

The Parental State: A Study of the Wisconsin Child Welfare System during the
Progressive Era

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Abstract

The Progressive Era saw the beginning of a modern welfare system where the state assumed a more notable role for those under its care. In Wisconsin, the State School for Dependent and Neglected Children located in Sparta became a prominent institution in caring for children deemed dependent or neglected because of familial poverty, supposed moral issues, and/or mental health issues of the parents. The very existence of this institution challenged new Progressive ideas emerging about how the state should provide welfare to the poor by continuing more traditional views of welfare, resulting in the disconnect between Progressive reforms and state practices. Using child records from the State School, this paper will study admittance practices, care for the child in and outside of the institution, and the relationship between family and state in the early twentieth century in order to show how the reality of Progressivism diverged from the theory.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	i
Introduction	1
State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children	9
The State's Role	11
Commitment: The Interaction Between Local and State Governments	15
Sending the Children out on Indenture Contracts	18
Education the Poor Children of Wisconsin	22
The "White Slaves" of Wisconsin	26
Mother's Pensions: The Emergence of the Maternal State	29
Maternalists: Women in the Public Sphere	31
Mothers' Pensions on a Local Level	33
SPS after the Implementation of Mothers' Pensions	37
Life After the Institution	39
Conclusion	41
Bibliography	43
Appendices	
Appendix 1	46
Appendix 2	47

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-K. L.

Introduction

Helene was on her third foster home. The first home to which she was indentured claimed that she was “not a child [they] care[d] to keep.” At her second indenture home, the foster mother left her husband, resulting in the foster father sending her back to the State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children (SPS) in Sparta, Wisconsin, because a farm was “not a proper place for a little girl now that there was no woman to mind the house.” Helene had been committed to SPS at age 8 after her biological father had died and her mother had been admitted to the Baron County Poor Farm in 1908 due to old age and ill health. Because children were not allowed to reside at poor farms, there was little her mother could do to keep their family together. Helene was admitted before the mothers’ pensions act was passed in 1914, meaning that poor single mothers were not believed to be able to provide the best care for their children and thus received no assistance from the state that would allow them to stay with their children. Despite Helene’s mother’s efforts to retrieve her from the institution, her requests were futile and Helene remained in the system until she aged out in 1918 at age 18.¹

Helene’s case highlights several important features in the typical SPS experience. Poor children were often taken away from their biological families and placed in an institutional setting and then placed into foster homes on indenture contracts where the thought was that poor children would be raised to be more productive citizens by foster homes than if they were to

¹ Children’s names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect their identity, however county of origin and county where students were indentured have remained the same. Children will also be referred to by their first names because of the personal nature of this subject as last names feel too impersonal and adult-like. Names have been randomly selected off a list of the top 1000 baby names from 1910. Last names of children are only present in cases where biological family members are involved and have been randomly chosen from a last name generator. Foster family names have also been randomly selected. Wisconsin Child Center Children’s Records, 1886-1953, Call number: 1976/135; 1992/169, Boxes 1-98, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

remain in their biological family's homes or in the institution.² Once admitted to SPS, the state became the legal guardian of the child and thus acted as the parental force in the children's lives. The state also acted as a middleman between biological families and their children by monitoring correspondence between the two and physically separating them from each other. The goal of SPS was to provide a temporary housing situation at the school in Sparta, where the child would be trained in gender-specific trades before being indentured out to homes selected by SPS officials across Wisconsin.³ These indentured children would continue to be monitored by the state from a distance, however once indentured, the state largely entrusted foster parents to raise the child in a way that would produce productive citizens. Many children under state care were indentured out as sources of labor to multiple families throughout their time under state care, with a very low percentage of legal adoptions ever taking place demonstrating that the indenture system was often not the most nurturing. Children under state care were separated from their biological families until their 18th birthday based off the thought that poverty and crime could only be solved by separating a child from the negative environment perpetuated by the biological family living in poverty.⁴

As the Progressive Era developed, so did the notions of how child welfare should be provided.⁵ Progressive reformers thought the best place for children was at home with their biological families. The notion that society should reward mothers for raising productive citizens

² Placing out poor children into foster homes was not confined to Wisconsin. For a contemporary example of taking poor children away from their families and placing them out into "respectable" homes, see Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

³ U.S. Children's Bureau, "Children Indentured by the Wisconsin State Public School," Publications 150-160, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, Children's Bureau, 1925, 4.

⁴ Changing notion that juvenile delinquents were victims of their circumstance, rather than their delinquency being an inherent thing within them. Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 54.

⁵ The Progressive Era consisted of the early part of the twentieth century, often defined by the multitude of reforms passed during it.

resulted in the decline of institutions and the rise of in-home care in the form of mothers' pensions that aimed at keeping the biological family intact. The historiography for Progressivism has largely been in consensus that Progressive Era child reform policies like mothers' pensions worked. Molly-Ladd Taylor even goes as far to claim that mothers' pensions were the most effective reform policy of the twentieth century.⁶ Joanne Goodwin argues that the creation of mothers' pensions succeeded in keeping families together and children out of orphanages, even though the compensation allotted from the pensions acted as more as an income supplement rather than acting as a salary that would allow poor mothers' to stay at home full-time to look after their children like Progressive reformers initially wanted.⁷ However, these findings were not as evident at SPS as the institution seemed to remain largely untouched by Progressive ideas.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that mothers' pensions reached their full potential in Wisconsin as seen by the maintenance of SPS during this time. The reality that persisted was evident that child welfare policies remained largely unchanged, despite the passage of reforms that would have encouraged the decline of the institutional setting if adopted fully. Despite these changing ideals, SPS continued to take in poor children that the state determined were dependent and neglected who came from parents of low mentality or morality and placed them in families chosen by the institution that were perceived to be better rather than keep them with their biological family throughout the Progressive Era. This is evident of regional differences in the enactment of welfare policies, similarly to what Thomas Krainz has argued.⁸

⁶ Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*: 135.

⁷ Joanne Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform: Mothers' Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 7.

⁸ Thomas Krainz, *Delivering Aid: Implementing Progressive Era Welfare in the American West* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 2.

The Progressive Era, in theory, marked a shift in policies that removing children from “immoral” parents in order to restructure the children would produce productive citizens, to keeping families intact. Poor parents were often synonymous with immoral parents in the eyes of middle-class Americans in the late nineteenth century.⁹ Progressives started to realize at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, that poverty was not always caused by morality but was often caused by circumstances beyond an individual’s control, such as economic depressions.¹⁰ This, coupled with the rising notion that institutions, which often stripped children of their individualism, were not the proper places for children, resulted in the push for change—a change that came about in the form of mothers’ pensions. Mothers’ pensions were first introduced in Illinois in 1911 as part of a national effort led by middle-class white women to reward mothers for raising future citizens. Mothers’ pensions were also designed to fulfill the changing belief that moving children around too much was actually detrimental to a child’s development by keeping them out of institutions.¹¹ This coincided with the development of maternalism, which valued the care of all members of society equally by the state.¹² Maternalists found a woman’s best fit in society was to stay at home and provide maternal care for children, which they hoped to encourage by having the government compensate women for their service to

⁹ Middle-class reformers sought to impose their middle-class moral authority on the lower classes through new programs. Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), xx. Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, 13-14.

¹⁰ The number of children in SPS decreased when the county was in “good times.” State Public School, *Eighth Biennial Report of the State Public School for the Twenty-one Month Period Ending June 30, 1902*. Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, State Printer, 1903), 315.

¹¹ Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, 3-5.

¹² Maternalists sought to politicize motherhood. Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 3-9. For the difference between sentimental maternalists and maternal feminists, see Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, 9.

society in raising citizens. Thus began the maternal state in which the government gained an increased interest and presence in its citizens lives.¹³

As seen in Helene's case, the mediation of correspondence between the state and the biological families was typical. Even after numerous requests from Helene's mother to retrieve her daughter, Helene remained at the institution. The state often mediated relations between the biological families and the child on behalf of what the state perceived as the child's best interest. Severing the child from all ties to his or her previous life was thought to limit the effects of poverty in order to reform the child into a contributing member of society. By entering the institution, the child became totally under the guardianship of the state who sought to retain it by any means possible. Therefore, parental control was rarely returned to the biological parents, even after desperate pleas and acts of improving their lifestyle.

