Making the Radical Respectable:
Little Rock Clubwomen and the
Cause of Birth Control during the
1930s

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From 1873, when the Federal Comstock Law was passed, until 1936, when the case of United States v. One Package removed previous legal restrictions, dissemination of birth control information was associated with obscenity and unlawfulness. Yet in 1931 Little Rock clubwomen directed the work at the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic, a clinic open to poor white women, which was sponsored by the Arkansas Eugenics Association. That clubwomen, well-respected members of the white social elite, would lead in promoting access to birth control information for the public during the 1930s seems daring and courageous. After all, Margaret Sanger had been in legal trouble as late as April 1929, when the police raided her clinic, the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in New York. The Little Rock clubwomen successfully participated in this movement and kept the doors of the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic open because they presented the potentially controversial idea of access to birth control information to working-class and poor women in a context acceptable to an otherwise conservative community.

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1 The Comstock law prohibited the mailing of birth control information.
The women who directed the work at the clinic had their own reasons for devoting time to the Arkansas birth control movement, based on their ideas concerning the meaning of marriage, family, birth control, and prescribed roles for women. In examining their motives, as expressed through the conduct of their lives in conjunction with their commitment to the birth control movement, it becomes clear that their birth control advocacy was not a threat to the members of the white middle-class in Little Rock. To the poor and working-class women in Little Rock, however, the assistants and the medical setting in which the birth control information was offered might have been an obstacle. Relatively few of the prospective seekers of reliable birth control information actually approached the clinic.2 The power to accept or reject a prospective client belonged to the assistants and was based on clinic policies and an individual volunteer's ideas concerning birth control, appropriate gender roles, and race relations.

Hilda Kahler Cornish was the initiator and director of the Arkansas birth control movement. Born in 1878, she grew up in a working-class immigrant environment in St. Louis and had, through her experience as a textile worker in New York City, been exposed to a life where people faced and coped with economic difficulties.3 She moved to Little Rock in 1901 and married Edward Cornish the following year. By 1930, when Cornish took the first steps toward the establishment of the birth control clinic, people in Arkansas were in the midst of severe economic difficulties. During the latter part of the 1920s, one natural disaster after another had brought additional predicaments to an already depressed agricultural economy. Parents, such as the following letter testifies, struggled to make ends meet and were searching for ways to reverse the chain of events that seemed to lead to ultimate disaster:

We are terribly poor. We have four children, oldest 8 1/2 years, baby 13 mos. [sic]. I live in terror that I will become pregnant again. I honestly do believe I will die if I give birth again. We do not have enough to eat, never have milk. Life is just a dull, drab ache of fear. My husband is now a W.P.A. worker and he has had no work for a year and a half. He has only drawn one W.P.A. check. Will you please tell me where, if possible I can buy whatever contraceptives that are safe and how much they cost. My doctor says he does not know. I do not think it fair to all concerned to have more children.4

Hilda Cornish saw the birth control clinic as a means to alleviate the anxiety of women facing another pregnancy in such circumstances. She directed the work at the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic from its inception, arranging for space where the Arkansas Eugenics Association could assist women without incurring overhead expense. She facilitated contact between Sanger’s Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau and the Little Rock clinic.5 She even ordered supplies used by the physicians in advising and fitting women. However, the clinic was never a one-woman operation; she shared the actual work with a group of devoted women who volunteered their time and lent their names to a potentially controversial issue. Because Hilda Cornish was a well-respected clubwoman at the time, she was able to tap into a network of women experienced in organizational work to lead in the birth control cause.

One of the twenty women who volunteered as assistants at the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic between 1931 and 1940 was Hilda Cornish

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2 Approximately 1,650 women approached the clinic between 1931 and 1940. For further discussion see Marianne Leung, “‘Better Babies’: The Arkansas Birth Control Movement During the 1930s” (Ph.D. diss., University of Memphis, 1996), 140-170.

