THE NEW EXTENDED FAMILY
Divorce Reshapes the American Household
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Cover: Members of the Dinkel-Hanna extended family gathered in Des Moines. A fuller group portrait appears on Pages 26-27 with identifications on Page 44.
Photograph by John Marmaras / Woodfin Camp and Associates.

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The instant expansion of families caused by remarriage after divorce has altered the meaning of 'family.'
THE NEW EXTENDED FAMILY
Divorce Reshapes the American Household
In Menlo Park, Calif., the Lahrs and Wards (above) live in the same neighborhood. The Coopers (right) live in Opelika, Ala., far from former spouses. (Identifications are on page 46.)

By Michael Norman

Menlo Park, Calif., a small bedroom community on the San Francisco peninsula, likes to think of itself as a quiet haven in the middle of noisy suburban sprawl — the perfect place for the modern family to raise its children. The president of the local Chamber of Commerce reassuringly tells newcomers about apricot orchards on the edge of town, merchants who know customers by their first names, and a hardware store that still sells tenpenny nails out of the barrel. But in some ways, Menlo Park only mimics the manners of the past — this is, after all, California, a place known for discarding customs almost as fast as they are embraced.

Peter and Karen Ward, John and Jan Lahr and Sandy Ward all live within eight blocks of one another in Menlo Park. Their three houses form a sort of triangle in the neighborhood, the “Bermuda Triangle,” they call it, only half jokingly. Four years ago, Peter was married to Sandy, and Karen was married to John. They had known one another for years, going back to their graduate-school days. Each couple had a son and daughter.

Peter and Sandy’s marriage was the first to go sour. Sandy moved out and Peter kept custody of the children. Then Karen and John separated. Karen married Peter and, with her children, moved into his house. Later, John met Jan, who married him and moved into his house. Sandy, meanwhile, with the money from the divorce settlement, bought a house nearby. And that is how Peter and (Continued on Page 44)

Michael Norman is a freelance writer who reports frequently on social trends.
Four out of every five people who go through a first divorce remarry within three to five years of the final decree.
Karen, John and Jan and Sandy, came to live in the triangle, and how five adults share four children and how all of them are linked in a new social network, a new American extended family, as it might be called.

Created by divorce and remarriage, and common to millions of Americans in every section of the country and on every rung of the social and economic ladder, the new American extended family has attracted the attention of social scientists nationwide. In the first flurry of research, they have given it a variety of names — conjugal continuation, second-marriage family, stepfamily, blended family, reconstituted family and metafamily. Whatever the label, it challenges some of the most basic tenets about family life and about the relationships between men and women, between parents, children, stepchildren, stepparents, grandparents and stepgrandparents. This week, like families everywhere, they will gather together for Thanksgiving and the traditional meal, but for them, the family seated at the table will have a distinctly untraditional shape.

There are roughly 3.5 million households, one out of every seven in this country, in which at least one parent has remarried and at least one child is from a previous union. Many of these children spend a good deal of time in the home of their other biological parent, and thus become the link, the nexus that connects two families and, at the same time, extends one family over several households.

From this it is clear that modern American family does not match our popular or political notions about it. President-elect Ronald Reagan may have persistently called for the preservation of the hollowed nuclear family, but for a great number of people that kind of family is a myth, an ideal that no longer serves them. Indeed, it even escapes President Ronal Reagan, the first American President to enter office divorced and remarried.

Our old and comfortable ideas about the family fall in the face of some unsettling statistics. One scholar predicts that half of all people married in the last decade will commit adultery. Statisticians tell us that 40 percent of all marriages in the 1980's will end in divorce, and they say that by 1990, only slightly more than half, 56 percent, of the children in the United States under the age of 18 will be living with both their natural parents. But, as it seems to be, the family is still the basic thread from which American society takes its shape. It's just that now it is woven together in different patterns.

Four out of every five people who go through a first divorce remarry, most within three to five years of their final decree. Thus it is that husbands and wives, their former partners, children and stepchildren, and a whole constellation of grandparents and other relatives are brought together in the new American extended family.

Proportionally, there were almost as many families made by remarriage in the 19th century as there are today. However, the families of our grandparents were victims of a high mortality rate. Now, it is mostly divorce that splits us apart. Yet, though separated,
we remain related. "Divorce can never gainsay kinship," says anthropologist Paul J. Bohannan of the University of California at Santa Barbara. "My ex-wife will always be my son's mother and my ex-wife's mother will always be his grandmother, whether I like it or not."

