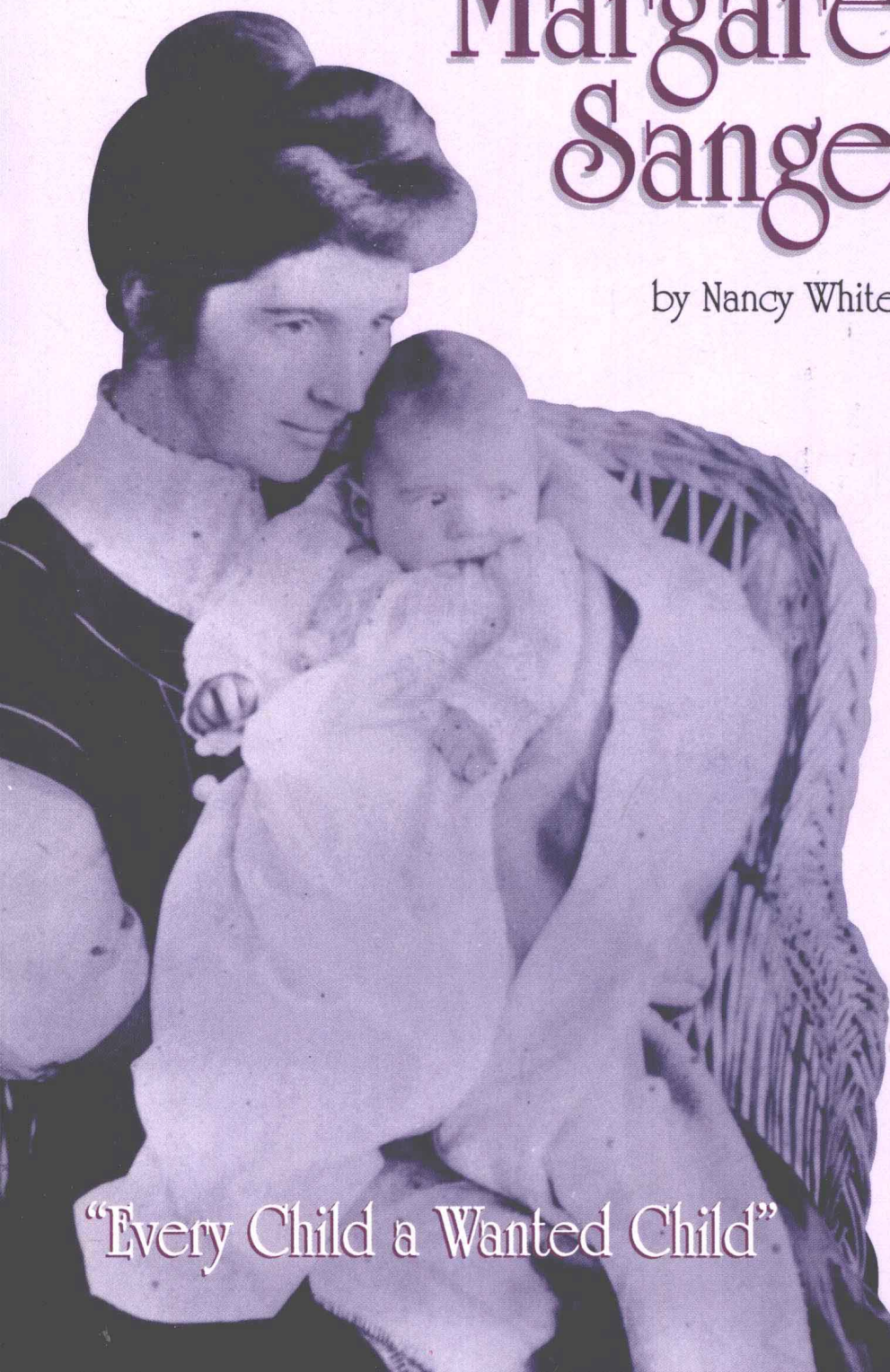


*A People in Focus Book*

# Margaret Sanger

by Nancy Whitelaw



*"Every Child a Wanted Child"*

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*A People in Focus Book*

 **DILLON PRESS**  
New York

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New York Oxford Singapore Sydney

To Eva Whitelaw Barrett, my granddaughter—with love

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# Introduction

Eight-year-old Maggie Higgins took one last look at her feet as she stepped on the first tie of the narrow railroad bridge.

This was in Corning, New York, in 1887. Maggie was working on her plan to become brave.

“Now don’t look down again,” she told herself. “Walk across this bridge with your head up high. Don’t think about the river swishing over the rocks. Don’t think about a train coming the other way. Think about making yourself strong.”

