
Taming Wild Girls: The Midnight Mission and the Campaign to Reform Philadelphia's Moral Fabric, 1915-1918

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Taming Wild Girls: The Midnight Mission and the Campaign to Reform Philadelphia's Moral Fabric, 1915–1918

On the morning of the 23rd of September I saw this girl coming up the street with two young fellows about 2.20 in the morning. Before they got opposite to me, one of them came across the street with the girl and one stayed on the other side. Afterwards one of them came down to me and told me this girl wanted a room. I went after them and placed the girl under arrest and she admitted to me about three men having her in this house. . . . Afterwards I found out this was the house we had so many complaints about. I saw her once before at the Carnival with two men but when I went after her she ran behind the tents.

Officer Easterday¹

OFFICER WILLIAM H. EASTERDAY'S matter-of-fact recitation of the actions he observed Rose O. undertaking on a cool September night in 1915 reflects how many middle-class Progressives viewed the public conduct of working-class adolescent

¹ Case Summary of Rose O'_____, Midnight Mission Case File 388a, Midnight Mission Case Files 1911–1924, Episcopal Community Services, Urban Archives (Restricted Materials), Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia.

girls.² Fearful of what they believed to be rampant working-class sexuality, which they associated with prostitution, and convinced that the root of sexual vice lay not with those men who pursued and purchased the services of prostitutes but rather with the prostitutes themselves, Progressive reformers launched a campaign to rid the streets of those who they believed peddled disease and immorality. Police raided suspected brothels, closely monitored dance halls, and questioned unescorted (and occasionally escorted) women in public spaces all in an effort to protect the decent, moral public from those willing to offer their very bodies for money.

This perspective was relatively new. Prior to the Gilded Age, antiprostitution reformers placed the blame primarily on predatory males, convinced that women engaged in the “world’s oldest profession” would voluntarily leave its service if only given the opportunity to do so. They established networks of private, informal “reformatories” to aid those women who, “disgusted with their life of shame,” wished to redeem themselves in the eyes of the public and of God himself.³ The Midnight Mission of Philadelphia was one of these facilities. Founded in 1868 as part of a nationwide Episcopalian network of private civilian reform institutions, this ten-bed facility was created to provide those wishing to leave a life of prostitution a safe, secure, and above all moral environment in which they could work to redeem themselves without the fear of stigmatization or the risk of further corruption believed possible in state-sanctioned facilities such as the House of Detention, a formal institution created to incarcerate underage offenders guilty of minor crimes such as truancy.⁴

² By the time of his encounter with Rose, Officer William H. Easterday had been a member of the Philadelphia Police Department for at least seven years, as his actions occasionally made the local newspaper. Curiously, eighteen months before his arrest of Rose, Easterday was tried on the charge of wife beating, but apparently this accusation had no effect on his career as he was still on duty as late as 1920. “Policeman Wears Blinders, Says Court,” “Policemen to Be Tried,” and “Coat and Vest Lead to Arrest for Arson,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 13, 1909, Feb. 7, 1914, and May 3, 1920.

³ *The Third Annual Report of the Midnight Mission for the Year Ending January 25th, 1870* (New York, 1870), 13. Most records of the Mission’s activities during the late nineteenth century no longer survive except in the form of admission books, which provide little information beyond the name, age, and basic biographic data of the women who passed through its doors.

⁴ This belief was expressed by W. A. Muhlenberg in *The Woman and Her Accusers: A Plea for The Midnight Mission* (New York, 1871), 26: “The Mission asks for the means of providing homes for those whom they would rescue, and whom they can rescue only by placing in circumstances favorable to their reformation. Not the ordinary Magdalen Asylum. They wont go there to be stamped as they think, with an additional stigma of infamy; and I profess that this is hardly the most promising method of moral elevation, which makes herds of the debased, and expect them not to debase one another. Penitentiaries, so called, are often but colleges of corruption, where tyros in sin go through the classes and graduate in iniquity.”

At the turn of the century the program and purpose of the Midnight Mission shifted in response to changing beliefs concerning the nature of public vice and the role that social structures played in ensuring the social purity of the public body, especially within the burgeoning urban environment. In the first two decades of the twentieth century reformers no longer believed it effective merely to attempt the redemption of a woman *after* she had slid into a life of moral turpitude; rather, social scientists, moral reformers, and public servants felt that the way to combat the spread of public vice was to attack the environments that led adolescent girls into prostitution and to identify and intervene in the lives of those girls inclined towards the immoral life.⁵ Dangerous environments were easily identified and monitored—they were those places such as dance halls, amusement parks, and darkened movie theaters where individuals of both genders mingled anonymously and indiscriminately. But controlling the adolescents who frequented such establishments was far more difficult for reformers. Generally from ethnic, working-class backgrounds, these young people often displayed public behaviors almost diametrically opposed to those that Progressive Era moralists considered wholesome. Staying out all night, stealing, lying, and (worst of all) mingling with members of the opposite sex in unsupervised settings were, in the eyes of Progressives, sure signs that a teenager was on a slippery slope towards an immoral, degenerate adulthood.

This social and intellectual environment shaped Officer Easterday's suspicions of Rose in 1915. Not only did he observe an adolescent girl of Irish ethnicity on the streets of the city long after midnight, she was in the company of two young men and entered a house long suspected to be a site of immoral activity. When confronted, Rose confirmed his suspicions—she was rude and insubordinate and admitted to sexual activity with numerous men. To stop her downward descent (and, perhaps more existentially, to protect Philadelphia society), the juvenile court sentenced Rose to the Midnight Mission to be inculcated with socially acceptable behaviors. When Rose was released two years later, it appeared that the Mission's program had been successful. Rose's behavior showed a marked improvement, she had excelled in stenography and typing classes, and she had enrolled in the Bell Telephone School on Market Street with the goal

⁵ See Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995), 98–108, for an in-depth examination of Progressives' understandings of female sexuality, environment, and redemption.

of becoming an operator. Perhaps more importantly, she had accepted the moral teachings of her keepers and had been confirmed by an Episcopalian bishop in 1916.⁶

The Mission's success seems to support the Progressive belief that moral inculcation, coupled with social and practical education, could curb behaviors deemed immoral and therefore unacceptable. Progressive Era intellectuals, moralists, and social scientists believed that reform could be achieved, as in the case of Rose, on an individual, case-by-case basis. To support this strategy, according to historian David Rothman, they linked different facilities and organizations into a massive "reform web" in an effort to end institutional rigidity.⁷ Yet when we examine numerous cases from a single facility in the web and analyze them as a whole, the success of the Progressive reform ideal comes into question. Though the case of Rose was a success, numerous girls who passed through the Mission's doors did not submit to moral or social inculcation willingly, or internalized such instruction only long enough to convince a facility matron that they deserved release. This failure can best be attributed to the shifting relationship between social norms and individual values during the Progressive Era. Progressive reformers believed that entire segments of society could be uplifted through the application of scientific knowledge, moral inculcation, and social control, yet individual reformers frequently found that the subjects of their ministrations either did not fit their preconceptions and/or fundamentally rejected their values and instruction.⁸ When we compare the intended program of Philadelphia's Midnight Mission with the actions of its inmates during incarceration and after release, the tensions between Progressive Era beliefs in the primacy of morality as a vital component of modern society and the realities of class-based social uplift come into sharp relief. These tensions rendered the program of the Mission only partially effective and highlight the difficulty of applying the norms of society to individuals.

