

Elyse: Our final story takes us to a period in U.S. history when American sexual behavior comes under strict legal scrutiny.

Tukufu: This investigation includes a frank discussion of early contraceptive devices and is intended for mature audiences.

Elyse: On March 3, 1873, a law is passed in a late-night session of Congress banning the sale and distribution of contraceptive devices, which many considered to be the tools of immorality. Merchants are forced underground. They know that despite the ban, many women still need birth control agents. This was not an issue born of sexual liberation; it was often a matter of life or death. In the late 19th century, for every 1,000 pregnancies, seven women died during childbirth. So a woman wishing to avoid pregnancy is left with few options. What could she do? Over 100 years later, Krista Scott of Georgia believes she holds an answer in a wooden box that has been in her family for generations.

Krista Scott: We were cleaning out the summer kitchen, and in one of the humpback trunks, we found a dove-tailed box. Opened it up to see what it was, and -- and when you look, it has a diagram of the object. It certainly doesn't look like something that we would consider having in our house as a modern person, so -- it looked more like a torture device.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray. I've come to Statesboro, Georgia, with Tukufu Zuberi to help Krista uncover the truth about her strange family heirloom.

Krista: Come on in.

Elyse: Thank you.

Tukufu: So what do you have for us?

Krista: This is it: the box.

Elyse: Wow! Let's see what's inside.

Tukufu: "Gray's Recurrent Syringe." Do you have the item that was in the box?

Krista: No, and in fact, I'm really not even sure what it was. All that was in there is the label that you see there that gives us a hint of what must have been in there originally. We suspect that it was some sort of birth-control device, but it didn't really come right out and say that, so I wasn't sure what I was looking at, but I was intrigued.

Tukufu: Okay, now what do you want us to find out about it?

Krista: Well, first of all, is it a birth control device, or was it a container for a birth control device? And if it was, was that legal? I have a vague notion that that was not legal to sell birth control or . . .

Tukufu: Okay, who did it belong to?

Krista: This box was owned by a lady named Molly Stevenson. She was the sister of my great-grandfather. For her time period, she was well-educated. She did go to college in the 1890s, married pretty young, 16-18, had 5 children, and died at the age of 30.

Elyse: Do you have anything else for us to go on?

Krista: Actually, I do. I have Molly's journal --

Elyse: Oh, nice.

Krista: From that time period as well as her mother's journal and copybook.

Elyse: Oh, wow.

Krista: And a whole plethora of family letters.

Tukufu: Well, you have a lot of reading to do, Elyse.

Elyse: I think so. Thank you.

Tukufu: Was this really a birth-control device? I'm not sure. Krista told us that Molly had five children, but maybe she didn't want any more. She died at the age of 30. Perhaps her health was in jeopardy, or she feared losing a child during delivery.

Elyse: While Tukufu searches for information on Krista's syringe, I want to find out more about birth-control laws in the late 19th century. The Siecus Library in New York City is one of the country's primary sources of educational materials on sexuality. I discover that for much of American history, pregnancy was associated with the risk of death or serious injury during childbirth. Cotton Mather, the 18th century Puritan minister, wrote that conception meant, "your death has entered into you." In the early 19th century, a woman averaged between seven and eight live births. But in the mid-1880s, an improved kind of rubber makes condoms more effective and affordable. That prompts a surge in the manufacture and advertisement of all kinds of contraceptive devices. But it also fuels a national controversy. Anti-vice crusader Anthony Comstock argues that birth control promotes lust, and that lust breeds other social evils. Listen to this, "lust is the boon companion of all other crimes. There is no evil so extensive, none doing more to destroy the institutions of free America. It sets aside the laws of God and morality; marriage bonds are broken, most sacred ties severed, state laws ignored, and dens of infamy plant themselves to almost every community." Comstock launches a relentless campaign to ban obscene materials, including medical pamphlets of contraceptive advice. On March 3rd, his efforts are rewarded when Congress passes the Comstock Act, the "bill of five sections which prohibited the mailing of obscene matter within the United States." In this bill first appeared the phrase, "For the prevention of contraception." The Comstock Law was followed by even more Draconian laws. In Connecticut, married couples using birth control faced a possible one-year prison sentence. So contraception was clearly illegal in Molly's time. Does that mean if her syringe was used for contraception, she was breaking the law?

