

A Thoroughly Modern Courtship:  
Preparing for Marriage in the 1930s

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Abstract

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(Under the direction of John Kasson)

In the United States during the 1930s, restrictive anti-obscenity laws ensured that contraceptive information was extremely difficult to find. Arthur Taylor and Sallie Blackwell Sharp were married in 1935, and in the year before their wedding they pursued a variety of tactics in hopes of learning how to control the size of their family. Taylor and Sharp provide a valuable case study for evaluating how middle-class white Americans worked to learn about birth control and how they dealt with the formidable obstacles that stood between them and the knowledge they sought.

To both of my grandmothers, who were a bit younger than Sallie and a lot luckier.

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For Sallie Blackwell Sharp and Arthur Lawrence Taylor, June 20, 1934 was a long time coming.<sup>1</sup> It was two days before their wedding, and it was the first time they had seen each other in over a year.<sup>2</sup> Their entire engagement and a good portion of its preceding courtship had taken place via correspondence. While the distance between them was a source of constant frustration for Sallie and Arthur, it is a boon to history. With only letters for communication, the future Taylors wrote to each other about everything. As a result, they have left a rich record of what a courting couple would have discussed prior to marriage. Arthur and Sallie's opus of love letters presents an excellent case study in how socioeconomically privileged but otherwise unexceptional people in the 1930s dealt with issues of contraception.

Arthur and Sallie first met while Arthur worked as the manager of the Montgomery Ward store in Sallie's hometown of Reidsville, North Carolina. Arthur had graduated from the State College in Raleigh (now North Carolina State University) and was nearly seven years older than Sallie.<sup>3</sup> During school holidays Sallie worked in the store and Arthur fell for her. At the time Sallie was a student at the North Carolina College for Women in Greensboro, training to become a music

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Sallie Sharp from Arthur Taylor, June 10, 1934. Hereafter cited as SS and AT. All of the Arthur and Sallie's correspondence with each other and their families is found in the Sallie Blackwell Sharp Taylor and Lawrence Arthur Taylor papers, 1932-1999, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to AT from SS, June 5, 1934.

<sup>3</sup> Finding Aid, Sallie Blackwell Sharp Taylor and Lawrence Arthur Taylor papers, 1932-1999, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

teacher. Sallie was a particularly talented violinist, and the university offered her a chance to develop her skills.<sup>4</sup>

After Sallie returned to school for her senior year, Arthur wrote her letters and occasionally visited her. Initially Sallie addressed her letters to “Mr. Taylor” and apparently resisted Arthur’s affections.<sup>5</sup> Arthur called her Sallie from the start, frequently adding “my dear” to amplify his affectionate feelings. Eventually even “dear” was not expressive enough, and he addressed two March 1933 letters to “Sweetheart” and “Wonderful Girl.”<sup>6</sup> He never misspelled her name, though other people frequently did. Sallie seemed uninterested at the beginning of their courtship, but over time she was both persuaded to accept him as her beau and to call him Arthur. Sallie might have played hard to get initially, but once she let Arthur in, infatuation also consumed her.

Soon after their official relationship began, Arthur’s job required a move to Hammond, Indiana, and their courtship shifted exclusively to letters.<sup>7</sup> By March of Sallie’s senior year Arthur had proposed and Sallie had accepted, on the condition that Arthur write for her father’s permission.<sup>8</sup> Mr. Sharp’s reply was polite, but he made it clear that he felt Sallie was too young and naïve to get married. He also reminded Arthur (and Sallie, implicitly) that Sallie had accepted reduced tuition at

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<sup>4</sup> Anna R. Hayes, *Without Precedent: The Life of Susie Marshall Sharp* (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 2008), 94

<sup>5</sup> Letter to AT from SS, December 8, 1932 and Letter to Sallie, January 29, 1933.

<sup>6</sup> Letters to SS from AT, March 5, 1933 and March 19, 1933.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to SS from AT, March 5, 1933.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to AT from SS, March 22, 1933

NCCW in exchange for two years of service to the state as a teacher. Mr. Sharp expected his daughter to honor her obligation.<sup>9</sup>

In light of parental disapproval, Sallie and Arthur elected to delay their marriage. Sallie went to Raleigh to teach at the School for the Blind, and Arthur continued managing at Montgomery Ward, moving from Indiana to Michigan over the course of their engagement.<sup>10</sup> By the time Sallie started work, she and Arthur knew that a wedding was in their future, and they had plenty of time to prepare for it. Both expressed a fervent desire to enter marriage as ready as possible in order to ensure the greatest possible state of domestic bliss. Sallie and Arthur had over a year to prepare for their wedding day, and in that year they addressed a great many issues.

One important topic of discussion was birth control. Sallie and Arthur were remarkably candid about their understandings of and attitudes towards contraception. Perhaps their candor was the product of necessity. They were unable to discuss such delicate matters in person, so circumstances forced them to frankly address them in writing. Maybe they were particularly liberated in their thinking. Or maybe ordinary people in the 1930s were more comfortable talking about sex than we now think, and that fact is hidden from us because very few people wrote about this issue. Whatever the reason for their openness, Arthur and Sallie were quite forthright.

The discussion began with talk about how many children they wanted to have. Sallie first broached the topic of childbearing and how much of it she should prepare

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<sup>9</sup> Letter to AT from J.M. Sharp, April 4, 1933

<sup>10</sup> Letter to AT from SS, June 30, 1933 and Letter to SS from AT, September 13, 1933.



for. Writing to Arthur, she boldly began, “Let’s talk about children. Don’t you think people should reserve the right to have their children when they choose and the number they want?”<sup>11</sup> With no equivocation, Sallie clearly stated her opinion on a couple’s right to reproductive control. Seeming to sense that her boldness might have been too much, she added, “Am I crossing bridges...? I would like to have several years with just us together. What do you think?”<sup>12</sup> Sallie apparently realized that her forthright declaration might not be a popular one, and she backtracked a bit by acknowledging that she had possibly taken her opinion too far. Her step back indicates that she knew her opinion violated the status quo in some way.

Sallie needn’t have worried. Arthur agreed with her that a couple had the right to schedule the births of children. Both he and Sallie seemed to believe that immediate pregnancy was not a necessary consequence of marriage. There was no acknowledgment of leaving procreation to the will of God. Arthur and Sallie clearly believed that the decision of when and how many children to have was theirs and rightfully so. There was no compunction or doubt. The truth of their right was self-evident.