The state during the Progressive Era became a paternal force in the lives of the poor through the creation of mothers' pensions and institutions. SPS was created as a quasi-parent for dependent and neglected children in an era where the state became directly involved in the lives of its citizens. The state intervened based on perceived immorality of the poor on behalf of what the state believed to be in the best interest of the child, however how this interest interacted with the goals of Progressivism changed over time. The state embodied maternal and paternal characteristics when dealing with its citizens, especially when it came to dealing with the children under their care and the children's biological families. The state embodied traditional maternal roles, like the care for children, and paternal roles, like financial control. In both roles the parental state oversaw the lives of many impoverished children and families.

¹³ Mink, *Wages of Motherhood*, 34.

The research for this study was collected largely from the Wisconsin Historical Society library and archives located in Madison, Wisconsin. The archives at the Historical Society contain records of students admitted to SPS and the library is home to hundreds of government documents, including those from the U.S. Children's Bureau and from SPS itself.¹⁴ The Monroe County Historical Society in Sparta, Wisconsin, which holds hundreds of newspaper clippings regarding SPS from the beginning of the institution in 1885 up until the erection of the monument naming all of the children buried at the school's cemetery in 1995, was also valuable for information about the town's perception of the school.

I chose to study ten years before and after the enactment of the 1914 mothers' pension in Wisconsin, in order to study any possible trends that may have occurred as the shift of welfare went from being provided mostly by institutions to being a mix of institution and in-home care. Because of the sheer volume of records of students admitted between the years of 1904 and 1924, I devised a system that would allow me to study a representative sample of students during this period. At the Historical Society, I was given a list of roughly 4,470 students during this time who had not been adopted and whose records were available at the Historical Society archives. From this list, I was able to form a representative sample of 184 students.¹⁵ I then made a spreadsheet that included the

¹⁴ Student records have a minimum of 75 years before non-family members are allowed to view them, and adoption records are sealed forever meaning that the archivists at the Historical Society had to first scan the document for any adoptions missed by Wisconsin Child Protective Services (CPS) when the agency first turned over the student files to the Historical Society before I could view them. The U.S. Children's Bureau (1912) is an example of a Progressive Era policy led by middle-class women that sought to protect the experience of all classes of children in the United States by examining and regulating things like infant mortality, workplace conditions, orphanages, and Juvenile Courts.

¹⁵ The list only showed the student's name, date of birth, and commitment number. Because it did not include the date of commitment, which is what I was interested in, I had to guess if the student would have been admitted between 1904 and 1924 based off their unreliable commitment number and date of birth. The average age of students entering SPS was between 6 and 8 during this time, so I looked for birthdates between 1898 and 1918, 6 years before the dates of commitment I was looking at. Furthermore, I alternated which gender I was looking at

name, date of birth, date of admittance, county or origin, where/ if the student was indentured, and any other relevant information on the child, including any information on why they were admitted, any familial correspondence with the institution, and comments on their behavior at both the institution and their indentured homes. It was from this spreadsheet that I was able to retroactively observe patterns of who was being admitted to SPS and why. The records kept by the institution were not always complete, with what documents and information varying in each. Therefore, it is often hard to gage the entirety of the experience of a child under SPS care. It was also difficult to gather all the details of the children once they left the institution, for very few records held letters or other accounts after the child turned 18. Because of this, it is hard to tell if SPS's goal of producing responsible citizens who would not need support by the state as adults was met.

SPS has not been studied by many historians, so a majority of my research has come from histories about institutions as a whole in the early twentieth century, Progressivism, and mothers' pensions. Historians have defined the Progressive Era as the start of an era where industrial workers expected the government to adjust to their needs and work for them rather than against them as it had during the Gilded Age.¹⁶ In conjunction with the Progressive movement, historians have argued the emergence of the maternal state in which the government was tasked with taking care of its citizens, particularly through the

with boys being chosen from even numbered pages and girls being chosen from odd numbered pages in order to get an accurate representation from both genders.

¹⁶ For an in depth study of the interaction between laborers and the government during the Progressive Era, see: Stephen Stormquist, *Re-Inventing "The People": The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006). Stephen Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998): 7.

enactment of mothers' pensions.¹⁷ Coinciding with the push for mothers' pensions was the push to reform child care through deinstitutionalization, which Michael Crenson argues was as result of the state governments showing an increased presence in its citizens lives with the adoption of new social policies like mothers' pensions and adopting "placing out" systems (which most closely resemble foster care systems today) and the abandonment of traditional institutions like orphanages.¹⁸ The Progressive Era marked a shift in policies that valued the family and sought to protect those who were viewed as defenseless, although these policies were not always enacted to their full extent.

This study will demonstrate the ideals and reality of the Progressive Era welfare reforms regarding children. SPS is a prime example of the failure to incorporate Progressive reforms like mothers' pensions that valued the biological family into its system in favor of the continuation of a more traditional institutional system, all while still claiming to have the best interest of the children in mind in order to create a better future society with upstanding, productive citizens. What often ended up happening with the transference of parental guardianship of a child to the state was that the state's interests were being met in their attempt to create productive citizens, while the best interests of the child was not taken into as much consideration as the state perhaps believed. The expectations Progressives had for a drastic change in how welfare was distributed was not the reality at SPS, as this institution continued more out-dated techniques of welfare in

¹⁷ Women were the largest contributors to the push for a maternal state that would take care of its citizens, especially those viewed as having no control of their unfortunate circumstances such as poor women and children. For more information of women's involvement in Progressive Era politics, see: Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, 2. Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 50. Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Matthew A. Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage: A Prehistory of the American Welfare System* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

order to achieve the same end goal of creating worthy citizens who would not be dependent on the state as adults but instead contribute to society.

The institution will be examined from the ground up starting with why the school was established. Next, how the children were committed to the institution and what they experienced within school walls will be investigated, followed by how the children ended up in foster homes on an indenture contract. Finally, the intersection between mothers' pensions and SPS will be inspected in order to show how Progressive Era reform policies were mostly ignored by the institution.

State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children

In 1885, state legislators recognized the need for an alternative solution to house the poor and orphaned children of Wisconsin. The legislature subsequently allocated \$30,000 to the establishment of a state school, where “dependent and neglected” children would be sent with the goal of creating upstanding future citizens by removing them from the influence of their morally inferior poor biological families. After searching around Wisconsin for land to build the school on, the legislators settled on Sparta in Monroe County where construction began shortly thereafter.¹⁹ The first three dormitories to house and educate the school were erected in 1886 and could house 130 children total.²⁰ It soon became evident that more housing would be needed

¹⁹ Sparta was chosen because the town offered to sell the land relatively cheap at \$8,000 and also agreed to contribute an additional \$5,000 for the erection of buildings on the property. Wisconsin Child Center Records, Box 1, Folder 3, Monthly Reports, 1919-1948, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI. For a map of the institution, see Appendix 1.

²⁰ The dormitories where the children were housed were known as “cottages” within the institution. These large buildings were all two stories with a basement and ranged from 8,500 to 14,175 square feet. Wisconsin Child Center Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI. To see what a cottage at SPS looked like, see Appendix 2.

after 301 children were received within the first two years. The school rapidly outgrew the space it had, resulting in the erection of two more dormitories in 1888 and another three between the years of 1904 and 1912 to accommodate the 140 to 270 students residing in the institution at any given time.²¹ In order to provide the best care possible to the children during their stay at SPS, these dormitories all included showers, playrooms, lockers, toilets, a work-room where an average of thirty-seven students could read and write, and living space for staff as well as a separate bed and bath for a matron. The matron, known as the “Mothers of the cottages,” served as a substitute maternal figure in these students’ lives, heading the disciplinary actions and the nurturing aspect admitted students would otherwise have missed being separated from their biological mothers. As the superintendent believed, “While the discipline might be firm, love dominates, and the children are led in the same manner they would be if they were in well regulated homes.”²²

The superintendent, teachers, matrons, and attendants served as parental figures for the students charged in their care, monitoring the children in order to prepare them for their future lives as productive citizens. At the turn-of-the-century, many Progressives viewed the newly industrialized society filled with immigrants and those living in poverty as a threat to what they viewed as traditional America. In order to reverse this threat and restore the original America, Progressives decided to target children and reform the nation by molding the unformed minds of

²¹ Information taken from the statistical reports in the biennial reports between 1904 and 1912. State Public School, *Ninth Biennial Report of the State Public School for the Biennial Period Ending June 30, 1904* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, State Printer, 1905). State Public School. *Report of the State Public School for the Biennial Period Ending June 30, 1908* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, State Printer, 1909). State Public School. *Twelfth Biennial Report of the State Public School for the Two Years Ending June 30, 1910* (Madison, WI: n.p., 1910). State Public School. *Thirteenth Biennial Report of the State Public School for the Biennial Period Ending June 30, 1912* (Madison, WI: n.p., 1912).

