

THE REASONS TO

Party

HISTORY
PROVES
ANY WILL DO

By Kate E. Stephenson

it seems that throughout human history we have always looked for reasons to celebrate. Eating and drinking are integral components of being merry; add a bit of dancing and debauchery and you have a winning party recipe. While we don't really need much encouragement to get a party started, there are several benchmarks that warrant elaborate festivities just about everywhere — the Hudson Valley is by no means an exception, and indeed has become a haven for partiers with panache. These events can be lumped into three main categories: coming of age, pre-matrimonial, and achievement.

While most of us have attended at least one of these varieties (if not all), few of us really know how these celebrations came to be so important to our culture. We've been celebrating these landmark occasions for so long that they have become things we do with few questions asked. But for those of you who have found yourself sitting at a frilly table laden with flowers and ribbon, wondering, "What am I doing here?" we wanted to give you a few answers.



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COMING OF AGE CELEBRATIONS

Almost every culture marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. Many traditions today are colored by the Christian faith and European culture. But this Western influence merely adds to the long history of established coming of age rituals. (Americanization, in particular, has intensified the party aspects of originally religious customs.) The most noted coming of age events are the bar/bat mitzvah, quinceañera, and sweet 16.

In general terms, all these practices can be considered a debut. In fact, the Western influence that has infiltrated these customs is rooted in the debutante ball or season. In the French and British traditions, when girls came of age — normally around 16 — they were formally introduced or debuted to society; this was called a “season” and marked by a series of balls. At these soirees, marriages and other social connections were arranged. The cotillion is an outgrowth of this tradition and is still very popular in the South.

Historically, young people came into their maturity between the ages

of 12 and 16. They were considered adults in the eyes of society and the law at this age, and hence able to marry, be gainfully employed, and have children. By today’s modern standards this seems almost preposterous; yet when you examine our persistent cultural coming of age celebrations, history speaks volumes.

The bar mitzvah is the coming of age celebration for Jewish boys at age 13. “Bar mitzvah” translates to “son of commandment.” It marks the young man’s taking on the religious responsibility to study and honor the teachings of the Torah. Exactly when the observance of bar mitzvah began is not known, but classic sources refer to the age 13 as when males must fast on the Day of Atonement, and so begins their observance of the commandment. There is a great deal of religious ceremony attached to the bar mitzvah, but what has brought the observation into the popular consciousness is the after party. Bar mitzvahs are known to be elaborate, lavish, decadent affairs that celebrate entrance into manhood. These celebrations are thrown in large banquet halls and are replete with deejays, dancing, and fine dining.

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bat mitzvah ceremonies became popular in non-orthodox communities. Translated “daughter of commandment,” bat mitzvah is achieved at age 12 for females. It is the time at which they come into full observance and responsibility for maintaining the traditions of the commandments. (Interesting that females bear this burden a full year before males.) The first bat mitzvah was held in the United States on March 18, 1922 by Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan for his daughter Judith. While the female counterpart to the bar mitzvah has not been adopted uniformly across Jewish branches, many Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative synagogues now recognize some version of the bat mitzvah. Likewise, the party that follows the religious ceremony is often as lively and festive as that for males.

In the Latin American tradition the quinceañera, which literally translates to “one who is fifteen,” (also called fiesta de quince años, fiesta de quinceañera, quince años, quince, or baile de debutantes) is celebrated at — you guessed it — age 15. Traditionally this celebration has been solely for girls coming of age, but as all things evolve, in recent years males have

also begun to mark their birthdays with large celebrations.

The quinceañera has its roots in Native American traditions of the Aztecs, Inca, Maya, and Toltec, all of whom marked adulthood by separating males and females and training them for their gender-appropriate duties. A festival often marked this transition. European Christian colonization replaced many native elements with Western cultural expressions, introducing ball gowns, formal dances such as the waltz, and Christian religious observations. But the purpose remained the same — to introduce a young girl to society as a woman. Often the celebration begins with a holy Mass or blessing and is marked by several ceremonies that express this change. The specific celebrations vary from culture to culture but can include:

- Changing of the dress, from a girlish fashion to a more mature special dress for the occasion
- Changing of the shoes, in which the celebrant is presented with the symbolic first pair of high heels
- Fifteen-candle ceremony, in which 15 candles are lit representing the childhood years the

celebrant is leaving behind

- The exchange of the last doll, to symbolize the leaving of childhood and childish things behind.

These celebrations can be so large and lavish they resemble weddings in both size and expense. The girl is often accompanied by her court of damas and chamberlains (young women and men) who perform elaborate dances around her. Formal dress is mandatory and the event often requires weeks, if not months, of preparation.

