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Fannie's Flirtations: Etiquette, Reality And the Age of Choice

by Sue Lynn StoneMcDaniel

Looking back on his youth during the last decade of the nineteenth century, American author Henry Seidel Canby entitled the period "the age of confidence." Canby depicted a society with "a free association of boys and girls in their teens and early twenties that perhaps never has existed on the same plane elsewhere in the history of the world."¹ In Canby's world the "right" girls won their lifemates through comradeship, good spirits, character, and beauty; "high-sexed" girls controlled their responses, carefully concealing interests in any behavior not deemed "pure" by their peers, or "lost caste." Females could flirt, "but one hint of the sexual made her 'common,' which was only one word above vulgar."² Stating that after age thirty the members of this society "consisted only of husbands and wives," Canby emphasized home as "the most impressive experience in life" and omitted all mention of spinsters.³ Although born into the world Canby was vividly describing, the vivacious, intelligent, and attractive Fannie Morton Bryan of Russellville, Kentucky, and many of her contemporaries who actively participated in the social world of courtship would have found no home.

Yet, Canby's perceptions mirrored the contemporary writings available to Bryan and other late nineteenth-century adolescents. Articles in the *Ladies Home Journal*, and other popular magazines, warned of the dangers of flirting and the nonchalance with which young ladies spoke of their engagements. Such articles would have their readers believe that to flirt was to turn "from the vocation of a sweet and gracious woman to become that odorous creature – an accomplished flirt."⁴ Reading decorum manuals and works of fiction of the day, young middle-class readers learned that every aspect of a young woman's activities was open to inspection. From her greeting of

¹Henry Seidel Canby, "Sex and Marriage in the Nineties," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (September 1934), 428.

²*Ibid.*, 428-30; idem, *The Age of Confidence: Life in the Nineties* (New York, 1934), 91.

³Canby, *Confidence*, 50, 93.

⁴Felicia Holt, "Why Is Flirting Wrong?" *Ladies Home Journal* (November 1890), 6. See also "Broken Engagements," *ibid.* (October 1888), 9; "The Dangers of Flirting," *ibid.* (December 1885), n.p.; Rev. F. E. Clarke, "Frivolity and Flirtation," *ibid.* (May 1887), 15; "Girls, Don't Flirt," *ibid.* (September 1888), 10; "Boys and Girls and Marriage," *ibid.* (April 1889), 10; "Is Flirting Wrong?" *Russellville Ledger*, November 25, 1891, 1. The reading of the *Ladies Home Journal* among Russellville youth was documented by comments in the Bethel College publication *The Blue and the Gold*, October 1895. For a comparison to modern popular culture's opinion on flirting, see Rebecca Barry, "Quiz: What Kind of Flirt Are You?" *Seventeen* (August 1994), 106, 112.

acquaintances on the street to any demonstrations of anger or laughter, a young lady must conform to the code or detract from her femininity.⁵ While admitting that remaining single was more agreeable than living in a bad marriage, advice columnists largely favored marriage and motherhood as the path to happiness.

In his monograph *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (1980), Carl Degler challenged late nineteenth-century writings and Canby's view as unrealistically depicting the era's courtship. Only in urban upper-class families was courtship "formal, excessively restrictive, or even chaperoned." Elsewhere couples engaged in late-night courting, in which kissing and caressing transpired until the early morning hours. Degler recognized the difficult role of single women in an age which expected marriage of each female, yet he informed his readers that more women born between 1860 and 1880 did not marry than in any other period between 1835 and 1980 (between 10 and 11.1 per cent). To Degler, spinsters who rejected matrimony by choice or default were women without a place in their society. While noting the culture's obsession with a maiden's virtue, Degler and other historians revealed that Bryan and other late nineteenth-century females had difficult choices to make concerning their romantic encounters and marriage.⁶

Born in 1870 and the third of four children, Fannie Morton Bryan grew up in Russellville, a south-central Kentucky community boasting two thousand residents. Her father owned a dry goods store. Vivacious and fun loving, Fannie enjoyed a carefree childhood in the small but culturally rich community and participated in the church socials, picnics, parties, and civic events of her day. Much of her time she spent at Logan Female College, a prestigious primary and secondary school for young ladies owned and operated by the Methodist Episcopal Church,

⁵Amelia E. Barr, "Conversational Immoralities," *North American Review* (April 1890), 462; John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York, 1990), 54, 121, 124, 143, 156-58, 161, 180. For other discussions of the genre, see Esther B. Aresty, *The Best Behavior* (New York, 1970), and Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore, 1988). For a particularly interesting discussion of street etiquette, see Guy Szuberla, "Ladies, Gentlemen, Flirts, Mashers, Snoozers, and the Breaking of Etiquette's Code," *Prospects* (1990), 169-96. For a British study on Victorian fiction, see Judith Rowbotham, *Good Girls Make Good Wives: Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford, 1989).

⁶Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York, 1980), 19-23, 152-53, 159. See also Peter Uhlenberg, "Cohort Variations in Family Life Cycle Experience of U. S. Females," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 36 (1974): 286. For a clear definition of society's expectations, see: Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820 - 1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-74; Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920's* (New York, 1977), 73; Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America*, 2d ed. (Baltimore, 1986), 7-8; Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago, 1970), 23-26, 54-57.

South. There she studied the usual curriculum and in the upper grades attended classes in elocution, literature, algebra, trigonometry, geology, history, and political economy. She also may have enrolled in special art, music, and china-painting classes and probably belonged to the school's literary society. The teachers at Logan took pride in providing for the moral as well as mental development of their charges. The school brochure explained that its faculty "would rather make women strong in moral influence and substantial, mental culture, than to turn out numerous butterflies, who for a day dazzle the eyes of fashionable society by the glitter of superficial polish."⁷ Requiring simple dress and plain jewelry, the college limited visitors of the boarding students to the immediate family, uncles and aunts, or married friends. The catalog advised pupils to "rise above the mass of your sex who . . . flirt to the disgust of sensible boys" and "marry worthless dudes."⁸ Certainly, this school was not interested in training coquettes!

Six months after her June 1888 graduation from Logan Female College, eighteen-year-old Bryan began the first of two diaries that documented many of her thoughts and activities during the next six years. She sometimes neglected the journals, and often months passed unrecorded. In many ways, she teased her diary in a manner similar to her flirtations with her suitors; while professing that her diary was her truest confidante, she deliberately chose not to put "on paper" certain details essential to a totally accurate assessment of her opinions and actions.⁹ Like most diarists, Bryan left many questions unanswered.

The 1880s and 1890s were particularly difficult years in which to be an adolescent female. Young women were simultaneously being urged to be "independent" and to adhere strictly to the codes of etiquette. For a few years

⁷Russellville *Herald*, June 29, 1887; Russellville *Herald & Enterprise*, December 21, 1887; *Logan County Union*, May 13, 20, 27, June 17, 24, July 1, August 12, September 2, November 11, 1891; Edward Coffman, *The Story of Russellville: A Short History of the Town of Russellville, Logan County, Ky.* (Russellville, Ky., 1931); *Kentucky State Gazetteer and Business Directory for 1876-7* (Louisville, 1876), 472, 474; *Gardner & Gaines' Russellville Directory, for 1876-77*, 51; *Register and Announcement of Logan Female College, 1885-1886*, 4, 10, Logan Female College Special File, Kentucky Library, Department of Library Special Collections, Western Kentucky University (hereafter Library Special Collections); Annual Concert and Elocutionary Contest of the Logan Female College programme, June 1, 1886, *ibid.* Anne Firor Scott noted that as the century progressed, boarding schools increasingly "emphasized correct female behavior more than intellectual development." See Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 7.

⁸*Register and Announcement of Logan Female College, 1885-1886*, 15, 17, 18. For an account of local male efforts to thwart the restrictions, see Rena Milliken interview with the Reverend and Mrs. Edward Coffman, October 17, 1977, Milliken Collection, Manuscripts, Library Special Collections.

