

# Sex in the 1800s

**W**hat? The longest chapter in Goofy Foot history is on sex in the 1800s? Perhaps that is because sex in the 1800s was fascinating. So fascinating that the authors of America's definitive text on sexual health included this chapter in their four-volume set.

So if you bought *The Guide* to learn how to give better oral sex, you might want to turn to the first half of this book. But if you want to see how Americans enjoyed sex during our nation's adolescence, you've struck it rich.

In the pages that follow, you will discover how prostitution was a vital part of American culture long before men and women started dating. Time and technology would need to intervene for dating to evolve.

If you had been a young man in the 1800s, you might have had sex with prostitutes on a weekly basis. And unlike today's teenager who works at the mall or at Burger King, if you were a 16-year-old working-class girl in the 1800s, you most likely would have been a maid or seamstress who worked 60 hours a week for pennies a day, or you may have turned tricks in a brothel.

In this chapter, you will also learn about the birth of pornography as we know it today, about condoms that only covered the head of a man's penis, and about oral sex in the century of the Civil War.

Best of all, learning about sex in the 1800s will help you have a better perspective on sex today, and that is one of the things this book is about.

Many of the facts and perspectives used in the pages that follow are from the authors listed below. Without their efforts, we would know little about the incredible richness of America's sexual landscape in the 1800s:

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### **Bicycle Seats or Live Sex Shows?**

There are all kinds of ways to learn about sex, from downloading porn to taking your clothes off with someone you love. Each lights up a different part of your brain and feeds a different part of your curiosity.

Of all the ways to learn about sex, the chances are excellent you have never read about the ways our forefathers and foremothers did it in the 1800s. This chapter invites you into a lovemaking time machine. You'll get to look at how our great-great-great-grandparents got it on when they were young.

Just like today, sex in the 1800s had its contradictory ups and downs. For example, let's take a brief look at two things that you wouldn't think would be happening in the same century at the same time: live sex shows and concerns about women on bicycle seats.

*Live Sex Shows:* If watching live sex shows is what turns you on, it was much easier to find one in the 1800s than it is now (with "live" meaning being there in person as opposed to watching on a webcam). Consider *The Busy Fleas*, a trio of young women who made up one of New York's City's most famous live sex shows. For \$5, you could stand close by and watch the three Fleas get very busy, sexually speaking. No one carded you at the door. You would watch the girls give each other oral sex, do themselves with dildos, place cigars in their vaginas and rectums, suck on each others' breasts, and lick freshly poured beer off of one another's vulvas while their legs were tucked behind their necks. At the show's conclusion, you might be one of the lucky audience members who would get to have sex with one of the performers while the other men in the audience watched and cheered you on. As sexually explicit as this might sound, *The Busy Fleas* sex show was tame and downright virginal when compared to the live *Sex Circus* shows at Emma Johnson's Brothel in Storyville, the legal red-light district of New Orleans.

*Concerns about Women and Bicycle Seats:* At the same time there were explicit live sex shows, America's professional journals were waving flags of caution about American women who were starting to ride bicycles. A number of feminists and medical experts were concerned that the shape of the bicycle seat would leave America's women sexually aroused. They cautioned that the bicycle seat would promote "libidinousness and immorality" in the fairer sex, and that raising a leg in public to get on a bicycle might scandalize a woman of the better classes.

So how do you judge sexuality in America during the 1800s—hardcore live sex shows or concerns about bicycle seats for adult women? For that matter, how do you judge it today—abstinence-only sex education or porn-filled websites? Perhaps it's a bit of both.

**“Evil Is Generally Sniffable, Don’t You Think?”**

Disagreements among the American people about what is and isn't sexually acceptable go back a long way. Consider the following two newspaper reviews from 1896 about a live performance that took place in one of America's popular burlesque halls. While these are reviews of the exact same performance, it would be hard to find two perspectives that differ more, down to the descriptions of the performers' legs.

“I witnessed the performance of the Barrison Sisters and never saw an exhibition in any theatre more suggestive, lewd and indecent. It was disgraceful. The whole aim of these women was to excite the base emotions of the audience. All their motions were simply vicious and libidinous. Before the curtain went up the ten legs of these Barrisons could be seen by the audience under the edge of the curtain, indecently twisting and wriggling, as they sat upon the floor. This was designed to whet the appetite of the spectators. Then they came out and turned their backs to the audience, lifting up their dresses in a vulgar and indecent manner. Their underclothes had been specially made to excite the spectators, with many parts plain to the feminine eye... A law ought to be passed putting a stop to such exhibitions, and I will make a recommendation of this kind to the Legislature this Winter.” *By feminist reformer Charlotte Smith, who was no fan of the bicycle seat.*

“As Miss Lona Barrison appeared I began to sniff around for a little evil. (Evil is generally sniffable, don't you think?) Where was her beauty? That was the first question I asked myself. A complexion like boiled veal and a figure that had neither symmetry nor grace of any sort.... After she had left the stage, without any attempt on the part of the defrauded audience to cheer her by applause, she returned with the five Barrison sisters. They showed us their legs first, for they sat with them poked out under the curtain. I like a leg

or two occasionally, but it must be a leg in the true sense of the word. The spindle shanks that the Barrisons betrayed were so screamingly funny and so bewilderingly emaciated that I had hard work to keep in my seat. In fact, I don't mind saying that the only things immoral about the Barrisons are their legs. They are an affront to symmetry. They should be sewn up in masses of petticoats and kept from an unfortunate public. Amputation would be justifiable.... And then the poor little Barrisons began to do what they had been taught to do for the delectation of imbeciles. They sat on the stage looking hopelessly ill at ease, and ridiculously cheap, and sang a vulgar but stupid song dealing with the physiology of generation. There was no tune to it, no metre to it, no rhythm to it, nothing latent, nothing chic, nothing clever.... The applause, like the letter, never came. Not a gleam of intelligence gleamed in their eyes. Not a wicked look was cast in any direction. Five little frumps tugging away at a cheap concert hall chason was all we saw. Such utter inanity made you feel that you might as well have left your brains at home." *By Alan Dale, a journalist and popular critic.*

While neither of these reviewers had a single kind thing to say about the performance, you would get a very different sense of sexual standards during the nineteenth century if you read only the first review and not the second.

Perhaps people in the 1800s were even more confused about sex than we are today—especially American women, given how large numbers of them were working in brothels while others were wondering what to do about bicycles. (By 1870, the second-largest industry in New York City was the selling of sex.) On the other hand, the mixed messages about sex may have seemed normal back then, just like they seem normal to us today when conservative TV networks and religious talk shows are just a click away from radio shock jocks and porn-filled websites.

### **Layers Upon Layers**

Historians who write about sex in the 1800s sometimes present it as having different layers—with *The Busy Fleas* and concerns about girls on bikes being examples of two very different layers. Here are a few more layers that make sex in the 1800s all the more interesting:

It's difficult to know the percentage of American women who could even get on a bicycle in the 1800s when physicians were prescribing large

amounts of opium and morphine for everything from headaches and depression to menstrual pain and sleepless nights. By 1872, a half million pounds of opium poppies were being legally processed in America each year, and the morphine that came from them was being used like Tylenol and Prozac are today. By 1898, a new wonder drug called heroin was being billed as a totally safe, non-addictive substitute for opium and morphine.

Narcotics were more often prescribed for women, who took them at home, while men seemed to prefer alcohol, which they consumed in more public settings like saloons and concert halls.

We know today that morphine-based drugs do a serious number on the human sex drive. We also know that between the years of 1886 and 1906 there was so much cocaine in Coca Cola that people who had a second eight-ounce glass risked a cocaine overdose. Hashish was not exactly in short supply, and amphetamines were racing their way into the drug scene. All of this while the average American man was drinking up to a half a pint of liquor daily.

So how do you discuss sex in the 1800s without taking into account how many men and women were under the influence of drugs or alcohol? We'll never have an answer, but good luck understanding sex in the 1800s without considering it. (One of the first questions a sex therapist asks a patient today is if they are taking any drugs that might be impacting their sex drive.)

And how do we handle the fact that sex-for-sale was such a central part of our culture when our country considered itself to be the home of Christian values, a fortress of fundamentalism, and site of frequent Evangelical revivals? Perhaps the drugs and alcohol helped us deal with our contradictions.

### **Our Sexual Desires—Shaped or Innate?**

As we will see, there were many forces that shaped the sexual desires and decisions of Americans in the 1800s. Perhaps there are as many forces that are shaping our sexual desires and decisions today, but we aren't able to see them because we don't have the perspective that a hundred years can offer. We assume our sexual behaviors are determined because we are horny or in love. But what if there were other influences, such as art, religion, science, technology, fashion, television, music, birth control, the law, where you live, how much you make, what you drive, your education, your relationship with your parents, the drugs you take, whether you like your job, the cost of food, rent, and the price of gasoline?

## Statistics

A writer can face no greater peril than when his readers expect sex, and he delivers statistics on population and immigration. Take comfort in knowing that sex is on the pages that follow. But first, we need to look at the population of America in the nineteenth century before we can appreciate what the population did in bed.

### The Population of America's Ten Largest Cities in 1800

1. New York city, NY .....	60,515
2. Philadelphia city, PA .....	41,220
3. Baltimore city, MD .....	26,514
4. Boston town, MA .....	24,937
5. Charleston city, SC .....	18,824
6. Northern Liberties township, PA..	10,718
7. Southwark district, PA .....	9,621
8. Salem town, MA .....	9,457
9. Providence town, RI .....	7,614
10. Norfolk borough, VA .....	6,926

### The Population of America's Ten Largest Cities in 1900

1. New York city, NY .....	3,437,202
2. Chicago city, IL .....	1,698,575
3. Philadelphia city, PA .....	1,293,697
4. St. Louis city, MO .....	575,238
5. Boston city, MA .....	560,892
6. Baltimore city, MD .....	508,957
7. Cleveland city, OH .....	381,768
8. Buffalo city, NY .....	352,387
9. San Francisco city, CA .....	342,782
10. Cincinnati city, OH .....	325,902

It's hard to compare these two sets of figures without saying "Wow!"

In 1801, America was a small nation of 5,000,000 people. Its home was the Atlantic Seaboard. Only a few people lived west of the Alleghenies, and fewer yet had ever seen the Mississippi. Less than 10% of the population lived in cities.

By 1901, we were a nation of 77,000,000 people living in 45 states that stretched from San Francisco to New York City. Nearly 60% of us lived in cities, including millions of immigrants. Unlike our white, Protestant, old-stock settlers who arrived before 1800, English was a second language for many of our more recent immigrants.

At the start of the 1800s, America had defined herself as a small country on the edge of a boundless frontier. In 1891, the government announced that the frontier no longer existed. In less than 100 years, America had transformed from a sleepy seafaring and farming society of thirteen colonies into a major military power that produced one-third of the world's industrial output. Our rural persona was quickly becoming industrial and impersonal, especially in the North.

As we shall see, these changes resulted in a new social order that would impact our sexuality in many different ways.

### **Immigration & The New Sperm Glut**

Today's social scientists are warning about the growing disproportion of males to females in China, where there will soon be 120 boys for every 100 girls. They worry this will cause an "inherently unstable" society with increased amounts of violence, prostitution, rape, and warlike aggression.