²² State Public School, *Seventh Biennial Report of the State Public School for the Two Fiscal Years Ending September 30, 1900* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, State Printer, 1901), 283.

children into the Progressive's moral standards.²³ Progressives around the country sought to do this by eliminating orphanages because the institutional setting did not promote individualism within it, although this was not always practiced as evident by the existence of SPS.²⁴ Thus, the idea that children should be kept in home settings with their parents gained in popularity— as long as the parents proved to be of good moral character, that is.²⁵

The State's Role

SPS is a prime example of the Progressive Era ideal of state involvement in caring for the poor. With the establishment of public institutions, welfare shifted from almost exclusively being provided by local private charities and local governments to being supplied by the state. Middle-class white women paved the way for reform by creating and operating child health and welfare programs run by professionals.²⁶ Eventually, the government absorbed these programs, creating a maternal state that looked after the poor.²⁷ In Wisconsin, the State Board of Control (BOC) was created to oversee ten institutions that would care for the poor. The care of children, mentally challenged and physically disabled individuals, prisoners, and those infected with tuberculosis around the state was provided by separate institutions around Wisconsin. The BOC created a budget for each institution, largely influenced by the head of each institution arguing for funding based on any projects that needed completion. At SPS, the superintendent produced

²³ Children were targeted as being the way to restore "original America" Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, 8.

²⁴ Individualism was thought to be better catered to through non-institutional welfare. Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, 201, 247.

²⁵ Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, 12-13.

²⁶ Only qualified professionals were hired for positions at SPS. State Public School, *Report of the State Public School for the Biennial Period Ending June 30, 1908* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, State Printer, 1909), 366-367. Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 43. Stormquist, *Re-inventing the People*, 6.

²⁷ S.J. Keinberg, *Widows and Orphans First: The Family Economy and Social Welfare Policy, 1880-191* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 9.

biennial reports detailing the works the school was doing as well as projects the school needed done that required an increased budget. These reports along with annual visits from members of the BOC were platforms for the superintendent to argue the necessary maintenance of the institution along with the value the institution had in society.²⁸ Often, these arguments revolved around preserving the morality of the children and shaping them to be upstanding citizens. Superintendent M.T. Park, for example, wrote that he believed that 85% of children coming through the institution become upstanding citizens when they grow up whereas only 15% lived lives similar to their parents where they ended up living in poverty or squalor.²⁹ According to Park, this was reason enough to keep funding for the institution going in order to create a better society than would occur if the children remained with their parents. And, following Progressive ideals valuing welfare worker's experience over appointment, the superintendent had the qualifications necessary to run the institution, so therefore he must know best in the eyes of the state.³⁰

The creation of the BOC directly represents the maternal state of the Progressive Era. All of the institutions were created to service the poor and those with mental problems, highlighting the changing attitude that the state should support all of its citizens— even the poor.³¹ The institutions controlled by the BOC that serviced children were the State Public School in Sparta, the Home for the Feeble Minded (also known as the Northern Colony) in Chippewa Falls, School

²⁸ All biennial reports contain a section that justifies the maintenance of the institution. See for example State Public School, *Report of the State Public School for the Biennial Period Ending June 30, 1908*, 365-366.

²⁹ State Public School, *Report of the State Public School for the Biennial Period Ending June 30, 1908*, 365.

³⁰ Other Progressive Era superintendents include C. D. Lehman (1923-1945) had experience of welfare in connection with industrial plants and J.F. Brown (1911-1917) who was the former superintendent of the state school for the blind in Janesville, Wisconsin. *Cashton Record* (Sparta, WI), July 14, 1911. "New Superintendent at the State School," *Cashton Record* (Sparta, WI) July, 3, 1923.

³¹ Stormquist, *Re-Inventing the People*, 2-9.

for the Deaf in Delvan, the School for the Blind in Janesville, the Industrial School for Boys in Waukesha, and the Industrial School for Girls in Milwaukee.³² Many of these schools worked in conjunction with each other, with SPS being the institution that most children were sent to first before they were evaluated for the others. At SPS, children were evaluated by Stanford-Binet Intelligent Scales (also known as an IQ) test to determine if they were “feeble minded” or of “low mentality.” IQ tests were given every few months in some cases, like Elaine, who was administered tests every two months after her commitment to the institution in 1923. While most of these tests were specifically marked with “not recommended for commitment (at the Northern Colony),” it only took one low score for her to be shipped off to Chippewa Falls in 1926, three years after her original commitment.³³ The IQ tests were often not reliable as children’s scores often changed throughout their time at SPS, something that should not happen with a reliable psychological test. The length of time a child was at SPS could be in part due to the lack of space at Northern Colony, or the need to clear out space at SPS. By clearing out space at SPS, the school was able to admit more children that the state deemed would be able to be reformed into productive citizens.³⁴ Because mentally challenged individuals were not considered contributing citizens, SPS found no reason to keep children who would remain “feeble-minded” in their care.

How well the child was liked by SPS officials could also influence the amount of time a child was at SPS before being sent to the Northern Colony, for children who were well-liked

³² The other institutions in Wisconsin were the State Hospital for the Insane in Mendota, the Northern Hospital for the Insane in Winnebago, the State Prison in Waupun, the Wisconsin State Reformatory in Green Bay, and the Wisconsin State Tuberculosis Sanatorium in Wales. Wisconsin Child Center Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

³³ Elaine’s score in February 1924 was 79 (not feeble minded) but just six months later in August of that year she scored a 59 and was immediately transferred to the Northern Colony. Wisconsin Child Center Children’s Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

³⁴ Section 5 of Chapter 585 of Laws of 1911 states that only children amendable to treatment can be received at SPS. Wisconsin Child Center Records, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

often remained at SPS longer. For example Eric, the six year-old son of Polish immigrants who did not speak English well at the time of his arrival, was labeled as having a “very good” mentality by his kindergarten teacher. He stayed at the institution for four years, despite his suspect low mentality, before he was eventually transferred to the Northern Colony in 1922.³⁵ There was not a statewide standard of the commitment of children to the Northern Colony, there was not even an institutional standard. Thus, the statewide standard of child welfare Progressives argued for was often not the reality as a child’s fate was at the discretion of SPS officials. Progressive values regarding consistent care for all poor were not fully practiced in SPS, marking the divergence between theory and reality.

SPS also used the other institutions in control of the BOC to maintain state guardianship of the children. Emerson Stone was sent to the Northern Colony a few months after his father expressed an interest in having him returned home. Emerson had been at SPS two years, the whole time being labeled as having a low mentality and a trouble maker who beat up smaller boys and did “nasty things in the dormitory at night.” It was not until he had returned home for Christmas in 1924, a rare treat for SPS children, that his newly remarried father found out how controlling the state could be. Mr. Stone wrote to the institution asking for the return of his son permanently, even getting the county Juvenile Court judge to support him, but was denied on the basis that Emerson was of too low mentality to be a productive citizen.³⁶ The state believed only they could create upstanding citizens and when this view was threatened they quickly asserted

³⁵ Eric was admitted with a few of his siblings, all of whom were eventually released back to his father while he remained at Northern Colony. Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

³⁶ The superintendent held the belief that some children would never fit in anywhere except for the Northern Colony or one of the Industrial Schools and thus should not be released back into society. Biennial Report 1910, 218-219

their power that would prevent the child from being lost from their control and threaten the state's ideal society. By doing this, the state not only challenged Progressive ideals but furthered more institutional social darwinistic ideals that supported the separation of the weak from larger society.³⁷

Commitment: The Interaction Between Local and State Governments

In order for a child to be sent to the institution, a Juvenile Court judge in the county of the child's origin had to commit them on either a temporary or permanent basis. The child's parent could also voluntarily relinquish all parental rights to the state in order to have them committed to SPS. This could either be on a temporary basis so the child could receive medical care provided by the state, or on a more permanent basis if there were issues with a parent or stepparent not wanting to care for the child. For example, Edith was committed to SPS in 1919 after her mother remarried and her stepfather wanted nothing to do with his wife's child.³⁸

Another common reason for parents to commit their children voluntarily was if the parent felt as if they could no longer adequately care for the child, although many viewed this situation as temporary and did not understand that they were surrendering their parental rights to the state permanently as evident by the multitude of correspondence between biological parents and SPS officials. Many parents who relinquished their parental guardianship either voluntarily or as ordered by the court did not realize that they may never see their child again.³⁹

³⁷ Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, 44-45.