⁹Fannie Morton Bryan Diaries, January 1 - March 16, 1889, July 15, 1889 - January 24, 1895, Fannie Morton Bryan Collection, Manuscripts, Library Special Collections (hereafter FMB Diary).

following her education, a female spent her days assisting her mother, visiting and receiving guests, playing instruments, going to social events, and perfecting her charms on the men of her acquaintance prior to the arrival of the lover who would claim her as his bride. Parents saw these unwed years as the young females' time to amuse herself; marriage and its cares would come later. While believing experience in the working world was profitable for young females, even feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman held that "all girls ought to [marry] unless there is something wrong with them."¹⁰ Yet as early as 1855, *The Young Lady's Counselor* called a bad marriage "the acme of earthly wretchedness."¹¹ As the century progressed, marriage was becoming a choice and not an obligation. But, in 1890, the majority of females usually married at age twenty-two, while males wedded at age twenty-six.¹²

In February 1891, the *North American Review* ran an article giving three general causes for the rising disfavorable view of marriage: philanthropy, higher education, and self-analysis. Having observed mothers whose marriages had left them unhappy servants to men who married for a home rather than a wife, many late-nineteenth century daughters did not hasten into lifetime commitments. The view of the wedding day as the end of playful courtship and the beginning of relentless work juxtaposed against new attitudes toward women in wage-earning occupations certainly gave young women reason to consider their life course carefully.¹³

Into this period of choice, Fannie Bryan stepped confidently. As if oblivious of possible strictures from her contemporaries, Bryan bragged on the first page of her diary, "he is a little flirt but he found out he had met his match in me."¹⁴ Bryan certainly enjoyed the attention of male callers, complaining in jest that they "actually don't give me time to breathe."¹⁵ Of one of her favorite callers from nearby Bethel College, a private academy for young men known for academic excellence, she wrote, "I wonder if he is flirting. I guess he is for he has told me he didn't

¹⁰Szuberla, "Ladies, Gentlemen, Flirts. . .," 179; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (Urbana, 1972; orig. pub. 1903), 270-71. An outstanding American author and lecturer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman Stetson first became known for her efforts to improve labor conditions and for her interest in the advance of women through her lectures on economics, sociology, and ethics in the 1890s.

¹¹Mary Roberts Coolidge, *Why Women Are So* (New York, 1972; orig. pub. 1912), 13-14, 16-17; Gilman, *The Home*, 255-57; Daniel Wise, *The Young Lady's Counselor* (Cincinnati, 1855), 237-38.

¹²Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful*, 66; Uhlenberg, "Cohort Variations in Family Life Cycle Experience," 287.

¹³Kate Gannett Wells, "Why More Girls Do Not Marry," *North American Review* (February 1891), 175-81; Rebecca Harding Davis et. al., "Are Women to Blame?" *ibid.* (May 1889), 633, 638.

¹⁴FMB Diary, January 2, 1889.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, January 25, 1889.

love me not in so many words of course. Two can play at the same game but is naturally sweet.”¹⁶ Confirming her suspicion that he was not in love through a sermon given to a crowded church – the Reverend Mr. Hall said the “Bethel boys were in love but Wood Griffin was an exception” – Bryan told her diary that Griffin would pay for his defiance. “I can flirt,” she wrote, “about as well as you can and from this on we will see who will come out victors.”¹⁷

Throughout 1889, Bryan’s diary entries evinced her confidence in her ability to gain the attention and admiration of the young men she knew. Of one beau she wrote, “He says he will never get down on his knees to me but I bet he will in spirit if not in deed or else I don’t know how to work such schemes.”¹⁸ Eleven days later, Bryan declared a gentleman to be “treading on dangerous ground” by saying she could not make him love her. Her ability to toy with the affections of beaus was obvious early in her writings. She boasted how she had told one suitor that she did not care anything for him, while in the same entry penned of another, “I guess he thinks I am a hard case but I am only full of mischief and fun.”¹⁹ Standing on Lover’s Bridge in Russellville, Bryan counted her former sweethearts whom she still believed were in love with her.²⁰

Despite the admonitions of etiquette manuals and popular literature, mention of flirting was everywhere, even in the song lyrics which one of Bryan's admirers requested that she sing as they strolled on a lovely March day in 1889. The first verse told of a walk during which a young suitor to his anguish heard, “I never dreamed you loved me, Never thought that you'd even care.” The second verse described a man broken, old and indifferent, while the flirt remained “a lovely winsome lady” with a “daunting face.”²¹ Other song titles of the day include “Sweet black-eyed flirt,” “Flirting at the fair”; “. . . in the cars,” “. . . in the park,” “. . . in the starlight,” “. . . on our block,” “. . . on skates,” “. . . on the beach,” “. . . on the ice,” and “Flirting on the sly.”²²

¹⁶*Ibid.*, February 15, 1889. For additional information on Bethel College, see Milliken interview.

¹⁷*FMB Diary*, February 24, 1889.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, January 29, 1889.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, February 10, 1889, January 26, 1889.

²⁰*Ibid.*, February 16, 1889.

²¹This sheet music is found at the Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University. Bessie Jena Kirby, arranger, "Flirting" (Nashville, Tenn., 1896).

²² KWIC Index: Music Copyrights, 1870-1883, Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, 227-28.

An exception to the usual admonitions was an 1860 article in *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* which encouraged girls to flirt as an opportunity to exhibit their qualifications as wives. Locally, an article in Bethel College's *The Blue and The Gold* took a much lighter view of the subject, calling flirtation a pleasant pastime that should not be ended.

Flirtation sweetens common places and the silliest nothings become eloquence in its enchanted atmosphere; and though some should suffer in the game by reason of inexperience or sensitiveness, shall the many be sacrificed for the benefit of the few?²³

The article warned its readers that “some personages pass their leisure in a perpetual carnival of flirtation, ‘no sooner off with the old love than they are on with the new.’”²⁴ The conclusion remained that, although a difficult game to interpret, it was worthy of pursuit.²⁵

But most literary sources persistently warned against the dangers of flirting. In 1892, the Russellville newspaper published an article by poet and advice columnist Ella Wheeler Wilcox entitled “Why Is It? That Men Say They Have No Use For Flirts And Then Turn Around And Marry Them.” Wilcox stated that men admired a woman full of “go,” but that misdirected “go” “caused many girls to become flirts.” Wilcox believed marriage to be the ultimate goal of every female. For her, the greatest danger of flirting was

If she marries a man that she loves, every indiscreet act and every familiar attention she has received from other men during her flirting days will be little drops of gall in her cup of sweets. And if she does not love the man she marries, surely she is not to be envied, for she is very likely to continue her flirtations after marriage.²⁶

Wilcox concluded, “Avoid flirting, my dear girls, but cultivate ‘go!’” In her 1899 book entitled *Men, Women and Emotions*, Wilcox surmised that flirts were often seen as depraved and lost their good name without inspiring a great love. Wilcox explained that a man “likes a spice of coquetry in a woman, but he does not like the

²³*Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* (July 1860), 80-81; *The Blue and the Gold* (May 1896), 15.

²⁴*The Blue and the Gold*, 16.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 17.

²⁶ Russellville *Ledger*, February 24, 1892. Wilcox published frequently on this subject. See also *Ladies Home Journal* (March, April 1889).

absolute flirt. He may pursue her, but it is for amusement, not from admiration.”²⁷ In *The Relation of the Sexes*, Eliza B. Duffey identified idleness and vanity as characteristics which led a certain class of women to “handkerchief flirtations” with handsome strangers. To Duffey, ultrafashionable social butterflies, “flitting from pleasure to pleasure” without care or responsibility, were destined to prostitute themselves.²⁸

As much as Bryan enjoyed their company, she apparently did not trust the men she knew. Appearances could be deceiving; Bryan noted in her diary her irritation at the guys’ miscalculations of the knowledge of their female companions. Herein lies evidence that Bryan did not agree with the double standard regarding male/female sexuality so prevalent in her day. Accompanying a bridal party to Nashville, Bryan noticed the number of “fancyhouses” near the hotel and wrote “may be the boys didn’t think we caught but we did just the same.”²⁹ Perhaps the most perplexing of her entries was written on March 6, 1889.

