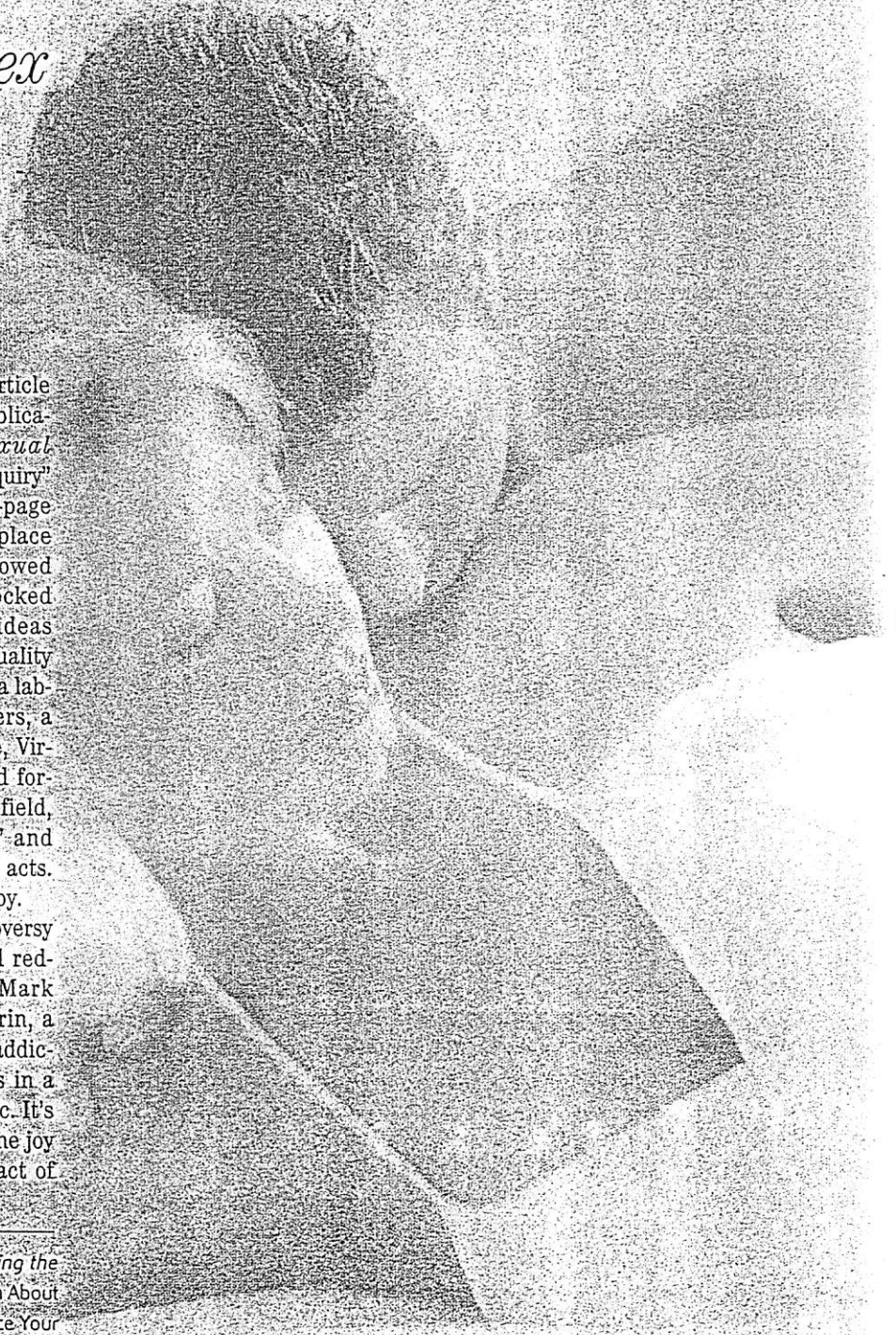
FROM ECSTASY TO AGONY

The rise and fall of sex therapy in St. Louis

BY SUSAN CRAIN BAKOS



On Monday, April 18, 1966, a front-page article in the *New York Times* noted the publication of a new book, *Human Sexual Response*, the result of an 11-year "inquiry" into the physiology of sex. The 366-page tome, based on research that took place right here in St. Louis, in the hallowed halls of Washington University, shocked the nation with its revolutionary ideas about sex — especially women's sexuality — and the field of sexual research. In a laboratory setting, Dr. William H. Masters, a gynecologist, and his research associate, Virginia E. Johnson, a pretty, twice-divorced former lounge singer with no prior training in the field, photographed vaginas, hired "sex surrogates" and observed 694 men and women engaged in sexual acts. Their work led to a new treatment field: sex therapy.

