

# “To Control Their Fertility – And Thus Their Lives”: The Birth Control Movement in Twentieth-Century Iowa

NEAL ROSS HOLTAN

IN 1966 the *Des Moines Sunday Register's* Home and Family Section featured an article commemorating the opening of the city's first birth control clinic 32 years earlier, in 1934.<sup>1</sup> The reporter began the story by commenting that “a little band of the most respectable women in Iowa” broke the law by distributing birth control information and supplies to poor married women, which was illegal under both Iowa and federal law. One photograph accompanying the article showed a few of the surviving founders of the clinic. Another pictured Elizabeth Bates Cowles (1900–1976) holding a silver platter awarded for her “courage, vision, and dedication” in having started the Iowa Maternal Health League and its clinic.

This article tells the story of Iowa's birth control movement starting in the 1920s. It reveals how, at critical times, national birth control leaders provided significant encouragement and support to the Iowans who were participating in the movement,

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1. Frances Craig, “They Fight for ‘Wanted Babies’: Planned Parenthood of Iowa Got a Determined Start—and Is Still Going Strong,” *Des Moines Register*, 3/20/1966, section six, 1.

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*Elizabeth Cowles accepts a silver tray award for her work helping to found the first birth control clinic in Des Moines in 1934. From Des Moines Register, 3/20/1966.*

but they were not heavily or directly involved in the details of establishing the birth control clinic. Local human and financial resources were sufficient to establish and support a public birth control clinic in Des Moines without much outside support. The founders of the birth control movement in Iowa were nearly all socially well-connected white women. The Cowles family, owners and publishers of Iowa's most prominent newspapers, led the birth control effort in Des Moines, provided positive publicity, and offered advocates protection from opponents.

Most accounts of the history of the birth control movement in the United States begin with Margaret Sanger and the national organizations she founded.<sup>2</sup> But the story often ends there with-

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2. See Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (1992; rev. ed., New York, 2007); James Reed, "The Burden of Domesticity," in *The Birth Control Movement and American Society: From Private Vice to Public Virtue* (Princeton, NJ, 1978), 67-88; Linda Gordon, "The

out acknowledging the local bands of women in places such as Des Moines who organized simultaneously with the national movement. Those mostly well-off women gave the movement shape and substance in the form of clinics for poor women. Relatively little documentation exists about such local or state birth control activism in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Sanger's voluminous personal papers and the records of her organizations are preserved and heavily studied by historians, the documents of state and local birth control organizations are relatively sparse other than as a subset of Sanger's papers. In this case, the papers of the Iowa Maternal Health League and its successors (including Planned Parenthood of Iowa) apparently have not been preserved, typifying the loss of information about local birth control movements.<sup>4</sup>

THE EARLY 1920s mark the beginning of the history of the birth control movement in Iowa.<sup>5</sup> Margaret Sanger opened the first birth control clinic or, more accurately, information center, in Brooklyn in late 1916. But anti-obscenity laws inhibited the growth of the birth control movement in the 1920s.

Anthony Comstock, a New England anti-smut crusader, championed the laws and convinced the U.S. Congress in 1873 to pass sweeping yet vague legislation that outlawed sending allegedly obscene publications and materials through the U.S. mail.<sup>6</sup> The law specifically included birth control information or devices as obscene. States, including Iowa, passed similar laws and updated them from time to time. The Comstock Laws, as these measures were known, effectively squelched public dis-

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Struggle for Reproductive Freedom," in *Controlling Reproduction: An American History*, ed. Andrea Tone (Wilmington, DE, 1997), 147-55.

3. For a rare instance of a work focusing on the history of more than 600 local birth control clinics, see Cathy Moran Hajo, *Birth Control on Main Street: Organizing Clinics in the United States, 1916-1939* (Urbana and Chicago, 2010), 6-7. Rose Holz, in a review of Hajo's book in the *Annals of Iowa* 70 (2011), 92-94, suggested that the history of Iowa's birth control movement needed to be told.

4. Many people mistakenly assume that the early papers of Planned Parenthood of Iowa are in the archives of the State Historical Society of Iowa or with the Iowa Women's Archives at the University of Iowa Libraries. They are not.

5. Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, 149-60.

6. *Ibid.*

cussion of birth control for decades. Up until the late 1930s, Iowa law was clear about what was called “obscene literature—articles for immoral use.” It was illegal to sell, loan, or give away such material, specifically including any written information about the “prevention of conception.” The penalty for breaking the Iowa law, a misdemeanor, was a fine of up to \$1,000 (not less than \$50) or up to a year in the county jail, or both. The law contained an exemption clause for doctors, druggists, and artists—for medical education, medical practitioners in their practices, druggists in their businesses, or artists’ models “in the necessary line of their art.”<sup>7</sup>

Prior to the emergence of the birth control movement, differences in socioeconomic class led to marked disparities in access to birth control. Especially for rural women, birth control information and services were difficult to obtain because of the laws that prohibited mailing birth control information or supplies. Publications such as *The Farmer’s Wife* did not address the subject of birth control except in letters from readers. One reader pointed out that mail-order catalogs offered an array of “feminine hygiene” supplies, a euphemism that she felt had been coined to mislead and confuse women. She urged that “it is long past to brush the quacks aside and your decent magazines of character must carry the torch. It is time to get birth control on the right basis.” Another woman, signed “Just Tired, Iowa,” a mother of four children, ages 8, 4, 2, and 1, wrote that she was “up in arms against dear old ladies who are continually telling us mothers of too many small children, ‘Oh, how I envy you! This is the happiest time of your life.’ . . . But—I’m tired of never having one minute of peace or quiet. I haven’t time for a flower garden or even house plants and fish bowls. I can’t attend church with two babies.”<sup>8</sup>

Urban, more affluent women had greater access to birth control information and services. In the 1920s sociologist Katherine Bement Davis (1860–1935) interviewed one thousand married college alumnae and members of women’s clubs and found that

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7. James Reed, “The Suppression of Contraceptive Information,” in *The Birth Control Movement*, 34–45; “Obscene Literature—Articles for Immoral Use,” Code of Iowa, 1927, chap. 592, sec. 13190 and 13195.