Imagine what these social scientists would say if they learned that between 1870 and 1910, the male-to-female ratio in some of America's largest cities may have been up to 135 males for every 100 females?

By the end of the 1800s, nearly a million immigrants were entering America every year, and most were settling in the larger cities of the North. As a result, there were almost twice as many foreign-born residents living in the big cities of the North as there were native-born citizens. The bulk of these immigrants were young, working-class males. For example, 80% of the Italians who entered the United States from 1880 to 1910 were males between the ages of 14 and 44. Our largest cities were being filled with young virile male bodies that nature programmed to ejaculate like machine guns.

Worse yet, the already high male-to-female ratio assumes that all of the potential female sperm catchers were as sexually willing as the male sperm hurlers. But think about it. Among the immigrant working class, how many Irish, Italian, German, Greek or Chinese fathers allowed their daughters to cruise big city streets that were slick with the dripping testosterone of working-class stiffs? And how many middle- and upper-class daughters of white, protestant American families during the Victorian era were willing to put out sexually for the swelling ranks of working-class males?

Good luck finding material about our cities from the 1800s that doesn't refer to them as "Satan's slums" or "infernos of vice." There are reasons for this. The demand was swelling for prostitution to flourish.

### **America's New Sporting Culture**

Past generations of Americans who had been craftsman or farmers were suddenly living in big cities and working in large factories. Industry was becoming America's employer; cities were replacing small towns as America's bedroom. In the past, you knew who your neighbors were because you grew up with them. Now, if you were living in a large city, it was likely that your neighbor or your neighbor's parents were born in a foreign land.

A whole new "sporting culture" of young men started to emerge in America—a hard-drinking, hard-working wave of American "boyz" who craved sexual release and wild entertainment. These young men were no longer constrained by small-town mores and middle-class values. The apprenticeship system that had helped to mold young men's lives was collapsing. A factory and corporate culture had taken its place, one that provided few restraints on what a person did when not on the clock.

Men in America no longer had a desire to marry young. They were working 10 to 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. They had no traditional homes to go to. The streets, saloons and brothels became their home away from home. Whoring, gambling, fighting and public entertainment filled their free time.

The penises of millions of American men were up for grabs, and prostitution rose to meet the demand. Brothels became cheap and plentiful. They thrived in a society that believed the daughters of the better classes would face grave danger if America's men didn't have outlets to sow their seed.

Equally as important, America's economy during the 1800s was a treacherous landscape of booms and busts, pocked with financial recessions.



Brothels provided one of the few safe, high-yield investments. The rents that brothels paid were at least ten times higher than if the same building had been occupied by a home or business, and the “fees” that were collected from brothels and prostitutes kept the governments of many American towns and cities in the 1800s from going bankrupt.

### **A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the 20th Century**

Before 1820, when American men were often farmers, craftsmen or artisans, they worked out of their homes, and women had an important role in keeping the household together. But with the creation of factories, a number of important items like food and ready-to-wear clothes could now be bought in stores. Women were not as essential to the running of households as they had been, but it was still important for women of the working classes to contribute to the household economy.

Most of the new factory jobs needed male muscle from the working classes, and many of these jobs were dangerous. The few clerical jobs were mostly filled by males from the middle class. It wouldn't be until the early 1900s that the labor force would want large numbers of women in the form of secretaries, sales girls, clerical workers, and phone operators. As a result, the years 1840 to 1900 were often brutal for women of the working classes. The job market was so bad for these women that prostitution was often the best alternative among a small group of dismal choices.

For instance, after the Civil War, a seamstress might earn as little as 20 cents a day, with \$2 to \$3 a week being a good wage for a woman who was employed full time. This would hardly pay her rent. The same woman might earn more in a single night of sex work than during an entire week of domestic work. Domestic work was often unsteady, unavailable, and, according to a number of women, much harder on them than turning tricks.

Since this was the first time in our history when women needed to earn income outside of the home, there were no protections against sexual harassment. If a woman had to give in to the sexual advances of her boss to keep her domestic or seamstress job, she might as well get paid top dollar for it.

Another problem with the transition into an industrial economy was that factory jobs for men were often seasonal and lay-offs were frequent. Unemployment benefits didn't exist, and so the survival of the family would suddenly rest on a wife's ability to rustle up quick cash.

As a result, between 5% and 10% of all young women in cities like New York were probably involved in prostitution at one time or another. During harsh economic swings, the number might have been higher, and during boom times it might have been lower. (Like women today, women in the 1800s also traded sex for rent, goods and services in lieu of paying with cash. This has never been considered prostitution.)

We will talk more about prostitution later in this chapter. For now, it's important to realize there can be no discussion of sex in America during the 1800s without an awareness of how important prostitution was, both socially and economically. While prostitution is still an economic force in America today, it is not nearly as central as it was in the 1800s.

In some ways, the modern porn industry has taken prostitution's place, but it hardly holds a candle to the importance of prostitution for working class women in nineteenth-century America. Today's porn starlet has many choices for making a living besides helping men ejaculate. This is not to say the average prostitute in the 1800s would have chosen bank telling over sex work, but today's woman has a range of choices that would have made a nineteenth-century woman's jaw drop.

### **Honey, Who Shrunk the Family?**

In 1800, a healthy, white American female had, on average, 7 children. One hundred years later, she would be having only half as many children. Among the upper and middle classes, the size of the average family would drop 50% between the years of 1800 and 1900.

There have been suggestions that the decline in family size was due to a Victorian disdain of sex. But as we look at the availability of birth control and the flow of information about sex during the 1800s, it will become obvious that this was highly unlikely.

Also, since there were no sex researchers in the 1800s to ask people what they did in bed, we can only speculate about how often couples had sex. In one of the most complete surviving diaries from the 1800s, the author put a series of Xs on the pages when she and her husband had sex. She apparently did this to help her calculate the rhythm method of birth control which was popular during the day. The frequency of her Xs throughout a marriage that lasted for several decades indicates that she had intercourse with her husband as often as married couples supposedly do today. Her writing also explained that she looked forward to having sex with her husband, and

it was an important part of her married life. The love letters that were written between husbands and wives during the 1800s corroborate that physical passion was an important part of their relationships.

### **Abstinence Was Unnatural**

There were no movies until the 1890s, and radio and TV were products of the twentieth century. Yet people in the 1800s craved information just as much as we do today. To help answer this need, public lectures became very popular, as did advice books and women's magazines.

The lectures were often about sex and birth control. This tells us that sexual enjoyment was no stranger to the masses of women and men from middle and upper classes. In the 1860s and 1870s, "Physiological Societies" sprung up where birth control and sexual knowledge were often discussed. Some of the most popular books in the 1800s were about sexual enjoyment and birth control.

One modern sociologist who has studied the availability of sex information believes that the American woman of 1860 may have known as much or more about sexuality as the American woman of 1960.

Considering all of the pamphlets, books and lectures on birth control and sexuality that were available by the middle of the 1800s, there seemed to emerge a unified voice about sexual pleasure. This voice said that sex was important to both men and women, and that abstinence and celibacy—whether you were married or not—was unnatural and bad for you.

### **The Cherished Victorian Sex Scandal**

Even today, it is not considered proper for TV news anchors to talk about oral sex and male ejaculation. However, when an American president from the 1990s was embroiled in a sex scandal, the American people couldn't get enough of it. First-graders suddenly knew what fellatio was. A subject of frequent conversation was "that woman" and her famous blue dress.

It was no different in the 1800s, when a good scandal or trial was a cherished part of the daily headlines. America loved a sex scandal—from the 1830s murder trial of Richard Robinson, who was the moody, rich boyfriend of prostitute-victim Helen Jewett, to explicit reports from Oscar Wilde's 1895 trial in England. The more sordid the details, the better. (If comparisons to more recent American murder trials are in order, people claimed that Richard Robinson, too, had gotten away with murder.)

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During the 1890s, American newspapers reported the gristly details of America's first and perhaps deadliest and most gruesome serial killer, H.H. Holmes. Medical schools had marveled at the wonderful condition of the skeletons that H.H. Holmes sold to them. These were the bones of his early victims, who he had gassed in his suburban Chicago chamber of horrors and, whose flesh he removed by hand. It was estimated that 200 men, women and children were murdered by "the archfiend" Holmes before his crimes were discovered by Frank Geyer, a Philadelphia police detective.

In addition to the reporting of the mainstream press, the 1800s had newspapers like the *Policeman's Gazette*, which was the precursor of today's popular police and crime shows. The American appetite for crime-reporting and sex scandals has always been robust. It is not a modern phenomena.

### **Contraception and Abortion in the 1800s**

People who don't have sex don't need contraception. They don't buy contraceptives. Yet in the 1830s, America's largest newspapers had advertisements for contraceptive devices, diaphragms (womb veils), drugs to induce abortions, condoms, aphrodisiacs, and cures for sexually transmitted infections. By the 1870s, more than a third of the advertisements in America's tabloids and sporting papers were for birth control. This is not evidence of a sexually-repressive society.

But would we be able to recognize the content of these ads if we read them today? Consider the following newspaper ad from the 1800s:

*Ladies. Carter's Relief for Women is safe and always reliable; better than ergot, oxide, tansy or pennyroyal pills. Insures regularity.*

Today, we would assume this was to help with constipation. But after reading this ad, Americans in the 1800s weren't envisioning smoother moves in the outhouse or less time squatting over the chamber pot. They could tell the ad was for a drug that was supposed to cause an abortion, which was an acceptable form of birth control in 19th Century America. For instance, the terms "Insures regularity" and "Relief for Women" were expressions that referred to abortion. Other well-known terms for abortion included "remedy for producing the monthly flow," "ladies' relief," "cure irregularities," "ridding oneself of an obstruction," "female regulator," "female pills," "tansy regulator," "uterine regulator" or "female cure." Ads for abortion-inducing pills promised

to “bring on the monthly period with regularity, no matter from what cause the obstructions may arise.”

The second clue had to do with the herbs that were mentioned: “better than ergot, oxide, tansy or pennyroyal pills.” These herbs were thought to induce an abortion. Abortion was legal and common in the United States until the last part of the nineteenth century. It was allowed if performed before the quickening that occurred at approximately 16 to 20 weeks after conception. Ads for abortion-inducing products sometimes contained “warnings” such as “women who are pregnant should not take them as they would surely cause a miscarriage,” or “if a pregnant woman took the pills by mistake and a miscarriage resulted, it would not at all injure her health.”

Women in the 1800s could also buy instruments for self-inducing an abortion. There were several different types of uterine probes (also known as “sounds”) that were popular for this purpose. These instruments could easily be purchased at drug stores and through catalogues.

In addition to drugs and instruments, abortion clinics freely advertised in America’s newspapers before the 1870s.

### **Types of Contraceptives in the 1800s**

#### *Withdrawal (Coitus Interruptus)*

Withdrawal was one of the most widely practiced methods of birth control in the 1800s. There were two kinds of withdrawal: one was where the man pulled his penis out of the vagina shortly before orgasm, ejaculating outside of the woman’s body. The other was partial withdrawal, where he pulled out as far as possible while still leaving the head of his penis inside the vagina when he ejaculated.

Partial withdrawal made sense in the first part of the 1800s, when two ancient theories about conception still prevailed. One was that the sperm had to be forcefully ejaculated against the cervix for conception to occur. The other was that a woman needed to have an orgasm in order to become pregnant. Partial withdrawal became less popular by the middle of the century, as the ability of sperm to swim became known.

