THE FAMILY REUNION: WHAT CAUSES ITS DEMISE

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[Assignment: Select some family "institution" (the family vacation, the family reunion, celebration of holidays, celebration of birthdays, anniversaries, etc.) that, in your opinion, has changed over time (either for better or worse), and analyze the causes of change. You may of course draw from your personal experience, but your paper should comment more on social change generally than on your own individual experience.]

A warm, sunny, summer day, lots of home-baked pies, cake, cookies, delicious pan-fried chicken and the traditional case of bananas, faces that resemble one another and great aunts and uncles teasing, hugging, and playing games with us kids, a white elephant bingo game, guess-the-jelly-beans-in-the-jar contest, and the men playing poker... these are just a few of the rich memories I recall of my family reunions. Family reunions have been an American tradition that has created a binding force to hold families together. When families attend reunions, they spend time tracing their roots, the uniqueness of their heritage, and what has helped to shape them into what they are today. Reunions have been a time of coming home—relatives from near and far—and sharing in that warm feeling of security that only a mom and dad and family can give. But today, like many other family traditions, the family reunion has lost its place in our cultural heritage. Some families don't have them at all while others try desperately to keep them alive. What has caused us to no longer see the need for retaining a tradition that at one time was probably one of the highlights of the year?

If we look at the causes of this new behavior, I believe we can find a number of them. One of these causes may be the distance between family members. For many years, generations of families would live and work their entire lives within a few miles of one another. Today, though, we find families in constant motion. As industries close and our economy changes, people find it necessary to move where there are jobs which sometimes take them far from their family members. Our constantly mobile society has also affected a part of our family we would least have expected. We find our senior citizens living in the South in the winter and the North in the summer. They no longer retire to "the old home place." Our grandparents no longer feel a need to stay in one spot and may feel their responsibilities ended when their children leave home. Reunions in the past took place at the family "homestead," but it is hard to find Grandma and Grandpa at the homestead anymore. With the distance and mobility of relatives, second and third generations of the family lose the feeling of "connectedness" to their relatives. Relatives they may see only once a year become less important than those friends they see daily.

As society changes so do many of our priorities. Attaining the American dream of owning a home, car, and all the extras that go with it has necessitated the sacrifice of close family ties—work takes up most of our time and energy. The once lazy-hazy-crazy-days of summer have now turned into the hurry-we-only-have-so-much-time-to-get-this-
done days of summer, just another string of routine days. We find it easy to make excuses for not taking that long trip home: we're not always financially able to travel longer distances; the children are involved in activities that require their attendance; with a tightened job market, we make sacrifices like working on Sundays, holidays, and would-be vacations in order to collect the money instead. Furthermore, people have lost their ability to communicate. We have become a society of watchers—constantly needing to be entertained whether by television, radio, or computer. This entertainment addiction has strangled the art of conversation: once we do get together we find it difficult to talk because we'd rather be watching a football game.

The business community has done its share in destroying the family reunion. For many years it was unlikely to hear of businesses being open on Sundays. With an eye for gaining an ever-greater market share, they began not only to be open on Sundays and holidays, but also twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This was a boon to housewives who wanted a little extra spending money, but, unfortunately, other economic downturns have forced both husbands and wives to seek full-time employment. As a result, we find Sundays being used as a catch-up day to do laundry, shopping, and other necessary tasks to get ready for the next week.

Whatever the causes of the decline in interest in the family reunion, I believe it has to come back to each individual and their commitment to keep one worthwhile American tradition alive. It takes so little from us, just the time and effort to show up. By participating we can provide our children and generations to come with a rich heritage. It can be an opportunity for our children to relive the history of their own roots; sitting on grandpa's lap, they can hear stories of his life as a child and look at old photo albums of family members who have passed on. It can be a time of sharing concerns, opinions, and new ideas and receiving encouragement from those who have lived through difficulties as well.

In sharing my early memories of my family reunions, I questioned whether I have given my children the same opportunity to trace their family roots and instilled within them the desire to keep this family-bonding process alive. Family reunions can be a healthy influence on generations to come—a tradition worth keeping.