8. “Letters We Receive,” *Farmer’s Wife*, 12/1/1938, 3; “Farm Women’s Letters,” *Farmer’s Wife*, 5/1/1938, 8.

nearly 75 percent used contraceptives, namely, barrier methods. The Middletown, USA, studies in the mid-1920s, conducted in Muncie, Indiana, showed that affluent women were more likely to use birth control than poorer women. On the other hand, because of anti-obscenity laws, the media avoided the subject, resulting in "private acceptance of, but public opposition to, birth control." Even affluent users of contraception were reluctant to discuss the topic publicly.<sup>9</sup>

An event involving Margaret Sanger and Iowa clubwomen illustrates this disconnect. During the last three days of October 1923, Sanger presided over the Middle Western States Birth Control Conference at the Hotel Drake in Chicago. Des Moines physician and birth control advocate Carrie C. Harvison-Dickey could not attend, but, as president of the Des Moines Federation of Women's Clubs, she invited Sanger to make a side trip to Des Moines to meet with club members. A separate, independent committee sponsored Sanger's visit and covered expenses because, according to Harvison-Dickey, "Federation women are still timid about this subject." Sanger was in Des Moines on November 2 for a luncheon with women's club members followed by an afternoon of meetings about birth control advocacy.<sup>10</sup>

The effects of anti-obscenity laws could be more direct as well. On September 19, 1931, the Polk County sheriff's office raided several Des Moines drug stores that sold birth control supplies. They arrested druggist Lloyd E. Wilson, and a Polk County grand jury indicted him for violating the state's obscenity laws by selling contraceptives even though his attorneys contended that Wilson in his regular course of business was legally allowed to sell birth control material.<sup>11</sup>

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9. David Kennedy, "The Debate on Morality," *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven, 1970), 136-71; Katherine Bement Davis, "A Study of the Sex Life of the Normal Married Woman," Part I, "The Use of Contraceptives," *Journal of Social Hygiene* 8 (1922), 173-89; Peter Engelman, *A History of the Birth Control Movement in America* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2011), 21.

10. Margaret Sanger to William Thomas Belfield, undated, Margaret Sanger Papers, microfilm, Collected Documents Series (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN), vol. 97, reel 64, C02:0394; Carrie C. Harvison-Dickey to Margaret Sanger, 9/9/1923, *ibid.*, C02:0639; Sanger to Harvison-Dickey, 10/1/1923, *ibid.*, C02:0704.

11. "Birth Control Trial Is Opened," *Des Moines Tribune*, 11/3/1931.

News of the raids and indictment reached Margaret Sanger in New York through newspaper reports and in a letter from a Unitarian minister she knew in Des Moines. The minister, Charles Dutton, pinned the blame for instigating the raids on "certain clergy" in the city. Sanger corresponded with Wilson's lawyer, Paul G. James, and offered to provide information about birth control laws in other states and to arrange a consultation from an experienced law firm in New York City. James wrote to Sanger, "I have a copy of your 'Motherhood in Bondage,' and how anyone could read it and not weep is beyond me." He told her that he admired her "courage and fortitude, and that the Mothers of America should be grateful to you for the wonderful service you have rendered their cause." Whether Iowans generally shared his obvious respect for Sanger and her work promoting birth control is unknown, but the efforts to establish birth control clinics in Iowa during the next few years indicate that he was not alone. As for his client, Lloyd Wilson, a judge dismissed his case an entire year later on recommendation of the county attorney because of "insufficient evidence."<sup>12</sup>

Sanger's next substantial contact with a birth control advocate in Des Moines was Violet Spencer, a woman of a different social class from the clubwomen she had encountered a decade earlier. Spencer, born in 1891, was married to Henry Spencer, ten years her senior, by 1910 and had one child. Census records indicate that she was not employed outside the home; Henry's occupations over the years included coal teamster, furniture store employee, and carpenter. In 1930 the Spencer family included six children. The oldest sons—Harry, 21 years old and a laborer, and Edgar, 19, a truck driver—still lived at home. The 1933 city directory of Des Moines listed Henry as being a roofer. The 1934 directory shows "Mrs. Violet Spencer" listed separately from Henry and at a different address. Her occupation was "cook,

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12. Charles J. Dutton to Margaret Sanger, 9/20/1931, Margaret Sanger Papers, microfilm, Library of Congress Edition (University of Maine, Orono, ME), vol. 141, reel 92:L092:0278; Paul G. James to Margaret Sanger, 12/16/1931, *ibid.*, reel 92:L092:0311A; Sanger to James, 1/4/1932, *ibid.*, reel 92:L092:0311B; James to Sanger, 1/12/1932, *ibid.*, reel 92:L092:0312; James to Sanger, 1/14/1932, *ibid.*, reel 92:L092:0315A; *State of Iowa v. L. E. Wilson*, Polk County District Court Records, 9/29/1932.

Business Women's Association." Presumably she and Henry had separated or divorced.<sup>13</sup>

Sanger and Spencer corresponded throughout 1931. Spencer described herself as "having been in Christian work among the very poorest classes for many years." As a volunteer at a family shelter in the winter of 1930, she "saw so much suffering and listened to so many stories of hardship. I was almost frantic, little helpless children going hungry for days at a time and I made up my mind I would do all in my power to stop more from being born." Spencer was passionate in her concerns about the poor that she visited. "I have watched a mother lay on the floor wallowing in her own blood. Poverty and filth spread through the home, other little children, dirty, hungry and listless standing around. The mother had committed abortion on herself which is a fearful thing to do: hundreds of these cases I have had a chance to visit and help." Spencer assured Sanger that the working class, as she called them, "takes birth control information gladly," but the only thing that could prevent these problems would be a change in the law to allow the poor access to birth control.<sup>14</sup>

Spencer faced enormous challenges in advocating birth control in Des Moines. She had no automobile and had to rely on public transportation. She had been informed (she did not say by whom) that if she continued to teach and counsel poor women about birth control, she "will get in jail – well I hope not but that will not stop me." She felt that she did "not have much influence," and her "financial standard does not measure up to my public prestige."<sup>15</sup>

Spencer sought contributions for her work but found that many people stated that they did not favor birth control even though, as she observed, most of them had small families. On the other hand, doctors and nurses who visited the poor favored

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13. *Fifteenth Census of the United States*, 1930, Des Moines, Ward 6, Polk, Iowa, roll 674, p. 3A, Enumeration District 0026, Image 908, FHL microfilm: 2340409, Ancestry.com; U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989 [online database], Ancestry.com.