Although withdrawal was widely practiced, some physicians and even feminists warned that it was unhealthy for males to ejaculate outside of a woman’s body, as if an essential circuit was not being made, and the man’s body was being unnecessarily depleted.

### *Douching*

By the 1880s, one of the most common forms of birth control was vaginal douching. This usually happened after intercourse, but sometimes before.

Imagine what it was like for a woman in the 1800s to get out of bed on a freezing night in an unheated room to douche with cold water immediately after making love. Some of the birth control literature in the 1840s suggested that a woman could add spirits to the douche water to keep it from freezing over. Some physicians of the day—males, no doubt—recommended that douche water be as cold as possible. This echoed the Aristotelian notion that it took heat for conception to occur.

More than twenty different solutions were used as spermicides or astringents, including vinegar and bicarbonate of soda. It may have simply been coincidence, but the average pioneer family who traveled west on the Oregon Trail took eight pounds of baking soda with them.

The instructions in some of the earlier douching kits that were intended for birth control said that women should douche even if they didn't have an orgasm. This was because many people in the early part of the 1800s assumed that if a woman didn't have an orgasm, conception wouldn't occur.

### *Rhythm*

By the mid-1800s, another “new” form of birth control became popular. It was based on the idea that there was a safe period when a woman could have intercourse without becoming pregnant. There was only one problem: modern science in the 1800s got the timing wrong. Ovulation usually occurs in the middle of a woman's cycle, and not at the start of menstruation as they thought back then.

### *Condoms*

Condoms in the 1800s came in two styles: the full length models, like we have today, and high-water models that fit just over the head of the penis. For a long time, the caps that only covered the head were more popular than full-length condoms.

The better condoms were made from animal intestines that had been processed in lye. They were thin and strong. Large amounts of the material that they were made from, which was called Gold Beater's Skins, was imported into the United States during the 1800s. It was still being widely imported after 1873 when the Comstock laws made it illegal to import birth-

control materials. Condoms made of fish skin and membranes were also available. They were considered better than those made of rubber. (The Comstock laws made it illegal to mail condoms or send information about sex or birth control anywhere in America. More on that in a bit.)

Even with vulcanization, which made rubber stretchy instead of brittle, rubber condoms were thick and inconsistent. Their only advantage was cost.

Although they were widely used, condoms were associated with prostitutes. As a result, they had a higher sleaze factor than rhythm, douching, or pills for abortion.

### *Diaphragms or Womb Veils*

When an ad in a newspaper from the 1800s mentioned “Ladies rubber protectors” it wasn’t talking about boots for rainy days. Just about any woman reading such an ad knew that it was referring to diaphragms or douching syringes that were specially made for contraception. Diaphragms were called womb veils, the French Shield for Women, and closed-ring pessaries. They became very common by the 1880s.

The diaphragm was the one contraceptive that a woman could use without her husband’s knowledge. This was particularly helpful when the husband’s withdrawal abilities were less than stellar, or when he didn’t respect the rhythm method’s black-out days. She could also use a womb veil when her husband didn’t want her to use birth control.

### *IUDs and Nursing*

During the 1800s, there were dozens of different intracervical and intra-uterine devices for birth control. Many of these were popular, and women usually inserted them by themselves. It was also believed that nursing a baby kept you from getting pregnant. While nursing can be an effective form of birth control, it only works when it is done exclusively and at least every four hours. They didn’t know that back then.

### **The Bigger Issues of Birth Control—Then vs. Now**

At the beginning of the 1800s, it was beyond the consciousness of Americans to believe they could have control over any aspect of their health. Life was fragile. Even if a loved one was healthy, death could whisk him or her away at the snap of a finger. So how could you possibly control when you became pregnant? It’s hard to imagine today, but accepting the idea that birth control

could be a way to control pregnancy required a shift in consciousness in the early part of the 1800s.

Pregnancy had always been a concern for most women, but the option to do something about it didn't arrive in America until the 1800s. Before then, there was no difference between sex for pleasure and sex for pregnancy.

The option to use birth control was not welcomed by all. Many of the feminists during the 1800s worried that contraception would rob women of the one effective reason they had for saying no to sex—the excuse that they didn't want to become pregnant. And men in the 1800s had to digest the idea that if their wives could have sex without becoming pregnant, what would keep them faithful? What would keep their daughters chaste?

There were groups of men and women who were known as social purity crusaders. They accused women who advocated for the right to control the size of their families as being proponents of free love. Politicians accused middle- and upper-class women who used birth control of committing race suicide. Yet America's Protestant ministers—the very people who you would expect to be opposed to birth control—seldom spoke out against it.

Our concerns about birth control today are much different than they were in the 1800s. They center around cost, convenience, effectiveness and side effects as opposed to free love and suicide of the upper class.

### **Technology and the Presses of Satan—The Birth of Modern Pornography**

The 1800s saw the birth of America's first anti-obscenity laws. Anti-obscenity laws don't just drop from the skies. There needs to be enough indecency floating around to create a fuss, and it needs to have inserted itself far enough into the mainstream to be seen by more than its intended audience. During the 1800s, these conditions were easily met and greatly exceeded.

Recently, someone tried to open a brothel in Nevada featuring male prostitutes for female customers. The other brothel owners in Nevada were upset about this, because they feared the publicity would motivate a movement to shut down all of the legal brothels in Nevada. These brothel owners were acutely aware of something that the commercial sex industry in America during the 1800s had no clue about—that vice is usually tolerated as long as the citizens are allowed to turn a blind eye to it. It seldom matters whether the sexual vice is prostitution, pornography, cross-dressing or gay sex, as long as the public isn't forced to trip over it.



Leaps in technology during the nineteenth century helped it become the temporal birthplace of pornography as we know it today.

First came the modernization of the printing press and new printing technologies. This allowed cost-effective print runs that could be tailored to fit the mass markets for mainstream porn and smaller niche markets for the kinky stuff. Then followed the technology that allowed paper to be made by machine. Before that, sheets of paper were crafted by hand. Handmade paper was often scarce and expensive.

You can't call it pornography if it isn't captured by a camera or webcam. The invention of the photograph in 1839 and the ability to mass produce it by the 1860s was what helped create the explosion of modern pornography. Next was the invention of the moving picture in 1877, and the ability to show it to large audiences in 1895.

Pornography that has survived from the 1800s is amazingly explicit and shows some of the same sexual acts that pornography does today. As for written erotica, here are just a few of hundreds of titles that were popular in the 1800s. Some of these titles were best-sellers:

*Amorous Adventures of Lola Montes*

*Aristotle's Master-Piece (an explicit how-to)*

*Awful Disclosures by Maria Monk, of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal*

*Confessions of a Sofa*

*Curiositates Eroticæ Physiologiæ; or, Tabooed Subjects Freely Treated. In Six Essays: 1. Generation. 2. Chastity and Modesty. 3. Marriage. 4. Circumcision. 5. Eunuchism. 6. Hermaphrodism, and followed by a closing Essay on Death.*

*Exhibition of Female Flagellants, in the Modest & Incontinent World, Proving from indubitable Facts that a number of Ladies take a secret Pleasure in whipping, and that their Passion for exercising and feeling the Pleasure of a Birch-Rod, from Objects of their Choice of both Sexes, is to the full as Predominant as that of Mankind.*

*Fanny Greeley: Confessions of a Free-love Sister*

*Marie de Clairville; or, The Confessions of a Boarding School Miss*

*Male Generative Organs*

*Physiology of the Wedding Night*

*Romance of Chastisement; or Revelations of the School and Bedroom. By an Expert.*

*Scenes in a Nunnery*

*Six Months in a Convent*

*The Amours of a Musical Student: being A Development of the Adventures and Love Intrigues of A Young Rake, with Many Beautiful Women. Also Showing The Frailties of the Fair Sex, and their Seductive Powers.*

*The Amours of Sainfroid and Eulalia: being the intrigues and amours of a Jesuit and a Nun; developing the Progress of Seduction of a highly educated young lady, who became, by the foulest Sophistry and Treachery, the Victim of Debauchery and Libertinism*

*The Bridal Chamber, and its Mysteries: or, Life at Our Fashionable Hotels.*

*The California Widow; or Love, Intrigue, Crimes, & Fashionable Dissipation.*

*The Child of Nature; or, the History of a Young Lady of Luxurious Temperament and Prurient Imagination, ....*

*The Intrigues and Secret Amours of Napoleon*

*The Lady in Flesh Coloured Tights*

*The Marriage Bed—Wedding Secrets Revealed by the Torch of Hymen*

*The Wanton Widow*

*The Lustful Turk*

*Venus' Album; or, Rosebuds of Love*

### **Oral Sex in Another Time**

In the 1800s, the medical experts of the day claimed that oral sex was an unnatural act because a woman couldn't become pregnant from it. However, oral sex was present in pornographic photos from the 1800s and it was no stranger to the erotic literature of the day, where it was sometimes referred to as "gamahuching." This rolls off the tongue as smoothly as cunnilingus and fellatio, which begs the question of how things that feel so good can sound so bad.

As for cunnilingus, references to it appear in nineteenth century erotic literature and in pornographic photos as well. Woman-to-woman oral sex

was one of the favorites in the live sex-shows. If a man paid to watch one woman give another oral sex, it seems he might be inclined to try it on a woman himself, if he was allowed the opportunity.

Unlike today, a man in the 1800s who wanted to receive oral sex from a prostitute needed to find a brothel or a girl with a reputation for giving it. The buzz words to look for were “French,” “French talents,” “French-house,” “unnatural practices” and “indecent dances and dinners.” This means that when a man encountered a prostitute with the name “French Blanche LeCoq” or “French Marie,” he was safe to ask for oral sex, especially if she spoke with a Midwestern accent.

In New Orleans’s famous red-light district of Storyville, there was a brothel known as Diana and Norma’s. This was a so-called French house, which means that fellatio was the specialty. Because blow jobs were all that Diana and Norma’s offered, the rooms could be smaller (they didn’t have to fit a bed) and the men didn’t need to take off their shoes and pants. Due to the faster turnover and smaller space, Diana and Norma’s was able to take advantage of the economies of scale and offer oral sex for the same price as intercourse. This was unusual during the 1800s, when blow jobs were considered kinky sex and usually cost more.

The best known “French House” in Storyville was that of Mme. Emma Johnson, who called herself the “Parisian Queen of America.” Rather than being born in Paris or Versailles, French Emma was a native of Louisiana’s Bayou country. Her oral skills were so renowned that although she was notoriously long in the tooth, she offered a “sixty-second plan” where any man who could handle more than a minute of her ministrations without ejaculating did not have to pay. Emma Johnson’s brothel offered more than oral sex, including live sex circus shows where the male performer had a mane, four legs, hooves and a tail. It goes without saying he was hung like a horse.

