“Says There’s Nothing Like Home”
FAMILY CASEWORK
with the
MINNEAPOLIS POOR
1900-30

HUNDREDS OF LEADERS in social welfare convened in Minneapolis in 1907 for the annual meeting of the National Conference of Charities and Correction. They listened to speeches and debated what to do about deviance and dependence, institutions, relief, and family work among the poor. William D. Washburn, Jr., one of the city's wealthiest men, played the role of town booster informing the crowd that in spite of "various failings" in the social condition, "the average type of life in the Mississippi Valley is the highest the world has yet produced in any such large section or community upon the world's surface." Others in the audience knew well from experience, however, that Minneapolis was not immune to the social problems suffered elsewhere.

1 Washburn, "Preventive Measures in the Mississippi Valley," National Conference of Charities and Correction (NCCC), Proceedings, 1907, p. 341. The NCCC became the National Conference of Social Work and later the National Conference on Social Welfare, which held annual meetings and published conference proceedings. The 1907 meeting in Minneapolis was covered by the city press as well; see Minneapolis Tribune, June 12, p. 7, June 20, p. 6, both 1907. See also David J. Klaassen, "The Deserving Poor: Beginnings of Organized Charity in Minneapolis," Hennepin County History, Spring, 1988, p. 15-25.

2 Minneapolis Board of Court House and City Hall Commissioners, A History of the Municipal Building of the City of Minneapolis and the Court of Hennepin, Minnesota (Minneapolis: The Board, 1910), [23]. This article is based on 300 cases of the approximately 35,000 case records compiled between 1895 and 1945, microfilm copies in the Family and Children's Service (FCS) Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota; it is part of a larger study by Beverly A. Stadum entitled "'Maybe They Will Appreciate What I Done and Struggled': Poor Women and Their Families—Charity Cases in Minneapolis, 1900-1930," Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1987.

For many cities rapid industrialization, immigration, and almost unmanageable urban growth characterized life at the turn of the century. In response to civic needs authorities in Minneapolis built a massive new City Hall/County Courthouse that officially opened its doors in 1909; poverty was one of the unpleasant realities to which city fathers allotted space. The office for public poor relief was located at one end of the first floor, and at the other was a larger set of rooms for Associated Charities (AC), a private agency. The family experience of the poor in Minneapolis and their involvement with Associated Charities was part of the struggle to survive early in the century.

Thousands of early 20th-century case records at the University of Minnesota's Social Welfare History Archives reveal the private aspects of homemaking and child rearing among the lowest class, answer questions of how such families coped with their lack of resources, and show how the local agency played a role in that. Throughout the period the agents (a female-dominated workforce) made calls and shaped their case-record observations almost exclusively with the woman of the house; men generally were absent at these times either by choice or by necessity. Therefore the records chiefly reveal the interaction between two groups of women: female professionals, who had pledged themselves to improve community life, and destitute homemakers trying to make do. The result in most instances was a shifting relationship that included both co-operation and conflict.

Associated Charities began in 1884 at the urging of George A. Brackett whose energy in fortune-building

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through mills and railroads had been matched by his penchant for civic reform. Sitting on the Minneapolis Board of Commissioners, he had helped to plan the new municipal building. But Brackett's enduring mark on his city's philanthropy started at an earlier date when he called together persons from benevolent societies and churches who shared his alarm about the increase of urban poverty. The result was formation of a charity organization society (COS) named Associated Charities that resembled similar agencies of welfare "reform" conceived in eastern states in the 1870s and 1880s. The idea of the COS quickly spread as a means to establish order over cities' efforts to retard pauperism and uplift the impoverished. As intended, a COS would not give any relief but would investigate all applicants and then direct legitimate appeals for aid to participating agencies. In its own contact with the poor, the COS expected to teach morality and efficiency through a corps of volunteer ladies recruited to "visit" needy families. For many reasons initial accomplishments fell short of expectations, and as a result many of the societies reorganized. Some engaged in reform—in Minneapolis, for example, Associated Charities led the state's earliest antituberculosis campaign in 1903 and organized the first nurses to bring health care into homes on the wrong side of the railroad tracks and along the river lowlands. The lawyers on the AC board advised staff members who encountered legal dilemmas within families, and this evolved into a department of legal aid staffed by students and teachers from the University of Minnesota law school. The central mission of the agency shifted as its director joined other organizations' chief executives in sessions at the 1907 national confer-

