



*Dwight David Eisenhower as a senior at Abilene High School, 1909.*

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# Microcosm of Manhood: Abilene, Eisenhower, and Nineteenth-Century Male Identity

*by Peter M. Nadeau*

I was raised in a little town of which most of you have never heard. But in the West it is a famous place. It is called Abilene, Kansas. We had as our marshal for a long time a man named Wild Bill Hickok. If you don't know anything about him, read your Westerns more. Now that town had a code, and I was raised as a boy to prize that code.

It was: meet anyone face to face with whom you disagree. You could not sneak up on him from behind, or do any damage to him, without suffering the penalty of an outraged citizenry. If you met him face to face and took the same risks he did, you could get away with almost anything, as long as the bullet was in the front.

And today, although none of you has the great fortune, I think, of being from Abilene, Kansas, you live after all by that same code in your ideals and in the respect you give to certain qualities. In this country, if someone dislikes you, or accuses you, he must come up in front. He cannot hide behind the shadow. He cannot assassinate you or your character from behind, without suffering the penalties an outraged citizenry will impose.<sup>1</sup>

President Dwight Eisenhower's analogy at a B'nai B'rith dinner in 1953 conflated two modalities of male identity that were in conflict during his youth. While borrowing from the masculine image of the western duel, Eisenhower appropriated the metaphor to extol a more traditional virtuous manhood. The president's re-characterization of a Wild West gunfight into a Victorian gentleman's refusal to slander his enemy demonstrated Eisenhower's consistent aversion to masculine bravado and his esteem for male responsibility. Eisenhower, like his fellow male residents of Abilene, Kansas, may have enjoyed stories about cowboy and pioneer prowess, but they conceived of their own identities as males according to the virtues of responsibility, self-control, and maturity. While a hard-bodied toughness flexed its muscle and defined masculinity in urban areas at the turn of the century, nineteenth-century dutiful manhood remained the dominant construct of male identity in rural towns.

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*Peter Nadeau is a PhD candidate at Oklahoma State University. His research interests include presidential history, masculinity studies, and post-World War II America. He is currently writing a dissertation on Dwight Eisenhower.*

1. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Remarks upon Receiving the America's Democratic Legacy Award at a B'nai B'rith Dinner in Honor of the 40th Anniversary of the Anti-Defamation League," November 23, 1953, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), 797-98.



*Abilene's reputation as a lawless cow town in the 1860s gave way by the 1880s and 1890s. Rather than having an identity based on saloons and brothels, the Abilene of Eisenhower's childhood was populated by shopkeepers and wheat farmers, models of manly self-discipline.*

This article will examine the dutiful manhood that proliferated in nineteenth-century rural towns such as Abilene and how, despite the new emphasis placed on masculine power in the cities, rural areas largely rejected the urban paradigm and maintained a traditional emphasis on manly virtue. Abilene in the late 1890s provides a miniature example of the persistence of this model of manhood, and Eisenhower's upbringing demonstrates how one generation passed this gender conception onto the next. Differentiating understandings of maleness at the turn of the century is critical for understanding the gender transition of the 1890s and the competing constructions of maleness in the twentieth century. Understanding male identity in Abilene gives us a better understanding of gender relations across nineteenth-century Kansas and their reverberations throughout the nation in the succeeding century.<sup>2</sup>

2. Numerous historians have identified a transition in masculinity in the 1890s wherein urban areas venerated strength and toughness while rural areas held onto an ethic of manhood that preached duty

Nineteenth-century manhood focused on the imperatives of manliness. Manhood required something from its members. It carried with it obligations. The success or failure of participants to meet its requirements structured debates over who was truly manly. Men of all races, classes, and stations had obligations to meet. Those who neglected to do so were not just failures, but failures as men. Descriptions of their responsibilities may vary across age, rank, and context, but the understanding that men were culpable went undiminished. In a word, nineteenth-century manhood was about duty.<sup>3</sup>

and restraint. For more on this transition in male gender identity, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 2011); and Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

3. Mapping nineteenth-century manhood is a task that has generated significant disagreement. It is clear that manhood was important to the century, but interpretations diverge as to how best to describe constructions of male identity in the 1800s. In his essay, "Learning About Manhood: Gender Ideals and the Middle-Class Family in Nineteenth

Dutiful manhood was a nineteenth-century understanding of male identity that emphasized responsibility, self-control, and maturity. Responsibility necessitated meeting domestic and occupational obligations while simultaneously demonstrating the virtues the century deemed essential. Self-control required a man to master his appetites, subdue his urges (particularly the sexual), and avoid the extremes of indulgence or indolence. Proper men would mature sufficiently to don their role as husband and father and provide for one's own through diligent labor.

The origins of dutiful manhood extend early in American history. Indentured servants understood their freedom was contingent on fulfilling a set of requirements. Puritan writers often conceived of sanctification through an enumeration of obligations: a list of what was required of them for God and for others. Cotton Mather's *Essays to Do Good* spelled out appropriate behavior for the man of God. The Enlightenment corroded the authority the established churches had in the colonial period, but the embrace of rationalism among Unitarians and Universalists accentuated a focus on moralism, albeit shorn of Puritan predestination. Benjamin Franklin's writings frequently expounded on enlightened morality. His *Poor Richard's Almanac* and "The Art of Virtue" coherently detailed for the aspiring man the path to success based on virtue and responsibility.