In his 1961 interview with former Storyville prostitutes, author Al Rose recorded the following words of a black woman who had worked out of a small row house known as a crib:

“Mos’ly for plain fuckin’ on a weekday night, I use’ t’ get twenny-fi’ cent. Ten cents in d’ daytime. We chawged fifty cent, mos’ alway fo’ suckin’ off and’ seven’y-fi cent fo’ lettin’ d’ prick come in our ass.... Good weeks I could take fo’ty dolluh, Big money dem days... Dey [black

men] come fo' fuckin'. Dat's all day hawdly done. White boys?... Shit! Dey come fo' everyt'in' else. Mos'ly dey come fo' suckin' off. Sometime' dey come fo', fi', six at one time, all jam in dat po' li'l crib an' pay me a dime to let 'em watch me suck 'em. Shit! Carrie don' caiah!" —From *Storyville, New Orleans: an Authentic, Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red Light District* by Al Rose, University of Alabama Press, (1978).

Another Storyville prostitute interviewed by Rose was proud to recall that the madam of the house she worked in required the girls to give oral sex only when they were menstruating. She was disgusted to say that at some of the brothels, the women didn't do much else but give oral sex all of the time!

Starting in 1933, the American Social Health Association began doing a survey of the kind of sex acts that were requested of prostitutes. Only 10% of the requests in 1933 were for sex acts other than intercourse. By the end of the 1960s, nine out of ten requests of prostitutes were for oral sex or a combination of oral sex and intercourse.

As for oral sex in New York City, during the 1880s there were a dozen brothels in close proximity to the newly-opened Metropolitan Opera House. Since a number of these brothels were "French-run," it is likely that the prostitutes performed arias the likes of which few opera goers had previously known. Anti-vice investigators reported that because the girls in the French-run houses performed oral sex, other prostitutes would not associate or eat with them. But rather than disgust at oral sex, the real reason for the rivalries was more likely inter-brothel competition, like we see in college sports today.

### **The Great Masturbation Panic**

With many wonderful puns that were not lost on readers in the 1800s, Charles Dickens' famous novel *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839) refers often to the male body and its sexual maturation. Consider the following passage:

"I suppose you don't even know what a prig is?" said the Dodger mournfully.

"I think I know that," replied Oliver, looking up. "It's a th—you're one, are you not?" inquired Oliver, checking himself.

"I am," replied the Dodger. "I'd scorn to be anything else." Mr. Dawkins gave his hat a ferocious cock, after delivering this sentiment, and looked at Master Bates, as if to denote that he would feel obliged by his saying anything to the contrary.

The word “Prig,” which was a term for thief, sounds very close to the word “frig” which was a well-known slang word for masturbation. Then we have a “ferocious cock” which is followed by “Master Bates.” The puns and references to masturbation keep getting better, as Master Bates produces four handkerchiefs to clean up the mess that his name suggests will occur.

In spite of masturbation being well known and practiced in the 1800s, an anti-masturbation panic arose in the middle of the century. There are many reasons why masturbation started being described as such an evil at that time. One factor was the creation of the modern insane asylum in the early 1800s. The physicians at these harsh facilities discovered that patients often masturbated. Instead of viewing masturbation as one of the few pleasures that inmates of these dungeon-like asylums could give themselves, physicians published scientific articles claiming that masturbation had caused the insanity of the poor wretches who were under their care. In other words, the patients had masturbated themselves into the looney bins.

These reports helped fuel the fires that were being stoked by fanatics of the day like John Kellogg and Sylvester Graham, who wrote that more than 40 ounces of blood were lost during each male ejaculation. They believed that this huge depletion of blood led to horrible diseases such as cholera and the plague. In order to save a man from such a terrible fate, they declared that he was to have sex no more than once a month, and that he was to totally abstain from masturbation. This tied in nicely with religious prohibitions against any kind of sexual release that could not result in conception.

Understanding more about this panic helps us see why organizations like the Young Men’s Christian Organization (YMCA) worked so hard in the 1860s and 1870s to pass anti-obscenity laws. These laws targeted any materials that might cause a young man to masturbate. There is a bit of irony in this, as it wasn’t too many years later that if a young man in America wanted to find a place where he could masturbate with other young men, the YMCA was often at the top of his list.

Prohibitions against masturbation in America reached their climax in the second half of the 1800s. People today assume that these prohibitions must have scared young men and women into not masturbating. They also assume there must have been prohibitions against masturbation in America before the 1800s, and that anti-masturbation zealots like Sylvester Graham

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and John Kellogg were giving voice to long-standing fears. None of these assumptions are true. At best, the bizarre prohibitions made people feel guilt or shame, but they didn't seem to stop many from masturbating.

Anti-masturbation fanatics like Graham and Kellogg were the first to admit that there was hardly an adolescent boy in America who didn't masturbate or know about masturbation. While the anti-masturbation fanatics weren't as concerned about masturbation among girls as among boys, this wasn't because they thought that girls didn't suffer horribly from it. It had more to do with their initial focus, which was saving the bodies and souls of white, middle-class Protestant youths who they believed were in grave danger from sexual excess of any kind, including masturbation.

The fires of masturbatory panic struck a chord in the minds of middle-class urban parents. Self-help and advice books were becoming hugely important, and the bogus medical advice of people like Sylvester Graham and John Harvey Kellogg may have found an audience among the new middle class who was consuming these books. These couples didn't take seriously the prohibitions against frequent intercourse in marriage. The only prohibitions they may have taken seriously regarded their children's masturbation. And it's unlikely that children heeded their parents' concerns about sex any more than today's children do.

Sex writers today tend to make too much of zealots like Graham and Kellogg. While these men were not without influence, especially regarding circumcision, they hardly defined the sexual climate in America during the 1800s.

### **Sex & The Civil War**

The thirty-year span from 1846 to 1876 was one of the bloodiest in our history. It began with America's war against Mexico and ended with Sitting Bull's massacre of Custer at Little Big Horn in 1876. In between were Gettysburg, Chickamauga, Chancellorsville, Fredericksburg, Vicksberg, Shiloh and Appomattox.

Today, most Americans know about the attacks of 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as images on a TV screen or computer monitor. In the 1860s, the Civil War impacted Americans in a much more personal way. Instead of fighting an enemy on foreign soil, we were fighting each other.



Among the nearly 60,000 books that have been written on the Civil War, there is only one currently available whose focus is sex.

Today, when we talk about a woman having access to the military, we mean that she is able to join and rise within the ranks. In the time of the Civil War, having access to the military meant that a woman got to sexually service men in the ranks. And there was no shortage of prostitutes who did just that. There were entire camps of prostitutes who followed the military.

For instance, much has been written about how the word “hooker” may have come from the large camp of prostitutes who General Hooker allowed to be located near his division in Washington, D.C. While General Hooker was known to have had a personal fondness for prostitutes, the slang term of “hooker” came from the 1820s, when General Hooker was five-years old.

An interesting story about prostitutes in the Civil War emerged when the Army ordered 150 prostitutes from Nashville to be placed on board a brand new passenger ship named the *Idahoe*. As was reported in the *Nashville Dispatch* on July 9, 1863: “Yesterday a large number of women of ill fame were transported northward.... Where they are consigned to, we are not advised, but suspect the authorities of the city to which they are landed will feel proud of such an acquisition to their population.”

The city where the women were supposed to be let off was Louisville. The trip should have taken a few days at most. But neither Louisville nor any other ports along the Mississippi would allow the load of prostitutes to come ashore. The *Idahoe* became famous and was called “The Floating Whorehouse.” Its cargo of prostitutes nearly trashed the entire boat. They were finally returned to Nashville in August of 1863.

Love letters between Civil War soldiers and their partners are often poignant reminders that sexual intimacy was seldom forgotten in the face of tragic circumstance:

From a soldier to his wife: “I anticipate unspeakable delight in your embrace and look forward to your voluptuous touch.” In her reply to him, she wrote: “How I long to see you... I’ll drain your coffers dry next Saturday, I assure you.” From the diary of a soldier who had just returned to duty after a short leave with his wife—“We didn’t sleep much last night... The reunion so buoyed up our affections that we had a great deal of loving to do.” From General Weitzel to his lover—“My darling Louisa, I have pinched your picture

and it does not holler. I have bitten it and it does not holler. I have kissed it and it does not return my kisses. I have hugged it and it does not return my hug. So just consider yourself pinched, bitten, hugged and kissed.”

One thing we often forget about the Civil War is how the absence of men at home impacted traditional sex roles. This was studied at length during World War II, when Rosie the Riveter ran our heavy industries while men were away at war. It is likely that similar role reversals occurred during the Civil War, impacting how men and women related both at home and in the world of business. These role reversals contributed to the nineteenth century woman’s growing sense of independence.

### **The Civil War & Proposed Constitutional Amendment**

A fascinating by-product of the Civil War was a constitutional amendment that was proposed in 1863. Its wording affirmed “Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Ruler among the nations, and His Will, revealed in the Holy Scriptures, as of supreme authority.”

You would think such an amendment would have been a backlash against so much prostitution in America. However, sexual excess was not the primary motivator. The main reason for the proposed amendment was because politicians feared that God was angry with the Union government, and that’s why the North had been doing so badly in the Civil War.

A number of state governors supported the proposed amendment, and William Strong, who headed the organization that spearheaded it, was appointed to the United States Supreme Court. He would be instrumental in helping Anthony Comstock get his anti-sex legislation through Congress.

### **The Civil War and Rape**

War is often associated with an increase in rape. While there were certainly rapes during the Civil War, the numbers were low compared to wars in Europe. Perhaps that’s because the soldiers who committed rapes were often court marshaled and hanged or shot—sometimes the same day they were caught.

The rape victims of both Union and Confederate soldiers tended to be slave women. It is a sad irony that the Union soldiers who were supposed to be liberating slave women were raping some of them. But these women

were the property of Southern men, and “destroying” their property may have been a way of humiliating the slave owners. Black women were also thought to have been more sexual than white women.

### **Slaves and Sex**

For slaves, “family” had a different meaning than for most whites. The black family could be forever separated because a master wanted it that way, or because an auctioneer had placed family members in different lots. Black men were not allowed to protect their wives and children.

Sexual relations between white masters and black slave women were frequent. Some of these relationships were tender and caring, while others were rape and exploitation. The resulting mixed-race children drew particularly poor lots in life. Their presence could be a reminder to the white wife of the owner about her husband’s adultery with the slave.

Before the Civil War, it was not unusual for free black women to have long-term relationships with white men. Between 1870 and 1894, it was even legal for white men and black women to marry in Louisiana. But after the Civil War, white America convinced itself that there was an epidemic of black men raping white women. Affairs between white women and black men threatened the social order and were no longer tolerated.

It is a myth to think that the North was any less racist than the South. Few people in the North were willing to tolerate the idea of blacks as neighbors or as lovers, except for visits to black prostitutes. After the Civil War, the few protections that society had afforded blacks all but disappeared.

### **Prostitution in the 1800s**

Here lies Charlotte  
 She was a harlot  
 For 15 years she preserved her virginity  
 A damn good record for this vicinity.

*—from the graveyard plaque of a nineteenth century prostitute in Colorado*

In the bigger cities of the North, between one-in-ten and one-in-twenty women were at one time working as prostitutes. For most of these women, it was an occasional job. Some would do it exclusively for a couple of years, while others would do it only as the need arose.

Brothels were plentiful, and prostitutes could be found in almost every neighborhood of every city. Prostitutes also worked out of restaurants called Lobster Houses, concert saloons, or dance halls where they might take a trick to an upstairs room for a quick drop of the drawers. Big-city hotels were hubs of whoring, with the finer hotels having separate entrances for "respectable women" so there was no risk they would be confused with the prostitutes.

