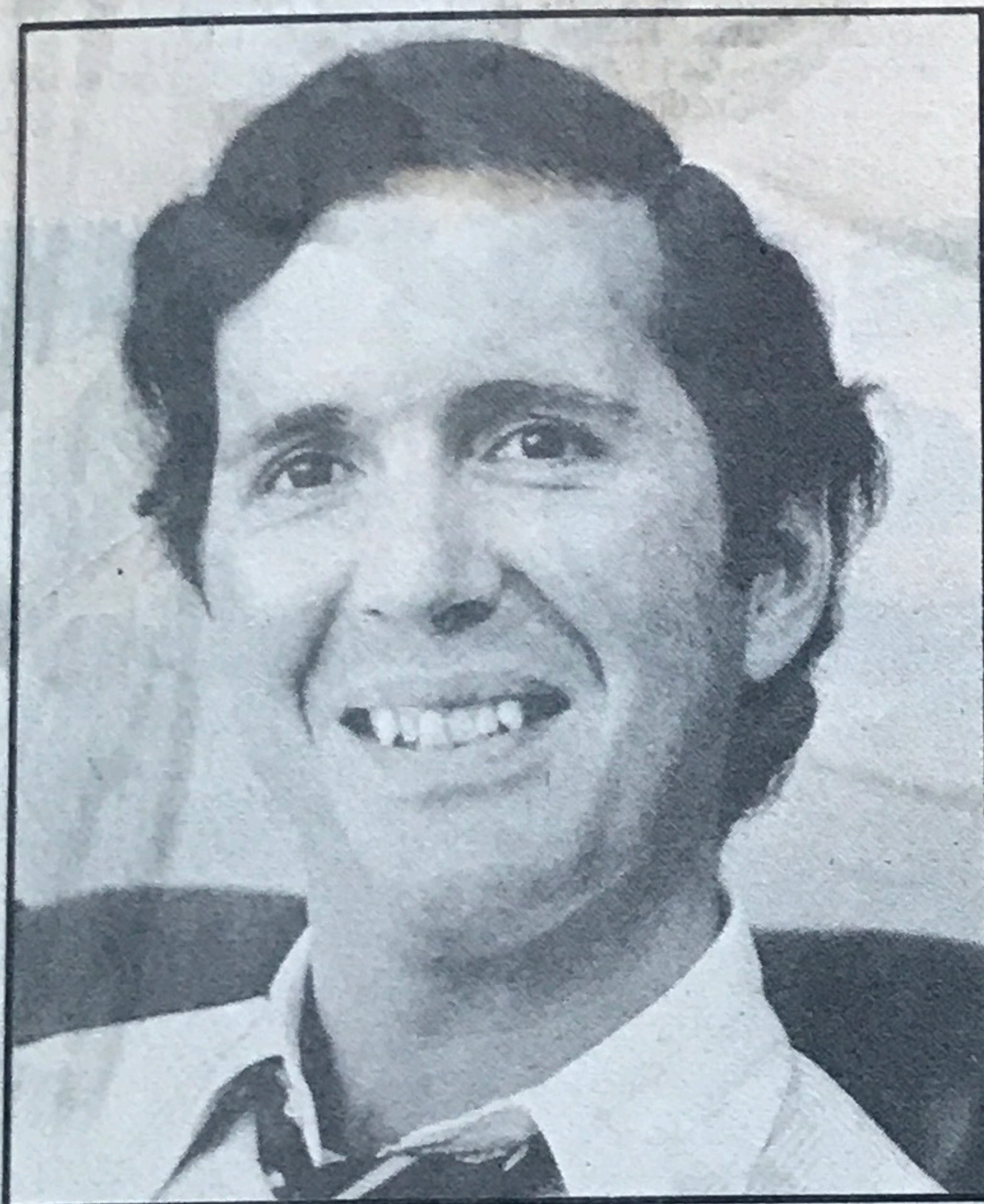


Birth Control Crusader



Alexander Sanger, Palm Beach attorney and grandson of Margaret, recalls the politics, determination and vanity of this uncommon woman who was ahead of her time — and eventually paid for it.

Daring Margaret Sanger Earned Place in History

By MARGO HARAKAS

Post Staff Writer

A colleague called her "a little bunch of hellfire." That she was. She was a rebel, a defier, a compassionate soul who believed not in God or masters, but in the inherent right of women to choose their pregnancies.

She went to jail several times for daring to discuss contraception with women. She was Margaret Sanger, who abandoned her family for "the greater cause" and later, much later, worried about the price they all had paid.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of her birth. Mrs. Sanger died in 1966 in a Tucson, Ariz., nursing home. She had been placed there by her older son who later found her surrounded by sycophants and gigolos out to grab the last of her money.

"She paid for their flattery," said her grandson, Alexander Sanger, 31, a Palm Beach attorney.

He prefers to recall the happier days, when she would come to visit at his family's home in New York. "She was marvelous with young children," he said.

"Hum it in there, Domie," they'd holler at her as she pitched a ball across home plate. Domie is short for Domah, a Japanese word, as Alexander recalls, meaning second mother.