\[\text{CITY FATHERS allotted space for Associated Charities on the main floor of the new Municipal Building.}\]
Before the widespread economic insecurity of the Great Depression led to new federal programs with permanent responsibility for public welfare, social work fell almost entirely within the purview of the private agency. There personnel understood themselves to be the local experts on poverty and family well-being. A family in need came to the office for some specific assistance; sometimes concerned neighbors, teachers, or nurses referred the name. Such a referred household quickly became a "case"—an initial investigation usually led to repeated visits from an agent who was simultaneously a conduit for cash and material relief and the family's advocate with employers, General Hospital, or the landlord.

The agency's investigation was meant to reveal why a household had "failed to keep abreast of the current of life"; and a caseworker's efforts could lead a family "back to a position of independence and equality" in the community. The literature of the developing family casework approach asserted that fathers were to give "loving, undivided service to secure the means of subsistence for the whole family"; mothers were expected to complement this with "loving, undivided service to transmute this provided means into an adequate home environment"; and children in turn were to offer "teachable and obedient love." All of this was to transpire in the home, which one prominent COS director described ideally as the "arch of enjoyment." Family

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charged with establishing a home life designed to improve children's health and keep a husband's affection. Thus, a woman's work was to include thrift in buying, organization of regular, nutritious meals, and tidy, orderly housekeeping habits. Poverty stood in the way of women completely satisfying such demands, but the records indicate that most took their homemaking responsibilities seriously, as did staff at AC/FWA who often wrote up a flat assessment that the housekeeping was "good" or "bad."

Social workers sometimes returned from home visits and wrote with disgust about ignorance and filth, "pigeons, ducks and geese in the kitchen"; "used wash water and garbage thrown out back door, reaches steps"; "garbage around, mildewed paper sacks, dirty dishes"; "Family seems so easily satisfied and while she apologizes for dirt, I never find things clean."^ To some of these "bad" places the agency sent a visiting housekeeper to demonstrate correct homemaking. The comments reveal what skills poor mothers lacked as well as what the agents' priorities were; "discussed sanitation"; "I suggested washing her rugs"; "I discussed health, value of having an education and keeping the children in school"; "Showed Annie how to clean the stove"; "Combed Sophia's hair, it had not been combed in four days"; "Demonstrated cornmeal porridge"; "Cut an apron and began sewing it"; "Discussed the pleasure of living in a clean attractive home." Women were not always amenable to learning, and some shut the door when the expert arrived; more were willing to watch a lesson on making macaroni but were not about to agree with all the advice on more personal things—child rearing, doctors' appointments, or marital relations.\footnote{Case 810, reel 112; this and all cases cited hereafter are in the FCS Collection.}

Housekeeping, however, was also an activity in which poor women won respect. Almost one in six women was judged to be "good" at her task, persisting in making home as best she could—sending sons to the lumberyard for scrap wood for fuel, saving rags for the bed during "confinement," trying to get store credit for a new blanket, mattress, or stove. Many women were creative and expressed small pride in jobs done. An early social historian, Arthur W. Calhoun, looking at contemporary families in 1919, said "wives of poverty could give many a lesson in economy and character to women of the upper world that aspire to elevate them."\footnote{For discussions of visiting housekeepers, see AC, Annual Report, 1909, 2, 7, 1910, 36, 1913, 48, 49. See also Minutes, Friendly Visitor Conference, Nov. 10, 1909, Feb. 2, 1916, FCS Collection.}