3 Hilda C. Coates, interview by author, July 12, 1989, transcript, Oral History Research Office, University of Memphis, Tennessee; correspondence with Mrs. Coates since 1989; Manuscript Census Returns, Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, St. Louis County, Missouri, Wards 21-29, National Archives; Manuscript Census Returns, Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Pulaski County, Arkansas, National Archives; obituary of Hilda Cornish, *Arkansas Gazette*, November 20, 1965; correspondence between Cornish and Margaret Sanger, Margaret Sanger Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; records of the Arkansas Eugenics Association and the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic, Historical Research Center of the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences Library, History of Public Health Collection, cited hereafter as BC-UAMS.

4 Letter from a woman in Mt. Olive, Arkansas, April, 1941, BC-UAMS, box 6, file 3.

5 The Little Rock birth control advocates were concerned with how promotion of birth control should be introduced into the community and opted for associating their cause with eugenics development rather than with Margaret Sanger or the American Birth Control League. See Rabbi Ira E. Sanders, interview by Charlotte Gadberry, January 18, 1978, Little Rock, Arkansas, transcript, Oral History Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Arkansas at Little Rock. For further discussions concerning eugenics and the Little Rock birth control advocates, see Leung, “‘Better Babies.’”
Coates, the oldest daughter of Hilda and Edward Cornish. She was born in 1904 and grew up in Little Rock. In 1922, at age 18, she enrolled at Bryn Mawr College. Even though Hilda's mother never attended a university, it was important to her that her five children attend prestigious universities and receive excellent educations.

In spite of her education, Hilda was not very knowledgeable about birth control methods at the time of her wedding in 1925. The method she used early in her marriage was douching after intercourse, and this was, as Hilda stated in an interview in 1989, "after the fact." Withdrawal and "wishing and hoping" were other methods relied on by this and other young couples. Hilda Coates gave birth to three children between 1926 and 1930. It was not until after the birth of the last child that Hilda tried a more effective method of birth control. In 1932, more than a year after the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic had opened and after Hilda had assisted in fitting other women with diaphragms, she was herself fitted with one by the attending physician at the clinic, Dr. Homer Scott. Hilda had learned of this method earlier while her mother was in the process of organizing the Arkansas birth control movement, but she was reluctant to use it herself. This method was apparently very effective for Hilda and her husband, who had no more children after 1930.7

November 17, 1930, the day she brought her last child home from St. Vincent Hospital, was the day that the banks closed in Little Rock. A trained nurse was hired to assist Hilda with the children, even though the family was strained financially at the time. The family was then living on one hundred dollars a month, and every penny had to be used wisely. Even though six dollars would buy a week's worth of groceries, the young couple had to cut back wherever they could in order to make ends meet. Of course the Coateses were relatively mildly affected compared with the majority of the Little Rock population. Reminiscing in 1989, Hilda remembered this period of adversity as one of family togetherness and cooperation, which she described as one of the "closest, most wonderful times of our lives."8

Hilda joined the Arkansas Eugenics Association at its founding and assisted at the clinic from the time it opened in February 1931. Even though her children were small-between three months and four years old-Hilda was able to participate in community volunteer work because she had a servant to care for the children. She did not keep track of the number of hours spent away from home but recalled in 1995 that she was at that time involved in volunteer work every day. Compared with some of her fellow clubwomen, Hilda devoted her time to only a small number of clubs. In addition to being active in the Arkansas Eugenics Association, she was also a member of the Junior League.10 Both organizations focused on women and family issues at a time when she herself was building a family life.11

Most of the hours Hilda devoted to civic work were spent assisting her mother in activities related to the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic. There were no nurses volunteering at the clinic, but Hilda assigned this role to herself. She saw herself as the assistant to the physician and made a point to stress the medical legitimacy of the clinic. Her function was to accompany each woman into the examination room at the time of a physical examination and fitting of a diaphragm. In an interview in 1989, Hilda remembered that "having a woman there in the doctor's office, that was medical ethics. You had to have the nurse there with the doctor. We would hand things to him. We never did fit a diaphragm."12 Her comments reveal that, in her mind, a woman was not comfortable being alone with a male physician in an examination room. "The women were probably afraid if they were in there with the doctor alone."13

Most of the women who came to the clinic were poor. According to Hilda's recollection, some of these women had many children and their bodies were "all torn up inside." It was the desire to help these women

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6See reports for the Arkansas Eugenics Association and the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic, 1931–1940, BC-UAMS; Coates, interview.