The most comprehensive description of dutiful manhood in the nineteenth century was W. W. Everts's *Manhood: Its Duties and Responsibilities* (1854). Everts was a Baptist minister who wrote a series of books on the maturing male titled "The Voyage of Life." The series offered volumes on childhood, youth, manhood, and old age. His exposition of manhood presented exhortations to fulfill all the duties of men, resist temptations, and flee youth-

ful amusements. The duties Everts enumerated included self-duties, family duties, patriotic duties, philanthropic duties, and religious duties. Self-control received particular focus from Everts because he associated "ungoverned passion" with "weakness, as well as meanness and degradation." The "sensual appetite is as important as that of an irascible temper" to be brought under the "high duty" of self-control. Hard work was a universal duty of all men that none should consider wearisome. "In the care of the body, the culture of the mind, in the discipline of the thoughts, and subjection of the passions . . . show yourself a man. Become what man is capable of becoming, and consummate a character which may adorn earth, and shine in the ranks of heaven." Any man entrusted with an office "from policeman to president" should faithfully meet the duties of his office. Everts urged males to conform to "the existing system of society" to minimize differences and promote unity. Consequently, the "system may be improved, in industrial pursuits, in politics, and in religion, and not be destroyed."<sup>4</sup> Community conformity would be the by-product of discharged duties.

Along with other preachers and moralists of the century, Everts issued dire warnings regarding the temptations of the city and its threat to a youth's manhood. "Cities are the world's chambers of darkness—its assignation places of wickedness and crime. The depraved and the designing flock to them from every part of the land and the globe, to consummate and practice their villainies [*sic*] unknown and unsuspected." Cities distinguished themselves through "an extreme and artificial levity of character." The "anti-domestic" tendencies of urban areas demonstrated "an apparent ambition to be free from the cares and restraints of the family." If not for the continual supply of physical, intellectual, and moral character from the country, then the race would deteriorate and "sink to the lowest effeminacy." A young man could only preserve his virtue through numerous conflicts and victories. For the city was a battlefield and "the warfare of human life rises to its intensest [*sic*] moral conflicts in a large community." Only the rural home could nurture a young man's virtue for the battle.<sup>5</sup>

Central to dutiful manhood was the mastering of impulses. The responsible man may exhibit an abundance of esteemed virtues, work hard, provide for his family,

Century America," E. Anthony Rotundo asserts that the three most important ideals of manhood for middle-class men in the century were the masculine achiever, the Christian gentleman, and the masculine primitive. In *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Michael Kimmel argues earlier paradigms of genteel patriarch and heroic artisan eventually gave way to the concept of the self-made man. Kimmel suggests the last has been the most enduring as well as the most fluid concept of male identity in American history. Whereas middle-class white males were most often the target audience for nineteenth-century literature delineating male duties, poor whites, African Americans, Americans Indians, and immigrants were also evaluated according to dutiful manhood. From the perspective of established whites they were negligent in executing their duties and therefore less manly. For an example see Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 91; Rotundo's essay is in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds., *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800–1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

4. William W. Everts, *Manhood: Its Duties and Responsibilities* (Louisville, Ky.: Hull and Brother, 1854), 18, 26, 27, 29, 32, 39, 44, 60.

5. *Ibid.*, 197–98, 202, 273, 282–83.

and advance in respectability, but if he could not suppress his primitive urges, he compromised his manhood. T. S. Arthur asserted an inextricable link between the duties of manhood and impulse control in *Advice to Young Men on Their Duties and Conduct in Life* (1849). "Every young man can see how great is the responsibility resting upon him as an individual," Arthur wrote. "If he commence with right principles as his guide, — that is, if in every action he have regard to the good of the whole, as well as to his own good, — he will not only secure his own well-being, but aid in the advancement towards a state of order." Yet responsibility was not enough. "If he . . . follow only the impulses of his appetites and passions, he will retard the general return to true order, and secure for himself that unhappiness in the future which is the invariable consequence of all violations of natural or divine laws."<sup>6</sup> Commentators produced an abundance of guidebooks in the century to teach men young and old how to gain mastery over themselves such as William Alcott's *The Young Man's Guide* (1848), George Peck's *The Formation of a Manly Character* (1853), and George Burnap's *Lectures to Young Men* (1848). The MacGuffey Readers combined pedagogical instruction with clear moral lessons. "By gaining the manly strength to control himself," historian Gail Bederman points out, "a man gained the strength, as well as the duty, to protect and direct those weaker than himself: his wife, his children, or his employees."<sup>7</sup>

In addition to responsibility and self-control, nineteenth-century moralists added maturity as the third requirement of dutiful manhood. Commentators distinguished the mature man from the child by his ability to do hard work and provide for his family. The child was a dependent. Only the mature man could serve as a breadwinner. Writers described work as exceptionally arduous and a demonstration of sacrifice on behalf of wives and children. Work, according to Robert Griswold, was also "a trade-off: men accepted the responsibility of supporting a family in exchange for the power, prestige, and joy that came with fatherhood." The struggles of the

breadwinner earned him "respect and deference from wives and children."<sup>8</sup>