Two years ago! How well I remember. From that day on my eyes were opened. I enjoyed life as the butterflies. Those few months were the happiest of my life and I shall never forget them.

Experience is a bitter teacher though a good one. Boys are ‘whited sepulchers.’ But gentle or they might here [*sic*] me.³⁰

During the time Bryan admitted her inability to decide between so many men, she described herself as having been “half way engaged . . . for several years” to John Nichaus of Evansville, Indiana. Describing him as “quite a dude,” she stated her uncertainty about their relationship. When Nichaus was angry with her, Bryan declared, “May be he will get in a good humor some day but if he don’t I don’t guess anybody will cry.”³¹

Even Bryan’s choice of description indicated her carefree attitude. The August 1887 *Ladies Home Journal* had a strict warning.

²⁷Ella Wheeler Wilcox, *Men, Women and Emotions* (Chicago, 1899), 71, 79.

²⁸Mrs. E. B. Duffey, *The Relation of the Sexes* (New York, 1974; orig. pub. 1876), 129-34.

²⁹FMB Diary, February 27, 1889.

³⁰*Ibid.*, February 27, March 6, 1889.

³¹*Ibid.*, January 27, 1889.

Don't marry a dude. Better get you a monkey. It is cheaper and a great deal nicer. Don't fool with that class of animals. They generally wear a \$10 hat on a ten cent brain, and the woman who takes one of these chaps will get left about as bad as the southern confederacy did at Appomattox.³²

In the same entry in which she wrote of Lover's Bridge, she penned of her relationship with Nichaus: "I wonder how it will all end at last."³³ And a week later, Bryan mused, "Which shall it be, which shall it be. Heaven help me make this final decision concerning earthly things."³⁴

Very seldom did Bryan encounter open hostility as the result of her game, but in February 1889 Mot Williams, with whom she was earlier tempted to fall in love, called her "all kinds of heartless names." After taking them back, he wanted a goodnight kiss, "but I was obstinate for 'I am not built that way. Mot, I never kiss the boys but I suppose you have found that out by this time.'"³⁵

Yet to Bryan, flirting remained simply a game in which the young ladies of her community participated. She intended no harm. During summer break from Bethel College, callers were abundant at the Bryan household: "Henry says there are too many boys down here for him. I can't help it you know."³⁶ The summer of 1889 found Bryan attending Ladies' Aid Society meetings, college entertainments, camp meetings, parties, and dances, yet commenting frequently on monotony and the length of her father's absence. Her closest friend and cousin, Lena Raetz, was steadily dating Phil Andrews and had hinted broadly to Bryan that three was a crowd at the sulfur well. Unable to go to Evansville to see John Nichaus without Raetz, Bryan confessed that she suffered from depression, yet told no one.

In August 1889, Bryan joined her father for a weeklong excursion to Niagara Falls. Bryan's vivid description of the trip indicated her love of travel. Of the day they visited the falls, she penned, "The whole day seems like a dream to me for I can't realize that I have seen the greatest wonder on the globe."³⁷ The itinerary

³²"See Here, Girls," *Ladies Home Journal* (August 1887), 11.

³³FMB Diary, February 16, 1889.

³⁴*Ibid.*, February 23, 1889.

³⁵*Ibid.*, February 28, 1889.

³⁶*Ibid.*, July 15, 1889. Henry Leland Trimble (1869-1947) graduated from Bethel College in 1887 and later served as their librarian and military department commandant.

³⁷*Ibid.*, August 21, 1889. Bryan was a regular participant in the Ladies Aid Society. Methodist historian Ronald A. Brunger considered such community and local church constituency service

included a day at the Chautauqua, where they heard music and a debate on trusts. By the 1890s, as many as one hundred thousand visitors participated in the summer festival of education, entertainment, and culture held at Lake Chautauqua, New York. The 1892 program included 130 lectures, 10 musical recitals, 20 concerts, 4 evenings of fireworks, and baseball games, plus bicycle and athletic competitions. Although originating as a Methodist Sunday-school teachers conference, the Chautauqua maintained a free platform for formal debates and lectures. University professors, ministers, and other famous orators' favorite topics included evolution, national unity, and temperance and prohibition. Bryan's brief exposure in 1889 must have whetted her appetite, for in years to come she became a regular summer participant.³⁸

The fall of 1889 found Bryan immersed in music lessons, church events, aid society activities, lectures, and teaching. Only the latter was unmentioned in her diary. Visiting Evansville for twelve days, she received numerous callers, attended the opera, and dined in the homes of friends.³⁹

Bryan's flirting sometimes had disastrous results. Perhaps her most desperate words resulted from her knowledge that an old sweetheart was suffering. In "The Art of Coquetry," Gertrude Lynch found a woman's heart as distinguishing a flirt from a coquette. Lynch postured that, although all females had "the spirit of coquetry latent or forgotten in their hearts," a true coquette cared not for her victims' feelings, while a flirt's heart could dissuade her from premeditated actions.⁴⁰ Writing that discussions with Winlock Morris about his love for her were impossible to avoid, as a true "flirt," Bryan bemoaned her inability to reciprocate his adoration and choose him from among her suitors: "O God why should I be an instrument of torture to one I have loved so well all my life."⁴¹

After visiting with her fiancé Nichaus in early October 1889, she referred to Wood Griffin as her "husband" whom she loved "more and more everyday but I don't tell John [Nichaus] about it."⁴² A month later, when Nichaus paid Bryan a surprise November visit, she wrote,

organizations as very important to Methodism between the Civil War and 1940. See Brunger, "The Ladies Aid Societies In Michigan Methodism," *Methodist History* 5 (1967): 31.

³⁸FMB *Diary*, August 26, 1889; James H. McBath, "The Emergence of Chautauqua as a Religious and Educational Institution, 1870-1900," *Methodist History* 30 (1981): 7-11; *Chautauqua Assembly Herald*, August 5, 1892, in McBath, *ibid.*; Logan Female College catalog, 1905-1906, 13.

³⁹FMB *Diary*, September 1 - October 3, 1889.

⁴⁰Gertrude Lynch, "The Art of Coquetry," *Cosmopolitan* (March 1904), 603, 605.

⁴¹FMB *Diary*, November 1, 1889.

⁴²*Ibid.*, October 4, 1889.

He loves me above all others I know. . . . He begged me to marry him next fall but I don't want to marry yet awhile. I will cling to my idol as long as possible. When he [Griffin] leaves Russellville then I will also.⁴³

After meeting with that “idol” later that evening, Fannie admitted that her suitors were making her nearly crazy.⁴⁴

Her idol was Wood Griffin, a Bethel College ministerial student from Owensboro. For months, she struggled with this relationship, unable to figure it out. In January 1889, Griffin lectured her on dancing, and she disagreed “just to get him to fuss.”⁴⁵ Months later, he amused her by accepting a glass of wine after first refusing it. Perhaps her knowledge of other boys’ vices was her attraction to Griffin. In May 1889, as she noticed that Griffin was emotionally drifting away from her in search of a new love, she expressed concern that he “is so pure that none of these boys are good enough for him to go with.”⁴⁶ When Griffin returned to school that fall, she lamented that their greeting did not match in manner their actions at his departure for summer break. Her conclusion simply stated, “But he has changed as all things change, Nothing in this world can last.”⁴⁷

Always eager for a new conquest, Bryan accepted a Christmas present from Bethel College student Ernest Bradshaw and wrote, “I am almost tempted to flirt with him. O Fan! Fan! why can't you behave yourself. What do you want to make the boys suffer for. I try to help it but it seems second nature with me to make others suffer. I almost feel as though that was my mission on earth.”⁴⁸

Despite her carefree attitudes and her success as a primary department schoolteacher, nineteen-year-old Bryan was restless from time to time. “I feel like I ought to be doing something but nothing presents itself to me,” she wrote. “But I must be filling my mission on earth or God would send me elsewhere.”⁴⁹