⁶ Summary of the Case of Rose O'_____, Midnight Mission Case File 388a.

⁷ David J. Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America* (Boston, 1980), 3–12.

⁸ In his study of liberalizing influences in American society during the 1940s and 1950s, Alan Petigny notes a frequent disconnect between American norms and individual values on a wide variety of subjects, most notably race, gender, and religion. Frequently the actions of an individual contradicted the professed social mores expressed by the group. His argument can be extended back to the Progressive Era. See Alan Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941–1965* (New York, 2009), 249–82.

A Snapshot in Time

The concerns that prompted Philadelphia's Progressive reformers to focus on wild girls in Philadelphia stemmed from two paradigmatic shifts in American cultural and intellectual thought. Most basic of these was the creation of the concept of the adolescent. Before the turn of the nineteenth century there were two age categories in American society: childhood (infancy to around puberty) and adulthood. Though the concept of a physical stage of human development between childhood and adulthood had been acknowledged by physicians and biologists for many years, it was only in the first decade of the twentieth century that adolescence was recognized as a stage during which both social and cultural development occurred. Progressive Era intellectuals viewed adolescence as a key period of development that heavily influenced the moral development of the protoadult. Some modern historians see the concept of adolescence as, in the words of Kent Baxter, "a cultural invention" reflecting social tensions sparked by industrialization, urbanization, and the perceived disruptions of traditional family and social controls.⁹ Yet Baxter himself notes that adolescence was more than a mere reflection of social tensions, but a sociocultural creation containing its own definitions of "right" and "wrong" and specifically designed to ensure the development of proper, moral adults. By defining a proper, moral, ideal adolescent (largely a fiction), authority figures could identify those who did not fit into this mold and who represented "a kind of cultural anxiety of the physical and sexual threat the adolescent can become if left to his or her own devices."¹⁰ Using this template, social workers, law-enforcement officials, and moral reformers could identify those adolescents deemed at risk and take appropriate action to curb their antisocial behaviors while protecting society from their influence.¹¹

⁹ Kent Baxter, *The Modern Age: Turn-of-the-Century American Culture and the Invention of Adolescence* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2008), 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹ A more existential version of this argument can be found in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York, 1978), 81–91, where he argues that sexuality is defined within a power relationship to the state. Initially it is bifurcated into "licit" and "illicit" actions; these actions are to be defined by the mechanisms of power; and the "power" is the ultimate authority of the legitimacy of the act. To enforce its will, "power" utilizes a series of prohibitions of increasingly oppressive sanctions that finally culminate in incarceration. Though he perhaps places too much emphasis on "mechanisms of power," in Progressive Philadelphia there definitely existed an inchoate interpretation of what actions were licit and illicit based upon a set of ever-changing, subjective interpretations of individuals.

At the same time, moral reformers in the first two decades of the twentieth century came to believe that deviant tendencies in adolescents could be eliminated through an institutional structure. By the mid-nineteenth century, physicians, pundits, and sociologists had come to believe in the primacy of social hereditarianism: that a child's physical and emotional characteristics were inherited from his or her parents. Progressive Era attempts to curb the apparent spread of sexual immorality were the natural evolution of this belief. American intellectuals had come to the conclusion that social and economic progress were inextricably linked, and that both could be promoted through such institutions as public schools, civic organizations, and religious systems. By the turn of the twentieth century, Progressive theorists had added morality to the mix, thus adding the reform institution to the list as the perfect vehicle to inculcate the desired moral mindset into those who authority figures deemed susceptible to immoral activity. This Progressive conviction in the efficacy of the institution as a means of controlling and eliminating negative social impulses within adolescents (exemplified by the rise of the juvenile court and the state-run reformatory system) was behind both the existence and the program of the Midnight Mission.¹²

Few historians have studied the role of the reformatory in the promotion of Progressive Era sexual propriety, which is surprising considering the conviction among reformers that uncontrolled sexuality posed a threat to American society. The few studies in existence note the shift away from a focus on women as victims to women as the target of moral reformers and rightly note that reformers were seriously concerned with adolescent sexuality and propriety.¹³ In a way this shift of focus is understandable; during the first two decades of the twentieth century cultural interpretations of gender roles and female sexuality in the United States were in a state of flux, caught between the reticent, proper Victorian woman of the 1890s and the self-actualized, independent woman of the 1920s.¹⁴

¹² Charles E. Rosenberg, *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought* (Baltimore, 1976), 25–26, 135–41.

¹³ Numerous studies have examined Progressive reformers' obsession with controlling unrestrained sexuality. See, for example, Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-vice Activism, 1887–1917* (Urbana, IL, 2006); Alison M. Parker, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873–1933* (Urbana, IL, 1997); and John C. Burnham, *Bad Habits: Drinking, Smoking, Taking Drugs, Gambling, Sexual Misbehavior, and Swearing in American History* (New York, 1993). These studies, however, do not look specifically at the reformatory.

¹⁴ Linda R. Hirshman and Jane E. Larson, *Hard Bargains: The Politics of Sex* (New York, 1998), 156–79.

Indeed, the case files of the Midnight Mission seem to bear out the conclusion that the rise of female reformatories in the period 1905–1925 reflected an attempt to regulate adolescent girls who were feared to be on the very cusp of entering a life of prostitution, if they had not already done so. Yet the few in-depth scholarly studies of the various (mostly public) institutions dedicated to the reform of such adolescents in the Progressive Era all seem to provide similar narratives of transgression, education, and redemption. Sharing a common set of beliefs about adolescent sexuality and how to control it, most institutions presented similar narrative arcs regarding their inmates' violations, incarcerations, and attempts at reformation. As a result, the particulars of individual institutions get lost in these narratives and in the historiography.¹⁵

Yet the individual *inmates* of these institutions were not homogenous. Some scholars have acknowledged this fact by including examples of individuals within their larger narrative in order to provide anecdotal support to their conclusions about the institution.¹⁶ But a few examples selected out of an institutional body of over one hundred inmates cannot prove the rule, or even the exception. Furthermore, scholars inquiring into the control and reform of adolescent female sexuality during the Progressive Era face evidentiary hurdles, namely survivability of records, access to those records that do survive, and restrictions upon their use.¹⁷

¹⁵ For examples of such studies, see Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, and Ruth M. Alexander, *The "Girl Problem": Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900–1930* (Ithaca, NY, 1995). For more generalized examples that move beyond female adolescents and examine nonsexual Progressive reform organizations, see Sherri Broder, *Tramps, Unfit Mothers, and Neglected Children: Negotiating the Family in Late Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2002). For an example of studies that do not limit themselves to traditional narratives but instead emphasize the contextual nature of "immorality" and reform, see Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence: Boston 1880–1960* (New York, 1988), and Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900–1945* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006). However, these last three works focus less on reformatories and more upon the entirety of the system attempting to understand and control "deviant" behavior and therefore only touch on institutional practices.

