

“A Black Spot”: Florida’s Crusade against Venereal Disease, Prostitution, and Female Sexuality During World War II

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Abstract

Long before there was HIV/AIDS, venereal disease constituted a challenge to public health officials. This paper captures some of the public health, educational, political, and law enforcement interventions attempted in Florida (and the Tampa Bay area in particular) around the time of the Second World War, reflecting herein the social beliefs and understandings of times past.

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Introduction

In January 1944, a distinguished member of Florida’s recently created venereal disease steering committee, Mrs. Argow, addressed the public on radio stations throughout the state. Mrs. Argow was part of an elite ten-member committee dedicated to educating Florida’s residents and visitors about the spread of venereal disease, including its causes and cures. With that goal in mind, Mrs. Argow dramatically recounted the experiences of Jean, a young woman she had recently met in a state operated quarantine facility. Jean was once a “small town” girl, innocent in the ways of the world, who had watched her city suddenly “turn big” with the war [World War II]. “Eager” soldiers quickly flocked to Jean’s side, ready to show her “a good time.” Sent out without the appropriate sexual guidance, Jean “slipped into immorality,” had sex, and soon found herself a carrier of venereal disease. In light of the 1943 Florida laws on prostitution, the police apprehended Jean and gave her an invasive vaginal examination. The court then convicted her and sent her to one of Florida’s newly converted civilian conservation camps. Jean spent the next five weeks there receiving treatment, job training, and lessons in socially sanctioned morality. Mrs. Argow believed Jean’s story exemplified both Florida’s “number one social problem” and its solution. In her opinion, women like Jean “unfortunately contribute far more than their share” to the virulent spread of VD. This tale led her to conclude the community could no longer ignore its responsibility to provide young people with a firm sense of morality (Florida State Archives, n.d.a).

This paper places Florida’s crusade against VD within the larger context of the Atlantic war effort. As a departure point for Europe-bound U.S. troops, as well as the site of a supply depot, a ship builder, and a training ground, Florida (and Tampa in particular) was especially important staging grounds during World War II. Despite Tampa’s strategic importance, it was its infamous reputation as a “black spot” for prostitution and venereal infection which received most of the military’s attention

(*Tampa Tribune*, August 26, 1942). In response to military pressure, the Florida Department of Health (DOH) and Tampa acted in ways that reflected a more modern approach to the problem of venereal disease. In other words, the actions of the state were not just repressive, negative, or unidirectional; the state incorporated new and productive directions of power. Home to a diverse population, Tampa became a unique lab for this unprecedented statewide VD experiment.

The VD War

Between 1941 and mid-1945, the military, the governor, the Florida DOH, and local law enforcement fought against venereal disease. At first these bodies were unequipped, unprepared, and antagonistic towards each other. However, by the winter of 1943, all four entities collaborated and consolidated their respective powers to become an extraordinary phalanx of authority. Mrs. Argow’s radio broadcast was only one part of Florida’s unprecedented and concerted plan to repress female sexuality, educate both white and black people about venereal disease, rid the state of the venereal threat, and cure those infected with syphilis. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, [the project to eliminate VD on Florida’s home-front] demonstrated how the power of the state can “traverse and produce things, induce pleasure, form knowledge, produce discourses” (Foucault, 1980, p. 119).

In his canonical work *No Magic Bullet*, Alan Brandt discusses the United States military’s fight against venereal disease during the U.S. Army’s excursion into northern Mexico in 1916, as well as during the first and second world wars. Brandt suggests that disease was “socially constructed,” because social and cultural values (including issues of race, class, gender, and ethnicity) underlie epidemiological theories of VD transmission and treatment. Poverty, race, and biology all factored into the spread of venereal disease; the three were inseparable. In Brandt’s words, “medicine is not just affected by social, economic, and political variables—it is embedded in them.” He further argued that

venereal disease persistently has been associated with dirt, depravity, disorder, and immorality. Within medical discourses, VD was influential in substantiating the argument for sexual reform among the festering minorities and lower classes. According to Brandt, these “social uses” of venereal disease have “dominated medical and public approaches,” whereas the pursuit of therapeutic cures has, unfortunately, remained a secondary concern. Put simply, instead of concentrating on education, treatment, and active community engagement, health officials have traditionally focused on repressing sexuality while demonstrating the inferiority of minorities and the poor (Brandt, 1987).

During World War II, Florida benefited from the massive presence of U.S. troops moving and supplying the war effort in North Africa and Western Europe. Talk of syphilis in various communities threatened the benefits and presence of these troops in the Florida’s cities. Concerned agencies in Florida sought to do more than repress sexuality. Florida’s government sought to improve and expand upon the traditional methods of combating syphilis by incorporating new comprehensive educational strategies. In a modernization effort, the Florida DOH urged labor boards, women’s clubs, and African-Americans to participate in their unprecedented venereal disease education program.

