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# The Flirt Detectives:

## “Canoe Lizards” and “Mashers”

BY **DANIEL J. DEMERS**

**A**s the American industrial revolution exploded, men, women and families by the tens of thousands moved from America’s farms to the cities. While people were relatively scattered on the farm, the revolution eradicated this seclusion. Suddenly young ladies and men lived and worked in close proximity to one another. American morality was seemingly upended by this urban influx. State laws and city ordinances tried desperately to keep the old order in check as these changes were perceived to be unnatural, immoral and un-Christian.

By the mid-1880s, newspapers began exposing the problem. In Rochester, NY, a reporter came upon the by-laws of the ‘Avenue Anti-Flirting, Anti-Kissing, Anti-Marriage Society.’ The Society had been founded by “a bevy of beautiful young ladies.” The girls agreed to fine themselves 25¢ per flirt, \$1 per kiss and expulsion for marriage. One of the members “took her name off the books” after being fined \$4 the first week, according to the *Washington Evening Star*.

The same year, the Treasurer of the United States ordered all clerks—male and female—at the department “from visiting and promenading the building corridors...[to stop those] with a disposition for flirtation.”

By 1890, letters to the editor were asking newspaper readers to “teach girls to abhor flirting.” One letter to the editor asserted that women should be trained “to be the helpmate of man...and [called]...the practice of flirting...detestable.” Another letter to the editor written by one Sir Herbert suggested girls must avoid “society...people [that] are well dressed...the devil can masquerade in fine clothes.” “Men,” he declared, prefer “home girls” to “society girls” for wives.

Police across America began arresting flirts. In 1895, Seattle Police arrested one May Jones, “a middle-aged women...[who] can sit in a [train] depot and make eyes at elderly gentlemen as coquettishly as a girl of 16.” Jones (AKA Klondike Kate) was forced to leave Seattle.

In the Stark County (OH) jail, one inmate, Frank Ray, “made goo goo eyes at female prisoners” and was docked 22 days of his accumulated good behavior days which he had collected against his prison term. By the early 1900s, the Denver Women’s Business Club hired special “plains clothe women detectives...made up of the most handsome and striking looking young ladies employed in the various [department] stores...to lure...disreputable men [in an effort to stop] old hoary-headed sinners [from] offering...blandishments to the pretty girl.” By 1907, the press reported that two marines had been ejected from the Library of Congress who “had been detected flirting”, giving a slightly different meaning to the term “Hurrah” or maybe not.

The nation’s press announced the demise of the Milaca (MN) Bachelor’s Club after it held a special meeting to impose fines on male members who “had been flirting with, squeezing the hands of and hugging” females. In nearby Michigan, the *Detroit Times* defined a “masher,” as a male flirter—one who “smiles at a young lady...makes googly eyes; or when he walks up to her, tips his hat and pretends he has known her for 13 years.” Some “mashers” carried a women’s silk handkerchief in their pockets which they used to start up a conversation by inquiring if the lady had dropped it.



Painting by Miklos Barabas <https://www.wikiart.org/en/miklos-barabas/flirtation-1841>

The *Times* went on to relate that police departments across America were assigning undercover police women “playing the part of sirens” to entrap the “mashers.” In 1912, the Hoboken (NJ) High School principal banned girls from eating their lunches inside classrooms. He caught them gathering on the window sills “waiving their hands and smiling at the young men.”

In Chicago, Margaret Coughlin was booked for disorderly conduct for flirting with a detective. The police department also announced it had assigned six detectives to “protect women from flirts.” Helen Wagner, a “pretty, well-dressed woman,” was arrested by Detective Michael Vaughn for flirting. She didn’t deny it, “saying he was the handsomest man” on the Chicago police force. Vaughn also arrested a “dozen men...for flirting” the same day.

By 1919, the popular hit song “How Ya Gonna Keep ‘Em Down on the Farm (After They’ve Seen Parce)” followed millions of doughboys returning from World War I. The nation’s attitude towards flirting seemed to change, the result of the intermixing between soldiers and battlefield nurses and lady Red Cross workers on the battlefields of France. The same year, one woman in Philadelphia came to the aid of a girl who had been arrested for flirting: “she was walking...minding her own affairs, and the detective flirted with



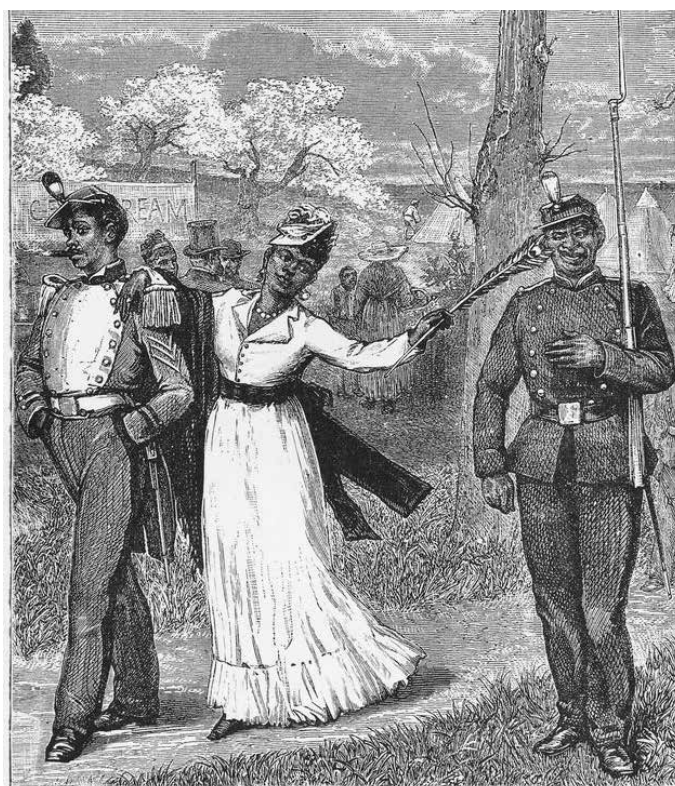
What's a Man Flirt, *Detroit Times*, September 18, 1911, page 5 (Column 4) <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016689/1911-09-18/ed-1/seq-5/>



Poster by Henri Gerbault <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flirting>

“We got them off the streets of Westchester...now we have to chase them out of the water.” John Newmann, a private detective, took flirting a bit too far. Newmann started flirting with Alice Sutherland on the subway. After leaving the subway at Manhattan, he followed her and “threw his arms about her...she resisted and he struck her on the jaw.” He was chased by the police and arrested and held on \$1,000 bail.

By 1930, laws against flirting here in America seemed to have disappeared. Things could have been worse, though. In 1905, a small article appeared in the *Reynoldsville Star* (PA). Giles Holloway was delayed leaving Tapanuli (Sumatra) because a native who owed him money arrived three days late. The native explained that his “pangul (elder) was detected flirting with my wife. He was condemned, and I stayed to eat my share of him.” **PI**



A woman flirts with a soldier by tickling him with a feather. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flirting>

her” and arrested her. She asserted “that’s putting a penalty on the [innocent] girl.” City life was catching on and morés were changing.

Still, NYPD policemen arrested four men driving along Broadway for “whistling at girls” from their autos. The cops were following in taxicabs. In the Bronx, twenty-six ‘canoe lizards’ were arrested for “annoying girls and women.” Two detectives in bathing suits paddled canoes about the beaches and “every time they heard [an indignant] woman’s voice...the detectives swam to the scene [and] upset the canoe and towed the offenders ashore.” The *New York Evening World* quoted Police Captain Costigan