

CULTURE, *et cetera*

Professor discusses criminal abortions

Focuses on time in U.S. when it was against law

By Catherine Young
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As the abortion debate approaches its 25th year, interest has picked up about the era between the mid-19th century to 1973, when what is now America's most common medical procedure was a crime.

Leslie Reagan, assistant professor of history, medicine and women's studies at the University of Illinois, has produced a new book, "When Abortion Was a Crime," a history of illegal abortion. She was interviewed by The Washington Times during a recent visit to the District.

Q: At one point, abortion before "quickening" — the movement of the fetus — was not seen as murder by its opponents. Why did people not consider the baby to be alive until it moved?

A: What we now would call abortion in early pregnancy was legal under common law. It was thought of as the period had been missed, menstruation was out of order and they needed to get it back on track. Common law considered at the point of quickening, when the woman could feel movement, [that] it was illegal after that and people were occasionally prosecuted for late abortion, that would be in the fifth or sixth month....

I think you're starting with an assumption that pregnancy is a baby from conception on, and what I find is that's not how people think of pregnancy at all. They think of it really as a developmental process. When abortion was criminalized [in the mid-19th century], the law said that during early pregnancy, those efforts to get menstruation going again were also an abortion and that completely changed what had been tradition.

Q: Did you do much research into the role and opinion of the fathers of the children?

A: I actually think it's incorrect to call them fathers, and the women mothers at the point of early pregnancy.... When people have children and they're rearing them, they're parents. During pregnancy, it's potential.

Women relied on each other to a great deal for getting assistance in locating an abortionist or purchasing the medication to induce an abortion, but they also relied on



Photo by Jim Brantley/The Washington Times

Leslie Reagan, assistant professor of history, medicine and women's studies at the University of Illinois, signs a copy of her book "When Abortion Was a Crime" for Ben Schneider at Politics and Prose on Connecticut Avenue.

men. Especially with unmarried women who found themselves in this situation.... The boyfriend was responsible for identifying potential safe abortionists and raising the money to pay for it. They often did more than that. Frequently, they accompanied the women to the clinic, stayed and cared for her, paid for any sort of related hospitalization expenses if she were injured.

So, they are very involved and obviously if they are unmarried, part of the reason they had this shared interest was that the pregnancy would make visible their illicit sexual behavior....

I certainly find evidence of husbands agreeing with the plan to have an abortion in order to avoid adding additional children to their family. And occasionally being more involved in that in terms of going with them actually to clinics, going with them and waiting while she was being seen.

Q: What was the role of the church at the turn of the century?

A: Churches weren't all that interested in the 19th century. It was really the medical profession that led the campaign to criminalize abortion. They were sort of annoyed at the ministers who didn't seem to care about the issue. There's not a lot of attention to it.

Q: In the book, you talk about

the psychiatric arguments against abortion. Do you feel that is a strong argument against abortion? Do you believe in post-abortion syndrome?

A: In the '50s and '60s, many women were able to get legal therapeutic abortions because of the psychological problems associated with the problems of having children they didn't want. It's very important to understand the widespread view among psychiatrists in the medical profession that forcing women to continue with pregnancies they did not want was potentially damaging to their mental health and also potentially damaging to their children to be brought into the world with parents who did not want them.

In terms of any post-traumatic stress... during the era of illegal abortions, women were especially worried about finding a safe practitioner. They were worried about being injured or killed in the process, were trying to find a way to get a safe abortion and were extremely relieved when they found someone and they went through it. Mostly what they felt was relief. Also what they were concerned about was that because it was illegal they were afraid of possibly police catching them or being arrested.

Much of the concern really was

that here you have people who are law-abiding citizens, who do not break the law, who cannot have a child for many many reasons, and feel they have no choice and they have to go and break the law.

Q: What has changed in the 40-year interval between the 1950s and today?

A: In the '50s, as women were increasingly being encouraged to go to college and to enter the work force, those institutions didn't make it possible for women to have children. You got kicked out of school if you had a child, and if a woman was pregnant, she was fired. That situation made more women feel that they have no way out except abortion.

[Today] the feminist movement has increasingly made it possible for unmarried women, even in high school and college, to keep their children. Especially for white women, this was not something they could do. They had to go into hiding in an unwed-mothers home and give away their baby.... [Currently], schools do not provide the services for child care and they're not going to help the students out. It's very difficult for students to combine these things. [The situation] is better than the 1950s, but a lot of the same reasons [for abortions] still exist.