The quinceañera shares many of its traditions with what North Americans call the sweet 16, and in fact many Latinas in the U.S. have blended the two traditions, celebrating traditional quinceañera customs on the 16th instead of the 15th birthday.

The sweet 16 is a far more secular celebration as the ceremony is not usually coupled with any spiritual ritual. It is solely a celebration of societal entry. While the sweet 16 is not always as elaborate as the quinceañera, they share many traditional aspects including the changing of shoes, the wearing of a tiara, the candle ceremony, and formal dancing.

In many ways all of these coming of age ceremonies echo each other; the core impetus is the transition into adulthood. Much significance is attached to the survival of adolescence and achieving one's maturity. All this pomp and circumstance may seem odd when the average life expectancy in developed countries is mid-70s, but not long ago many people in advanced countries only lived until 35. To make it past puberty was a big deal. And so today, we honor history and human advancement through these celebrations.

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cause we hold the joining of two people and two families with such high esteem, the celebration also often comes with a high price tag. And because of that high price tag an interesting custom was born: the bridal shower.

There is no traditional way to approach a bridal shower (also called wedding shower). Venues range from home basements to banquet halls, because the party is so specific to the socio-economic circumstances of the bride. In truth, its sole purpose is to amass gifts (similar to its sister party, the baby shower). It is said that the first of these occasions was held in 17th-century Netherlands to offset the stinginess of a penny-pinching father who refused to pay for the dowry and wedding. However, stories in Belgium and practices in the United States also place the bridal shower's origins sometime in the mid-1800s. This event was a way to fatten out a bride's dowry and also allow the married couple to begin their life as one without completely breaking the piggy bank.

Traditionally, while the bride has been concerned with money matters, the bridegroom has wanted to let off the final vestiges of single steam before being shackled to the ball and chain. The bachelor party far precedes the bridal shower — by about 2,300 years. It is believed

that in the fifth-century B.C., the Spartans first celebrated the groom's last night as a single man, making toasts and drinking to his pending nuptials. This merrymaking tradition to mark the end of bachelorhood has continued in lavish style. In fact, Las Vegas has become almost synonymous with bachelor party debauchery. You know: "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas!" The Sexual Revolution of the 1960s led to the equal opportunity demonstration of bachelorette parties, giving women license to the same vice as men right before taking the leap.

ACHIEVEMENT

In fact it seems that many parties are attached to the concept of taking a leap into the next phase of life. Achievement parties are no different, the most observed being graduation and retirement. While the first is by no means a new concept, the latter is really a 20th-century invention.

Whether from high school or higher education, the graduation is often marked by not only an official academic ceremony, but also an after party. Academic study can be just as rigorous as a paying job, and so at the end of a full course, the dutiful scholar has earned a moment to shine and relax. The graduation party is usually

attended by all those who have supported the student through his or her academic career. Often gifts are given to help the student's transition into the next stage of life, whether that be another round of study or entering the workforce. Graduations usually rank among the least extravagant as far as celebrations go. According to the website *GraduationParty.com*, on average, the bill doesn't exceed \$1,000. But the party plays an important cultural role, recognizing students' achievements in this increasingly knowledge-centered world.

Until the early 1900s, retirement was the time at which you took yourself off to bed. Germany's Chancellor Otto von Bismarck was the first to design an old-age social insurance program for those 70 or older in 1889. The program allowed those who had reached the then unusually old age to retire from work and be provided for by the government. In 1916, the program reduced the age to 65. This idea of old-age security took hold in the United States in 1935 when the country established Social Security.

Progress, it would seem, was the impetus for retirement. The industrial revolution and its subsequent technological revolutions required speed and agility



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to succeed. Enter retirement! Those who were beyond the healthfulness to work in mind, body, or spirit were encouraged to leave work to the able-bodied and enjoy their old age. Over time, retirement has changed, and now in most professions 20 to 25 years of service grants the ability to retire with pension benefits.

Retirement has come to symbolize a major life transition into the golden years. As such, a party is in order. Sometimes thrown by the company for which the person worked, or by friends and family, or even by the retiree themselves, the occasion is usually marked by food and drink, music, and dancing. Often a gift recognizing the retiree's contribution to the workforce is given; these gifts are notoriously unequal to the merits of the retiree and are often satirized in pop culture.

Whether it entails a keg in the basement or chocolate fountain in a banquet hall, parties are a deeply embedded part of our culture. For millennia people have been coming up with reasons to come together and celebrate. Life's sweetest moments create the best party atmospheres. And it seems that there is no end in sight to the party line.

