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**Divorce Reshapes the American Household**

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November 23, 1980

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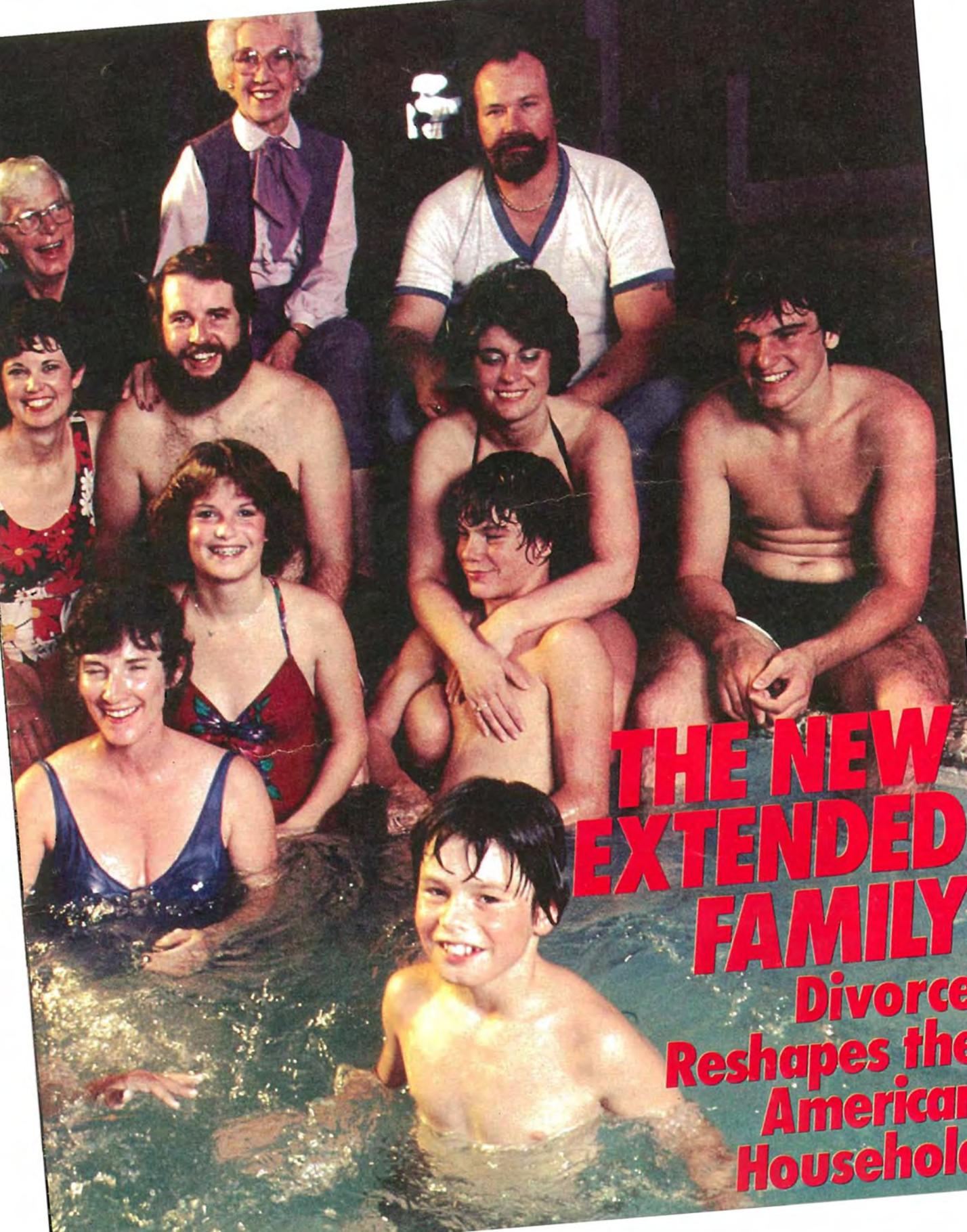
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**Cover:** Members of the Dinkel-Hanna extended family gathered in Des Moines. A fuller group portrait appears on Pages 26-27 with identifications on Page 44. Photograph by John Marmaras / Woodfin Camp and Associates.

**T**he instant expansion of families caused by remarriage after divorce has altered the meaning of 'family.'



*Right, the Dinkel-Hanna extended family during a recent reunion at a motel in Des Moines. (Identifications are on Page 44.)*



# 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.



**F**our out of every five people who go through a first divorce remarry within three to five years of the final decree.





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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."