It was unusual for a man to walk down a street in a big city and not receive offers for sex. The offers came from women who appeared classy and from girls sitting half-naked in open doorways. A man could pick up a woman on the street and have sex in an alley, or he could find a prostitute working out of a small market, liquor store or cigar store.

If he were in a miner's town in the West, a man's only opportunity for sex might be to wait in a long line in front of a tent. This would get him a soggy poke with the area's only prostitute—not that his experience would be any worse than if he'd been with a prostitute in New York. Even garrisons on the frontier offered prostitutes along with food and water for your horse. There were also Native American women who danced with more than wolves.

### **How the Prostitutes Lined Up**

Prostitution had its pecking order. At the top were the courtesans or mistresses to the wealthy. These select, educated, charm-school graduates could turn a phrase as elegantly as they could turn a trick.

Then were the Parlor Girls who worked in the upscale brothels or parlor houses. They were followed by the girls who worked in the public houses. These ladies didn't earn as much per poke, but turned more tricks per night.

Next were the cribs, which were rows of tiny shacks that were rented to prostitutes. Cribs were the horse stalls of commercial sex, often populated by former brothel girls who had grown too old or who were in poor health, or who didn't have the minimal looks or social graces to work in a brothel.

Lower yet in the ranks of whoredom were the streetwalkers. Streetwalkers were the dregs of commercial sex. They lived in sleazy hotel rooms or wretched apartments. They were not known for their cleanliness or good health. Life for streetwalkers was difficult.

At the very bottom of the barrel were the signboard girls. These girls and women lived on the streets and did their tricks in back alleys or behind billboards or large street signs. They didn't have a single good thing going for them.

Some of the occasional prostitutes in the cities ran in packs of teenage girls. They would hook up with men for a quick hit of cash or for a date to see the kinds of entertainment they couldn't otherwise afford. These young women became such a visible part of popular culture that they earned the name "charity girls."

### **Economics and Inclination**

When Dr. William Sanger did his study of prostitutes that was first published in 1858, he had expected to find poverty as the main reason for why a woman would do this kind of work. What he didn't expect to find was that the second most common reason the women gave for why they were working as prostitutes was "inclination" or sexual desire. In the minds of white Christians from the better classes, this was a frightening and perplexing finding. They wanted to believe that a woman's place was in the home, with her husband supporting her. They were also trying to convince themselves that women weren't interested in sex. To realize that thousands of prostitutes were not only supporting themselves financially, but weren't exactly hating their jobs, was a curve ball that threatened their view of the world.

### **A Prostitute's Life**

A full-time prostitute's best chance of finding friendship was from a fellow prostitute. But how many prostitutes had rewarding relationships with other prostitutes, either as friends or as sexual partners, is not known. For instance, there were plenty of brothel customers who paid to watch two prostitutes have sex with each other. Some of these situations evolved into same-sex relationships, but actual accounts are rare.

For many full-time prostitutes, the main source of companionship was their pets or their children. Long hours and boredom made for high rates of alcoholism and drug addiction. Some prostitutes did themselves in with overdoses of morphine, opium, cocaine and/or laudanum. Pregnancies were frequent, and venereal disease went with the territory as did abuse from police, pimps, customers and fellow whores. Tuberculosis, pneumonia, infected tonsils and poisoning from abortion-causing drugs were not unusual.

Prostitutes were sometimes a jealous, competitive, socially challenged lot whose only chance to feel good about themselves was at the expense of the women they were working with. Arrest records from the 1800s show that more prostitutes were arrested for public drunkenness and fighting among themselves than for pandering.

Also, before 1885, the average age of consent for American girls was ten to twelve. It was not unusual for brothels to have young girls working as full-time prostitutes. Most girls in the 1800s did not begin to menstruate until they were fifteen years of age. So a young prostitute of twelve to fifteen years of age had “the advantage” of not having to worry about pregnancy.

As for America’s concern about its teenage girls, Alexis de Toqueville wrote in 1835 that there was no country in the world where he had seen girls turned out at such a young age. There was also a high demand for virgins. A virgin could get as much as \$50 to \$500 for her first time, which was a tremendous incentive when you consider that she might only make \$1 to \$2 a day for full-time employment, if she could find it.

### **Sex in Brothels**

By the end of the 1800s, the brothel in America was a one-stop multiplex of sexual excess. To put it in perspective, there were at least as many neighborhood brothels as there are neighborhood gyms today. The main difference is in the body parts that were being exercised.

Brothels were dedicated centers of prostitution and were run by madams. They tended to be one of two kinds: private or public.

Private houses, which were also known as parlor houses, were the forerunners of today’s upper-end country club. Only the wealthy could afford them. Membership was restricted to regular, well-known customers of the better classes. The furnishings were finely appointed, and everything from the food to the women were five-star. Members of private houses might be influential businessmen or lawyers, puffing on the finest cigars from Cuba and drinking the best whisky.

Public houses were the Pizza Huts of prostitution. The average stiff was welcome. There were often long, loud lines of drinking and drunken men, especially from Saturday night to Monday morning, given how this was the only time that men from the working classes had off from work.

The better of the public houses were known as dollar-houses, where men from middle class dropped their drawers. There were also fifty-cent houses that catered to the working class. These places often smelled bad and were infested with cockroaches and rats. In the working-class brothels, there might be a bench in the waiting area where men lined up next to each other. A voice from another room would yell, “Next!”

The one sex venue that a man absolutely wanted to avoid was called a panel house. A panel house was a room designed to help prostitutes rob their customers. There would be a false wall or panel that another prostitute or pimp would hide behind. Once the customer had his pants off, the accomplice would quietly relieve his wallet of all cash. Good luck finding a sympathetic policeman when you'd been robbed while paying for sex.

### **The Madam**

The person who ran and sometimes owned the brothel was the madam. Madams were often former prostitutes who knew the business from their bottoms up.

The madam was one of the best management positions a woman could hold in the 1800s. Put in today's terms, she was a combination of hotel and restaurant manager, personnel director, head of marketing and publicity, nurse, counselor, bookkeeper and director of customer relations.

Besides being venues for sex, the better brothels were often places where business deals were made and where political wheeling and dealing occurred. When a well-known businessman or politician suffered a coronary at the brothel, the better madams would have the still-warm corpse moved to a more respectable location before the authorities were notified.

### **Storyville—The Sinful Sexual Sapphire of the South**

“In 1897, New Orleans city officials, acknowledging their belief that sins of the flesh were inevitable, looked Satan in the eye, cut a deal, and gave him his own address.”

—Alecia P. Long, author, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920*, LSU Press

By the late 1800s, city governments all over the country were talking about establishing legally-controlled red-light districts. Prostitution would be allowed within these districts, but nowhere else. The most famous and longest enduring of the municipal vice districts was in New Orleans. It was called Storyville, and it was the nineteenth century's most successful attempt at harm reduction.

By 1890, the city of New Orleans was becoming a massive, municipal gumbo of sexual excess. To help save the city, a reform-minded, classical-music loving alderman named Sidney Story drafted an ordinance to create

a red-light district at the edge of New Orleans' French Quarter. This was to be the only place in all of New Orleans where prostitution was allowed. The concept worked well for more than fifteen years. However, "Storyville" was the last place on earth that an upstanding man like Sidney Story would want as his namesake.

By 1900, only two years after its official creation, Storyville housed more than 2,000 prostitutes in 230 brothels and houses of assignation. It was also home to a number of dance halls, concert saloons, gambling dens and firing ranges. Particularly popular in Storyville were the brothels that promised girls who were octaroons and quadroons. These were light-skinned, mixed-race beauties. They were the product of "almagamation" or *sex between the white and negro*. An octaroon was theoretically one-eighth black, while a quadroon was one-quarter black.

Octaroons were thought to be the genetic superstars of Southern sex workers. They had just enough black in them to make them drip with a primitive, unrestrained, animal desire for sex that people believed *the negro* possessed, but with enough white to have the supposed intelligence, personality, creativity and physical features of the Aryan races. Sex with an octaroon was thought to win a man the best of both worlds, and he often paid more to fulfill his racist fantasy.

As the rest of America become aware of following hurricane Katrina, Storyville and New Orleans were built over a swamp. Indoor plumbing and sewer pipes were rare in Storyville. The streets were flats of mud mixed with excrement from freshly-emptied chamber pots and the remains of decaying rodents. The smell was putrid, but a nose for sex could ignore the wicked odors that steamed up from the streets below.

The sounds of Storyville were not tranquil. Trains ran along the main street, shooting galleries operated at all hours and music blared from the dance halls and concert saloons. A loud chorus of barkers, pimps and prostitutes wooed the wads of the passersby.

Storyville did big business during winter, when tourists from the North could warm themselves before the fires of Satan. They could gamble, bet on horses and go on sexual rampages that made the offerings of their hometown red-light districts look like church socials.

At the height of Storyville's existence, the possibilities for excess ranged from visits to expensive, elaborate brothels and bars that were the casinos of



their day, to tiny, dark, foul-smelling cribs, which were little more than live-stock pens with beds. In addition to selling sex, some claim Storyville was the birth place of jazz. But jazz was born long before Storyville. What Storyville did, however, was employ as many as fifty musicians a night, including some of the early jazz greats like Clarence Williams and Jelly Roll Morton.

Jelly Roll Morton played piano at Emma Johnson's during her notorious, live sex-circus shows. In addition to tickling the ivories, Clarence Williams was a cabaret manager who invented the "Ham Kick." The Ham Kick was a contest for willing females. A ham was suspended from the ceiling, and if a woman was able to kick it, she got to take it home. But it needed to be obvious to the audience that the woman wasn't wearing any underwear.

### **Did the Customer Always Come First?**

According to the few lasting memoirs from nineteenth-century madams, the men who arrived at their brothels were often lonely. They were men who felt like aliens in a changing society that offered few comforts. Their hope was to find a moment of connectedness with a kind and caring woman. But even in the rare situations when a prostitute did pretend to be kind and caring, she was often getting ready to service her next customer before the man had finished his final thrust.

When Al Rose (author of *Storyville, New Orleans*) interviewed men who had been frequent customers of the prostitutes of Storyville, similar stories were told in different words:

"She'd take hold of your prick and milk it to see if you had the clap. I think the girls could diagnose clap better than the doctors at that time. She'd have a way of squeezing it that if there was anything in there, she'd find it... Then she'd fill the basin with water and put in a few drops of purple stuff—permanganate of potash, it was... Then she'd wash you with it. She'd lay on her back and get you on top of her so fast, you wouldn't even know you'd come up there on your own power. She'd grind so that you almost felt like you'd had nothing to do with it. Well, after that, she had you. She could make it go off as quickly as she wanted to—and she didn't waste any time, I'll tell you. How did I feel about it?... I was never satisfied. I don't mean that I thought that the girls of the district had cheated me... They'd drain me off. I'd be depleted and enervated—but I never had the feeling of satisfaction that I was always looking for. The truth is that a man

wants something more from a woman than that... No, I can't say I have happy memories of the District. I just had a weakness for those whores—and they were so easy to get.”