¹⁶ Perhaps the best example of this methodology can be found in Alexander, "Girl Problem."

¹⁷ In response to an information inquiry in 1945, the executive secretary of Philadelphia's Episcopal Community Services stated that "so many of the old, small, charitable agencies were run by well intentioned, but untrained people who had little conception of the value of statistics or records." Executive Secretary, Episcopal Community Services, to Lillian Garner. Response Letter, Jan. 20, 1945, Midnight Mission Case File 443a. Ironically, this letter is the only document in this particular case file, as no other information regarding the specific inmate could be located in regards to this inquiry. This problem is not limited to private institutions. In her study of the development of the Cook County, Illinois, juvenile court system, Anne Knupfer gives voice to the problems faced by scholars; the case files of the period 1899 through 1936 were highly fragmentary, for some years completely unavailable, and "only one historian, David Tanenhaus, has been granted permission to look at what case files

Given the paucity of verifiable case studies, scholars of adolescent delinquency are frequently forced to examine their subjects from the vantage point of the reformers, a methodology that emphasizes institutional homogeneity, with only a few select individual examples included to reinforce the narrative.

The records of the Midnight Mission of Philadelphia give scholars a rare opportunity to examine adolescent inmates within a purportedly homogenous reformatory system. The institution was a small, private reformatory operated by the Philadelphia Episcopal Church. Located on Arch Street, this ten-bed facility took in approximately 120 white, Protestant, adolescent women, ages fifteen to nineteen, between the turn of the twentieth century and the shuttering of the institution's doors in the 1920s. An examination of the case files from 1915 to 1918 reveals the individuality of the inmates sentenced to a two-year term of incarceration behind its walls and demonstrates that the Mission's reforming program was too inflexible to be universally successful in curbing antisocial behaviors. By examining the specific reasons for inmates' imprisonment, as well as individuals' behavior within the facility and fate upon their reintroduction into society, we gain a greater understanding of the nature of female adolescent delinquency (and of the individual values of the inmates) during the Progressive Era and the tempered success of Progressive reformers in enforcing their social norms upon the inmates.

Committed to the Mission

Most scholars of moral reform during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era agree that reform was designed to curb perceived sexual deviance among young women of the lower classes. The records of the Midnight Mission inmates bear this belief out to a degree; if an adolescent girl was sentenced to the facility, chances were that she was working class and had already been "immoral" or had given the appearance of "immoral tendencies," as defined by those who had sentenced her to the facility.¹⁸ Yet not only sexually promiscuous adolescent girls were sentenced to the Mission;

exist." Furthermore, the probation records and parole officers' reports for the Chicago Home for Girls, the House of the Good Shepherd, and the State Industrial School for Girls "were not only unavailable but destroyed." Anne Meis Knupfer, *Reform and Resistance: Gender, Delinquency, and America's First Juvenile Court* (New York, 2001), 181–82.

¹⁸ My conclusion is based upon a general survey of surviving background reports of over fifty inmates of the Midnight Mission, 1909–1925.

individual case files reveal that transgressive actions demanding incarceration could vary widely from inmate to inmate. Certainly, there were girls who were well along the perceived path towards moral degeneracy, but others appeared to be victims of sexual abuse within the home and were incarcerated for their own safety, while still others displayed a tendency to defy authority and pursue an independent life. This wide range is illustrated by examining the details of three specific cases. Their stories call for a basic shift in our understanding of adolescent sexuality and the Progressive drive for its control and show that the inmates of the Mission were not generic working-class adolescent females but vibrant, independent young women searching for their way in the rapidly changing urban landscape of the modern world.

Records indicate that, in certain cases, reformers promoting reformatory structures as a necessary part of modern social control were successful and that girls who had already been lost to an immoral lifestyle could be redeemed, if given the proper training and incentive. Rose was one such girl. Born in 1901, Rose came from a large Irish family in which her father's "very small salary" harmed all its members.¹⁹ Rose discovered the financial earning power of her sexuality at an early age, trading unidentified sexual favors for undisclosed sums at the precocious age of eleven. This activity brought her to the attention of the judicial system. As noted previously, on September 23, 1915, Officer Easterday reported seeing Rose in the company of two unidentified males who took her to a house on Stoughton Street well known to the neighborhood as a site of prostitution. After observing no less than five different men entering and leaving the building, the officer entered the house and arrested Rose, who admitted to intercourse with no less than three different men that evening.²⁰ The

¹⁹ It was a commonly held belief that there was a direct relationship between poverty and immorality and that insufficient economic resources led to rapid moral degeneration within the family. A 1913 report on vice noted that "large groups of men in Philadelphia earn annually a wage about \$200 below the amount estimated as a 'living' wage in this city for a family. . . . Such a family status as to income insures deterioration physically and socially for the individual and for the family as a unit social group. Exceptions to this truth are negligible." Vice Commission of Philadelphia, *A Report on Existing Conditions with Recommendations to the Honorable Rudolph Blankenburg, Mayor of Philadelphia*, 26, reproduced in *The Prostitute and the Reformer: Commercial Vice in the Progressive Era*, ed. Charles Rosenberg and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (New York, 1974), 26. Given that the background report on Rose states that the family consisted of her parents and eight children, it is quite possible that Rose entered prostitution in order to meet an economic need; at the same time, her family's economic plight could have brought it to the attention of Philadelphia's social reformers, who would have recognized the danger into which the family's financial situation placed its members.

²⁰ Summary of the Case of Rose O'_____, Midnight Mission Case File 388a.