She planted her right foot firmly on the wooden tie. “Eyes straight ahead. Look at the farms on the other side of the river.” She lifted her left foot and sent it searching over empty space for the next tie. Left foot down. Right foot up and searching. Right foot down.

Left foot. Right foot. Left foot. “Stronger. Stronger. Every step, stronger.”

She guessed she was about halfway across.

Right foot. Left foot. Right . . .

Quietly, then louder and louder, the rails began to hum. Suddenly the hum was drowned out by the shriek of a train whistle. She looked over her shoulder. A huge black locomotive was heading straight for her.

Maggie fell on one knee as the bridge shook with the weight of the iron monster. She knew she had to make her body as flat as possible. She let her feet and

legs slip down between the ties as she grabbed for the edge of the tie in front of her. Her fingers curled around the rough edge with all her strength.

Her eardrums ached with the clattering and screeching of steel wheels on iron rails. She winced as hot cinders flew at her arms and face and back.

The next thing she knew, a man's arm was around her waist, pulling her upward. Strong fingers forced her to release her grasp on the tie. She was lifted to her feet where she wobbled and swayed, trying to get her balance. Her rescuer, a friend of her father's, steadied her. He had been fishing, he said, when he saw her do this dangerous thing. He scolded her, gave her a little spank, and told her to go right back home.

Maggie waited until he was out of sight. Then she turned around and finished her trip across the bridge.

Another fear beaten! Earlier that year, Maggie had promised herself to get rid of her fears. Before that, she sang when she went down into the cellar, hoping to scare away strange beings who lurked there. No more! Now Maggie walked down the stairs without a sound. She used to take a candle when she went upstairs to bed, swinging the flame to force monsters into hiding. No more! Now Maggie went to her bedroom in the dark. She used to be ashamed of her fear of the railroad bridge. Now even that fear could not stop her. She was

free to go over the bridge whenever she wanted to.

Later in life, Maggie Louisa Higgins (Sanger) would dedicate her life to helping women to overcome their fears and to accept the responsibilities that freedom brings.

She was born in the late 1800s, when most women accepted a passive role. For centuries women had obeyed their parents, their church leaders, their government officials, their doctors, and their husbands. They had been afraid to take responsibility for their own bodies, their families, and their futures.

Margaret Sanger showed them the way to freedom from fear. For this, she was scorned, ridiculed, and humiliated. She was arrested, and she was sent to prison. Still, she never wavered in her determination to bring reliable and accessible birth control to any woman who wanted it.

After more than 50 years of struggle, Margaret saw much of her dream fulfilled. Because of her, women all over the world are challenged to take responsibility for their lives and to participate in making this a better world for all families.



# Chapter One

## *From Maggie Higgins to Margaret Sanger*

1879-1902

During this time . . .

- ❖ Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*.
- ❖ The first bicycles were manufactured in America.
- ❖ Basketball was invented by J. Naismith.
- ❖ A carriage driver was arrested for speeding at 12 m.p.h.
- ❖ Ball-bearing roller skates were patented.

Maggie, born in Corning, New York, in 1879, was the sixth child in a family of eleven children. She could always find a few brothers or sisters to take parts in the plays she loved to put on.

Life was busy for the Higgins children. Each day they walked the five miles to school and back. The boys

*Maggie at 14*

took care of the cows and chickens; the girls helped with housework and younger children. They all played baseball, skated, swam, and hunted together in the little free time that they had.

Maggie created a picture of herself. "I realized I was made up of two Me's," she said. One was the Thinking Maggie, who acted slowly and thoughtfully. It was the Thinking Maggie who made up rules for overcoming her fears. The other was the Emotional Maggie, who acted and talked without thinking. It was the Emotional Maggie who continued her trip across the railroad bridge when told to go home.

Maggie's father was Michael Higgins, a stone mason who made decorations for gravestones. Maggie sometimes watched him at work—rounding out an angel's mouth, chipping away stone around the wings, carving the strong, straight lines of a cross.

Mr. Higgins loved to talk and to argue. He'd spend hours in a tavern, on a street corner, or anywhere people would listen to him. He urged his children to talk, question, and argue just as he did. From him, Maggie learned to criticize government, laws, the church, customs, and traditions.

"Don't be afraid to speak your mind," Maggie's father would say. "Always say what you mean."

From the time she was a little girl, Maggie heard





*Michael Higgins, Maggie's father, a stonecutter*

lots of criticisms and complaints, lots of strong opinions and arguing. Mr. Higgins disagreed with the way America was run. Like other Socialists, he believed that government should take control of business and industry.

Mr. Higgins had rebellious ideas about women, too. At that time, most people believed that a woman's role in life was to be a wife and mother. Mr. Higgins accepted the traditional role for his own wife. He was content to have her bear 11 children, even though each