7Ibid. interview.

8Ibid.

9Ibid.


11The Junior League was reluctant to publicly support the Arkansas Eugenics Association. When Hilda Cornish requested help from the league to find space for a future birth control clinic, the Junior League officers informed Cornish that the league did not in any way wish to be associated with the "birth control organization." Secretary of the Junior League to Hilda Cornish, January 7, 1931, BC-UAMS. It is interesting to note that, despite this cautious approach, several of the Junior League members became intimately involved with the Arkansas Eugenics Association and its birth control clinic.

12Coates, interview.

13Ibid.
prevent further pregnancies that moved Hilda to volunteer her time and energy to the movement. The husbands of these poor women were not looked upon kindly. When birth control was not available to the women and their men did not cooperate in reducing the risk of pregnancy, the men were referred to as "beasts." It made Hilda angry to see how the bodies of these women were worn out because of too many pregnancies and births. Hilda did not display the same sympathy for all women. When poor women who were instructed did not use the method properly, Hilda blamed their failures on ignorance and lack of common sense.

Hilda held that poor people who were not able to pay the fees for a visit to a physician should not be prevented from gaining access to birth control. The Arkansas Eugenics Association was there to help families that were financially unable to find help elsewhere. In addition, she believed, these people should not have children, because their children would be "sickly," and the parents could not afford to care for them properly.

Hilda identified primarily with the role of wife and mother rather than that of a radical feminist. She did not see herself as using the local birth control movement to aid in the liberation of women from their traditional roles as mothers. In her own life she chose to make it her priority to take care of her children once they arrived. She proudly proclaimed that she never held a paid position, that all her work was done as a volunteer. Because Hilda was in a position to hire household help, she did not spend all her time with the children; however, her primary goal was still to guide their lives. Her motivation for participating in the local birth control movement was based on her own priorities. She saw her role at the clinic as one of assisting women who, for medical or economic reasons, sought to limit the size of their families in order to raise healthy, well-cared-for children.

Another volunteer at the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic was Louise Boaz Hall. She was one of ten community members whom Cornish called together in November 1930 for the meeting that resulted in the organization of the Arkansas Eugenics Association and the opening of the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic. Louise began her volunteer work at the clinic when it opened in February of 1931 and continued to assist until 1935. In addition to contributing to the practical work of running the clinic, she was also a member of the board of governors (called the board of directors after 1937) between 1933 and 1938.

Louise was about the same age as Hilda but came to the movement with quite different experiences. She was born in Texas in 1905 to Hiram A. Boaz and Caroline Browne Boaz and moved to Little Rock in 1926. Her father was a bishop in the Methodist church and held positions in China, Japan, Korea, Siberia, and Manchuria before he was sent to the United States to accept a position in Arkansas. Louise received no formal education except for one year at an all-girl high school in Louisville, Kentucky. Her mother did not believe in the contemporary educational system and kept her daughter out of it. According to Louise, her mother "thought that children should not be incarcerated in school and should certainly not have to do homework in the afternoons when they should be resting and playing." Her two older sisters had tutors and then four years of schooling at an academy before entering college, but Louise was dropped off at museums or public libraries and instructed to learn as much as possible for herself while her mother spent time attending classes. As a result, Louise felt that she never learned some of the basics of math and speech.

Nevertheless, Louise graduated from Barnard College at Columbia University in 1925. As a young woman she had big plans for her life. She aspired to writing the great American novel and began as a journalism major but ended up graduating with a major in French. Her father never restricted Louise in her choices. She felt that he encouraged her independent thinking and never pressured her to look for a husband and marriage. Louise followed her dream to write but settled for short stories about her traveling experiences while living with her parents in Southeast Asia.