Philadelphia Juvenile Court, however, saw the potential for rehabilitation within the fourteen-year-old girl, and after a short stay in the House of Detention while her case was adjudicated, the court sentenced her to one year in the Midnight Mission on October 11, 1915.²¹

The secure and stable environment of the Mission was evidently what Rose needed, and over the next two years she caused no troubles and excelled in the program. The matrons noted that even though she had a violent temper and was at times “very hard to manage,” she could display a “very sweet” temperament when not upset and worked hard to “overcome faults.” In 1917 Rose pursued stenography and typing lessons, independent of the Mission program (her training was financed through the juvenile court system, specifically the House of Detention), and did “remarkably well.” On October 15, 1917, Rose was returned to her parents and was entered “as student in Bell Telephone School.”²² Rose’s rather brief and noncontroversial record within the facility suggested, in the opinion of the matrons, that Rose did not especially desire a life of prostitution but was instead forced by economic pressures to pursue such a course. Furthermore, when given the opportunity to obtain the skills and training that would allow her to earn a living through socially acceptable means she was able to become a respectable member of society. In Rose’s case, the Mission’s program worked exactly as the patrons of the Mission hoped.

Incarceration in the Mission was not just for those actively engaged in the vice trade but was used to remove vulnerable girls from bad home situations. Such was the case with Anna, a fourteen-year-old girl who did not fit the mold of the sexually precocious adolescent. According to the deaconess’s comments, there was little wrong with Anna, she was “simply an untrained girl” whose mother had “left father when girl was a few months old.” Anna seemed fully attuned to the Mission’s program as it was offered; the matrons proudly noted that she was “a nice girl of many good qualities” who was “always truthful,” even if she often got “herself and other girls into trouble” through carelessness. Indeed, the matrons noted that she was a “very promising case.” Unlike many of the Mission’s inmates, it appears that Anna gave the matrons no trouble in the least and made “steady progress for the better” until she completed the two-year

²¹ Commitment and Discharge Records, Midnight Mission Case File 388a. It is interesting to note that in Rose’s case, the court was willing to defer to the opinions of the matrons of the Mission, who kept Rose in the program for the full two years even though the court only required a single year.

²² Ibid.

program and was placed in the care of a Mrs. H. of Hulmeville, Pennsylvania, who had “known Anna all her life.”²³

So why was it necessary for Anna to be sentenced to the Mission and placed among girls considered at risk for sexual deviation by the court? And why would her father not only consent to this incarceration, but go so far as to pay five dollars per month as support?²⁴ The answer lies in a combination of small-town social networks and Progressive Era theories regarding eugenics and sexual deviance and illustrates the lengths that influential members of a small community would go to in order to protect girls they felt were in an unhealthy environment and in danger of degeneracy.

In the second decade of the twentieth century, some Progressive reformers were influenced by the science of eugenics. Historian Wendy Kline notes that many eugenicists believed “inadequate motherhood resulted in defective children” who would invariably degenerate into sexual immorality and subsequently cause the genetic degradation of the American people. As a result, adolescents who showed tendencies to go astray “were scientifically scrutinized in light of their family environment.”²⁵ Since her mother had the reputation of being “a very bad woman” before abandoning the family, Anna would have given reformers cause for concern. The inhabitants of the small town of Hulmeville would also undoubtedly have been aware of the “stories about her father and others in the town.”²⁶ While the details of Anna’s home life can never be fully known and records of the rumors about her father do not survive, Anna’s neighbors and family decided that, to protect her from an inevitable slide into depravity stemming from her genetic heritage, Anna would benefit from the Mission’s program.

These factors placed Anna in a separate category from those sentenced to the Mission by the juvenile court. By removing her from her unwholesome family environment, placing her in a facility located some distance away from the negative influences of her biological parents, and providing her access to the education and light industrial training offered by the

²³ Matron’s Comments for Anna S_____, Midnight Mission Case File 384a.

²⁴ Admission Record, Midnight Mission Case File 384a.

²⁵ Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), 28.

²⁶ Matron’s Comments, Midnight Mission Case File 384a. The population of Hulmeville Borough was only 468 in 1910 and 491 in 1920. *Fourteenth Census of the United States: State Compendium, Pennsylvania* (Washington, DC, 1924), 15.

Mission, members of Hulmeville's Progressive elite were able to ensure that at least one young woman in their borough would not fall into a life of immorality. To ensure that there was no chance of her relapse, upon her discharge from the Mission Anna was placed in the care of the wife of the same influential member of the Hulmeville community who had convinced her father to send her to the Mission in the first place.²⁷ In contrast to Rose, whose incarceration into the Mission's program stemmed from her activities driven by economic need, Anna entered the program to escape a degenerative home environment that was causing her emotional damage and could lead to future physical and social harm.

Finally, there were those girls who were sentenced to the Midnight Mission not because of current sexual transgressions or dangers, but because the juvenile court feared they might become sexually promiscuous if allowed their freedom. Helen R. was one such girl. Born March 1, 1900, Helen seemed to be an unproblematic girl, content with life in her parents' home in Bridgeport, Pennsylvania. A radical change in the family dynamic occurred, however, when Helen's mother was committed to an asylum for the insane. Without seeking a divorce, Helen's father then chose to cohabit with another woman, whom he publicly referred to as his wife. Helen did not react well to this change and at age twelve began acting out, defying parental authority by "stealing pennies" and staying out all night. Helen was eventually placed under the care of the juvenile justice system, ostensibly because "the girl cannot be with her father because of his way of living." In an effort to remove her from the familiar yet potentially dangerous environment, the court placed her in a series of different homes in Tarentum, Allegheny County.²⁸

These placements seemed to be beneficial to Helen, although she still chafed under the restrictions placed upon her by the court. While many in the court system were pleased with her progress and felt that she had "improved a great deal since she came under the care of the court," Helen still insisted upon slipping out of the private homes in which she had been placed and roaming the streets of Pittsburgh at

²⁷ No less than three notations within Anna's Mission file contain references to Dr. and Mrs. H____; the former witnessed her father's agreement to admit Anna to the Mission, whereas the latter gained custody of the girl upon her release. Finally, both allowed Anna to live in their home for five months upon her return to Hulmeville. Matron's Comments and Admission Record, Midnight Mission Case File 384a.