Today, St. Louis is still the site of major controversy in the field of sex therapy. In the sprawling old redbrick Campbell complex in South St. Louis, Mark Schwartz, a doctor of science, and Lorie Galperin, a licensed clinical social worker, focus on abuse, addiction, trauma and repressed childhood memories in a new incarnation of the Masters and Johnson clinic. It's a far cry from their predecessors' exploration of the joy that results when two human beings join in an act of passion.

Susan Crain Bakos is the author of seven books, including the bestselling What Men Really Want: Straight Talk from Men About Sex *and the most recent* Sexational Secrets: Erotic Advice Your Mother Never Gave You, *a Literary Guild selection. She is also a frequent contributor to* Cosmopolitan, New Woman, Harper's Bazaar, Ladies Home Journal *and other publications.*

THE GYNECOLOGIST AND THE LOUNGE SINGER

Before Masters and Johnson, no one had ever watched sex acts with clinical detachment to see how the process works — or doesn't work — and recorded the results. It's hard to imagine now, with bookstore sections devoted to sexuality and women's magazines trumpeting sex advice on every cover, that little or no mechanical sex instruction, much less accurate information about the physiology of male and female sexual response, was available to the average person in 1966. In those days, when the facts of life were shrouded from scrutiny like the veiled form of a devout Muslim woman, Masters himself was denied access to the only textbook on human sexual anatomy in the Washington University library, where it was kept under lock and key. When he asked for the book, the librarian sternly reminded him that he was "only an assistant professor of obstetrics, not a full professor."

Masters met Johnson when he advertised for a research assistant. One of his female subjects told him he would never really understand a woman's sexual responses without an interpreter, so he ran an ad with the university placement office asking for "a woman who is good with people, because I'm not, has to work, married and divorced with at least one child, intelligent, and no post graduate degree." Johnson, recently divorced from her second husband, St. Louis bandleader George Johnson, responded. They met, and he hired her. She planned to work at the job for a few years, then resume her singing career.

The details of their romance remain a mystery. They were circumspect in public. The major clue to Johnson's influence over Masters was in his rapidly evolving philosophy. Shortly after Masters began working with Johnson, his work took on a feminist slant. He suddenly recognized the vast sexual capacity of the female gender.

In 1971, Masters divorced his first wife and quietly married Johnson. By the late '70s, after Wash. U. had awarded Johnson her Ph.D., there were two doctors in the family and "Masters and Johnson" was the brand name in a burgeoning new field. After the publication of *Human Sexual Response*, the couple was hailed for bringing sexual function and dysfunction out of America's bedroom closet and teaching a cadre of therapists their model for sex therapy — though they were sometimes derided as mere sexual technicians, concerned with mechanics, not emotions. The foundation of their treatment philosophy and the *raison d'etre* of sex therapy was this: Heal relationships through sexual healing. For most people, sex is an integral part of an intimate relationship. If the sex doesn't work, can the marriage thrive? Claiming a phenomenal 80 percent success rate in curing garden-variety sexual complaints such as premature ejaculation in men and inability to reach orgasm in women, the pair attracted clients from all over the country.

Back in the days when doctors were unquestioned authority figures, the pair held court in their separate ultramodern offices at the newly formed Masters and Johnson Institute — black leather, stainless steel and glass, polished dark wood — located on the leafy outskirts of Washington University. Each wore a starched white lab coat, his over an equally pristine white shirt. His face composed, Masters betrayed his reactions to his patients' answers to the standard questions only through flashes of his huge green eyes. Like giant marbles in sockets of flesh, they dominated his face, asserted his intellectual authority and telegraphed annoyance, boredom, amusement. Johnson, who projected more warmth, gave away less information. Who could tell from her smiling demeanor, pleasant tone of voice, or gentle quality of her patient answers how many times she'd explained the physiological components of male and female sexual arousal or whether she found this particular petitioner a slow learner or an apt student? When they appeared together — he, taller and broader as the man was supposed to be — they were impressive: dignified, powerful, magnetic and a little bit sexy in the way that power couples are.

