WEBSITES


The House on Henry Street

Nonfiction work, Photograph

By: Lillian Wald
Date: 1915

About the Author: Lillian Wald (1867–1940) was a nurse and social worker who started her career serving the downtown of New York’s Lower East Side, establishing the Henry Street Settlement in 1895. She later became a public health official, teacher, author, editor, women’s rights activist, and founder of the Visiting Nurse Society. Wald persuaded President Theodore Roosevelt (served 1901–1909) to create a Federal Children’s Bureau to protect the rights of children, helped form the Women’s Trade Union to protect the rights of women, and lobbied for workplace health inspections to protect the rights of workers. Her visionary social service programs have been a model for similar programs worldwide.

Introduction

Urban population at the beginning of the twentieth century was increasing at an astounding rate. In the fifty years between 1870 and 1920, the population of America’s towns and cities grew from ten million to fifty million. People came from America’s farm communities to find work where factories were springing up rapidly. Immigrants came in search of employment and a better life. They were motivated by the promise of the “American Dream” and envisioned running their own shops and providing a comfortable living for their families.

While some first-generation immigrants realized this dream, most lived in very harsh conditions in America’s burgeoning cities. Overcrowding resulted in inadequate housing and sanitation. Garbage and sewage piled up in the streets and attracted rats, insects, and germs. Disease ran rampant. Entire families lived in one room. Wages were too low to purchase even the basic necessities.

These were the conditions Lillian Wald found in her first home nursing visit in 1893. When Wald was studying at Medical College, she developed a class in home nursing that was adapted to the patients she had been treating as part of her practical training. She conducted the class in an old building on Henry Street, in the center of a dense industrial population. A little girl who happened to be at the class one morning asked Wald to come help her mother, who had just had a baby. The child led Wald over piles of trash and through squalid neighborhoods into the family sickroom. The family of seven shared two rooms with boarders. The sick woman lay on an unclean bed. Wald called that morning a “baptism of fire.” It drew her immediately into the task of caring for these people, never to return to the laboratories and academia of her college studies again.

Significance

Wald shared her ideas about how to educate and care for families like the one she had seen that morning with Mary Brewster, a fellow nurse and good friend. The plans that followed became the basis for two long-standing service establishments. Wald and Brewster founded the Visiting Nurse Service in 1893 and, with the help of friends and philanthropists, began the Henry Street Settlement House in 1895.

Wald believed that educating and providing a social outlet for people was just as important as tending to their physical ailments, so the Settlement House provided a wide range of services including healthcare, dramatic activities, vocational training, a library, a savings bank, and a social hall. In the early 1900s, branches of the Henry Street Settlement opened in Manhattan and the Bronx, catering specifically to Italian, Hungarian, and African American communities. By 1903, Henry House’s Visiting Nursing Service was caring for 4,500 patients per year, and the numbers kept growing.

The Henry Street Settlement was part of a much larger settlement house movement that had started in 1889 with Jane Addams’ Hull House in Chicago. Other reformers and social activists recognized the need to address the concerns of the overcrowded urban centers, and hundreds of settlement houses were established. Like the Henry Street Settlement, they met more than just physical needs. Typically a settlement house was a combination boarding house, dispensary, nursery, school, and social and cultural center for the neighborhood.

Primary Source

The House on Henry Street: Nonfiction work [excerpt]

SYNOPSIS: Many public health and education initiatives resulted from the Henry Street Settlement House and its Visiting Nurse Service. In this excerpt from Wald’s memoirs of the Henry Street Settlement, she recalls her efforts to promote training and standards for midwives. She also writes of the importance of establishing a system of visiting nurses for home and workplace, particularly in outlying areas, to be under the administration of the Red Cross. She envisions a time when trained graduate nurses will provide in-home care and instruction from coast to coast. A photograph from Wald’s book is also here.
Perhaps nothing indicates more impressively our contempt for alien customs than the general attitude taken toward the midwife. In other lands she holds a place of respect, but in this country there seems to be a general determination on the part of physicians and departments of health to ignore her existence and leave her free to practice without fit preparation, despite the fact that her services are extensively used in humble homes. In New York City the midwife brings into the world over forty per cent. of all the babies born there, and ninety-eight per cent. of those among the Italians.

We had many experiences with them, beginning with poor Ida, the carpenter’s wife, and some that had the salt of humor. Before our first year had passed I wrote to the superintendent of a large relief society operating in our neighborhood, advising that the society discontinue its employment of midwives as a branch of relief, because of their entire lack of standards and their exemption from restraining influence.

To force attention to the harmful effect of leaving the midwife without training in midwifery and asepsis free to attend women in childbirth, the Union Settlement in 1905 financed an investigation under the auspices of a committee of which I was chairman.

A trained nurse was selected to inquire into and report upon the practice of the midwives. The inquiry disclosed the extent to which habit, tradition, and economic necessity made the midwife practically indispensable, and gave ample proof of the neglect, ignorance, and criminality that prevailed; logical consequences of the policy that had been...
pursued. The Commissioner of Health and eminent obstetricians now co-operated to improve matters, and legislation was secured making it mandatory for the Department of Health to regulate the practice of midwifery. Five years later the first school for midwives in America was established in connection with Bellevue Hospital.