14. Violet Spencer to Margaret Sanger, 4/17/1931, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel 92:LO92:0301B.

15. Violet Spencer to Margaret Sanger, 6/30/1931, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel 92:LO92:0301B.

birth control, “but it is as if they are afraid of the present law.” Spencer concentrated on teaching groups of 10 to 25 poor women about birth control. She was ridiculed by some for her effort (again, she did not specify by whom). Sanger sent Spencer pamphlets and other educational material to distribute and gave her strong words of encouragement.<sup>16</sup>

Spencer described the “fight” over distributing birth control education, “but I am going to give it out just the same and regardless of what is done, I mean to carry this work on.” She found that most well-to-do men lacked interest in birth control education. Some even refused to donate money for her new soup line “because I am teaching birth control. But I am not giving up. I have turned to the Educated class of women for help and I am slowly but surely bringing the two classes of women together—the Educated and the un-Educated.” Spencer thought that many women were constrained by churches or political parties, “but in their hearts they are in favor of birth control and undercover will try to help.” Some of these “ladies—wives of the men who take no interest—are slowly taking an interest and are helping me form some plans that will be very helpful in teaching birth control.” Those plans included an independent, free clinic located in the poor southeast bottoms of Des Moines.<sup>17</sup>

Spencer’s views of humanity were not always the rosiest. In one letter she wrote,

I dread the winter so many hungry mothers and their babies—many new babies and half the time nothing to live on, no clothing, no food, no fire. I will hear tales of woe—suffering death bed confessions, poverty of the worst kind, and the whole thing is brought on by people who are oversexed. God never said to bring fourth [*sic*] like animals, he said there was a reason for all things. The human today is not as good as animals, they are most of them rotten with social disease not fit to bring children into the world.

Sanger seemed to ignore these comments and wrote an upbeat reply that tried to enlist Spencer’s help in finding opportunities

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16. Violet Spencer to Margaret Sanger, 6/30/1931, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel 92:L092:0294; Margaret Sanger to Violet Spencer, 8/21/1931, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel 92:L092:0285.

17. Violet Spencer to Margaret Sanger, 8/13/1931, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel 92:L092:0285.

for her traveling birth control advocates to speak before church groups, women's clubs, and men's business associations in Des Moines. While Spencer's comments might be interpreted as having eugenicist impulses, Sanger's replies did not.<sup>18</sup>

From her New York office, Sanger ordered Spencer's long, handwritten letters to be typed and filed by the staff, and she answered the letters personally and promptly. Perhaps Spencer reminded Sanger of her own passion and dedication to the early cause of birth control in the face of opposition, ridicule, and jail.

THE YEAR 1934 was especially momentous for the birth control movement in Iowa. Sanger and the American Birth Control League made a strong effort to get the U.S. Congress to pass legislation that would allow physicians to offer contraception information and to send supplies through the U.S. mail. One strategy for promoting the bill was to engage the National Congress of Parents and Teachers for support. The annual meeting of that organization was held at the Hotel Fort Des Moines May 13–19, 1934. Sanger's staff planned an information booth at the convention and hoped to gain official support from the 1,500 attendees for changing the law regarding physicians and birth control.

Sanger dispatched a seasoned field worker, Elizabeth Grew Bacon, to Des Moines to accomplish these aims. Bacon failed to secure permission to set up their information booth, not, in her opinion, because they were being singled out, but rather because other progressive organizations were also being denied approval for informational tables at the hotel. The resolution supporting the proposed birth control physician bill was not brought up at the congress at all, even in committee meetings, because, Bacon

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18. Violet Spencer to Margaret Sanger, 11/11/1931, Margaret Sanger Papers, vol. 141, reel 92:L092:0285; Margaret Sanger to Violet Spencer, 7/31/1931, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel 92:L092:0294. State-authorized eugenic sterilization did not begin in Iowa until 1934. See Amy Vogel, "Deregulating Degeneracy: Eugenic Sterilization in Iowa, 1911–1977," *Annals of Iowa* 54 (1995), 119–43. For an analysis of Minnesota's well-established system of selective eugenic sterilization, see Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Fixing the Poor: Eugenic Sterilization and Child Welfare in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore, 2017), 146–76.

thought, no one wished to offend the organization's president, who was a Roman Catholic.<sup>19</sup>

While in Des Moines, Bacon was the houseguest of Magdalon Grahl, whose husband, Charles, Iowa's Adjutant General, had an office in the capitol. According to Bacon, Magdalon Grahl was politically well connected in Iowa, including with the congressional delegation, and Bacon thought that she could help with the lobbying in Washington. Through her, Bacon met Elizabeth Cowles and learned that Cowles had been contacted by a representative of the National Committee on Maternal Health (NCMH), a rival organization to Sanger's, to lead an effort to set up a birth control clinic in Des Moines. In fact, no follow-up contact from the NCMH had occurred. Instead, Bacon impressed upon Cowles the value of Sanger's leadership and "drawing power" and emphasized the ease with which a clinic could be set up.<sup>20</sup>

Cowles was a member of one of the most influential families in the state, the owners and publishers of Des Moines's two largest newspapers, the *Register* and its sister paper, the *Tribune*. The Cowles family was active in the community, public-spirited, and supportive of repealing laws unfavorable to birth control. For example, the newspapers covered events at the American Congress of Parents and Teachers that pertained to birth control and ran two interviews with Bacon. In follow up, Sanger wrote to Cowles, "I hope you will call on me at any time I may be of service" in starting a birth control clinic in Des Moines.<sup>21</sup>

COWLES, in fact, had already taken action. On May 24, 1934, in a meeting held at her home, she led the formation of the Iowa Birth Control League. E. D. Plass, chair of the University of Iowa's

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19. "Birth Control Pushed Here: Mrs. Bacon Opens Drive for Support," *Des Moines Register*, 5/14/1934; Elizabeth Grew Bacon, typed field report to the American Birth Control League, 6/6/1934, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel 92:LO64:0403.

