

From Front Porch to Back Seat: A History of the Date

One day, the 1920s story goes, a young man came to call upon a city girl. When he arrived, she had her hat on. The punch line is completely lost on twenty-first-century readers, but people at the time would have gotten it. He came on a “call,” expecting to sit in her parlor, be served some refreshments, perhaps listen to her play the piano. She expected to go out on a date. He, it is fairly safe to surmise, ended up spending a fair amount of money fulfilling her expectations (1).

In fact, the unfortunate young man really should have known better. By 1924, when this story was current, “dating” had almost completely replaced “calling” in middle-class American culture. The term appeared in *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, a bastion of middle-class respectability, several times in 1914—set off by quotation marks, but with no explanation of its meaning. One article, written in the then-exotic voice of a college sorority girl, began:

One beautiful evening in the spring term, when I was a college girl of eighteen, the boy whom, because of his popularity in every phase of college life, I had been proud gradually to allow the monopoly of my ‘dates,’ took me unexpectedly into his arms. As he kissed me impetuously I was glad, from the bottom of my heart, for the training of that mother who had taught me to hold myself aloof from all personal familiarities of boys and men (2).

Despite the sugarcoating provided by the tribute to motherhood and virtue, dating was a problematic new practice for the middle classes. Its origins were decidedly not respectable; they lay in the practices of “treating” and the sexual exchanges made by “charity girls” (discussed in Kathy Peiss’s article on pages 14-16). The very term “date” came from prostitution. While the urban working class and frankly sexual origins of dating were fairly quickly obscured, not only by such tributes to virtue but also by the increasingly common belief that young people began “going out” because automobiles made it

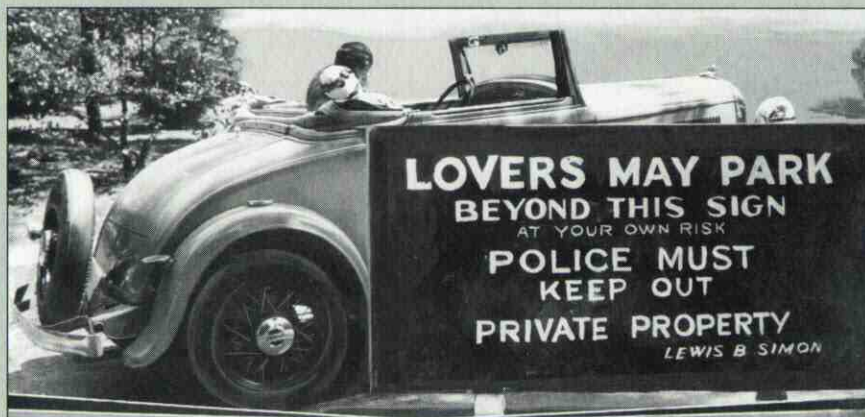
possible, notions of exchange lingered. The same author who recorded the story about the frustrated caller and the woman in the hat made sense of dating this way: In dating, a man is responsible for all expenses. The woman contributes only her company. Of course, the man contributes his company also, but since he must “add money to balance the bargain,” his company must be worth less than hers (3). Thus, according to this economic understanding, she is selling her company to him. Some men declared, flat out, that the exchange was not equitable, that men were operating at a loss. Others, of course,

imagined ways to balance the equation: Man’s Company + Money = Woman’s Company + ?

Dating, which emerged from working class urban culture, became a key ritual of youth culture in the 1920s and was unquestionably the dominant form of “courtship” by the beginning of World War II. Certainly not all American youth participated in the rituals of dating. But those who did not, whether by choice, exclusion, or ignorance of the dominant custom, often still felt the weight of a set of expecta-

tions that were enacted in high school peer cultures and even written into school curriculums. For the great majority of youth who did date, the highly personal emotions and experiences of dating were shaped, at least in part, through an increasingly powerful and far-reaching national culture that defined the conventions of dating and lent meaning and coherence to individual experience.

While dating remained “the way of American youth,” in the words of one sociologist, it took radically different forms during its roughly forty-five-year heyday from the mid-1920s through the late 1960s. In the years before World War II, American youth prized a promiscuous popularity, demonstrating competitive success through the number and variety of dates they commanded. After the war, youth turned to “going steady,” arguing that the system provided a measure of security from the pressures of the postwar world.



In the 1930s, Lewis B. Simon established a “necking grounds” on his Delaware township farm near Camden, New Jersey. A large sign at the entrance to his property welcomed “spooners” and admonished authorities to stay away. (Image donated by Corbis-Bettman.)

