

"outfits sold separately"

Does Barbie ever tire of shopping? Probably not. Which is why we thought of using her as a yardstick for measuring the change in America's standard of living since the mid-20th century — a sort of Benchmark Barbie. Our hunch was that contemporary Barbie must have way more stuff, and better stuff, than she did in the early 1960s.

But we hit a snag. As it turns out, Barbie always had a lot of stuff, and some of it was pretty darn nice.

In her debut year, 1959, Barbie's wardrobe included a Roman Holiday Separates collection, complete with a very stylish pair of Italian sunglasses. Then there was the stunning White Magic ensemble in 1964: a white satin coat, pillbox hat, white gloves, and silver clutch purse. And it wasn't just the clothes that set Barbie apart. Her first car — a coral-colored 1962 Austin-Healy convertible — was a thing of beauty.

No, Barbie was not your average girl. Clearly, we couldn't hold her up as an example of how the material standard of living has improved for middle-class Americans.

But on another level, Barbie's experience reflects the fact that Americans — especially American women — have a much broader range of choices than they had in the early 1960s. Back then, one of the few professional-level career options open to Barbie was student teaching, but by the mid-1990s she was a firefighter, a policewoman, and a pilot in the Air Force's elite Flying Thunderbirds.

Anything seemed possible. She could stand next to Ken in her "Rendezvous with Destiny" desert camouflage fatigues and red beret inspired by Operation Desert Storm. Or she could be Madame du Barbie, glamorous as ever in an outfit that recalls Marie Antoinette. The choice was hers.

Of course, we don't want to take this Barbie

theme too far, nor do we want to be cheerleaders for contemporary life. We're not saying that any woman — or any man, for that matter — can now live the life of her or his dreams. In fact, if we wanted to extend our Barbie theme to round out the picture of 21st century economic life, we'd also need to include a bunch of tough, tiring, low-wage jobs — maybe Chambermaid Barbie, who cleans motel rooms for \$6 an hour, or Bedpan Barbie, who works 10-hour shifts in a nursing home, or Associate Barbie, who makes minimum wage for standing on her feet all day behind the cash register at an off-price warehouse store.

No, things aren't as good as they ought to be. But for a sizable number of people, contemporary life offers a much wider range of possibilities. And that's a good thing. The fact that more of us have the option to do things we couldn't do 50 years ago is an indication that, overall, we're living better.