For most of them, however, domestic skills followed the ebb and tide of material resources, the changing demands of children—particularly if they were young or ill—and a woman's emotional and physical energy in combination with personal idiosyncrasies. As agents came by unannounced, they discovered and wrote about a broad spectrum of scenes rife with contradictions. One woman was described as living with "no plumbing . . . bed sheets black . . . likes housekeeping and says there's nothing like home." Other homes suggested women's sense of maintaining standards despite limitations imposed by poverty. Caseworkers realized this. "They were living," one reported, "in a small frame building the front of which was made into a shoe shop and the back, 2 rooms, was used for living. One room was used for kitchen and living room and another small room used as a bedroom. There were three full size beds in the bedroom. It was necessary for one to climb over the beds in order to get anywhere in the room. . . . Mrs. S. was ironing [to earn money], and was turning out shirts, which were beautifully pressed."\footnote{Calhoun, A Social History of the American Family from Colonial Times to the Present, vol. 3, Since the Civil War (reprint ed., New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960), 123. On the importance of home life to working-class women, see Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, Women, Work and Family (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1978), 213.}

In another situation, the living condition "was very much littered up. The table had soiled clothing on it, and orange peelings on the table and floor. The beds were away from the wall and Mrs. M. did this because of the bedbugs. The crib had only one side and Mrs. M. had to keep the side that was broken next to the wall so..."
the baby would not fall out. . . . There were no rugs on
the floors and the three chairs which they owned stood
on the porch. The front room had only a trunk in it and
a clothes line with some laundry which was fairly
clean. . . . The dining room also had no furniture. . . .
She also needed an ice box as she had no way of keeping
foods. . . . Mrs. M. was neatly dressed but her hair was
not combed. She apologized for this and immediately
put on a clean breakfast cap."

The immigrant mother of nine children reflected
the conscientious planning and efficiency that many
poor homemakers attempted. Her undated letter to
AC/FWA explained: "Am sending my son up [to
agency] as Mr. Anderson couldn't walk that far to day.
We owe for milk now 6 qts Sat Sun & Mon & need
Bread also spinach Mr is supposed to have that once a
day or every other day, have been Baking Biscuits as
Bread don't last very long & Pancakes for Breakfast.
Will need a few things & will try & get along the best I
can. . . . have a few potatoes for to night but will need
some to morrow & spinach, Butter sugar lard crackers
use so much Lard Baking so much it don't go very far &
a little meat we don't need the things to day only the
Bread as have baked all my Flour up & it takes to much
gas. [P.S.] some Tomatoes as I have quit[e] a lot of
maccaroni & need it to work in with Please."

Women stood by their own decisions about how to
spend their food money, and agents were often critical
or surprised at these choices. One client "was very par­
ticular on the subject of meat and mentioned that she
would rather give her children half of a good pork chop
than a large piece of cheap meat. . . . [Agent] argued
this point a little with her but felt nothing was gained."
Another reported that "Mrs P. buys 30 cents worth of
cigarettes at Johnsons every day for her own consump­
tion. [Three months later] She showed visitor a list of
her purchases and this showed that she did know how
to be economical. She said she had been using a kero­
sene lamp all winter instead of the gas and the cook
stove heated their rooms and furnished them with fuel
for cooking."

Households operated under adverse conditions.
Frequently there was no soap, not enough wood or coal
in the winter or ice in the summer, too few shelves,
POOR HEALTH commonly sapped women's strength for household chores. Consecutive years of childbearing, poor care at birthing, and heavy work—particularly lifting tubs of water for laundry and wringing wet clothes—showed up as sore feet, bandaged legs, and hernias protected by corsets. Almost one-half of the 300 women had chronic health problems; doctors described them as "unfit for hard work," and many records showed deterioration of health over time. Women of all ages were ill; for some the diagnosis was simply "weak and nervous," "bad eyes," or "bad teeth," but 77 experienced "female problems," cancer, heart trouble, or tuberculosis.

Agents made clinic appointments that women failed to keep. Sometimes this was the result of fear and suspicion of male doctors, and antipathy toward the county hospital was widespread. More often, however, women saw their own health needs as secondary to the demands of child care and wage earning. Agents were anxious about the collapse of a family when the mother appeared to be "breaking down" from overwork, but the women pushed themselves on, ignoring doctors' advice to "rest." More often than taking care of themselves, they took time to nurse husbands and children, using camphor rubs and catnip tea as well as doctors' prescriptions and nurses' advice that sometimes called for water, heat, and cleanliness not easily available. Tuberculosis was the primary enemy, and mothers were instructed to see that only the inflicted family member drank the free milk and ate the eggs left by the visiting nurse; mothers were to wash the dishes and clothes carefully and air rooms to prevent contagion.