Even her interest in Griffin included reservations. Bryan realized that her love for him was futile “for I was never cut out for a missionary’s wife yet I could go with him anywhere if my health would permit.”⁵⁰ When Griffin

⁴³*Ibid.*, November 25, 1889.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, January 27, 1889.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, April 30, December 24, 1889. On many other occasions, Bryan wrote of Griffin’s goodness; see February 23, September 3, November 1, 25, 1889.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, September 3, 1889.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, December 25, 1889.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, August 1, 1889.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, October 24, 1889.

asked if she would like to have six children, she “felt like telling him I wouldn’t mind it so very much if they were already here but I would not like to perform that important office for six.”⁵¹ Although childbirth was considered an essential part of womanhood, young maidens were completely sheltered from knowledge of its physical realities; pregnancy was concealed from polite society. In *Why Women Are So*, Mary Roberts Coolidge concluded, “After overhearing the painful details of the discomforts of pregnancy and of agonizing childbirth, they could not help [but] look forward to marriage with fear.”⁵² Perhaps the copy of *The Marriage Guide, or Natural History of Generation; A Private Instructor, . . . In Every thing Concerning The Physiology . . . And Production or Prevention of Offspring* which was in the Bryan home had provided Bryan with enough information on which to base her concerns about childbirth.⁵³ In 1876, advice author Eliza B. Duffey criticized her peers who did not limit the number of children produced in their marriages. Speaking of women “who are deliberately and pitilessly murdered by their husbands,” Duffey concluded that the strain of childbirth and caring for a large family deprived these women of the prime of their lives and left them “decrepid and aged . . . in a premature senility.”⁵⁴

Kissing was another subject with which Bryan chose to tease both her suitors and her diaries. After a playful day with a beau, he asked for a kiss goodbye, “but I didn’t see it in that light for ‘I really can’t do it you know.’”⁵⁵ She added that if she did it once he would want her to keep it up and she didn’t care about spoiling him. Arriving in Evansville to visit her fiancé, she was perturbed that her hostess acted like a spy and thus prevented her from kissing Nichaus. At her departure, she kissed Nichaus publicly in the train, but justified it, saying the other passengers knew neither of them. When her old sweetheart Win Morris was distraught over her failure to reciprocate his love, she commented, “He has kissed and loved me nearly to death.”⁵⁶ A week later when Mot Williams visited: “He went away mad (as usual) because I would not kiss him.”⁵⁷ As Fannie matured, her thinking on the subject of

⁵¹*Ibid.*, December 24, 1889. Ella Wheeler Wilcox admonished her readers that although men might consider children a great bore, they would shrink from a woman who declared a dislike for them. Wilcox, *Men, Women and Emotions*, 83.

⁵²Coolidge, *Why Women Are So*, 122.

⁵³Frederick Hollick, *The Marriage Guide*. . . . 200th ed. (New York, 1860). The volume was given to the Kentucky Library at Western Kentucky University as part of the Fannie Morton Bryan estate.

⁵⁴Duffey, *Relation of the Sexes*, 247-48.

⁵⁵FMB Diary, August 5, 1889.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, August 5, September 21, October 3, November 1, 1889.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, November 8, 1889.

kissing apparently changed. By age twenty-three, she wrote that, although she wanted to kiss a certain gentleman, she feared she might shock him.⁵⁸ Within the guidelines set by the decorum manuals, this attitude toward kissing was quite progressive.

Advice columnists warned that only a fiancé should be allowed to put his arms around his intended and kiss her, but even then a proper young lady should “be a little stingy” with her favors. Other manuals took even a stricter viewpoint, discussing whether “the prudent and modest maiden should not even allow her lover, (even after their engagement), to kiss her.”⁵⁹ The *Logan County Union* published advice letters which took a more liberal stand on kissing, provided that the recipient was “a nice young man and does not chew or smoke or drink, and takes you out twice or thrice a week to eat ice cream.”⁶⁰ The writers were not only concerned with controlling sexuality, but also preserving public dignity. Social historian John Kasson concluded, “A 1905 book of etiquette for young people summarized the bulk of generations of advice when it firmly declared: ‘It is not well-bred to kiss any one on the street, even a baby.’”⁶¹

Like most diarists of the period, Bryan concealed exactly what types of actions she deemed acceptable prior to marriage. Beginning with the earliest entries in her diary, she did document that callers were allowed to stay late into the night, that couples were allowed complete privacy in a separate room, and that, on occasion, men “made love” to her if she was feeling “sentimental.” In May 1894, when the serenaders saw her and a guest through a back window, a mortified Bryan wrote, “To think how carefully we have guarded our secret and then for those boys to find it out that way.” Although Bryan never spelled out the limitations she placed on her amorous actions, the diaries clearly revealed her need for privacy and her concern about her peers’ opinions.⁶²

On several occasions she toyed with the idea of marriage, but seemed to conclude that her interest would fade as days passed. Serving as a bridesmaid in February 1889, she penned, “That is as near as I ever expect to

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, April 18, 1894.

⁵⁹“Behavior Towards A Sweetheart,” *Ladies Home Journal* (June 1890), 10; “A Few Don’ts For Girls,” *ibid.* (May 1891), 12; Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 162.

⁶⁰*Logan County Union*, June 17, 1891.

⁶¹Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 162; “Kissing in Public” *Ladies Home Journal* 2 (May 1885), n.p.

⁶²FMB Diary, January 7-12, 18, February 27, 28, March 1, July 20, 25, September 3, 1889, June 1, 14, July 4, 1890, May 4, 1894.

be.”⁶³ Her interest in Griffin made her long for him instead of her fiancé, Nichaus. Declaring her honest efforts to be true to Nichaus, she still was forced to conclude, “I respect John and could live contented with him but I know that I don't love with such a love as they say exists.”⁶⁴

Ironically, it was her feelings for Allen Sandidge, not Wood Griffin, which later convinced her to break her engagement with John Nichaus. Bryan's justification was that no one else held for her such charm. Her diaries recorded no adverse effect on her social calendar resulting from the broken engagement. As her fiancé lived in Evansville, Indiana, her Bethel College suitors may have never been informed of Bryan's engagement, despite the ring which Nichaus gave her on July 15, 1889.⁶⁵

Bryan's handling of her engagement is another indication of her unwillingness to follow prescribed etiquette of the day. In the November 1888 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, an article entitled “Broken Engagements” stressed the seriousness of ending such a commitment. Engagements should only be broken if the intended was found on further acquaintance to have a serious character flaw, unstable mind or disloyal faith. The author lamented the changing attitude. Rather than a season of retirement, similar to a young widow's mourning, females now “brazen it out, as if she had done no more than promise to go to a picnic and had then thought better of it.”⁶⁶

Lattie Robertson of Bowling Green, some thirty miles northeast of Russellville, also recorded her 1890 activities in a diary. Robertson's entries noted how she filled the majority of her days with visits, “bumming down town,” and receiving callers. By late February 1890, Robertson learned that her favorite beau (and later husband), Phineas Hampton Coombs, planned to move to Texarkana to seek his fortune. Prior to his departure, Robertson asked Coombs to promise to notify her when he jilted her. Although corresponding with Coombs regularly throughout the year, Robertson pursued a very active social life. On several occasions, she penned that callers were giving her the “rush,” in one case, stating that she and the gentleman had “rushed each other.” On November 16, 1890, Robertson made her only reference to kissing: “Mr. Holbrook . . . wanted me to kiss him, said it was no harm.”⁶⁷ Although the relationship between Robertson and Coombs appeared obvious to her circle of Bowling

⁶³*Ibid.*, February 27, 1889.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, November 24, 1889.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, October 2, 1893.

⁶⁶“Broken Engagements,” *Ladies Home Journal* (November 1888), 9.

⁶⁷Lattie Robertson 1890 Diary, Coombs Collection, Manuscripts, Library Special Collections.