At the time of her death, Margaret Sanger was nearly 88. But none of the obit writers got it right. The reason was simple. Margaret

Sanger preferred to minimize such things. It was Alexander who pinpointed the exact date his grandmother came squawking into this world.

In the Higgins family Bible at Smith College, he saw where Margaret had changed her entry from 1879 to 1884. (She also frequently quoted the year 1883.) Unfortunately, the ink she used was inferior to that used by her father years before. Her attempt to deceive showed boldly through.

Margaret Sanger was in all things uncommon — in looks, in attitude, in resolution.

"She'd stand up to anybody," said her admiring grandson. "It was the Irish in her."

Her militancy got its first public airing with the labor movement. Among the banners she hoisted was that for the Lawrence Textile Strike of 1912.

Ever an appreciator of the fine nuances of publicity (good and bad), she gathered up the kids of the strikers and carted them off to New York City. "She arranged for the kids to be cared for by strike sympathizers in New York. She made the most of it, parading them through the streets. It was a PR gimmick, but it was marvelous."

Mrs. Sanger received some political awakening from her first husband, William Sanger, architect and artist. He introduced her to Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman and other anarchists of the day.



Margaret, Son Stuart in 1903. 1979 Is the 100th Anniversary of Her Birth

Margaret Sanger

"She was part of that whole radical movement," Alexander said.

Actually, she and her husband were, if anything, socialists. It was that movement they later became identified with.

Despite her toughness and unrelenting positions, Margaret Sanger was an enticing woman. Petite, blue-eyed, red-haired, soft spoken, she captivated one male heart after another, including those of novelist H. G. Wells, and sexologist Havelock Ellis. She had affairs with both. Wells, unable to contain his boyish exuberance, wasn't content with their secret love letters. He proclaimed to the world, "When the history of our civilization is written, it will be a biological history and Margaret Sanger will be its heroine."

Years later at the nursing home, Margaret Sanger would pause between sips of champagne through a straw (she no longer could hold a glass) and announce, "You know H.G. Wells called me the most famous woman in the world." That was all she said, before once again falling silent.

Mrs. Sanger obviously enjoyed all the attention of her famous lovers, but she was first and foremost discreet — fearful her enemies would discover her extramarital adventures and use the information to discredit her cause. And the cause, birth control — a term she originated — was all important.

"She made a choice early on whether she was going to stay with her husband and children or take on this cause," Alexander said. "Once she decided, she attacked with singlemindedness."

The turning point came in 1912. Mrs. Sanger told the story often — about the tenement wife and mother of three on the lower East Side of New York. She had nursed the mother back to health after a self-induced abortion.

Explaining there was no way her family could support another child, the woman begged the doctor to explain how she might avoid future pregnancies. The doctor, in a now famous quote, replied, "Tell Jake to sleep on the roof."

Three months later after another home abortion, the woman was dead.

Mrs. Sanger was galvanized to action. She quit her job and headed for Paris. According to Alexander, she went with her husband, William. William went to study art. She went to discover birth control techniques being used in Europe. "The French and Dutch were far ahead of us at that time," Alexander said. "They had established birth control clinics."

Mrs. Sanger and her husband, while still friendly, never lived together again. "She came back and left grandfather over there," Alexander said. "He had become friends with Monet and Matisse and Modigliani. He had been trained as an architect but he always wanted to paint and felt this was his big chance."

Mrs. Sanger returned home and her troubles — and history — began. She brazenly put out a magazine called "Women Rebel." In it, she encouraged women to practice birth control methods and promised in subsequent issues to tell them how.

The postal authorities were enraged. Had this fool never heard of the Comstock Act? By the time the sixth issue had rolled off the presses, they had their indictment. The charge — sending lewd and lascivious information through the mail, among others. Any mention of that taboo subject, birth control, was deemed lewd.

It was not Mrs. Sanger's first arrest. Some time before, during her labor organizing days, she had been arrested for bopping a policeman. But this time, she packed her bags and fled the country, leaving behind



Margaret Sanger tried to hide her age by lying about it and changing the date in the family Bible. But she was born in 1879, not 1884 as public records indicate.

her two sons, daughter, and husband, who by this time had returned to the States.

While Margaret Sanger was out of the country, William Sanger would be arrested for distributing birth control pamphlets. Ironically, Anthony Comstock, the man after whom the law was named, would attend that trial. A few days after William Sanger was found guilty and sentenced to 30 days in jail, Comstock would die of pneumonia contracted while attending the trial.

Approximately a year after she had fled, Mrs. Sanger came home to stand trial. Her timing was not capricious.

"She kept having these dreams," said Alexander, "dreams with the figure 8 in them. She concluded finally that it was the date Nov. 8. She had to be home by then."

The premonition was of her daughter's death. A few days after Margaret arrived home, her daughter died of pneumonia. The date, Nov. 8.

Eventually, the charges against Margaret were withdrawn. Free once again to pursue her cause, she immediately jumped in full force by opening the country's first birth control clinic.