More than a third of the women's husbands or ex-husbands also suffered from health problems. Limbs had been crippled and lost in accidents; heart problems and hernias were aggravated by hard physical work, and 18 in the sample had tuberculosis. Like their parents, children also got tuberculosis, developed bad eyes or teeth, rickets, or anemia; they caught pinkeye and scabies at school and contracted communicable diseases uncontrolled by vaccines. Diphtheria, whooping cough, scarlet and typhoid fever occasionally took households into weeks of quarantine. The case records hold a few frantic notes from mothers who saw the agency as the only means of help at such times.

Small health problems were exacerbated by inadequate diets and medical attention that came too late. Almost one-sixth of the 300 mothers lost a child to illness, and some felt these youngsters had been "released" from a life of poverty. A respectable funeral was almost always considered to be essential. Burial insurance, when it existed, was only for the man, thus neighbors and relatives pooled resources to provide for proper undertaking, contrary to agents' urgings that the cheapest burial was best.

TRAGEDIES were not uncommon, but agents also observed and wrote with appreciation of times when affection for children filled a home, and mothers and fathers expressed hopes common among parents of any economic status: "The children were all playing about the house having a very happy time. Matthew was cracking some black walnuts which Mr. P.'s brother had sent to the family for Christmas. Edward was very much excited telling about the Christmas play at Hope Chapel [at Westminster Presbyterian]. [Six weeks later] They were anxious to move as it was difficult to bring up the children in such close quarters and with so many children playing about the yard. They hoped to move

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1 Katharine Anthony, Mothers Who Must Earn (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, West Side Study series, 1914), 142, 146, said that among families she studied the machine was "seldom missing"; she attributed this to market salesmanship. According to Heidi I. Hartmann, "Capitalism and Women's Work in the Home, 1900–1930," 167, 349, Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1974, 90 percent of the sewing machines sold in 1925 were purchased with as little as 10 percent down and an average of 18 months to pay.

2 Case 6,477, reel 145, describes a family that lost two children to whooping cough, had another daughter with heart trouble, a son with bowed legs who also needed glasses, and another son with pneumonia and blood poisoning. The father tested positive for venereal disease, and the home was in quarantine for chicken pox.
CLINIC STAFF members check over a young patient as her mother looks on.

Joanna C. Colcord, director of AC/FWA from 1925 to 1929 and a national leader in the field, wrote about the strengths that social workers discovered among poor families. "In simple justice to the mass of our clients," she wanted the public to understand, there were "examples of wise parenthood among the humble folk known to us." Using a particular case record as an example, Colcord pointed out the "Strong affection between all members of the family." In spite of want, children often experienced "A sense of security"; "Sharing [of] pleasures and successes"; "Unselfish attitudes"; "Hopeful and unified aims"; "Fortitude"; and the "Utilization of opportunities."

These same qualities were evident in Minneapolis cases. For example, a divorced immigrant woman with two school-age sons said her husband "didn't amount to much," but she was happy to have boys "turning out so fine." The agent agreed that they were "very mannerly" and helped their mother in the house, hunted for fuel outdoors, and went to Sunday School. They were good students, although their teachers suspected malnutrition because of the boys' thinness. The oldest enrolled in mechanical drawing, and his mother wanted him to have the correct pencils so as not to get "discouraged." For some days the caseworker discussed the possibility of finding a donor to provide drawing pencils as a birthday present. When the day arrived, however, it was his mother who had managed somehow to find $5.40 for the gift and to treat neighbors to cake and ice cream, peanut butter and lettuce sandwiches, cocoa, and olives.

Such festive occasions among families were duly reported by Minneapolis agents, but they wrote at most length about the frustrations of raising children. Problems not only pushed mothers to ask for help but drew the surveillance of neighbors and the attention of teachers. Agents, however, heard more about children from mothers than they actually seemed to observe; although a few neighbors reported abuse and women spoke of their husband's physical cruelty, agents very rarely described a mother punishing a child. When this happened, the agent's reaction was usually disapproval and the parent was sullen.