Even as the ethics of manhood endured in rural towns, at the turn of the twentieth century urban areas began to promote an ethic of masculinity. This construct of male identity promoted toughness and feats of strength as the delineator of true manliness. Speaking of this period, Howard Chudacoff writes, "men found themselves engaged in a balancing act between domestic masculinity—the still-valued responsibilities to home and family—and a preoccupation with virility—the competitive independence of the nondomestic male sphere."<sup>9</sup> Urban males hoped exaggerated notions of power and toughness could brake the gender blurring that urbanization, bureaucratization, and industrialization seemed to be accelerating. "The whole generation is womanized," lamented Henry James in *The Bostonians* (1886).<sup>10</sup> Others voiced similar concerns about the expansion of women in the workplace, higher education, and in the voting booth. Coupled with the confinement of men in new corporate bureaucracies and a debilitating depression in the 1890s, anxious American males at the turn of the century were receptive to redefining their maleness as a collective set of traits that could be executed and measured. Performing masculinity proved far more enticing than subscribing to a well-worn ethic of duty. Sports offered the most prominent delineation of masculine prowess in urban areas. Popular publications helped rally male veneration of specific sports and athletes into a broad fan-base for masculinity. It is no surprise that boxing, brawling, football, baseball, swearing, and exercise enjoyed unprecedented participation at the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup>

Dutiful manhood, however, continued to endure in rural small towns. There were multiple reasons for its staying power. Outside of large cities, publicized athletic contests, publications promoting a muscular physique, and discretionary income for the theater were not readily available. In small towns pragmatism governed by a strict morality remained the expedient male identity. Dutiful manhood also served as a moral delineator for rural residents between themselves and the city's

6. T. S. Arthur, *Advice to Young Men on Their Duties and Conduct in Life* (Boston: Barton, 1849), 178.

7. William A. Alcott, *The Young Man's Guide*, 16th ed. (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1846); George Peck, *The Formation of a Manly Character: A Series of Lectures to Young Men* (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1854); George W. Burnap, *Lectures to Young Men on the Cultivation of the Mind, the Formation of Character, and the Conduct of Life* (Baltimore, Md.: John Murphy, 1840); Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 12.

8. Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 48–49.

9. Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 224–25.

10. Henry James, *The Bostonians* (New York: Modern Library, 1956), 343.

11. James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 31.



David and Ida Eisenhower married in 1885 and had six sons who lived to adulthood. Eisenhower remembered his parents having a perfect partnership based on nineteenth-century gender roles in which his mother cared for the home and family and his father was the breadwinner. Courtesy of the Eisenhower Presidential Library & Museum, Abilene, Kansas.

new consumerism, promiscuity, and violence. Sport and boxing promoters were able to capitalize on the expendable hours that urban workers enjoyed while rural workers completed additional chores. Whereas systematization and publication of baseball, football, and boxing matches could thrive in multiple urban media outlets, rural towns usually only supported a single newspaper devoted to local business. The smaller size of rural towns accommodated a community of accountability whereas larger population areas struggled to mandate virtue and self-restraint. It was easier for churches and evangelical Christianity to hold sway over the smaller and more homogenous populations of rural towns than the larger ethnically and religiously diverse populace of the city.

The *Saturday Evening Post* was the most popular publication clinging to the gender values of the fleeting rural past. As late as the 1890s, the *Post* featured the subtitle, "The Great Pioneer Family Paper of America." The magazine's celebration of common virtues, a traditional gender order, and the working family in small towns appealed

to a population that watched with dismay the migration of blacks to northern cities, the expansion of urban tenements with non-Anglo immigrants, and the increasingly lurid tales of city life. Rural working- and middle-class families with strong religious convictions found in the *Post* an affirmation of their values and virtues. Small town residents endeavored to distinguish the hard-working members of their communities from the sloth and vice of the city. David Eisenhower's acceptance of the magazine in his home spoke to its conservative content. His son Dwight remembered the fights that ensued between his brothers each week to be the first to read its pages.<sup>12</sup>

The *Post* reinforced a traditional nineteenth-century gender order. In the 1890s parallel columns titled "Masculinities" and "Femininities" appeared on the same page containing maxims, jokes, and anecdotes for each gender that affirmed distinctions even as they poked fun at the behaviors of each. Despite being titled "masculinities," the designation that described urban manliness, the column actually reinforced rural manhood. The segment regularly preached such axioms as "The man who nurses his wrongs carefully finds that they grow rapidly" and "He is a good man who has done half as much good as he meant to do." Women were instructed to "Speak with calmness on all occasions, especially in circumstances which tend to irritate" and to remember, "Women are to be measured, not by their beauties but by their virtues." Homey yarns about men losing their authority in marriage, wives who talk excessively, and the power of feminine beauty over the male ego smirked at the incongruities of the sexes even while reaffirming their assigned roles.<sup>13</sup>

The *Post* viewed the male as the key to domestic success and gender stability by emphasizing responsible performance of duties, self-regulating the passions, and working diligently to provide for one's family. Articles on the "Duties and Privileges of Wealth," "The Making of Character," "Shall We Return to the Rod?" and "Good Conduct and School Study" harkened back to the importance the concluding century placed on virtuous men.<sup>14</sup> A sermon published by Reverend James McClure in August 1898 titled "The Safeguard of Manhood" reminded male readers that "a young man cannot let any bodily passion

12. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), 34.

13. *Saturday Evening Post*, December 11, 1897; November 27, 1897; October 16, 1897; and November 13, 1897.