20. Elizabeth Grew Bacon to Margaret Sanger, 5/18/1934, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel 92:L064:0403B; Engelman, *History of the Birth Control Movement*, 154–57.

21. Bacon, field report; Margaret Sanger to Elizabeth Cowles, 5/28/1934, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel 92:L092:0418.

Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology and a birth control advocate, addressed a group of 12 people. They then took the courageous step of signing an agreement to create the league and pledged their support, an act potentially contrary to Iowa's obscenity law.<sup>22</sup> A lawyer drew up articles of incorporation for the league, and a larger group of 40 people recruited by the original 12 met to set up the structure of the organization.<sup>23</sup>

In September the league's president, Elizabeth Cowles, and 11 other people, including her sister-in-law, Florence Cowles Kruidinier (1895–1985), formed an executive board for the league. An additional 21 people, including Elizabeth Cowles's father-in-law and his wife, served on an advisory board. A group of supportive medical specialists in obstetrics and gynecology volunteered to serve as a medical board.<sup>24</sup>

The Iowa Maternal Health League's birth control clinic in Des Moines opened on December 18, 1934.<sup>25</sup> It served married women who lacked access to birth control through private physicians. During the first 27 months of operation, 782 women used the clinic; 372 had husbands with jobs, 381 had husbands on relief, and 39 had husbands who were unemployed but not on relief. Their average age was 27.5 years, average number of pregnancies 4.2 per woman, average number of live children 3.3, and total prior induced abortions 107.<sup>26</sup> Given their characteristics, their pregnancy histories, and their lack of access to private physicians, the women represented the profile of the tragic cases that Violet Spencer had observed and had felt powerless to help.

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22. Roy M. Pitkin, "Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Iowa: Three Leaders and 51 Years," *Proceedings in Obstetrics and Gynecology* 3 (Supplement, 2013), 1–17, <http://ir.uiowa.edu/pog/vol3/iss4/>. The framed document with the original 12 signatures hangs in the board room of the offices of Planned Parenthood of the Heartland in Des Moines, viewed by author on 1/17/2013.

23. "Iowa Maternal Health League, Inc.," undated pamphlet, George Mills Jr. Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

24. "Report of the Iowa Maternal Health League, Inc., Des Moines Clinic, Cedar Rapids Clinic, Cedar Falls Clinic, Sioux City Clinic," undated brochure, covering 1/1/1935–4/1/1936, George Mills Jr. Papers.

25. "Birth Control Clinic to Open," *Des Moines Register*, 12/18/1934.

26. "To Protect Their Health—How Des Moines Birth Control Clinic Works—And How It Helps," *Des Moines Register*, 4/11/1937.



*Elizabeth Cowles (right) discusses clinic issues with Nurse Myrna Johnson. From Des Moines Register, 4/11/1937.*

The clinic operated on Wednesdays and Thursdays for only two hours, but on other days a nurse could schedule appointments. Eligible patients were “women who are leading a normal married life with their husbands and who in the opinion of the Clinic physician are in need of contraceptive advice.” Cost of care was about \$3 per patient per year. Patients covered the cost of care when able, or they could contribute what they could or make arrangements to pay over time. Contributions from league members and their friends made up the difference. As expected, the clinic achieved a 96 percent success rate in preventing pregnancies, meaning that among women attending the clinic, only four in a hundred became pregnant unintentionally.<sup>27</sup>

New patients had to wait a week or two for an appointment. At the first visit, a staff person or volunteer took the woman’s

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27. Ibid.; “Report of the Iowa Maternal Health League.”



*Members of the board of the Maternal Health League study the map in the birth control clinic's waiting room, which records the distribution of the clinic's cases. From Des Moines Register, 4/11/1937.*

history and told her about payment options, future appointments, and expected cooperation. The doctor then examined the patient and fitted her with a barrier device and instructed her in its use. The patient came back one week later to resolve any problems and ask any questions and received an appointment for four months after that. If the physician felt certain at that time that the patient was managing successfully, the woman returned to the clinic only as she needed supplies. Women had to pick up contraception supplies in person because the Comstock Laws prevented the clinic from mailing them. When women failed to return, a social worker investigated why. Composite statistics from 1935 to 1939 showed that the Des Moines clinic served 1,563 married women ranging in age from 15 to over 40 years. Approximately one-third were 20-24 years old. The average woman had experienced 2.2 pregnancies before arriving at the clinic. She had two live children. The total group had experienced 56 child deaths and 188 abortions.<sup>28</sup>

28. "Report of the Iowa Maternal Health League"; "Maternal Health League," *Des Moines Register*, 1/9/1940.

The clinic in Des Moines was typical of most local birth control clinics in the United States. A study of more than 600 clinics in all parts of the United States found that they fell into just three models of organization: free-standing, governmental, and hospital-based. The large majority, including the Des Moines clinic, developed as private, freestanding organizations created and run by volunteer, upper-class female social activists and philanthropists.<sup>29</sup>

ELIZABETH COWLES'S TIES to the *Des Moines Register* and *Tribune* yielded significant support for the clinic's work. Elizabeth Morley Bates met her future husband, John Cowles, while she was a student at Smith College and he was at Harvard. They married in 1923 and moved to Des Moines for John to help his father run the newspaper business. He was the fifth of six children of Gardner Cowles Sr., a teacher, businessman, journalist, and politician originally from Algona, Iowa, and his wife, Florence Call Cowles. In 1903 Gardner Cowles Sr. purchased the *Des Moines Register* and transformed it into Iowa's premier news organization. John Cowles received national attention as a rising young publisher, political observer, and operative, host to overnight house guests such as former President Herbert Hoover, and cohost with Elizabeth at parties at their home. *Time* magazine placed him on its cover on July 1, 1935, with the title, "Iowa Formula"; the story inside described his success in his business and personal life.<sup>30</sup>

News articles about the Iowa Maternal Health League and its clinic during the first few years pointedly listed the names of board members and officers. Readers in Des Moines likely recognized most of the names. Myrtle Meyer Eldred, who covered children's health for the *Register* and wrote a nationally syndicated column, served on the board for 25 years and also chaired

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29. Hajo, *Birth Control on Main Street*, 2.