Not everyone in 1930s America felt the same way that Sallie and Arthur did about the right to control reproduction. Most famously, the Catholic Church decreed that sex within marriage was designed exclusively for the creation of children, and

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<sup>11</sup> Letter to AT from SS, January 1, 1934.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

that any “artificial” attempts to curtail fertility were sinful.<sup>13</sup> The Church had been nominally opposed to contraception since antiquity, but the rise of Protestant and mainstream approval of the practice awakened Catholic clergy’s interest in the matter. The doctrine did not change so much as the Pope and other Catholic leaders dramatically raised the profile of the issue, working to ensure that all practicing laymen were aware of the teaching.<sup>14</sup> In the *Casti Connubii* of 1930, Pope Pius XI forcefully stated, “Any use whatsoever of marriage, in the exercise of which the act by human effort is deprived of its natural power of procreating life, violates the law of God and nature, and those who do such a thing are stained by a grave and mortal flaw.”<sup>15</sup> The *Casti Connubii* was widely publicized and incorporated into Church life, preventing lay Catholics from pleading ignorance of the doctrine and also ensuring that many non-Catholics were aware of the Church’s vehement opposition to birth control. According to the official teachings of the church, only God had the right to decide how children were spaced.

Other opponents of access to family planning included racist whites, who denounced birth control as they pleaded with native-born women to save America

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<sup>13</sup> C. Thomas Dienes, *Law, Politics, and Birth Control* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1972), 106.

<sup>14</sup> Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 4-7. For a detailed history of the Church’s changing attitudes on birth control from antiquity to the 1960s, see John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 72.

from the specter of “race suicide.”<sup>16</sup> Nativists viewed the comparatively high rates of fertility among immigrant and black populations with alarm. Eugenicists worked to promote increased childbearing among white, native born people, with very little success.<sup>17</sup> The eugenics movement was a more divided opponent to birth control than other interests, however, because some activists saw birth control as an opportunity to limit the fertility of supposedly undesirable groups. One British eugenics group pledged its support to birth control research in hopes of securing a contraceptive that could easily be used by “the stupidest and therefore the most undesirable members of society.”<sup>18</sup>

The professional medical community, at least officially, also opposed the practice of artificial contraception. The American Medical Association contended until 1937 that birth control education was not a valid component of the practice of medicine, continuing a commitment to prudery that had also led the organization to argue in 1851 that practical experience in obstetrics training was inappropriate and unnecessary.<sup>19</sup> The 1937 acceptance of birth control was given grudgingly, with the caveat that contraception was still only acceptable when its use was medically indicated. Sallie and Arthur quietly expressed their belief that they deserved to

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<sup>16</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 141.

<sup>17</sup> Richard A. Soloway, "The 'Perfect Contraceptive': Eugenics and Birth Control Research in Britain and America in the Interwar Years," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 4 (Oct. 1995): 639.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 639, 661.

<sup>19</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 81, William G. Rothstein, *American Medical Schools and the Practice of Medicine: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 59.

control when they had children, but their opinions would have seemed incendiary to many people of the time.

Arthur and Sallie felt entitled to birth control, and they trusted that access to it would be very valuable to their marriage and to their own happiness. Their letters were filled with allusions to other couples that they knew and how birth control had or had not improved their lives. Her parents' marriage was the relationship Sallie had the most experience observing. Mr. and Mrs. Sharp had had seven children in the course of twelve years, with the first child appearing a year after they married. They had also endured tremendous financial struggles in the early years of their marriage, declaring bankruptcy twice in seven years.<sup>20</sup> In reflecting on the experience of her parents, Sallie mused, "I think Mother and Dad would have gotten more fun out of life and enjoyed each other more if they had had fewer children," and in explaining why her mother disapproved of her young marriage, "She told [a friend]...that she was married at my age, and she did not want me to go through with all she had. She must not have any faith in birth control."<sup>21</sup> Sallie lamented how unfortunate it was that her parents had not had access to birth control information. She believed it would have made them happier.<sup>22</sup> Sallie never doubted that her parents loved all of their children, but she was fully aware of the sobering existence of a couple with no contraception.

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<sup>20</sup> Hayes, *Without Precedent*, 12-18.

<sup>21</sup> Letters to AT from SS, January 1, 1934 and March 21, 1934.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to AT from SS, March 21, 1934.

Sallie's parents were not an unusual case. Birth control information was exceptionally difficult to access during the fifty years surrounding the turn of the century. Geography frequently prevented couples from learning about contraception, as many women did not live close enough to a birth control clinic or a competent doctor, and so were unable to obtain informed medical advice.<sup>23</sup> A second access issue was rooted in economic stability. Even in cases where a doctor served nearby, often it was only middle-class women who could afford an evaluation.<sup>24</sup> The difficulty of procuring information resulted in another external obstacle to access. Although there were bureaus that had tested contraceptive products, and there were groups willing to share their findings, this information was not publicized or easily available. The time and energy required to find out about these organizations and engage in a beneficial correspondence with them rendered their existence virtually meaningless for most American women.<sup>25</sup>

Internal obstacles also contributed to women's difficulty in accessing effective birth control. Embarrassment over the subject of sex and a vague uneasiness about the female body kept many women from seeking information. Advertisers sympathized with (and probably contributed to) this sense of shame. Ads spoke of problems that were too personal to share with a doctor. Drugstores constructed sequestered "feminine hygiene" departments where women could shop without

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<sup>23</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 152-3.

<sup>24</sup> James Reed, *The Birth Control Movement and American Society: From Private Vice to Public Virtue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 45.

<sup>25</sup> Rachel Lynn Palmer and Dr. Sarah K. Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds in Woman's Hygiene: A Medical Guide Against Misleading Claims and Dangerous Products* (New York: Vanguard, 1936), 21, 24.

worry of being seen by casual shoppers.<sup>26</sup> The all-female salespeople of these departments may have made women more comfortable, but they also reinforced the notion that birth control was not a topic of respectable conversation.<sup>27</sup> Whether this restraining modesty was already present in women or it was cultivated in them by advertising copywriters, it inhibited women from seeking the assistance of medical professionals.

Arguably the biggest impediment of all was the Comstock Act, a codification of birth control censorship policies passed in 1873. A national law with many state and local expansions, this brainchild of anti-obscenity zealot Anthony Comstock prohibited distribution of contraceptives or information about them through the mails.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, the law stated, “No obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character, or any article or thing designed for the prevention of conception or producing of abortion, nor any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature...shall be carried in the mail.”<sup>29</sup> Most state legislatures followed suit with similar statutes, further tightening the grip of censorship.<sup>30</sup> The Comstock Act was initially about a great deal more than contraception. It was aimed at stopping pornography, and

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<sup>26</sup> The subject of feminine hygiene will be addressed more fully later in this paper.

<sup>27</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 163-4.

<sup>28</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven: Yale University, 1970), 23-4.

<sup>29</sup> The Comstock Act (1873), as excerpted in Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> M. E. Melody and Linda M. Peterson, *Teaching America About Sex: Marriage Guides and Sex Manuals from the Late Victorians to Dr. Ruth* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 49.

other matter deemed inappropriately salacious. Contraceptive information was just one of many “obscene” subjects listed by the law, but its inclusion on the list was to have the greatest ramifications.