Just as the standards of housekeeping went up and down in relationship to household exigencies, so many...
mothers' ability to deal with youngsters varied from child to child and crisis to crisis. A mother admired one day for her patience would be criticized two weeks later when the agent found her short of temper with whining children in sagging diapers. The demands of motherhood began with pregnancy: 25 women were pregnant when they first came to the AC/FWA, and almost twice that number gave birth while still involved with the agency. Most women seemed resigned to the dangers of delivery and the financial strain of more dependents. It was the immediate practical considerations that agents heard about and responded to—for example, the need for layette and linen if the birth was to be at home. Workers in turn urged prenatal care with visiting nurses or at the settlement house clinics. A very few case records included medical reports from the county hospital that revealed self-induced abortions. More than one woman had vainly sought information on contraception from an agent, who said she had none to give and the client should see a doctor.21

SENDING CHILDREN to live temporarily with relatives often eased the awkward household equation of too many children and too little income. Nearly two-thirds of the families (186) had kin in the Twin Cities; of the rest, 111 had relatives in other Minnesota communities and 74 had family in contiguous states. Families felt that relatives on farms could more easily accommodate an extra mouth, and a mother with young children whose spouse was absent was most likely to seek this solution. One in seven of such women lived temporarily with a sister, enabling the two to help one another with child care and rent. Not all households, however, had such support from extended family, and sometimes these resources had been used to the point of exhaustion. In 43 cases parents turned to AC/FWA to place their children in an institution or at the home or farm of strangers. Usually—but not always—such placement was talked about as temporary.22

If the mother died, the father usually would resist agency intervention and attempt to carry on by relying heavily on the oldest female child if there was one. In a matter of weeks or months, however, different arrangements almost inevitably had to be made. Homes apparently needed mothers. In one case, a married daughter called about her stepfather and younger siblings; when an agent went to the home she found a ragged little girl peeling potatoes by the light of a candle. The father said that he was "very much distressed over their condition, that he did not feel they could continue during the winter to keep house as it was not safe to leave the children alone, to which agent fully agreed with him. He wanted to go to his mother on a farm. He believed he could take Thomas with him, and would like to have the girls left in some public home. He does not want to give them up permanently. [His] eyesight was very bad and he is otherwise thin and emaciated looking."23

To "break up a family" was terminology used by agencies, and staff took the matter seriously. Parents could and did make that choice—usually for economic

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21 According to Twin City Federation of Settlements, Self-Analysis Survey of Minneapolis Settlement Houses (Minneapolis: The Federation, 1934), many settlement houses historically had baby clinics, some staffed first by visiting nurses from the COS. Anthony, Mothers Who Must Earn, 154, 155, found abortions common and "unsuccessful attempts are even commoner." Between 1927 and 1936, 109 Minneapolis women—half of them married—were reported to have died from criminal abortions; Calvin F. Schmid, Social Saga of Two Cities (Minneapolis: Council of Social Agencies, 1937), 410. On social workers’ attitude on abortion as a social good, see Linda Gordon, Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976), 256.


23 Case 4,359, reel 130.
A SOCIAL WORKER and her client, a battered child, appearing before a Minneapolis court

reasons—but for AC/FWA to interfere, something more than poverty had to be wrong. The judge of the Ramsey County Probate Court in St. Paul spoke in 1903 about a new concept of judicial work that would deal with neglected and dependent children. Owing to the “progress of civilization,” citizens had become unwilling to accept conditions for children that previously had passed unnoticed; with the “congestion of the larger centers of population” it was impossible for “parents of simple habits of thought” to guide their children adequately. He had been wary, however, of tampering with the sacred institution of home until experience on the bench had proven that for some careless parents a day in court could jolt “a revolution in the family life.”

With great blurring of public and private jurisdiction, AC/FWA, the local Humane Society/Children’s Protective Society, and the Minneapolis juvenile court worked together to investigate, press charges, and remove children—if only temporarily—from 35 of the 300 families. This strategy continued into the 1920s, although expansion of the local Children’s Protective Society meant AC/FWA had a lesser role to play. Charges were pressed owing to perceptions of parental neglect, immorality, and cruelty, and less frequently because children were beyond parental control, or because parents were ill and resisted medical care or institutionalization for themselves or children.

