

## CHANGING MALE NAME FASHIONS 1870-1950

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My daughter, who is named Lois, has occasionally chided me for choosing an old family name for her (my sister has it as a middle name, as did my maternal grandmother); she claims that she has almost never heard of a Lois as young as she is, and that people hearing her name are likely to think that she is several years older than she actually is. Most people are aware of fads in child naming--Susan in the 1950s, Christopher, Jennifer and Jason more recently--but I am unaware of any long-term quantitative comparisons among first names. Books on onomastics commonly indicate the relative frequency of all names in the population at a given epoch, weighting the relative popularities of different names held by people of a specific age by the distribution of ages in the population. The only writer I know who takes dates of birth into account in tabulating the relative frequencies of given names is Leslie Dunkling, in his book *First Names First* (Universe Books, New York, 1977). However, his data are strongly oriented toward the British Isles; all he does for United States given names is tabulate names of people born about 1925, about 1950, and about 1975 (the first two from college directories, and the last from birth announcements in newspapers).

My dissatisfaction with available data led me to collect my own data on this matter. I wanted a large database of names with dates of birth attached, representing all parts of the United States and all ethnic groups. Unfortunately, I know of no such database, so I instead used several *Who's Who in America* volumes. As these are strongly biased toward men, I restricted my study to male names. (Another reason is that male names are more concentrated than female ones, meaning a better chance of establishing meaningful rankings among the top ones.) *Who's Who* biographees are biased in favor of whites; if, for example, blacks are less likely than whites to name a child William or David, then my data for William and David is likely to be overrepresented. Still, blacks make up only about 15 per cent of the population, so it is possible that their differential preferences or aversions to common male names is not all that large.

In sampling *Who's Who*, I attempted to get roughly equal samples of male names in each of nine decades: 1870-80, 1880-90, ... 1950-60. Although the samples ranged from 999 for 1950-60 to 4856 for the 1920-30 decade, six of the nine decades were between 2500 and 4000. The problem with 1950-60 is obvious--relatively few *Who's Who* people are

this young, and I had to tediously scan many pages of regional Who's Who to get even 999 names.

One might consider using genealogies to do time-dependent name studies, but here one runs into serious biases due to family preference for certain names. Furthermore, genealogies are pyramidal, with few names available in the early generations. [Social Security death records on CD-ROM have become available since 1984, but these sample a relatively narrow range of birth dates, typically from 1870 to 1920 or so.]

In using Who's Who, I took the preferred first name (the one not abbreviated or parenthesized), but when two undifferentiated names were given I took the first one. There is a small sprinkling of foreigners in Who's Who, mostly diplomats to Washington and the United Nations, which I eliminated; however, I did include foreign-born men who worked at other occupations for any substantial time (say a decade or two). If I hadn't I would have lost an important component of US first names of people born before 1910, when immigration was large. I suspect that a study of native-born US residents in the 1870 through 1900 decades would reveal somewhat different name frequencies.

The results are tabulated below. It is difficult to clearly distinguish the order, especially after the first three or four. The number to the left of a name represents its frequency of occurrence; a name without a number has essentially the same frequency as the name above it.

And what about my daughter Lois? Is her complaint justified? I haven't made a study of female names in general, but I did scan a recent volume of Who's Who in American Women for Loises. I found that the name Lois was given to .006-.007 of U.S. females born 1910-40, but in the 1950s seems to have fallen to a rate of only .0015. (However, this rate is calculated on a sample size of only five Loises in that decade.) Alexander Pope gave the best advice back in 1711:

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.

Essentially level: John, Joseph, Carl, Raymond

Slow decline since 1870: William, Charles, Edward, Frank, Arthur,  
George

Faster decline since 1870: Henry, Herbert, Hugh, Frederick, Louis,  
Edwin, Walter, Samuel, Albert, Fred

Slow rise since 1870: James, Thomas, Paul, Allen, Philip, Gerald

Faster rise since 1870: Richard, Alan, David, Peter, Kenneth

Level, then sudden rise: Bruce, Ronald, Douglas, Dennis, Michael,  
Stephen, Christopher, Daniel, Brian, Gary

Rise, then fall: Harry, Ralph, Howard, Harold, Gordon, Norman,  
Donald, Roger

1870-80 (DE) 1890 names	1880-90 (ADE) 3226 names	1890-00 (ADE) 3833 names	1900-10 (ADE) 3689 names
.070 William	.059 William	.060 John	.058 John
.060 Charles	.057 John	.048 William	.050 William
.046 George	.042 Charles	.031 Charles	.041 Robert
John	.030 George	James	.032 James
.025 Henry	James	.028 Robert	.028 George
James	.024 Robert	.024 George	.026 Charles
.021 Frank	Arthur	.018 Joseph	.020 Edward
Edward	.020 Henry	Thomas	Joseph
Robert	Thomas	Walter	.019 Henry
.019 Arthur	.018 Harry	.017 Henry	Harold
Joseph	Walter	Edward	Thomas
Frederick	Edward	Frank	
Walter	Frank	.016 Harold	
		Harry	
		.015 Arthur	
		Paul	
1910-20 (A) 3727 names	1920-30 (A) 4856 names	1930-40 (A) 2544 names	1940-50 (AB) 4149 names
.066 John	.069 John	.064 Robert	.060 John
William	Robert	.062 John	.054 Robert
.051 Robert	.058 William	.050 James	.042 Robert
.036 James	.042 James	.046 William	.036 William
.034 Charles	.030 Charles	.041 Richard	.035 James
.029 George	.028 Richard	.028 David	.032 Michael
.023 Richard	.022 George	.026 Charles	.030 Thomas
.016 David	.019 Donald	Donald	.028 David
Arthur	David	.023 Thomas	.020 Charles
Joseph	.017 Edward	.018 Joseph	Joseph
.013 Edward	.016 Thomas	George	.016 Stephen
Thomas	Joseph	.015 Edward	.014 Donald
1950-60 (AC) 999 names	Dunkling 1950	A = Who's Who 1981-2 (A-CRI)	
.053 Robert	.050 John	B = Who's Who in the East	
John	.049 Robert	1983-4 (CRI-Z)	
.042 James	.045 James	C = Who's Who in the East	
.039 David	.042 Michael	1983-4 (A-Z)	
Michael	.041 David	D = Who Was Who 1961-8 (A-Z)	
.032 William	.036 William	E = Who Was Who 1950-9 (A-CHR)	
.030 Thomas	.034 Richard		
Richard	.029 Thomas		
.027 Joseph	.020 Mark		
Charles	.019 Charles		