

MY QUEST FOR THE Fountain of Age

The catalyst of the women's movement, now 72, hopes to do for the image of older people what she did to dispel the "feminine mystique"

BY BETTY FRIEDAN

At the start of my quest, I sat at my desk trying to make sense of some strange discrepancies between image and reality in the pile of clippings and studies I had been accumulating about age. On the one hand, despite continued reports of advances in our life expectancy, there was a curious absence—in effect, a blackout—of images of people over 65, especially women, doing, or even selling, anything at all in the mass media. On the other hand, there was an increasing obsession with the "problem" of age and how to avoid it personally, through diet, exercise, chemical formulas, plastic surgery, moisturizing creams, psychological defenses and outright denial—as early and as long as possible. And there seemed to be a growing impatience for some final solution to that problem—before the multiplying numbers of invisible, unproductive, dependent older people, unfortunately living beyond 65, placed an "intolerable burden" on their families and society with their senility, chronic illnesses, Medicare, Meals on Wheels and nursing homes.

Consider the following, a random selection from my pile:

- ▶ In a study of characters appearing in prime-time network television drama monitored for one week in a major city, of 464 role portrayals, only seven (or 1.5%) appeared to be over 64 years of age. Another study found that only 2 out of 100 television commercials contained older characters.
- ▶ In an analysis of 265 articles on aging in a large Midwestern newspaper, none depicted older people still active in their communities. All dealt with the "problem" of age, like nursing homes, or had retirees reminiscing about the "good old days."
- ▶ In a nationwide survey of American adults conducted for the

National Council on Aging to determine popular images of aging, Louis Harris found the great majority of Americans agreed that "most people over 65" were not very "sexually active," not very "open-minded and adaptable," not very "useful members of their communities."

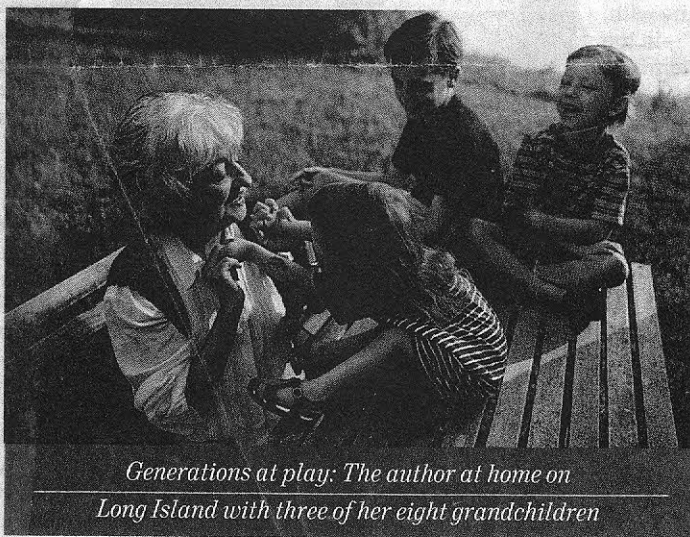
I went through all the major mass-market magazines for August 1986—fashion, general, women's, men's, news—studying every ad or illustration showing identifiable faces. The non-existence of images that were not "young" was dismaying: the seeming disappearance of people who could be over 65, except for those extremely rich or famous—and they were shown as "young."

Even articles that dealt with people known to be in their 60s were, for the most part, illustrated with pictures of those same people in their youth. The main illustration in a *Vanity Fair* article on Imelda Marcos showed her at 45. A *Vogue* article on Jean Harris did not show her white-haired, as she was in prison, or in the dramatic years of her mid-life murder trial, but a brown-haired,

younger picture "taken six years before Hy's death." Four out of six illustrations for the article on Rock Hudson's death from AIDS were of the "young" Rock Hudson.

THE MYSTIQUE OF AGE

Staring at these images—and thinking about what they left out—I became aware that I had been on this road before. I remembered when some 30 years ago I had suddenly sensed there was something missing in the image of woman in the women's magazines I was then reading and writing for. That image defined a woman only in sexual relation to a man—as wife, mother, sex object, server of physical needs of husband, children, home. But I had heard women groping to articulate a "problem that had no name," because it didn't have to do with husband, children, home or even sex. And I became aware that the image of women we all accepted left out



Generations at play: The author at home on Long Island with three of her eight grandchildren

Betty Friedan is the author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and *The Second Stage* (1981). Her new book, *The Fountain of Age*, is being published in September by Simon & Schuster

PHOTOGRAPHS FOR TIME BY GREGORY HEISLER

