“Changing Attitudes: Aging In America”

The experience of aging in America is not the same today as it was in earlier historical times. Until the last 50 years or so, only a minority of people lived to old age. The social, political and economic roles of older people during the colonial days differed greatly from contemporary expectations. As the older population becomes larger, we can expect to see continued changes in attitudes toward old age. The following highlights some of the historical changes that occurred in the United States.

David Hackett Fischer, a social historian, studied the changing role of older people from colonial times to the present. In *Growing Old in America* (Oxford University Press, 1978) Fischer wrote that older adults in colonial America were not only respected, but venerated. Old age was treated with respect, partly because so few people reached old age; only one out of 50 (two percent) were age 65 and over. Not just those elders who held chief religious and political positions, but all old people were given special consideration. For example, church seating was assigned with the oldest members of the congregation near the pulpit, with the rest of the church generally seated according to age behind them. Much was written during this period to instruct young people on the proper behavior to exhibit toward elders. In fact, it was a Puritan belief that old age was a sign of God’s favor. Respect for the old was viewed as an innate instinct, a natural law which any young person would obey instinctively.

During this time, the veneration of age was characterized more with awe than with affection. While power and prestige were reserved for older adults, emotional distance between young and old existed. The veneration of age continued through the colonial period and increased to the point where people not only venerated age but emulated it. The powdering of hair and wearing of white wigs is an example of this effort by the young to appear older.

When and how did the attitudes toward and status of older adults change? According to Fischer, the change in age relations began in the half century between 1770 and 1820, roughly the period of the American Revolution and establishment of the republic. Evidence indicates that the reaction against the elderly was part of the general revolutionary spirit of the times. Since elders largely controlled society in terms of politics, religion and property ownership, it was natural for a revolt against the “establishment” to carry with it a reaction against age itself.

The new attitudes toward age and the aged were manifested in many ways. Instead of powdered hair or wigs, toupees and dyed hair became fashionable ways to disguise one’s age. Clothing, previously tailored to make one look old, now was tailored to create a youthful appearance. Prior to this time, adults often claimed to be older than they were, but now people often claimed to be younger. Seating by age in churches was abandoned; instead, pews were put up for auction with the best seats going to the highest bids in support of the church. Terms of respect for older people became pejorative expressions, and some new terms of disrespect came into use. *Gaffer*, a term of endearment contracted from *grandfather or godfather*, became a term of contempt. *Fogy*, which had referred to a wounded military veteran, became a disrespectful term for an elderly man. Other opprobrious terms appeared—*old goat, codger, fuddy-duddy, geezer, galoot and baldy*.

The revolution in age relations grew through the 19th and 20th centuries into a “cult of youth.” Henry David Thoreau expressed the new attitude of the young when, in 1847, at age 30, he wrote: “I have lived some 30 years on this planet and I have yet to hear the first syllable of
valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing and probably cannot teach me anything.”

Gerontophobia, the fear of aging and the aged, took many forms and spread to all age groups in society, including older people themselves. Although the average age of workers increased steadily as the general population grew older, discrimination against older workers began. This eventually led to a widespread practice of mandatory retirement, meaning mandatory poverty for many older workers.

The old system of family responsibility for the aged began to break down. The early 19th century witnessed the establishment of the first old-age homes for people of the uppermiddle class. By the end of the 19th century there were old-age homes, or “poor houses,” under a variety of names throughout the country. These were for older people who were unable to provide for themselves and who had no one else to provide for them. Literature no longer assigned active and attractive roles to older characters. When older characters did appear in stories of the time, they often were treated as objects of pity or contempt.

The cult of youth affected the behavior of older people as well as young. Even when people did not lie about their age, a kind of denial of age became common in such expressions as: “You’re only as old as you feel,” or “I’m 60 years young.” A popular saying of the time was “age before beauty,” which implied age is ugly and beauty is young.

Ironically, as the education of young people improved in the United States, the relative condition of older Americans grew worse. “Old” knowledge became outmoded. The moral authority of old age was eroded. Age prejudice in employment opportunities increased. The growth of the factory system encouraged the growth of retirement, which brought increased poverty among the aged.

Fischer’s historical investigation spanned the period from 1600 to 1970. Since 1970, the United States has experienced a demographic revolution. Our young country is growing old. The current generation of older adults is healthier, lives longer, and has more money and education. The attitudes of the 19th century still prevail but probably not for long. We are witnessing continuing changes in attitudes toward old age as society notices the opportunities as well as the difficulties of later life. Our participation in these changes affects us as individuals as we grow older.