In the '50s and early '60s, secrets were more easily kept in St. Louis. Here, it was possible to move stealthily outside the public standards of morality and evade the rigors of academic examination — if you knew how to handle the important men.

SEX AND ST. LOUIS

St. Louis seems an unlikely ground zero for the sex-help industry, but it was in reality the place most likely. Location and timing were important factors in Masters' success at getting funding for his research in the mid-'50s. The St. Louis police looked the other way when Masters paid the prostitutes and other volunteers who performed sexual acts in his laboratory, including female "sex surrogates" hired to work with men who had performance problems but no partner to help work things out. In a conservative city with a significant Catholic presence, Masters launched the nation's premier sex-therapy clinic because he knew how to play the game.

A deft politician, Masters reported on his ongoing study of human sexual behavior in secret meetings with Police Commissioner H. Sam Priest; Joseph Cardinal Ritter; Richard Amberg, the publisher of the right-wing *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*; and Ethan Shepley, the chancellor of Wash. U. By staying in touch with these men, who needed simultaneously to be privy to secret information and guaranteed safe passage through any potential media minefields, Masters gained the clandestine support he needed without garnering unfavorable publicity. Before the political assassinations of the '60s and Watergate, secrets were more easily kept everywhere in the country, but this was especially true in St. Louis. In high-profile East and West Coast cities, the activities at universities and teaching hospitals were closely scrutinized by both the mainstream and academic press. In St. Louis it was possible to move stealthily outside the public standards of morality and evade the rigors of academic examination — if you knew how to handle the important men.

Although there were rumors of sex

experiments, especially among the Washington University faculty, little was known about Masters and Johnson's work outside the small circle of "friends" until the publication of *Human Sexual Response*. An article in the *New York Times* mentioned the most titillating piece of the story: their use in the lab of a special camera inserted into women's vaginas with the aid of a speculum, a tool used in gynecological exams. It didn't note that the tiny camera exposed evidence that would turn conventional sexual wisdom upside down.

With a pen mightier than Lorena Bobbitt's knife, Masters and Johnson dethroned the penis and elevated the clitoris to sexual supremacy. Clitoral stimulation results in an orgasm felt and seen inside the vagina, they said. Furthermore, they concluded, most women do not reach orgasm without clitoral stimulation. Penis size — the penis itself! — does not matter. That an orgasm is an orgasm is accepted today, but then it was a maverick concept, contradicting Freud, then the reigning sex authority, who'd held the clitoral orgasm in low esteem as a marker on a woman's path to sexual maturity. For the first time in modern history, sex had a feminist slant.

With the 1970 publication of their second book, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, the couple focused on problems such as premature ejaculation in men and anorgasmia — the inability to reach orgasm — in women. They made amazing claims of success. Some of their revolutionary techniques had been developed during the treatment of clients who came to St. Louis for two weeks of outpatient treatment, but Masters picked up one famous technique, "the squeeze," for treating premature ejaculation, from conversations with prostitutes who were paid participants in his earliest research studies. These women taught the simple method they used to prevent a client from ejaculating so soon that he might feel he hadn't gotten his money's worth.

The sex-therapy clients who stayed at the Chase Park Plaza Hotel and spent their days at the Institute were typically "last resort" cases — next stop, divorce court. Mark Schwartz, who did his postgraduate training at the Institute, recalls being "blown away" by some of the sessions he witnessed, with Masters and Johnson "working their magic" on couples, including a man and woman who hadn't had sex in 15 years but were making love again before they left St. Louis. Another couple, who recently celebrated their 45th wedding anniversary, lived together for two decades without consummating their marriage. Their two weeks with Masters and Johnson ended the wife's virginity and changed their lives.