³⁸ Edith's father was dead at the time of commitment, and her mother was known to associate with "low classes of men." Her stepfather was reportedly destitute and had gone to jail for the rape of oldest stepdaughter from a previous marriage, who was in the hospital giving birth to his baby at the time of Edith's commitment. Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

³⁹ Poor children were most often taken from their single mother homes, especially pre-mothers' pensions. in order to give them a better life. Poor parents rarely saw their children again due to indenturing, because the parents could not get out of poverty, because a new partner refused to accept the children back in the home, or because the children died of disease within the institution. Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*, 7.

Even if the biological family were lucky and their child was released back to them, it was often a long process in which the state retained control, as seen in Marvin Garfunkel's case. Marvin was committed to the institution by his parents in 1918 after they had gotten a divorce. His father's family had tried multiple times unsuccessfully to get him back. It was only after his father had remarried four years after Marvin's commitment that the state even considered releasing Marvin. His father wanted to move him out of state but encountered legal obstacles that allowed the state to retain control for as long as possible by not immediately releasing Marvin from the state's guardianship into his father's. State laws barred indentured children under their care to be removed from Wisconsin for at least one year. So instead of his father regaining complete parental control of Marvin right away, Mr. Garfunkel had to first had to indenture his son before Marvin could be relinquished from state control. Only after this contract was up were the Garfunkel's free to move.⁴⁰ The policy that biological families had to apply for indentures of their own children was absurd, especially considering not all biological family's requests for indentures were honored meaning that a child could remain under state care for even longer. This policy shows the distrust the state had over the biological family as opposed to the foster families that the state believed it had closely inspected.

Foster families were not monitored to the same degree as biological families and were shown more trust, possibly because of the state's perceived control in choosing the foster families. Children were often not observed as closely in foster families with rare occurrences of children like Beth being removed out of state without the foster family notifying SPS. Biological family members of baby Beth later wrote to the institution requesting her whereabouts. They were first told that there was no record of her ever being at SPS, but years after it was admitted

⁴⁰ Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

by officials that she was lost from the system after her foster family moved out of state without notice.⁴¹ Progressive ideals that valued the biological family unit were not being practiced at SPS. The state often valued the families that were chosen for indenture and vetted by state officials over the poor biological families perceived to have some immoral issue for the child to be sent to SPS in the first place. This also shows the division between the perception of lower-class individuals, particularly in regards to their inherent immorality, and how this clashed with Progressive ideals that sought to create a society where class had no enduring place.⁴² This exhibition of control over the poor is just another example of the failure of reforms to really take effect in Wisconsin.

The trust exhibited by the state to foster parents is evident from the appointment of practically all parental control to the foster parents once the child left SPS. It was easier for the state to delegate parenting of the children to the foster parents the state believed it had so carefully selected, rather than to monitor the children that closely. Only two agents were employed by the institution in 1904 to look after 887 children on indenture, so it is unlikely home visits were as often as the superintendent claimed in his biennial reports.⁴³ Agents from the school were said to visit each child at least every four months, yet the visits were not as often as SPS claimed and often stopped shortly after the child was placed in the home. The small number of agents employed at the institution and the lack of agent reports in the files of the children are indicative of a greater degree of trust than given to poor biological families of the children. Like true Progressives, SPS officials believed that the environment a child was being raised in greatly contributed to the child's future behaviors and whether or not the child would be an effective

⁴¹ Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

⁴² Stormquist, *Re-Inventing the People*, 4.

⁴³ State Public School, *Ninth Biennial Report*, 350.

member of society. Unlike other Progressives however, SPS did not try and reform the child's biological family home but instead employ the use of homes believed to already be stable. This had the potentiality to be detrimental not only to the child, but the poor families who perhaps needed the assistance of the state in order to create a better environment for parents and children alike.

Sending the Children out on Indenture Contracts

The main house loomed in the distance. It was August 1907 and Marian stood outside the institution that would become her home for the next month until she gained the skills necessary to be placed out on indenture, hopefully with a family that would treat her as their own.⁴⁴ Marian's mother and father had recently divorced and their mother was without means to support her children because of her "intemperate" former husband. Mothers' pensions had not yet been introduced leaving Marian's mother no choice but to turn over her parental rights to the state by committing her two children, including Marian, to SPS at age 8. Marian's time living in the institution was short, although, like nearly all of the children committed to SPS, she remained a ward of the state until her 18th birthday, ten years after her original commitment. She was indentured to the Schrauger family of Iowa County in September 1907. Unlike many of the children in the system, Marian found a family who treated her like one of their own so much so she refused to take the \$50 bond promised to every indentured child on their 21st birthday. But like many of the children indentured out, Marian was not legally adopted by the Schraugers, perhaps because they did not want to go through the hassle of filing the papers. Marian was a

⁴⁴Marian was also admitted with a brother who was indentured to a family in a different county after staying at SPS for two years. Records included in her file included letters from the Juvenile Court Judge to SPS, letters from Marian to SPS, letters from the Schrauger's to SPS, letters from the SPS superintendent to the foster parents, and the Schrauger's application for indenture. Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

lucky one. Many of the children indentured out were not treated as members of the family but rather a source of labor to help with chores around the farm or the house.

The application system for sending children out on indenture was not as rigorous as the state would have liked one to believe. Families around the state, and sometimes even neighboring states who heard of this program, could fill out a form and send it into the headmaster at the institution who would review it with his agents. The form asked the applicants for a complete list of members of the family; the religion of the wife and husband; why they were looking for an indentured child; any physical preferences like appearance, age, or sex; the value of any property they owned; and the distance to the closest school and train station. The waiting list was long and families were frequently on the waiting list for months if not years for a child who met their specific criteria to become available. Opal, a mixed race child committed to the institution after her white Irish “human parasite” father abandoned her unmarried black mother, was indentured to a woman in Milwaukee who specifically requested a good looking girl for companionship because she did not have any children of her own. Sadly, the woman in Milwaukee did not work out, and Opal was bounced around to multiple foster families before eventually being returned to SPS and then transferred to the Northern Colony.⁴⁵ It was common for foster families to list the reason they wanted the child as being for companionship, although this was usually coupled with wanting the child for light chores or help around the house.

After the initial screening of the applicants’ paperwork, the agents made house calls to decide if the family was worthy of a child from the institution. Thousands of applications for

⁴⁵ Opal brought to SPS as a baby because her mother was of low mentality and did not have an income. After her indenture to the first woman, she was transferred to another Milwaukee family five months later. She eventually returned to the institution and then was transferred to the Northern Colony where she remained for the rest of her life. She was placed on the list for sterilization in 1940. Wisconsin Child Center Children’s Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

indenture were sent to the institution every year and it became up to the agents of the school to make a home visit and determine if the applicant was moral enough with a well-kept house and would be able to raise the children in their care with the best interest of the child in mind. Some applicants were automatically rejected because of their shoddy living conditions or their lack of education, both of which were at the discretion of the agent.⁴⁶ The agent thus had the sole responsibility to judge the applicant's suitability after only one visit, hardly enough time to actually gauge whether the child would be best suited for that family or if the family would have the child's best interest in mind. Through this process, the state was acting paternalistically by judging potential foster families in order to determine the best place for a child. However because this process was confined to one visit, it was not as holistic in the consideration of the child's best interest as it should have been resulting in many misplaced children. Instead of every child being nurtured in a loving household where the foster family would treat them as their own offspring, most children from the institution were placed in houses for their labor value. Even applicants that claimed they wanted a child for "companionship" on the application, would contradict themselves later on by writing to the institution that the child was not providing adequate work around the house or farm.

These agents would then supposedly visit the families after the child was placed every four months or so, more or less if the agent determined it was necessary. While a child was out on indenture, the state lacked direct control of the child. To compensate for this lack of control, the families were asked to fill out forms once every two months that would give the headmaster some sense of how the child was fairing along with a platform for the foster parents to complain about anything that they deemed was wrong with the child like if the child was being too "lazy"

⁴⁶ State Public School, *Report of the State Public School for the Biennial Period Ending June 30, 1908*, 367-368.

with their chores or acting out. If the family required immediate attention in disciplining the child, the foster parents could write to the headmaster threatening to send the child back to the institution. The headmaster would then determine if their complaint was valid and would usually write to the child directly telling them to behave or they would be sent back to SPS or one of the Industrial Schools. If absolutely necessary, an agent could visit the child and talk to them although this was rarely done as agents were too busy making their normal house calls to other children around Wisconsin. The state parented these children from a distance, using the institution as a tactic to compel them into submission of their foster family. Not only was the state trying to keep tabs on the trouble children, but the foster parents were using the state as disciplinary figures in the child's lives. This diminished the family environment that Progressive reformers valued by substituting the state as parental figures in a child's life rather than honor the traditional family structure that placed parents, biological or not, as the sole supervisors of children.