The next Storyville veteran interviewed by Rose had frequented the more expensive brothels in Storyville and had the added perspective of comparing American prostitutes with those in other parts of the world:

“She approached me and seized my genital organ in one hand, wringing it in such a way as to determine whether or not I had the gonorrhoea. She did this particular operation with more knowledge and skill than she did anything else before or after.... She washed me with some foul-smelling disinfectant and lay down on the bed, inviting me to mount her. This I proceeded to do, and the mechanical procedure that followed endured for perhaps a minute.... I've been in whorehouses all over this globe. I've been in the cheap brothels of Montmartre and in the House of Seven Stories in Tokyo. I've been fucked in Singapore, Kimberly, San Juan, Buenos Aires, and Calgary... The foreign whores, somehow, manage to feign an attitude that leads you to believe, at least for the moment of intercourse, that you have their attention and that they are interested in seeing that you have a pleasant time. While they never do it free, they always seem just a little surprised when you hand them the money—as though they'd forgotten about this crass detail... Storyville whores, no matter how well-dressed or how gaudily expensive the whorehouse, were avaricious, greedy, and uncouth.... No house in the District could, with their practices, survive for a month in Paris.... It took much time and trouble to seduce the young ladies of our social circle, though I sometimes took the time and trouble. These experiences, few and far between, were much more satisfying—but it was difficult to make the effort with the District so near.”

### **Dating Does the Prostitute In**

While talking about prostitution's decline in America is more academic than erotic, it helps us understand about the birth of dating and sex as we know it today. By the time the 1800s were over, prostitution was in decline and sex in America was starting to assume its current shape.

You would think that in the history of sexual relations in America, dating would have come before prostitution. But it happened the other way around. Prostitution was a mighty force in America from the 1830s until the end of the century, when dating started to take its place. While dating by no means boarded up the brothel door, it was one of the things that helped drive a stake through the heart of the harlot as a central figure of sex in America.

By the 1900s, the “new” American woman was becoming the standard bearer of sexual release, and she didn’t work in a brothel or bear the stigma of women who did. Women now had the option of more jobs and better wages, including white collar jobs in sales and in the service sector. They were also gaining more sexual freedom.

The winds of favor that had made prostitution the centerpiece of popular culture started changing direction. Young men and women started expecting sexual enjoyment to be the reward of relationships rather than the result of pulling a dollar from a wallet. Dating and “stepping out” became the new darlings of our market economy, helping to ease prostitution into the shadows.

In the 1890s, the average age of a New York City prostitute was as young as fifteen years. By 1915, the average prostitute was twenty-five with some being as old as thirty or forty. Prostitution was no longer an entry-level position for young girls in America.

There were many reasons for prostitution’s decline, few having to do with reformers, anti-vice crusaders, or sexual repression. As New Orleans Mayor Martin Behrman lamented shortly before World War I when the Secretary of War forced him to shut down Storyville, “You can make it illegal, but you can’t make it unpopular.”

One of the reasons for prostitution’s decline was the failure of prostitutes to put the satisfaction of the customer ahead of their own greed. Prostitutes also refused to operate within socially acceptable boundaries. Prostitution in America had become like a neighbor who never turned his stereo down.

Downtowns started to grow and become centers for shopping and commerce. Good taste dictated that they needed to be protected from the antics of prostitutes who couldn’t keep from lifting their skirts in the faces of men on the street. Prostitutes in the nineteenth century knew no subtlety, not that those in the current day are models of modesty and good taste. Changes

in real estate, jobs and technology were making the in-your-face type of prostitution of the 1800s a liability instead of an economic plus.

During the 1800s, brothels were the most lucrative tenants for real-estate owners. However, in the 1900s, this was starting to drastically change. Land was badly needed for skyscrapers and high-rise apartments. Factories and office buildings needed space to expand, with nowhere to go but the land occupied by brothels.

Many city governments in the 1800s would have gone bankrupt without the fees they collected from their brothels. However, with the start of the twentieth century, the revenue base of America's cities grew stronger, and politicians had their fingers in more pies than just the prostitute's. Close ties to prostitution were no longer worth the political repercussions, and politicians were finding cleaner ways to get dirty money. Due to citizen demands for reform, corruption in police forces was decreasing. Policemen could no longer collect large stashes of cash from prostitutes, and so the incentive to protect them was evaporating. All of these factors helped make the climate for prostitution less favorable.

By the 1900s, telephones were widely available. A man could phone a prostitute and arrange a meeting for sex rather than needing public spaces for the transaction to occur. The telephone also helped make gambling and numbers-running more profitable than prostitution.

There had always been a close association between alcohol and prostitution. What made the throat wet also helped to quiet the mind. It was also easier for a prostitute to relieve a drunken trick of his money than a sober one. But with the start of Prohibition, the availability of alcohol in social settings became limited to speakeasies. Prostitutes followed the shot glass, and speakeasies became America's new brothel. While speakeasy sex could be notoriously brazen, it was also hidden, allowing the rest of society to turn a blind eye.

A major source of demand for prostitution in the 1800s had been the huge waves of immigrants, led by younger males who left the old world to find their fortunes in America. However, by 1933, the number of immigrants to America had fallen to 23,000, down from nearly a million a year during parts of the 1800s. Lower male-to-female ratios no longer favored the business of prostitution.

While settling the West had often been the job of male pioneers and gold prospectors, America's railroads were making travel safer and more sensible for women. During the covered-wagon days of the 1800s, small towns often had ratios of one woman to every 10 to 100 men. These numbers started to even out by the 1900s. The long lines in front of "the whore's tent" were becoming a thing of the past.

With the invention of photography and leaps in printing technology, pornography was becoming a lucrative business. Resources that had gone into prostitution during the 1800s started shifting into pornography during the 1900s, to the point where adult films, magazines and X-rated websites would one day rival the market domination that prostitution had held. The porn starlet of today may have well been the parlor girl of the 1800s.

Brothels and concert saloons were the command centers of prostitution after the Civil War. But by the 1900s, movie theaters were becoming the hubs of entertainment. The new movie theaters offered social legitimacy and dark balconies—providing a new set of sexual possibilities. Rather than being haunts for beer, burlesque and prostitution, the movie theaters were a place to take a date, find entertainment, eat popcorn, enjoy fine confections, make out and cop a feel. They provided places where a respectable girl could go with the approval of her parents and be sexual but not scandalized.

While the whereabouts of the sporting man's penis in the 1800s was controlled by the number of bills in his wallet, after the 1900s it became fashionable for him to surrender control to his *sweetheart*. The single man's sexual expectations were changing. He and his partner were exploring sexually while keeping the head of his penis on his side of her hymen. Since intercourse was increasingly tied to serious relationships, men and women started marrying at a younger age than they had in the 1800s.

Around the time of the Civil War, sex between whites and blacks was a gray area. While people certainly noticed, their protests were often limited to searing stares and mumbled expletives. In many of the commercial sex venues throughout the country, interracial sex was not uncommon. However, by 1900, segregation was becoming the law of the land. The new segregation laws were impacting commercial sex districts, like the nation's number-one address for vice, Storyville in New Orleans. (Storyville had originally been set

up as two separate, segregated vice districts, one for white prostitutes and one for black prostitutes, but this was ignored until its final years.)

A fascinating motivator for the move to close the brothels was not so much the feminist or religious outcry, but the growing sentiment that sperm was a bad thing to waste. For instance, camp whores had been seen as an important way of providing Civil War soldiers with a much-needed sexual release. But by World War I, Americans felt that prostitutes posed a great danger to our soldiers, both with venereal disease and physical depletion.

With America's approaching involvement in World War I, we believed that the best way to protect our boys was to keep their khakis on. Harsh new laws were enacted to protect our troops from the dangers they might encounter when their private parts were in a prostitute's hands—as if mustard gas and the trenches of Western Front could not compare. Cities that didn't aggressively hide their red-light districts faced losing their war-related expenditures. In the case of Storyville, the Secretary of War told the City of New Orleans that if it didn't shut down its famous vice district, they would send in soldiers to do it. Where prostitution used to be a financial lifeline, it now threatened the wartime gravy train.

### **Ransacked Hymens & Myths about the American Woman**

During the first half of the 1800s, people believed that sexual enjoyment was just as important for women as for men. But as the latter part of the century ticked away, some very bizarre theories emerged about women's sexuality and about women in general.

In 1881, the *New York Times* claimed that the reason for the falling birth rate among the better classes was because women were addicted to the “purse-destroying vice” of shopping. According to the *Times*, promiscuous and unrestrained shopping was destroying the fabric of American life. Even the head of the Women's Christian Temperance Union cried out against “the love of finery,” which she said was one of woman's greatest temptations.

A popular public-health manual warned about the physical cost to women of higher education: “Great mental exertion is injurious to the reproductive power” and “college produces women with monstrous brains and puny bodies.” Not to be outdone, some of America's best-selling books in the latter part of the 1800s claimed the place of a Christian woman was in the home, where she could excel at cleaning, cooking, mending and having kids.

An editorial in America's leading medical journal in 1911 lamented the new trend of women choosing careers over marriage. America's physicians, it said, should always encourage marriage.

Medical experts began to claim that women were pure and free from sexual desire or excess. Women were starting to be described as innocent of the faintest ray of sexual pleasure, and it was said they never experienced feelings of physical pleasure or yearning.

Still, America's streets were lined with prostitutes and our newspapers were overflowing with ads for birth control, so the people who concocted the new propaganda about women's natural state of purity added the caveat that if a woman was exposed to wanton sexuality, she could easily be lost to sin and hopeless vice. Vice was apparently more robust than purity.

It is likely that these bizarre theories emerged as a backlash to the social and economic advances that women in America were beginning to make by the end of the 1800s. More teenage girls from the middle class were going to school, and they often outnumbered boys in high school. Instead of going straight home after school, the new breed of American girls socialized with each other and with boys. Instead of cooking, sewing, and caring for younger children, they were reading books and thinking thoughts that were previously restricted to men. By the end of the 1800s, a more independent, modern American woman was being born, and this was disturbing to both women and men from prior generations.

Worse yet, between 1870 and 1920, the divorce rate in America increased 1500%. The size of the middle-class American family had plummeted, and an increasing number of women were choosing careers over marriage. Women were increasingly being seen as assassins of the white, middle-class family.

As for notions of women being pure and avoiding sex, the new invention of the moving picture begged to differ. The most popular titles shortly after the turn of the century showed American women as being sassy, seductive, and very much in control.

### **Technology Gives America a New Nightlife**

Technology can change a culture in many ways. Think of how the television changed America. And what about the car, radio, phone, record player and iPod?

The influence of technology was particularly profound after the 1870s, when Thomas Edison's invention of the light bulb may have done more to liberate American women than the day's feminists and social activists.

Before Edison brought us the light bulb in 1879, America's downtowns after dark were dangerous and scary places. They were lit by gas lights which cast dark, ominous shadows. However, the electric street light helped transform America's downtowns into places that were bright and inviting. America's women no longer needed to stay behind closed doors after dark, and our modern concept of the nightlife was being born. The scene was set for America's women and men to start going out and "steppin' out."

When we think about how the electric light helped change the way that Americans socialized, the invention of the telephone had an even greater impact. In 1848, it took upwards of a month to get a letter from coast to coast. Good luck casually checking in on a friend who lived only five miles away. Fifty years later, Americans were talking to each other on nearly a million telephones. The new telephone industry not only created thousands of jobs for women as telephone operators, but the young women who now had good jobs were able to call each other and say, "Let's go to the movie" or "Meet me at the soda shop." Modern dating began with the first generation of men who called women at the start of the 1900s to say, "Would you like to go out dancing with me?"