Anthony Comstock and other anti-vice crusaders may have opposed artificial interference with the process of conception out of fear that birth control would create a sexually depraved culture, but contraceptives were classified as obscene for reasons beyond Comstock’s fear of sex without obvious consequences. Birth control came to be included on the list of obscenities more as a result of Comstock’s own perception of what might debauch an innocent person than because of prevailing Victorian ideas about the morality of contraception. Comstock argued that his crusade was a chivalrous act of protection for the impressionable. He felt “malice toward none, but...an earnest desire to save the credulous from being swindled, the poor from being robbed and oppressed, the youth from being debauched, and to help the weak ones.”<sup>31</sup> According to Comstock, a young man or woman could be rendered impure simply by seeing an untoward advertisement. The “weak ones” had little control over how such sights affected them, so it was in society’s best interest to remove such literature from possible sight. Birth control devices were sometimes sold in the same places that sold other objectionable material. Comstock despaired to think that someone looking for contraception might accidentally see a pornographic image in his or her search and be irredeemably corrupted. In the interest of thoroughness, birth control was added to the list of obscene materials.

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<sup>31</sup> Anthony Comstock, *Frauds Exposed; or, How the People Are Deceived and Robbed, and Youth Corrupted* (Montclair: Patterson Smith, 1969), 570.

By the 1930s, enforcement of the Act was lessening, but the code still required careful sidestepping. Manufacturers of contraceptives risked fines, seizure of goods, or prosecution for advertising or selling their wares. In order to eliminate those possibilities, the sellers of birth control products chose to advertise their products for alternative purposes, trusting that carefully chosen euphemisms would still convey what the product was for. Lysol, the most popular form of woman-controlled contraception, advertised their product as “positive death to germ life.”<sup>32</sup> Whether those germs were disease-causing bacteria or the germs of life was left unclear, and the product remained on the market. This necessity of evading the Comstock laws swiftly produced the delightfully vague term “feminine hygiene.” Feminine hygiene quickly became a code word for contraception, and while both women and producers knew the game, the government could not prosecute unscrupulous sellers under the Comstock Act.<sup>33</sup>

Although this evasive language allowed for the development of a contraception market, it also made meaningful consumer protection impossible. If a product did not explicitly claim to prevent pregnancy, then there were no grounds for a charge of dishonest labeling if the product turned out to be a nostrum. Feminine hygiene was not a cure for any disease, so the Food and Drug Administration had little to say about such products.<sup>34</sup> Birth control manufacturers found a way to subvert the censorious Comstock Act, but women were not so lucky as to find a means of determining whether products did what they implicitly claimed.

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<sup>32</sup> “The Facts About Feminine Hygiene.” (USA: Lehn & Fink, Inc., 1930), 4.

<sup>33</sup> Palmer and Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds*, 25-6 and Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 172.

<sup>34</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 181.



Feminine hygiene was the most popular segment of the hidden contraceptive market, but condom makers also did a brisk business during the 1930s.<sup>35</sup> Condoms had become widely available in the wake of World War I, as the U.S. military had embraced the devices while facing a crisis of venereal disease among the enlisted men. Explicitly condoms makers marketed their product exclusively for protection from disease, but most consumers also depended on condoms for pregnancy prevention.<sup>36</sup> Margaret Sanger, the most famous of the birth control activists, felt that condoms were an insufficient solution to the problem of fertility control. She advocated for woman-controlled birth control, recognizing that condoms kept reproductive power in the hands of men. For condoms to work, the man had to be willing to wear one, and many women found their partners indifferent to their pleas.<sup>37</sup> Arthur and Sallie never openly considered using condoms. When Arthur wished for, "...any real way to control birth and to still have an intercourse in the natural way," he may have subtly communicated to Sallie that condoms were not an option.<sup>38</sup> It is also possible that the Comstock Act prevented Arthur and Sallie from knowing about the secret second use for the condoms they saw advertised at the pharmacy.

The Comstock Act's ban on contraceptive information was effectively struck down by the *United States v. One Package* ruling of 1936, but its legacy persisted

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<sup>35</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 184.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> This statement probably also indicated that Arthur was not amenable to relying on withdrawal as a contraceptive technique. Letter to SS from AT, June 3, 1934.

long after it lost its teeth.<sup>39</sup> The National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control, formed by Margaret Sanger in 1929, pursued assorted legal strategies to protest the Comstock law. The Committee achieved various smaller victories throughout the first half of the 1930s, with their final vindication taking place in the Supreme Court. *United States v. One Package* ruled that doctors could prescribe contraceptives for any reason they chose, with one justice favoring the action because the scientific community had proven the relative safety and reliability of modern birth control.<sup>40</sup> The birth control movement continued fighting for increased acceptance and availability of contraceptive information, but the restrictions of Comstockery had been largely dismantled by the end of the 1930s. Its last vestiges were removed in 1965 when the Supreme Court's *Griswold v. Connecticut* ruling stated that citizens had a right to privacy, and correspondingly, a right to utilize contraception.<sup>41</sup>

Sallie's personal family experience embodied the obstacles that kept people from learning about contraception, and her background deeply influenced her thoughts about the importance of access to birth control. Arthur's family was smaller, but he also had strong opinions. He reflected, "I realize that most of the older people know very little about birth control and never practiced it," and opined, "that if there are many [children], that the ordinary parents are never able to give their children

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<sup>39</sup> Dienes, *Law, Politics, and Birth Control*, 115.

<sup>40</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 245-6.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur E. Sutherland, "Privacy in Connecticut," *Michigan Law Review* 64, no. 2 (December 1965): 283.

the things they should if they are to have things for themselves.”<sup>42</sup> Arthur had already been exposed to the pragmatic need for limiting his family’s size. He had moved to two faraway states in order to keep his job while nearly a quarter of the labor force was unemployed.<sup>43</sup> He spent his spring saving for a ring for his fiancé, saving money for a train ticket to go retrieve her, and searching for a furnished apartment that he could afford. He was well enough acquainted with the economic realities of supporting a family that he did not need to observe an overburdened marriage in order to know how important birth control would be for him and Sallie.

Arthur and Sallie’s discussions of the value of birth control revealed their ideas about gender roles within marriage, while also displaying how each of them imagined their marriage would work. Arthur wanted to limit the size of his family, but he believed that Sallie’s role as homemaker left that decision ultimately in her hands. He expressed his desire for two or three children, but then retreated, conceding, “...since you are the homekeeper-it is well that this [decisions about childbearing] be left to you.”<sup>44</sup> Arthur also seemed to imagine himself as Sallie’s teacher and guide through courtship and marriage. He frequently apologized for not knowing much about married life, but he encouraged Sallie to ask him questions anyway, as he worked to cultivate a sense of easy and unembarrassed communication. He asked Sallie, “Won’t you please tell me anything you wish to without any hesitancy- ask me any questions you feel that I could answer or could

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<sup>42</sup> Letters to SS from AT, January 10, 1934 and January 31, 1934.