In the 1930s, a sociologist gave the competitive system a name: the dating and rating complex. His study of a college campus revealed that the system was based on notions of popularity. To be popular, men needed outward, material signs: an automobile, the right clothing, and money. Women's popularity depended on building and maintaining a reputation for popularity. They had to *be seen* with many popular men in the right places, indignantly turn down requests for dates made at the "last minute," which could be weeks in advance, and cultivate the impression that they were greatly in demand (4). Thus, in *Mademoiselle's* 1938 college issue, a Smith College senior advised incoming freshmen to cultivate an "image of popularity." "During your first term," she wrote, get "home talent" to ply you with letters, telegrams, and invitations. College men will think, "She *must* be attractive if she can rate all that attention" (5). At Northwestern University in the 1920s, the competitive pressure was so intense that coeds made a pact not to date on certain nights of the week. That way they could find time to study, secure in the knowledge they were not losing out to others in the race for popularity by staying home (6).

The new conventions held sway well beyond the gates of colleges. The *Woman's Home Companion* explained the modern dating system—with no mention of college campuses—for its non-elite readers: "No matter how pretty you may be, how smart your clothes—or your tongue—if you have no dates your rating is low. . . . The modern girl cultivates not one single suitor, but dates, lots of them. . . . Her aim is not a too obvious romance but general popularity" (7). Writing to *Senior Scholastic*, a magazine for high school classrooms, a girl from Greensboro, North Carolina, summed it all up:

Going steady with one date
Is okay, if that's all you rate (8).

Rating, dating, popularity, and competition: catchwords hammered home, reinforced from all sides until they seemed a natural vocabulary. You had to rate in order to date, to date in order to rate. By successfully maintaining this cycle, you became popular. To stay popular, you competed. In the 1930s and 1940s, this competition was enacted, most publicly, on the dance floor—whether in private dances, college formals, or high school parties. There success was a dizzying popularity that kept girls whirling from escort to escort. One etiquette book advised young women to strive to become "once-arounders" who never completed a turn around the dance floor before another man "cut in" on her partner (9). Dancing and cutting in were governed by strict protocol: The man had to ask the woman to dance and was responsible for her until she was taken over by another partner. On no account could he leave her stranded on the dance floor or alone on the sidelines. "Getting stuck" with a partner was taken quite seriously as a sign of social failure—even if it was with

one's escort. Though a 1933 advice book told the story of a girl who, catching her partner waving a dollar bill behind her back as an inducement to cut in, offered, "Make it five and I'll go home" (10), a more serious suggestion for handling the situation appeared in *Mademoiselle*: "Keep smiling if it kills you" (11).

By 1950, that system had almost completely disappeared. A girl in Green Bay, Wisconsin, reported that her parents were "astonished" when they discovered that she had not danced with anyone but her escort at the high school formal. "The truth was," she admitted, "that I wasn't aware that we were supposed to" (12). This 180-degree reversal signaled not simply a change in dancing etiquette but a complete transformation of the dating system. Definitions of social success as promiscuous popularity based on strenuous competition had given way to new definitions, which located success in the security of a dependable escort.

How did such an entrenched system change so quickly? It was in large part because of World War II. With virtually all physically fit men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six inducted into the military by 1943, a system already strained to provide multiple male escorts for every woman foundered. Though some women, near military bases, found an overabundance of men seeking companionship, in much of the nation the complaint was, in the words of the popular song, "There is no available male."

As war disrupted one pattern of courtship, it also changed priorities for many of the nation's youth. During the war, the rate at which Americans married jumped precipitously. That made sense—many young couples, facing an uncertain future, including the possibility the man might not survive the war, married in haste. Marriage rates also rose because the war revived the American economy; many couples had delayed marriage during the Depression, so there was a backlog of couples waiting to marry. But the high rate of marriages continued on well past the end of the war. And most strikingly, the average age at marriage plummeted. In 1939, the average age of marriage for women was 23.3. By 1959, fully 47 percent of brides married before they turned nineteen (13).

Before the war, when discussions of courtship centered on rating and dating, marriage had few cheerleaders. It is not that people did not intend to marry. They did. But marriage and the dating system were two quite different things. Dating was about competition within the peer culture of youth; marriage was the end, not the culmination, of participation in youth culture. By the time World War II drew to a close, however, American culture had begun celebrating marriage for youth. And the dating system was no longer a competitive struggle for popularity within youth culture, but instead preparation for an early marriage.



