, 2003). "It's a different kind of happiness; it's different than mated happiness, but it is still happiness."

Much of the joy derives from nurturing and maintaining a strong network of friends, many singles report. Dinner parties and impromptu outings to the movies or for coffee enrich their lives and help fulfill a desire for companionship.

"In my group of friends, I'm often the event planner," Feldon said. "In some ways, I'm the bridge, and my friends walk across. It's something I never really developed when I was with someone, and I love it."



Single status also affords time for creative endeavors that could be difficult to pursue in most serious relationships. Researchers have found happier singles usually have a strong passion for something, whether it's writing, collecting or a physical activity.

"I'm an artist, and I'm free to do that whenever I want," said Miriam Greenwald, 55, a proofreader who lives near Philadelphia and has never been married. "I'm not trying to compensate for something. This is what I love to do."

Still, a stigma persists for many singles. Psychologist and author Bella DePaulo points out that the societal myth is: If you're alone, you must be unlovable. In popular mythology, promoted in everything from movies to greeting cards, a partner is supposed to fulfill either all or most of one's needs for emotional intimacy, financial security and romantic sex and love.

"We've come to the point in America where we think the only real root to happiness and a meaningful life is coupling," said DePaulo, who has written extensively about society and singles. "Single people are defined by what they don't have."

Relationship horizons weren't always so narrow, according to social historians. For instance, centuries ago, the American family was primarily an economic

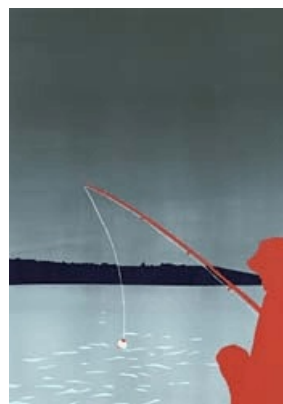
unit that provided an important context for education, religion and care of the needy, DePaulo said. And around the turn of the 20th century, it was far more common for adults to maintain rich relationships with same-sex adults, both family members and friends, she added.

"It was not really until the last century that the perfect couple assumed a central place in the Western imagination," wrote historian John Gillis in "A World of Their Own Making." "Romantic love has never been more valued than right now."

The myth of the über-couple often translates into political and economic mistreatment of the single person, many singles advocates contend.

Singles routinely face tax and insurance penalties, housing discrimination and inequities in Social Security benefits solely because of their status, said Tom Coleman, executive director of Unmarried America, a nonprofit advocacy group for singles rights.

"None of the political candidates will even say the 'S word,'" said Coleman, whose organization is based in Glendale. "They'll say 'marriage, family, seniors,' and Democrats will say 'minorities,' but nobody acknowledges [singles]. Not even [Ralph] Nader, and he is one of them."



Societal judgments don't make opting for a single life any easier. Decades ago, women were considered sad old maids, men were dirty old bachelors. There are still remnants of these biases, sociologists say.

"Society doesn't want people to be mateless," said Ester Buchholz, director of the psychology of parenthood program at New York University. "They want it to perpetuate itself. All the push all the time is toward relationships, and if you resist that you're just considered antisocial or crazy."

Research on singles is still thin. And what research exists has yet to identify the types of personalities best suited for happiness and living alone. Whatever the driving forces, singles are simply trying to strike the same balance as everyone else, say psychologists — namely, between the two powerful and universal human needs for attachment and solitude.