"In the early years, we had tried intercourse," the woman recalls, "but we stopped because it hurt me too much. Then we gave up. Masters and Johnson helped us overcome our fears and inhibitions and taught my husband how to prepare me for intercourse through manual stroking. Our only regret is that we didn't find them sooner."

What these couples and many others needed were basic sex information, permission to be sexual, help in communicating their needs and desires to each other and therapeutic hand-holding to help them overcome early performance failures and negative sexual teachings that had left them too terrified to touch each other. They blossomed under the dispensation of a little white-coated magic.

When Masters and Johnson appeared together, they were impressive: dignified, powerful, magnetic and a little bit sexy in the way that power couples are.

PARADISE LOST

"Their dry books don't reflect their artistry," says contemporary sex therapist Lorie Galperin. And that was surely true. In the years that followed the publication of their first book, Masters and Johnson enjoyed more than a decade of ascendancy as magical healers, golden years in which they were seldom seriously challenged in a public forum. The men and women who became sex therapists owed their careers in large part to the work of these founding parents. The members of this new category of helping professionals were, for the most part, suitably grateful.

Then, with the publication of *Homosexuality in Perspective* in 1979, Masters and Johnson moved outside the territory they comfortably owned and took a controversial position: Homosexuality was a learned behavior, they said, a result of nurture over nature. Homosexuals could learn to be heterosexuals if they wanted. One of their success stories was a man named Phil, who later told reporters that, although he had indeed been able to have intercourse with his partner, Janet, while in treatment, he'd found the experience unsatisfactory and ended their relationship after completing treatment. Did that constitute "success"? The barrage of criticism in response to their "conversion therapy" led to a re-examination of their previous success statistics.

San Francisco therapist and author Bernie Zilbergeld, Ph.D., became Masters' chief nemesis. In articles published in *Forum* and *Psychology Today* magazines, he charged that Masters and Johnson's phenomenal 80 percent success rate for curing sexual problems was false. Other therapists, he said, reported more accurate success rates of less than 50 percent for the same disorders.

(To be fair, he should have noted that some of that disparity may have been due to Masters' insistence on medical evaluations of prospective clients, a process that weeded out those with physical problems leading to sexual dysfunction, such as diabetes or alcoholism. Other therapists were less discerning in their selection of clients.)

Zilbergeld persisted in his attacks. In *Time* magazine, he maintained that Masters had once told him confidentially in a San Francisco bar where the two were sharing a drink that his standard for successfully treating lack of orgasm in women was one orgasm during the two-week intensive therapy at the Institute and one more orgasm at any time during the next five years — a minimal standard that "floored" Zilbergeld. Masters denied both the conversation and the low statistics. But the sniping from Zilbergeld and others continued, leading to a major confrontation at the November 1982 meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex. There, Zilbergeld publicly challenged Masters to publish his standards.

The next year, at 1983's Sixth World Congress of Sexology in Washington, Masters and

Johnson called a press conference to defend themselves against increasing charges that their sex research was slipshod, their criteria for measuring success vaguely defined, their methodology confusing. They released for the first time a list of the criteria used for their studies. Among the standards for measuring success in treatment were three erections in every four attempts for impotence, two orgasms in every four tries for anorgasmic women. Fearing "enemies" would pounce upon dissension as an excuse to discredit sexual inquiry in general, many sexologists at the conference closed ranks around the pair. The distinguished elder statesman of sex research, Wardell Pomeroy, who had been a colleague of sex-research pioneer Alfred Kinsey, said: "Masters and Johnson are the giants in their field." Who could say otherwise?

In 1988, the giants fell. With co-author Robert Kolodny, M.D., they published *Crisis: Heterosexual Behavior in the Age of AIDS* — once again, a subject not truly their own. It hit bookstores at the height of AIDS hysteria and still failed to sell. Reputedly Masters became involved with the book because he'd been unable to get funding for a research project to determine whether HIV is carried by pre-ejaculatory discharge — getting funding for research involving masturbation had become impossible — and he'd hoped that the profits from the book would pay for the study. But the book's apocalyptic conclusions led to a firestorm of denunciation from the medical community. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop labeled the pair "irresponsible." Among their dubious contentions in a work that had never been submitted to medical journals for advance scrutiny: AIDS can be spread by casual contact, including kissing and even toilet seats in public restrooms. Having interviewed a mere 800 volunteers in four cities, Masters and Johnson had once again failed to provide convincing backup research for their findings.