<sup>43</sup> T. H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Hold, 1999), 43-4.

<sup>44</sup> Letter to SS from AT, January 10, 1934.

secure the information. It is too bad that we all do not know more about the so called mysteries of life-for if we did know-I fully believe that everyone would at least be some happier.”<sup>45</sup>

Arthur requested Sallie’s opinions, and she was happy to offer them in abundance. Early in their conversations, Sallie unequivocally laid out her primary purpose in marrying. “You hear and read that marriage is primarily for the establishment of the family,” she told Arthur. “To me that is second. I shall marry in order to be with the one whom I love most.”<sup>46</sup> Sallie felt that her romantic love for Arthur would be what made their marriage work. She believed this despite what other older women had told her about the institution. Her college sociology professor had urged her students to make “Happy Home or Bust” their slogan once they entered married life. Sallie remarked, “That’s all right, but it sounds like marriage is a trial. I think a happy home is the natural result of a happy marriage.”<sup>47</sup> Arthur agreed with Sallie on this matter, reassuring her when she worried about the future that, “Our marriage will be as pleasant as our courtship.”<sup>48</sup> Sallie confessed ignorance about what it would be like to be married, but she was confident that she and Arthur would be good at it.

Sallie was less confident when it came to their impending sexual relations. Arthur frequently encouraged her not to worry and to tell him anything that was on

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<sup>45</sup> Letter to SS from AT, January 10, 1934.

<sup>46</sup> Letter to AT from SS, January 16, 1934.

<sup>47</sup> Letter to AT from SS, January 25, 1934.

<sup>48</sup> Letter to SS from AT, January 30, 1934.

her mind, and she obliged. She confessed to her fiancée, "...sometimes the thought of marriage seems so strange that I am almost afraid."<sup>49</sup> Arthur reassured her that it was normal for her to be scared.<sup>50</sup> Later on, when she was about to learn more about sex, Sallie confided in Arthur, "Though to tell the truth I think I will feel a little shaky the minute before [receiving the information]....I guess I'm really not very sophisticated, as Susie informed me the last time I saw her."<sup>51</sup> Sallie's sister might have teased her for a lack of sophistication, but Arthur consoled his bride to be by promising that they would learn about sex together and at a comfortable pace. "Darling girl....We will have plenty of time to discuss this [the honeymoon] after I get there-We are two sane healthful people and nature will help us in many ways-We can decide when, how-and so on-later, and please don't worry about it now. Learn all you can-but don't worry."<sup>52</sup> Sallie was nervous about sex, but her openness with Arthur shows that it was not he who made her anxious. The act itself was what Sallie feared, and Arthur saw it as his job to assuage all her apprehensions.

If Sallie's personal evaluation of the situation is to be trusted, it was just the mechanics of the act that made her uncomfortable. She claimed that sex was clearly a beautiful thing designed for good; she simply struggled to imagine herself engaging in it. Sallie told Arthur that early on she had "decided that a thing created so universally could not be wrong and sinfull [sic] as some people seem to think," and that a married friend of hers had shown her "that love could be beautiful in telling

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<sup>49</sup> Letter to AT from SS, January 25, 1934.

<sup>50</sup> Letters to SS from AT, January 30, 1934 and January 10, 1934.

<sup>51</sup> Letter to AT from SS, March 17, 1934.

<sup>52</sup> Letter to SS from AT, March 26, 1934.

me how she felt towards [her husband].”<sup>53</sup> She went on to admit “...there is a sort of inconsistency there. I can think of it and read [about sex relations] and it all seems perfectly natural and logical, but when I try to imagine myself in such a situation I feel terribly queer.” Sallie’s logical mind was convinced that sex was nothing to be ashamed of, but her less rational self occasionally showed itself and scared her. She presented herself to others as a progressive woman, but she was not always convinced of it herself.

Sallie and Arthur’s belief in the right to and the value of birth control fueled in them an intense desire to learn about their contraceptive options. They spoke of this wish with a longing they usually reserved for each other. Arthur said, “I would give anything to know about it [a reliable method of birth control].”<sup>54</sup> Sallie vented frustration to Arthur, complaining, “That dumb law against the printing of birth control information keeps people from knowing things that would improve courtship in lots of cases.”<sup>55</sup> Arthur was determined to get the information he desired, asking Sallie, “Won’t you try to get all the information possible....When I find out things I will let you know at once-Won’t you let me know too[?]”<sup>56</sup> Arthur and Sallie displayed the conviction and the drive to get the information they wanted. They were sufficiently motivated, and thus they began their difficult quest for answers.

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<sup>53</sup> Letter to AT from SS, March 21, 1934.

<sup>54</sup> Letter to SS from AT, June 3, 1934.

<sup>55</sup> Letter to AT from SS, January 29, 1934.

<sup>56</sup> Letter to SS from AT, March 26, 1934.

At the beginning of their search, Sallie and Arthur had looked to each other for the facts, only to find that neither of them knew anything about contraception. Both were well-educated and relatively well-off. They ran in fairly urbane company and they had both been exposed to life outside of the small towns they had been born in. Clearly it was not lack of opportunity that had kept them both ignorant. They were in good company.

Most Americans in the 1930s were uninformed about birth control. The most popular female-controlled birth control technique was the antiseptic douche, a dangerous, ineffective, and anatomically unreasonable device.<sup>57</sup> Women used these douches, sold under such popular proprietary names as Lysol and Zonite, to flush out sperm from their reproductive systems after intercourse. Consumers were led to believe that the douche would immobilize sperm and then remove them, thus preventing conception. The douche may have rinsed the uterus in some way but it was useless at capturing sperm that reached the cervix. As such, it was useless at preventing pregnancy. In addition to being ineffective, antiseptic douches were frequently corrosive to delicate tissues, and their use could lead to poisoning. The popularity of the douche and other techniques in the face of their worthlessness revealed that Americans had limited understandings of how their bodies worked, how conception took place, and what measures might be taken to prevent pregnancy.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 170.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-6

The reliance on the douche was not a symptom of inferior technology. Supremely more effective contraceptive methods existed, and by the 1930s scientists understood the human reproductive system well enough to know that douching for birth control made little sense. In this era, the most effective form of contraception was an individually fitted diaphragm used along with spermicidal jelly. The diaphragm served as a barrier to the cervix, and it needed to be specially fitted to each woman to ensure a proper seal. The need for specialized fitting required that women visit a birth control clinic or a doctor, a reality that severely limited the availability of quality contraception to many women.<sup>59</sup>

After realizing how little he knew about contraception, Arthur's first impulse was to find a book about marriage and birth control. His expectations for the book were quite high, for it would "have to be sound and logical reasoning, helpful and especially written in plain everyday language before [he would] feel it [was] worthwhile."<sup>60</sup> Sallie liked the idea of a book and asked Arthur to send her anything he found that met his exacting standards.<sup>61</sup> Initially Arthur and Sallie seemed to think that acquiring such a book would be easy. Their belief that sex manuals were readily available suggests that they were either forgetting about the Comstock Act or that they seriously underestimated its power. Anthony Comstock liked to brag that he had brought about the conviction of 160 train car loads of contraceptive peddlers and that he had driven 15 people to suicide. In such an environment, it is not surprising that sex manuals were difficult to find. When Arthur and Sallie were

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<sup>59</sup> Palmer and Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds*, 274.