The worst behavior, seemingly, that a woman could be guilty of was drinking at home, making moonshine, and having a male friend—or friends—who came around and aroused the neighbors’ interest. But these transgressions did not guarantee having one’s children taken away unless a mother was judged mentally ill or seemed to be casual about a daughter’s sexual behavior. Many mothers could not feed and clothe their children and did not keep them clean or manage accounts “responsibly,” but it was the continual failure to send children to school that could result in the threat of legal charges and time in the workhouse.

Families and their neighbors reacted differently to court actions. On occasion an accused mother objected so much in a hearing that the judge gave her “a second chance” to prove her efforts were honest. Frequently parents’ failure to show up in court meant rescheduling of more than one session. Legal action to “break up a family” sometimes caused a reaction among neighbors, who accused agents of erring. One neighbor, for example, “came to see just why [the children] are to be taken away. They say [she] is a poor manager but that she seems to work [for wages] several days a week; that the children are about as well kept as other children in the neighborhood and [she] seems to have a great care for them.”

Such cases remained unpredictable even after the family was officially separated. Children were sent in a variety of directions. Some went to relatives, more were sent to strangers’ homes in a boarding arrangement for a paid fee, and others with special health or learning problems sometimes had to wait for space in institutions. Occasionally they went back to their mothers in
the interim. Only the institutions for delinquent youth seemed always to have room available, and while some mothers fought the removal of boys and girls for reasons of delinquency, more mothers were likely to despair of such behavior, wanting the agency “to do something.” The records show that second in frequency of such behavior, wanting the agency “to do something.” The records show that second in frequency of such behavior, wanting the agency “to do something.” The records show that second in frequency of such behavior, wanting the agency “to do something.” The records show that second in frequency of such behavior, wanting the agency “to do something.” The records show that second in frequency of such behavior, wanting the agency “to do something.” The records show that second in frequency of such behavior, wanting the agency “to do something.”

AT TIMES while visiting, agents saw what parents talked and worried about their “bad” boys and girls. 

Bad boys varied—many skipped school and smoked stolen cigarettes in barns and alleys, others came home late after hanging around with the wrong sort and insolently turned a deaf ear to maternal criticism. A few broke into stores or stole cars; agents clipped the news stories for inclusion in the case record. R. E. Denfield, superintendent of schools in Duluth, told a 1911 conference that the problem of the “Delinquent Parent” was the majority of children in trouble had only one parent; the father usually was gone, and women were less effective than men in controlling behavior. Denfield also cited poverty as a causal factor: “Petty larceny and dishonesty many times develop because parents fail to provide their children with a reasonable amount of spending money.” In this study, a shortage of spending money was almost always the constant, yet the majority of children were not described or charged as delinquents. Neither were children “better” in the cases that had begun with two parents in an ongoing marriage.

The records showed that boys and girls were frequently and equally guilty of school truancy, but their reasons for skipping school differed. Boys found outside activities that attracted them and kept them away from both home and school. Girls more often said that they stayed home because they lacked clothing or were ashamed of what they did have, and many times they were functioning as “little mothers,” the term used by social workers to describe girls with domestic responsibilities. Thus, older daughters provided child care for the younger ones because a mother was sick or away at work. But girls also were accused of hanging around on corners and smoking.

Many girls in the 1920s were “guilty” of becoming, or wanting to become, consumers of the many new cosmetics on the market. Agents were quick to notice: “Rather an attractive girl but had a bit too much rouge on, her hair looked as though she had tried to bleach it, or had given it a henna rinse.” Concern about young girls’ appearance was an extension of general social fears of immorality. If sons were arrested it was most likely to be for theft, but their sisters were most likely to be arrested for sex-related offenses—reflecting an old pattern of greater social alarm over female sexuality.