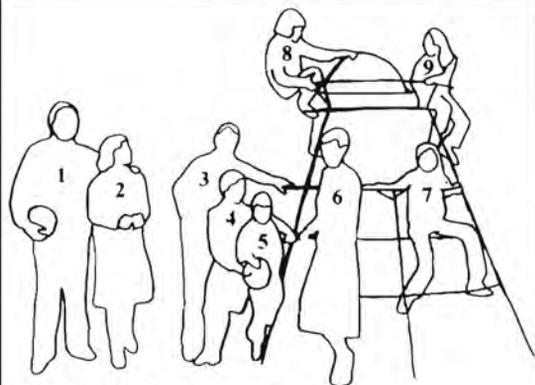
Still, the researchers tell us that our desire to be part of a family has not been tempered by the disillusionment that usually follows a divorce. In fact, as the places where we live become more impersonal, the family, whatever its form, becomes more important. We turn to it, not as we once did, for 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 stepfa-

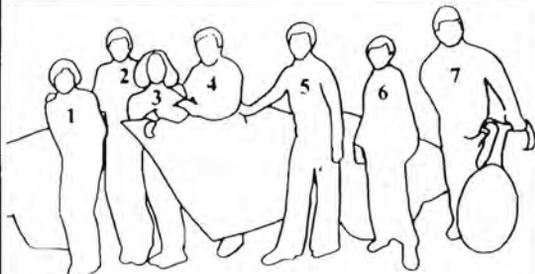
mily is an instant family, created at the moment the marriage vows are spoken. The ties are impromptu, the relationships without guidelines. For example, how should a man's new wife, who is his son's stepmother, treat his former wife's parents, who are the boy's grandparents? Since this is a new social 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)



**The Lahrs and Wards:** 1. Peter Ward; 2. Karen Ward; 3. John Lahr; 4. Jan Lahr; 5. Nils Lahr; 6. Sandy Ward; 7. Taya Lahr; 8. Chris Ward; 9. Tonya Ward, in a playground.



**The Coopers of Opelika, Ala.:** 1. Kathy Reiter; 2. Ricky Cooper; 3. Julie Cooper; 4. Bob Cooper; 5. Joan Cooper; 6. Freddie Reiter; 7. Bobby Cooper, gathered around Bob's Maserati.

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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mares 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 mommys 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 ex-spouses 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)



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# FAMILY

Continued from Page 54

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, I was very nervous that my sense of being as parent would be eroded by being separated from the kids. Now I feel I can maintain that special rapport with them, especially 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. "Stepparenthood has to be earned; it is made and can be unmade, and stepparents know this," says Furstenberg.



On a recent autumnal Saturday in Lincoln, Neb., a football

Saturday, the shops along the main drag were open but not crowded, which was just as well, for clerk and customer alike seemed to go about their business with a certain preoccupation. The hometown team, the University of Nebraska, Big Red, was away playing Penn State in a big game.

At 6317 Deerwood Drive, a split-level, red-brick house in a development on the southeast side of the city, a group of adults and children was gathered in front of a television set, whooping and hollering at the screen. Sharon Hanna, the hostess, sat nibbling popcorn between first downs. Her husband, Bob Dinkel, hovered, drink in hand, nearby.

They have been married almost two years now. Sharon, a community college instructor, is a comely woman with a long face and short graying hair. Her first marriage lasted 14 years. Bob, a fencing contractor, is a tall, energetic man with glasses and a dark mustache. He had been married for 13 years. Both of them are 40 years old and have two children — Bob's boys are 14 and 16, Sharon's girls are 10 and 14.

Early in their marriage, Bob and Sharon were forced to confront the major source of diffi-

culty for most new extended families. "The chief problem is the conflict over children," says Jean Giles-Sims, a sociologist at Texas Christian University. "Some families have told me that their problems with children are so immediate and so pressing that the couple do not have the time to settle into a relationship of their own."

What's more, children in extended families are often treated as if they were property. If a stepparent tries to discipline his partner's child, he is sometimes told that he is trespassing. And when there are children from two marriages in the house, parents usually find themselves torn between their kin and their stepkin.

"This is something you have to get straight. You treat all the kids equal, but there's a bond you have with your own children," says Bob. "Sometimes I look at it in a macabre way, like if one of my boys and one of Sharon's girls were about 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 good 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)

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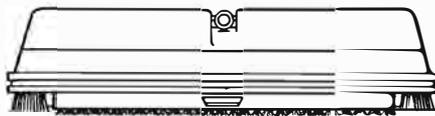
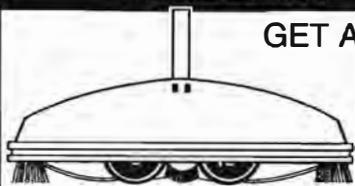


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# FAMILY

Continued from Page 147

Ill. "Maybe it's because she has control of everything, visiting and all, and when I get frustrated or mad at what she's doing with the girls, I can't fight back."