"SOS To Your Own Stag Line," from Emily Post's *How to Behave—Though a Débutante*. (Illustrated by John Held Jr., 1928. Image courtesy of the University of Delaware.)

This new model had some unusual results. If girls were to marry at eighteen and boys at twenty, the preparation for marriage had to begin earlier than before. Experts told parents to help their children become datable, warning that a late start might doom their marriage prospects. Thirteen-year-olds who did not yet date were called "late daters;" magazines recommended formal sit-down birthday dinners and dances for ten-year old boys and their dates. A 1961 study found that 40 percent of the fifth-graders in one middle-class Pennsylvania district were already dating (14).

In the prewar years, high school students had emulated the dating-rating system of their elders. As conventions changed for older youth, the younger group tried to keep up. As their slightly older peers married, younger teens developed a parallel convention: going steady. In earlier times, "keeping steady company" was understood as a step along the way to marriage (15). Going steady meant something quite different by the 1950s. Few steady couples really expected to marry one another—especially the twelve-year olds—but, for the duration, they acted as if they *were* married. Going steady had become a sort of play marriage, a mimicry of the actual marriage of their older peers (16).

The new protocol of going steady was every bit as strict as the old protocol of rating and dating, with the form of going steady mirroring teenagers' concepts of young marriage. To go steady, the boy gave the girl some visible token—class ring, letter sweater, etc.—or they exchanged identical tokens, often gold or silver friendship rings worn on the third finger of the left hand.

Customs varied locally, as *Life* magazine reported: in Birmingham, Michigan, the girl wore the boy's ID bracelet, but never his letter sweater. In rural Iowa, the couple wore matching corduroy "steady jackets," but in the far West, any couple wearing matching clothing was sure to be laughed at (17).

As long as they went steady, the boy had to call the girl a certain number of times a week and take her on a certain number of dates a week—both numbers were subject to local convention. Neither boy nor girl could date anyone else or pay too much attention to anyone of the opposite sex. While either could go out with friends of the same sex, each must always know where the other was and what he or she was doing. Going steady meant a guaranteed date, but it also meant that the girl had to help her boyfriend save up for big events by budgeting "their" money, even if it meant sitting home together. Going steady also implied, as parents quickly figured out, greater sexual intimacy—either more necking or "going further" (18).

Despite the intense monogamy of such relationships, few saw going steady as a precursor to marriage. One study of 565 seniors in a suburban high school in the East found that 80 percent of them—or approximately 452 seniors—had gone or were going steady, but only 11 of them planned to marry their steadies (19). In New Haven, Connecticut, girls wore "obit bracelets": each time they broke up with

a boy they added a disc engraved with his name or initials to the chain. So temporary were such arrangements that a teen advice book from the mid-1950s suggested girls engrave a "Puppy Love Anklet" with "Going Steady" on one side and "Ready, Willing, 'n Waiting" on the other (20).

Harmless as this system sounds today, especially compared to the rigors of rating and dating, going steady precipitated an intense generational battle. The key issue, predictably, was sex. A popular advice book for teenage girls argued that going steady inevitably led girls to heavy necking and thus to guilt for the rest of their lives. Better to date lots of strangers, the author insisted, than end up necking with a steady boyfriend (21). Adults who advocated the old system as

somehow sexually safer, however, had selective memories. The days of promiscuous popularity were also the days of "petting parties," and young people had worried endlessly about how "far" to go with a date. And who knew whether a stranger, parked on a dark road, would listen to a young woman's "firm but polite" NO (22)?

Promiscuous dating and going steady held different dangers. Consent was the difference. A beleaguered system of sexual control based on the resolve of girls and young women to say no—at least to the final step of sexual intercourse—was further breaking down in the new system of going steady. As going steady was a simulated marriage, relationships could and did develop within its even short-term security, monogamy, and, sometimes, love.

Parents thought it was easier for girls to say no to the rapid succession of boys who were, at some level, markers for popularity—even when the young men insisted, as one did in the pages of *Senior Scholastic*, that the \$1.20 he spent on the date should entitle him to at least a little necking (23). Adults were afraid it was harder for girls to say no to a steady.