Technology not only changed how we spoke to each other, but how we could meet each other. For instance, in April of 1846, the Donner party began their famous journey west. If you wanted to go west, the covered wagon was the only game in town. But that drastically changed in May of 1869, when the final spike was hammered into the first of five transcontinental railroads that would connect East and West. What used to be a perilous journey in covered wagons now took less than five days by rail. By 1880, railroads crisscrossed the entire country. Not only did they provide a safe and convenient way for men, women and their families to populate new parts of the country and to visit each other, but the railroads allowed goods produced in one part of the country to be sold in another. Completing the railroads was no less of an engineering feat than putting a man on the moon—which occurred exactly 100 years after the completion of America's first intercontinental railroad.



Soon after the railroads were built, Americans turned to building public transportation in our cities. Public transit helped America's downtowns and new amusement parks become centers of social activity. Not only would young men and women have places to go for socializing after work, the new networks of public transportation would give them a way to get there.

Technology also transformed how long we lived. From 1800 to 1870, the average white American could expect to die at the ripe old age of 39. But suddenly, between 1880 and 1900, our life expectancy leapt to almost age 50. Infant mortality dropped in half. Why the sudden change? Cities began installing sewer and water systems between 1880 and 1900.

Imagine how bad our cities smelled before the installation of sewers and the diseases we suffered due to the lack of sanitation and potable water? It was the new sewers and plumbing, rather than advances in medicine that added ten more adult years to the lives of Americans. Ten more years for us to have romance and sex.

### **What Used to Happen in Private Becomes Public**

It wasn't until the very end of the 1800s that dating and the social mixing of young men and women started becoming a normal part of popular culture. Before then, males socialized with males, and females with females. And when young men were allowed to be with young women, there was often a chaperone.

The segregation between the sexes was so great that during the last third of the 1800s, nearly one-in-every-five men in America belonged to a male-only fraternal order—from the Freemasons and Odd Fellows to the Knights of Pythias, Modern Woodmen of America and Improved Order of Red Men. These secret fraternal organizations required men to be at the lodge many nights each month for the initiation rites that were held when a member rose from one level in the fraternal order to the next. Membership in fraternal orders began to decline rapidly as technology helped transform American popular culture into a dating culture at the end of the 1800s. To survive, the fraternal organizations had to trim their elaborate initiation ceremonies.

Only a few years after the invention of the electric light bulb and the telephone, the moving picture arrived. This invention would herald in the era of the majestic movie palace, where couples could meet and date.

In 1895, there had been no amusement parks on New York's Coney Island. By 1904, three newly-built amusement parks were attracting more than 4 million visitors to Coney Island each year—many of them young couples on dates. One of the first amusement parks on Coney Island was lit up by 250,000 of Edison's miraculous light bulbs.

After the first years of the 1900s, almost every city in the country had amusement parks. Some of the new amusement parks were as amazing as Disneyland and Disney World are today. They became popular venues where millions of American couples and families would spend the day or evening.

Visitors to these story-book amusement parks could marvel at exhibits such as "Streets of Cairo and Mysterious Asia." They could see the latest in technology in the great halls, or listen to the new phonographs and view the new moving pictures. Visitors could enjoy the carnivals with their magnificent carrousel, roller coasters, skating rinks, and even "Blowhole theaters" where jets of air would blow women's dresses up into the air.

Some of the most popular attractions in America's amusement parks were their dance halls and ballrooms where single men and women could meet—men and women who didn't know each other beforehand and who were not chaperoned. Before then, unsupervised meetings of single males and females were often in sleazy surroundings, where it was assumed that the women were prostitutes and the men their customers.

Magnificent events called "world's fairs" and "expositions" began awing millions of Americans. 14 million people attended the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. By 1904, another 19 million people would attend the great expositions in Atlanta, Nashville, Omaha, Buffalo and St. Louis. These events impacted their hosting cities like the Olympics do today.

Until the end of the 1800s, much of America's nightlife had centered around the hard-drinking, prostitute-loving, sporting culture of males. The new amusements prided themselves on having no beer gardens and on quickly removing any thugs or drunken patrons. They were some of the first places in America where members of all genders and economic classes could mix and mingle, and they helped transform the way that Americans socialized. They marked the beginning of dating as we know it today.

### **Beyond the Boundaries of Home**

During the 1800s, the American woman of the middle and upper classes had prided herself on being the anchor of the home. She provided her spouse with a refuge against a working world that was difficult and demanding. The home was where he went to escape the gambling, whoring, and bawdy street life of the lower classes.

However, as one author put it, “God Bless Our Home” never meant “God Make Our Home Happy.” By the end of the 1800s, the American woman’s options were evolving. It was becoming safe for women of any social class to be out in public, laughing and dancing with men they didn’t know, without having to worry so much about their reputations. There were now places where young Americans could meet, and the public transportation to get them there and back.

### **Venereal Disease in the Time of Victoria**

No discussion of sex in the 1800s would be complete without a look at venereal disease.

An interesting thing happened to venereal disease over the course of the 1800s. In the mind of physicians, syphilis and gonorrhea went from being no more serious than a headache or cold, to a social and moral plague that was worse than cancer or leprosy. The truth was somewhere in between.

It wasn’t until 1837 that scientists discovered that gonorrhea and syphilis were two distinct diseases. Even then, there was little awareness that syphilis could cause blindness, heart failure, insanity and death. The more devastating forms of the disease that did not occur until years after the initial infection were not understood to be parts of syphilis until the late 1800s. Before then, physicians thought that these were separate diseases that had nothing to do with sexual infection.

As for gonorrhea, physicians believed that it was a benign infection, often resulting from too much sexual activity. Well into the 1870s, many physicians assumed it was normal for women to have gonorrhea and that there was no reason for concern. It wasn’t until the latter part of the 1800s that we learned gonorrhea was a cause of sterility in women, and could cause blindness in a child who was born to a woman with an active case.

Once physicians started becoming aware of how dangerous venereal diseases could be, the pendulum swung far in the other direction. A moral panic ensued in the ranks of our medicine men. Although they had no clinical tests to confirm the presence of venereal disease, leading physicians made bold, unfounded declarations that venereal diseases caused more death and destruction than all other diseases combined. They made outrageous claims that as many as 80% of American men had a venereal disease. They declared that we could get venereal diseases from cups, kisses, pens, pencils and toilets. Cases of vaginitis among school girls were said to be gonorrhea, and people had to be especially wary of contact with America's immigrants, who, physicians warned, were naturally disposed to moral and physical degeneracy.

Once the medical community became aware of the danger of venereal disease, they did not treat it as a medical matter, but as a problem of morality. When they did provide "education" about venereal disease in the 1900s, it was fear-based and shame-based. When some states started requiring proof of no venereal disease before issuing a marriage license, it was only the man who was examined. Such examinations were thought to be disrespectful for a proper woman.

America's physicians, who were starting to view themselves as the new high priests of morality, stated that venereal disease posed an even greater threat to the American family than birth control. Perhaps, they wrote, the decreasing size of the American family wasn't the fault of selfish women who were practicing birth control, but of philandering husbands who were bringing home venereal diseases that were making their innocent wives sterile!

These ideas fit nicely with the sentiment of America's finer minds that women were constitutionally weaker than men. Not only were women's bodies being emaciated by foolish pursuits such as attending college, but America's leading physicians were now declaring that our women were being cheated from their sole purpose and destiny in life—to bear and raise children—by the venereal diseases of an immoral society.

Just how much the general population paid attention to our physicians' hysteria is not known. While popular newspapers and magazines were happy to accept paid advertisements for quack venereal-disease cures, they

were terrified to actually report on the subject. In 1906, the popular *Ladies' Home Journal* became one of the first magazines in the country to publish articles on venereal disease, and it lost 75,000 subscribers as a result. As late as 1912, the U.S. Post Office seized Margaret Sanger's pamphlet *What Every Girl Should Know* because it talked about syphilis and gonorrhea. It was declared obscene under the Comstock Law.

Even if the general population did know about the physicians' fears, history shows that this might not have altered their behavior. For instance, in the 1840s, physicians started declaring that masturbation caused insanity, but there is no evidence that their dire warnings stopped a single person from masturbating. Even today, when we know that unprotected anal sex can cause AIDS, the practice of barebacking remains epidemic in large parts of the gay community. And good luck getting Americans who are having intercourse with a new partner to consistently use condoms.

It is difficult to know how extensive venereal disease was in America during the 1800s. Since the more devastating secondary and tertiary phases of syphilis were thought to be caused by other diseases, we don't know how many people died from them in the 1800s. And once the connection to syphilis was understood, physicians would often change the cause of death to protect the reputation of the family. Also, the diagnostic criteria for venereal disease was so broad that many people who did not have it were diagnosed with it.

What we can assume is that venereal disease was a significant problem and that many people died from it in the 1800s. We also know that the "cures" for syphilis were often toxic and could cause as much pain and suffering as the disease itself. However, because the initial symptoms of syphilis usually became dormant as a natural part of the disease's progression, even the strangest of the quack cures were thought to cure it.

While prostitution was often blamed as the source of venereal disease, it is unlikely that fear of catching the disease caused the decline in prostitution in the United States. The decline in prostitution started in the last decades of the 1800s, while awareness of the true dangers of venereal disease had not become part of the nation's consciousness. Even then, the newfound knowledge did not stop people from visiting prostitutes.

**Anti-Obscenity Laws of the 1800s**

The 1800s brought America its first anti-obscenity laws.

By the end of the 1800s, our government had given itself the authority to throw people in prison for up to ten years at hard labor for mailing information about condoms or for printing or receiving a romance novel that was declared obscene by postal inspectors—men whose sole basis for expertise was their membership in the Young Men’s Christian Organization or the Society for the Suppression of Vice.

A name that has become synonymous with anti-obscenity laws in America is that of Anthony Comstock. The anti-obscenity laws of 1872 that were nicknamed after him were the most far-reaching of any in our nation’s history. Yet America’s first federal anti-obscenity laws were enacted in 1842, when Anthony was a mere twinkle in the eyes of his evangelical Christian parents.

These laws were part of the Tariff Act of 1842. This might seem strange, given how tariff acts are supposed to regulate foreign imports. But that was the point. Our politicians assumed that the indecent materials that were circulating in America in the 1840s were imported from abroad, particularly from Satan’s country of birth, France. America’s first federal anti-obscenity law attempted to stop “the importation of all indecent and obscene prints, paintings, lithographs, engravings and transparencies.”

It was beyond the comprehension of American politicians that some of the erotica that was starting to flood our cities may have been homegrown. From their perspective, the new wave of printed filth must have followed the immigrant aliens from Europe who were landing on the sacred shores of our forefathers.

The second round of anti-obscenity laws were enacted in 1865. These were an expansion of the Tariff Act of 1842. Again, Anthony Comstock had nothing to do with them, as he was still a proselytizing and unpopular Civil War soldier stationed far from combat in Florida.

By 1865, the newer printing presses had the ability to mass produce photographs, particularly those of Victorians doing nasty things. As a result, dirty books were fast replacing the Good Book as the mainstay of the Civil War soldier’s knapsack. Special X-rated booklets were made in smaller trim sizes that allowed them to conveniently accompany the Civil War soldier. While it

was fine for a soldier from New York to kill a soldier from Virginia, our government believed it was morally unacceptable for a soldier to keep a picture of a naked woman next to his spare ammo.