Part of the duty assigned to nurses of the Bureau of Child Hygiene is to inspect the bags of the midwives licensed to practice, and to visit the newborn in the campaign to wipe out *ophthalmia neonatorum*, that tragically frequent and preventable cause of blindness among the newborn.

These are a few of the manifestations of the new era in the development of the nurse’s work. She is enlisted in the crusade against disease and for the promotion of right living, beginning even before life itself is brought forth, through infancy into school life, on through adolescence, with its appeal to repair the omissions of the past. Her duties take her into factory and workshop, and she has identified herself with the movement against the premature employment of children, and for the protection of men and women who work that they may not risk health and life itself while earning their living. The nurse is being socialized, made part of a community plan for the communal health. Her contribution to human welfare, unified and harmonized with those powers which aim at care and prevention, rather than at police power and punishment, forms part of the great policy of bringing human beings to a higher level.

With the incorporation of the nurse’s service in municipal and state departments for the preservation of health, other agencies, under private and semi-public auspices, have expanded their functions to the sick.

I had felt that the American Red Cross Society held a unique position among its sister societies of other nations, and that in time it might be an agency that could consciously provide valuable “moral equivalents for war.” The whole subject, in these trouble times, is revived in my memory, and I find that in 1908 I began to urge that in a country dedicated to peace it would be fitting for the American Red Cross to consecrate its efforts to the upbuilding of life and the prevention of disaster, rather than to emphasize its identification with the ravages of war.

The concrete recommendation made was that the Red Cross should develop a system of visiting nursing in the vast, neglected country areas. The suggestion has been adopted and an excellent beginning made with a Department of Town and Country Nursing directed by a special committee. A generous gift started an endowment for its administration. Many communities not in the registered area and remote from the centers of active social propaganda will be given stimulus to organize for nursing service, and from this other medical and social measures will inevitably grow. It requires no far reach of the imagination to visualize the time when our country will be districted from the northernmost to the southernmost point, with the trained graduate nurse entering the home wherever there is illness, caring for the patient, preaching the gospel of health, and teaching in simplest form the essentials of hygiene. Such an organization of national scope, its powers directed toward raising the standard in the homes without sacrifice of independence, is bound to promote the social progress of the nation.

**Further Resources**

**Books**


WEBSITES

“Bring Playgrounds to Detroit”
Speech
By: Clara B. Arthur
Date: 1926
About the Author: Clara B. Arthur (1858–1929) was a prominent social activist in Detroit. Her deep concern for the welfare of women and children led to the development of visionary public programs and changes in the city’s political system. An important leader of the Woman’s Suffrage Movement, Arthur served as president or vice president of the Michigan Equal Suffrage Association from 1896 to 1913. She used her superior organizational skills and patient tenacity to persevere despite many early defeats. Her efforts paid off as she eventually brought playgrounds and public bath houses to Detroit, helped effect changes in labor conditions for women and children, and improved conditions for tuberculosis victims. In her retirement, she saw full suffrage for women become a reality with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

Introduction
The Playground Movement grew out of a concern, beginning in the middle 1800s, for children to have wholesome alternatives for their leisure time. Until the industrial boom following the Civil War (1861–1865), most American children grew up on farms or in small towns, where there was ample open space to play. By 1900, however, nearly 14 million people lived in cities of more than 100,000 people. As population densities in these places grew, children lost access to their natural play areas—woods and fields, the fishing spot by the creek, and the old swimming hole. In addition, the Industrial Revolution drew many children into factories and sweatshops.

Cities were overcrowded with scarcely enough room for families to live comfortably. Often entire families lived in one or two rooms, and there wasn’t adequate space for children to play. About the same time, however, urban middle-class Americans began to adopt a new view of childhood that included education and the opportunity to play as an important part of maturing.

Slowly, conditions began to change. Schools were made available to children, and attendance gradually became mandatory. Legislation prohibited underage children from working. These factors, combined with the unhealthy environment in which many urban children were dwelling, focused increasing attention on child welfare.

Children were often without acceptable outlets for youthful energy and curiosity. There was little for children to do in the cities that was not meant for adults. Boys learned to smoke and gamble and tell obscene stories. There were accidents resulting from children playing in the streets. Poolrooms and dance halls were crowded with children spending money and being lured by sexual temptation and alcohol. Parents, psychologists studying child development, supporters of civil order and moral standards, and activists for children’s rights began to take a collective interest in what children were doing with their leisure time.

Significance
This interest became action in the late 1800s, when Joseph Lee started one of America’s first public playgrounds in Boston. Inspired by the play movement in Germany, Lee is considered the father of the Playground Movement in America and was the first American to write a book on the subject. Following Lee’s early efforts in Boston, playgrounds began to emerge in Chicago and in New York. In 1898, New York City opened 31 playgrounds under the auspices of the Board of Education.

In 1906, the Playground Association of America was founded in Washington, D.C. President Theodore Roosevelt (served 1901–1909) was elected honorary president, and Joseph Lee took the helm in 1909 at the Association’s fourth congress. The Association’s earliest goals were to conduct studies of playground sites and to prepare a historical account of the play movement. Another goal was to develop a college course in play, which inspired similar courses in teacher colleges across the country. The Playground Association also developed a Committee on State Laws, aimed at securing laws in each state requiring every city of 10,000 or more to vote whether or not it would maintain playgrounds.

The main work of the Association, however, was to provide survey results and expert information to help guide

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