Bob's former wife, Karen Baxter, and her new husband, Jerry, live in Eagan, Minn., 400 miles from Lincoln. "Bob wouldn't be my friend on any terms," she says. "I spent 13 years with him, and I still can't stand him. I guess I don't like his reprimanding my kids."

Still, despite the bitterness between Bob and Karen and the unfinished business on all sides, the members of this new extended family have managed to get together. In October, the three couples, the four children, Bob's parents, his sister, her husband and their two children, and Sharon's parents - 18 people in all - met for a weekend in Des Moines, a middle point for all of them. They all stayed at the same motel, shared the children, and talked. "It was a really bizarre thing," said Bob's former wife, Karen, "just unreal that we were all together and not scrapping."

As expected, there were some awkward moments. On Sunday, the three couples, "all the parents," as Sharon described them, had a meeting. The air at first was a bit thick. Larry said he had trouble looking at his former wife, Sharon. Nan, his new wife, said she felt Sharon had trouble looking at her. Then the fog rolled out and they got down to business. Sharon and Bob promised to be more reasonable and flexible with scheduling the children's visits, and they all agreed to stop using the children as "messengers" if they had something they really wanted to say to each other. "The kids always tell us what they think we want to hear," said Larry. And Sharon and Nan discovered they had something other than Larry in common. As stepmothers, both felt "unappreciated."

No extended family, of course, is complete without grandparents, and remarriage has given Sharon and Bob's children 10 grandparents, all of whom they see periodically. Some of the grandparents, in fact, have developed their own subfamily network. Sharon's parents often spend time with Bob's parents in Minnesota and occasionally see Larry's parents, who live in Colorado. What's more, after Sharon and Larry divorced, the Pattersons helped their former daughter-in-law buy a house

and paid her tuition through graduate school. Larry visits his former in-laws as well.

"He and Nan sometimes stop by here when they've got the kids," says Sharon's mother, Lorane Hanna, who lives in Cozad, Neb. "I was surprised when I first met Nan, she was so different from Sharon. The divorce really upset us. Sharon and Larry went together for so long. I thought, heavens, they should have known each other. But I guess people change. We're real pleased with Bob. His sons are the next thing to being our own."

It is common for grandparents to lose contact with their grandchildren following a divorce. But, in many instances, remarriage makes grandparents part of a large pool of relatives, a pool for the child that includes blood relatives and extends to the step-grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins created by the new marriage. "For the child, this is usually a real boon," concludes Frank F. Furstenberg, the sociologist. "It means being connected, albeit sometimes weakly, to a great number of adults who are prepared to treat him as kin."

□

Lately, Opelika, Ala., a mill town of 22,000 people, has been busily primping itself. Down by the railroad tracks, the streets still sag, but the cotton warehouses wear a fresh coat of paint, and they are finally getting around to fixing the clock on the old county courthouse. New money and new enthusiasm have moved into some of the weathered Victorian houses in town. The gingerbread gleams again, the porch swings are busy at night, and when the dogwood is in bloom, the old neighborhoods seem as solid and stately as they once were.

In short, as Joan and Bob Cooper discovered, it is the kind of place where a fondness for the past tends to linger. When Bob and Joan talked about marriage eight years ago, they never for a moment considered living together first. "Living together?" Joan says with a smile. "Not in Opelika. That's really looked down on in this part of the country." And later, when problems erupted in their marriage, they sensed a certain disapproval in the air. "Down here," says Bob, "you feel a tremendous amount of

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# FAMILY

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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 their house in an exclusive development. Former spouses, on occasion, are welcome, but they are not included. The children "visit" them and then return "home," and that'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 Bob'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 two 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 was lenient. He gave me love, my mother gave me material things." Years later, the Coopers tried to give their children both, Bob in his way, 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 redraw their lines, no matter 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 and I quit because I felt guilty about that. 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. Visher, a California psychologist and president of the Stepfamily 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 himself to his stepchildren, though not as long as Joan did. When they were first married, he worked hard to win the affection of Joan's son and daughter, Freddie and Kathy Reiter, but the harder he worked, the more he ignored his own three children, sometimes treating them harshly. "Joan's kids were very mild-mannered. I had three children who were hyperactive. When problems broke out, they were usually at the center of things, so I was very hard on my kids. Then, a few years ago, I realized I'd better get off them, because I was losing them."