Ironically, some of their conclusions were later supported by other studies — most notably their contentions that 5 percent of the most sexually active heterosexual population with no other risk factors carried HIV and that many gay men slipped back into high-risk behavior despite public-health information programs. Too little vindication, too late. Masters and Johnson had committed a virtually unpardonable sin in the sex-therapy community by adding to the climate of hysteria. The Institute had been suffering financial problems before the book and never recovered from its credibility-bashing aftereffects. After the crisis, patient inquiries dropped precipitously, forcing staff cutbacks. The board quietly disbanded, and the Institute was gone. Virginia Johnson went into semiretirement, taking the archives with her. And few were surprised when the couple filed for divorce in 1992.

Today Masters, suffering from Parkinson's disease, lives in Arizona with his third wife, a former college sweetheart. Johnson has helped launch the Virginia Johnson Masters Learning Center in Creve Coeur. The center is a mail-order business dispensing standard sex advice on cassette tapes, in a newsletter and in printed brochures. The center also has an information-gathering Web site that posts a question each week. A typical question, "Are you satisfied with the frequency of intercourse in your relationship?" recently got a discouraging response: Only 15 percent said they were.


Virginia Johnson Masters

SEXUAL HEALING

Old-fashioned sex therapy lives on in St. Louis through the Virginia Johnson Masters Learning Center in Creve Coeur, which offers no on-site clinical care but does provide booklets, audiotape cassettes, workbooks and newsletters to help clients with a variety of sexual problems. For more information, contact the center by writing: VJMLC, 10803 Olive Blvd., Suite 200, St. Louis, MO 63141; calling 991-0341 or 888-937-3528 (toll-free); or visiting the center's Web site, www.vjmlc.com.

THE NEW EXPLORERS

What people seemed to want in the late '60s and early '70s was sexual demystification, answers to the questions they'd never dared ask their parents, advice on improving the collective performance in bed. Lust was in the air. Herpes was behind an unopened door, HIV behind another. Sex, not "relating," was the currency of the time.

Today, in a society inundated with sex information and imagery, a hunger for information and permission has been replaced by the lack of desire for sex. In the late '90s, the most common sexual complaint is inhibited-desire syndrome, an intractable problem with many roots, including stress, the fast pace of modern life, fear of sexually transmitted diseases, the ascendancy of conservative values and the longevity of the aging baby-boom population's (more or less) monogamous relationships. And then there are Prozac and other mood-elevating drugs with desire-suppressing side effects. Educated estimates put as many as 30 percent of adult Americans on one of these medications at any one time. Often, they have traded lust for a state of emotional equilibrium.

This is the social climate in which Mark Schwartz and Lorie Galperin, co-directors of the Masters and Johnson Clinic, the Institute's descendant, practice a new brand of sex and marital therapy.

"There's not that much sex therapy to do anymore," Schwartz says. "In 1970 I had 13 therapists working for me, and we were busy. For many years we had a huge client waiting list. Now a sex therapist can't make a living." He laughingly adds, "No one is having sex anymore."

Now that medical treatments are readily available for premature ejaculation, impotence and other sexual problems, people are more likely to ask a gynecologist or urologist for a prescription than seek a therapist whose sessions would cost several hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars — an expense most likely not covered by insurance. Besides, these days, sex advice is easy to come by and as cheap as the cost of a magazine or a paperback book.

Treating victims of abuse, by contrast, is a long, complicated, expensive process.

Together, Mark and Lorie, as they prefer to be called, are engaging, compelling, sincere, more disarmingly casual than their predecessors and, yes, sexy, too. He considers her the more intelligent partner, sounding impressed by her "superior" mind when he touts her achievements. He is shorter than she, and both are nearly overwhelmed by their clothes and by their hair — hers long, reddish-blond, curled to the frizzy level and banged, his long and blond and grown just outside the lines of a Prince Valiant pageboy.