In 1926, when twenty-one-year-old Louise Boaz moved to Little Rock, she was ready to establish some roots. She had never spent more than two years in one place. That year, the Little Rock middle- and upper-class white community held numerous debutante parties, and Louise, as the daughter of a prominent clergyman, was invited to many of them. This was her introduction to the social life of her generation and, as was the custom for

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
18 Reports for 1931–1938, BC-UAMS.
19 Louise B. Hall, interview by Dianne Larrison, July 18, 1978, Oral History Collection, UALR.
20 Ibid.
young women at the time, she dated many different men. Three months after a first date with Graham Roots Hall, the two were married in November 1927. This was far from what Louise had envisioned for herself, as at the time she felt that both marriage and motherhood represented a “badge of slavery.”\(^{21}\) She wanted several children but did not feel ready yet; there were too many other things she wanted to experience before she tied herself down with parental responsibilities. However, soon after marrying, she became pregnant.

Shortly after her wedding, Louise took on her first commitment within the Little Rock women’s club movement as a provisional member of the Junior League. Engaging in volunteer work was, in her view, the way a woman could get things done in a community. Primarily she was interested in the welfare effort, including assistance to families in need. Her desire to join a community organization was not solely based on altruistic motives. This was also a constructive way to make friends and to become part of a community which she was longing to make her own. Because of her frequent moves, Louise had never experienced any continuity in social relationships. Thus, joining a community organization was of great importance to her. In addition, she needed something to increase her sense of self-worth other than being a wife and mother.\(^{22}\)

Motherhood did not come easily to Louise. She was afraid of this new responsibility because of her inexperience with small children. To prepare herself she read much of the available advice literature, but the more she read, the more frightened she became. According to Louise, the child experts at this time argued that infants should be put on strict feeding schedules and not be picked up when crying. This was not agreeable to her, but as an inexperienced and, she felt, gullible first-time mother, she followed the advice. When her second child was born, she followed her intuition rather than “professional” advice.\(^{23}\)

When her first son, Lee Boaz, was a toddler, Louise started a nursery school. She thought that her son needed to be in a group of children in order to learn social skills. Because there was no such opportunity available in the neighborhood, she took it upon herself to create one. At the time Louise was focusing most of her energy on the many facets of managing a complicated household consisting of extended family and staff. During the nursery school’s second year, Louise was therefore happy when Louise Scott (later Vincent), who had had formal training in child development and care, relieved her of the responsibility of running the school. The school continued to operate at the Hall’s residence for another year but then moved to another location. It was difficult to find children to fill the school because depression-era parents could not spare the money for paid child care.

Louise’s involvement with the Arkansas Eugenics Association began after she became acquainted with Hilda Cornish. To Louise the work for the Arkansas Eugenics Association fit into her view that volunteer work was an effective way to get needed community work accomplished. With her focus on family welfare, she saw the need for birth control advice. “It was so rewarding and so interesting to see those poor women so eager for information to avoid having further children,” Louise recalled in an interview in 1978. She took on responsibilities that required her to participate directly in the work of the organization. In reflecting on her life, she felt that she always did “the dirty work” and that the other club women knew this. The only way she knew how to accomplish her goals was by getting in the midst of the action. When she joined an organization, she ended up doing the “hard, really nitty gritty stuff.”\(^{24}\) It is not surprising to find that Louise was both a member of the board of governors and an assistant at the clinic carrying out the work that directly touched the lives of others.

Her work with the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic was part of her overall work to better conditions for white families in the community. She saw the need for nursery schools for middle-class women and the need for birth control information for poor women and felt that she could be instrumental in filling these needs. From her middle-class perspective, these programs created opportunities for the recipients to enjoy a better quality of family life.

There is no direct evidence concerning Louise’s knowledge of birth control as a young woman. But her reluctance to become a mother early in marriage and the fact that she nevertheless did so, indicates that the couple did not use an effective birth control method. That she did not have any

\(^{21}\) ibid.

\(^{22}\) ibid.

\(^{23}\) ibid.

\(^{24}\) ibid.
more children after 1930 indicates that she made use of the information she received while volunteering for the local birth control movement.

A third volunteer with key responsibilities at the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic was Raida Pfeifer. Although she did not serve the clinic continuously as Hilda Coates did, she always held important positions during active periods. When Raida’s name is absent from the list of assistants at the clinic or members of the board of governors, she was usually busy with her family. Raida acted as the clinic’s receptionist from 1932 to 1935, as a member of the executive committee between 1933 and 1935, and as a member of the board of governors of the Arkansas Eugenics Association from 1933 to 1940 (except for 1935–1936). After a leave of absence from the association in 1935–1936, she served as vice chairwoman in 1938.25 It was through her acquaintance with Hilda Cornish and association with Rabbi Ira Sanders that she learned about the Arkansas Eugenics Association.