²⁸ Philadelphia Juvenile Court, Probation Officer's Report for Institutions on Helen R____, Jan. 18, 1916, Midnight Mission Case File 382a.

night. Because of her continued defiance, the court felt that although she was not necessarily immoral, there was an excellent chance that she would “get into serious trouble” unless placed in an environment with stricter discipline. In January 1916 a judge remanded Helen to the Midnight Mission on the charge of delinquency, despite of the fact that her probation officer felt that “she had not been with men when she ran away” and showed no immoral tendencies beyond challenging authority and taking risks.²⁹

From the start it was apparent to the deaconess that Helen might not be like other girls placed under her care. Described as a “bright girl and quite attractive, rather pert and ‘smart’ in manner,” the only negatives that the staff could report were a tendency to become “very stubborn when aroused” and a distinct streak of laziness. Helen was “unusual, in that she never tells vile stories, and seems to have fewer evil tendencies than any girl in the home.” Still, Helen managed to maintain something of an individual streak while incarcerated; over the vast majority of her sentence in the facility she was deemed to have “an excessive opinion of herself,” was deceitful, and showed a marked dislike of housework. Indeed, it was only during the last two months of her stay in the Mission that Helen displayed any improvement, although the deaconess noted that she still seemed “very strange at times,” but put the cause down to heredity (i.e., her biological mother’s insanity). However, there seemed little justification to retain her as she appeared more than capable of resisting the temptations of the streets, and in January 1918 she was returned to Pittsburgh.³⁰

Unlike Rose, Helen did not display the immorality believed endemic among working-class girls of the Progressive Era, but instead acted in ways that reformers believed showed the *potential* for immorality. Furthermore, her case indicates that Progressive Era reformers were willing to take preemptive action to combat what they perceived as public immorality. Neither the degenerate home of her father nor her odd behaviors, which were generally attributed to her heredity, individually would have indicated that Helen was especially at risk for moral degeneracy. But the combination of the reasons for concern evident in her life and actions painted her as someone seriously at risk to the threats posed

²⁹ Probation Officer Sarah G. Barbour, County of Allegheny, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Juvenile Court, to Deaconess Morris, Midnight Mission, information update letter, Feb. 11, 1916, Midnight Mission Case File 382a.

³⁰ Matron’s Comments, Midnight Mission Case File 382a.

by white slavers and the entire public vice industry. For this reason, the court believed she should be placed in the Mission.³¹

Taken as a whole, the cases of Rose, Anna, and Helen suggest that Progressive Era social reformers did not possess a singular set of criteria with which to evaluate girls at risk. Indeed, when it came to identifying and restraining those on the path toward sexual degeneracy, the judicial system and social reform networks used loose definitions to cast a very wide net that seemingly identified every action undertaken by the three as transgressive. The three cases reveal that adolescent girls caught up in these systems fell within a series of spectrums of “moral degeneracy,” economic need, home environment, education, and mental maturity and possessed an individuality overshadowed by the apparently homogenous institutions. Rose, Anna, and Helen negotiated individual troubles that went far beyond mere immorality, indicating that adolescent sexuality was a convenient stand-in for more generalized concerns about changing gender roles and perceived threats to ideals of feminine propriety.

A Serious Effect on Her Character

The girls sentenced to the Midnight Mission reacted to the program in different ways. Some, like Rose, embraced the Mission's program. Others resisted their incarceration, or sought to escape from it. Still others navigated the system using a combination of charm and blatant dishonesty. These varying responses represent differing relationships between matrons and inmates of the Mission. The former, convinced of the validity of sociomoral reform, felt that the inmates could be redeemed and reshaped into productive members of society, whereas many of the young women determined to resist this reshaping using any means at their disposal. Though there is no surviving evidence that indicates the thoughts of the Mission inmates, several studies delving into the relationship between reformer and subject during the Progressive Era indicate that working-class recipients of agency attention developed ways to manipulate

³¹ In the Progressive Era, there was a belief that a “global network of pimps” worked tirelessly to replenish brothels with fresh prostitutes through kidnappings, drugs, and other predatory practices. Though this network was largely dismissed as fiction by the legal community, the prosecutions of pimps who used coercive practices against their prostitutes gave the theory an air of legitimacy, ultimately leading to the enactment of the Mann Act in 1910. Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 1–4; James Adams, “Alien Animals and American Angels: The Commodification and Commercialization of the Progressive-Era White Slave,” *Concept: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Graduate Studies* (2005), <http://concept.journals.villanova.edu/article/view/252>, accessed Mar. 12, 2009.

the system to their advantage.³² Some girls sentenced to a term of incarceration in the Midnight Mission also resisted what they may have seen as unwarranted interference in their lives. Examining the cases of individual inmates, it becomes apparent that just as the reasons for entry into the Mission were diverse so too were the means of resistance.

Born May 8, 1900, Bertha was typical of the individual who refused to submit to sociomoral reshaping through her sheer physical resistance. Her father deserted the family when Bertha was only six, leaving her, her mother, and her younger brother to fend for themselves. Bertha first came to the attention of the judicial system when the supervisor of Compulsory District No. 5, a city education division governing operation of the public schools, reported that Bertha was neither attending school nor working. Two days later, the owner of the boardinghouse in which the family resided called the House of Detention to complain, stating that the “girl was entirely beyond control, used terrible language, stole, was out late at nights and some times all night.” When Bertha failed to respond to a delinquency petition, a warrant was issued for her arrest. An examination revealed that she had been sexually active in the past (four years previously, at age twelve), but not any time recently. Nonetheless in April 1916 Judge MacNeille of the juvenile court sentenced Bertha to a two-year term in the Midnight Mission.³³

Bertha was determined to resist the program at all costs, however. The only entry in her Mission record for the entire year of 1916 notes that she was atrocious and that her “language and manner” were violent. In 1917 the matrons discovered to their horror that Bertha was “given to habits of self abuse,” a sure sign of moral degeneracy and a significant signpost on the road to prostitution.³⁴ Moreover, she was “so violent at times . . .

³² Broder, *Tramps*, 53–88, contains numerous examples of individuals in working-class neighborhoods conspiring to resist, misdirect, and avoid agents from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC) when they visited to investigate particular households. Likewise, Gordon, *Heroes*, 82–115, devotes an entire chapter to single mothers during the Progressive Era and provides examples illustrating that working-class recipients of agency attention were not merely passive victims, but rather utilized a variety of methods to passively and actively resist interference in their lives.

³³ Thomas G. Parris, chief probation officer, Municipal Court of Philadelphia Juvenile Division, Background Report on Bertha A_____, Apr. 10, 1916, Midnight Mission Case File 1a.

³⁴ There was a school of thought within nineteenth-century jurisprudence and medicine that linked self-abuse (masturbation), insanity, and moral decay, with masturbation leading to ever greater forms of immorality. See Ronald Hamowy, “Medicine and the Crimination of Sin: ‘Self-Abuse’ in 19th Century America,” *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 1 (1977): 229–70, for an in-depth study of the link between masturbation, criminalization, and public vice.

breaking windows, clock, & various other things in her anger” that the matrons felt that she was becoming a danger to the other inmates under their care.³⁵

While the records of the Mission provide only tantalizing clues, it appears that Bertha’s behavior in the facility continued to deteriorate, and the matrons felt that there was no hope for her redemption. Exactly one year after her admission, Bertha was returned to the House of Detention after a “scene of particular violence.” However, it appears that her consistent resistance to reshaping gave Bertha exactly what she desired. The final entry in her Mission records notes that she had been granted “permission to go home to mother” by the court and was placed at “Good Shepherd” contingent upon her mother finding a new residence for her family.³⁶ There may have been an unidentified dynamic at work involving Bertha, her family, and the juvenile court system that allowed her to resume her independence without completing a formal reformatory program and despite the opinion of an examining psychologist that she had “acquired rapid cheap habits” and was in desperate need of discipline.³⁷

In many ways Bertha’s narrative is not representative of adolescent working-class girls sentenced to this type of facility. The primary method of dealing with a recalcitrant inmate at the Mission was expulsion and transfer to a different facility, an act undertaken for many girls who resisted the program. Such girls were returned to the House of Detention, for a more stern and restrictive treatment, or sent to a rural facility known as Sleighton Farm for a more bucolic, but still restrictive, reeducation.³⁸ The

³⁵ Matron’s Comments, Midnight Mission Case File 1a.

