Any Friend of the Movement
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In the 1920s my grandmother Helen bore two children within twenty months of her wedding day. Upon discovering that she was pregnant for the second time, Helen realized that her naive notions of birth control held serious flaws. A few years later her third and last child died shortly after birth.

In the 1950s, although equipped with more information and options, my mother, Elaine, endured six pregnancies, at least three of those unplanned. Mom bore five living children. (At my mother’s bedside, after the sixth birth, when Mom was thirty-eight years old, her husband’s grandmother shared methods that she had used to space her four children.)

In the 1970s, despite technological advances, I conceived my own firstborn a few months earlier than intended due to a faulty contraceptive.

Moralistic attitudes, policies, and laws helped to maintain women’s ignorance about their bodies in general and their lack of precise knowledge about controlling reproduction in particular, as represented in Helen’s experience in the 1920s. Two generations later, even after wider dissemination of such information, a dearth of systematic research meant the absence of simple, effective, reliable contraception free from the unpleasant or dangerous side effects that plagued the pill, especially in its early days. Public birth control policy affects the intimate realities of women’s lives: the political is personal.

The above stories (and there are more) explain in part my interest in the history of reproductive choices and the restriction of those choices. The current study focuses not on research or contraceptive methods per se but explores and analyzes the actions of women and men to create and sustain Ohio’s first birth control clinic. The account lies within the much broader context of ongoing cultural ambiguities and tensions around
sexuality in the United States. Disparate themes such as the power and reach of the law, the authority of physicians, the impact of voluntary action, the critical nature of networks, and the role of female agency in institution building and social change add texture to the tale.

Many, many people have supported me in bringing this book to fruition. I will not name all of you, but your help proved invaluable. A few individuals and organizations deserve special mention. Jane Kessler planted the seed that quickly blossomed into a fascination with the history of women’s choices in America and the restrictions of those choices. Lois Scharf, Jan Reiff, Roberta Wollons, and Carl Ubbelohde encouraged that fascination. A fellowship funded by the Lilly Foundation at the Center for Philanthropy of Indiana University/Purdue University in Indianapolis piqued my interest in nonprofits and voluntarism. Special thanks to David Hammack for suggesting that opportunity and to Darlyne Bailey and others at the center for their perceptive comments. Other early funding sources included a Littleton-Griswold Research Award from the American Historical Association and travel grants from the Case Western Reserve University Alumni Fund. For financial support of a portion of this project, thanks to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and Ortho Pharmaceutical Corporation. My stint as an ACOG-Ortho History Fellow aided my transformation from student to scholar and opened my eyes to the wealth of fascinating untapped material in the history of women’s health. Susan Rishworth, then the ACOG archivist, helped me set a research course and made my time at the ACOG history library most pleasant.

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