<sup>60</sup> Letter to SS from AT, January 21, 1934.

<sup>61</sup> Letter to AT from SS, January 16, 1934.



hunting for information, the stranglehold of the Comstock Act was lessening, but it remained the law, so it still effectively curtailed a great deal of expression about birth control.

Although books describing contraception proved elusive, marriage manuals were more plentiful. Once the book hunt began, Sallie remembered that her sociology of the family professor had recommended several books on marriage. Sallie herself had made a presentation about *The Companionate Marriage* by Judge Ben B. Lindsey.<sup>62</sup> Lindsey was famous for his support of medical birth control, and due to his position as a public proponent of contraception he often received letters asking for information that he felt unqualified to give, not being a physician.<sup>63</sup> Sallie did not think to write to him in her search for birth control information, but she did remember having read his book. Though birth control was a key component of Lindsey's argument, the Comstock Law prevented him from discussing options. He apologized to his readers, "I cannot indicate the methods here simply because it is against the law for me to do so."<sup>64</sup> He said only that the method was mechanical, but beyond that he offered little assistance. He encouraged his readers to write to the Birth Control League for more information, even offering the League's New York address.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ben B. Lindsey and Wainwright Evans, *The Companionate Marriage* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927).

<sup>63</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 152.

<sup>64</sup> Lindsey, *The Companionate Marriage*, 227.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

The Birth Control League was an organization led by Margaret Sanger, the famed champion of contraceptive rights. Sanger mailed information about birth control and prescribed contraceptive products to women who visited her clinics, boldly defying the law. She was jailed on more than one occasion for her activism. Lindsey knew that Sanger was willing to break the law to educate women about birth control. He was unwilling to make his book unpublishable by including forbidden information, but he pointed his readers to where they could get it. As she approached her wedding, Sallie probably would have relished a chance to write to the League for information. By the time she was preparing for marriage, however, she had left her college library behind, and she and Arthur had to look elsewhere for the knowledge they sought.

Once they had discovered how extensive the censorship of the Comstock law was and how difficult it was going to be to get written information, Arthur and Sallie set out to pursue other options. Arthur suggested two paths of inquiry, one for him and one for his bride-to-be. He would write to a doctor friend of his to ask for information. “Maybe” he wrote, “he would tell me since we were very good friends. If you could talk with some young married woman, someone you know and could depend on—perhaps she could help in giving some information.”<sup>66</sup> Arthur also recommended that Sallie talk to her sister, Annie Hill, a nurse, though Sallie did “not think [birth control information] is usually given to nurses,” her sister included.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Letter to SS from AT, January 31, 1934.

<sup>67</sup> Letter to AT from SS, January 29, 1934.

When Sallie and Arthur looked for birth control information, they looked to people they knew personally. Arthur's decision to speak to a friend who worked as a physician indicated that he believed medical professionals were more likely to possess privileged information. Sallie's approaching her sister the nurse further demonstrated this belief. Despite their medical ties, however, these individuals were first and foremost friends. Neither Sallie nor Arthur paid a visit to their personal physician. They sought information from people they were comfortable with, people they could discuss delicate matters with without shame. Personal ties were more important than medical honors. These discussions ultimately bore little fruit, but Sallie and Arthur's pursuit of them shows the avenues for getting information that they felt were available to them. Despite these setbacks in their investigation, Sallie and Arthur continued seeking the information they so strongly desired.

After much fruitless searching, Arthur finally got a copy of a sex manual. He said that a friend of his found it for him, but he offered no explanation of how this friend was able to secure it.<sup>68</sup> Finding it had been an ordeal; everyone that Arthur and Sallie told about the book seemed awestruck that they owned a copy, and people were clamoring to get a chance to read it. The type of candor that the book displayed was rare and prized.

The book was *Sane Sex Life and Sane Sex Living*, subtitled *Some Things that All Sane People Ought to Know About Sex Nature and Sex Functioning; its Place in the Economy of Life, its Proper Training and Righteous Exercise*, published in 1922 by the Eugenics Publishing Company, a house that specialized in scientific books for

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<sup>68</sup> Letter to SS from AT, March 14, 1934.

lay people. The Eugenics Publishing Company published some of Margaret Sanger's works as well as one of the first books to unabashedly support abortion. The house at least once came under fire for production of "obscenity."<sup>69</sup>

*Sane Sex Life* was written by Dr. H.W. Long. The book featured a remarkably frank discussion of sex.<sup>70</sup> Long clearly hoped to move beyond prudish ideas of sex, encouraging his readers to see sex within a marriage as a wonderful part of life. Though printed without illustrations, presumably to avoid triggering claims of obscenity, the book was still straightforward in its teaching. The author never shied away from using explicit terminology, and his explanations were clear and free of false modesty. Even when Long indulged his flair for poetry, describing the vagina as a "love cup," for instance, he never let his romanticism interfere with the information he was trying to convey.<sup>71</sup> The sex manual that Arthur found was exactly the sort of reasoned explanation that he and Sallie had been looking for.

Long's book may have been the only sex manual Arthur and Sallie could procure, but it was not the only treatise written on the subject. Many other marriage handbooks were published in this same era, and some achieved great popularity.<sup>72</sup> Such books wrote about sex exclusively in the context of marriage. Even with this

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<sup>69</sup> "Censorship of Obscene Literature by Informal Governmental Action," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 22, no. 1 (Autumn 1954): 219. R. Sauer, "Attitudes to Abortion in America, 1800-1973," *Population Studies* 28, no. 1 (Mar. 1974): 61.

<sup>70</sup> H. W. Long, *Sane Sex Life and Sane Sex Living* (New York: Eugenics Publishing Co., 1922.)

