Editors' Note Appended

"WHEN I was a child, adults never asked girls what they wanted to be when they grew up," Betty Friedan, 79, said. "Only boys. With girls they would say, 'You're such a pretty little girl -- you'll grow up, get married and have children just like your mommy.' Well, I sure as hell didn't want to be a mommy like my mommy. On the other hand, I wanted to be a mother and wife and have a family and do it better than she did -- have it warmer, more real. My mother was sort of hypocritical. She would say, 'Oh, darling,' on the phone to her friends, then hang up and make bitchy comments. As a result, I err in the other direction. I'm too brutally frank."
She smiled. "I think I don't have enough hypocritical graces," she said.

That's for sure. In 1963, Ms. Friedan, the combative writer and activist, inspired a social revolution for women with "The Feminine Mystique," in which she debunked the myth of the postwar woman, that docile soul who tended home and hearth while happily forgoing her own ambitions and interests. It sold more than three million copies. In her sixth book and first memoir, "Life So Far" (Simon & Schuster, $26), she recounts a turbulent personal history that includes physical abuse by her former husband, Carl Friedan, an advertising executive, during their 22-year marriage.

A founding mother of the women's movement getting black eyes from her husband?

Ms. Friedan grimaced and waved her hand dismissively, perched on an overstuffed chair in her home here in Adams-Morgan. "Well, don't make too much of that," she said. "He was no wife beater and I was no passive victim. We were both hot-tempered people." Her voice grew louder as she continued, establishing her pattern of speaking in italics. "Unfortunately, he was bigger than me," she said. "So even if I started it, I ended up with the bruises. My daughter the doctor does not think I should make statements on domestic violence because I don't know the literature, but in my instance, it's all wrong to characterize our stormy marriage as any business of beating and victim. And I certainly am a stormy person."

Indeed. When it came to organizing and inciting, Ms. Friedan was a champion. She became the founding president of NOW, the
National Organization for Women; a co-founder of the organization that became Naral (National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League); and a co-founder of the National Women’s Political Caucus. But when it came to details like cooperation, she was a disaster, the Larry Kramer of the women’s movement.

Reached by phone, Patricia Ireland, the current president of NOW, was respectful, if somewhat obtuse about Ms. Friedan’s outsized personality. "The 60's and 70's were a time when everything was black and white, good and bad," she said. "Looking now at someone like Betty Friedan, you see sometimes that people are more complex than the movement gave them credit for. I think we’ve seen a whole lot more women moving inside institutions that shape our culture, and you can trace a fair amount of progress to the insights Betty had. Her personal experience had a great resonance."

Which is why it’s hard to imagine Ms. Friedan as much of a homebody. Here in her spacious, three-bedroom apartment, she seems oddly diminished. Long before 24-hour news channels and the proliferation of the sound bite, Ms. Friedan was synonymous with microphones and podiums. Alone in her home, with just a housekeeper running a vacuum cleaner, she seems a bit lost, like a candidate without a crowd.

Not that she’s isolated. She is still employed, as a visiting distinguished professor by Cornell University, where she is conducting a three-year study on women, men, work, family and public policy, financed by a $1 million Ford Foundation grant.

Though her assistant keeps an office in one of the bedrooms, old habits die hard among working women of a certain age: Ms. Friedan's desk is in the dining room, where she can spread out onto the dining-room table. Much of her furniture is from the early days of her marriage.

"This chair I'm sitting in cost 10 or 12 bucks," she proclaimed proudly. "See that love seat? I bought it for $35 at auction, and that chair that goes with it for $7.50. As you can see, I don't care which period is who. I certainly never used a decorator. When I was beginning to have some money I called one, but she wanted everything in beige. I am not a beige person. I like color. So that was the end of the decorator."

Photographs by Susana Raab for the New York Times
BARGAIN HUNTER A love seat bought for $35 and a chair for $7.50, above, fill Betty Friedan's Washington apartment. Left: An early family photo with her mother-Betty is on the right.
For all her feistiness, Ms. Friedan seemed a bit frail. She was sometimes hard of hearing, and her breathing was labored when she walked. A lifelong asthmatic, she claims not to have had an attack since she had a heart valve replaced -- twice -- seven years ago.

Her trademark voice, authoritative and strong, seems to be her motor. Speaking one on one doesn't energize or reassure her as much as when she projects, as if to an audience. Her concentration was spotty; sometimes she spoke in full, eloquent paragraphs, sometimes she repeated things she had just said. She recovered one of two ways: either gruffly shouting "What?" which seems her time-honored way of making timid souls jump, or by continuing a thought she had left off previously, completing sentences with an acuity that would make a copy editor cheer.

"Women today have lots of opportunities I envy," she said. "If I was young today I might become an anthropologist, or go to law school and aim for the Supreme Court."