With the onset of World War II, following the construction of MacDill and Drew Air Force Bases and the Port of Tampa, hundreds of thousands of people migrated to the Tampa Bay area. One historian argues that Tampa residents saw the war as a horrific tragedy but also an economic and social blessing (Mormino, 2001). Shopkeepers, hotel proprietors, nightclub owners, and prostitutes thankfully procured the hard-earned money of U.S. soldiers while Florida’s politicians eagerly carried out the demands of capricious military commanders. The interests of military health officials, however, often conflicted with the prurient needs of their subordinates.

As in the hunt for Pancho Villa and World War I, prostitutes and “misguided ‘patriotic girls’” also flocked to the congregations of anxious World War II soldiers awaiting deployment in Florida. Confronted by the pangs and worries of possible death, soldiers sought the succor of women, sex, alcohol, and good times. To their commanders’ dismay, soldiers’ proclivities inflamed the virulent spread of venereal disease. In a widely distributed military pamphlet, “What about Girls?” Eliot Ness (of “Untouchables” fame during the Al Capone era of Chicago) encapsulated the anxieties of military health officials. He urged soldiers to stay away from “chippies” and prostitutes in order to avoid

devastating venereal diseases. Ness then underscored the importance of vice officers and health authorities in the fight against prostitution and VD; he encouraged them to “use any means” to keep these women from infecting and debilitating “our nation’s fighting men” (Ness, n.d.). Allan Brandt contends that during World War I the prostitute was the “venereal scapegoat, vilified, shunned, and eventually locked up” (Brandt, 1987, p. 87). During World War II, military officials in Florida did not stray far from their predecessors. In the summer of 1941, they demanded a “wholesale crackdown on the ‘girl racket’” which in their minds was the source of VD (Ness, n.d.).

By the winter of 1941, syphilis had already caused the loss of over 15,000 man-days in the air corps alone and the military fervently persuaded Florida’s government to take action. The head of the VD protective service for the entire army air corps, Captain Robert Dyer, held Florida (specifically Tampa) directly responsible for the high rate of syphilis infections. In his opinion, Tampa was the “worst spot in the United States in the prevalence of commercialized prostitution.” On August 25, 1942, Dyer threatened to take drastic actions if local law enforcement did not abolish this problem (*Tampa Tribune*, August 26, 1942). Several months later, Major General St. Clair Streett threatened to close certain areas of Tampa to soldiers if the police would not clean up their rampant problem of prostitution and VD (*Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 5, 1943). General Streett struck the hearts of local businesses. Local hotels refused unmarried couples and placed placards in their front windows, which patriotically stated “to help our fighting men, this hotel has pledged to aid the U.S. Army and the City Police Department in their drive against Vice and Social Disease” (Florida State Archives, n.d.b). By threatening the loss of military patronage, Streett may have convinced small business owners to heed his cause.

State and local politicians had been working hard to assuage the anxieties of military officials such as General Streett and Captain Dyer. As Dawn Truax discusses in her article “Victory Girls and Social Protection in World War II Tampa,” Tampa leaders “made a good faith effort” to shut down the “more infamous” houses of prostitution in early 1941. But without a definitive law against prostitution, police had to arrest women on misdemeanor charges of vagrancy and loitering (Truax, 1993). State politicians helped to ratify a Florida Statute in 1941, expanding police authority over diseases of quarantine to include venereal disease; Florida’s Senate later rendered prostitution illegal in the spring of 1943, citing *Jacobson v. State of Massachusetts*

(1905) for support to expand police authority. The Senate's definition of the offense made it considerably easier to arrest all women who were seen as straying from accepted social norms; prostitution not only included sexual intercourse for hire but also included "licentious sexual intercourse without hire" (State of Florida Legislature, n.d.). The law made no distinction between pre-marital and hired sex. As in the case of "Jean," once a woman was arrested for a vice crime, health authorities could perform an invasive vaginal examination. Moreover, the state's new laws threatened to revoke the licenses of hotels, apartment houses, rooming houses, bars (or jooks) and restaurants if they abetted in any form of "prostitution, lewdness, or assignation" (State of Florida Legislature, n.d.b). Dr. Hanson, a state health officer, called on Florida judges to give their broadest interpretation to the Florida laws against prostitution. "For the first time in history of the state," Hanson stated, "essential power for controlling promiscuity has been placed in the hands of the courts" (*Tampa Tribune*, January 5, 1944). Hanson's statement implies a state condoned witch hunt against unescorted women who ventured into public spaces, women who frequented bars and jooks, and women who had pre-marital sex.