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>72</sup> Jessamyn Neuhaus, "The Importance of being Orgasmic: Sexuality, Gender, and Marital Sex Manuals in the United States, 1920-1963," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 4 (Oct. 2000): 453.

concern for propriety, many books still fell victim to Comstockery. Theodoor H. Van de Velde's *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique* (1930), one of the most popular books on the subject, had a publisher's warning in its first edition that advised "The sale of this book is strictly limited to members of the medical profession, Psychoanalysts, Scholars and to such adults as may have a definite position in the field of Physiological, Psychological, or Social Research."<sup>73</sup> It took Marie Stopes, Margaret Sanger's English counterpart, three years to find a British publisher for her book, and American courts later ruled that her *Married Love* was obscene.<sup>74</sup>

Clearly, Arthur and Sallie were not the only people seeking this information. By the time Arthur sent the manual to Sallie, two other men of his acquaintance had already read it. One of them had been married for eight years, eight years during which he had tried unsuccessfully to secure a copy of Long's book. The other was a doctor of thirty years. The physician told Arthur, "I wish I could have had this book when I was married-I'll always appreciate you telling me about this book and letting me read it. I wish every minister had one of this book to give to every couple he married."<sup>75</sup> A doctor, the type of person who would be expected to have the greatest level of access to information about reproduction, was thrilled to read a frank sex manual.

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<sup>73</sup> Melody and Peterson, *Teaching America About Sex*, 94.

<sup>74</sup> Marie C. Stopes, *Married Love or Love in Marriage* (New York: Eugenics Publishing Co., 1927), Alexander C. T. Geppert, "Divine Sex, Happy Marriage, Regenerated Nation: Marie Stopes's Marital Manual *Married Love* and the Making of a Best-Seller, 1918-1955," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8, no. 3 (Jan. 1998): 398, 416, and "Book Many Endorsed," *New York Times* (1857-1922), Apr 23 1921, p. 10.

<sup>75</sup> Letter to SS from AT, March 14, 1934.

People were fiercely interested in candid sex information when they could find it. Soon after Sallie received the manual, Arthur began urging her to send it back. He wrote, “If you have finished the book I would like to let a couple of young people here read it for they are going to be married soon too.”<sup>76</sup> Sallie sent the book back with an apology, “I mailed the book back this morning. I hope I did not keep it too long. I lent it to a friend of Hagels who is getting married in June too. She was very appreciative, saying that she would always be thankful to me for lending it to her.”<sup>77</sup> When the book made its way back to Arthur, his two friends read it almost immediately.<sup>78</sup> All told, at least seven people in Arthur and Sallie’s circle read their copy of *Sane Sex Living*, and all seemed exceptionally eager to do so. A culture that was deprived of any useful knowledge of sex produced a hunger for solid and honest information. Long’s book fell into this vacuum, and Arthur and Sallie and their friends treated it as an awe-inspiring revelation. The facts about sex were nearly impossible to find, but it was not for a lack of wanting them.

Although Long’s book satisfied most of the questions that Arthur and Sallie had, it was notably taciturn on one subject of considerable interest. In 151 pages, Long scarcely mentioned mechanical or chemical birth control. He did offer instructions on how best to get pregnant. The book also suggested that there was a safe period that began about ten days after the end of a woman’s period.<sup>79</sup> Long

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<sup>76</sup> Letter to SS from AT, March 30, 1934.

<sup>77</sup> Letter to AT from SS, March 26, 1934.

<sup>78</sup> Letter to SS from AT, April 13, 1934.

could discuss the safe period because it was considered a “natural” form of birth control. Encouraging couples to abstain from sex for a particular period of time did not fall under Anthony Comstock’s umbrella of obscenity. Long took great pains to prove that his advice was decent, as he admonished his reader, “...let it be said that all sane and intelligent men and women agree that anything even approaching *infanticide* is nothing short of a crime, and that abortion, except for the purpose of saving the life of the mother, is practically murder.”<sup>80</sup> Only after this warning did he teach his readers about how to prevent conception, assuring them that keeping a sperm from meeting an egg, “which...would be liable to result in a living human form, is *quite another affair*.”<sup>81</sup>

Long encouraged his readers to carefully schedule their sex lives so as to accommodate this “free time” when it was believed that the woman was unlikely to conceive.<sup>82</sup> His notion of birth control was abstention for two weeks out of every month. He acknowledged that this would require a great deal of personal strength, but he encouraged his readers to try anyway. Long anticipated that some of his readers would look elsewhere for other, more controversial, information about contraception. He ended his short section on contraception by reminding his readers that, “If anything further on this point should be desired, [they should] consult a

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<sup>79</sup> This timing of the “safe period” was popular at the time. Even Margaret Sanger preached it. Unfortunately, ten days after the end of menstruation is frequently the time when a woman is most likely to conceive.

<sup>80</sup> Long, *Sane Sex Living and Sane Sex Life*, 99.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

reliable physician.”<sup>83</sup> The Comstock Act prevented him from explicitly discussing birth control in his book, and perhaps he decided that it was more important for people to have a little bit of information about sex than none at all.

Other manuals of the time suggest that Long’s book was mostly typical, though his explanation of birth control was unusual. In the 1920s bestselling *The Doctor Looks at Love and Life*, Joseph Collins blamed any lack of interest in sex on the husband’s failure to nurture his wife, making no mention of the role that fear of pregnancy could play.<sup>84</sup> Marie Stopes spent a great many pages arguing against the opponents of birth control, but as to the method, she only allowed that, “To render inert the ejaculated spermatozoa...is a simple matter, now familiar to every intelligent physician and layman. The knowledge is easily obtainable.”<sup>85</sup> Van de Velde devoted twelve pages of his massively detailed volume to the role of smell in sex, but his discussion of contraception was limited to a single footnote appended to his denunciation of the practice of withdrawal. His primary motive in discussing coitus interruptus was to discourage its use because of the potential psychic damage it might inflict on the woman, and after stating that the method was frequently used to prevent pregnancy, he added, “Which it notoriously often fails to do.”<sup>86</sup> The failure to discuss contraceptive technique was surely a result of the Comstock law and not an oversight of the authors.

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<sup>83</sup> Long, *Sane Sex Living and Sane Sex Life*, 103.

<sup>84</sup> Joseph Collins, *The Doctor Looks at Love and Life* (Garden City: Garden City Publishing Co., 1926), 39. Neuhaus, “The Importance of being Orgasmic”, 458.

<sup>85</sup> Stopes, *Married Love*, 137.

<sup>86</sup> Theodoor H. Van de Velde, trans. Stella Browne, *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique* (New York: Random House, 1930), 173, footnote 9.