Tukufu: Although I've studied the history of contraception, this box is a mystery to me. All we have is this label. "Gray's Recurrent Syringe." and this: "A.L. Gray & Company, patent date, 1894 and 1897." Maybe the patent will tell us what the device was used for. The New York Public Library of Science, Industry and Business has an index of U.S. patents dating back to 1873. Fantastic. Thank you very much. Now I need to find the actual patent. I scan the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office database. This is what I was looking for. So I have here an image of the device and a description. Let's see what we have here. Oh, here we go: "The object of this invention is to provide a syringe of improved construction to be used for the purpose of irrigating the vagina." Nothing here gives me any indication that it was used as a contraceptive device. I wonder if Elyse is having any better luck.

Elyse: I'm looking through Molly's letters to see if she mentions a desire to limit her pregnancies. Her letters are intimate. They give me a glimpse into the life of a young woman coming of age over 100 years ago. Here's an earlier letter from Molly to her mother, Rachel, when she's away at school. "Today is the common disease. You know what I mean. It will be eight weeks next Tuesday since I have been that way. Do not know what made me go for so far." Now, the language is a little peculiar, but by "common disease," it seems to me that Molly's talking about her menstrual period. It looks like she relied on her mother as her confidante throughout her life; but so far, I don't see any indication that Molly was using birth control.

Tukufu: I've located an expert on the social history of contraceptive devices. Andrea Tone is the author of *Devices and Desires* and a professor of medical and business history. Maybe she can say if this was used for contraception. I know that in the latter half of the 19th century the distribution of contraceptives was illegal. It must have been almost impossible for a woman to find a contraceptive then.

Andrea Tone: No, not at all, because what happens after the Comstock Act becomes law in 1873, is that women and men continue to have sex and do not have to deal with the consequence of having children as a result. If we look at medical literature from this time, if we look at the letters and diaries of women who are really desperate to limit their family size, we see plenty of references to a very robust, flourishing trade in black-market birth control.

Tukufu: So what contraceptive options were there?

Andrea: They had something like this: a lemon that would have been halved and inserted, and the actual juice would have neutralized sperm – or so it was said. Various cervical caps and diaphragms over here, and IUDs that would have been quite popular in the 19th century. These are the 19th century models.

Tukufu: Now, I have this box, which contained a device, and it still has a description of that device right in here. "Gray's Recurrent Syringe." What do you think about that?

Andrea: Well, it's interesting because we see a reference to a very long tube, a special or large tube, suggesting that it "could be used to wash out secretions," which could be code for sperm, "from the mouth of the womb," so close to the cervix where you don't want that sperm passing through. And then you have also a reference to cocoa butter, olive oil, and Vaseline, which in this time period connoted certain contraceptive ingredients, so they were associated with the contraceptive trade.

Tukufu: So this could be a contraceptive device. Does that mean Molly broke the law?

Andrea: No, manufacturers were really very savvy about ways to protect themselves from criminal suspicion. So within the loopholes that were available to them, they continued to supply various contraceptive products, but they did clever things, like they disguise their products using euphemisms that shield themselves and their products from any suspicion. Here I have a copy of some of the pages from the 1902 edition of the Sears, Roebuck Catalog. So, for instance, if you look at this syringe, it says that this particular model is "highly recommended to married ladies." Now, "married" is about as close a clue as a reader can get to "being sexually active," because in the late 19th century, unmarried women aren't supposed to be having sex. So the fact that this is for married women meant that this is really a device that a woman having sex can benefit from.

Tukufu: So it's very likely that she purchased this legally, but we still can't say for sure that she bought it for contraceptive purposes.

Andrea: I think to answer that question conclusively, we'd have to learn a lot more about Molly herself.