³⁶ Ibid. It is possible that the facility cited in the matron’s comments refers to the Good Shepherd Homes, a Catholic-run variation of the Episcopalian Midnight Mission that appears to have shared the same institutional structure as most private reformatories of this era. See Sharon E. Wood, *The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005), 186–212.

³⁷ Dr. Walter S. Cornell, University of Pennsylvania Psychological Laboratory and Clinic, Background Report on Bertha A_____, Apr. 10, 1916, Midnight Mission Case File 1a.

³⁸ The formal name for this facility was the Sleighton Farm Training School, the Girls’ Department of the Glen Mills Schools. An “outgrowth of the Philadelphia House of Refuge chartered in 1826” and located in Darlington, Delaware County, Pennsylvania, by 1910 the facility housed approximately 350 “fallen girls.” The stated goal of the farm was, in the words of its founder and first superintendent, Martha P. Falconer, “to provide a home where the children of poverty and ignorance would be sheltered from temptation and led into ways of usefulness and virtue.” Most of the farm’s inmates were “sex delinquents” sentenced by the courts, which perceived the redemptive program of the facility to be invaluable to the “recovery” of fallen adolescent girls and in inculcating them with middle-class moral values and job skills. Mabel Agnes Elliott, *Correctional Education and the Delinquent Girl* (Bryn Mawr, PA, 1926), 7–15; Amy Hewes, “A Study of Delinquent Girls at Sleighton Farm,” *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 15 (Feb. 1925): 598.

causes of Bertha's atypical treatment can be found in the reasons for her initial incarceration. Records indicate it was not the court or moral reformers who regarded Bertha as a threat to her own personal virtue or public morality, but her mother, a single parent forced to work long hours in a laundry and who was "home only in the evenings" and incapable of dealing with a daughter possessing a personal force of will much greater than her own.³⁹

While Bertha appears to have resisted her confinement alone, other inmates chose to resist the Mission's program by working together. Examination of multiple individual records in concert reveals that a group dynamic took shape within the Mission during 1916 and 1917, one in which a small group of inmates (sometimes individually described as "hopelessly depraved," "constitutionally inferior," or "a typical child of the slums") conspired in small groups of two or three to flee incarceration.⁴⁰ The interplay among five particular inmates who, between August and November 1917, sought to escape is typical of the relationships that formed among these girls of different personalities and circumstances who were enduring the same conditions. The actions of members of this heterogeneous group are telling, for they indicate that these inmates adjusted to their situation by actively resisting the Mission's moral reform program. These inmates became members of a community, but not the particular community that social reformers and the Mission matrons had in mind.

In November 1915, Gladys, age fourteen, was sentenced to a two-year term in the Mission. Described by the assistant chief probation officer of the juvenile court as a girl "who has drifted but she is a neglected child . . . a very nice child with a very mild disposition" who "would respond to kind treatment and training," Gladys was apparently sentenced to the Mission for spending three days in the room of an unidentified man. While Gladys's record does not state that she was unchaste while in the company of this man, merely that "she met a woman in the neighborhood who gave her a note and sent her to a man's room in the neighborhood

³⁹ Background Report, Midnight Mission Case File 1a. Broder, *Tramps*, and Gordon, *Heroes*, also note that working-class families frequently used institutional facilities to control what they considered to be "wayward" children.

⁴⁰ Matron's Comments for Margaret M_____, Midnight Mission Case File 389a; Dr. Walter S. Cornell, University of Pennsylvania Psychological Laboratory and Clinic, Psychological Report of Gladys Viola S_____, Nov. 18, 1916, Midnight Mission Case File 387a; Matron's Comments for Helen L_____, Midnight Mission Case File 433a.

where she was kept for about three days," Gladys admitted to engaging in sexual activity at other times, claiming relations with "the man in whose homes she was staying" in Woodbury, New Jersey, before she "repeated the offense with another man in Phila." The authorities believed that she had already descended into a life of moral degeneracy and public vice. Coupled with an apparent "feeble-mindedness" that made her "easily influenced by others," in the eyes of the court this behavior necessitated her incarceration to prevent yet another innocent's slide into depravity.⁴¹ Given Gladys's development and temperament, the decision to place her in the Mission with wayward girls of considerably more degraded character might be questioned.

For the first eleven months of her incarceration Gladys seems to have struggled with her domestic training, religious education, and schoolwork alongside the other residents of the Mission, making no real impression one way or the other upon the matrons. As late as 1916, the matrons reported that Gladys displayed "little improvement, probably none at all." It was thought that no permanent improvement was possible due to Gladys's "enfeebled intellect."⁴²

Helen S. seemed to be the type of girl for whom the Mission's program was created. Seventeen-year-old Helen had been in and out of Progressive Era reformatories, industrial schools, and even Sleighton Farm since she was twelve.⁴³ The background report on Helen describes a gradual descent into immorality. Remanded to the Children's Aid Society (CAS) in 1911 because she was "constantly running away from home and taking pennies," she was placed in another home, ran away, and was retrieved by her father from a Philadelphia hospital (by some trick, it was noted) where she was being treated for tuberculosis. She was

⁴¹ Jean D. Modell, psychologist, University of Pennsylvania Psychological Laboratory and Clinic, Psychological Report of Gladys Viola S____, Nov. 18, 1916; Assistant Chief Probation Officer Margaret H. Reynolds, Municipal Court of Philadelphia Juvenile Division, to Deaconess Morris, Midnight Mission, Inquiry Letter, Nov. 24, 1915; and Francis N. Maxfield, University of Pennsylvania Psychological Laboratory and Clinic, to Isabella V. Smith, probation officer, Philadelphia House of Detention, Evaluation Report of Gladys Viola S____, Nov. 16, 1915, all Midnight Mission Case File 387a.

⁴² Jean D. Modell, Psychological Report of Gladys Viola S____, Nov. 18, 1916, Midnight Mission Case File 387a.