Sallie and Arthur were not unaware of the major omission in their sex manual. They were quite pleased with Long's explanation of mutually fulfilling sex, but they still wanted to know how to limit pregnancy. Sallie was skeptical of Long's safe period. Her college sociology teacher had told her that no safe period existed, and that reliable birth control was the only sure thing. She said that, in typical form, her sociology teacher had neglected to mention what reliable birth control might entail.<sup>87</sup> Clearly, Sallie's reverence for Long's book had not dulled her capacity for critical thinking. Arthur agreed with Sallie's doubts about the safe period, and he promised her, "I am going to do my best to find out all I can so that we will be protected until we decide that we want children."<sup>88</sup> He had already achieved a great victory by getting a copy of a sex manual, but Arthur was determined to continue his quest for the information he and Sallie desired.

Arthur and Sallie's access to Long's book was unusual. Most couples in the 1930s would not have been so fortunate. The excitement that surrounded Arthur's copy of Long's book indicates that it was a rarity, a treasure. Sallie and Arthur both indicated that they learned a great deal from the book, so its contents were novel. Certain marriage manuals of the time, like *Ideal Marriage*, have been called bestsellers. Without arguing that they were not, the case of Arthur and Sallie suggests that even the most popular books may not have been widely available to most Americans.

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<sup>87</sup> Letter to AT from SS, March 21, 1934.

<sup>88</sup> Letter to SS from AT, March 26, 1934.

Dr. Long's book had taught them about the safe period, but Sallie and Arthur were still skeptical, so they embraced the opportunity to hear another professional opinion. About ten days before her wedding, Sallie made her way to a doctor. Months before she had remarked to Arthur, "I don't know whether it is against the doctors [sic] code of honor to give it [birth control information] to laymen or not."<sup>89</sup> She was still unsure about the provisions of the Hippocratic Oath, but she was willing to try convincing a physician to teach her contraception. Her mother had written to a Dr. Carter requesting an appointment, and Sallie wrote to Arthur "[I'm] hoping that he will not feel that it will be against his professional honor to give me birth control information."<sup>90</sup> Dr. Carter was a surgeon at Duke University who had operated on Sallie's mother and worked with her sister, Annie Hill.<sup>91</sup> The American Medical Association did not recognize contraception as legitimate medicine, and most medical schools did not teach birth control, but by the 1930s some doctors became comfortable helping their patients control fertility. Had they dispensed this assistance via mail they would have been liable under the Comstock Act, but by this time doctors and pharmacists had earned greater latitude due to their status as esteemed professionals.<sup>92</sup>

Sallie filled her letter about the visit to the doctor with descriptions of how nice he was to her family and how pleased her mother had been with the visit. Clearly, she felt this particular sort of visit was not within the typical physician's

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<sup>89</sup> Letter to AT from SS, January 29, 1934.

<sup>90</sup> Letter to AT from SS, May 30, 1934.

<sup>91</sup> Letter to AT from SS, March 28, 1934.

<sup>92</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 127.

obligations.<sup>93</sup> Her gratitude stemmed from some source other than general awe of the medical profession. She had shown no such reverence when discussing with Arthur the physicians who were treating her for a skin infection. In that discussion she was grateful that the doctors protected her from tetanus, but she never treated their care as if it exceeded their call of duty. She even critiqued their skills, complaining that the doctor “cut away the dead skin which didn’t feel very dead.”<sup>94</sup> In contrast, she felt that her contraceptive investigation visit was an out of the ordinary doctor’s appointment.

A small entourage accompanied Sallie to her visit. Both her mother and Annie Hill went along. Despite her family’s support, Sallie lamented that Arthur was unable to join her. She wrote to him that she was upset about the appointment because she had been unable to tell the doctor why her fiancé was not present. She told Arthur, “Dr. Carter said that he wished you were there too when I talked to him, but he did not give me a chance to say that your being in Michigan—was the cause of your absence.”<sup>95</sup> Her tone revealed embarrassment. She wanted the doctor to know that she was a respectable woman, that she was interested in learning about birth control for use within the bonds of marriage. She seemed agitated that the doctor did not know the perfectly legitimate reason why Arthur was unable to take her to her appointment. Her mother’s and Annie Hill’s presence now made sense; they were there as character witnesses. They could vouch for Sallie’s valid reasons for wanting

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<sup>93</sup> Letter to AT from SS, June 7, 1934.

<sup>94</sup> Letter to AT from SS, October 3, 1933.

<sup>95</sup> Letter to AT from SS, June 14, 1934.

birth control. Their very presence told the doctor that she was not a promiscuous woman.

At first Sallie was reticent in her explanations of what the doctor told her. She assured Arthur that she would fill him in when she saw him. “I will tell you all that he said,” she promised.<sup>96</sup> Part of this postponement may have reflected her excitement to see Arthur after their seemingly interminable separation. But she might also have reached the threshold of what she was comfortable putting in writing. She and Arthur had talked easily about family planning and their concerns about sex, but the discussion had never been explicit. Dr. Long’s book used clear language unblushingly, but Sallie and Arthur either did not want or did not need to be quite so precise. Her previous candor eliminated the possibility that she was worried about the letter being intercepted, so embarrassment was likely the cause of her caution. Explaining her doctor’s recommendation, if it was anything aside from the safe period, would have perhaps made Sallie uncomfortable.

After a few days, Sallie seemed to realize that she needed to tell Arthur at least some of what the doctor told her because he had prescribed a drugstore compound, and she wanted Arthur to look into purchasing it. Presumably Sallie could have procured this item herself because Dr. Carter had assured her that the product could be found at any drugstore.<sup>97</sup> But she wanted Arthur to get it. Sallie had been uncomfortable in the doctor’s office when she couldn’t produce a fiancé as proof of her morals. Her discomfort carried over to the procurement of her prescription. She

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<sup>96</sup> Letter to AT from SS, June 7, 1934.

<sup>97</sup> Letter to AT from SS, June 8, 1934.

did not relish purchasing contraceptive materials in a drugstore without the benefit of a ring or an accompanying husband.

The recommended product was Koromex jelly. Although she apparently had decided there was embarrassment in buying the product, Sallie assured Arthur that Dr. Carter “said that we should not mind asking for it.”<sup>98</sup> Her doctor’s reassurance that there was no need for shame indicated that feelings of embarrassment and impropriety still clung to contraception, even for such modern citizens as Arthur and Sallie. Even after telling Arthur what product to purchase, Sallie demurred from explaining any further. She ended the discussion by advising Arthur, “Unless you especially want to know the other things he said, I will wait until you come to tell you.”<sup>99</sup>

Koromex jelly was a compound manufactured by the Holland-Rantos Company, a firm Margaret Sanger unofficially supported.<sup>100</sup> The jelly was intended for use with a Holland-Rantos physician-fitted diaphragm. Diaphragms were by far the most popular physician-prescribed birth control technique at this time.<sup>101</sup> Sallie’s doctor likely fitted her for the diaphragm in his office and sold it to her there, so all that remained was getting the jelly. If a diaphragm was her doctor’s recommendation, Sallie’s reluctance to discuss the solution in her letters made sense. Explaining a

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<sup>98</sup> Letter to AT from SS, June 8, 1934.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 132.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 136.

diaphragm or even the fitting would have forced her to use much more graphic language than she had previously displayed.

