OUR CHANGING SEXUAL CODE

by John McPartland

Sex During W.W. II

At the beginning of World War II, our army was a mixture of callow boys and domesticated men. The older men were homesick for wives and children, the younger men felt themselves on the verge of an adventure they didn't quite understand. While most were unsure of themselves, their need for women was painfully apparent.

They didn't want women for physical satisfaction—though that is what they believed—but rather as a magic that would reassure each soldier that he was a person, a man, and that there was an escape for him from the ponderous pressure of the army, the camp and its overpowering maleness. And so most of these new soldiers went to the army towns, hungering for women.

There was a lot of companionship, and there was a lot of sex. For some men it was a simple bedding of as many girls as time, liquor, lies and money would afford. For others it was romance, with vows and heavy sentiment. Then there were those less bold who walked the streets alone or in groups, who dreamed of a hundred love affairs without ever speaking to a girl.

For the girls of the army towns, these were years to remember. Just being a girl was something newly wonderful. There were thousands of men eager and anxious; there were new types from faraway places like Chicago, New York and Los Angeles.

There were plenty of lonely wives, too, and it soon became evident that a fair share of them were committed to the belief that continence was bad for women. Every camp had its experts in seduction who hunted for lonely wives, literally moved into their houses and supplied a sort of proxy husband for a sort of proxy home.

The soldiers were worried and lonesome, they wanted to believe

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in their women, and they made obvious substitutions of girls for mothers. Finally they left the army towns, the wives in furnished rooms, the girls at the USO dances, the aimless, lonely walking around the square, the one-night loves and one-day honeymoons, and off they went to the boats.

The shambling awkwardness with which they had walked the streets of Georgia or Texas disappeared in London or Naples. They had been callow youths and domesticated men, now they were soldiers, and most important—Americans. They were the most desirable men that foreign girls could hope to find, and they acted the part.

These foreign women must be forgiven their surrenders. Swaggering hundreds of thousands of men, confident, well-fed, comparatively rich, and avid lovemakers swept through their towns. The Americans believed in direct, brutal sex, combined with the sort of romance invented by the movies; women respond to that kind of combination.

Back home, the faithless wife was becoming an issue. A large number of service wives had gone to work, including hundreds of thousands who had not worked before. They had money, they were in contact with men, and they felt the sexual excitement that wars induce. Good wives would indulge in a sort of sentimental hysteria over their far-away husbands, then go out to a bar for a pickup.

The war ended. Combat men began to go home, unaware of the deeper currents that lay beneath their dalliance in Europe. They returned to their one-week brides of training-camp marriages, their sweethearts, their wives and children. The most amazing thing is that they didn't seem much different; we had become a people so emotionally tough that nothing surprised us, and nothing seemed to affect us, except our own remarkable country.

Coronet
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