30. "The Cowles Family: Four Generations," website of the Cowles Family Publishing Library, Drake University, <http://www.lib.drake.edu/heritage/GardnerCowlesFamily/JohnCowles.html>; "Iowa Formula," *Time*, 7/1/1935, 26-31. See also William B. Friedrichs, *Covering Iowa: The History of the Des Moines Register and Tribune Company, 1849-1985* (Ames, 2000), 45-138.

the clinic operations committee.<sup>31</sup> Other advisors included a number of wealthy and well-connected women and a few of their husbands—leaders of prominent Protestant churches and synagogues, heads of publishing, banking and real estate interests, and the president of Drake University.<sup>32</sup>

Another adviser, Flora Dunlap, represented the greater women's movement. After working at urban settlement houses, including Hull House in Chicago, she spent her long career in Des Moines as a social worker and advocate for women's causes. She directed the Roadside Settlement House on the southeast side of Des Moines for 20 years. She became the first female member of the Des Moines school board, president of the Iowa Equal Suffrage Association, and the first president of the Iowa League of Women Voters. She served on the Polk County Emergency Relief Committee during the Great Depression and later on the county welfare board, advising the government on social welfare legislation. Elizabeth Cowles donated money to the Roadside Settlement House year after year. In return, Dunlap gave strong support to the local birth control movement.<sup>33</sup>

SOON AFTER the clinic opened, Magdalon Grahl sent Cowles, who was vacationing in Arizona, reports of rumors that the Iowa Attorney General's office was raising questions about the legality

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31. Dorothea Sidney, "The First Fifty Years: Planned Parenthood of Mid-Iowa," 1984, photocopy of original document obtained by Chery R. Jacobsen from Planned Parenthood of Mid-Iowa in 1994-95, but now apparently no longer extant; copy in author's possession.

32. Examples of such prominent individuals include Dr. Stoddard Lane, a prominent minister; Mrs. Gerard S. Nollen, wife of the president of Bankers Life Insurance Company; Mr. and Mrs. James W. Hubbell, real estate developers; Rabbi Eugene Mannheimer, a Grand Chaplain of Iowa Masons and one of the founders of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and his wife; Harvey Ingham, editor of the *Des Moines Register*, and his wife; Mrs. Max Mayer, the director of the Jewish Community Center; Mrs. Ernest V. Kennan, wife of the rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church; and D. W. Morehouse, the president of Drake University, and his wife.

33. "Flora Dunlap, What She Did for Des Moines," *Des Moines Register*, 4/24/1953; Flora Dunlap, "Roadside Settlement of Des Moines," *Annals of Iowa* 21 (1938), 165; "Flora Dunlap Dies; Was in Social Work," *Des Moines Tribune*, 8/27/1953; Folder: [Elizabeth Cowles] Contributions 1937-1965, file 10 (3), drawer 1, Cowles Papers, Drake University.

of the birth control clinic operation. Cowles counseled restraint and urged that no one contact the Attorney General, who was a Roman Catholic. She wanted the clinic in Des Moines to have functioned long enough "to prove by statistics, its indisputable need and the value of its public service, also after leagues and clinics have been organized in various other communities in the state with a resulting informed (which means favorable) opinion on the subject that then will be the time for approaching the Attorney General." She reassured Grahl, "If you think I'm a weak sister, dodging issues, please let me assure you that I am completely earnest in this work, and that it is the only cause for whose principles I'd be willing to make any sacrifice. But I don't want to force issues until we are unassailably prepared to meet them." Cowles felt that the new clinic was making friends and winning support. "If we can only keep on in this quiet and dignified way for a few more months, we shall have an amazing body of public opinion behind us." As it turned out, the Attorney General did not press the issue.<sup>34</sup>

Compared with the stiff opposition to birth control clinics from the Roman Catholic Church in neighboring Minnesota, the church's opposition to birth control clinics in Iowa was far less intense.<sup>35</sup> The church did, however, register its opposition in an article reprinted in the *Des Moines Register* from *The Witness*, the Catholic weekly journal published at Dubuque. Its arguments against birth control included loss of customers for businesses, unfairness to the poor, and "growing selfishness" of the culture.

In recent years, . . . the comfortable classes in this country, not content to have deprived the poor of their money through a muddled economic system, and of their religion through a godless school system, have reached out to deprive them of their children. In Des Moines and other American cities the wealthy have set up birth control clinics, dishonestly called maternal health centers, to im-

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34. Elizabeth Cowles to Magdalon Grahl, 2/12/1935, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel 92:L092:0420; Elizabeth Cowles to Hazel Moore, 2/14/1935 and 2/12/1935, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel 92:L092:0422.

35. Mary Losure, "'Motherhood Protection' and the Minnesota Birth Control League," *Minnesota History* 54 (1995), 359-70.

pose their immoral practices on the poor, who are still healthy enough in conscience and in body to have children.<sup>36</sup>

Speakers at the 1940 annual meeting of the Iowa Maternal Health League in Des Moines, addressed that opposition. Woodbridge Morris, the executive director of the Birth Control Federation of America, argued that 77 percent of people in the United States favored birth control and that "one religion has no right to dictate" to the rest of the people their position opposing it.<sup>37</sup>

THE IOWA MATERNAL HEALTH LEAGUE in Des Moines was not the first birth control advocacy group in Iowa. The movement arose independently in several Iowa cities in the early 1930s. At least one site, Cedar Rapids, predated the group in Des Moines in establishing a public birth control clinic for poor married women. Volunteer Helen Ettinger and physician Florence Johnson began the clinic in 1930. Ettinger, who had studied college-level biology and was Johnson's personal friend, recalled that "there was some religious opposition at first, but Dr. Johnson had great courage. She was determined to see this project through." The clinic offered pelvic examinations and fit diaphragms, but patients also received marital counseling and advice about prenatal and infant care. Private physicians and hospitals referred low-income patients. The clinic, which operated in City Hall, served 174 patients in 1935. The average age of the patients was 28.2 years, perhaps indicating that they already had children and wished to prevent more.<sup>38</sup> The involvement of a physician, as in Des Moines, enabled the clinic to evade the obscenity laws.