In some ways parents were right, but it was youth themselves, not parental complaints, that would transform the dating system once again. By the late 1960s, the system of sexual exchange that underlay both dating systems was in tatters, undermined by a widespread sexual revolution. In the 1970s, many young people rejected the artificialities of dating, insisting that it was most important to get to know one another as *people*. And a great many women, recognizing the implied exchange in Man's Company + Money = Woman's Company + ?, rejected that sort of bargain altogether for a variety of arrangements that did not suggest an equation in need of balancing. Since the early 1970s, no completely dominant national system of courtship has emerged, and the existing systems are not nearly so clear in their conventions and expectations as were the old systems of dating. Not always knowing "the rules" is undoubtedly harder than following the clear script of the traditional date, but those critics who

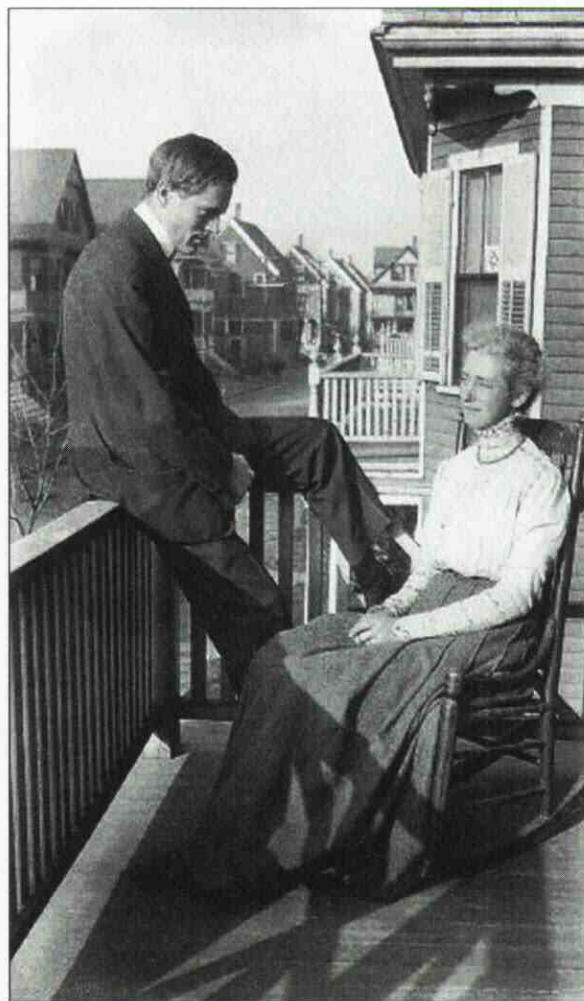


Young couple dine at the Busy Bee Restaurant in Radford, Virginia, 1940. (John Vachon, photographer. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.)

are nostalgic for the good old days should first understand the complicated history of the date. □

Endnotes

1. Alexander Black, "Is the Young Person Coming Back?" *Harper's*, August 1924, 340. The author of *Ladies' Home Journal's* (LHJ) "Good Manners and Good Form" column advised a young woman who had been invited to the theater to greet her escort with her hat on, though without her wrap and gloves. Mrs. Burton Kingsland, LHJ, August 1909, 39.
2. "How May a Girl Know?" LHJ January 1914, 9. See also a letter to Mrs. Stickney Parks, "Girls' Affairs," LHJ, May 1914, 58.
3. Black, 342.
4. Willard Waller, "The Rating and Dating Complex," *American Sociological Review* 2 (1937): 727-34. Women's popularity was described as associational—she received status as the object of men's choice. Undoubtedly, the right clothes, the right connections, and all the intangibles that come from the right background purchased male attention in the first place, but popular and scholarly experts consistently slighted this angle.
5. Mary Ellen Green, "Advice to Freshmen," *Mademoiselle*, August 1939, 8.
6. Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 200. Fass found the Northwestern arrangement reported in the *UCLA Daily* (November 13, 1925). I found an apocryphal version of the story in "If Your Daughter Goes to College," *Better Homes and Gardens* (BH&G), May 1940.
7. Anna Streese Richardson, "Dates in Christmas Socks," *Woman's Home Companion* (WHC), January 1940, 7.
8. "Jam Session," *Senior Scholastic* (SS), February 28-March 4, 1944, 32.
9. Elizabeth Eldridge, *Co-ediquette* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1936), 203. The author based her book on personal research and experience at several U.S. colleges and universities.
10. Alice Leone Moats, *No Nice Girl Swears* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933) 84-5.
11. Virginia Hanson, "Party-Girl—Princeton Style," *Mademoiselle*, May 1938, 46.
12. Jan London, "The Dateline: Every Dance With the Same Boy?" *Good Housekeeping* (GH), March 1955, 100. In the South, the cut-in system persisted longer, but as *Esquire* noted in 1958, "Cutting is the outer limit of poor form almost everywhere else in America" (Nicholas David, "Courtship on the Campus," *Esquire*, February 1958, 49).
13. See Phyllis I. Rosenteur, *the Single Woman* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1961), 58; James H.S. Bossard, "The Engagement Ring—A Changing Symbol," *New York Times Magazine*, September 14, 1958, 74; "The Family: Woman's World," *Time*, June 14, 1963, 66.
14. Ruth Imler, "The Sub-Deb: The Late Dater," LHJ, September 1955, 54; Dorothy Barclay, "When Boy (Age Twelve) Meets Girl," *New York Times Magazine*, January 23, 1955, 39; "The Pre-Teens," *Time*, April 20, 1962,