The cutting edge of the birth control community believed that the diaphragm with jelly was the most effective and safest contraceptive option available. Margaret Sanger and her American Birth Control League worked to publicize the device, and Sanger set up Holland-Rantos to provide supplies to American doctors.<sup>102</sup> Holland-Rantos sold some of the most expensive diaphragms on the market, with the mark-up going to cover free devices that were offered to the indigent in birth control clinics.<sup>103</sup> These diaphragms were tremendously popular among doctors despite their high price, largely because Holland-Rantos was the first widely available brand. The company had time to build up name recognition before competitors emerged.<sup>104</sup>

Sallie and Arthur demonstrated the belief in family planning and the determination to get information about birth control. It is important to note, however, that their circumstances made it possible for them to apply what they learned from the sleuthing. The records of the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms provide a useful counterpoint to the Taylors' experience. The Delta Farm was a commune-style farming experiment in 1930s Mississippi, populated by black and white former sharecroppers and led by social activists, whose goals included, "rehabilitation of some of the victims of the present economic system in the South"

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<sup>102</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 127.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

and “the breaking down of race prejudice and the promotion of united activities for mutual advance on the part of whites and Negroes.”<sup>105</sup>

The Delta Farm was an experiment in Christian social justice, spearheaded by activist Sherwood Eddy. Eddy’s colleague, Sam Franklin, invited him to see firsthand the misery of recently evicted sharecroppers in Arkansas. While talking with farmers who were living in tents by the road, the two men were arrested and subjected to two hours of white community leaders telling them “the truth about these damned niggers who won’t work.”<sup>106</sup> Shocked by the blatant racism and horrible condition they encountered, Eddy and Franklin took action, buying a farm with the intention of allowing former sharecroppers to work cooperatively for their own good. Residents of the Delta Farm were black and white, and both groups received equal wages for their labor. The Farm experiment eventually broke up in 1956, in part due to accusations of Communist leanings, but it was considered a moderate success while it ran.<sup>107</sup>

The leaders of the Farm aspired to provide the cooperative with more than just equal pay for work. They hoped to give the workers medical care, social activities, and better access to education. With these goals in mind, Sam Franklin pursued a correspondence with Margaret Sanger and Dr. Clarence Gamble, an acolyte of

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<sup>105</sup> “A Tentative Plan of Organization.” All of the Delta Farm’s correspondence is found in the Delta and Providence cooperative farms papers, 1925-1963, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

<sup>106</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), 156.

<sup>107</sup> Rick L. Nutt, *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World: Sherwood Eddy and the American Protestant Mission* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 280.

Sanger's, about securing birth control for the residents. In August of 1936, Dr. Gamble sent a large box of contraceptive jelly with applicators and instructions to Franklin. The jelly was probably paid for out of profits from selling diaphragms to middle-class women like Sallie. Gamble informed Franklin that, "Though it is my belief that jelly used alone is the most effective method of contraception for use in rural districts, few actual statistics have been collected regarding its effectiveness. I would, therefore, like very much to secure reports on the cases for which it may be used in your project and will send you later on the history forms which I have designed for this."<sup>108</sup> He was unapologetically using the Farm residents as test subjects, and Franklin was so desperate for contraceptive assistance that he jumped at the chance for his workers to participate. Sam Franklin was excited to receive birth control advice, and eagerly embraced the opportunity Dr. Gamble offered him, fully aware that they were unlikely to get such assistance anywhere else.

Two months after the Farm had received the birth control shipment, Gamble still had not received any medical history forms to support his study. He wrote to Sam Franklin to cordially inquire about the progress of the contraception education project.<sup>109</sup> Franklin's wife replied, as her husband was on a fundraising trip to buy cattle for the Farm to ensure a steady supply of milk. She apologized to Dr. Gamble, and explained, "...[T]he doctor...has been able to do nothing along the line of birth control at all as yet. During the summer he had one emergency after another so that he was kept busy day and night most of the time. Then we have discovered so much venereal disease that examinations and treatments have taken all the time not

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<sup>108</sup> Letter to Sam Franklin from Clarence Gamble, July 10, 1936.

<sup>109</sup> Letter to Sam Franklin from Clarence Gamble, September 30, 1936.



involved in other illnesses.” She went on to confide that, “The ignorance of our people is such that they think there is curative power in the use of the stethoscope [sic]!”<sup>110</sup>

The people of Delta Farm had an urgent need for contraception. They were eager to learn about family planning. Ultimately, however, their resources were strained, and more pressing matters took precedence. Birth control was a preventative measure, and emergency medicine and the treatment of infectious disease proved more urgent. Most people of similar background to the Delta Farm participants would never have even received birth control products. The Farm experience shows that Sallie and Arthur and others like them had one more distinct advantage in their pursuit of birth control. Their immediate needs were already being met. People like the Taylors had the luxury of hunting for contraceptive information because their energies were not devoted to securing food or basic healthcare.

Sallie and Arthur could have been poster children for Margaret Sanger’s agenda. They had gone to a medical professional to secure a doctor-fitted diaphragm, which they then successfully used to space their children. Sallie wanted three years before children and Arthur wanted two.<sup>111</sup> The Taylors’ first child, Larry, was born two and a half years after his parents’ wedding day.<sup>112</sup> His only sibling, Jimmy,

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<sup>110</sup> Letter to Clarence Gamble from Mrs. Samuel Franklin, October 16, 1936.

<sup>111</sup> Letter to SS from AT, January 10, 1934; Letter to AT from SS, January 16, 1934.

<sup>112</sup> Letter to SS from J.M. Sharp, March 21, 1937.

followed over five years after.<sup>113</sup> Sallie and Arthur got the children they wanted, and when they wanted them. They may have overpaid for the diaphragm and they might have been embarrassed about talking to a doctor about sex, but the Taylors eventually found the information they desired, just in time for their nuptials.

Sallie and Arthur's quest for birth control is a telling example about how people work to secure information. The achievement of their goal showed the strides that the American birth control movement was making. In the 1930s, many people who wanted and needed contraceptive information were unable to get it. Margaret Sanger's heartrending stories of women who died from lack of quality birth control were not overstated; for many Americans the situation was bleak. The movement had many miles to go if it was to benefit people of all races and socioeconomic classes, but Sallie and Arthur's ultimate success in controlling the size of their family indicates that progress was already underway.

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<sup>113</sup> Hayes, Anna. *Without Precedent*, 213.

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