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*From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century
America*

Secondary Resource Paper

HIST 215A: American History

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From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America provides a look at how the courtship practices developed through the years and how it changed the teenage society. The author, Beth L. Bailey, discusses the shift of courtship between the 1920s and the 1960s. Her book gives us a view of how teenagers looked for mates and why they behaved the way they did. She also briefly states throughout the text how this change affected the economy and other people in society. Dating went from private acts in the home to public affection in a matter of a few decades.

Bailey discusses in her book “the dating system that flourished between about 1920 and 1965. It examines the origins of dating... the rituals and conventions that shaped the courtship of several generations of American youth... analyzes the understandings and beliefs on which dating was based, and shows the connections of private acts of courtship to larger changes in American society.” Bailey is not giving an explanation for the different forms of courtship but she is exploring the important themes developed in American society. She examines the “internal logic” of the systems of courtship and tries to suggest ways “these constructs lent meaning to individual experience.” Bailey explores the parallel changes in American culture through the youth of our society. She connects these changes with the development of the system of courtship. The information Bailey provides throughout her book provides an insight to the dating system of the early 20th century. Although she does not provide an explanation for the changes that occurred, the reader is able to provide their own perspective toward the system and why it changed. This book provides a phenomenal amount of information without giving an opinion towards the topic. The reader is able to read Bailey’s book and form their own opinion toward

the change in American courtship through the years. Bailey does not give her own opinion but forms all her information around sources. This is an excellent way to approach her material.

In Bailey's book she discusses aspects of the dating system that pertain to the youth of America and how they transformed the system. One of her main themes is the convention of courtship. What were the societal laws that the youth abided by in order to date? For her book, she had to use sources that told her what the youth was thinking. Her main use of source was magazines and advice books for courtship. The youth of this time period began to develop their own culture through the media. By reading advice columns and magazines, a person would know what the norm was and what everybody was thinking about. *Seventeen* became a popular magazine in the 50s. Bailey uses this magazine many times to reiterate the conventions of this time, and how the youth read these types of magazines to become popular in the system of courtship. The main theme of Bailey's book is the conventions of courtship. These sources are perfect to back up this theme. The conventions of courtship are displayed in the many magazines and advice books that they youth read during this time. In the modern day, these magazines are still the perfect spot to find the conventions of courtship.

In the Epilogue, Bailey discusses that today's society is centered around sex. The change in the courtship system allowed more freedom for people to find their mates. When courtship moved from the private home to the public scene people had more freedom to do what they wanted. Competition became key in finding a mate. Every girl went to advice columns to become popular among society. The more popular you were, the more dateable you were. Bailey says that today's society is trying to look back before the transformation of courtship to the more

traditional days. Our modern society wants to fix the sexual aspect of modern courtship and go back to traditional days of private dating in the home. Bailey states that, “Certainly we should seek our usable past, but to find answers to the current problems of American courtship we need to go not backward but forward.” By looking at the transformation of courtship from 1920 to 1960, Bailey attempts to make the conclusion that we should not look toward the past to find answers to our modern concerns of courtship. She explains the transformation during these years, what changed, and how people thought about it. This was an excellent way to start explaining her conclusions. She sets a background for her readers. Although she does this, she never explains why society should not look back into the past. She discusses the calling, money, sex, and etiquette issues that transformed. Why should we not look toward the past for answers to courtship? Does Bailey believe this transformation was a bad one or good for our culture? In her thesis, stated in the introduction, she explains that she will be discussing the different themes that emerged throughout the change in courtship. Throughout her book, she refers back to her thesis very well. She sticks to the thesis while explaining the transformation. The Epilogue offers a different conclusion to this thesis. She does not refer back to the “meaning” that she explains in her introduction. A reader may be confused by this and what she means through her introduction and epilogue.

The style of Bailey’s writing makes her book easy to read. She starts with the introduction of the book. Here she explains what she is going to discuss throughout the book, giving the reader a heads up on what they are going to be reading. The structure of the book helps the reader understand the different themes Bailey attempts to discuss. Her chapters are split

into the six different themes she looks at during the change in courtship. At the beginning of each chapter, Bailey begins by introducing the concept of the whole chapter. She clarifies any definitions of any unfamiliar words she may use to aid the reader in understanding the text. In each chapter, she also provides the reader with many examples from her sources she retained her information from. This allows the reader to see where Bailey is getting her information and how she gained insight from these sources. At the end of the chapters, she gives a paragraph that summarizes what was said in the chapter and also provides an introduction into the next chapter. At the end of “The Economy of Dating” chapter, she summarizes how the economy was based on competition and scarcity. The next chapter is titled “The Worth of a Date”, where she expands on the economy from the previous chapter and explains how much a date would cost for the male. The organization of her book was excellent. Each chapter and the information flowed together allowing the comprehension of what is being said easier. Another thing that helped visualize the time period that was being discussed, were the pictures that Bailey displayed in the middle of the book. Many historical secondary sources do not have pictures in the book. This can help a reader see what people would have seen during this time.

This book offered me a lot of insight into the transformation of courtship. I have always been interested in how courtship changed so much in such little time. Bailey’s style and structure made this book interesting. It was easy to understand and she provided plenty of examples to help the reader envision how people thought and felt about courtship. While reading this book, I was able to see the many examples of where Bailey retained her information and develop my own sense of opinion. During the main chapter of the book, Bailey rarely stated her own opinion

about the information. She states it in the introduction and the epilogue. The examples in the text allowed me to form my own opinion based on those examples and not on how she feels. Bailey's book, *From the Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*, provided a lot of insight about dating for me. I was able to see the change that occurred up to the 1960s. From there I can infer how we came to have the dating system we have today.