They met in New Orleans when she, a Tulane graduate, came to train with him, a Masters disciple, at the sex and marital clinic he ran. Together they set up a Masters and Johnson sexual-trauma unit at River Oaks Hospital in New Orleans in 1989 and another one in Kansas City. Shortly after beginning private practice in New Orleans, Schwartz began specializing in treating the victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse. He then convinced Masters and Johnson to appoint him director of research at the Institute and to lend their names to a treatment program for sexual compulsion. After the Institute collapsed, Schwartz and Galperin, whose specialty is hypnotherapy, were in a position to keep the struggling franchise afloat — in the new form of the Masters and Johnson Clinic. In addition to living and working together in St. Louis since 1992, the husband-and-wife team spends a lot of time on the road running workshops for clinicians.

The type of therapy Schwartz and Galperin practice is a very different thing from fixing errant penises and inducing miracle orgasms. There's something dark and disturbing about the world of sexual trauma, pain and victimization. When Masters and Johnson made a diagnosis, only the patient (and partner) were involved. There's much more at stake when Schwartz and Galperin identify the root cause of a sexual problem. Often, clients end up accusing their relatives of sexual abuse.

Schwartz claims that more than 80 percent of the 3,000 patients he and Galperin have treated at the clinic since 1992 were victims of childhood sex abuse. "Eighty to 90 percent of them were misdiagnosed" with some other problem such as eating disorder, sex addiction, intimacy disorder or fetishistic behavior, Schwartz says: "We are calling people sick, giving them diseases, looking at what's wrong with them rather than what happened to them. They are survivors."

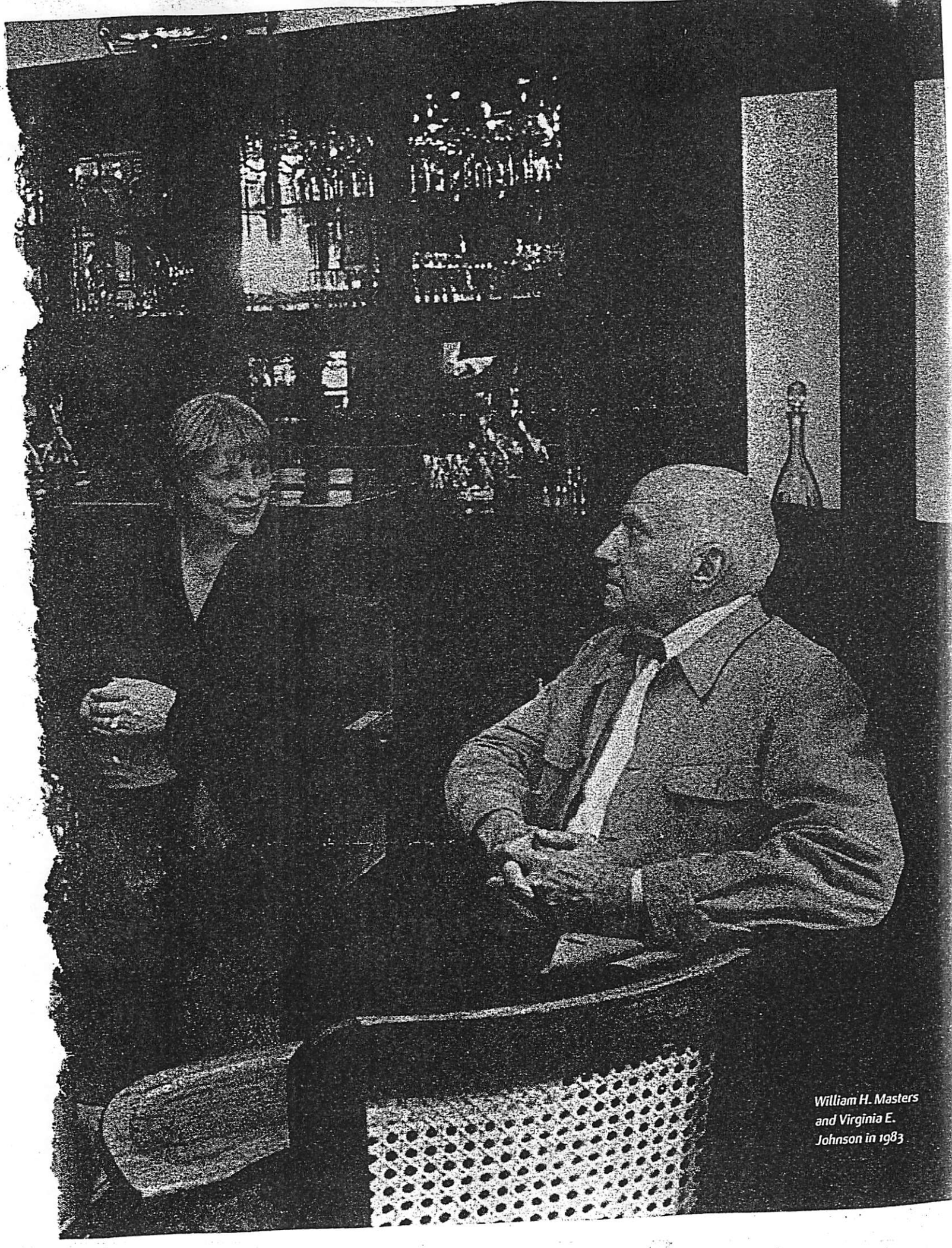
Once identified only in war veterans, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), according to Schwartz, may affect more than 50 percent of women. Boys, too, he hastens to add, are victims. Recounting news stories about Roman Catholic priests accused of sexual abuse in Belleville, Ill., he says, "There are more priests convicted of molesting children over the years in that diocese than there are priests active in the diocese now." (According to published reports, about 13 priests in the Belleville Diocese have been publicly accused, not convicted, of sexual abuse. There are more than 100 priests serving in the diocese.)