Raida was born on January 3, 1910, to Albert and Marcuse Cohn in Little Rock. The Cohn family, originally from Poland, had come to Little Rock in 1880, when Mark M. Cohn, Raida’s grandfather, moved there from Arkadelphia. That year Mark M. Cohn opened a store that would become the M.M. Cohn clothing store. Raida’s father, Albert, who had prepared for a professional life in civil engineering, took over the family business when his father died in 1897. The Cohn family developed a tradition of community activism. Raida’s mother, Marcuse Stiff Cohn, was the recipient of the letter which was the initial contact between Margaret Sanger and the Little Rock community. According to Raida’s recollection, her mother was active as a suffragist, and both parents were members of the school board. Thus Raida was familiar with organized community activism. For her the question was in which “major charity” should she become involved.26

The man that Raida married a year after graduation from college, Harry W. Pfeifer Jr., was also from a family in the retail business.27 At the time of the wedding, Harry was the treasurer of his family’s business, the Pfeifer

Brothers, but soon joined the M. M. Cohn company because, as Raida said in 1992, “we couldn’t compete when we were married.”28 During her engagement to Harry, she visited New York and while there, made an appointment at the private practice of Dr. Hannah Stone.29 Dr. Stone examined her and fitted her with a diaphragm. Pfeifer recalled in an interview that “she was lovely. I was so nervous. I remember afterwards, I had lunch with my brother-in-law, and I had this pessary in my purse (laughter) and I was embarrassed.”30 The couple agreed to start out their marriage in control of when children would be added to the family. The method of birth control did not fail them, as their first child was born more than four years into their marriage.

The Pfeifers had both been brought up in the tradition of activism in civic affairs for the purpose of, as they understood it, improving their community. Harry was involved in issues that addressed economic aspects of the community. For example, he served as president of the chamber of commerce, director of the Urban Progress Association, a member of the council of the Boy Scouts, and the first president of Arkansas Arts Center Foundation.31

Raida Pfeifer focused on issues that had traditionally been the domain of women like herself who actively sought to influence the world around them. As an economics major at Vassar College from 1926 to 1930, she had developed a special interest in the issue of population control. It was when she returned to Little Rock as a newly married woman in 1932, following a trip in Europe with her college roommate, that Pfeifer learned about the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic and the Arkansas Eugenics Association. Its work coincided with her view that “an increased population would be a runaway problem for the whole world in time unless pregnancies were controlled.”32

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29At the time of Pfeifer’s visit, Hannah Stone, M.D., was the medical director at the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau, initiated and directed by Margaret Sanger. See James Reed, From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society since 1830 (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 113–116, 118–119, 121, and 180.
31Ibid., LeMaster, Corner of the Tapestry, 382.
The Arkansas Eugenics Association was only one of many commitments Raida made to community work. She was also active in the Jewish community, where in 1934 she served as fourth vice president of the Council of Jewish Women. She gained important contacts through her network of women at Temple B’nai Israel and especially through the active group of the Temple Sisters. A few years later, while serving as vice chairperson of the Arkansas Eugenics Association, she was also active in the American Association for University Women, the Woman’s City Club, and the Council of Jewish Women.

Her first child, Don, was born in January 1935; the second, Marcuse, arrived in November 1936, and her third child, Susan, was born in August 1938—three children within three years and eight months. That volunteer work was important to Raida was clear, given that she had three small children but arranged for time to participate in volunteer organizations. This was possible, of course, because she could afford to hire help to run her large household.