The year was 1916, the site, the shabby Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

On the first day, no fewer than 150 women lined up outside the clinic, seeking help and information.

The predictable occurred. A week and a half after the clinic opened, Margaret and her sister, Ethel Byrne, were arrested.

As always, Margaret was determined to make the best of an exploitable situation. Ethel was going on trial first. If sentenced, the sisters decided, Ethel would go on a hunger strike. According to Alexander, it was the first time that technique (borrowed from suffragettes in England) had been used in this country.

Ethel was convicted and sentenced to 30 days in jail. She made headlines around the world. Day after day, the public read about this woman starving herself for the cause. Finally the judge ordered her force fed. "They wrapped her in blankets and poured eggs down her throat. It was really horrible," Alexander said.

The publicity continued. Finally, the governor pardoned Ethel. In the meantime, Margaret was tried and found guilty. She spent her 30 days in jail without going on a hunger strike. When she got out, however,

she decided she no longer needed her sister in the movement. Margaret did not take well to being upstaged. "She was jealous of all the publicity Ethel had gotten," Alexander laughed. "Later when she wrote about the incident, you would have thought it was Margaret who had gone on the hunger strike."

Margaret was, in Alexander's words, "a very vain woman."

Years later Margaret would invite Ethel to a Christmas party at her estate in New York. She was remarried — to J. Noah H. Slee, manufacturer of 3-In-One Oil.

It was one of those lush affairs ("Margaret loved parties") with champagne and butlers everywhere. Ethel started getting a little tiddy. "Remember," she chided Margaret, "back in Corning when all we'd have for Christmas was an apple?"

That was the last time Margaret invited Ethel to dinner. Margaret, the sixth of 11 children, had grown up poor and didn't want to be reminded.

Mrs. Sanger's arrangement with Slee was unorthodox for the day. "They had a prenuptial agreement," Alexander explained. "They lived in separate apartments in the same house and he had to call her on the phone to make dinner dates with her. They had an understanding she would keep her name and would be free to pursue her cause without interference."

On the surface, they seemed to have little in common.

"My father and uncle remember him fondly," Alexander said. "He was quite friendly, a conservative, crusty businessman, Episcopalian to the core. He divorced his first wife to marry my grandmother. In her autobiography she says he was already divorced. She did that. If the facts didn't fit, she'd make them up. Anything to make herself look better," he said good-humoredly.

A charming, attractive man, Slee undoubtedly funneled great sums of money into the cause. In those early days, according to Alexander, Margaret even used the 3-In-One oil cans for smuggling.

"There were two ways she used to get contraceptives into the country," said Alexander, amused by the recollection.

One involved a sympathetic boot-

legger. He simply made sure the blockade runners carried her cargo as well as his. On nights when illicit booze was being dumped overboard for retrieval by motorized craft, included among the cases were some destined for Sanger.

When customs agents caught up to the bootlegger, Margaret had her contraceptives sent into Canada, where they were stuffed into oil cans for transport to New York.

When Slee died about 1941, he left Margaret Sanger a millionaire. "I'm not sure how much he left her. I heard it was about \$5 million," Alexander said.

She promptly announced to her older son, "I'm going to spend every single penny before I die."

"She almost did, too," Alexander said. "When she died 25 years later, she left an estate of \$100,000."

During her declining years in Tucson, she was still surrounded by men. "She loved men. She loved the attention they paid her. She'd give them money, jewelry, expensive gifts."

Eventually, her older son Stuart had her involuntarily placed in a nursing home.

"I remember visiting her there when I was about 14. And how said it was to see her. She had always been so full of life," Alexander said.

The family would visit and take her champagne. "She still loved parties," Alexander said.

"In the end she was not an entirely happy person. She was surrounded by gigolos, giving them money to pay attention to her."

And while she had won the battles, she was aware always of the price exacted.

The victories, hard fought, were all historic. In 1918, for the first time, the New York State Court of Appeals expanded the conditions under which a physician might pass on birth control information. In 1937, a decision by then Atty. Gen. Homer Cummings not to pursue one of its small cases toppled the final barrier to the dissemination of contraceptive devices and information.

Throughout the years, Mrs. Sanger organized societies and conferences on contraception including the first World Population Conference in 1927. She also founded an organization that later merged into the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

She knew victory, and as H.G. Wells predicted, when history is written her name will be indelibly there.

But as Alexander sees it, "She was never really reconciled to the decision she made in 1912 to abandon her husband and children."

Her life and her sons, Alexander, both physicians, never really had a mother during much of their life.

"My father was in boarding schools from a very young age," he said. "My uncle Stuart didn't start

school till he was about 11. He bounced around from neighbor to neighbor. She just wasn't there much. Neither was my grandfather."

Alexander remembers seeing letters from his father among his grandmother's personal papers, now at the Library of Congress and Smith College. "All the boys are go-

ing home at Thanksgiving. Can I come home too?" asked one.

"I waited at the train station for you yesterday, but you never came," stated another.

Perhaps what her sons couldn't understand as children, they did as adults. According to Alexander, they are proud of Margaret Sanger and were supportive of her work.