Such shocking claims and statistics spill as easily from Galperin's mouth as from Schwartz's: One in three little girls will be sexually abused, one in seven little boys. One in two couples has a sexual dysfunction, often rooted in trauma. Schwartz and Galperin insist that their numbers, casually tossed off, are "indisputable."

But according to Edwardsville, Ill., professor Hugh D. Barlow, author of the widely used textbook *Introduction to Criminology*, experts agree that although the real numbers of childhood rape, sex abuse and other sex crimes are higher than government reports indicate, they are probably lower than the numbers reported from independent studies, which are often conducted in small research populations by researchers seeking funding or support for conclusions already reached. And, when numbers are at odds, anecdotes take on greater power.

One therapist who worked for the pair on the trauma floor at River Oaks in Kansas City for three years says, "Mark and Lorie were always absolutely sure they had the correct diagnosis when previous doctors and therapists had been 'wrong.' But the patients loved them, and so did most of the staff. When cult hysteria was at its peak, we had patients who thought they had multiple personalities because they'd been sexually abused as children by their parents and other members of satanic cults. They walked around the floor with their teddy bears, all trying to get in touch with their child personas. Mark would greet each patient by asking, 'Who am I talking to today?'

"One autumn the nurses were convinced a cult was meeting in the woods surrounding



William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson in 1983

the hospital. They saw a group assemble around a fire at the same time every day. It was squirrel season. The group was teenage boys squirrel hunting after school and warming themselves at the fire."

POTENT TESTIMONY

Schwartz is in demand as an expert witness on the long-term negative effects of child sex abuse, specializing in cases involving sexual abuse by priests. He also testified as an expert witness in the Pamela Atkins case in Hillsboro, Ill.

In that case, Atkins successfully sued her grandfather for sexually abusing her as a child. She also sued her mother for failing to stop the abuse. In testimony, Schwartz said it could take up to 20 years of therapy to undo the psychological damage done to Atkins as a child. A jury awarded her $1.25 million in 1996.

Several years ago, when recovered memory was a new theory, a St. Louis professional woman in her 30s saw a therapist — not Schwartz or Galperin — who, through hypnosis, "helped" her remember graphic incidences of childhood sexual abuse by her father. Like other "victims," she first felt her abuse as "a black cocoon inside my body, gradually opening to let the memories and pain fly out." At her therapist's urging, she shared this information with her mother, who — perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not — had a heart attack the next week and fell into a coma from which she never recovered. The woman stuck by her story, driving a stake through the heart of her family. Now her mother is dead, her estranged father remarried, her siblings — none of whom could recall abuse or corroborate hers — incommunicado. She is again in therapy.

