Betty Mary Goetting Brought Birth Control to El Paso

By Kim Wilson and Jane Van Velkinburgh

Goetting was inspired by Sanger’s fight against the Comstock Laws and expressed the wish that she could meet her. “I thought she was the greatest woman in the country,” Goetting told the El Paso Times. Sanger had made her first trip to El Paso in 1936, but ironically, she and Goetting did not meet because of the birth of Goetting’s second son. In 1937, they did.

Returning to help organize an El Paso clinic, Sanger planned to speak at the Hilton Inn during her second El Paso visit. Pressure from local churches caused the hotel to revoke the reservation, so Sanger spoke to a packed house at the Paso del Norte Hotel. According to the Times, it was then that Goetting and Sanger met and talked about the future of birth control clinic, but opposition was fierce. Renting a location for the clinic was also difficult; as soon as the owners knew the clinic was also difficult; as soon as the owners knew the clinic was necessary, they raised the rent.

In 1938, the Comstock Law was passed in America prohibiting “obscene” materials from being sent in the mail, aimed at the dissemination of birth control methods and/or devices. According to “Comstockery in America,” an article by Margaret Sanger, national leader of the movement to legalize birth control and founder of Planned Parenthood of New York, these laws were designed to “aid and abet” moral and religious “prejudice and persecution,” preventing physicians from offering family planning because of the threat of imprisonment.

During her work in New York, Goetting became aware of the birth control movement and Margaret Sanger’s work. Just before she was married, Betty Mary wrote to Sanger under a pseudonym because of family opposition, inquiring about methods of birth control. In her letter she said, “I feel that it is my right to say when my children shall be born.”

Sanger, whose mother was pregnant 18 times, bore 11 children and died at 40, was a nurse who worked with poor immigrant women. She saw the effects of unchecked childbearing but also knew that obtaining information about birth control was almost impossible for poor American women. Poor women also often resorted to having illegal or self-induced abortions and many died. In 1916, Sanger, her sister and a friend opened the first birth control clinic in the country, serving some 500 women in 10 days before police raided the clinic and arrested the three women.

Out on bail, Sanger continued her work. The Crane decision in 1918 allowed physicians to prescribe birth control for their married patients “for the cure and prevention of disease.” It would take 18 more years to reverse the Comstock Law’s classification of birth control literature as pornography with the legal case of United States v. One Package.

Betty Mary Goetting began supporting women’s causes early in life and was instrumental in establishing Planned Parenthood clinics in El Paso.

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in the Texas Retailers Association, disagreed.

In Schwartz’s opinion, a seven-day retail week
would increase business costs without increasing
sales because the free days would be lost.

The owners of Malooly’s Furniture Store, Gibson’s
Discount Stores, Michelle’s Clothing, K-Mart and
several automobile dealerships, as well as many
others, found themselves before a judge.

In 1971, a civil court injunction was requested
by the DDA against George and Eddy Malooly,
owners of Malooly’s Furniture Store, for selling
prohibited items on consecutive Saturdays and
Sundays.

“We are only trying to serve the people,” the
Malooly brothers stated in an article published in
the El Paso Herald-Post on Dec. 4. “Many, many
people have called us from outlying areas, saying they
are unable to travel so far during the week.”

Judge Hans Brockmoller, 120th District Court,
granted the injunction, which barred any Sunday
openings by Malooly’s Furniture, according to an
El Paso Times article on Dec. 17. The Maloolys did
not file an appeal.

The DDA also requested a civil court injunction
against Gibson’s Discount Stores, with criminal
charges pending. Brockmoller issued the injunction,
and Gibson’s appealed. In 1973, the appeal was
denied, and Gibson’s took the case to the Texas
Supreme Court, which upheld the state’s blue law
in a 5-4 decision against Gibson’s.

Justice Thomas M. Reavley stated that it was the
court’s opinion that blue laws were a legislative
question, not a constitutional one. Justice Ross E.
Doughty disagreed, questioning the legislature’s
right to prohibit the sale of certain merchandise
day a weekend.

Gibson’s continued the fight all the way to
the Texas Supreme Court. In 1978 the case was
dismissed due to failure to apply within a proper
time frame.

In another case, Mickey Robbins, owner of
Michelle’s Corp., a clothing store, was held in
contempt of court for violating an injunction
requested by the El Paso Retailers Association.

H.W. Freeman reported in the El Paso Times on
Sept. 13, 1981, that Robbins felt he was not in
violation of the law due to the law’s “charity
clause.” Twenty-six percent of Sunday sales went
to the El Paso Rehabilitation Center where his
daughter, Michelle, was being treated for cerebral
palsy.