IN MINNEAPOLIS, as elsewhere, the value placed on home life in the early part of the century, the modern recognition of adolescence as a particular stage in life, and belief in the malleability of youth led to creation of a juvenile court system as the locus of public authority for dealing with young people. A fight against child labor was also part of the broad national concern of reformers for child welfare, but this was an issue where agents showed ambivalence. In 1907 Owen R. Lovejoy, an officer of the National Child Labor Committee, gave a Minneapolis audience a litany of the deleterious effects of children at work and called into question social workers’ own behavior: “I fear the connection between child labor and poverty is sometimes seen by the social worker, like the image in a lake, upside-down. Does not the charity worker too often, in his effort to meet a local need, take any offer of labor by any member of the family as a solution of the problem of poverty? . . . It is an immediate, easy solution for certain cases of poverty, which leads to a worse disease.”

At this time workers at AC/FWA were very much involved in implementing child labor policy. At the beginning of the century children under 16 years old needed a special work permit signed by a school official that authorized absence owing to family poverty. Such declaration of need was usually determined by the COS. Then state law changed to prohibit children less than 14 years old from working during school hours, although older children could work up to 60 hours a

Case 1,355, reel 115.

Denfield, “The Delinquent Parent,” Minnesota Conference of Charities and Correction, Proceedings, 1911, 68–71. See also Juvenile Court, Report, 1926–1928 (Minneapolis, 1929), 15, 20, 21, which shows that the majority of delinquent boys and girls in these years were from two-parent homes and that probation was the most common disposition of the cases.

Here and below, see Juvenile Court, Report, 1926–1928, 14. Theft was the primary delinquency of boys and sex offenses the leading problem of girls; a similar difference is noted in Schmid, Social Saga, 363.

week. In 1909 a compulsory school attendance bill passed, and the state Bureau of Labor boasted of it as “among the most advanced in the United States,” although parents—particularly in farm communities—were complaining.35

Compared with other cities like Milwaukee, Chicago, and Indianapolis, commerce and industry in Minneapolis had never employed a large number of children. Nevertheless wages from child labor were assumed by parents and the agency alike to be an appropriate and necessary part of a household budget. Information and debate about employing adolescents appeared in over half of the records of families with teenagers at home. Boys held unspecified jobs at industrial factories and plants; a lesser number were messengers, delivery and newsboys; some went to North Dakota harvests with their fathers; and a very few dressed up to caddy at exclusive golf clubs. Girls, like their mothers, were most likely to do domestic work that required no training. Commercial laundries and department stores employed some, and others worked as stenographers or telephone operators. In almost equal number with boys, they had factory experiences but did “women’s work”—sewing bags for flour shipment, processing candy, biscuits, and pickles.**

Whether he knew it or not, Owen Lovejoy was criticizing many Minneapolis AC/FWA workers when he said that social workers approved of labor by any family member. Agents did push parents to send younger children to school rather than to work, but the issue appeared to be one of truancy more than criticism of child labor. When school was out in the summer or as a child reached the age to be away from school legally, AC/FWA expected wage earning to begin.36

To this end businessmen known to AC/FWA hired messenger boys and chauffeurs, and wealthy ladies employed girls to clean their homes after a plea from the agency. Staff, board members, and committee volunteers all provided contacts that could lead to employment for case families. They arranged appointments for interviews with downtown department stores and the telephone company, paid tuition to millinery classes at the YWCA, and hunted for benevolent individuals to subsidize classes at the Dunwoody Trade School or Minnesota Business College. The making of such plans filled some case records with letters and notices of phone calls, but these arrangements almost never worked as the agent had hoped, and children settled for—or preferred—what they found on their own.