⁴³ It should be noted that Helen's case file contains peculiar discrepancies, most notably regarding her age at time of commitment. Surviving records indicate that she was born August 30, 1898, making her eighteen upon remand to the Mission on October 3, 1916. This is noted on Helen's psychological evaluation from the University of Pennsylvania Psychological Laboratory and Clinic; however, the matron's records give her age as seventeen. Midnight Mission Case File 385a.

later turned back over to the CAS, committed to Sleighton Farm, and discharged into her father's custody almost two years later. It was discovered that Helen had been sexually involved with one Frank S. in the two months between her retrieval from the hospital and her incarceration. After her release, she seems to have taken up where she had left off, admitting to her probation officer during a delinquency petition investigation that she had once more been "immoral with the young man Frank S____. . . . She was also immoral with two other men." On September 27, Helen was examined by a psychologist, who noted that it was "impossible to make a prognosis, for her past record and conduct since her recent discharge . . . leave one in doubt as to her desire or sincerity for future reform," and that she was infatuated with and hoped to marry Frank.⁴⁴ Based on her continuing troubling behavior, Helen was sentenced to another term in Sleighton Farm. Upon reconsideration, Judge MacNeille decided to remand her instead to the Midnight Mission in October 1916.⁴⁵

Unlike Helen S., who evidenced a continuing pattern of transgressive behavior, sixteen-year-old Helen L. appears to have been sentenced to the mission for a solitary offence. Described by a matron as "uncouth, noisy & very rough. Typical child of the slums," Helen was sentenced to the Mission by the Philadelphia Juvenile Court in December 1916. The previous December, after the desertion of her father and the designation of her mother as an unfit parent, the juvenile court placed Helen with her sister. But in December 1916, Helen left her sister's Philadelphia home for an undisclosed reason and rented a room on Vine Street with another girl. After an unsuccessful attempt to "take two young men to the room," Helen and her roommate went to the movies where they met Bill and William, and the four retired to the latter's home. From December 6 through the morning of December 8 Helen stayed in the company of William, although she claimed that she slept in a separate room. However, this transgression of propriety was enough to land Helen in the mission for a two-year sentence.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Jean D. Modell, psychologist, University of Pennsylvania Psychological Laboratory and Clinic, Psychological Report of Helen S____, Sept. 27, 1916, Midnight Mission Case File 385a.

⁴⁵ Thomas G. Parris, chief probation officer, Municipal Court of Philadelphia Juvenile Division, Background Report on Helen S____, Oct. 5, 1916, Midnight Mission Case File 385a.

⁴⁶ Matron's Comments for Helen L____, Midnight Mission Case File 433a. The mission records indicate that Helen L. was sixteen at the time of her incarceration, but court records place her age at only fifteen.

These three girls were sentenced to the Midnight Mission for reasons ranging from consistent antisocial tendencies to mental enfeeblement, but there is no evidence that any of the three were actively seeking to enter a life of prostitution and vice. Margaret H., however, hailing from what was considered a “degenerate family,” not only sought out a life of prostitution but was actively engaged in the trade when she came to the attention of the Philadelphia juvenile court system. On April 13, 1917, officers of the Eighteenth District arrested fourteen-year-old Margaret and charged her with being an inmate of a disorderly home.⁴⁷ In Margaret’s case, the fear of moral degeneracy seemed well founded; the chief probation officer noted that “the girl had been away from home and the mother felt she was living at Mrs. M.’s house. . . . Nine men, Mrs. M., Margaret and Ethel were arrested. A keg of beer and a number of beer glasses were on the table.” Like Gladys, Margaret was considered somewhat feeble-minded, but in her case the psychologists examining her noted that the apparent cause of her delinquency was a “mixture of degrading and improper home influences and degenerate heredity.” There appeared to be a sense among the court officers that a change in living conditions could reverse this degeneracy, a feeling seconded by the examining psychologist. As a result, she was sentenced to the facility in May 1917.⁴⁸

Margaret’s arrival at the Mission was the spark that inspired other girls to resist conformity and to escape their confines. Margaret managed to conform to the Mission’s program for the first few months of her incarceration; no reports survive that indicate she gave the matrons any trouble or made any particular impression upon the staff. However, it appears that the lure of her life outside of the Mission was too much for her to bear.

On August 12, 1917, Margaret escaped from confinement, taking Gladys with her. Details are sketchy in the case records regarding their method of escape, but it appears that Margaret and Gladys immediately fled to Margaret’s mother’s home on North Second Street, where the two

⁴⁷ Matron’s Comments for Margaret H_____, Midnight Mission Case File 392a. It should be noted that this description of the family was a strictly informal diagnosis on the part of the matron, based on a comment scrawled in the margin of Margaret’s Mission case record.

⁴⁸ J. D. Rippin, chief probation officer, Municipal Court of Philadelphia Juvenile Division, Background Report on Margaret H_____, May 9, 1917; and Walter S. Cornell, M.D., University of Pennsylvania Psychological Laboratory and Clinic, Psychological Diagnosis of Margaret H_____, Apr. 16, 1917, Midnight Mission Case File 392a. Cornell reported, “Should be removed from her home, which is not fit for any of the children, some of whom are bad and some feeble-minded, and some both.”

girls hid from police and social workers. Gladys's motivations for fleeing are not noted, and it may simply be that she was following the lead of the more confident and self-possessed Margaret. Margaret's motivations are somewhat easier to determine; it appears that she resented the attempts to reform her character and was determined to pursue a course of her own choosing. Circumstantial evidence suggests that she engaged in illicit sexual activity during the pair's escape. However, this initial attempt at escape was poorly planned and on August 18 the two girls were recaptured and returned to the Mission from the police station at Fourth and York.⁴⁹

Margaret was not deterred. Fifteen days later, on Sunday, September 2, the matrons uncovered a plan involving Margaret, Gladys, and Helen L. to "run away" from the facility. Margaret and Gladys were "prevented" from escaping, but Helen succeeded. After fleeing the facility, Helen "spent the night at her sister's home in Philadelphia," but was recaptured in Camden, New Jersey, the following day and returned to the Mission. After this incident the matrons decided that Margaret was an intensely negative influence upon the girls in the facility but were at something of loss of how to proceed against the three transgressors. On September 11, Margaret was officially discharged from the program and sent to the House of Detention. Helen and Gladys were given the standard gynecological exams and allowed to remain.⁵⁰

For the next twenty-six days everything seemed calm at the facility, but it is apparent that escape was never far from the minds of those chafing under their incarceration. On the evening of Sunday, October 7, Helen L. and Helen S. made a successful escape from the Mission "by means of a fence in bad condition" and managed to evade recapture until the next morning. In escaping, Helen L. suffered from a "sprained foot, caused by jumping over high fence." The matron reported that Helen S. "had a bad experience" during the few hours that she was away "according to a telephone story given by a strange woman who said she lived in Olney, but did not care to give us her name." Both girls were recovered by the police at two o'clock the next morning and returned to the Mission, where they underwent the standard examination.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Upon recapture, both girls were forced to undergo gynecological exams. The matron's notes regarding Gladys merely indicate examination; however, in Margaret's case the doctor added the additional recommendation of douches. Matron's Comments, Midnight Mission Case Files 387a and 392a.