The crowning jewel of American anti-obscenity legislation came in 1872. It was the brain child of the conservative power elite from the Young Men's Christian Association. This unusual legislation was passed during a last-minute, late-night session of Congress. It is unlikely that members of Congress understood its implications any more than Congressmen understand the laws they pass today. But at least with today's laws, there is usually a quorum in the House of Representatives before a vote is cast, and legislation seldom passes the Senate without the vote being recorded. Neither condition was met when the anti-obscenity legislation was passed in 1872.

Comstock's law, which was nearly identical to one written by members of the YMCA a few years prior, was quite deceptive. Its stated purpose was to close loopholes in legislation that prohibited the interstate sale of obscene literature and materials. Its title was "The Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use."

But buried in the text of Comstock's law was the inclusion of "any article whatever for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion." Not only had Comstock managed to make it a crime to send contraceptive devices in the mail, but he made it illegal to send information about birth control as well. The highly repressive laws that he and his cohorts got through Congress helped breed a number of state laws that made it a crime for a physician to even discuss birth control with his patients.

The Comstock law made it illegal to give away, exhibit in any manner, publish, write, print or have any card, circular, pamphlet, book or notice of any kind, any drug, medicine or article for the prevention of conception or for causing abortion.

Before 1872, contraception in America was neither obscene nor illegal. For the next hundred years, it would be. It was not until 1965 that the courts would declare it illegal for a state to prohibit the use of contraceptive devices, and it wasn't until 1971 that it became legal to send information about birth control in the U.S. mail.

Thanks to the Comstock legislation, the federal government now controlled the reproductive behavior of its citizens.

Anthony Comstock was rewarded for his efforts by being appointed the nation's chief postal inspector. Not only did his new law give him the power to seize material, but to arrest those sending it, as well as those who received it. That might not be such a big thing today, when many alternatives to the U.S. mail exist for sharing information. But in the 1800s, the US mail was the main artery short of telegrams for getting information from point A to B.

As America's first czar of the chaste mind, Comstock believed that the minds of the young were delicate and easily corruptible. He believed that any materials that could generate impure thoughts were obscene. This included information in leading medical journals about birth control.

Allowing Anthony Comstock to police the U.S. mails was like allowing an abortion-clinic bomber to have oversight of Planned Parenthood. Remarkably, it is difficult to find evidence that Comstock and his anti-obscenity crusade helped stem the flow of pornographic materials that might be considered obscene. He may have inconvenienced the producers of pornography, but he was unable to check them.

Comstock did his damage by stemming the flow of information about reproduction and birth control. In 1913, after searching some of the biggest libraries in America for information about contraception, birth-control crusader Margaret Sanger could find virtually no medical information about birth control anywhere in America. This had not been the case in America before the 1870s, when information about birth control had been freely available. (The stance of America's physicians against the use of contraception did little to help check Comstock's influence. Physicians, who were mostly white, male, Protestant and from the better classes, were trying to position themselves as guardians of the American family. Many of American's physicians in the late 1800s believed women should be at home, having and raising children.)

While it is easy to make blanket condemnations of people like Comstock, we need to remember that Congress and the courts could have stopped him. Instead, they usually did the opposite. It is also important to remember that the purity groups of the late 1800s occasionally had an important battle on their hands. It was not unusual for twelve-year-old girls to be turning tricks in houses of prostitution. This, and the out-of-hand nature of prostitution and pornography, was often at the center of their concern.



### **Fairies, Wolves, Trade and Loop-the-Loop**

An important starting point for our modern categories of straight, gay, and bisexual occurred at end of the 1800s. This is when the notions of heterosexual and homosexual first got off the ground. Before then, males in America tended to socialize with males, and females with females. Men could sleep in the same bed without eyebrows being raised, and two men who had a caring relationship did not usually pay a large social price for it as long as they did not flaunt what they were doing or appear to be effeminate. And it was perfectly normal for women to live together and share the same bed for much of their adult lives. This doesn't mean that the vast majority of men and women weren't heterosexual. It just means we didn't pay as much attention to it.

Until the end of the 1800s, an American male was not usually ostracized for having sex with another man as long as it seemed like he was maintaining the normal male role in the sexual act. It was only the guy on the receiving end of male-to-male sex who was considered a "fairy," "queer," "invert" or member of the "third sex." For instance, a masculine-appearing sailor who let it be known that he enjoyed having sex with a male prostitute lost no social standing because people assumed that it was the male prostitute who was taking the "woman's role" in sex. The effeminate male was called a "cock-sucker," "pogue," or "two-way artist," depending on whether he liked to give oral sex, receive anal sex, or do both.

Even when the government set up a sting operation to entrap homosexuals in the Navy in 1919, the male decoys who allowed themselves to receive oral sex and who were the inserting partners in anal sex did not consider themselves to be homosexual, nor did the Navy. Only the sailors who performed oral sex or received anal sex were charged with criminal activity.

By the end of the 1800s, same-sex activity could be found at social clubs, baths, beaches, parks, tearooms (washrooms and comfort stations where men were known to meet for same-sex activity) and rooming houses. The larger cities in America had masquerade balls where men dressed as women, dance halls where same-sex couples danced, and certain buildings and public parks that were known for their cruising and pick-up opportunities. By the time the 1900s rolled around, a young man wanting to explore sex with other men couldn't go wrong by getting a room at the local YMCA, as the Y would

soon become the vortex of same-sex relations for males in America. Lesbian enclaves were forming as well by the end of the 1800s.

On the commercial side of same-sex relations, there was no shortage of “fairy prostitutes.” Sailors in the 1800s had a full range of sexual possibilities, from female prostitutes who crowded naval ports, to interested males who would wine and dine sexy seamen in exchange for being able to give them oral sex or share anal maneuvers.

Only as the social order started to change in the late 1800s and early 1900s did the notions of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” come into play. Women were suddenly getting high-school and college educations, and they were beginning to compete with men for jobs in the workplace. Middle-class males found their world being invaded by women. One way these men coped with the increasing social status of women was to see themselves as having distinctly different roles from women, or to appear to be the opposite of women. This had never been necessary because men’s and women’s roles in society had been so different. It may have been the origin of our modern-day notion of masculinity, which rests upon the premise that a man’s feminine side needs to be well-hidden. This also corresponded with a time in the late 1800s when physicians and psychiatrists were trying to invent the notion of psychopathology. Men who were attracted to men became targets for modern psychiatry, as did women who were defying the social order by choosing careers over motherhood.

Again, the percentages of men and women who were straight, mostly straight, bisexual and gay were probably no different in the early 1900s than in the 1800s or today. It’s the social stigmas that were beginning to grow.

### **Then and Now**

This is as good a place as any to end our look at sex in America during the 1800s. While it is sometimes difficult to see the forces that are guiding our sexual choices of today, that is certainly not the case as we peek under the sheets of generations past.

Whether it’s 1850 or today, our sex drives have always been present. They are the engines that entice us to be naked together. But how we get there and what we do when we get there often depends on the time and culture.

Today's young couples might wonder about techniques for giving each other better oral sex. In the 1800s, there were no articles in books or magazine about oral sex.

Modern technology in the 1800s became a vehicle for delivering pornography just like modern technology has today. Consider the invention of the phonograph recording in the late 1800s. The brand-new technology of Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell was soon being used to delight listeners with the sounds of vulgar conversations, dirty songs, simulated sexual encounters, and even a "secret" recording of a husband's verbal advances to the family maid.

You could fill an entire book talking about the impact of the Model T on dating and relationships in America. It was just around the corner from where this chapter stops. And what about comparing the impact of the railroads in the 1800s with the Internet today, or the obscenity laws of the 1800s with recent attempts of the FCC to levy massive fines for indecency?

As our great, great-great-grandparents were the guardians of sexuality the 1800s, we are its guardians today. While much has changed, many of the dualities remain.

### **Sex Slang from the 1800s**

**CRIB GIRLS**—prostitutes who lived in tiny row houses or shacks that were known as cribs. Crib girls were often former brothel workers who had grown old or were in poor health. They often had to pay high rent to a landlord, pimp or madame.

**CRUISERS**—prostitutes in New York City who gathered in small groups along Broadway. If these girls had a sense of subtlety or reserve, it was hidden well.

**FRENCH LOVE**—when a prostitute was willing to give a man oral sex.

**GAMAHUCHE**—to have oral sex with, "she gamahuched me with her warm lips."

**GASH**—vulva

**GROG SHOPS**—term for bars or taverns that often had rooms in the back or upstairs that were rented to prostitutes in order to service customers (1790 to 1820), aka "slop shops" and "tippling houses"

**GUIDEBOOKS**—in most cities around America, small guidebooks were printed that listed the brothels and their specialties. These books were often made in a size that could easily fit into a coat pocket.

### Terms for Prostitutes in the 1800s

charity girls	female Bacchanals	jezebell
cockyneys	femmes d'amour	lorettes
Corinthians	frail sisters	nymphes de paves
Cyprians or "Cyts"	gay figurantes	perter misses
daughters of vice	gay nymphs	soiled doves
dirty loafers	gay sisters	strumpet

### Terms for Houses of Prostitution

brothel	female boarding house	lust palace
bawdy house	French house	palace of perdition
Corinthian haunt	house of assignation	parlour house
den of infamy	house of bad fame	public house
den of iniquity	house of infamy	

**HAVE YOUR ASHES HAULED**—for a man to be sexually serviced.

**LEMON**—stealing the money of a man when he was focused on the sexual favors of a woman.

**MASQUERADE BALLS**—masked balls which were often sponsored by the madams of the leading brothels. These became popular in the 1840s and remained so for the rest of the century. Dress for these often elaborate and elite affairs ranged from masks and magnificent costumes to masks and the costume you were born in. By the end of the night, the line between a masquerade ball and a drunken orgy was sometimes thin.

**PANEL HOUSE**—a room used by prostitutes with a false wall that an accomplice could hide behind. He or she would quietly rob the customer's wallet once his pants were off.

**PUBLIC HOUSES**—brothels where the average man was welcome. Often had long, loud lines of drinking and drunken men, especially from Saturday night to Monday morning.

**SIGNBOARD GIRLS**—prostitutes who lived on the streets and did their tricks in back alleys or behind billboards or large street signs. These were women who didn't have a single good thing going for them.

**SOLDIER'S DISEASE**—drug addiction to morphine by Civil War veterans. Morphine was frequently used as a pain-killer during the Civil War. A number of soldiers became addicted as a result.

**SPORTING CULTURE**—generations of hard-drinking, prostitute-loving, gambling, fighting American males who abandoned traditional mores for a social life that was lived on the streets and in the back alleys of nineteenth century America.

**STORYVILLE**—located in New Orleans between 1898 and 1917, the nation's most notorious and famous legally-mandated red-light district.

**THIRD SEX**—people who preferred to have sex with same-sex partners.

**TRADE**—manly or “normal” males who allowed or invited the sexual advances of “fairies” or effeminate-appearing males.

**TWO-WAY ARTIST**—a man who gave other men oral sex and received anal sex, e.g. “a two-way artist is a cocksucker and a pogue.”

**VAGINAL TENTS**—diaphragms for birth control

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