14. *Ibid.*, February 26, 1898; September 10, 1898; August 12, 1899; and December 16, 1899.

run away with him and expect to be safe” and instructed them that “happy the man who early acquires reverence for purity.”<sup>15</sup> The *Post’s* alignment with the closing century’s concept of manhood was complete with its celebration of work, male breadwinners, and fleeing childishness in such articles as “The Measure of Success” and “Why Young Men Fail.”<sup>16</sup> An 1898 piece titled “A Man’s Work in the World” reminded readers of the primacy of work for achieving mature manhood declaring, “no noble career is possible when once the fibre [*sic*] of manhood, with its spirit of hope, and courage, and determination to do something noble and worthy, has lost its virile strength and purpose.”<sup>17</sup> A poem published in 1899 combined all three emphases of dutiful manhood: virtue, self-control, and maturity:

How oft in my dreams I go back to the day  
 When I stood at our old wooden gate,  
 And started to school in full battle array,  
 Well armed with a primer and slate.  
 And as the latch fell I thought myself free,  
 And gloried, I fear, on the sly,  
 Till I heard a kind voice that whispered to me:  
 ‘Be a good boy; good-by.’  
 ‘Be a good boy; good-by.’ It seems  
 They have followed me all these years.  
 They have given a form to my youthful dreams  
 And scattered my foolish fears.  
 They have stayed my feet on many a brink,  
 Unseen by a blinded eye;  
 For just in time I would pause and think:  
 ‘Be a good-boy; good-by.’

Oh, brother of mine, in the battle of life,  
 Just starting or nearing its close,  
 This motto aloft, in the midst of the strife,  
 Will conquer wherever it goes.

Mistakes you will make, for each of us errs,  
 But, brother, just honestly try  
 To accomplish your best. In whatever occurs,  
 ‘Be a good boy; good-by.’<sup>18</sup>

Abilene, Kansas, rejected the masculine culture of the city because it had already experienced the raw and contentious ethics of cowboy culture in its early years. Stationed at the terminus of the Chisholm Trail, Abilene was the longed-for destination of many fatigued, thirsty, lonely cattle drivers with a little bit of money in their pockets. Abilene prospered for the first time in the late 1860s when cowpunchers directed their herds to the stockyards of the fledgling town and then to the railcars that would carry them to Chicago and its slaughterhouses. The men who lived on the open range practiced what Dee Garceau calls an “all-male nomadic subculture,” which thrived on alternatives to Victorian middle-class domestic values and accepted the shame of being condemned by preachers and reformers.<sup>19</sup> In his memoirs, Eisenhower remarked that his hometown was originally nicknamed the “Cow Capital of the World” and that “for a time it maintained its reputation as the toughest, meanest, most murderous town of the territory.” The saloons, brothels, and gunfights that gave Abilene’s Texas Street its uninhibited reputation outraged and frightened the town’s other residents, particularly when their children had to walk through its unruliness on their way to the schoolhouse.<sup>20</sup>

Parents and preachers successfully tamed the unchecked masculinity of Abilene after the town no longer served as the railhead for cattle shippers. The railroad had transformed the sparse settlement of Abilene into a raucous terminus at the end of the trail. When the railhead moved to Ellsworth, Newton, and Wichita, Abilene lost its purpose and its customers. Entire building frames which were previously saloons, brothels, and gambling houses were shipped on railcars south and west, commemorated by the phrase “hell on wheels” to describe the transport of Abilene’s wickedness. In addition, the success of winter wheat planted in Abilene’s surrounding prairie spurred Dickinson County’s passage of a herding law by the county commissioners in 1872. The herding or fencing law prohibited the free ranging of cattle on land that was now more valuable for growing wheat and needed to be protected from trampling long-horns. The change in Abilene was almost immediate. The

15. *Ibid.*, August 20, 1898.

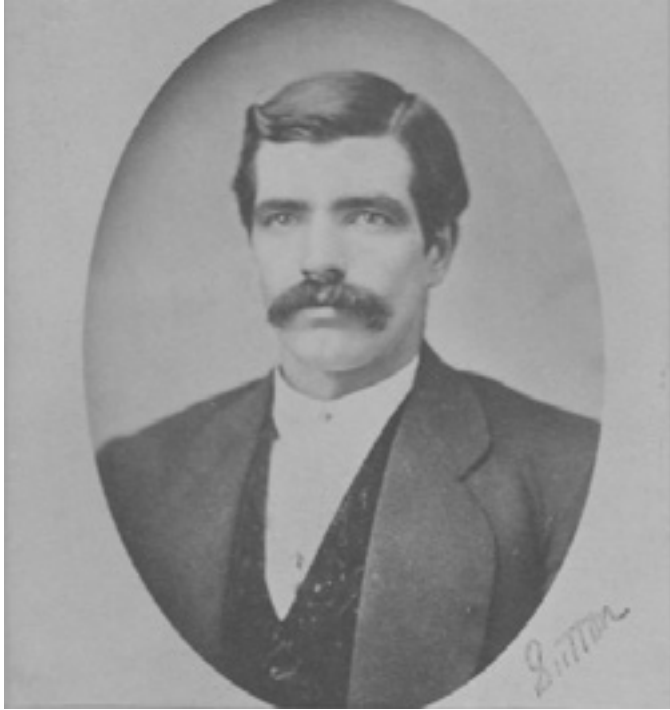
16. *Ibid.*, December 3, 1898; October 7, 1899; and November 18, 1899.

17. *Ibid.*, December 3, 1898.

18. *Ibid.*, September 23, 1899.