At times parents were perceived as impractical because they encouraged children not to work. Many mothers, however, took the initiative to seek a work permit for a child; they did so more often in the early years of the century than in the 1920s after the anti-child labor reform efforts had gained strength. In cases where permits were denied, parents became angry at AC/FWA: One woman “said her husband was sick and older son in the workhouse and her daughter Louise employed in Faulkner’s Laundry was only support of family . . . . Woman was so angry because permit [for younger daughter Lilly] had not been granted that she refused to admit visitor to the home or discuss the necessity of assistance . . . . Woman said she did not want help from the city. Lilly wanted good clothes like other girls and must earn them. Agent tried to explain to her that she must comply and send Lilly to school.”36

Young workers, their parents, and agents often disagreed vociferously with one another about the choice of work versus school and what should happen to the paycheck. Adding some part of adolescent wages to the family budget appeared to be the accepted norm, and in 18 case records agents could find no alternative but for the family to rely solely on children’s labor for some months. In the 1920s, for example, three brothers each had a newspaper route and fed a family of eight children and two adults through the winter. One of the boys won a Thanksgiving turkey by getting the most paper subscriptions in the city. The news article of this achievement was prominent in the record.37

If there were grown children living away from home, the agent went to some trouble to get their addresses and persistently urged them to help support their parents. Mothers resisted agents acting as go-betweens. The records revealed that adult children who lived locally acknowledged their obligations and did what they could to help mothers and younger siblings with small amounts of money for groceries, burial insurance, medical bills, and housing. Occasionally they took younger brothers and sisters to live with them or sent surprises at Christmas. Parents in return provided

36 United States, Census, 1930, Population, 4:385, 5:389; “Child Labor,” Monthly Labor Review 11 (Dec., 1903): 120–123. A survey of 9,300 clerical workers in 191 Minneapolis businesses, conducted by the University of Minnesota’s department of sociology, showed high unemployment and fluctuating demand for such workers: 25 percent left work because of seasonal layoffs or business failures, 20 percent left to marry, and 83 percent earned less than $25 per week. Manuel C. Elmer, A Study of Women in Clerical and Secretarial Work (Minneapolis: Women’s Occupational Bureau, 1925), 5, 6, 18, 21, 33.
37 The state Commission of Labor and Industries investigated hundreds of complaints during the 1920s concerning underage children or hazardous workplaces; “Child Labor,” 11:129, 130.
38 Case 1,048, reel 113.
39 Case 18,213, reel 235.
a home to come to if daughters' marriages failed or sons' jobs disappeared.

The records also showed an intimacy in the relationship between mothers and daughters that was not often evidenced with sons. Women provided care for grandchildren, and some mothers and daughters encouraged one another to leave bad marriages. Old women relied on daughters for essential nursing and help with housekeeping, although some sons became attentive to an aging parent. Creating workable living situations for the aged and infirm was another problem agents often faced. If children could not or would not help out, some boarding or institutional arrangement was necessary but most older women refused to go along with plans that drastically altered their lives.

"HOME" in the early 20th century was both a physical shelter and a concept poetically represented as the "arch of enjoyment." Professionals in social welfare and the larger society shared an ideal for the aggregate of American families to satisfy. This ideal featured economic dependency on a man combined with woman's devotion to and sacrifice for him and their children in an environment kept clean and wholesome. In Minneapolis, a family became known to the Associated Charities/Family Welfare Association because someone perceived that something had gone wrong. Material deprivation was interwoven with illness, delinquency, frustration, and exhaustion. Under trying circumstances women went about homemaking and child rearing, at times meeting the ideal standards, but often falling short of them and making compromises as they saw fit. Choices had to be made: Was it more important to get a stove on credit, or to get a coat? To nurse oneself back to health or care for others? Should the children go to school or to work, or perhaps to the country to stay with relatives? Women also decided when to turn to strangers for help. They asked agents what to do with an insolent child and where to place an enfeebled mother, but they did not always agree with the suggestions forthcoming. An agent could advise the cheapest funeral at a child's death, but grief might outweigh the suggestion. An agent might recommend that a daughter go back to her husband or that a lazy son be thrown out of the house, but mothers made up their own minds, felt free to change them, and decide anew. Survival was a struggle for such Minneapolis residents, and not all poor families faced the same trials or reacted in the same way, but in spite of their relationship with the city's central charity/family work agency, their lives were marked more by independence than dependence.

THE FLOOR PLAN on p. 44 is from A History of the Municipal Building of the City of Minneapolis and the County of Hennepin, Minnesota, [23]. All other illustrations are from the audio-visual library of the MHS; those on p. 47, 48, 50, and 51 were photographed by the Minneapolis firm of Mills and Bell.