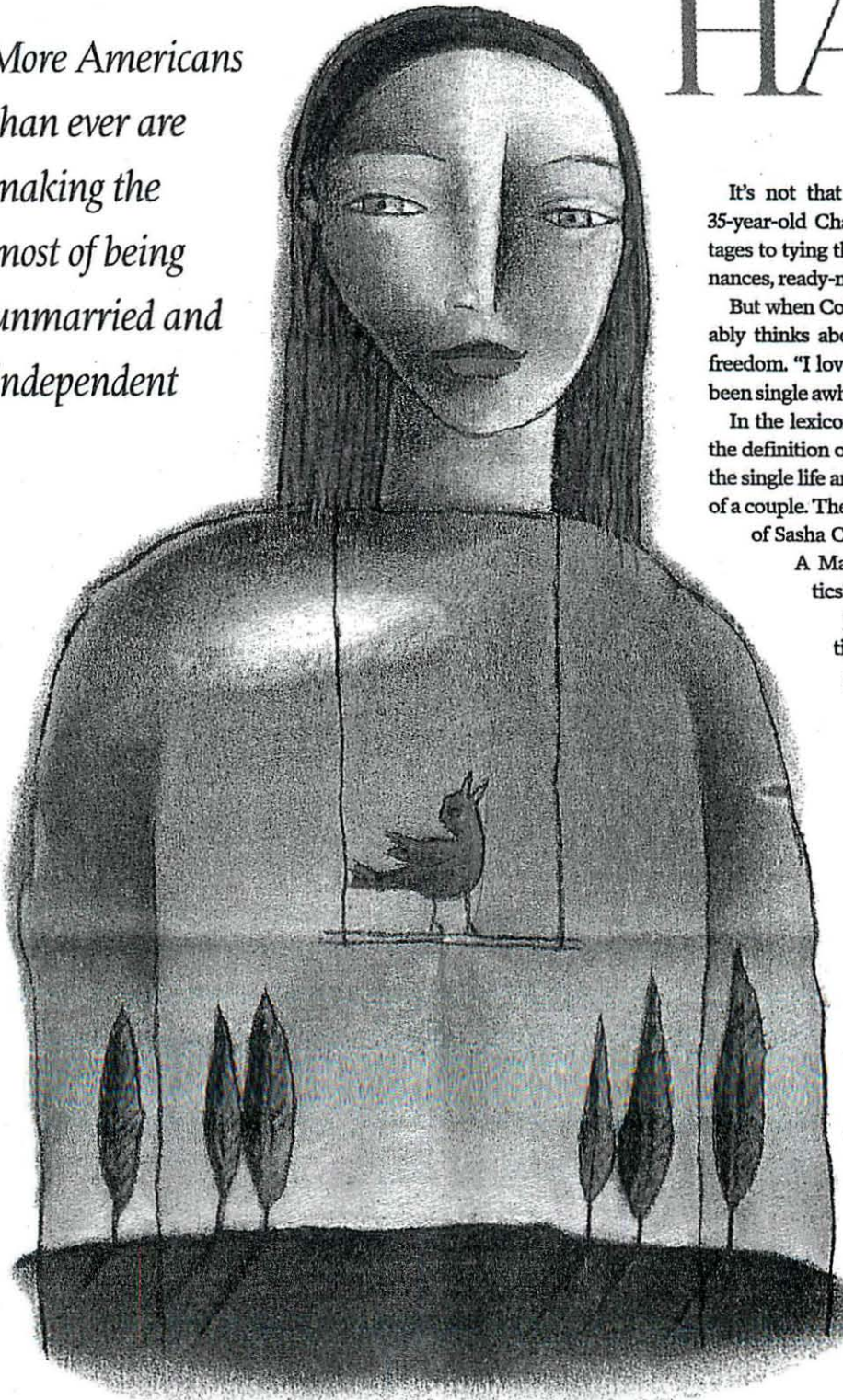


SINGULARLY HAPPY

*More Americans
than ever are
making the
most of being
unmarried and
independent*



BY PAM KELLEY
Staff Writer

It's not that Becky Cohen is anti-marriage. The 35-year-old Charlotte woman can list several advantages to tying the knot - companionship, improved finances, ready-made dates for weddings.

But when Cohen contemplates marriage, she invariably thinks about the drawbacks - less privacy, less freedom. "I love living alone," she says. "Once you've been single awhile, you really get used to your privacy."

In the lexicon of romance, Cohen suspects she fits the definition of a "quirkyalone," a person who enjoys the single life and isn't willing to date simply to be part of a couple. The recently coined word is the brainchild of Sasha Cagen, author of the new "Quirkyalone:

A Manifesto for Uncompromising Roman-
tics" (HarperSanFrancisco, \$19.95).

Just in time to offer a counter-perspective to Valentine's Day gushiness, Cagen's book bills itself as an inspiring guide and celebration of singles everywhere. It's also evidence of a larger trend: Single America is growing.