Opponents of the blue law had about as much luck
with the state legislature over the years as they had
with judges. State Rep. Paul Moreno described the
law in a 1971 El Paso Times article as “antiquated
and wholly inadequate,” but early repeal attempts,
such as the one he introduced, regularly failed.

a new effort at repeal. However, the bill was not
even voted out of the House Business and Industry
Committee.

The next major attempt to repeal blue laws was
led by El Paso Rep. Robert (Bobby) Valles in
1979. Supported by Gov. Bill Clements, Valles’ bill
would have offered repeal on a local basis, so the
will of the people could decide. Valles believed this
distinction gave the bill a good chance of passage.

Tri-State Associated Grocers Inc., representing 130
independent grocers, joined the fight. In an effort to
get consumer feedback to the legislature, hundreds
of leaflets and letters were passed out by El Paso
grocers. Sam Stewart, Valles’ administrative
assistant, declared the bill dead on May 5. Ken
Bridges, spokesman for Tri-State, vowed not to
quit. “It’ll come up again, no doubt about it.”

The fight finally ended in June 1985. Texans For
Blue Law Repeal, Inc., a group of retailers, headed
up a strategy and lobbying campaign. The Texas
legislative session ended with an indigent health
care plan, seatbelt laws, increased arts financing –
and repealed blue laws.

Today, remnants of Sunday legislation can still
be seen in auto sales. Laws imposed by the Texas
Department of Transportation require dealerships to
close either Saturday or Sunday. The sales manager
of a local automobile dealership told Russell Folk that
because an automobile is such a large investment,
most customers shop around for days before
purchasing, so being closed one day doesn’t affect
business. When asked if he would open on Sundays
if the law was repealed, he replied, “I don’t think
so … people get tired, even the building gets tired.”

Since 1863, weekends in Texas have been
influenced by Sunday legislation, in one form or
another. Liquor stores are still closed on Sunday.
At other stores only beer and wine may be sold
but only after noon. And on Christmas day, hard
liquor cannot be purchased except at restaurants.
But Texans and most Americans can buy almost
anything else on Sunday, as most blue laws have
been repealed across the country.

Reputedly haunted and with a story all its own, the
Hart mansion, best known to locals since 1940 as the
Hacienda Café, stands empty in 2010, awaiting another
owner. For more than 50 years the café welcomed
natives and tourists alike to its historical rooms, serving
food and drink in the shadow of the first industry of El
Paso: Hart’s Mill. ✎

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by the Virgin Mary. They believed all the healings and
stress built up throughout her life finally took its toll.
Hundreds of people attended her funeral at Shannon
Hill Catholic Cemetery, where she was buried next to
her father.

Moving from one country to another, then state to
state and city to city, Teresa Urrea left a permanent
imprint in the minds and hearts of all the people she
healed and supported. Urrea’s spiritual guidance is
still called upon during the hardest and most desperate
times. In El Paso’s Segundo Barrio, many people are
praying and hoping Teresa Urrea’s spirit is with them.
Parts of this historic community are in danger of being
demolished to build a “downtown district” which could
include one or more “big box” stores. The building
Teresa lived in happens to be part of this section in the
Segundo Barrio.

As she did in the past, Teresa Urrea continues to
unite people of all races and classes. Many of Segundo’s
residents have come together to form Colectivo
Rezonte, a group protesting against the politicians and
business owners involved with the plans to destroy their
community. With the help of the Paso del sur group
and their faith in Santa Teresita, opponents of the use
of eminent domain will continue to battle to preserve
this part of El Paso’s history and more importantly,
the homes and lives of many. Although more than
100 years have passed since “La Santa de Cabora”
physically graced our world, it is clear that she will long
be a source of guidance and motivation for the poor and
unrepresented. ☼

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In 1966, Goetting became only the third person in
the United States to receive the National Margaret
Sanger Award for her work in the birth control
movement. In 1968, she received the Planned
Parenthood Center of El Paso Leadership Award, the
Presidential Award in 1970, and the Paseña Valerosa
Award in 1974. In 1977, Goetting was recognized by
the El Paso Women’s Political Caucus as a Pioneer
in Women’s Rights. She received an honorary life
membership from the El Paso Library Association in
1979. In 2009, she was named to the El Paso County
Historical Society’s Hall of Honor.

In a surprise move in July 2009, Planned
Parenthood closed six facilities in El Paso because of
financial problems. According to the El Paso Times,
more than 12,000 patients were forced to look for
alternate care.

Kathleen Staudt, a political science professor at
the University of Texas at El Paso, told the El Paso
Times that she was shocked. “How could the 21st
largest city in the United States – El Paso – not have
Planned Parenthood clinics?”

While other providers attempt to fill the gap,
Planned Parenthood in El Paso will be missed. It will
take another organization, other individuals to carry
on the work and pioneering spirit of Betty Mary
Smith Goetting, who did so much to help El Paso
women. ☼