Green friends, the number of gentleman callers in Bowling Green, Hopkinsville, Atlanta, and Chattanooga indicated that Robertson's social life did not suffer in Coombs's absence.⁶⁸ Robertson's diary substantiates that middle-class southern Kentuckians expected no more of their recently graduated women than to pass their days in leisure entertainment and courting.

An etiquette book published by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, referred to the recent alumnae's role as a problem. Although allowing for the possibility that a mature single woman could return home, achieve independence through earning her own wages, and bring cheer to her parents' home, the author reminded her readers that "woman's head is the man."⁶⁹ Stressing duty over idleness, girls could pursue vocations, including teaching, so long as they never failed their highest calling as "obedient children, affectionate sisters, loyal wives, devoted mothers!"⁷⁰

During this age of choice for young women, nine ninth-grade female students of the Andrews School, located south of Russellville in Maury County, Tennessee, wrote themes addressing the topic, "What I Propose to Do In Life." Sounding very much like a textbook on the cult of true womanhood, E. Agnes Ussery stated that her "principle [sic] object in life shall be to make home happy." Nettie Irvine penned that, although some would criticize her view as wasting time, her first obligation was to benefit her parents. While joining three 1886 classmates in anticipating choosing a vocation, Mary L. Daniel was the only girl to state openly that she had no intent to marry: "I . . . expect to be quite a charitable old maid and relieve the suffering wherever I can."⁷¹

In the summer of 1891, the local newspaper recorded basket dinners, a lawn party, an ice cream supper, a Rainbow Rock excursion, as well as dances and visits, often listing Bryan and Raetz as participants. The season was inaugurated with the reopening of the Buena Vista Springs resort. Over four hundred invitations were sent to the ball which topped the grandeur of all previous similar events on the premises. Dressed in white gauze over pink silk, Bryan joined the ladies described in the *Logan County Union* as "perfect dreams of loveliness, and the

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹Sarah Tytler, *Papers for Thoughtful Girls, With Sketches of Some Girls' Lives* (Nashville, Tenn., 1875), 7-8.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 9, 42, 182-83, 203.

⁷¹Composition book, Samuel Mayes Arnell Collection, Special Collections, University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville. Three students wrote noncommittal essays.

personification of womanly sweetness, grace, beauty and culture!”⁷² That fall, several of Bryan’s friends enjoyed music, dancing, and a banquet held by the Sigma Nu society of Bethel College.⁷³

Perusing the local newspapers, the most shocking announcement from the perspective of the diary’s record was the marriage of Lena Raetz to Samuel J. Rose on November 24, 1891. Although frequently mentioned between January and March 1889, Rose had left the pages of the diary except in a simple notation of taking him to the train on May 12, 1890. Bryan made no mention of their courtship in her only entry (dated April 9, 1891) between July 31, 1890, and October 2, 1893. In keeping with this silence, the October 2, 1893, entry recorded no information about Bryan’s deposition in the Lena Raetz Rose equity trial, nor the granting of a divorce in May 1893.⁷⁴ Instead, Bryan wrote: “Where is now the merry party I remember long ago. They have changed as all things changes [sic]. Nothing in this world can last.”⁷⁵

After commenting on her neglect of the diary for nearly three years, Bryan stated that her current intent was to update the volume on her friends’ lives.⁷⁶ Although she wrote much about her beaux, no mention was made of Lena Raetz, Sam Rose, or Phil Andrews.

In the 1880s and 1890s, numerous articles addressed the increased number of divorces. According to the *North American Review*, divorces increased twice as fast as marriages between 1870 and 1889. Yet in 1889, the author declared that divorce was still viewed by southerners as disgraceful. Another writer blamed the false perceptions females acquired during courtship as not realistically preparing them for marriage. Feminists argued that rising divorce rates evidenced “progress toward a society where marriage would provide women with love, respect, and individuality.”⁷⁷ Mindful of rural Russellville society’s opinions on divorce, Bryan must have found

⁷²*Logan County Union*, May 13 - September 2, 1891. [The Buena Vista Springs opening described on July 1, 1891.]

⁷³*Ibid.*, November 11, 1891.

⁷⁴*Logan County Union*, November 18, 1891; *Russellville Ledger*, November 25, 1891; FMB Diary, January 1 - March 10, 1889, May 12, 1890; *Lena Rose vs. S. J. Rose*, individually, and *S. J. Rose, administrator of Fredrick Raetz, deceased*, Petition in Equity, Logan Circuit Court Records, Logan County, Kentucky. Between 1889 and 1906, the American divorce rate accelerated rapidly. See Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago, 1980), 2-4.

⁷⁵FMB Diary, October 2, 1893.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷Davis, “Are Women to Blame,” 625, 633, 638; Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 49. See also Margaret Lee and Philip S. Moxom, “Final Words on Divorce,” *North American Review* (February 1890), 263-67.

particularly distasteful her own testimony, along with those of her mother, aunt, and maternal grandmother in Lena Raetz Rose's behalf in January 1893. It is not unlikely that she questioned the ability of a spouse (and in this case, someone she had known personally since childhood) to experience a personality change immediately after marriage. Like most females filing for divorces in her day, Mrs. Rose claimed cruel treatment rather than infidelity as grounds for dissolving the marriage. The diaries' omissions suggest Bryan never approved of Raetz's first marriage. After July 31, 1890, Lena Raetz's name appeared only once more; on April 17, 1894, "Phil and Lena are going to marry in a few days I think."⁷⁸

The subject of marriage was not confined to the private world of Bryan's diary. The local newspapers noted Bryan's attendance of a valentine party under the heading, "The Jolly Sixteen Club Make Love and Woo Mates at Miss Clark's." In a black net and diamond gown, Bryan dined at the A.S.E. Club's initial banquet at the Forst House. On March 30, 1892, the Russellville *Ledger*, under the heading "Egotistical Men," ran a playful story summarizing interviews with four Russellville bachelors. Leap Year's custom of allowing females to propose marriage to their beaux may have been the impetus of the story. Thomas Brizendine admitted that he should marry, but "tut, tut, marrying is for inferior beings." Attorney Tom Rhea stated, "when I thought of the misery brought to light every day in the divorce courts I stood firm." Describing himself as "too noble-natured to live alone," Phil Andrews confessed that he wanted to marry, and that he loved all the girls, "almost any of them will do."⁷⁹ Four years later, the paper noted that a young Russellville man had proposed marriage to eight different girls during the past four years, yet still enjoyed "singleblessedness."⁸⁰

⁷⁸Degler, *At Odds*, 169; Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York, 1929), 122; *Lena Rose vs. S. J. Rose Petition in Equity*; FMB Diary, July 31, 1890 - April 17, 1894. A family Bible recorded Lena Raetz marriage to Philip C. Andrews on April 25, 1894. Bible records, Bryan family file, Vertical Files, Library Special Collections. It is also interesting to note that Lena's name appeared in the March 1894 Bethel College *Blue and Gold* as entertaining a "charming visitor" in her home. Interestingly enough, Raetz's divorce was in line with the majority of late nineteenth-century divorces in which the grounds was not infidelity, but failure to be a responsible family member. For additional information, see Degler, *At Odds*, 165-76. Not until 1928 did the Methodist Episcopal Church rescind its restriction against its ministers remarrying any divorced person save "innocent parties" in adultery-based divorces. See Nolan B. Harmon, Jr., *Is It Right or Wrong?* (Nashville, 1938).

⁷⁹Russellville *Ledger*, February 17, March 16, 30, 1892.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, April 25, 1896.