Still, the researchers tell us that our desire to be part of a family has not been tempered by the disillusionment that usually follows a divorce. In fact, as the places where we live become more impersonal, the family, whatever its form, becomes more important. We turn to it, not as we once did, for shelter, for a job, for an education — these are now provided by our public institutions — but for emotional support. The family is our well-spring of feeling, our touchstone, the place we go when we want to find out who we are. More than anything else, we demand intimacy from it, and when we do not receive that intimacy, we divorce, remarry and look for it once again. Divorce, the scholars say, is not a repudiation of the family. Rather, it is the rejection of a particular partner.

Thus we seek family, but our second experience with it is never the same as the first. The relationships in a traditional family evolve and develop slowly. But the stepfamily is an instant family, created at the moment the marriage vows are spoken. The ties are impromptu, the relationships without guidelines. For example, how should a man's new wife, who is his son's stepmother, treat his former wife's parents, who are the boy's grandparents? Since this is a new social arrangement, society has yet to establish models for its behavior. "There are no rules, no stereotypes for these people to draw on," says Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, who, with Graham B. Spanier, a sociologist at Pennsylvania State University, just completed three years of research for a study of divorce and remarriage.

In part, the lack of models or standards leaves the new extended family adrift and vulnerable to trouble. The divorce rate for remarried women in their 20's and 30's — including those without children — is 44 percent, six percentage points higher than that of first marriages. Stepfamilies are often beset by jealousies and conflicts of loyalty not found in traditional families. Sometimes, children who resent the experience of divorce either cannot adapt to the new family or try to tear it apart. And many husbands and wives

(Continued on Page 53)
carry into their second marriage the attitudes and behavior that ruptured their first.

But the new extended families that survive, and more of them do than do not, are held together by people who have created their own rules and models and who have re-examined their ideas on love, marriage and parenthood. Many remarried couples say that with the passing of their first romance, their first marriage and the birth of their first child, they also lose their innocence and their illusions about family life. They go into their new families with psyches that are often bruised and marked, and many of them, like the Lahrs and Wards of Menlo Park, are aware that their new family groups are much more complex and intricate than the ones they left.

In many respects the Lahrs and Wards are an unusually well-adjusted group. They have managed to overcome difficulties that divide other new extended families or take them years to settle. They are, it would seem, a textbook example of how a new social arrangement can work.

Home base for the four children, ages 7 to 11, is with Karen and Peter Ward, but every other weekend and one evening a week, they pair off to spend time with their non-custodial parents — Sandy Ward, who lives alone, and John Lahr and his new wife, Jan. The adults drop the children off at each others' homes, talk regularly, even attend school conferences together.

“I think we're very much like the old extended family,” says Sandy Ward, a thin, busy woman who is 37 years old and a librarian at Stanford University. “Some of us get along with each other better than the others, just like in any other family.”

But this sense of family is not shared by all the members of the Menlo Park group. John Lahr, 36, whose former wife married Sandy's former husband, says, “I don't think we're an extended family at all. We don't have a relationship with Karen and Peter or a relationship with Peter's children.”

John's wife, Jan, a 32-year-old nurse, also feels no kinship with the other adult members of the family: “The relationship I have with Karen and Peter is a business relationship. I think a social relationship would be risky and would interfere with what I have with John's kids.”

Though the Lahrs and Wards have tried to work smoothly with each other, some problems have been unavoidable. Two of the children had night-
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mores following their parents' separation, but these have passed. Sometimes the children become confused and call their parents and stepparents by the wrong name, but then strangers to the group have done the same thing. Mostly the children count their assets. "Hey, did you know I have two mommies and two daddys and two houses and a brother and two sisters and six dogs and a cat and ... " says 7-year-old Nils Lahr.

Like other families, the people of Menlo Park discovered that divorce and remarriage create multiple parents for the child and multiple roles for the parent. A stepparent is clearly not the same as a biological parent, but a biological parent without custody is clearly not the same either. The roles change and shift and tangle, and the family that survives is one in which the members are able to sort things out. One person may have to take for himself a role that is unfamiliar, while another must surrender one to which he has become accustomed.

Sandy Ward exchanged the role of full-time wife and mother, which she came to abhor, for the role of a distant parent, which she now willingly embraces: "At times I used to resent my two kids. I was with them full-time for seven years. Now I love being with them. The time we spend together is so much more meaningful. I'm very much like a grandmother to them. I'm a very significant person in their lives. I take full responsibility for them when they're with me, but I don't need to see them more than I do. I'm not Momma."