Educating the Poor Children of Wisconsin

The primary concern expressed by the state was the issue of education for poor children, based off of Progressive values seeking to create effective community members through school attendance.⁴⁷ This value of education increased the number of children being sent to institutions if a family, especially impoverished ones, could not provide adequate education or firm discipline at home.⁴⁸ Many children were sent to SPS because their biological parents could not afford to send them to school or did not see the importance. These children may not have transportation to the schoolhouse or may need to help out around the house or may have even been bullied for having immigrant parents who did not speak English as was the case with Ralph Pavlovic. The

⁴⁷ Klienber, *Widows and Orphans First*, 7-8.

⁴⁸ Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, 249.

son of Serb-Austrian immigrants, Ralph and his siblings were often persecuted in school resulting in his superstitious mother refusing to send them back. His mother, described as being “very peculiar- probably [had] psychosis of some kind,” was jailed for thirty days, and Ralph was sent to SPS.⁴⁹ The state sought to educate children of Wisconsin in any means possible, even if that meant sending them to an institution to get an education.

Once at the institution, children were instructed in not only traditional school subjects, but in gender-specific vocational trades as well that would prepare them for indenture. The older boys at the institution were “taught all the forms of farm life such as plowing, harrowing, planting, cultivating, harvesting. They are also taught how to work in the gardens, and much of the care of stock, assisting in milking and caring for our fine herd of Holsteins” on the 234 acres of attached farmland.⁵⁰ While the older girls were “Taught sewing, and cooking in the Domestic Science department, and they have practical work in the kitchens and dining rooms of the school, also various kinds of work such as cleaning, sewing, darning and mending in the cottages.”⁵¹ SPS had the policy that all students must work around the school in addition to time in the classroom. The purpose of training in these trades was to give the child valuable and practical skills as they made their own way in life, however training also served as a way to market the children to indenture homes. Most of the families requesting indentured children were in rural communities and owned farms, for which boys like Van were requested to help with chores and farm work. Requests for

⁴⁹Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

⁵⁰ State Public School, *Ninth Biennial Report of the State Public School for the Biennial Period Ending June 30, 1904* (Madison, WI, Democrat Printing Company, State Printer, 1905), 338-340. U.S. Children’s Bureau, “Children Indentured by the Wisconsin State Public School,” Publications 150-160 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, Children’s Bureau, 1925), 4.

⁵¹ State Public School, *Ninth Biennial Report*, 340.

boys like Van aged 12 to 14 to help with chores around the house and farm were most popular in the Spring when the agricultural season began.⁵² Families in town who were looking for help with housework or help with their other children would most likely apply for girls like Tessie who were indentured for “light housework.”⁵³ Seeing boys in more rural areas and girls in towns was common because of the different gender-specific tasks usually requested in each area, tasks that the institution prepared the children to do.⁵⁴ Furthermore, children could also be returned to the institution if the indenture family did not think the child had received the proper training during their temporary stay at SPS like.⁵⁵ This child would either be returned to the complaining foster parents or, more likely than not, would be indentured to a new family creating an unstable environment for the most of the children in state care. The state’s interest was therefore less about a child experiencing a “true childhood,” but more about a child being able to train for a vocational trade that would allow the child to contribute to society. It can be concluded that what was in SPS viewed as the best interest of the child was framed more in terms of what would be beneficial for the state, rather than what was actually in the best interest of the child.

Although the stated goal of the school was to provide education for the children in its care, this was often put on the back-burner when the children were placed out on indenture as the

⁵² State Public School, *Twelfth Biennial Report of the State Public School for the Two Years Ending June 30, 1910* (Madison, WI: n.p., 1910), 220.

⁵³ Tessie was indentured three times, the last of which wanted help with “light housework.” She was eventually sent to the Industrial School for Girls in Milwaukee because of her alleged promiscuity among town boys. Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

⁵⁴ State Public School. *Report of the State Public School for the Biennial Period Ending June 30, 1908* (Madison, WI: Democrat Printing Company, State Printer, 1909), 373.

⁵⁵ Louella was returned to the institution from one of her many foster homes two years after her individual indenturement, then was returned back to the same foster family a few months later. She was then indentured to another family just a few months later. Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

labor the child could provide became more important than the child's education.⁵⁶ When the child was placed on indenture, the foster parents were required to sign a contract stating the child would attend at least four months of school, dependent on the ease of access to the schoolhouse. The contract also stated that the child would complete up to the state-provided 8th grade education. Of course, this minimum education requirement was often adjusted if the child seemed incapable of passing a certain grade due to a low mentality or learning disability as noted by a local teacher or previously recorded at SPS. Despite these education contracts, it was not uncommon for foster parents in rural areas to withhold the children from school for long periods of time in favor of the labor the children could provide around the farm during schooldays.

Teachers from where the school where the indentured child was attending were required to send in report cards to SPS, detailing the child's academic and social progress as well as their attendance. SPS officials then contacted the foster parents of the children who were not attending school on a regular basis, warning them that the child must attend school more often or the child would be returned to SPS. These threats were rarely documented as enforced and the child more often than not remained at the indentured home. This is evident in the case of Truman, a young boy indentured to a Jefferson County farmer and his family. The farmer misunderstood how much schooling Truman was required to attend, as the primary concern of the farmer was not Truman's education, but rather the labor that Truman could provide around the farm. When the SPS superintendent was made aware of this from a report card from the local school marking the many absences of Truman, the superintendent wrote to the foster parents threatening to take Truman back so he could be educated at SPS. The foster father appealed to the superintendent to let Truman stay with them and was granted this request, with

⁵⁶ Many foster homes were only looking for cheap labor. Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, 212.

the condition that Truman complete the minimum amount of schooling required per year. So the foster family moved closer moved closer to a town where school was more accessible. This was not a traditional school, however. At that school, he learned the trade of “scientific farming” in order to better serve around the farm for foster parents were allowed to substitute traditional schooling with vocational trade schools in order to satisfy the state’s education requirements.⁵⁷ The state tried to monitor the child was receiving an education through an inadequate system of self-reporting by teachers and foster parents, parenting from a distance through letters while letting the foster parents act as interim parents on their behalf. The state rarely interfered in the foster parent’s decisions, resulting in a disconnect between the state’s perceived control and the reality of the situation.

The “White Slaves” of Wisconsin

The act of indenturing children to families was not unique to Wisconsin. Across the United States, orphanages placed out children in order to be able to accommodate more poor children under state control. Progressives viewed being in a familial setting in foster homes as more intimate than an institutional setting if a child absolutely could not remain with their biological family, allowing for the child to have a better chance at not being emotionally stunted later in life.⁵⁸ However, the indenture system was flawed, often caring more about quantity of children cared for rather than the quality of their lives. Every now and then, reports of neglect in the foster homes from concerned neighbors, preachers, or teachers were sent to the school who would then send an agent to investigate. Children indentured in homes even wrote to the

⁵⁷ Truman later won a full scholarship to University of Wisconsin- Madison, but was not supported by the state during this time. Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

⁵⁸ Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, 211.

headmaster with any concerns they had, only to be dismissed a majority of the time with the headmaster refusing to return the student to the institution or investigate. Such was the case of Rosa.⁵⁹ She wrote to the institution that she was being overworked and did not feel comfortable staying at her foster home, but her complaint was ignored by SPS officials. It was not until she was able to borrow a stamp from a neighbor and mail a letter to her brother who then wrote the institution claiming that she was being held as a form of “white slavery” and was being threatened and sexually harassed by the foster family’s son and farm workers that the superintendent took notice. She was finally removed her from the home five years after her initial placement, years after she initially made the complaint to the school. The communication between SPS officials and the children out on indenture was paternal in nature, as the superintendent and agents at the school often refused to take children’s claims seriously citing that children often “made things up.”⁶⁰ The state exhibited paternalistic qualities by interfering in the child’s lives and claiming the actions taken were in the best interest of the child, without taking into consideration the input received from the child thus largely ignoring the child’s personal views on the situation.

