

CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
WESTERN RESERVE STUDIES SYMPOSIUM

**BUILDING A MEDICAL COMMUNITY
IN THE WESTERN RESERVE**

October 12-13 2001

Allen Memorial Medical Library
Ford Auditorium

**Fewer and Better Babies:
The Maternal Health Association of Cleveland, Ohio**

Jimmy Elaine Wilkinson Meyer

Experienced in voluntarism, middle- and upper-middle class laywomen across North America founded birth control clinics in the late 1920s and 1930s to impart illegal information, addressing a gap in medical services. Physicians generally still refused women's demands to help space their pregnancies. The medical profession in general was unschooled in birth control techniques and mired in the late-nineteenth century depiction of contraception as immoral and/or associated with quackery. Many doctors avoided challenging restrictive federal and state laws.

Initiating birth control clinics such as the Cleveland Maternal Health Association as voluntary associations outside of the medical establishment, women acted out of mixed motives. Spurred by nativism, eugenic ideals, and a desire to solve social ills, clinic founders, staff, and volunteers also based their efforts on a womanist concern for other women. Using a combination of traditional female reform methods, civil disobedience, scientific charity, and their own ingenuity, these advocates helped to create enduring institutions such as Planned Parenthood of Greater Cleveland and set long-standing patterns. Founders used the power of their privilege while founders and clients alike drew on the strength and breadth of social and familial networks to modify public policy.