A group of birth control advocates in Cedar Falls organized to provide education in that community in 1933.<sup>39</sup> The group

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36. "Loss in Population Blamed on Birth Control," *Des Moines Tribune*, 5/17/1937.

37. Minutes of the Iowa Maternal Health League Annual Meeting, 4/19/1940, photocopy of original document obtained by Cheryl R. Jacobsen from Planned Parenthood of Mid-Iowa in 1994-95, now apparently no longer extant; copy in author's possession.

38. Pam Frueling, "Planned Parenthood Dates Back," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 9/23/1979; "Report of the Iowa Maternal Health League."

39. Cheryl Rose Jacobsen, at Loras College in Dubuque, has written an unpublished history of the Cedar Falls Birth Control League.

was led by Hansine (Titte) Eijber Holst (1889–1957), an immigrant trained as a nurse who moved to Cedar Falls in 1927. Prior to that, she had worked with foundling children at the Willard Parker Hospital in New York City. The Cedar Falls group had to meet at the Holst residence “because the people interested are a little timid to show colors because either they themselves or their husbands are in a public position.” Holst explained that her own husband was the editor of a Danish-language newspaper “and does not have to account to anyone.”<sup>40</sup> The Cedar Falls Birth Control League never established a free-standing birth control clinic because of opposition from physicians. Instead, Holst accompanied women to medical appointments and made home visits. The league served 32 patients from August 1934 to April 1936, nearly all of them on relief and with an average of more than four prior pregnancies.<sup>41</sup>

As in Cedar Rapids, the Sioux City Maternal Health League also operated in City Hall. From April 1935 to the end of 1936 it helped 124 patients, 80 percent of whom were on relief. The women reported an average of 4.4 prior pregnancies and had experienced a total of 87 spontaneous and induced abortions.<sup>42</sup>

The Leagues in Cedar Rapids, Cedar Falls, Sioux City, and Des Moines created a joint annual report in 1936 but had no statewide organization. Perhaps the show of unity reflected Elizabeth Cowles’s belief that the birth control clinic movement needed to build the image of a statewide base of support and to demonstrate that birth control clinics existed statewide and not just in Des Moines.<sup>43</sup>

NATIONWIDE, support for birth control grew during the 1930s. *Newsweek* magazine summed up the progress, noting that the delegates at the 1936 annual meeting of the American Birth Control League in New York “had no fear of police or public opinion. They felt their battle had been won.” Even though Congress had

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40. Titte Holst to Margaret Sanger, 11/22/1933, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel L092:0327.

41. “Report of the Iowa Maternal Health League.”

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*; Elizabeth Cowles to Magdalon Grahl, 2/12/1935.

failed to legalize the dissemination of information about birth control and the distribution of devices by physicians, the movement had made other strides. The number of clinics operating "in accordance with or in defiance of State laws, shot up 50 per cent to 237; printing presses ground out 135,000 pieces of literature; and police made no arrests of people interested in the movement."<sup>44</sup> Birth control advocates seemed to have achieved many of their goals.

Opposition to contraception started to crumble after the federal Second Circuit Court essentially ruled in 1936 that the Comstock obscenity laws were unconstitutional.<sup>45</sup> In 1937 the American Medical Association officially endorsed contraception as a legitimate part of medical practice.<sup>46</sup> Birth control supporters further argued that access to contraception was an important public health measure that could save lives lost to abortion and could prevent adverse consequences of unwise, unwanted pregnancies.<sup>47</sup> In 1940 Eleanor Roosevelt voiced her support for contraception, and during World War II the U.S. Public Health Service began to fund birth control programs for military families.<sup>48</sup>

In 1940 the American Institute of Public Opinion polled Americans about birth control, posing the question, "Would you approve or disapprove of having government health clinics furnish birth control information to married people who want it?" The response: 77 percent approved and only 23 percent disapproved. Respondents who disapproved gave three main reasons: "That birth control is a private matter and should not be the concern of the government; that the practice of birth control is contrary to religious principle; and that it will lead to 'race suicide.'" Those approving thought that the poor should have access to birth control information, that people deserved reliable information instead of "quackery," and that birth control would

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44. "Birth Control: The Net Gains in a Fifteen Years' Social War," *Newsweek*, 2/1/1936, 25.

45. Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, 373-76.

46. "Doctors Lift Long Taboo on Birth Control: Recognition Voted by Association," *Des Moines Register*, 6/9/1937.

47. Sophia J. Kleegman, "Medical and Social Aspects of Birth Control," *Minneapolis Journal-Lancet*, 11/15/1935, 1-7.

48. Gordon, *Moral Property*, 245.

allow for “better spacing of children and better living conditions for those already born.”<sup>49</sup> Public opinion had become overwhelmingly in favor of birth control and in support of making it available as a function of government.

The official end of legal restrictions on birth control for married couples came in 1965 when the U.S. Supreme Court in *Griswold v. Connecticut* struck down Connecticut’s law against physicians providing birth control information and services to married couples. In 1972, in *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, the court extended privacy rights to unmarried individuals receiving physician-prescribed birth control. At the time of that ruling, Justice Harry Blackmun was already drafting the majority opinion to legalize abortion in 1973.<sup>50</sup>

IN 1938, just four years after helping to establish the Iowa Maternal Health League, Elizabeth Cowles and her four children moved to Minneapolis to join her husband, who, along with his younger brother, Gardner Cowles Jr. (Mike), had purchased the morning *Tribune* and the afternoon *Star* (now the *Star Tribune*) in 1935. The Cowles brothers intended to replicate the success of the family’s Des Moines newspaper operation.<sup>51</sup>

In Minneapolis Elizabeth Cowles continued her volunteer work with Planned Parenthood, serving as president of the Hennepin County branch in 1942. She also contributed her time and money to many other social causes, including the American Civil Liberties Union, the League of Women Voters, and the Minnesota Human Genetics League. She discovered a passion for advocating racial equality after observing racial discrimination against African American servicemen returning from World War II and seeing the African American employees of the Cowles newspapers not being able to obtain housing in Minneapolis because of discrimination. She served on the board of the Minneapolis Urban League, was a charter member of the United Negro College Fund, and was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. After receiving an award

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49. “Public Birth Control Clinics Are Favored,” *Des Moines Register*, 1/24/1940.