More of us are marrying later, divorcing or not marrying at all. America now has more households of people living alone - 26 percent - than married households with children, 25 percent.

As their numbers grow, so does the attention being paid to satisfied singles.

Ethan Watters' new book, "Urban Tribes: A Generation Redefines Friendship, Family, and Commitment" (Bloomsbury USA, \$24.95), explores the lives of never-marrieds who form friendship groups that function as quasi-families. (Think "Friends" and "Sex and the City.") **Segue**, a new fashion and lifestyle magazine aimed

They're happy staying single

Alone from IE

at affluent, educated singles aged 30 to 55, debuts this spring. And the right-hand diamond ring has emerged as a hot fashion trend – a symbol of independence for the woman who's not waiting for a man.

Cagen conceived her book after a column she wrote about her own quirkyalone-ness drew hundreds of responses from singles who saw themselves in her description. Quirkyalones aren't loners, she says. But when it comes to dating, they have high standards. "We want a miracle," she wrote. "Out of millions, we have to find the one who will understand."

Can men be quirkyalones, too? Certainly, Cagen writes in her book, though she says the stigma of being single has traditionally hit women harder. Devin Mendelsohn of Charlotte thinks the term fits him. "It's pretty nice to be single and not have that significant other," says the 26-year-old, who works in logistics and warehouse management. Though unattached, Mendelsohn has a full social life. At least a couple of nights a week, he's out with friends, both male and female.

Marriage declining

Not so many years ago, nearly everyone married. In the 1950s, almost 95 percent of Americans married at some point in their lives, says David Popenoe, co-director of Rutgers University's National Marriage Project.

But since then, marriage rates have been falling, thanks to factors such as birth control and the rise of working, financially independent women. The percentage now stands in the mid-80s, and Popenoe believes it's likely to dip lower. At the same time, the median age at first marriage has risen, to 25 for women, 27 for men.

"We have this long stage of life now where everybody's out there in an historically unprecedented situation – not married and not living at home," Popenoe says.

Most will eventually marry. But with single adulthood becoming a larger portion of American lives, more singles are making the most of it.

Cohen, who works in southeast Charlotte, owns her home,



Koss



Salls

and when she recently turned 35, she threw herself a party, inviting friends and family to her father's home. For vacations, she's taken several singles cruises.

Such singles-targeted activities are growing. More churches are offering ministries for the unmarried, and niche singles groups are ballooning. (Charlotte is headquarters of the American Singles Golf Association.)

Still, in our family- and marriage-centered culture, many single people say they're often made to feel incomplete. "You have to be in a couple or you're not considered normal. That bothers me a lot," Cohen says.

And even when you're in a couple, says Charlotte real estate agent Leslie Salls, people want to know when you're going to get married.

"I get the question a lot, which baffles me," says Salls, 48, who has dated her boyfriend more than three years. "If a relationship is working, and a lifestyle is working, I don't see the necessity of being Mr. and Mrs."

Salls is divorced, as is her boyfriend. "Sometimes I'm offended by the question," she says. "Why do you feel this isn't working for us? Why do you feel it would make us stronger?"

In fact, she says, their relationship suits them. They've got

standing dates several evenings a week, but if one person has to cancel, "neither of us gets offended by it."

While many singles say they enjoy their lives, most hope to marry eventually. But they say finding the right person isn't easy.

At 32, Michael Koss, a CPA for Wachovia in Charlotte, says he'd like to get married. But his search for a mate has been complicated by a career that until recently required frequent travel and left little time or energy for dating. "People are dedicating so much more time to establishing their career," he says. Add to that the fact that he's Jewish and would prefer dating a Jewish woman. "That does make it a little tougher," he says.

People have indeed become more discerning about their potential mates, studies show. Back in 1965, 75 percent of college women surveyed said they'd marry a man they didn't love if he suited them in other ways. But a recent National Marriage Project study found that 94 percent of men and women in their 20s are looking for a soul mate.

"It would take some very, very special person," Mendelsohn says. The son of parents who've been happily married 35 years, Mendelsohn says his expectations are high, and that makes it harder to find someone.

Even Cohen concedes that marriage could be in her future. "It's not impossible," she says. Meanwhile, she may soon be the proud owner of a pair of diamond earrings. She'll be buying them for herself.

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Singleton Nation

■ Since 1999, Los Angeles-based Unmarried America has worked to fight the social stigma and inequities that it says single people often encounter. Among its major efforts: Convincing employers to revamp benefit programs so they don't shortchange unmarried employees – by allowing singles to include family members other than spouses or children on their health-care plans, for instance.

■ In 2002, 49.5 percent of all U.S. households were headed by unmarried people. That includes people who are divorced or widowed, as well as those who've never married.

■ In North Carolina, 23.7 percent of housing units are occupied by one person, the highest of any state in the country.

■ Interested in learning more about quirkyalones? Check out www.quirkyalone.net. You'll learn about plans in several cities (none in the Carolinas) to celebrate the second annual International Quirkyalone Day on Feb. 14.

Sources: Unmarried America, American Demographics magazine.