While the superintendent listened to Rosa’s brother, this was an atypical situation. Usually when family members of committed children out on indenture wrote to the institution requesting contact or return of their children, they were told that contact would be out of the question because the child was in a “good home” and any correspondence or removal of children would not be in the best interest of the child as Polly’s brother found out. Her brother wrote

⁵⁹ Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

⁶⁰ Stewart stole things growing up and falsely reported he was overworked and starved by his foster family to visiting agents. He was not removed until his foster family decided his attitude was too rowdy to deal with years later. Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

multiple times requesting Polly live with him, yet was denied every time and Polly was later sent to the Northern Colony, perhaps as an effort to further keep her away from her brother.⁶¹

Biological family members were usually informed when the child was out on indenture, however the whereabouts of the child was kept from the biological family in order to let the child adapt to their new surroundings— and further exert control on the child and the family by the state.

Instead of direct communication between the child and the biological family, the superintendent would instead intercept letters to the children at SPS where he would decide if the letter contained worthy enough information to pass on to the indentured child. More often than not, the superintendent would instead respond to the biological family member the same way he had responded with Polly's brother. The state acted as a middleman between the biological family and their child, exerting control. While the state claimed this was for the best interest of the child, this was another way to completely separate the child from their old life in order to form them into "ideal" citizens. SPS sought to separate the child completely from his or her old life from the moment he or she entered the institution. This included not only biological family members, but members from the community as well including local officials. The chief of police from Alfonzo's home town who had looked after him shortly before his commitment to SPS was told to stop sending so many gifts and letters promising to take him back for this was "not a good thing for the boy to do quite so much for him and it is apt to create dissatisfaction among the other boys."⁶² Under the guise that it was best for Alfonzo, the state effectively severed ties from his previous life in order to help the state restructure Alfonzo better to suit their needs. This is

⁶¹ Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

⁶² Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

evidence of the remnants of an older form of Progressivism, despite new efforts made by maternalists with mothers' pensions.

Mothers' Pensions: The Emergence of the Maternal State

Progressive Era reformers worked to change the perception of children living in poverty from being inherently immoral because of the child's living situation, something the child could not control. Impoverished children were previously marked as not deserving of aid because of their perceived immorality. Earlier reformers' solution was to place children in institutional settings like SPS where the flaws in the children could be addressed in order to create morally upstanding citizens. As America entered into the twentieth century however, reformers began to consider other options for child welfare that would preserve biological families. This was mainly due to the idea that a woman's highest calling was motherhood and that if a male breadwinner could not provide adequate support for the woman and her children for her to be able to stay at home, then the state should fill in this role.⁶³ The thought was that this would not only benefit women and their children, but the state as well for mothers who stayed at home were thought to create better future citizens.

Progressive reformers in the early twentieth century became increasingly concerned with preserving familial integrity among all classes, as they viewed this as the best pathway to creating future citizens that would contribute to society as a whole. However, there was question on how to achieve this. Left over sentiments from private charities had previously been able to curtail public assistance program passages in major cities along with the perception that freely

⁶³ Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 8.

handing out aid would encourage pauperism.⁶⁴ Public notions and governmental policies only began to change after pressure was put on by reformers at the 1909 Conference on the Care of Dependent Children that advocated the maintenance of the biological family through government assistance. Reformers' concerns were met with the passage of in-home care acts known as mothers' pensions. These pensions were created with the goal to keep biological families together and reward poor mothers for their work in creating morally upstanding citizens that would be positive contributors to society rather than become criminals or lazy, unemployed people living in squalor. First introduced in 1911 in Illinois, mothers' pensions spread relatively quickly around the nation with thirty-nine of the forty-two state legislatures passing laws for aid to mothers and children by 1919. A majority of state legislatures voted to adopt mothers' pensions policies in 1913, including Wisconsin.⁶⁵ Although officially adopted a year later in 1914, the passage of mothers' pensions in Wisconsin marked the theoretical shift from institutional state care to in-home care. The policy shifts, however, did not dramatically change the practices of the Wisconsin family welfare system, as SPS still exhibited control over how poor children received aid once the state was made aware of their alleged dependent or neglected status.

Mothers' pensions were one of the first public welfare acts enacted by the state, although private charities and some local governments provided limited aid before. It was still more likely for the state to commit the children to SPS and send destitute parents to their county poor farm. Private charities continued to supplement mothers' pensions or even bypass them all together as is the case with the Jacobs family. After Mr. Jacobs abandoned his family, his wife and children

⁶⁴ Mark A. Leff, "Consensus for Reform: The Mothers' Pension Movement in the Progressive Era," *Social Service Review* 47, no. 3 (1973): 398-399.

⁶⁵ Leff, "Consensus for Reform," 401-402.

became “objects of charity” supported by their city of residence and private charities until Mrs. Jacobs was sent to the tuberculosis asylum as a public charge and the children were sent to live with their grandmother who eventually had them committed to the Catholic Asylum in her town. The Jacobs’ son Alfonzo was then sent to SPS on temporary commitment because he kept running away from the Catholic Asylum while his county of origin paid for his stay. After the county money for his three-month stay was exhausted, the Juvenile Court judge in his county of origin was told Alfonzo must either be sent back to his grandmother or to a private Catholic orphanage in Wisconsin. Because neither was a viable option, he was permanently committed to SPS and thus became cared for by state funds rather than county ones.⁶⁶

Maternalists: Women in the Public Sphere

The growing consensus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was that women were responsible for the care of children and that this maternal duty extended beyond their own households. These female reformers became known as maternalists, or those who believed that their inherent motherly qualities made them qualified to operate in the public sphere.

Maternalists were mainly middle-class women who became increasingly involved in politics under the guise of social motherhood, which subsequently allowed for the establishment of child welfare reform.⁶⁷ Organizations like the National Congress of Mothers, established in 1897, were founded to advocate the traditional version of motherhood among all classes.⁶⁸ The goal of the National Congress of Mothers to keep biological families together that may otherwise be separated due to the state’s interference through institutions and to improve motherhood by

⁶⁶ Wisconsin Child Center Children’s Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

⁶⁷ Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 2.

⁶⁸ The National Congress of Mothers became the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (PTA) in 1924. Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 8.

providing assistance for impoverished women with educational opportunities and temporary assistance. By doing these two things, the National Congress of Mothers believed it would create the morally upstanding citizens from children that the state had previously viewed as only being able to be done by through placing children in institutional settings.⁶⁹

Women were directly involved in the political process of child welfare reform as private and public life coincided to form the maternal state. The goal of reformers was to preserve the American way of life by teaching mothers to raise good citizens and have the government compensate mothers for their services in child-rearing, as this would ultimately benefit the greater society.⁷⁰ Both of these goals would allow the biological family to stay together, an idea reformers strongly associated themselves with. This notion of keeping the family together also reflected reformer's intent of making sure poor mothers did not have to work, for work would take away from the woman's motherly duty. While this was an admirable goal, it was often divergent from the reality as the aid handed out through mothers' pensions was rarely enough to compensate poor mothers for their child-rearing services enough so they did not have to work.⁷¹

A prime example of in-home assistance failure is the Wood family. Six of the Wood children were temporarily committed in 1923 from Sauk County because their mother was a poor money manager despite having "sufficient money," resulting in the state taking away Ms. Wood's children while she figured out how to be a better mother in the eyes of the state. There is no indication that the state instructed Ms. Wood in how to better manage her finances while her children were at SPS, however she and her older daughter were able to find work in a bakery

⁶⁹ Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 50.

⁷⁰ Poor immigrants were especially targeted in parts of the country with higher immigrant populations in order to Anglicize them into fitting the American standard. See Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 5. Mink, *Wages of Motherhood*, 5.

⁷¹ Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, 7.

and establish a new home in Dane County while her children were at SPS. Upon the release of the Wood children, the superintendent wrote to the Madison Public Welfare Association to secretly keep an eye on Mrs. Wood and help her better manage her home, which they later wrote back to SPS confirming she had been assisted in “a wise management of her home.”⁷² There is no record of Ms. Wood receiving any aid from mothers’ pensions, perhaps because her and her eldest daughter’s wages were enough to provide adequate financial support for the entire family. This shows that while mothers’ pensions were in effect legislatively, the act was not always executed consistently. The odd case of the Wood family is also indicative of the meshing of old and new relief pathways, for the state embraced a more Progressive view by allowing the family to stay together and simply monitoring them through the Madison Public Welfare Association. The goal in the Wood’s case was to reform the home environment by observing and supervising the mother, rather than reform the children outside of the negative environment of a poor money manager. While the outcome of in-home relief was achieved, the route taken was through an outdated path of institutional commitment of the children at SPS. New and old policies were interacting with each other in not necessarily the most effective way. Families like the Woods who were split up in order to be reformed would probably have endured a far less amount of familial stress if allowed to remain together throughout the entirety of their interaction with the state.