Young couple on porch of suburban home, ca. 1906. (Image donated by Corbis-Bettman.)

68. "Going Steady at Twelve," *Newsweek*, December 18, 1961, 90. See also David R. Mace, "Let's Take a Sane Look at the Hysterical Quest for a Husband," *McCall's*, September 1962, 54.
15. See, for example, G. O. Schultz, "Are Our High Schoolers Snobs?" *BH&G*, February 1941, 86; and Henrietta Ripperger, "Maid in America: Going Steady—Going Where?" *GH*, April 1941, 70. In the 1930s and early 1940s, *Senior Scholastic* argued that going steady would divert teens from achieving their ambitions. A 1939 argument against going steady went: "In our modern, high-speed civilization, it is safe to say that physical maturity usually arrives long before emotional maturity . . . and before most young men are vocationally established and capable of supporting a wife, let alone a family. The educational process for professional or business success today often requires the full concentration of thought and energies for a long time before love and marriage can be seriously considered" ("Readers' Forum," *SS*, February 11, 1939, 3).

ing their ambitions. A 1939 argument against going steady went: "In our modern, high-speed civilization, it is safe to say that physical maturity usually arrives long before emotional maturity . . . and before most young men are vocationally established and capable of supporting a wife, let alone a family. The educational process for professional or business success today often requires the full concentration of thought and energies for a long time before love and marriage can be seriously considered" ("Readers' Forum," *SS*, February 11, 1939, 3).

16. Psychologists warned that going steady (unless leading directly to marriage) could have a "permanent emotional effect that makes later marriage anti-climatic, since it is 'make believe'" ("Going Steady . . . a National Problem," LHJ, July 1949, 131.)

17. For descriptions of the protocol of going steady, see "Going Steady," LHJ, 44.; Betty Coe Spicer, "If You Don't Go Steady You're Different," LHJ, December 1955, 68-9; Cameron Shipp, "The Strange Custom of Going Steady," *WHC*, March 1956, 4; "Profile on Youth: Iowa Teen-agers Step Out," LHJ, July 1949, 42; Jan Landon, "The Date Line," *GH*, October 1956, 21; Thomas B. Morgan, producer, "How American Teen-Agers Live," *Look*, July 1957, 21-32.

18. *Ibid*; see especially the articles in the *Ladies Home Journal*.

19. Maureen Daly, ed., *Profile of Youth* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1949), 30. Also quoted in E.E. LeMasters, *Modern Courtship and Marriage* (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 123.

20. Jan Landon, "The Date Line," *GH*, June 1957, 20; Landon, "The Date Line," *GH*, October 1954, 18; Beverly Brandow, *Date Data* (Dallas, TX: Banks Upshaw & Co., 1954), 100.

21. Helen Louise Crouse, *Joyce Jackson's Guide to Dating* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1957), 101. Crouse's name

appears nowhere on the book—it was supposedly written by teenage Joyce Jackson.

22. For example, see Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl: Fresh Date," *SS*, February 18, 1939, 31.
23. Gay Head, "Boy Dates Girl Jam Session," *SS*, December 1943, 45.

Beth Bailey is professor of history at Temple University. Bailey is a cultural and social historian, specializing in the study of gender and sexuality in twentieth-century America. Her books include From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America (1988) and Sex in the Heartland (1999). She is also coauthor of the American history survey text, A People and A Nation (7th ed.).

Copyright of OAH Magazine of History is the property of Organization of American Historians and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.