

# THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

GRANT SANGER

Oral History Project

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# THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

## PREFACE

The following manuscript contains the edited transcript of an interview with Dr. Grant Sanger. This interview was recorded at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, on April 6, 1989 and conducted by Patricia H. Labalme.

Dr. Sanger is a graduate of Princeton University, Class of 1931. He received his medical training from Cornell Medical School and was a surgeon at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City.

His mother was Margaret Sanger, the birth control advocate, who knew Caroline Bamberger Fuld, the founder, together with her brother Louis Bamberger, of the Institute for Advanced Study. Dr. Sanger requested the interview in order to relate an anecdote concerning Mrs. Fuld and H. G. Wells.

The reader should be aware that the following is a transcript of the spoken word, that it attempts to preserve the spontaneity and informality of the original tape, and that the views expressed therein are those of the narrator.

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Grant Sanger

SIGNATURE OF NARRATOR

Patricia H. Labalme

SIGNATURE OF INTERVIEWER

Date:

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Tape and partial transcript of interview on April 6, 1989

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INTERVIEW WITH GRANT SANGER

Date: April 6, 1989  
Place: Princeton, New Jersey  
Interviewer: Patricia H. Labalme

CASSETTE ONE, SIDE ONE

Labalme: O. K, now we're all set, we can just proceed. First of all, thanks for coming down.

Sanger: It's a great pleasure to be here. This story, I think, took place in 1932, maybe '31. I'm trying to remember. H.G. Wells came to America twice in the thirties. I know he came in 1937 and saw my mother in Presbyterian Hospital when she had her gall bladder out, and I know he was here for a dinner she had--I think it was 1932. It was an interesting dinner. Wells was the main speaker. John Dewey was on the dais with the other speakers. Ann Morgan was there--I'd never seen pearls like that in all my life and I haven't since. She had her big pearls on.

Labalme: Who was Ann Morgan?

Sanger: Ann Morgan was John P. Morgan's daughter and, as you know, during World War I she was one of the saviors of France. Anyway, my mother and Mrs. Fuld became friends, and Mrs. Fuld, I guess, was interested in birth control and anybody who was interested in birth control who could contribute, my mother latched onto. And she expressed--she was evidently quite a simple woman. I never met her, but she was bewildered by Abraham Flexner and his ideas. Nothing like this had ever hit her before. And mother said [to her], "You know, H. G. Wells is coming over here. Perhaps

you'd like to talk to him." And she said, "I'd be delighted." So it was arranged. And who introduced Wells to the problem, I don't know. Perhaps mother did. But anyway, H. G. Wells said to Mrs. Fuld, "There is one discipline which is badly in need of help, and that's mathematics. You take physics and chemistry and biology and astronomy. They are well supported. But mathematics is not." I guess he went on and explained it more, and finally Abraham Flexner was present there, of course. I don't think he let anybody near Mrs. Fuld when he wasn't around. So Abraham Flexner was asked for his thoughts, and he said, "I would have guessed that Mr. Wells had read my prospectus!" And that's just about the end of the story.

Labalme: This was all at the same dinner party?

Sanger: No, this was a separate interview.

Labalme: So your mother set up this interview with H. G. Wells--

Sanger: And Mrs. Fuld--

Labalme: On behalf of Caroline Fuld. That's very interesting. But then H. G. Wells didn't seem to have any connection with the Institute after that.

Sanger: No.

Labalme: Did your mother take any interest in the Institute?

Sanger: No, I don't think so.

Labalme: Too abstract, not practical enough.

Sanger: My mother's only interest in this world was birth control. Period. Period.

Labalme: Well, she was single-minded.

Sanger: That's right. They said to her--Eugene Debs, who was head of the American Federation of Labor, said "Margaret, join us." The League of Women Voters said, "Mrs. Sanger, join us." The suffragettes said, "Mrs. Sanger, join us." No. The only one who ever said, "Do it your own way, Margaret" was Big Bill Hayward of the IWW, who was a marvelous guy.

Mother liked Big Bill Hayward very much. He was big, he'd lost an eye in a mining accident somewhere in Nevada or somewhere out there. And mother liked Bill Hayward very much. And missed him when he went to Russia.

Labalme: I started her autobiography, and then I ended up reading, very fast, a biography last night by Gray. I went through it quite quickly to get some list of characters. Which is the best biography?

Sanger: One's coming out. You see, about a third of my mother's papers are at the Library of Congress and two thirds are at Smith.

Labalme: They gave her an honorary degree.

Sanger: The head of the manuscript division of the Library of Congress said to me, they're going to write twenty-five biographies of your mother before they write a good one. This Ellen Chesler is writing one on mother. She gave me an oral interview for the Radcliffe library. Took two days.

Labalme: They have a wonderful collection.

Sanger: Have they? Took two days, and when they got all through, I said to her, you know an awful lot about my mother, why don't you write a book about her, and she gave me an evasive sort of answer. She was at that point helping Carol Bellamy to be President of the City Council in New York City. And then she became pregnant, not once but twice, but now

she's writing this biography of my mother, and Simon and Schuster is going to publish it. When it's coming out, Lord knows. Whether it's going to be any good, whether she can write, I don't know.

Labalme: We don't know whether there's any correspondence between Caroline Fuld and your mother?

Sanger: Don't know. You could ask. Mother never threw anything away.

Labalme: Simon and Schuster would have her [Ellen Chesler's] address.

Sanger: When you talk about the Flexners, Simon Flexner married a Thomas.

Labalme: I know. All those connections.

Sanger: All those Bryn Mawr connections. Jim Flexner always talks about the Thomases.

Labalme: I wondered, as I thought about the connection between Margaret Sanger and Caroline Fuld, whom I do see as a very traditional type of woman, rather retiring--how much of a friendship [it was], or how long it lasted. Was this just an anecdote that your mother had repeated to you? She never said anything about anything else?

Sanger: No, nothing else, nor did she even when Abraham Flexner went over and hit the department of mathematics at Princeton and came out with Oswald Veblen and Jimmy Alexander and John von Neumann, it didn't mean much to mother.

Labalme: From your own days at Princeton, what was your impression of the Institute? Did you know about it?

Sanger: No. I graduated in '31.

Labalme: Even as a new alumnus, there was no real--?

Sanger: No. I knew Mrs. Alexander. Mrs. Alexander was French. And



mother came down once in May of my senior year. I wanted to show her Princeton in the spring. She came down and Mrs. Harvey--Newton Harvey's wife--had her for tea and Mrs. Scoon, Mrs. Hibben's daughter was there, and Mrs. Alexander. And Jimmy Alexander--he's a member of the great Alexander family, of Alexander Hall. Jimmy was the class of 1910 at Princeton and was a brilliant mathematician. And Oswald Veblen, of course, was very austere. His uncle was Thorstein Veblen, I think. I don't know, Patsy, if I'll be here when they write the history of the 20th century, but I'll bet a dime that John von Neumann is going to be labelled one of the great minds of the century. The people who were associated with him in any way at Princeton were just fascinated with this man.

Labalme: An unusual mind.

Sanger: His daughter [Marina], she's a power in her own right. Yes, what does she do besides being a trustee of General Motors.

Labalme: Not a trustee. She's a vice-president of General Motors. She's a trustee of the University.

Sanger: I know that. She was born in Princeton, you know.

Labalme: Yes.

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The rest of the interview did not concern the Institute, except as Dr. Sanger asked informational questions and was given answers by Labalme. Dr. Sanger discussed briefly his own educational career on his way to being a physician and physicians such as Dean William Henry Welsh and William Osler and William Stewart Halsted.