50. Engelman, *History of Birth Control in America*, 184–85.

51. James A. Alcott, *A History of Cowles Media Company* (Minneapolis, 1998).



*Elizabeth Cowles (1900–1976). Photo from Cowles Family Papers, Drake University.*

from the national Urban League in 1948, Cowles explained her interest in racial justice. “I had long known that my own life was held cheap in two states. I knew that in Massachusetts and Connecticut I would have been denied preventive medical care to save my life or preserve my health as a wife and mother of four children. I felt a bond with colored people whose lives are held cheap in varying degrees in forty-eight states.” Connecting the danger to women of being denied access to contraception with the damage that racism inflicted on African Americans, Cowles saw both as intolerable injustices.<sup>52</sup>

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52. Folder: “Presidents’ Reports,” box 10, Planned Parenthood of Minnesota Records, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis; Alcott, *A History of Cowles Media Company*; Elizabeth Cowles, “How I Became Interested in Racial Justice,” in *Opportunity* (Winter 1948), reprinted in Alcott, *A History of Cowles Media Company*. For more on Cowles’s activity with

Elizabeth Cowles's passion for her causes was legendary. Years later, a colleague in the Minnesota Human Genetics League recounted stories of Cowles standing in front of Minneapolis City Hall handing out birth control information and daring the police to arrest her.<sup>53</sup> And she never forgot her colleagues in Des Moines or the institutions that she had helped to found. Although she never lived in the state again, she donated money to Planned Parenthood of Iowa every year for the rest of her life.<sup>54</sup>

OVER THOSE YEARS, the Iowa Maternal Health League and its successors evolved to meet local needs, react to national events, and employ new medical science and birth control technology. For example, in March 1937, the clinic added a weekly evening session to serve African American women, staffed by an African American doctor. The organization also developed better communication with Iowans. In August 1937, for example, it opened its first exhibit at the Iowa State Fair and distributed 4,800 pieces of literature.<sup>55</sup>

Following national trends, the group changed its name in 1943 from the Iowa Maternal Health League to the Planned Parenthood Committee of Des Moines to reflect the 1942 decision of the American Birth Control League to change its name to Planned Parenthood Federation of America.<sup>56</sup> Margaret Sanger opposed the name change because it played down "control" in favor of the weaker, vague, "planned."<sup>57</sup>

New avenues to promote birth control opened up regularly, and advances in medicine allowed Planned Parenthood in Des Moines to offer new services, including an infertility clinic in

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the Minnesota Human Genetics League, see Neal Ross Holtan, "From Eugenics to Public Health Genetics in Mid-Twentieth Century Minnesota" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota dissertation, 2011), 111.

53. Lee E. Schacht, interview by author, 10/7/2007, Oral History Collection, University of Minnesota Archives, Minneapolis.

54. Folder: [Elizabeth Cowles] Contributions 1937-1965, file 10 (3), drawer 1, Cowles Papers, Drake University.

55. Sidney, "The First Fifty Years: Planned Parenthood of Mid-Iowa."

56. *Ibid.*

57. Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, 393.

1944. It extended its reach to the Polk County hospital, Broadlawn, in 1948 to provide birth control services to new mothers at the six-week postpartum visit. On the state level, the Des Moines organization convinced officials at the Clarinda State Hospital to discharge patients with birth control supplies. In 1960 it opened a clinic to serve the Meskwaki Settlement.<sup>58</sup>

The organization continued to increase staff, provide more direct services to patients, and offer educational outreach programs. In 1952 Planned Parenthood Committee of Des Moines hired a full-time organizer to recruit patients, eventually tripling the number in six years. In 1956 it purchased a large Victorian house at 18th and Pleasant to use as its headquarters and clinic space. In August 1961 the clinic in Des Moines began dispensing birth control pills, one of the first in the Midwest to offer that new advance in technology.<sup>59</sup>

The growth of Planned Parenthood's array of services, their complexity, the expanded outreach, and service to larger numbers of patients took a toll. Expenses exceeded income, and by 1960 Planned Parenthood of Des Moines faced a \$3,000 debt. One of its volunteers, Maddie Glazer Levitt, came up with the idea of holding a used book sale to raise money, and she organized other volunteers to do it. To everyone's surprise, the five-day sale raised \$2,650. Since then, the book sale has been held twice a year in the Agriculture Building at the Iowa State Fairgrounds and brings in a half-million dollars annually.<sup>60</sup>

The organization changed its name to Planned Parenthood of Iowa in 1965 because at that time only Sioux City had an independent birth control clinic and the Des Moines operation was becoming a statewide organization.<sup>61</sup> As an example of its statewide reach, Planned Parenthood of Iowa hired a nurse, Barbara Madden-Bittle, to coordinate research on birth control pills for pharmaceutical companies and to do statewide out-

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58. Sidney, "The First Fifty Years."

59. *Ibid.*; Newsletter, 12/9/1965, 4, history folder, Planned Parenthood of Iowa, Offices of Planned Parenthood of the Heartland, Des Moines.

60. Rekha Basu, "Bookmarking History, Choice: Planned Parenthood Is Celebrating its 50th Year of Selling Books to Support Reproductive Rights," *Des Moines Register*, 9/11/2010.