Peter Ward, 37, and Karen Lahr Ward, 32, play two parts simultaneously: parent and stepparent. The dual role gives them a kind of familial double vision, something they see as a distinct advantage: "We've discovered that each of us tends to favor the older of our own two children," says Peter. "I caught that in Karen and she caught that in me. We've also found that our kids have some traits of our exspouses that drive us crazy. But Karen doesn't have my excess baggage, and I don't have hers, so we can see each other's children a little more objectively. To me, the guts of the whole thing is whether we feel good as a group. If John's around our house, his kids call me Daddy-Peter. If not, they just call me Daddy. I'm sensitive to the fact that's hard on John."

"I don't feel threatened by Peter. I know the kids get on very well with him," says John Lahr, who is a part-time parent but would rather he were not. His divorce from

(Continued on Page 147)

Montreal

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Karen jarred his notion of family and parenthood. His marriage to Jan has given him back some equilibrium: “The first year or two after the divorce to Jan has given him family and parenthood. His back some equilibrium: “The divorce, I was very nervous that I would lose my sense of being as parent because I see them every week, something that would be difficult if it was only once a year.”

For his wife, Jan, the children at first presented a problem. She became an instant parent, something for which she was unprepared: “It wasn’t easy. First, the kids reminded me of a relationship my husband had had previously. Then I wanted to be a mother, equal to Karen, having the kids feel the same way about me they felt about her. After I realized that was wrong, I really backed off. I thought, O.K. they’re John’s kids, I’ll just be their friend. Then I saw I had a lot more going with them than that. The first year they spent vacation with us I couldn’t wait to see them leave. Last year when they left, I missed them terribly."

The experience of John and Jan Lahr in particular is a good example of what scholars are finding in their research on the new extended family. The sociologists Furstenberg and Spanier have found that fathers like John Lahr, who do not have custody of their children, often work harder at being parents than full-time fathers. “When they feel their relationship with the children is threatened, they become more determined than ever,” says Spanier. And, adds Furstenberg, “just because you’re a biological father doesn’t mean you’re a sociological father.”

Stepparents like Jan Lahr also cannot afford to take their roles for granted. “Stepparents know this,” says Bob. “Some times I look at it in a macabre way, like if one of my boys and one of Sharon’s girls were to be hit by a car and I could save only one of them, which would it be? I’d save my own kid. In reality, your loyalties are tested every day, particularly between you, your partner and the children, who constantly try to put themselves in the middle,” says Bob.

“From the beginning,” says Sharon, “Bob told his boys, ‘Don’t try to put yourself between me and Sharon, because you’re not going to do it.’” This edict, as she found out, had some predictable consequences: “I don’t think the boys feel real affection for me, and that bothers me. But I think they’ve come to respect me.”

The children, in their own way, echo their parents. “Our relationship with Sharon is not tops,” says Jeff, Bob’s 16-year-old. “We don’t get along as well with her as we do with my real mom.”

“I don’t think of Bob as my dad,” says Lyn, Sharon’s 10-year-old daughter. “It’s hard for me to explain. He’s just not like my real father.”

Though noncustodial parents are a significant part of the new extended family, they often feel estranged. The ties between a man and his former wife and a woman and her former husband are usually brittle and tenuous. “I’m very tense around Sharon,” says her former husband, Larry Patterson, who, with his new wife, Nan, lives 500 miles away in Freeport, (Continued on Page 162)
A DOCTOR'S ANSWER TO BALDNESS
by Paul Lockridge

There IS something new under the sun. It's a doctor's answer to baldness, and, in addition to everything else, it sells the sun from reaching bald heads.

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The people who have had the process say that the new hair is surgically attached to the scalp and the procedure is completely painless. The doctors performing the hair replacements say there is absolutely no chance of rejection or infection.

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"You'll be a 'different' person."
Continued from Page 162

social pressure on keeping the family intact.

No matter. The Coopers wanted what convention demanded. Their family extends no farther than the Opelika city limits. At times it may embrace a distant uncle or grandparent, but it is firmly anchored in the local neighborhood of exclusive development. Former spouses, on occasion, are welcome, but they are not included. The children “visit” them and then return “home,” and then’s the way the Coopers like it.