"Young women today take for granted opportunities that my generation never dreamed of," she went on."I hear them say, 'I'm not a feminist, but I'm going to law school.' 'I'm not a feminist but I'll get married when I choose, if I choose.' " She smiled wryly. "She's not a feminist, but choice, autonomy, ambition and opportunity are her subtext."

Where Ms. Friedan always split from more radical members of the women's movement was in her insistence that women not isolate themselves from men, that women's liberation and men's liberation were intertwined. Of her study for Cornell, she said: "We need a values revolution in this culture. We need quality of life to be more important than the bottom line. We need a new definition of the bottom line, a purpose larger than the self. For me, the women's movement provided such a purpose. To realize you were making a difference, changing history. It was exciting. Fun." Her face softened. "Fun," she repeated quietly.

She realized early on, she said, that she operated better solo than as part of a committee. "I started a number of terrific organizations," she said, "but I quickly saw that somehow it was not my thing to try to get, keep or hold on to power in those organizations. I could do best as a writer and lecturer. I didn't need those organizations for my own ability to make an impact."

She seems to have always made one naturally. Born Betty Goldstein in Peoria, Ill., in 1921, she was the oldest of three children. Her father, Harry, owned an upscale jewelry store; her mother, Miriam, was a housewife whose colitis disappeared after her husband became ill and she took over his business. Being Jewish, their daughter found herself something of a social outcast at school.

She went on to Smith College and the University of California at Berkeley for graduate work in psychology, which she abandoned after deciding not to pursue a life in academia. She moved to New York City and became a reporter for labor news agencies, married Carl Friedan and worked as a freelance writer in order to stay home with her three children. She began researching what became "The Feminine Mystique" when she...
composed a questionnaire for a Smith reunion and discovered she was not the only one who, as she writes in "Life So Far," "was not having orgasms waxing the family room floor."

Her father died after she graduated from Smith, and mention of him now is the only time tears threaten. "He would have been so proud of me," she said, averting her eyes. Her mother died at 90, having married twice more and become a bridge champion. Her doctor decided the stress of the tournaments was too much for her; she stopped and died soon afterward.

Ms. Friedan remains close to her children and nine grandchildren. Her son Daniel is a theoretical physicist at Rutgers University and a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant; Jonathan is an engineer in Philadelphia; Emily is a pediatrician in Buffalo. None of her children will comment on their mother's book, with its revelations of abuse. "They're not ecstatic," Ms. Friedan said bluntly. "But they support both me and their father."

Ms. Friedan even sees her former husband on occasion. "We had some good times, and we made a wonderful family," she said. Mr. Friedan could not be reached for comment.

"I don't think about getting married again, but it would be nice to share your life," Ms. Friedan said. After her divorce, she had a 10-year affair with a married man, who, unfortunately, stayed married. He died in 1993. She shrugged. "It's not very good for that kind of relationship," she said, "if five people stop you when you're walking down the street and say, 'You changed my life.' So having been married to somebody who was pretty threatened when I began to get famous, I'm leery of subjecting someone to that."

She looked at the floor. "The hardest thing I ever did was get divorced," she said. "It was much harder than starting the women's movement. I was terrified of being alone. Families are so important, keeping them intact. I don't think I had any choice by the time I did it. Now, it's not a fate worse than death if a woman makes more money than the man."

Walking to her desk, she pulled out a file with her book tour itinerary. As she started reviewing the grueling schedule, day by day, her voice grew stronger and her back grew straighter. She's experienced in the vagaries of the book business. When "The Feminine Mystique" started selling like mad, her publisher assumed that her husband had bought them all.

These days, is there anyone who calls her Mrs. anymore?

"Ms.," she said loudly, looking up from her chair and squaring her shoulders. "Or just Betty Friedan."

*Editors' Note: May 26, 2000, Friday An article in the House & Home section on May 11 reported on an extensive interview with the author Betty Friedan. In the fourth paragraph, it recounted her assertions in a recently published memoir, "Life So Far," that her former husband, Carl Friedan, had physically abused her. In the 23rd paragraph, the article noted that Mr. Friedan could not be reached for comment on her accusation. (His telephone number, although officially listed, was
missing from several directory assistance databases.) In fairness, in view of the seriousness of the accusation, The Times should have sought Mr. Friedan's response in person or by mail, and should have quoted him early in the article. A week after the interview appeared, the section published a letter from Mr. Friedan in which he called the accusation "blatantly untrue" and added, "Never in my life have I ever gratuitously struck anyone." But Mr. Friedan's letter was printed just above one from another reader, who assumed the truth of the accusation, and the placement seemed to undercut his denial. The juxtaposition should not have occurred.