19. Dee Garceau, “Nomads, Bunkies, Cross-Dressers, and Family Men: Cowboy Identity and the Gendering of Ranch Work,” in *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West*, eds. Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau (New York: Routledge, 2001), 149–54.

20. Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 65.



Thomas J. Smith, Abilene's town marshal, was killed in 1870 during an attempt to bring two men accused of murder to justice. Commemoration of Smith's death in the early 1900s showed the desire of Abilene's residents to emphasize duty and the rule of law, instead of the town's wild past.

*Abilene Chronicle* reported in May 1872 that "the town of Abilene is as quiet as any village in the land. Business is not as brisk as it used to be during the cattle season—but the citizens have the satisfaction that Hell is more than sixty miles away."<sup>21</sup>

Into hell's void a more domesticated gender order replaced masculine license by the wheat farmers, mechanics, shopkeepers, and tradesmen who stayed behind. "They might have missed their chance at developing a metropolitan Sodom, but the people settled down into occupations that made for a slower but steadier growth," Dwight Eisenhower wrote in his memoirs.<sup>22</sup> "These Kansans were religious, dedicated, hardworking, folk—quite unlike the bold, blazing, he-man types featured

in the old dime novels," wrote a family biographer.<sup>23</sup> Working- and middle-class males prevented Abilene's disappearance as a temporary trail town through a devotion to work, church, and home. Employment at local businesses and farms consumed the majority of a male's waking hours, and church functions and domestic chores disbursed the rest. Across the West, towns such as Abilene, which briefly profited from the wild frontier masculinity of pioneers and cattle drovers, were gradually abandoned or managed to survive by adopting the domestic morality of Victorian gentility. The cowboy code governed the open range; the Bible the respectable town.<sup>24</sup>

**A** bilene's rural identity was pivotal in developing the imperatives of virtuous manhood. Settlers who had been converted by evangelical revivals or had adopted the morality of eastern Victorian elites now outnumbered the town's forerunners. Working- and middle-class males who aspired to the wealth of eastern elites reflected their aspirations in their efforts to conduct themselves as established Victorian gentlemen even if their salaries were not equivalent. Manual laborers and white-collar workers who disparaged the cities for their crime, corruption, and immorality viewed the farms, shops, and mechanical plants of towns as character-building for the arduous demands they placed on aspiring men. The endless tasks of the farm, chores around the house, and community projects needing assistance kept a young man from idleness, consumed the hours of his day, and steered him away from the tempting amusements of the city. Dwight Eisenhower acknowledged as much when he wrote in his retirement that "in the transformation from a rural to an urban society, children are . . . robbed of the opportunity to do genuinely responsible work." Even while president of Columbia University he viewed New York City "as a place to live, seemed to me an environment out of which, only with difficulty and exceptional effort, much good could come." He acknowledged that the "farm boy and tenement boy are one at heart" and that parental love

21. Jim Hoy, "Joseph G. McCoy and the Creation of the Mythic American West" and Thomas D. Isern, "Theodore C. Henry: Frontier Booster and Nostalgic Old Settler" in *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History*, ed. Virgil W. Dean (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

22. Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 65.

23. John McCallum, *Six Roads from Abilene: Some Personal Recollections of Edgar Eisenhower* (Seattle, Wash.: Wood and Reber, 1960), 22.

24. "For all its humor, sexual license, alternative relationships, and challenge to Victorian mores, over time cowboy culture shifted with changes in the cattle industry. As family ranches gradually replaced open-range herding, cowboys traded the masculine privileges of the margins for the class privileges of the mainstream." Dee Garceau, "Nomads, Bunkies, Cross-Dressers, and Family Men," in Basso, McCall, and Garceau, *Across the Great Divide*, 163.



exists in both homes, but he considered a rural town a far better incubator for male character than squalid urban neighborhoods. Abilene as “a microcosm of rural life at that time” was a far better environment for nurturing dutiful men.<sup>25</sup>

The collective commemoration of one of the town’s more famous lawmen revealed the eagerness of Abilene’s residents to escape its wild past. Thomas J. Smith was appointed town marshal in 1869 for his reputation as a fearless law officer and willingness to confront frontier toughs with his fists or guns. Smith incurred the hatred of Texas Street’s cowboys for successfully enforcing a “no guns in town limits” law, overwhelming two large men with his fists, and surviving two assassination attempts. When Smith attempted to serve a warrant against two local farmers accused of murder, the outlaws overwhelmed him in a gunfight. He was shot, struck with a rifle butt, and decapitated with an axe. Outraged residents of Abilene launched a search party for Smith’s murderers and brought them to justice. Smith was given a public funeral in which the majority of Abilene’s citizens followed behind the horse-pulled hearse to a cemetery north of town. Smith was buried with a wooden headstone and a small fence surrounding the grave. Yet as Abilene prospered from local wheat crops, Smith’s grave fell into disrepair and became so overgrown that it was almost completely lost. Almost three decades later a local resident, J. B. Edwards, identified the grave and had the cast iron casket disinterred and moved to a more prominent place in the town’s cemetery. On Memorial Day 1904, a ceremony was held honoring Abilene’s famous marshal and a large stone was placed over his grave. A bronze plaque attached to the stone demarcated Smith’s final resting place and Abilene’s rejection of lawless masculinity in favor of a more dutiful manhood. The plaque read:

THOMAS J. SMITH  
MARSHAL OF ABILENE, 1870  
DIED A MARTYR TO DUTY NOV. 2ND, 1870  
A FEARLESS HERO OF FRONTIER DAYS  
WHO IN COWBOY CHAOS  
ESTABLISHED THE SUPREMACY OF LAW<sup>26</sup>

Abilene’s dutiful men borrowed from the closing nineteenth-century’s gender order to restore stability. This traditional formulation delineated gender differences even as it extolled their complementary responsibilities. Boys were trained in chores and outdoor manual tasks, completing minimal schooling until they abandoned the classroom completely to begin work on a local farm. Girls remained in school longer and became acquainted with housework, cooking, and childcare as they approached their high school graduations. Such gendered expectations created a sex disparity at Abilene High where girls outnumbered boys two to one. Dwight Eisenhower’s graduating class numbered twenty-five girls to nine boys. Eisenhower later attributed this disparity to the small community’s notion that education would not yield “practical results” and “it was a male-run society and schools were predominantly feminine.” Eisenhower’s observation in his memoirs that “Abilene was in those days just another rural town, undistinguishable from scores of others dotting the plains” no doubt included a consistency in gender relations common to the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

Abilene’s daily newspaper reflected the town’s embrace of a traditional gender order and endorsement of virtuous manhood. Like many small-town papers, portions of the *Abilene Daily Reflector* were reprints from sections crafted in large cities. Local editors still decided, though, what they included in their dailies and the papers spoke to local residents’ values. The *Reflector* catered to its patrons’ attention to virtue by emphasizing the character qualities of local merchants and tradesmen. In an 1894 advertisement for G. C. Sterl & Co., shoppers were told “‘The Strong-arm Man’ in the Clothing Business Today is the Value-Giver, Promise-Keeper.” The paper informed readers in July 1901 that Landes’s barbershop offered “cleanliness, skill and gentlemanly treatment.” During a quarantine on public meetings in 1901, the paper remarked that “Abilene men have spent more whole evenings at home this week than in any week for a decade.” The paper anticipated that “the men ought to acquire some good habits.” The *Reflector* also extolled male self-control, offering cures for drunkenness, chewing tobacco, and an unregulated tongue. Boys aspiring to mature manhood could read about the onset of adult responsibilities at the end of schooling, the Christian character and work ethic of deceased residents, and encounter a bevy of

25. Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 33, 53–54, 76.

26. Verckler, *Cowtown-Abilene*, 41–50; Nyle H. Miller and Joseph W. Snell, *Great Gunfighters of the Kansas Cowntowns, 1867–1886* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 415–19.

27. Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 65, 99.



*In small towns like Abilene, men engaged in physical labor and children helped on family farms. The Eisenhowers' home life deviated from the nineteenth-century ideal, because Ida and David did not have any daughters. Consequently, the Eisenhower boys performed some domestic chores that might have been delegated to girls, such as cooking or cleaning. Here, Dwight Eisenhower's brothers, Milton and Earl, are feeding the family's chickens. Courtesy of the Eisenhower Presidential Library & Museum, Abilene, Kansas.*

advertisements for custom-fitting suits. Eisenhower later remarked about the *Reflector*, "there is no other paper in the world that I read for so many years at a stretch as I did that one."<sup>28</sup>

**T**he Eisenhowers were one of the many rural working-class families with strong religious convictions common in Abilene and in many non-urban areas across the country at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Eisenhower parents' conception of gender roles reflected the traditional division of the sexes into a male breadwinner and a female homemaker. Yet despite their affinity with other rural families, variances with the nineteenth century's gender ideals existed in the Eisenhower home.

Although David and Ida Eisenhower had markedly contrasting personalities, their commitment to nineteenth-century gender roles provided stability in their marriage and parenting. David undergirded his stern demeanor

with a religious devotion to principled manhood. "He was inflexible and expected everyone to have the same standards as he had," wrote his granddaughter.<sup>29</sup> "He was an inflexible man with a stern code," his son Edgar later explained. "He expected everyone else to conform to his standards and high ideals, even people he read about in the newspapers. Even historical characters. He wanted people to be neat and decent and self-respecting, the way he tried to be." Edgar described his mother as "a versatile woman" whose domestic roles included "cook, baker, laundress, scrubwoman, dressmaker, milliner, valet, lady's maid, waitress, and chambermaid." She was also the family doctor, nurse, preacher, teacher, lawyer, judge, jury, policeman, banker, accountant, and carpenter.<sup>30</sup> Despite Ida's profound influence on each of her sons, it was clear that David was the head of the house. Dwight later concluded that such a clear delineation of

28. *Abilene (Kans.) Daily Reflector*, May 25, 1901; December 15, 1894; July 29, 1901; September 4, 1890; January 21, 1898; January 2, 1890; September 17, 1894; June 7, 1911; May 10, 1898; Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Remarks at the National Editorial Association Dinner," June 22, 1954,

*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), 585.

29. Kaye Eisenhower Morgan, *The Eisenhower Legacy: A Tribute to Ida Stover Eisenhower and David Jacob Eisenhower* (Mesa, Ariz.: Roesler Enterprises Publishing, 2005), 88.