Mothers’ Pensions on a Local Level

While mothers’ pensions standards were established on a statewide basis, its implementation was on a more local level where the concept of deserving versus undeserving

⁷² Wisconsin Child Center Children’s Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

poor was highly variable.⁷³ County Juvenile Court judges decided who was worthy of aid and the amount given to each recipient.⁷⁴ These courts were the same ones to decide who was sent to various state-funded institutions around the state, including SPS. Mothers' pensions came entirely out of the county's budget, unlike state run institutions which were funded only partially by the county and supplemented heavily by the state. Counties were required to pay the full board for children committed to SPS on a temporary basis with the expectation that children would eventually be reunited with their biological parents and therefore returned to the county, but children committed on a permanent basis were provided for from a state budget. Therefore, there was little incentive for the judges to keep the children in the county or at SPS on a temporary basis which would allow for an easier reconciliation of parents and their children. It was fiscally more responsible for the county Juvenile Court judges to send the children to SPS on a permanent basis where they would be financially provided for by the state, as in Ralph Pavlovic of Polk County's case. Mr. Pavlovic died when he was young, leaving Mrs. Pavlovic, who did not speak good English, on mothers' pensions. When Mrs. Pavlovic was imprisoned for keeping her children out of school and her mothers' pension was briefly suspended, Ralph was admitted to SPS on a temporary basis. This became permanent when Mrs. Pavlovic was admitted to the county sanitarium for treatment of tuberculosis. While in the sanitarium, Mrs. Pavlovic requested that her children be sent to a Greek Catholic home in Milwaukee County, to be paid for with her mother's pensions but was told by Polk County officials that the money could not be

⁷³ Kleinberg, *Widows and Orphans First*, 15.

⁷⁴ Advocates for mothers' pensions wanted juvenile courts to distribute the aid instead of welfare boards because of perceived connection between broken homes and juvenile crime as well as to distinguish mothers' pensions from relief. See Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 139. Natural belief that child would drift into crime if he/she remained in impoverished circumstances. State Public School, *Ninth Biennial Report*, 330. "Wisconsin's Greatest Benevolence: The State School for Dependent and Neglected Children, at Sparta," *Sparta Herald* (Sparta, WI), September 10, 1912 issue.

taken out of Polk.⁷⁵ The highly localized nature of mothers' pensions made it difficult for consistent implementation in a way that would honor the biological family's wishes.

Not only was there tension between biological families and their county of residence, but also between the biological and the state once the county surrendered control of the children. Mrs. Pavlovic experienced this after her release from the sanitarium and her reestablishment in Illinois where she received aid from the American Red Cross. She appealed to SPS for Ralph back, yet was continually denied. Despite keeping on the tradition of the maternal state by providing for poor women through in-home aid, the state still refused to relinquish parental control of the children even though Mrs. Pavlovic was now financially stable. This then led to the child's being indentured by SPS, for foster homes became the chief financial provider of the child and thus the child ceased to be under total financial care of the state. Thus, there was a financial motive to send the child out of the county to SPS, proving as a detriment to the enactment of mothers' pensions and further supporting the popularization of institutions.

Not all county juvenile judges shared the view that the institution was better for the child, highlighting the local differences around the state. For example, Judge H.P. Axelberg of Bayfield County recognized the power of keeping the biological family together rather than sending children to the institution only to have siblings be split up into different foster homes around Wisconsin. He believed his previous decision to send the children of the Anderson family to SPS was premature. He remorsefully admitted that he believed if the mother was given the full \$40 a month allotted by mothers' pensions, rather than the \$25 she was being supported with currently, then she would have been able to adequately care for her children. In an attempt to retrieve the children from the institution and place them back with their mother, he wrote a letter to the

⁷⁵ Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

superintendent stating, “the underlying idea of the ‘Mother’s Pension’ law was to encourage(sic) keeping dependent children together with their mother- or near relatives, and this is a case where I believe it would be for the best to permit a substantial allowance rather than have the children scattered about the state.” This admission of remorse by a juvenile judge was rare but, at least in the Anderson case, not completely in vain. The superintendent released seven of the eight children from the Anderson family back to their mother in 1925. However, the superintendent refused to send the youngest daughter back as she was in a “good home and comfortable,” exhibiting the control the state maintained despite pleas from county judges who committed the children in the first place.⁷⁶

Tensions between local and state government was largely due to the individual differences within local county structures and state standards. Mothers’ pensions gave county power in overseeing the poor, while institutional commitment gave the state power. This struggle can also be seen as an inevitable tension resulting because of interactions between the new and the old system of welfare. Localized aid was not new, but the establishment of a state standard of how aid was to be distributed was a characteristic of the Progressive Era. This state standard would be challenged by the state itself as the state realized that they would not gain control of welfare, but lose control as counties implemented these welfare policies independent of the state.

SPS after the Implementation of Mothers’ Pensions

After the passage of the mothers’ pensions act, it appears as if the demographic of the poor families with children being sent to the institution shifted slightly. Before 1914, single

⁷⁶ Wisconsin Child Center Children’s Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

mothers were more likely to have their children sent to the institution. This was based on the belief that the best way to create productive citizens was to remove them from the “negative” environment they were being raised in. This included single mothers who were believed to not be effective mothers if they had no male head of household to support them financially.⁷⁷ However, under the Progressive Era, the idea that children were better off in a familial environment and mothers deserved to be compensated for their services in raising the future generation spread resulting in shift in policies that did not necessarily translate into reality at SPS.⁷⁸ After the passage of the mothers’ pensions, children being sent to the institution came from families where one or both of the parents was deemed of “low morality” or “low mentality” rather than just seeing the children of single mothers.⁷⁹ Who was subject to this harsh judgement was still very unregulated and dependent on local variances meaning that the reality was that admittance practices remained generally unchanged.

One of the most determining factors in deciding which mother was eligible for mothers’ pensions and which mother deserved to have her children sent to SPS was the perceived morality of the mother.⁸⁰ In 1921, seven years after the introduction of mothers’ pensions that would have provided a way for Charlotte to stay at home with her mother, Charlotte was sent to SPS because of her mother’s low mentality and questionable living. After Charlotte’s father deserted his family, her mother had several live-in boyfriends, one of which resulted in an illegitimate child. Ultimately, it was Charlotte’s mother’s nature as judged by the state that prevented Charlotte from remaining with her mother.⁸¹ It was not uncommon for a local government to use the

⁷⁷ Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, 7.

⁷⁸ Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 2.

⁷⁹ Maternalists believed that only deserving mothers should get the chance to stay home with their children, instead of neglecting them by having to work or put them into institutions like SPS. Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 53.

⁸⁰ Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*, 42-43.

⁸¹ Wisconsin Child Center Children’s Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

character of a mother rather than consider any other possible circumstances that could have led to pauperism when determining what form of aid should be given, which in Charlotte's case resulted in her being surrendered to the state to be raised away from her "immoral" mother. This falls back on the old notion that institutional settings were the best way to reform a child, rather than reform the home environment in a way that would benefit the entire family. The state retained control of the poor through the ability to seize parental guardianship from "immoral" biological parents, almost always those living in poverty, as a notice that the parents' immorality would not be tolerated or fostered through the allowance of a family to keep their children. Charlotte's case challenges the very nature of Progressivism, as Charlotte's mother was punished rather than elevated through reform which shows the government's slow adoption of Progressive values regarding lower class morality and welfare. This also highlights the ineffectiveness of Progressive reform policies as the state often disregarded laws that would allow biological families to remain together in favor of more traditional practices that were believed to be more proven.

The institution did not experience a dramatic shift in policies in the ten years following the passage of mothers' pensions. Policies of taking children away from "immoral" impoverished environments rather than reform the environment they had been born into remained largely in effect along with the distrust of lower class families, despite Progressives' attempts to create a more classless society. Overall, child welfare in Wisconsin did not change that much with the passage of mothers' pensions.

Life After the Institution

On the child's 18th birthday, the child was released from the indenture contract and the foster family was required to pay \$50 to SPS to be put into an account accumulating interest until the child turned 21. If the child still happened to live at the institution on their 18th birthday, a rare occurrence, they were released without the same promise of \$50 when they reached 21 years of age. On or shortly after the child's 21st birthday, the school sent out letters to all the children SPS knew the whereabouts of letting them know they could collect their money. Most children were aware of the indenture money and would write to the institution asking for it, sometimes even before their 21st birthday, a claim that would be rejected by SPS officials every time. Children like Laretta who married at 18 wrote to SPS asking for her money as she "very much needed it" but was denied by SPS who cited that she must be at least 21 before they would be allowed to release the money, regardless of need.⁸² The state was the sole financial controller of these children and any money they accumulated during their stay through these indenture contracts, any inheritance, or any money they had coming with them into the institution. Even though the state had reared these children in their mold or placed them with those they believed would raise them in the best interest of the state, the controlling of finances reveals the lack of trust the state had for children born to poor parents that they would be able to control their finances enough to stay out of poverty initially following the child's release. This is contradictory to Progressive beliefs that children were merely victims of circumstance and not inherently immoral.