In addition to Raida, other members of her immediate family were closely involved with the Arkansas Eugenics Association. Her brother-in-law, Arthur Phillips (vice president of M. M. Cohn Company), served as a member on the board of governors in 1931–1932. By 1934 Raida’s mother, Marcuse Cohn, (widow of A. D. Cohn), sister Miriam Phillips (wife of Arthur Phillips), and mother-in-law, Heloise Pfeifer, were all listed as members of the board of governors.33

Hilda Coates, Louise Boaz Hall, and Raida Pfeifer, the three clinic assistants discussed above, were women coming of age at a time that was fundamentally different from that of their mothers’ young womanhood, a time when Margaret Sanger engaged in radical methods to gain an audience.34 The way in which Americans related to sex and gender issues changed dramatically during the 1920s. While sexuality was an extremely private issue for the earlier generation, it became widely discussed and commercially exploited in the postwar era. Films, magazines, novels, and advertisements expounded and conditioned the idea that men and women could find mutual erotic pleasure. Youths were experimenting with sexual relationships before settling for one mate.

The women portrayed here all practiced birth control but came to trust reliable methods at different points in their married lives. Coates and Hall both started out their marriages without using effective birth control methods, and in spite of their college educations and access to information, they both had their last children only after becoming active with the Arkansas Eugenics Association and advocates of the diaphragm. Pfeifer, on the other hand, started out her marriage using the diaphragm, which was, by that time, becoming an openly and widely discussed method of birth control within the Little Rock white middle- and upper-classes.35

Studies of contemporary middle-class women and their practice of birth control suggest that reluctance to use the diaphragm was common. For example, a study of sixty women by W. M. Bowman, a physician working out of Petersburg, Virginia, found that 97 percent of the women had attempted some type of birth control before approaching a physician for assistance in controlling conception. Of those women who used birth control in their marriages, a majority relied on a vaginal douche consisting of a Lysol solution. Where the men had been the primary user of a birth control method, the condom or withdrawal had been practiced. The study found these methods to be inferior to what the women were later introduced to, the vaginal diaphragm combined with spermicidal jelly.36

Not all middle-class women gained access to birth control devices solely through their physicians. There was an enormous growth of the contraceptive industry during the 1930s, and women bought their birth control devices directly from contraceptive manufacturers. Under the label “female hygiene,” numerous products such as vaginal jellies, douche powders and liquids, suppositories, and foaming tablets were available.

33 Arkansas Eugenics Association and the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic, 1931–1938, BC-UAMS.
35 Graham Roots Hall, a lawyer and husband of Louise Boaz Hall, was an active supporter of the Arkansas Eugenics Association and its clinic. He had at more than one occasion appalled guests at formal dinner parties by pulling a diaphragm out of his vest pocket. That he could pull off such a stunt suggests that the issue of effective birth control was well accepted in his social circles. Pfeifer, interview, June 17, 1992.
These products could be bought at drugstores, some department stores, and from mail-order firms. Pfeifer could not remember if there were any “feminine hygiene” products at the family department store in Little Rock during the 1930s, but thought she might not be the best judge of that as she was satisfied with the diaphragm- and jelly-method and was not looking for other methods.\(^{37}\)

The studies of contraceptive use demonstrate that middle- and upper-class women were overwhelmingly practicing some type of birth control, but many of these methods were not effective in preventing conception. Once women like Coates, Hall, and Pfeifer acquired knowledge of effective methods, they found this knowledge immensely empowering and were eager to share this knowledge with other women in the community.

It is important to examine just which women benefited from the urge to share the newfound information. The women who assisted at the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic were gate-keepers of this information, and only if they deemed the women who approached the clinic worthy of assistance were the women accepted. Before 1937 this particular clinic restricted its services to white women who had a family income of less than seventy-five dollars per month.\(^{38}\) This category included a large number of the Little Rock women, as the annual per capita income was $225 in 1930 (or approximately $19 per month).\(^{39}\) Even though many of the women who formed the backbone of the Arkansas birth control movement employed African Americans, none of them appeared eager to spread the knowledge of reliable birth control to the African American community.