On October 3, 1893, Bryan penned information concerning the formation of the G.D.M.F. club, with its first entertainment, a popcorn party, scheduled for her home on the following Tuesday night. By January 1894, she declared the G.D.M.F. club “the life of the town this winter.” Her opinion was echoed by the men of Bethel College. In the local newspaper they declared, “Long live the G.D.M.F. is the wish of those who have attended the gatherings.”⁸¹ Although the gentlemen admitted their inability to decipher the meaning of the initials, a secret which its members chose to guard closely, the men determined that the club’s object was to provide enjoyable entertainments.⁸²

A frequent topic in *The Blue and the Gold*, the G.D.M.F. Club informed its readers of a club regulation: “any gentleman desiring to wed one of the fair members of this mystic order should make his proposal before the assembled body.”⁸³ The writer speculated that, if the rule’s intent was to foster foreign interests, the marriage of two members to gentlemen from a distance indicated its success. He concluded his comments with a query from one of the Bethel College professors concerning the penalty for violation of said rule. Bryan never elaborated on the club’s rules except to record that the club “met with Alice this afternoon for the last time. She marries next Wednesday.”⁸⁴ To marry was to lose membership in the G.D.M.F.

If Bryan had looked to the literature published by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for guidance in her decision concerning marriage, the articles published on the topic in 1889, 1892, and 1893 by the *Quarterly Review* would have added to her confusion. The Reverend J. H. Brunner supported the views expressed in the recent publication, *Christian Womanhood*, stating that women were in considerable demand as teachers and that “the world is again being ‘turned upside down’ in her favor.” The January 1892 issue ran “Woman as Bread Winner,” an enthusiastic argument for the merits of free admission of females into all trades and callings to which her sex was fitted. After citing the need by never-married and badly married women to support themselves financially, R. N. Price broadened the basis of the appeal by emphasizing that choice would “furnish the men with the most powerful

⁸¹*Ibid.*, October 3, 13, 1893; January 18, 1894; *The Blue and the Gold*, January 1894. The acronym was never defined in Bryan’s diaries or other local sources. As it was frequently published, modern readers may feel quite confident that it does not equate with late twentieth-century use of those initials.

⁸²*The Blue and the Gold*, January 1894, October 1894.

⁸³*Ibid.*, February 1895. No accounts of such proposals before the club were recorded in the sources available.

⁸⁴FMB Diary, January 9, 1895.

motives to be worthy of [wives].”⁸⁵ Price further argued that the stigma of remaining single and economic necessity forced women to marry for homes rather than for love as a free choice. Yet, this author claimed to be conservative in defining the woman’s sphere of employment, excluding from her choices the ministry, military, surgery, politics, and law as better suited to men. As if speaking directly to Bryan, the essay stated that as a primary department teacher, woman was man’s superior.⁸⁶

If Bryan found solace in this journal, it was short-lived, for the June 1893 issue sharply lashed out at any woman who did not know her work was at home! Ignoring the possibility that some women remained single, S. W. Cope declared that “the desire for marriage . . . [was] innate” and that “all will be well” if women will “be content with their lot in the home and with the work God has given them to do.”⁸⁷

The girl “full of mischief and fun” turned to her diary less and less frequently to record her amorous activities. By age twenty, Bryan already was beginning to be reflective about past days. Despite the passing of time, Bryan’s journals still confirmed her confidence in her ability to maintain the interest of a string of eligible bachelors. In April 1891, Bryan discussed again Ernest Bradshaw, the Arkansas senior who would join the Bethel College English faculty in 1894. Drawing the conclusion that Bradshaw was hers if she said so, she quickly added, “I wouldn’t mind having him if I don’t change my mind.”⁸⁸ While attending the University of Virginia eighteen months later, Bradshaw corresponded with Bryan.⁸⁹

Then, after thirty months of silence, the twenty-two-year-old diarist addressed the marriage question in earnest. Stating that she expected to marry John Edgar Fritzson some day, she remorsefully declared, “the great love of my life has been wasted.” Writing that she had broken her engagement with John Nichaus for Allen Sandidge, Bryan recounted that Sandidge had later told her they “could never marry” and that over a period of many months they had eventually learned to “pass each other as strangers.” Bryan then described her next “victim,” Horace Spooner, an 1893 Bethel graduate from Hillsboro, Texas: “I love Horace better than any other boy and I have told

⁸⁵J. H. Brunner, “‘Womanhood’ and ‘M’Ferrin,’” *Quarterly of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (July 1889), 233; R. N. Price, “Woman As Bread Winner,” *ibid.* (January 1892), 310-22.

⁸⁶Price, “Woman As Bread Winner,” 322, 326.

⁸⁷S. W. Cope, “Marriage and the Home,” *Quarterly of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (July 1893), 263-67.

⁸⁸FMB Diary, April 9, 1891.

⁸⁹*ibid.*; *Russellville Herald and Enterprise*, June 15, 1892.

him so and he . . . wants to make me his wife.” Part of her dilemma was her accurate evaluation of her emotions: “There is no telling how I will feel on the subject a year from now.” In the matter of marriage for love (Spooner) or marriage to the man who can provide the best living (Fritzon), Bryan’s choice rendered her “rather tangled up.” So she quickly added to her confusion by introducing the names of a law student and a medical student who were also in love with her. When she put down her pen on October 2, 1893, Bryan appeared no closer to making her choice of a life mate.⁹⁰

Clearly, the students of Bethel College recognized the desire of their former classmate John Edgar Fritzon to take Bryan back to Arkansas as his bride. Of his Christmas 1893 visit, the student publication proclaimed, “every one knows the mission on which he came and all hope the gentleman success.”⁹¹ Although saying she was “ready to go,” her next words were “but what am I going to do with Horace Spooner.” Bryan corresponded with Spooner while he established his hardware business in Texas. Although writing in her diary that she was “going to try to be true to Jno. Edgar,” she declared herself “so fickle I don’t love any body long at a time.” In August, Sandidge visited for the first time in two years, insisting he loved her as much as ever, but still they remained resolved that they would never marry. In October 1894, Spooner visited for a month and left vowing only to return for their wedding. Bryan’s comment was, “I have got to decide what to do. The boys wont be put off any longer.”⁹² When the Texan returned to Logan County in May and December 1895, *The Blue and the Gold* recorded his presence in the county and announced that Spooner had turned his romantic attentions elsewhere by the latter visit.⁹³

Bryan’s attentions were now set on a man she described as “handsome as a picture and smokes more cigarettes than any body I ever saw.” Herschel Potter dazzled the young ladies of Russellville with his prowess both on the football field and off. Even one of Bryan’s closest friends confided her desire to kiss him! Despite her realization that Potter’s attentions were fleeting, Bryan chose to amuse herself with this latest conquest rather than face the marriage question.⁹⁴

⁹⁰FMB Diary, October 2, 1893.

⁹¹*The Blue and the Gold*, January 1894.

⁹²FMB Diary, January 18, October 17, 1894.

⁹³*Ibid.*, October 17, 1894; *The Blue and the Gold*, February 1894, May 1895, January 1896.

⁹⁴FMB Diary, April 17, 1894.

Two and one-half months later, Bryan wrote of Fritzon's final holiday visit, lamenting that despite her efforts, she could not love Fritzon. "Another year has set in," she wrote, "and I still am unsettled. I wish I knew what to do but I don't."⁹⁵ In her last diary entry, a few days later, Bryan recorded that Fritzon had left to return no more and concluded, "I am all alone now and feel rather lonely. I wonder why I don't want to marry like other girls."⁹⁶

As the years passed, Bryan found that her name appeared less frequently in the newspaper's society notes and Bethel College's *The Blue and the Gold*. On most such occasions, the focus of attention was on Miss Fannie Bryan's guest rather than Bryan herself. The column also noted Bryan's travels either alone or in the company of Lena Raetz Andrews or her mother to visit relatives, attend the carnival, or sojourn at Mammoth Cave. Although her female friends who had chosen to marry still made the local news as hostesses of various entertainments for the younger single population of Russellville, Bryan's name was absent from the guest lists published in the newspaper accounts. It was as if her decision not to marry had displaced her from the circle of friends she loved so much. By 1911, when her marital status no longer remained a question, Logan County society could comfortably include her again, noting in the newspaper her travels, attendance at social events, visitors, and work in the local schools.⁹⁷

Although the term "old maid" never appeared in Bryan's diary, it was a term in the late-nineteenth century Logan County vocabulary. A Logan Female College student Mary Martin pasted in her scrapbook a program from 1895. The entertainment included orchestra selections, songs, recitations, and an "Auction of Old Maids." At age twenty-four, Bryan was one of six single ladies to be auctioned in this event. As barbaric as the event sounds, a similar entertainment occurred at the opera house of Smith's Grove, an affluent community in an adjoining county. The Old Maid's Convention program included the names of seven unmarried females under the heading "Old Maids Rejuvenated." Although still a topic for jest to a girl in her twenties, an article published in an 1874 issue of *The*

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, January 9, 1895.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, January 24, 1895.