Some children were able to gain the trust of the state and were able to successfully apply for aid from the state in order to further their education. High school cost money during this time, so most children did not receive an education past the state-mandated 8th grade education.

⁸² Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

However, promising children like Stephen were sent to boarding houses in cities by SPS and given small allowances per week for books and other living expenses.⁸³ Stephen attended a high school in Madison and was then admitted to the University of Wisconsin- Madison, where he received help from the state in the form of tuition payments until his 21st birthday at which point he aged out of the system. The aid given to children for the help of further schooling was completely at the discretion of the headmaster who determined if the child was hard-working or worthy enough to receive assistance from the state. Progressives valued education, so it would only seem palpable that the state would continue to provide as much education as the child needed, yet this was rarely the case. Very few students applied for assistance for education beyond 8th grade, but even fewer received aid from the state.

It was often up to the foster parent to provide education past the 8th grade, but it was rare that foster family had the means to support this higher education. Foster families like the Sweeneys and the Newtons expressed interest for the boys in their care to attend high school, with the Newtons even looking into selling their farm and moving closer to town where the high school was. The Newton's foster son unfortunately did not make it into high school and the Sweeny's were not able to move to provide an education for the children in their care.⁸⁴ The state often did not have the means to care for all of the children requesting aid for education high school and above, as Alice discovered when she visited SPS after aging out of her foster home. She hoped to attend high school, but her request for assistance was denied because she was over

⁸³ Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

⁸⁴ The Newtons's foster son refused to retake the high school entrance test after his first failed attempt, stopping any dream of an upper education his foster parents had for him. Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

18 and SPS did not feel she was bright enough.⁸⁵ Educational aid was given discretionally by the state, and only to those who were deemed worthy enough.⁸⁶ The expectation Progressives had for the state to have an unbiased approach towards all citizens was not met at SPS as personal views of officials often clouded the full potential the state had for assistance.

Conclusion

Progressive reform movements did not always infiltrate previously established institutional settings meant to aid the poor. Furthermore, these reform movements did not occur overnight and often took years to implement within state welfare systems. SPS largely embodied earlier beliefs without adapting to new policies associated with the passage of mothers' pensions that would retain the integrity of the biological family unit. The state often showed a distrust of those from the impoverished biological families of children being sent to SPS because of their perceived immorality or ignorance. Further showcasing the distrust the state had for the biological families, SPS acted as a middleman between the biological family and the children in its care by limiting interactions between the two in order to shape the children into better citizens absent of perceived immoral biological families or the negative environment associated with poverty. This control the state had on the biological families was a manifestation of distrust of the lower classes by the state, contradictory to Progressives ideal of a classless society in the eyes of the state.

While in the custody of the state, a child's best interests were not always met, and often the best interest of the state was taken more into consideration. Through the separation of the

⁸⁵ Wisconsin Child Center Children's Records, 1886-1953 Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, WI.

⁸⁶ Scholarships were often a matter of private aid societies like the PTA in Massachusetts, working as financial supplements of educational public programs. Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, 53.

child from the biological family, the state was directly going against Progressive values. Furthermore, by the training of children in gender-specific vocational tasks that would better market them for indenture contracts as well as prepare them for adult life, the state often overlooked the nurturing a child needed.

The implications of mothers' pensions was theoretically almost flawless, although the actual implementation was not always supported by the state. Mother's pension had little effect in changing state welfare as Wisconsin continued to heavily employ the use of institutions to create what the state viewed as more productive citizens. By removing children from impoverished conditions in order to reform them rather than to reform their entire families, the state therefore expressed skepticism about the Progressive values. This reluctance to accept new reform ideas aimed at keeping the biological family together was a stark contrast to the philosophies of the Progressive Era and could be considered an impediment to progress in welfare actually being made.

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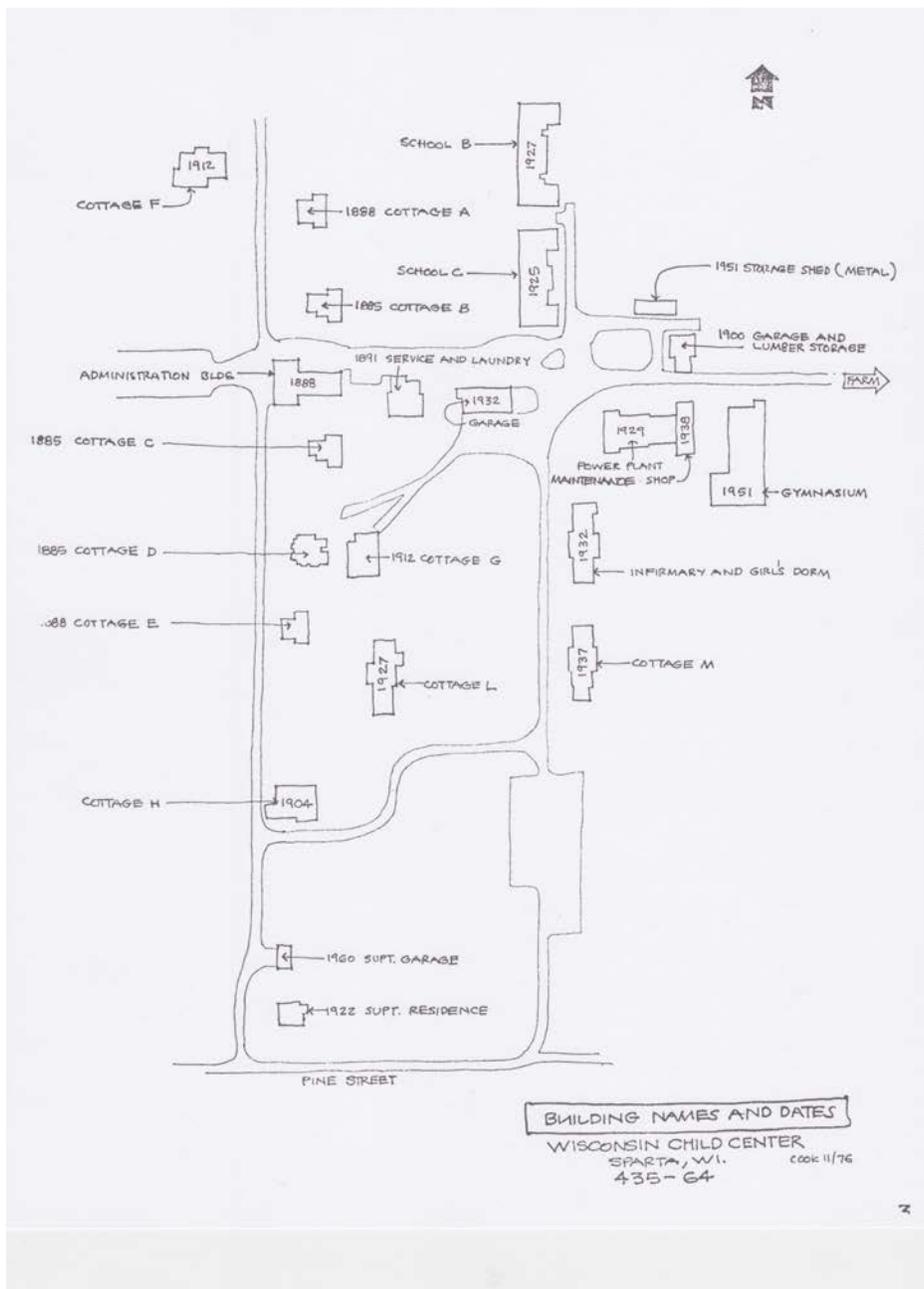
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Map of the Wisconsin Child Center (State Public School) Campus from the City Hall Engineering Department for the Wisconsin Department of Health and Services, 1976. Includes the names and dates of construction for the buildings included in the State Public School.



Appendix 2: Few buildings remain standing from the State Public School, including this cottage used by the Boys and Girls Club for the organization's annual haunted house. Today, the farmland is now a golf course with the children's cemetery nestled in between the holes.