

SEX DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

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by

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 OUR PEOPLE WENT into the Depression with poor preparation. We had been taught to value material things and to respect material success. Marriages weren't made in heaven, women weren't pure vessels, money would buy anything. When this whole structure fell apart, we were lost children and the effect of this collapse on our sexual manners was pretty much what might be expected.

Unemployment permitted a great deal more companionship between young men and women, which ordinarily would have led to marriage. The only thing lacking was money. The arrangement called,

simply, "living together" became common. Often the man or woman was married, and couldn't get, couldn't afford or didn't want a divorce. Sometimes the man simply refused to marry, and the woman took him into her home or moved into his as the next best thing.

These affairs started on a plane of sexual excitement, deteriorated to a state of being used to each other, continued on a level of financial interdependence, and usually broke up when one or both partners got sexually excited about someone else.

In Washington, D.C., the government decided the patriotic gesture was to restrict employment to unmarried women. This led to one of the finest carnivals of sex ever staged in an American city. Washington was crowded, there were more women than men, and most of the single women could not afford to get married on pain of losing their jobs. There were a lot of "we'll get married later on, but meanwhile let's not wait" romances. Before long the whole affair resembled a square dance.

In such ways did the economic pressures of the Depression change our moral code. The schoolteacher, the government employee, the WPA worker, all had friends, belonged

to churches and had felt themselves respectable members of society. Now, through circumstances beyond their control, they were penalized for marrying. Some were secretive about the privileges of marriage extralegally, but most were quite frank about it. More than the country club and parked-car promiscuity of the '20s, this frankness helped make sex a talked-about part of our lives.

Where money, a good job and stability had been important elements in judging men as prospective husbands, they were now supplanted by sexual response and companionship. Naturally, boys with money were still in the top classification of desirability, but they were scarce. Good dancers, athletes, good companions, good-looking boys and boys clever at sexual maneuvering became accepted at face value for boy-and-girl purposes, without immediate thoughts of marriage.

The '30s were also the years of the uncovering. Even the men got in the spirit of the thing, and the naked upper half of the male body, generally forbidden on beaches, became common by the middle '30s. Women began to show their stom-

achs, first on the beaches and gradually on the streets and even at social occasions.

Our popular music and dancing, always an interesting index of sex attitudes, crystallized some new forms. Swing was the music, and a style called jitterbug was the dance. Jitterbugging was good fun, strenuous and exciting. It was as sexual as any fertility dance of a pagan people, but it was a funny, laughing kind of sex that got breathless from the dance rather than from emotion.

All of this was part of a readjustment of our sex manners. The body itself was important now, and the dance, the beat of swing, the bronzing sun were all part of a glorification of the body. For a lot of boys and girls, sex itself became a form of physical sport, a game for two, exciting, with emotional fireworks—but still, mostly a sport.

Our people who had been part of the '20s realized how much more fun there was in being like these strong children, and the style of careless, easy youth became the style of the country as we moved toward the war years. The last of the decade of the '30s wasn't a bad time, at all.