Schwartz claims that more than 80 percent of the 3,000 patients he and Galperin have treated at the clinic since 1992 were victims of childhood sex abuse.

"I know now the abuse never occurred," she says. "I was angry at my father for changing jobs and moving the family to St. Louis when I was 8 years old. Unresolved anger and my feelings of betrayal were all that was inside the cocoon. I was in a highly suggestive state when my first therapist hypnotized me and put those horrible ideas in my head through his questions and interpretations of my memories."

She's considering a lawsuit against her former therapist.

Other victims of induced false memories have taken similar action: A hospital in Chicago agreed to pay $10.6 million, the largest such settlement to date, to Patricia Burgess, who claimed her doctors convinced her she had memories of being part of a satanic cult, being sexually abused by numerous men, and abusing her own two sons. And a Houston jury recently awarded $5.8 million to a woman whose psychotherapist had implanted memories of murder, satanism and cannibalism.

MORE SEX IN ST. LOUIS

St. Louis, which provided a safe backwater in which Masters and Johnson could conduct their research, now shelters Schwartz and Galperin from intense academic and media scrutiny as they deal in concepts such as recovered memory, sex addiction and multiple-personality disorder — ideas now being debunked by many therapists. The American Medical Association has warned against the risks inherent in and the misuses associated with hypnosis as a tool for "recovering" memories in therapy, labeling false-memory syndrome the "recovery of vivid memories of childhood events which did not take place." The American Psychiatric Association declared that such memories are "often not true" and expressed skepticism about the use of hypnosis and other techniques to elicit them.

Schwartz calls the controversies surrounding repressed memory, the numbers of abuse victims, sex addiction and other issues "much ado about nothing." "People don't want to know," he says. "(Believing that abuse memories are false) makes it easier for people to go on their way in a society in which the majority of women suffer from PTSD."

Galperin nods her head in agreement. "If we intellectualize and rationalize, perhaps our hearts don't get broken," she says.

Schwartz and Galperin continue to hold workshops and seminars for clinicians. In October 1997, they presented a program titled "Attachment and Intimacy Disorders of Childhood, Adolescence and Adulthood" at the Clayton Holiday Inn.

During Galperin's presentation about gender identity and differences, she sounds weary and wry, like a woman making idle and sometimes amusing commentary on the men who have disappointed her.

In his turn, Schwartz explains that some people use numbing or coping behavior such as drinking, smoking or working too much to continue numbing the feelings they've repressed for years. "I have this 'bubbling-dioxin theory' of affect dysregulation," he says, the phrase typical of his colorful language. "Trauma causes suppression of feelings and responses. Later, they bubble up to the surface like dioxin coming up to the top of the soil."

Without giving an example, Schwartz manages to make the implicit connection between recovered memory and sexual trauma. His audience appears to be with him as he shows slides of childlike artwork produced by adult patients and explains why, for example, a drawing of a squashed penis signifies anxiety disorder.

Later, flashing an exhibitionistic patient's drawing of an anus on the screen, Schwartz says: "I asked (the patient) to make a drawing of the part of him which was the (sexual) exhibitionist. He drew an asshole. That represented to him the disowned part of his self. 'Let's talk to the asshole,' I told him. 'Give it a voice. Embrace the asshole.'"

Listening to Schwartz and Galperin, one might reasonably wonder whatever happened to "sex." Nothing is said about the joyful, erotic interaction between human beings. Masters and Johnson believed "sex is a natural function" and that women are naturally capable of deeper, more sustained sexual pleasure than men. They talked about orgasms, not assholes. They believed in the positive power of sexuality.

"(Masters) and I were idealists," Virginia Johnson Masters says today. "We always said we'd like to put ourselves out of business — to make such cultural changes that sex would no longer be a sin and something to be feared."

Unfortunately, that's not the way things seem to have turned out.