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The quinceañera shares many of its traditions with what North Americans call the sweet 16, and in fact many Latinas in the U.S. have blended the two traditions, celebrating traditional quinceañera customs on the 16th instead of the 15th birthday.

The sweet 16 is a far more secular celebration as the ceremony is not usually coupled with any spiritual ritual. It is solely a celebration of societal entry. While the sweet 16 is not always as elaborate as the quinceañera, they share many traditional aspects including the changing of shoes, the wearing of a tiara, the candle ceremony, and formal dancing.

In many ways all of these coming of age ceremonies echo each other; the core impetus is the transition into adulthood. Much significance is attached to the survival of adolescence and achieving one's maturity. All this pomp and circumstance may seem odd when the average life expectancy in developed countries is mid-70s, but not long ago many people in advanced countries only lived until 35. To make it past puberty was a big deal. And so today, we honor history and human advancement through these celebrations.

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cause we hold the joining of two people and two families with such high esteem, the celebration also often comes with a high price tag. And because of that high price tag an interesting custom was born: the bridal shower.

There is no traditional way to approach a bridal shower (also called wedding shower). Venues range from home basements to banquet halls, because the party is so specific to the socio-economic circumstances of the bride. In truth, its sole purpose is to amass gifts (similar to its sister party, the baby shower). It is said that the first of these occasions was held in 17th-century Netherlands to offset the stinginess of a penny-pinching father who refused to pay for the dowry and wedding. However, stories in Belgium and practices in the United States also place the bridal shower's origins sometime in the mid-1800s. This event was a way to fatten out a bride's dowry and also allow the married couple to begin their life as one without completely breaking the piggy bank.

Traditionally, while the bride has been concerned with money matters, the bridegroom has wanted to let off the final vestiges of single steam before being shackled to the ball and chain. The bachelor party far precedes the bridal shower — by about 2,300 years. It is believed

that in the fifth-century B.C., the Spartans first celebrated the groom's last night as a single man, making toasts and drinking to his pending nuptials. This merrymaking tradition to mark the end of bachelorhood has continued in lavish style. In fact, Las Vegas has become almost synonymous with bachelor party debauchery. You know: "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas!" The Sexual Revolution of the 1960s led to the equal opportunity demonstration of bachelorette parties, giving women license to the same vice as men right before taking the leap.

ACHIEVEMENT

In fact it seems that many parties are attached to the concept of taking a leap into the next phase of life. Achievement parties are no different, the most observed being graduation and retirement. While the first is by no means a new concept, the latter is really a 20th-century invention.

Whether from high school or higher education, the graduation is often marked by not only an official academic ceremony, but also an after party. Academic study can be just as rigorous as a paying job, and so at the end of a full course, the dutiful scholar has earned a moment to shine and relax. The graduation party is usually

attended by all those who have supported the student through his or her academic career. Often gifts are given to help the student's transition into the next stage of life, whether that be another round of study or entering the workforce. Graduations usually rank among the least extravagant as far as celebrations go. According to the website *GraduationParty.com*, on average, the bill doesn't exceed \$1,000. But the party plays an important cultural role, recognizing students' achievements in this increasingly knowledge-centered world.

Until the early 1900s, retirement was the time at which you took yourself off to bed. Germany's Chancellor Otto von Bismarck was the first to design an old-age social insurance program for those 70 or older in 1889. The program allowed those who had reached the then unusually old age to retire from work and be provided for by the government. In 1916, the program reduced the age to 65. This idea of old-age security took hold in the United States in 1935 when the country established Social Security.

Progress, it would seem, was the impetus for retirement. The industrial revolution and its subsequent technological revolutions required speed and agility



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to succeed. Enter retirement! Those who were beyond the healthfulness to work in mind, body, or spirit were encouraged to leave work to the able-bodied and enjoy their old age. Over time, retirement has changed, and now in most professions 20 to 25 years of service grants the ability to retire with pension benefits.

Retirement has come to symbolize a major life transition into the golden years. As such, a party is in order. Sometimes thrown by the company for which the person worked, or by friends and family, or even by the retiree themselves, the occasion is usually marked by food and drink, music, and dancing. Often a gift recognizing the retiree's contribution to the workforce is given; these gifts are notoriously unequal to the merits of the retiree and are often satirized in pop culture.

Whether it entails a keg in the basement or chocolate fountain in a banquet hall, parties are a deeply embedded part of our culture. For millennia people have been coming up with reasons to come together and celebrate. Life's sweetest moments create the best party atmospheres. And it seems that there is no end in sight to the party line.

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