

FEATURE

The 200 Millionth American

By Jonathan Tilove

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Sometime in October, the Census Bureau's official Population Clock will tick off the arrival of the 300 millionth American and — just like that — the era of Robert Ken Woo Jr. will come to an end.

When Woo was born Nov. 20, 1967, at 11:03 a.m. EST in Atlanta's Crawford Long Hospital, Life magazine proclaimed him the 200 millionth American. In the years since, he has worn his footnote in history lightly and well, his flicker of fame fanned anew by the approaching milestone.

"I never took it that seriously," Woo says of his place in the annals of American trivia. "To me it seemed very random."

The magazine, however, endowed his selection with meaning: "If Life could find a baby being born at the moment the magic number came up on the clock, he would symbolize this point in the nation's growth — and have something to tell his grandchildren," read an editor's note accompanying his celebrated debut.

Still, well before Woo — now 38 and married with three young daughters — could even contemplate grandchildren, America has grown by another 100 million.

Until reporters started calling early this year, "I didn't think we were that close to it," Woo says in a telephone interview from his 36th-floor office at the prestigious law firm King & Spalding, a few miles from the hospital where he was born.

According to the September settings for the Census Bureau's Population Clock, there is a birth in America every seven seconds, a death every 13 seconds and a net migrant (the number

of immigrants minus the number of emigrants) every 30 seconds. That's a net gain of one person every 10 seconds, a quicker pace than the one every 14.5 seconds when Woo came on the scene.

America hit 100 million in 1915. It's estimated we'll reach 400 million in 2040.

But most of us haven't the foggiest idea how many people inhabit the United States. According to a USA Today/Gallup Poll of 1,002 people in June, 29 percent thought the population was less than 200 million, 19 percent thought it was a billion or more, and 27 percent wouldn't even hazard a guess.

Back in 1967, the Census Bureau projected that the 200 millionth American would arrive between 10:58 and 11:02 a.m. the Monday before Thanksgiving. Life, then America's iconic photo magazine and today a weekend newspaper supplement, dispatched 23 photographer-reporter teams to hospitals in 22 cities, ready to capture the birth that came closest to the appointed time.

In Miami, a physician pleaded with his patient, "push harder — and you'll be in Life Magazine." In Boston, a doctor arranged to deliver a baby by Caesarean section precisely at 11. But Census officials stopped the clock for three minutes so President Lyndon B. Johnson would be at the ceremony when it hit 200,000,000. Sally Woo awoke after delivery to snapping photographers.

Reg Murphy, an Atlanta Constitution reporter who later became editor of that paper and others, covered Woo's birth for *Life* and his first five birthdays for the Constitution.

One year, Woo remembers, a photographer prostrated himself to get a good shot of him on his bicycle. "I am watching this full-grown man in a suit lying down on my driveway." Another year, a photographer appeared at his kindergarten class. "I did not like that at all."

As a little boy, Woo asked his mother what the fuss was about. "She did put it in terms of people see you as the average American and want to know what you're doing."

But, he says, his parents, who live in suburban Atlanta, "never wanted to make too big a deal out of it. They didn't want to feel that this put any pressure on me."

If Woo felt any pressure to be average, he resisted it.

In high school Bobby Woo — that's how he has always been known — was named Georgia's state STAR student, chosen from those scoring highest on the SAT. In other words, the 200 millionth American was also, in his age cohort, the smartest kid in Georgia. Occasional news stories would alert Georgians to Woo's progress: The 200 millionth American graduates from Harvard and Harvard Law School. The 200 millionth American becomes the first Asian-American partner at King & Spalding.

Woo credits his parents and their strict regimen. "All we did is school." As a Korean-American attorney friend has put it to him, "Bobby, you and I were grounded our whole lives. We just never knew it."



Life magazine identified Robert Ken Woo Jr. as the 200 millionth American when he was born in 1967. (Photo by Bob Mahoney)

Woo's older sister, Angie, is the in-house counsel for Scientific Atlanta Inc. His younger sister, Cindy, is an obstetrician/gynecologist in California's Bay Area. His younger brother, David, is a urologist who lives outside Atlanta. Woo's wife — also Angie Woo, whom he met at Harvard Law — works for Georgia's attorney general.

Woo's is a typically atypical American story.

His family is of Chinese descent. His mother immigrated when she was 15 and met his father, who was born here, in Augusta, which has had a Chinese community since Chinese labor was brought there after the end of slavery. His father's mother cooked what Woo growing up assumed to be Chinese delicacies like black-eyed peas, collards and hog jowls. His wife is also of Chinese descent, but her maiden name is Mooney, the result of an Irish forbear who found his way to China. Their daughters are named Erin, Megan and Caeley.

As an emblem of America at 200 million, Woo acknowledges, "I clearly did not fit the statistics at all." "Too bad they got the wrong guy," agrees William Frey, a demographer at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and the Brookings Institution in Washington, who thinks a 200th or 300th million American ought to

symbolize the way America, at that moment, is growing and changing.

Back in 1967, Frey says, a baby born to white suburbanites would have been fitting. On October 17 — the day Frey calculates that America will reach 300 million — a baby born to Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles County would be the ideal choice.

Of course, theoretically, the 300 millionth American could also come across the border that day. The fraught politics of immigration and population growth may explain why, unlike LBJ, President Bush has no plans to be standing in front of the Population Clock when 300 million rolls into view.

There may well be no chosen successor to Woo. While Gerber is running a 300 millionth baby sweepstakes open to the parents of any infant born between the beginning of May and end of October, it lacks even the grand artifice of the Life search.

If somewhere, somehow a 300 millionth American should emerge, what advice would the 200 millionth American have to offer?

“Probably that he or she should not worry,” Woo says. “They’re not the average American. They are one of 300 million. That gives them a lot of freedom.”

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Jonathan Tilove can be contacted at jonathan.tilove@newhouse.com)