The adamant desire to extinguish the venereal threat to U.S. soldiers coupled with law transformed unescorted women into marked bodies of possible venereal infection. To the eyes of local police and health authorities, these women became hyper-visible "vectors of disease" (Hammonds, 1990). As the state government and local police waged their repressive war against syphilis, the Florida DOH continued to develop new comprehensive methods of combating venereal disease. The Florida DOH and its anti-VD forces understood, as Michel Foucault did, that elimination required more than repression. Dr. Sondag of the Florida DOH was determined to bring a new face to state power.

Believing syphilis had reached "epidemic proportions," Dr. Sondag wanted the state to educate "every town and county," to make people "aware of the seriousness of the disease," and to finally defeat "this insidious enemy in our midst." In January of 1943, Sondag submitted his revolutionary prospectus for a statewide VD educational program. The state would elect representatives from both military and public organizations, to form a VD steering committee. Through full-page ads in newspapers, radio broadcasts, films, billboards, and posters, Dr. Sondag hoped to produce new discourses about syphilis; he wanted to persuade people to disregard the more socially stigmatizing conceptions of VD, get tested for the disease, and obtain effective treatment for their inflictions. Sondag asked the

Women's Health Club Committee, Florida Junior Chamber of Commerce, the State Defense Council, the League of Municipalities, the Maritime Commission, the Fourth Service Command, the Jacksonville Naval Air Station, the headquarters of the Third Air Force Base, the Labor Temple, and the Bay County Medical society to participate in the educational effort (Florida State Archives, n.d.c). Sondag would select a representative from each body listed above to serve on the committee. Local citizen wartime health committees that included the city's health officer, the chairman of the defense council, and any private agencies willing to participate would then reinforce and disseminate information from the state board. The local health committees would train neighborhood health wardens (or "civilian VD control officers") to pass out pamphlets among young people. Together, the local and state steering committees would attempt to educate every part of society.

Governor Spessard Holland initiated Dr. Sondag's education campaign in January 1944, and proclaimed it venereal disease control month. The month was dedicated to "the stimulation of interest in and action to combat the inroads which venereal diseases are making into the availability and usefulness of manpower." Governor Holland's contribution integrated the unprecedented, state-funded educational program on VD into the home front war (Florida State Archives, n.d.d). The chair of Florida's venereal control steering committee, Dr. Sondag considered the Governor's actions "concrete and daring." In his words, the educational program "far outdistances anything else previously done or planned in any other part of the United States" (Florida State Archives, n.d.e). Newspaper ads, billboards, posters, pamphlets, and radio broadcasts began in earnest in early January.

The state steering committee began the month with a series of brief radio broadcasts throughout Florida that were performed on time donated by 12 stations. Left behind in script form, radio broadcasts featured interviews with local religious leaders, doctors, and health officials. Each script intended to teach people about symptoms, testing, and treatment options. One broadcast featured a dramatic re-enactment of the triumphs of the Florida DOH. The fictional character Mary Marsh was "a girl gone wrong through ignorance and bad up-bringing" and in her frivolity, she debilitated four soldiers with a venereal disease. Through thorough investigation, Dr. Wilkins and his team found the fictional Mary, forced her to undergo an examination, and then sent her away for treatment. Mary later emerged "a changed gal." "And did all this come about because you went to the State Board

of Health Hospital?” asks the inquisitive Dr. Wilkins. Mary replies, “Sure it did, Doctor Wilkins” (Florida State Archives, n.d.f). This melodrama attempted to lionize the Florida DOH while it assured its listeners that the Florida DOH had the best intentions of helping people in mind. One series of radio broadcasts featured interviews between public health officials and a renowned black reverend, Blake Foster, and other prominent black leaders (Florida State Archives, n.d.a).

Combating syphilis within African-American communities became a serious objective of the VD steering committee. Along with unescorted women, African-Americans experienced a hyper-visible transformation during World War II. In her article “Missing Persons,” black feminist Evelyn Hammonds suggests that African-American women with STDs became invisible, were ignored by public health policies, became ostracized by the media, and were treated like voiceless vectors of disease transmission by social services (Hammonds, 1990). Public health officials, such as Dr. Hanson, continued to blame the high rate of syphilis in Florida on the large numbers of black people in the south (Florida State Archives, n.d.g). World War II posters, pamphlets, and military films marked African-Americans as lascivious VD carriers, incapable of reform; pamphlet titles such as “Let’s Black out Syphilis” further reflect the racist association of black licentiousness with sexually transmitted diseases (Florida State Archives, n.d.h; Koppes, 1995). These negative representations of African-Americans confirm Hammonds’s view. However, a closer look at Florida’s VD educational campaign shows that health officials openly recognized the prevalence of VD within the African-American population and were willing to fund both the testing and treatment of black people.

