

Sex in the Heartland

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Sex in the Heartland, by Beth Bailey. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. xi, 265 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$27.00 cloth.

Reviewer Sharon E. Wood is assistant professor of history at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She edited *The Underworld Sewer: A Prostitute Reflects on Life in the Trade, 1871-1909* (1997) and has taught courses on the history of sexuality at the University of Chicago and the University of Iowa.

Of all the cultural shifts of the twentieth century, none is more difficult for my undergraduates to grasp than "the sexual revolution." They understand that gays and unmarried mothers once violated serious taboos. But it seems unimaginable to them that, not so long ago, *pregnant* was a vaguely dirty word, or that contraceptives were unavailable to single women of any age. For this reason, I looked forward to the publication of Beth Bailey's study of America's sexual revolution as it unfolded in the college town of Lawrence, Kansas. Bailey's first book, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (1988), is a lively history of dating. I hoped *Sex in the Heartland* would prove equally successful in the classroom, but I doubt that it will.

The fault does not lie in Bailey's organization, which is neatly chronological. The dislocations of the war years, followed by the expansion of the middle class under the G.I. Bill, helped integrate mid-westerners into a national culture of sexual values. On campuses such as the University of Kansas (KU), administrators struggled to act *in loco parentis* to student populations much larger and more diverse than before the war. University administrators welcomed the expertise of psychiatrists, whose therapeutic approach interpreted some sexual offenses, such as homosexuality, as illness rather than immorality, requiring treatment rather than expulsion. Ironically, "healthy" heterosexual students who flouted the rules in a local motel faced greater penalties.

The rift opened by therapeutic culture tore wide in the mid-1960s, when students challenged "parietals"—the often byzantine rules governing when and for what purposes women students could leave their residence halls in the evenings and on weekends. Not all students opposed parietals; some defended the curfew as a protector of "standards." Administrators gradually dismantled the parietal system, largely because they recognized that *in loco parentis* stood on shaky legal ground.

Bailey's chapter on "the Pill" debunks the notion that oral contraceptives introduced in 1960 launched the sexual revolution. Most of the millions of women who used the Pill in the 1960s were married. In some places, laws kept the Pill out of the hands of unmarried women, and the conservative mores of physicians blocked access in many oth-

ers. Bailey argues that the sexual revolution brought access to the Pill, not the reverse, but she acknowledges that popular perception blamed (or credited) the Pill for much of the change in sexual behavior.

In the concluding chapters Bailey examines student radicalism and the counterculture. She makes a case for Lawrence as a representative center of national youth culture. The town was an oasis on the "'silk route' for drugs" and "on the Oregon trail for hippies," according to an oral history of the era (143). The spring of 1970 brought violence to Lawrence as it did to many university towns. In April and May, sniper fire and arson killed two and left several buildings in smoldering ruins. For radicals, Bailey argues, sex became both a "weapon" of revolution and the subject of revolutionary intent (153).

Sex as a weapon included both the desire to "reclaim sex in order to create a new and honest community" (157), and the use of "obscenity" by both black and white radicals to shock and undermine the establishment (160). Bailey's examples come from underground newspapers and public demonstrations and reveal the sexism and homophobia of some radicals. The "women's issue" of *Vortex*, an underground paper, is one complicated case. Its images of gang rape drew criticism from other feminists, and leave Bailey wondering, "Is the transgressive necessarily progressive?" (174).

Sex as the subject of revolutionary intent found expression in the gay liberation movement and in aspects of the women's movement. The Lawrence Gay Liberation Front unsuccessfully sued KU for recognition in 1971 but was permitted to use campus space for dances. Ultimately, these dances proved key to creating a gay community in Lawrence. If gays celebrated sex as the site of liberation, the women's movement was far more ambivalent. In feminist writing, Bailey observes, "Sex appeared most often as a site of pain, a locus of oppression" (193).

Sex in the Heartland is an effective synthesis of scholarship on the sexual revolution, but it does not break much new ground. Readers hoping to learn about the role of movies, best-sellers, or rock-and-roll in shaping sexual attitudes will find little attention to popular culture here. Perhaps the biggest disappointment, however, is that the book never quite finds a balance between the intimacy of studying a single community and the sweep of large-scale historical change. Local conflicts sometimes drag down the narrative but rarely reveal the fears and passions of those involved. As a consequence, *Sex* can be dull.

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