30. McCallum, *Six Roads from Abilene*, 31, 35–36.



*Dwight Eisenhower credited his parents with instilling in him and his brothers a sense of manly self-discipline, which shaped their future actions. This family photograph from 1902 captured the idyllic image of Eisenhower's moral background. Courtesy of the Eisenhower Presidential Library & Museum, Abilene, Kansas.*

roles explained the absence of quarreling and peace in the home. "Father was the breadwinner, Supreme Court, and Lord High Executioner. Mother was tutor and manager of our household. Their partnership was ideal."<sup>31</sup>

**I**da was equally determined as her husband to infuse a dutiful manhood into her six sons through religious discipline. Family lore related that Ida had disciplined herself enough when she was younger to memorize a startling 1,365 Bible verses in six months. "She deeply believed in self-discipline and she preached it constantly," Dwight recalled. "Each of us should behave properly not because of the fear of punishment but because it was the right thing to do. Such a philosophy was a trifle idealistic for a platoon of growing boys but in later years we came to understand her ideas better."<sup>32</sup>

Determined to satisfy appetites while avoiding overindulgence, Ida would give her boys apples to hold them over until mealtime. The pacifism that Ida inculcated from the River Brethren spurred her to label Dwight's choice of a military career as "not of God, but of Satan." Yet the future general acknowledged during World War II, "if I have done or will do anything in the service of my country during this conflict, it will be because of the principles of life and conduct that she drilled into all her sons during all the years they lived under her roof."<sup>33</sup>

Dwight recalled the primacy assigned to work in Abilene and how esteeming its value above any amusements or distractions represented one of the greatest differences between American society at the end of his life compared to during his childhood. He wrote a fundamental change had occurred in attitudes towards the

31. Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 31.

32. *Ibid.*, 32.

33. Morgan, *The Eisenhower Legacy*, 96, 114, 143.



*Dwight Eisenhower and his brothers remembered hard work during their childhood, but they also enjoyed participating in outdoor activities such as camping and hunting. Courtesy of the Eisenhower Presidential Library & Museum, Abilene, Kansas.*

temporal role of man, “that role was once expressed in a single word: Work.” He recalled the minimal expectations residents of Abilene had for education. Primary schooling informed students about civic problems, but “beyond that, schools served to prepare the student for little more than the ordinary round of jobs. Physical work was done by almost every male.”<sup>34</sup> Edgar recalled his mother exhorting her boys “you must do like your father and work hard if you want to make a success of your lives.” All of the Eisenhower sons adopted the demanding work ethic of their father, but each of them did so apart from manual labor. Edgar later remarked that when he was struggling in law school at the University of Michigan

and considered withdrawing, observing a street sweeper and pondering the prospect of a lifetime of manual labor motivated him to complete his degree.<sup>35</sup>

The absence of daughters in the Eisenhower family was among the variances from the century’s domestic ideal. Consequently, the boys took on an unusual number of domestic tasks including cooking, dishwashing, laundering, and cleaning. Not all rural homes were as religious as that of the Eisenhowers, but most were strongly influenced and even shaped by the nineteenth-century Christianity that buttressed contemporary understandings of sex roles. Not all rural families lived in such a small community as Abilene, but enough distinc-

34. Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 79–80.

35. McCallum, *Six Roads from Abilene*, 58, 94.



*Future promoters of Eisenhower's political career tried to capitalize on the nostalgia of Eisenhower's upbringing, but Dwight believed that most American children had similar experiences. Eisenhower (far right) and his friends are pictured here in 1907 at Brown's Park. Courtesy of the Eisenhower Presidential Library & Museum, Abilene, Kansas.*

tion still remained between towns and cities at the end of the century to distinguish competing notions of manliness. Neither did all rural small town families match the Eisenhowers according to economic position. Dutiful manhood crossed class, religious, and regional demarcations, though less evenly between urban and non-urban spaces.

**D**wight Eisenhower's childhood transpired in a context of dutiful manhood. Concurrent to the significant change occurring in cities regarding male identity, Abilene and the Eisenhower home still preached a traditional notion of manliness that survived in rural working-class homes. His brother Edgar later wrote of their childhood, "our lives as youngsters

were full and purposeful. There was plenty of fun and good old-fashioned pranks. We played games that kept us happy and exuberant. But behind all of this activity was a stern daily routine of constant discipline and the solid exposure to the principles of life and the values that were planted and developed in our minds."<sup>36</sup> Although future promoters of his candidacy capitalized on the nostalgia of his childhood, Dwight believed that his upbringing was not unusual and that many of the nation's earliest settlers had upbringings similar to his own in Abilene.<sup>37</sup>

36. *Ibid.*, 49.

37. Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 51.



*Eisenhower and his brothers embraced sports including baseball and football as a means of learning manly self-discipline. Eisenhower is in the back row, third from the left in this 1910 photograph of his high school football team. Courtesy of the Eisenhower Presidential Library & Museum, Abilene, Kansas.*

While urban areas increasingly employed sports to demonstrate masculine prowess, Dwight conceived of athletics as an arena to sharpen manly character. Athletics were the primary passion of Dwight during his high school years. He played baseball and football at Abilene High School. He was proud of his school's undefeated football season his junior year. When the Abilene High baseball team played the University of Kansas freshman team in 1908, Dwight misjudged a fly ball and allowed it to go over his head. His team ended up losing, seven to three, and later he said that he carried the regret over the error for a long time. He helped organize the Abilene