⁹⁷*The Blue and the Gold*, December 1894, March 1895; *Russellville Ledger*, July 3, 10, 31, August 21, 1897; October 19, 1899; *Logan County Union*, May 13, 1891 - March 1892; *Logan County News*, October 19, 1899; *Russellville Democrat*, June 14, 1911.

Household had warned females that after the thirtieth birthday, potential suitors would question why no previous male had married the maiden; he would suspect a difficult temperament and have no further association with her.⁹⁸

Perhaps most telling of Bryan's opinion of linking the concept of flirting with "old maids" was a valentine preserved among her possessions:

To My Valentine
The Flirt

With glance of eye and flare of fan,
You labor to attract a man,
And when you get him "on the string,"
You think you've done the proper thing.
Beware! Beware! the game you play
Is apt to bring you grief some day,
For Flirts, whe'er their beauty fades,
Recruit the army of Old Maids!⁹⁹

It was copyrighted in 1902 and signed "one of the victims."¹⁰⁰ The fact that she kept it for sixty years hints that she recognized her struggle for identity between the roles of flirt and old maid.

As previously noted, the population of never-married females peaked during the lifespan of the population born within ten years of Bryan. Yet, while still a minority, spinsters were disproportionately conspicuous and frequently discussed in contemporary literature. As early as mid-century, women's journal writers preferred no marriage to a bad marriage in an effort to remove the stigma from a life as an "old maid." The November 1890 issue of the *Ladies Home Journal* ran a lengthy article entitled "WHY I NEVER MARRIED. BY AN OLD MAID." The author began her discourse by disavowing the notion, particularly popular among females, that unmarried women had never received proposals of marriage. She boldly stated that "every woman in this world who wants to, can marry. It is true, she may not get her ideal; . . . yet that she can marry if she wants is undeniable." The writer's explanation included comments about the character flaws of her rejected suitors, her sense of duty to her aging

⁹⁸Mary Martin Scrapbook, Library Special Collections; D. Dora Nickerson, "Old Maids," *The Household* (August 1874), 189. Attempts to gain additional information on old maid auctions have thus far been fruitless.

⁹⁹Valentine entitled "To the Flirt," copyright 1902, Bryan Collection.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*

parents, and her care of the children which her first suitor's marriage had created and then neglected. Evaluating her life as full and happy, she declared that since age twenty-five, her days had "been full of so much that it seemed my duty to do, that I did not believe that marriage was the main part of my existence."¹⁰¹ Somewhat unusual was the *Good Housekeeping* writer's reminder to educated women that marriage was not their only option: "[A] helpful, independent, self-respecting woman has no need to marry for a home or a protector as a weaker might do."¹⁰²

Ella Wheeler Wilcox considered such arguments for not marrying "positively absurd," declaring "I do not believe the single woman of 30 lives who could not be persuaded to change her lot if the right man urged persistently enough. . . . I say the right man, not any or every man."¹⁰³ Wilcox described women, aged twenty-five to thirty, in her society as "overripe . . . old enough to be sensible and well behaved; but, in fact, that is the very time of life when it is most difficult for an anchored girl to be prudent and reasonable."¹⁰⁴

An essay entitled "Old Maids" which appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in July 1872 declared: The highest type of old maid has made no sacrifice, nor is she in any sense a victim, for marriage as a state is not necessary to her idea of happiness. She is the woman who has never met with her ideal, and who has never been cunningly persuaded to accept anything short of it.¹⁰⁵

Myrtle Reed's *The Spinster Book* warned that of woman's three weapons, flattery, food, and flirtation, the latter would be denied to her by Time. Reed devoted a chapter of the volume to the issue of spinsterhood. Advising against drawing the conclusion that the unmarried woman had never received marriage proposals, she declared it "no disgrace to be a spinster."¹⁰⁶ Listing among the consolations that single women enjoyed was not having to belittle themselves by requesting funds from a husband for domestic necessities, Reed ended her chapter with her greatest hope for the old maid: "The Prince may yet come."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 19; "Why I Never Married. By An Old Maid," *Ladies Home Journal* (November 1890), 4; Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 169. See also "How to be a Happy Old Maid," *Ladies Home Journal* (May 1891), 12.

¹⁰²"'Berkshire' And 'Priscilla,'" *Good Housekeeping* (November 14, 1885), 22.

¹⁰³Wilcox, *Men, Women and Emotions*, 245.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰⁵"Old Maids," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (July 1872), 97.

¹⁰⁶Myrtle Reed, *The Spinster Book* (New York, 1901), 39, 214.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 216-17.

But most literature, including advice manuals and contemporary fiction, constantly suggested that to fulfill their destiny and achieve economic status, women must marry. Otherwise they were pitied. In 1871, one physician wrote that all too often the character of spinsters, as portrayed in common proverbs, was “peevisish, given to queer fancies, and unpleasant eccentricities.”¹⁰⁸ Writing in the late 1890s, Charlotte Perkins Gilman Stetson declared that whereas young men have multiple choices in life, a young woman must achieve all her worldly goods through a “small gold ring.” She believed that boys planned “what they will achieve and attain,” but that girls planned “for whom they will achieve and attain.”¹⁰⁹

In her introduction to a study of unmarried women in the twentieth-century novel, Nina Auerbach recently asserted that

Victorian spinsters were defined by what they could not have. . . . For the respectable middle-class woman who lived out the stereotype of the old maid, allowable work was limited to ill-paid dithering around the fringes of the service professions, while love meant meeting uncomplainingly the demands of aging parents or siblings’ children; attachments outside family, and of course, any assertion of sexuality were tabooed.¹¹⁰

Auerbach cleverly pointed out that the very term “old maid” took away “the long middle of life.” Martha Vicinus, author of *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*, further illustrated the portrait of an unmarried woman as “a vivid picture of time hanging heavily upon a woman confined to a tiny space in the corner of her family home.”¹¹¹ By 1903, Charlotte Perkins Gilman asked, “what real place has a grown woman of twenty-five and upwards in anyone’s else home?”¹¹² This feminist author berated American society for allowing sons to procure care for aging parents, while expecting daughters to render it personally: “to keep the girl at home is

¹⁰⁸Dr. George Napheys, *The Physical Life of Woman: Advice to the Maiden, Wife, and Mother* (Philadelphia, 1871), 290, in Degler, *At Odds*, 152.

¹⁰⁹Charlotte Perkins Stetson, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Boston, 1899), 21, 71, 86-87.

¹¹⁰Nina Auerbach, “Foreword” in Laura L. Doan, ed., *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Urbana, 1991), ix.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, x; Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community For Single Women, 1850-1920* (Chicago, 1985), 13.