Pfeifer employed a succession of women, both white and African American. A few of them were live-ins, others did day-work. Pfeifer recalled that she probably informed the women where she was going and what she was doing when leaving the house to work at the clinic. She could remember discussing issues of reproduction with only one of the women, a white woman who was to be married. She was unsure if the young woman had requested the information, or if she herself had brought up the issue. In any case, Pfeifer “saw to it that she was prepared.”\(^{40}\) It did not seem to enter her mind that she could discuss birth control methods with the other women, especially the African Americans. Little Rock was a racially segregated society and to Pfeifer at the time, the well-being of the young African American women was not of her concern. Coates’s response to why she did not discuss birth control issues with her African American domestic workers is also telling of the times. She recalled that she considered the women in her home too ignorant to benefit from such information.\(^{41}\)

In general, the contemporary Little Rock white middle-class community did not label these clinic workers as radicals. Some women objected to their work and felt that the birth control movement turned women away from their primary duty, that of motherhood, and encouraged them to “entertain at parties, wear fine clothes and drive fine cars.”\(^{42}\) But the women running the clinic did not advocate new roles for women. This was evident in the restriction of services to married women only; unmarried women were publicly discouraged from seeking contraceptive information. The proper place for contraceptives for poor women was within marriage and then only when women were in economic difficulties or had medical problems. The women targeted by this particular organization, poor white women, were seen by most of the white middle class as a potential economic burden.

Numerous members of the white middle- and upper-class joined the Arkansas birth control cause. These people were connected to each other through work, fellowship, or community activities. While the leadership of the American Birth Control League was generally perceived as radical, grassroots-based birth control movements were typically led by individuals who indicated they were not advocating fundamental change in gender roles.\(^{43}\) Earlier proponents of birth control had favored greater freedom for women, but birth controllers in the 1930s presented birth control in a context

\(^{37}\) Pfeifer, telephone interview by author, March 2, 1996.

\(^{38}\) Even though limiting African American births was an important element in the founding of at least one other southern clinic (in Miami, Florida), the directors of the Arkansas Eugenics Association did not target African American families in Little Rock. Actually, African American women did not gain access to birth control advice at the Little Rock Birth Control Clinic until 1937. African Americans provided a low-cost labor force to landowners, business operators, and in private homes as domestic workers in Arkansas, which perhaps mediated any eugenic impulses.


\(^{40}\) Pfeifer, interview, March 2, 1996.

\(^{41}\) Coates, telephone interview, March 2, 1996.

\(^{42}\) Letter to the Arkansas Eugenics Association, received March 31, 1937, BC-UAMS.

that did not openly challenge the contemporary roles of women; they were not promoting birth control in order to liberate women from motherhood. The Arkansas birth control advocates provide one good example of this. They consciously avoided controversy and sensed that community support was crucial to the success of their endeavor.

The Formidable Roberta Fulbright

NAN SNOW AND DOROTHY STUCK

"MOTHER, REMEMBER NOT TO TALK TOO MUCH." 1 Senator J. William (Bill) Fulbright's oft-repeated admonition to his mother, Roberta, always went for naught. Each time she visited him in Washington, D.C., he gave the same sage advice. Each time she ignored it. She had good intentions. It was just that the urge to tell a good story or dominate a discussion was too much to overcome. Garrulous by nature and a skilled raconteur, she was not hesitant to share her opinions in conversation or in her Northwest Arkansas Times newspaper column, appropriately titled, "As I See It." "They loved her in Washington," her granddaughter Patty Fulbright Smith recalled.2 She was as much at home there as she was in Fayetteville, where she wielded power as comfortably as did the solons in Washington.

Her ebullient nature sometimes led observers of Bill Fulbright's career to view her as superficial, domineering, and obsessed with her son's success. While she took great pride in her son, as well as her other children, Roberta Fulbright was a much more complex individual than this viewpoint indicates. Endowed from childhood with a sense of self-confidence and secure in her own considerable intellect, she was a powerful figure in northwest Arkansas long before her son's ascendency to national prominence in the U.S. Senate. She relished her son's success, but she was even more engrossed in her wide-ranging business interests, her newspaper, campaigns for civic improvement, the University of Arkansas, and the politics of northwest Arkansas.

Dorothy D. Stuck and Nan Snow are the authors of Roberta: A Most Remarkable Fulbright (University of Arkansas Press: Fayetteville, 1997).

1Patty Fulbright Smith, interview by authors, Texarkana, Arkansas, April 18, 1997.

2Ibid.