All of this, of course, led to a crisis in the Cooper family. But the moment of turmoil, like similar moments in every family, was brought on by a combination of things. For years, Bob and Joan argued about money. She thought he was prodigal, he thought she was too frugal. Joan thought Bob's preoccupation with material things showed "he didn't care about the family." Bob didn't see it that way. He believed he was "providing for the household and for the future of the children." The more money he spent, the more she worried, and the harder she tried to be the perfect mother. Bob felt estranged from the family and "wanted to walk out."

Much of this conflict was unspoken, but the discord created enough noise to attract the attention of their children, who now range in age from 12 to 17. One of them finally needed counseling, the others needed reassurance. "Sometimes when mommy and daddy got to fighting real bad, you kinda got scared," says Julie, Bob's 14-year-old daughter. "If they got divorced, you wouldn't know what was going to happen, you wouldn't know if we could afford to stay in this house or what the future would be."

In all likelihood, the Coopers' future will resemble their

past, with a few exceptions. Bob and Joan have reached an accommodation. Bob now provides more time instead of more possessions for his family and Joan is no longer consumed by an ideal.

"We live in a traditional place and we're still trying to establish a traditional family," she says. "But we're balancing things out. I haven't backed off. It's just I feel more comfortable with my role. I want to give the kids customs and rituals they never had. We're evolving into a family instead of trying to force it."

Clifford J. Sager is convinced that the American family, whatever its design, will outlive those who prophesy its death. His conviction, given what people tell him daily, makes him either an unbridled optimist or a man who hears hope in the language of despair. As a psychiatrist, of course, he is the latter. Dr. Sager directs the family psychiatry and remarriage consultation program of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services in New York City.

He is quick to point out that the only kind of people who pass through his office are those with problems, and neither he nor anyone else can assess the general mental and emotional health of a particular class of people or type of family. It would, therefore, be a mistake to assume that nuclear families experience any greater well-being than their less conventional counterparts. Clinicians can, however, tell us what they typically find in the people who come to them.

"The basic conflict in adults in second marriages is that they are torn between their need for romantic love and the demands of the children," says Dr. Sager. "For instance, a wife who marries a man with children may feel he is devoting too much attention to them, and she may become disaffected. I've also found that the emotional divorce takes place long after the legal divorce. In this regard, you find that a lot of people are jealous of their partners' ex's."

Other counselors take a slightly different view. "Romance is the big problem," says Jeannette Lofas, director of the Stepfamily Foundation Inc. of Manhattan. "A lot of people go into second marriages with the same romantic, unrealistic ideas that got them into trouble the first time. Romance is great on the weekends. But during the week, you've just plain got to work at it, and a lot of people

don't want to do that." Whatever the reason — jealousy, conflicts of loyalty, money, power or sex — the new extended family is subject to a high divorce rate. And the people who go through that divorce report that it is no easier the second time around.

Ruth Ross (not her real name) lives alone these days in a spacious apartment a short drive from midtown Manhattan. She is in her mid-50's, tall and blond. Her first marriage lasted 15 years and produced two boys and a girl. It ended when her husband lost his sense of direction and his sense of family. A short time later, she met a man who was "alive, vibrant, attractive — to me, he was a glamorous person compared to the staid man I'd just left."

They married, but it wasn't long before she discovered that "he was extremely selfish and a megalomaniac." Still, "I wanted to make the marriage work, but I went into it feeling guilty that I had picked a man for myself and not a good father for my children." As it turned out, she says, he was neither.

"He was particularly hard on one of my boys. The child looked like my ex-husband, and I guess my new husband resented that. The boy really wanted a good family life, so he was vulnerable. My husband would call him into his study and tell him we were going to get divorced. The worst incident came on a camping trip. My ex-husband had given my son a beautiful compass. We were walking along a trail and my son wanted to go in one direction and his stepfather in another. They argued, and my husband took that compass and smashed it against a tree. He knew it was my son's most prized possession."

It was eight years before Ruth Ross left her second husband. "I was afraid to admit I'd made a mistake. He kept telling me I put my children first, but, in truth, I really neglected them."

Then there's the case of Ben Capella (also not his real name), a 35-year-old executive with a graphic-arts firm in New York City. Ben's first marriage ended in divorce after eight years. His former wife won custody of their 4-year-old son, but Ben saw the boy most weekends and talked to him frequently at night. A few years later, he met "a beautiful, really beautiful and talented woman" who was considerably younger than he. During their courtship,

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