CHANGING FASHIONS IN NAMES FOR GIRLS

A. ROSS ECKLER
Morristown, New Jersey

Females can often be dated by their names: how many teenage Florences exist, or elderly Brittanys? My middle daughter has often taken me to task for saddling her with the name Lois, usually associated with women a quarter-century older (the name Lois achieved its greatest popularity in 1929-30, and had vanished from the thousand commonest female names by 1984). Perhaps I should have heeded Alexander Pope's 1711 advice, substituting *names* for *words*:

> *In words as fashions, the same rule will hold.*
> *Alike fantastic if too new or old;*
> *Be not the first by whom the new are tried,*
> *Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.*

In the last decade, a massive database, Popular Baby Names, has been made available by the Social Security Administration, depicting changing fashions in names for girls; it can be found at www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames/. This tabulates the relative ranks of the thousand commonest female names from 1880 through 2009, consisting of all Social Security cards issued to residents of the 50 states, starting with nearly 100 thousand female names born in 1880, and rising to more than a million by 1920 and two million by 1960. (It contains corresponding statistics for male names as well.)

Let us begin by tabulating each name which achieved the first rank for one or more years. The listing of these years is followed by the number of (earlier) years the name took to rise from the tenth to the first rank, the number of years from its first through its last appearance as number one, and the number of (later) years it took to decline from the first to the eleventh rank. These three numbers collectively measure the staying power of a name. The final number gives the rank in 2009 (or the last year the rank was less than one thousand).

Mary 1880-1946, 1953-61	?	82	10	102
Linda 1947-52	7	6	15	553
Lisa 1962-69	3	8	10	686
Jennifer 1970-84	4	15	7	109
Jessica 1986-90, 1993-95	8	10	10	78
Ashley 1991-92	8	2	13	20
Emily 1996-2007	5	12	2+	6
Emma 2008	6	1	1+	2
Isabella 2009	5	1		1

The most striking name is Mary, who reigned at the top of the list for 82 years; this reflects at least in part the Catholic predilection for the mother of Jesus. Emma has enjoyed a renaissance, having been ranked third 1880-86, but ranking as low as 460 in 1976.

The following table lists each name which achieved the second rank as its highest one.

Anna 1880-99	?	20	21	29
Helen 1900-19	8	20	16	389
Dorothy 1920-27	16	8	6	(2006)

Betty 1928-34	7	7	10	(1996)
Shirley 1935-36	8	2	5	(2008)
Barbara 1937-44	10	8	13	658
Deborah 1955	5	1	7	814
Debra 1956	4	1	7	(1998)
Susan 1957-60	12	4	7	753
Kimberly 1966-67	2	2	10	66
Michelle 1968-69, 1971-72	2	5	8	104
Amy 1973-76	4	4	6	130
Melissa 1977-79	10	3	5	137
Amanda 1980	4	1	16	166
Hannah 1998-2000	7	3	3	23
Madison 2001-02	2	4	7+	6

Is it possible that the name Shirley received a boost from the child film star of the 1930s, Shirley Temple, and that the name Deborah was similarly influenced by the 1950s star Deborah Kerr? Could Dorothy have been named after the heroine in Frank Baum's book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and its many successors? The name Anna has held up surprisingly well, never dropping below the rank of 106 (in 1971).

Names which reached at most the third rank include

Elizabeth 1887-90, 1892	8	5	31	11
Margaret 1891, 1894, 1907-11	10	21	28	187
Patricia 1937-43, 46-47, 49-52	8	16	14	541
Karen 1965	14	1	3	220
Heather 1975	3	1	10	558
Brittany 1989-91	2	3	4	460
Samantha 1998	5	1	8	15
Alexis 1999	3	1	4	13
Olivia 2009	8	1		3

Elizabeth has had remarkable staying power, never dropping below rank 26 (in 1948). Note how briefly Brittany and Alexis enjoyed the limelight—only nine and eight years, respectively.

Other names reached lower ranks:
4th rank: Judith 1940, Carol 1941, Abigail 2005, Ava 2007, Sophia 2009
5th rank: Minnie 1880-88, Ethel 1896, Ruth 1896-1922, Joan 1931-33, Sandra 1947, Donna 1959-60, Angela 1974-76
6th rank: Florence 1898-99, Mildred 1912-20, Doris 1929 Nancy 1850, Nicole 1983, Stephanie 1985, Taylor 1994-96
7th rank: Bertha 1888, Marie 1904, Virginia 1918-25, Cynthia 1957
8th rank: Alice 1880-82 1906, Clara 1884, Frances 1918, Sharon 1943-45, Lori 1963, Tammy 1966-71
9th rank: Marie 1910-11, Kathleen 1949, Crystal 1983, Rachel 1996, Chloe 2009
10th rank: Lillian 1898-1900, Carolyn 1942, Pamela 1953, Laura 1967-68, Julie 1971, Rebecca 1974, Tracy 1970, Kelly 1977, Megan 1992, Mia 2009