High School Athletic Association. The association collected dues to purchase sporting goods which most of the kids could not afford. In his senior year the members elected him president. Joe Howe, who edited the *Dickinson County News* and attended most of Abilene High's games, later wrote that Dwight "had self-assurance but never in all my contact with him did he ever show any conceit. He resented this in other boys more than anything else. In fact, he would dislike a boy for being conceited much more than for something he had done." He also insisted on fair play even in football. "Eisenhower would experience a surge of anger when he detected someone, even

one of his own teammates, violating the rules," historian Stephen Ambrose wrote. "If it were an opponent who was cheating, he would block or tackle him just a bit harder; if one of his side was guilty, he would sharply reprimand the player."<sup>38</sup>

Dwight's childhood also contained several lessons in the importance of self-control and the consequences of its neglect. When he was ten, his parents prohibited him from going trick-or-treating one Halloween with his two older brothers. Despite pleading and begging his parents to let him go, his parents' decision was final. Dwight flew into an uncontrollable rage, ran into the yard, and started punching a tree stump with his fists. His tantrum continued until his father grabbed him and demanded Dwight get a hold of himself. With bloodied and bruised hands, he was sent to bed where he sobbed in anger. When his mother eventually came in and rubbed salve on his knuckles and bandaged his welts, she spoke to him about his temper and soothed his damaged pride. "He that conquereth his own soul is greater than he who taketh a city," she quoted from the Bible. She pointed out the consequence of his rage and bitterness was only injury to himself. He would never gain mastery over his life if he could not master his passions. Recounting the event in his memoirs, Dwight identified the conversation "as one of the most valuable moments of my life."<sup>39</sup>

Eisenhower recalled that when he was twelve his father discovered Edgar was skipping school and working for the town doctor in order to earn some extra money. His father began to violently whip Edgar with a leather strap in the family barn. Frightened by the unusual intensity of his father's anger, Dwight screamed loudly from the barn hoping that his mother would come running. When she did not, Dwight endeavored to intervene and prevent his father from applying further blows on his brother. Dwight tried to grab at his father's arm until his father turned towards him and exclaimed, "Oh, do you want some of the same. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"I don't think anyone ought to be whipped like that . . . not even a dog," Dwight protested.

Dwight's father dropped the strap and walked away. Father and son were both surprised by David's momen-

tary lack of self-control, but recalling the incident many years later Dwight sympathized with his father for punishing Edgar for his truancy. Dwight conjectured that his father was fearful Edgar would "seriously damage all the years of life ahead" by neglecting his education and end up as "an unhappy handyman in Kansas," which of course was essentially his father's job at the Belle Springs creamery.<sup>40</sup>

David and Ida deliberately refused influencing their sons to choose a particular career. The Eisenhower parents probably resented their own parents trying to steer them towards farming and intentionally avoided making similar demands on their own children. As long as their sons demonstrated hard work and mature character, David and Ida would not reject their sons' career choices. Despite initial reservations about Edgar's choice to pursue law at the University of Michigan, David supported his son's decision. Even more egregious, Dwight's decision to accept his appointment to West Point violated Ida's staunch pacifism. His mother did not block Dwight's leaving, but as he walked in his suit to the train station in Abilene his brother Milton recalled their mother retreating to her bedroom and hearing her sob behind the closed door.

One month before Dwight walked to the station, the *Abilene Daily Reflector* ran an advertisement for Harry C. Litts, a local Abilene clothes merchant. The ad featured a boy with a drum and was entitled, "For the Boy's Last Days at School." The ad encouraged consumers to fix their child up in an "Xtragoood" suit, the uniform of mature manhood, for his last days of school. For "he will appreciate it and will some day be a president of a railroad or president of the U.S. You don't know."<sup>41</sup>

Dutiful manhood would continue to shape Dwight Eisenhower's concept of manliness for the rest of his life. The lessons in dutiful manhood he imbibed in Abilene were only reinforced in his education at West Point, where the motto remains, "Duty, Honor, Country." A lifetime military career confirmed the value he placed on responsibility, discipline, self-restraint, and maturity. Eisenhower only assented to run for the presidency when his supporters convinced him it was his duty and his administration is remembered for its restrained spending, responsible handling of crises, and determination to restrict the growth of the military-industrial complex.

38. Francis T. Miller, *Eisenhower: Man and Soldier* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1944), 80; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier, General of the Army, President-Elect, 1890-1952* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 1:34.

39. Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 51-52.

40. *Ibid.*, 36-37.

41. *Abilene Daily Reflector*, May 19, 1911.



*Despite the new emphasis on masculine power in the cities at the turn of the twentieth century, Eisenhower embraced the more traditional dutiful manhood of the nineteenth century throughout his military and political careers. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.*

Dutiful manhood itself quickly fell into disfavor amidst the turbulence of the early twentieth century. The urban veneration of hard-bodied masculinity mocked the prudishness of rural males and would eventually win the argument in the roaring twenties. Yet dutiful manhood would reappear in “the greatest generation” as the impetus to survive the Depression, storm Normandy’s beaches, and settle the suburbs after the war. Threatened with nuclear annihilation, racial upheaval, working women, and challenges to American supremacy abroad, the nation’s males looked back to rural simplicity

as an idealized model for ordering maleness. Although dutiful manhood never again enjoyed the hegemony of the previous century, its imperatives encoded Ike and his generation of men echoing into the next century.<sup>42</sup> ■

42. Robert M. Gates, who served as secretary of defense under George W. Bush and Barack Obama, is just the most recent claimant to dutiful manhood. His memoir, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), details his fulfillment of duty even as it decries the failure of others in government to do so.