Joan, who is 42, a handsome woman, quiet but not remote, says, “My ex-husband lives in North Carolina, and my ex’s ex-wife in Chicago, and that distance is a real advantage. Shuttling back and forth would be totally confusing to the kids. It would have been a lot harder to raise my own children, and Bob’s three, as one family if the other parents had lived closer.” Bob, who is 38, short, fit and exceedingly polite, felt the same way. “My parents were divorced when I was a young boy, and I felt torn between two different kinds of love and two different life styles. My mother was strict and harsh. My father, who I adored, had no regard for us. He didn’t care about the family.” Bob thought of his brother, who died in a car crash when he was 16, and of the children he left behind. “I’d just leave.”

They tried to give their children both, Bob in his world, Joan in hers, each in excess. They presented themselves as one family, traditional and circumscribed. But they knew, no matter how hard they tried to do it, that regardless of how much they blended, they could not perform social alchemy. Joan did not try to be a replacement mother to Bob’s children, and Bob did not try to supplant Joan’s former husband. Neither of them really wanted that. In a way they wanted more, especially Joan. “I wanted the marriage and the family to be perfect. I wanted to be a good mother. I guess unconsciously I put the kids first. Anytime they had a problem, I would make it mine. I worked for the first six years of our marriage before I quit because I felt guilty about it. I even felt guilty when I went to get my hair done. It was like I was taking something away from the kids. I also wanted so much for my second marriage to be better than my first.”

Joan’s reaction, say the people who study and analyze family life, was not uncommon. “Stepparents who set themselves up in the nuclear-famil­y mold often try to act out stereotypes, ideals,” says Emily B. Visser, a California psychologist and president of the Stepmfamily Association of America in Palo Alto, Calif. “They try overly hard to be what they think they should be rather than what they are. They constantly try to prove things to themselves and often to the community instead of just trying to relax.”

Bob, too, felt pressure to prove just how the Coopers like it.

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Joan’s reaction, say the people who study and analyze family life, was not uncommon. “Stepparents who set the (Continued on Page 172)
the woman and Ben's son, Richard, seemed to develop an affection for each other. But things quickly changed. "After we got married, I wanted to spend less time with her. Then she said Richard didn't like her. Every situation changed. "After we got married, she said, 'I'm feeling great. Then Richard and I were alone together. We were very affectionate and we were best to end it. Her face changed. She said, 'I don't like you. You're not my father.' "One night we were having a child with someone else."

From that point on, the relationship with their parents or stepparents. Many also had difficulty in school, difficulty forming friendships, or they suffered from psychosomatic illness or depression.

These symptoms were tied to a variety of attitudes. Children often see remarriage as an "additional trauma," according to Dr. Sager. The close bond they develop with a single parent following a divorce is broken when a stepfather or stepmother moves into the house. From that point on, the child is thrust into a family arrangement that is unlike anything he has known. Child may feel he must compete with a new set of siblings who are strangers. Further, whatever fantasy he had of his parents reuniting is shattered and he often feels he must choose between a new "mother" or "father" and the one who stayed behind.

As is often the case, the most telling notions about children come from the children themselves. But another 40-year-old girl from the Middle West watched her mother's second courtship and said, "I thought he was my half-brother. Mom said she was married for a while, then she meets him and boom, she marries him. She said she didn't like him at first. Then she said, 'He kinda grows on you.'"

It's clear from what children say that the subject of remarriage is much on their minds. They frequently compare notes, as this 13-year-old girl from the Southwest said. "When we talk about each other's experiences of the new ex-extended family, the stepfather's relationship, do you think your father not like your mother?" "What's it like not being with him?" I say, 'I've got someone to take care of me.'"

In the end, of course, what matters most is the future. How will divorce, remarriage and the experience of the new family affect the attitudes and behavior of the next generation? Will their families be any more stable and resilient than ours? Will they repeat the patterns of their parents or rebel against them and create what they believe to be a more traditional social climate? "That's the question," says sociologist Furstenberg. "We really don't know what the child will feel about life and the family in the future."

Perhaps not, but the last word on the subject should come from someone who is likely to give us a window on what's ahead. The herald, in this case, is a 12-year-old Texas girl, who lives with her parents and two sisters and stepfather: "Oh, yes, I know I'll get married. The divorce isn't the worst thing that happened to me. I was really hurt at first, but everything turned out all right in the end. When I grow up, I want to have a happy family and live on the farm with a couple of kids and a nice, cozy little home."