¹¹²Gilman, *Home*, 263.

to cut her off from life.” Like most single women, Bryan continued to reside in her parents’ home, moving with them to a new residence in 1893.¹¹³

A review of the 1900 census revealed that Bryan was one of more than 800 women between the ages of twenty and thirty-five in Russellville. Of them, 477 were married, 34 widowed and 312 single. The vast majority of women listed with occupations were single. Although washerwomen, cooks, maids, and servants predominated, seamstresses and teachers were the other two professions most frequently recorded. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, numerous women from the “better” southern homes were entering the teaching ranks.¹¹⁴

Much was said about teaching as a career option for late nineteenth-century women. According to an article in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South’s *Quarterly Review*, 80 per cent of American public schoolteachers in 1892 were women. Although her intent was to explain why more women were choosing not to marry, a writer for the *North American Review* saw the love of children, an essential foundation for a good teacher, as a “stepping stone to marriage,” yet warned that “teachers are very particular about the kind of men they marry.”¹¹⁵ By not waiting at home for marriage, schoolteachers exhibited initiative and self-respect. Should they never marry, these women still rendered themselves useful to a society which had an “immense need for those who have strong childward instincts, and who can be satisfied with vicarious parenthood.”¹¹⁶ By 1900, an article entitled “The Typical Woman of the New South” characterized employed southern women as having acquired “nobler, better and more serviceable qualities” and concluded, “Above all, she has learned, or is fast learning, that to grow is the noblest thing in life.”¹¹⁷

It is difficult to pinpoint when Bryan began her teaching career. News articles written in the 1960s referred to her as Logan County’s youngest teacher to hold a certificate. Although her wording left room for misinterpretation, Bryan recorded her best student for the school years 1887-88 and 1888-89. Extant catalogs from Logan Female College listed Fannie Morton Bryan as principal of the primary school from 1901 to 1908. In

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 263-67; FMB Diary, October 2, 1893; Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900 (Washington, D.C., 1901-2); Degler, *At Odds*, 384.

¹¹⁴Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900 (Washington, D.C., 1901-2); Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 111-12. In 1880, nine of ten professional women were teachers; see Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 32.

¹¹⁵Price, “Woman as Bread Winner,” 325-26; Wells, “Why More Girls Do Not Marry,” 177.

¹¹⁶Coolidge, *Why Women Are So*, 325.

¹¹⁷Julia Magruder, “The Typical Woman of the New South,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (November 3, 1900), 1687.

recording her qualifications, the catalog stated that Bryan was “justly regarded as the finest teacher of children in all this part of the state.”¹¹⁸ Like many other teachers of her generation who felt ill prepared by their academic training, Bryan regularly attended the Chautauqua schools in an effort to learn the best methods and systems of child education. Bryan joined the Russellville city school system in September 1908, teaching fifty-one students that year.¹¹⁹

The easy conclusion that, in a society in which Victorian women had to choose between career and marriage, Bryan chose career is not supported by her diaries. Not only did she not express career aspirations, a review of the diaries in search of evidence of her teaching career revealed only a January 30, 1889, reference identifying Logan Female College students as her “best girl,” “children,” and “grand-children.” As early as August 1889, Bryan had questioned God’s mission for her. Yet even in her discussion about her lack of desire to marry written on January 24, 1895, she never mentioned her work as a teacher.¹²⁰ Like many diarists, Bryan may have chosen not to record her daily teaching experiences as too routine; she consistently noted primarily her feelings of passion concerning beaus. Bryan’s discussions of marriage never included any allusion to its unacceptability due to an all-consuming desire to teach.

After the turn of the century, various magazines sought to redefine the role of single females in society; the *Atlantic Monthly* published “The Change in the Feminine Ideal” (1910), and *Forum* printed “The Day of the Spinster” (1912). Margaret Deland spoke to the restlessness of young women who return from college. No longer willing to occupy their days with helping mother around the house, these young ladies sought to be economically independent of their parents and expressed views on marriage and childbirth that caused their mothers to blush. To Deland, “The sense of individualism, as it expresses itself in the occupations of women, is one of the most interesting

¹¹⁸Logan Female College catalog, 1905-1906, 1901-1902, 1907-1908; Russellville *Democrat*, August 9, 1907; Russellville *News-Democrat*, January 1965.

¹¹⁹FMB Diary, January 30, 1889; Postcards from Bryan while at Chautauqua, N.Y., July 20, 1902, August 17, 1906, and portrait on porch of Longfellow Cottage, Bryan Collection; Logan Female College catalog, 1905-1906, 13; Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 112; Russellville *Democrat*, June 14, 1911; Russellville *News-Democrat*, February 3, 1965; Attendance record, 1908-31, Russellville City Schools, Russellville, Ky. The office lacks its earliest personnel records; thus the attendance record was their only documentation available.

¹²⁰Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 30; FMB Diary, January 30, August 1, 1889, January 24, 1895. Filene, 30, notes that the number of employed adult women more than doubled between 1880 and 1900.

economic facts of our generation.”¹²¹ Anna Garlin Spencer declared, “the spinster, as we now consider her, is that woman who is at the top of the new opportunity, not beneath it.”¹²² Pointing to previous references to marriage as “the frequent refuge for the incompetent woman,” Spencer suggested that continuation of the current advances might result in a breed of intellectually and economically elite women who have left marriage and maternity to the inferior females. Confessing her satisfaction with the growing numbers of women who refused to marry and sought life outside the home, the *Forum*’s author recognized the need for motherhood not to rest solely among the least developed persons. *Why Women Are So* (1912) added that single women “in this better time” were “working out their own ambitions” and “her future is solving itself with encouraging rapidity and ease.”¹²³

Bryan’s students provide the best testimony to the way she spent the remainder of her life. On her ninety-fourth birthday, “Miss Fan” received flowers, gifts, and numerous cards, including many messages from third-generation pupils she had taught first grade. In recounting her memories of Miss Fan, one student remembered how she always greeted each child at the classroom door each morning. At her death in 1965, a county newspaper writer expressed the gratitude of former Russellville pupils, declaring her mission fulfilled: “Learning to read was only one of the arts she taught. Learning to live was paramount with her. Fair play, loyalty, discipline, high ideals and courage, she instilled both by precept and example.”¹²⁴ In addition to her teaching, Bryan was an active lifelong member of the Methodist Temple, taught Sunday school, attended missionary society, and served as an active member of the Eastern Star. Ever a devoted daughter, she cared for her aging parents until their deaths in 1924 and 1925.¹²⁵

Through her diaries Fannie Morton Bryan has provided rich insights into her society’s etiquette and expectations for its young ladies. Despite all of the contemporary literary sources’ admonitions, flirting was not the evil that their writers would have readers to believe. Bryan’s flirtations did not prohibit her from maintaining a

¹²¹Margaret Deland, “The Change in the Feminine Ideal,” *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1910), 291, 295.

¹²²Anna Garlin Spencer, “The Day of the Spinster,” *Forum* (February 1912), 203.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 205-6; Coolidge, 369.

¹²⁴*Auburn News*, January 1965; interview with Lillian Tynes Pace, Bowling Green, February 29, 1992.

¹²⁵ Eastern Star delegate’s badge, October 13-15, 1914, Bryan Collection; Russellville *News-Democrat*, January 1965; tombstones of William Bryan, 1842-1924, and Sarah G. Weller Bryan, 1845-1925, Maple Grove Cemetery, Russellville.

position of respect within her small community as an elementary school teacher. In her own way, Bryan had found the combination her Logan College instructors thought impossible: a life which allowed her to serve her community, “strong in moral influence and substantial, mental culture,” while still dazzling the eyes of many a beau.

The 1890s were, for bright young females, an age of choice. Like their mothers and grandmothers, these women still felt tremendous pressure to marry, but opportunities outside the home were becoming more acceptable. Bryan’s peers at Bethel College acknowledged her suitors’ marriage proposals. She was not an “old maid” who never had an invitation to assume the role of wife and mother. Although possibly dismayed by Raetz’s divorce and her knowledge of childbirth, Bryan did not shrink from life’s challenges. For more than sixty years, she kept a valentine with an admonition not to enjoy the game too long. That single piece of paper draws historians to question if, indeed, Bryan found the label “flirt” appropriate. Reading the diaries provided an overwhelming affirmation. Despite all temptations to ascribe to Bryan lofty virtues and false importance, readers must acknowledge the study of Bryan’s life as simply good social history. For every Charlotte Perkins Gilman with a mission set on advancing the status of women within our society, numerous females existed simply to enjoy life’s fullness and frivolity. Women’s history must never fall prey to the temptation to fail to see merit in the lives of all women, not just the “great” ones. Bryan’s life story, as told through her diaries and newspaper accounts, gives late twentieth-century readers a glimpse of the many rather than the few, the fun-loving rather than the serious-minded, and one old maid flirt in the largest American generation of unwed females.