61. Newsletter, 12/9/1965, 1.

reach.<sup>62</sup> Another example was that physicians in Iowa could send prescriptions to Planned Parenthood of Iowa, which would mail birth control pills to the patient. In 1965 Iowa Governor Harold Hughes signed a law allowing the State Board of Welfare "to pay the family planning medical and drug costs for any welfare recipient who is married or who is a mother."<sup>63</sup> In 1969 Title X of the federal Public Health Act specified for the first time that federal funding could be used for family planning clinics in the United States. That same year, Planned Parenthood began offering services to unmarried women. By 1971, 61 of Iowa's 99 counties had public birth control services, some funded by federal grants; many clinics added services such as pregnancy testing, Pap smears, lab tests, and screening for venereal diseases besides contraception. Educational services reached 11,500 Iowans.<sup>64</sup>

In 1969 staff at Planned Parenthood in Des Moines established Iowans for the Medical Control of Abortions to advocate safe and legal abortions. In 1974, shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its *Roe v. Wade* decision on abortion, the Des Moines clinic began offering outpatient abortion services. As at other sites in the United States, opposition to abortion soon surfaced, and opponents became active, verbally abusing clinic staff and threatening them with physical harm. In 1978, after the federal government terminated Medicaid payment for abortions, Planned Parenthood in Iowa established a loan fund for patients who could not cover costs. In 1980 the Planned Parenthood Federation of America launched a public information campaign to counter opposition by characterizing Planned Parenthood as pro-family, pro-child, and pro-choice.<sup>65</sup>

In 1980 the organization in Des Moines once again changed its name, this time to Planned Parenthood of Mid-Iowa to reflect its geographic service area in 29 central Iowa counties. In 1981 and again in 1984 it won the Fairchild Award for excel-

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62. Some of Barbara Madden-Bittle's papers are housed at the Iowa Women's Archives at the University of Iowa Libraries. The records are from the decade of the 1970s.

63. Newsletter, 12/9/1965.

64. Sidney, "The First Fifty Years."

65. *Ibid.*

lence from the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. A capital fund for renovation and construction to replace several old buildings and renovate another allowed Planned Parenthood of Mid-Iowa to occupy new space in 1984 that it named for Elizabeth Cowles. With the acquisition of programs in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska, the newest name is Planned Parenthood of the Heartland.<sup>66</sup>

THIS HISTORY of the birth control movement in Iowa shows that, as in other locations in the United States, Margaret Sanger and her organizations provided ongoing support and encouragement but did so from a distance and only when most needed to shore up support for the local effort. Iowans marshalled sufficient local social power and resources to establish and maintain ongoing public birth control clinics for the poor, especially in Des Moines. As the stories of Violet Spencer and Elizabeth Cowles demonstrate, the birth control movement in Iowa started with the energy and passion of working women but stalled until upper-class women joined the effort. The potential for legal sanctions and personal risks was real and potentially serious. Clinic organizers in Des Moines used their unusual influence with the local newspapers to cultivate positive public opinion about their clinic activities. That circumstance allowed them to stave off legal and religious opposition and gave them an advantage that was perhaps unique in the birth control movement.

Did the early and less wealthy birth control advocates pave the way for the better-off women to start a successful birth control clinic and thus a movement? Scant records such as newspaper stories and letters to and from Margaret Sanger are not sufficient to answer that question. One piece of evidence seems to contradict the idea that the two groups collaborated closely. Violet Spencer responded to Margaret Sanger's 1936 "S.O.S call" (Spencer's words), asking her to work with the New York office again, saying, "We have a fine leader for our work, Mrs. John Cowles, who is much admired and liked by the people here in

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66. Planned Parenthood of the Heartland, "Our History," [www.planned-parenthood.org/planned-parenthood-heartland/who-we-are/history](http://www.planned-parenthood.org/planned-parenthood-heartland/who-we-are/history).

the city so I no longer have time to work national.”<sup>67</sup> Spencer therefore believed that her help in promoting birth control was no longer necessary in view of Cowles’s leadership.

On the 50th anniversary of the annual book sale, the manager of the first event in 1961, Joan Mannheimer, recalled that her mother-in-law, Irma (Shloss) Mannheimer, one of the founding officers of the Iowa Maternal Health League, would “joke that if they were sent to jail, at least there’d be enough for a bridge game.”<sup>68</sup> Given that the Polk County sheriff had raided pharmacies and indicted a druggist for obscenity for selling birth control supplies just three years before the Des Moines clinic opened, the women had reason to be concerned about legal action being taken against them.<sup>69</sup>

Elizabeth Cowles used her social network of influence and considerable personal financial resources to ensure the movement’s success in Des Moines, demonstrating leadership that seemed to inspire others to contribute their skills, time, and money. Her letters reveal both her intense dedication to the birth control cause and her tactical and practical ability to make social change. Her dedication to social justice drove her to make common cause with women across class and racial lines and to see their issues as universal.

Barbara Madden-Biddle, the former clinic nurse, board president, and book sale chairperson for Planned Parenthood of Iowa, observed in 2011, “What is striking is how cyclical these issues are. Though each generation thinks it is uniquely modern and liberated, some of the same battles have been repeating themselves for 100 years. That is because, as other social movements come and go, women’s struggle to control their fertility—and thus, their lives—is a timeless one. And that has driven many generations to activism. For the Planned Parenthood book sale volunteers, sorting and selling books is just a nonsubversive form of it.”<sup>70</sup>

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67. Spencer to Sanger, 3/8/1936, Margaret Sanger Papers (LC ed.), vol. 141, reel L092:0418.

68. The papers of Irma Shloss and Mannheimer family papers are housed in the Iowa Women’s Archives at the University of Iowa Libraries.

69. Basu, “Bookmarking History.”

70. Basu, “Bookmarking History.”

Birth control continues to be a contentious political issue in the twenty-first century, one that arises in a variety of new and different forms, while reasons for opposing it seem to remain the same as they were a century ago. As birth control advocate and physician Sophia Kleegman wrote in 1935, "In my personal experience, . . . I have yet to meet an oppositionist who is married and fertile and poor."<sup>71</sup> The same comment might just as easily be made today.

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71. Kleegman, "Medical and Social Aspects of Birth Control," 22.