The governor’s educational program included efforts to educate and treat the African-American population in Florida. Perhaps, the critical role black servicemen played in the war effort led health officials to include African-Americans in their VD campaign. Dr. Sondag addressed the public in January 1944, informing them that one in eight black people suffered from a venereal disease (Florida State Archives, n.d.i). He believed it was “especially important” that health wardens, the “personal approach” of the VD education campaign, be “developed among the colored people.” Moreover, the steering committee had local black leaders participate in scripted radio broadcasts in hopes of further encouraging African-Americans to get tested for venereal disease.

One African-American leader, Reverend Foster congratulated the state’s training of Florida

DOH black health wardens and stressed the need for continued state support of education among African-American communities. Foster stated proudly, “Negro workers are always more effective among Negroes” (Florida State Archives, n.d.j). The Tuskegee A.A.F. School on VD ironically graduated one hundred “Negro non-commissioned officers from the Third Air Force Base.” Properly trained by the institution, these men went to various black communities discussing the specifics of appropriate “sex hygiene” (*Tampa Daily Times*, January 22, 1944). They visited black schools, churches, and other local points of congregation. The state also distributed pamphlets featuring black families happily receiving blood tests from their local physicians. The African-American response to the efforts of the state’s VD steering committee requires further study but it is important to emphasize the simultaneous presence of negative stereotyping, the coerced enrollment of high status segments of black communities, and the distancing between white health officers and African-Americans accomplished by the training of black health reformers.

According to the State Board of Health, Tampa was the “most aggressive city in Florida in the fight waged to suppress VD.” Mayor Curtis Hixon, the head of the county’s health department, Dr. Leland Fox, the VD control officer for Tampa, and Captain Martin Fellhauer, the health officer of the Third Air Force, led Tampa’s war against vice and syphilis (*Tampa Daily Times*, January 28, 1944). They each worked together, emulating the state steering committee. The local health department printed thousands of pamphlets “urging Tampans to submit to VD tests.” On one occasion, civil war patrol planes dropped thousands of pamphlets over Tampa’s streets (*St. Petersburg Times*, January 22, 1944). The army’s venereal disease control officers sent monthly reports to the mayor detailing places where soldiers acquired VD. The venereal reports listed hotels, bars, small nightclubs, and even parks. The lists portray a city riddled with young people wanting to have sex while the figurative eye of the state eagerly watched over every hidden crevice (Tampa City Archives, n.d.a). Mayor Hixon most likely used these lists to direct his police force more efficiently. The extant records (court statistics from June 1944-December 1945) establish the pervasiveness of Tampa’s police: 1,092 people were arrested for vice crimes (such as “illicit sex,” “occupying the same room for immoral purposes,” and prostitution) during this 19-month period. The state enjoyed a 73% conviction rate (Tampa City Archives, n.d.b). With local jails overflowing with syphilitic women, the state transformed New Deal C.C. camps into resort-like treatment facilities.

There, women remained for up to five months, enjoying treatment (not punishment) and morality training at the expense of the state (*Tampa Daily Times*, January 15, 1944). According to the *Tampa Daily Times*, Tampa had cut venereal disease cases in half by the end of the VD prevention month (*Tampa Daily Times*, January 17, 1944). In January 1944, the *Tampa Morning Tribune* applauded the decisive victory of the Florida DOH and the apparent end to the “vicious tidal wave” that was “licking out to engulf [...] awe-struck and tender-aged girls” (*Tampa Morning Tribune*, January 11, 1944).

Syphilis was a “vile and loathsome communicable, infectious, contagious, and dangerous” disease that posed a serious and unnecessary threat to United States’ soldiers (Petteway, n.d.). Public health officials, religious leaders, government officers, military commanders and even parents perceived an inseparable connection between the spread of syphilis and promiscuity. By the spring of 1943, Florida’s Senate outlawed the once tolerated “age old” profession, providing local police the power to completely suppress both prostitution and pre-marital sex. Though the laws were created to repress female sexuality, they also improved the public health department’s ability to treat and cure devastating venereal diseases.

Summary

The objectives of the Florida VD steering committee were essentially twofold: enforce socially accepted moral standards (specifically, curtail female sexual agency) and educate people about state funded testing and treatment for VD. Through scripted radio broadcasts, full-page advertisements in newspapers, and a VD prevention month, the committee spearheaded an unparalleled educational campaign in Florida history. By creating and encouraging public discourses about sexuality and VD prevention, the Florida DOH further modernized state power. Florida’s VD project demonstrated the importance of sexual policing, both productive and repressive, to the shaping of military experiences and home-front citizenship.

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