

OUR CHANGING SEXUAL CODE

by JOHN McPARTLAND

ONE OF THE CHIEF frustrations of our times is that while we have developed an easy humor toward sex, have colored and perfumed it with new elegances, have sterilized and packaged it, we seem to be lost in misunderstandings of the rules of the game.

Our moral code is issued in numerous versions, tailored for distinctions in class, tradition and custom, but most of these versions still describe a people who are sexually shy. This was fairly true of us not long ago, but today we are a sexually bold and sensuous people. Unfortunately, however, we are only occasionally honest about the matter: our laws and religions are those of a chaste, modest, monogamous society, our amusements are those of a gay and amoral culture, and our sexual habits have become a worldwide scandal.

We live in a pagan's paradise of sexual fetishes and sexual worship; even our children learn to judge us in terms of sexual attractiveness. Radio, motion pictures, television, illustrations in the magazines and the giant faces of billboards—all tell the same story of pleasures to be enjoyed, of triumphs over less successful people, and of sex as the ultimate pleasure of all.

IT IS HARD to remember the America of some 40 years ago. Gaslights were still a part of the city back in 1915, farms were kerosene-lit lonelinesses beyond muddy roads. Parents were discouraged with their children's waywardness, even as their parents had been with them—but there was a difference: these children were not going to accept their parents' beliefs and manners, but were to grow up in a new and drastically different kind of world.

The churches were still the centers of social life, for here young folks met future husbands and wives, and older folks helped determine community behavior. But even in churches, where social events surreptitiously included frolicking, the good ladies sat as judges over morals. Any funny business, and a girl's chastity was open to question. Cigarettes were considered the mark of the degenerate, nine o'clock was curfew.

Yet, these were the years when self-repression began to be examined critically. Fear had dominated sex: fear of neighbors' tongues, fear of disease, fear of babies, fear of the sword of the Lord. We probably overrate our knowledge of the sexual function today, but the ignorance of 40 years ago seems incredible.

In 1915, the dean of girls in a small Eastern college interviewed 34 girls. It was a daring experiment, because she asked questions about their sexual knowledge. Twenty of these girls—they were 16 to 19 years old—did not know the basis of sexual reproduction. Eight of them refused to talk at all. Six girls had a fair idea of what went on, and of these six, four admitted having sexual experience.

Those interviews are probably a fair sample of the state

of sexual understanding in moderately prosperous American families 40 years ago. Thanks to the theory that sex was sinful, many mothers poor knowledge of the human body and were shy in telling daughters the little they did know. Physicians said the typical problem of marriage was frigidity in the wife, a frigidity comparable to the attitude of a person forced to drive a car without previous experience. The daughters took the mothers at their words, and accepted sex as ugly.

Sex Became Stylish



Sex became stylish.

ABOUT THIS TIME, the new entertainment of motion pictures began to show, between pictures of slapstick comedy and galloping horses, interesting shots of ladies in underwear, bathing suits, or almost nothing at all; the proximity of man to woman was shown to be capable of producing great excitement and pleasure. The people began to swarm into the theaters.

Other things were changing, too. Cheap silk and improved machines began to make silk stockings more available and, as women discovered how well their legs looked in silk, skirts began to get shorter. Cosmetics were becoming common in the cities. Bathing-girl movies were making men and women aware of the female body.

And so the rigidity of the so-called Victorian code began to give. Nearly 900,000 cars were built in 1915, a new record. The great middle class were becoming style buyers, willing to discard the old for the exciting new. Smart advertising men were becoming aware that women wanted desperately to be beautiful, and would pay for just being told they could be beautiful.

It was a long time ago, and far away, that America of 1915. Then, in 1917, we went to war. We sort of left home, and never came back.

The war didn't last long, but it had a more significant effect on our morals than the incomparably greater World War II. The first war brought women into factories and offices, and their real emancipation occurred with their near-equality to men in making money. Saturday night, they had money of their own. That made a difference in their attitudes toward men, a difference that was to alter our whole sex code.

For most of our 4,000,000 men in the services, the war represented their first chance to escape the routine of wives, fiancées, family, church and employer. They were concerned only with time, money and the military police.

When the 2,000,000 men returned from France, they never fully returned to the controls of 1915. Our ladies at home were impressed, and not altogether favor-

ably, by their fine tales of adventure. Some of the sexual looseness which inundated our morals a few years later may have been a form of retaliation. At any rate, the stage was being set for the carnival of the '20s. We had broken through more than a century of moral restraints in less than two years.

Our sexual code had been built around an ideal situation: boy and girl grew up together in a quiet city neighborhood, in a small town, or on neighboring farms. They fell in love, married and produced children. They worked hard, the girl was a good mother, the children grew up and married within their neighborhood. Love, not sex, was important.

Now, sexual ideas were changing. The boy and girl were restless, likely to break away from home in search of money and success. The boy wanted to be gay and experienced, the girl wanted to be beautiful and admired. Clothes, a city apartment, a car and smart gaiety were more important than children. Love was the sugar frosting on sex, and it was sex that was beginning to matter.

Before this change, a girl of 17 was too young for dates; she used a little powder sometimes, but believed that rouge and lipstick were unladylike; she might, in moments of excitement, say "darn," but would feel quite daring; she believed that kisses were reserved for engaged couples, and talked of sex only to girls her own age, with a background of misinformation and nervous giggles.

In the middle '20s, a girl of 17 was evaluated socially by her dates—how many, with what sheiks, how expensive, how exciting. She used paint on her face; she enjoyed saying "God damn it!" and "Hell!"; she talked about sex incessantly, preferably to boys a little older than herself; she wore high-heeled pumps, rolled silk stockings, her skirt reached just to her knees; she smoked, drank Prohibition gin from a flask, and prided herself on knowing every roadhouse for miles around town. She thought her parents were very funny indeed.

Money became the answer to just

about everything. Women found an expanding field of jobs, and began to plan on working a few years before marriage, or even after. The birth rate took the sharpest drop in history.

Our factories turned out perfumes, powders, rouges, lipsticks, eye-shadow—the tokens of sex; clothes, shoes, hats, girdles, ties, foundations—the stuff of youth. And something new had been invented—you didn't need money any more: you could buy youth, envy, love—all on the installment plan.

Sex made you feel popular, successful, envied. It was selfish sex, neither for physical pleasure nor for procreation—just sex for sin's sake. Parents were at a loss for controls—the important thing now was money. Without it your children didn't respect you, even your own wife didn't respect you.

A social typhoon like this has long-lasting effects. We are still muddling through the dislocations it caused. There were taboos that were pretty well smashed, of course—taboos about the body, for example. The '20s took the human body, especially the female body, out of musty wrappings and put it in the sun. And a lot of other prudishness disappeared. Divorces and birth control were removed from the sinful category, but mention of venereal disease was still frowned upon.

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