Elyse: As I read through the rest of Molly's letters, I am taken to the beginnings of her married life. In 1893, she married an older man, a local farmer named John. They began having children almost immediately. But Molly soon contracted tuberculosis, greatly increasing the risk of complications during childbirth. Here, she's writing to her sister after the loss of her fourth child. "If I could just have kept my baby, I don't think I will ever be satisfied until I have another baby in my arms. But I do dread the nine months." How sad. Poor Molly. She clearly loves having children, but they seem to be taking a terrible toll on her health. I wonder if she decides she needs a birth-control option despite this passion for children. I need some help deciphering these letters. I'm meeting with Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz. She's a professor of American studies at Smith College. Helen specializes in 19th century American attitudes towards sexuality. Helen, you know that we have this 19th century box, owned by an educated, middle-class woman named Molly. And we know that this syringe that would have been in the box could have been used for birth-control purposes. I'm trying to figure out if Molly would have used this syringe for contraception.

Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz: Yeah, that's a very interesting question. Uh, there are some moments in the letters we could look at that might get us somewhere.

Elyse: Helen reads from a letter written by Molly to her sister-in-law, Etoila.

Helen: "Tell you we're all so glad you are getting along so well with increase of your family. But if a mistake should be made, as it often does after people gets married, before you both get ready, don't allow yourselves to even try to make a miscarriage."

Elyse: Hmm.

Helen: So, what's interesting about this, the increase of the family is their marriage. A mistake should be made, that would be, I guess, an unwanted pregnancy.

Elyse: Right.

Helen: And she urges her sister-in-law not to try to have -- to have an abortion because of the terrible consequences to these . . .

Elyse: So Molly was at least aware that there was an unpleasant option, having an abortion, for women who wanted to limit their pregnancies. What else did you find?

Helen: Well, the most interesting letter, to me, is the one that is written by Rachel, Molly's mother, and she writes it to Etoila. It's at a very hard time in all their lives because Molly has just given birth and she's dying of tuberculosis or consumption.

Elyse: Mm-hmm.

Helen: And she's writing to Etoila, who has twins at this point, and she says to her, "Etoila, I hope you will wait three or four years before you have any more." And so what this suggests to me is that Rachel, Molly's mother, is someone who really does think that a couple needs to think about whether they want to have children.

Elyse: Do you think Molly could have used this device as birth control? I can't wait to tell Krista what Helen told me next. Tukufu and I are back in Georgia to let Krista know what we've discovered. We tell her that in

the late 19th century, manufacturers made products that had a dual purpose. They had a legal use as a feminine hygiene product and a second purpose as a contraceptive device. So, although Molly's syringe could have been used for birth control, purchasing and owning it wasn't illegal.

Krista: Oh, I'm really glad to know that Molly was not doing something illegal. Didn't seem to fit with what I have read about her. Because she seemed like a good mother, a good citizen, pretty concerned, churchgoing and all that, so I'm glad to know that. But yet, it's really interesting to see that they were aware of birth control, and I didn't know that they would have really even had that kind of a knowledge back then.

Elyse: We knew at the time that this was a contraceptive device, but what we didn't know was, would Molly have used this device? So we took your pieces to a historian at Smith College of American Studies, and she really felt that your letters were able to help us answer the question: Would Molly have been using this device for contraceptive purposes?

Helen: In a family where a mother writes to the next generation about limiting birth, Molly writes to her own sister-in-law about the dangers of abortion and the possibilities of not being ready for a child. Yes, I think it is very possible that she was using the syringe for birth-control purposes.

Krista: Thank you so much.

Tukufu: It's been our pleasure.

Krista: Oh, the information is fantastic.

Elyse: Well, it was a lot of fun.

Krista: Quite enjoyable. Learned a lot as well.

Elyse: Over a five-year period, beginning in 1893, Molly Stevenson gave birth every 18 months. As her health worsened, however, she didn't get pregnant for several years. In 1903, she began having children again. On September 8, 1905, just eight weeks after the birth of her fifth and final child, Molly died of tuberculosis at the age of 30.