⁵⁰ Matron's Comments, Midnight Mission Case Files 387a, 392a, 403a, and 433a.

⁵¹ Matron's Comments, Midnight Mission Case Files 433a and 385a.

The sudden and ongoing spate of escape attempts by the same group likely alerted the matrons of the Mission that an unusual bond had developed among certain girls under their care, and they paid closer attention for the remainder of 1917 in anticipation of continuing trouble. In November, a new girl, Margaret M., hatched a plan to escape the Mission in the company of Helen L. and Gladys, but the plot was foiled before it even began.⁵² For her role, Gladys was initially sent to the House of Detention, but as her two-year sentence at the Mission was nearly completed she was instead discharged and placed on probation “with a family at Oak Lane, Philadelphia.” Records indicate that she attempted to visit the Mission almost a year later but was denied access to any of the inmates.⁵³ Helen’s part in the plot was evidently not considered important enough to warrant comment in her records, possibly because during the same period the court ordered her discharge from the program and placed her in the custody of her sister. Margaret M. received a strict lecture and was allowed to remain within the Mission.⁵⁴

The numerous escape attempts during the summer and fall 1917 illustrate several important points about both the program at the Mission and the characters of the inmates. The fact that so many girls displaying radically different behavioral patterns attempted escape from the facility in such a short period of time indicates some disparity between the inmates’ characters (or desires) and the natures that the matrons believed existed within them. Not all inmates welcomed the opportunities provided by the Mission. That girls from disparate backgrounds and possessing such distinct temperaments could overcome these differences to unite in a common cause points towards a growing sense of community among individuals existing under restrictive conditions. But more than that, the fact that those girls who did manage to escape pursued individual goals outside of the facility indicates that they did not exist within the system as a homogenous mass, but rather only appeared similar in the eyes of those responsible for their “reform.” Within the social structures entrusted with their welfare and redemption they were viewed as a mass of wayward

⁵² Matron’s Comments, Midnight Mission Case File 389a.

⁵³ Matron’s Comments, Midnight Mission Case File 387a. This decision may be based more upon the matrons’ opinions of Gladys than on her specific actions, as the formal decision to bar access to the Mission was noted on January 15, 1919. Additionally, a notation in the matron’s comments for Margaret M. states that the Mission staff considered Gladys “hopelessly depraved,” an opinion that is not repeated in Gladys’s own file. See Matron’s Comments, Midnight Mission Case File 389a.

⁵⁴ Matron’s Comments, Midnight Mission Case Files 433a and 392a.

girls who could be redeemed with the same methods, whereas each individual inmate understood herself as an individual, as a girl who may, or may not, have been wayward and chafed at her restrictions.

Discharged from the Mission

Perhaps the most telling factors emphasizing the heterogeneous individuality of adolescent girls caught up in the juvenile court system are their final dispositions upon release from the program. Beliefs about the nature of vice, immorality, heredity, mentality, and propriety would have predicted similar life courses for these girls. In fact, once released from the Mission, they pursued widely disparate paths that, in many cases, had little relationship to their perceived natures either before or during their incarceration.

Given the increased mobility of Americans during the 1920s, it is not surprising that many of the girls sentenced to the Mission vanished from the matron's notes after leaving the facility. Margaret H.'s record ends abruptly after her discharge from the Mission and her return to the House of Detention; Gladys drifted from family to family until February 5, 1919, when it was reported that she was "three days away from home," after which there is no record. After a single entry made six months after her release stated that she was "not doing well," all references to Helen L. vanish, and Bertha's record ends immediately after her ejection from the facility. After a seemingly unending cycle of transgression, apology, and readmission to the facility, Margaret M. eventually was sent to the House of Detention, after which the matrons recorded no more reports regarding her. Even the perceived successes largely vanish from the evidentiary record after their dealings with the facility were over. Rose and Helen R. simply moved on with their lives upon discharge, and no records for either of the two exist.⁵⁵

The lives of some girls, however, did remain in view, and the deaconess was dutiful enough to record rumors, direct contacts, and official notifications regarding her one-time charges in their case files. It was apparent from these girls' final dispositions that not all of them took the lessons imparted by the matrons of the Mission to heart. After serving her two-year term in the Mission, Helen S. was released back to her father in November 1918. The matrons felt that she may have been incorrigible; as

⁵⁵ Matron's Comments, Midnight Mission Case Files 392a, 387a, 433a, 1a, 389a, 388a, and 382a.

the head matron noted, Helen “has had the protection” of the facility “for more than 2 years, and that is about all that one can say. The truth is not in her, and she is false through and through.” Over the next two months the matrons received word from her father, who complained that his daughter was “behaving badly and causing him great concern.” Helen disappeared from home and was traced to Kensington, where “she was living a shameful life, and proved beyond doubt that she [was] a sexual pervert.” In January 1919 a warrant was issued for Helen’s arrest, but the request for her incarceration in Sleighton Farm would go unfulfilled; on February 23 the Mission received word of Helen’s death from pneumonia.⁵⁶

But there were also success stories. Anna can be counted among these successes, though in her case the success was likely the result of removing her from a dangerous environment rather than from reforming her character. After her release from the facility, Anna returned to the Mission frequently on social calls, often staying overnight. In October 1918 Anna returned to the home of her father to “keep house,” but as there are no reports of any untoward activity it appears that the community of Hulmeville in general and Dr. H. in particular worked to ensure the private reform of her father, and there is no further indication of incest. Over the next two years Anna wrote and visited the matrons frequently, even going so far as to locate and reconcile with her long-lost mother (who appears to have reformed herself), was married in Elkton, Maryland, on August 16, 1920, and moved with her husband to Porters, Delaware, where she found employment as a housekeeper.⁵⁷

The records of the inmates of the Midnight Mission indicate that working-class adolescent girls of the Progressive Era were not a homogeneous mass acting with like purpose in their pursuit of immorality and degeneracy. While reformers attempting to inculcate “proper” morality within their charges were constrained by a framework that emphasized a homogeneous institutional curriculum, their success was highly dependent upon their individual subjects. The Midnight Mission reformers believed that moral degeneracy in an individual could be caused by a variety of negative influences (genetic predisposition, material want, home environment, etc.). However, their actions were constrained by their belief in the primacy of Progressive uplift (that human failings could be solved through the application of scientific analysis, moral instruction, and social

⁵⁶ Matron’s Comments, Midnight Mission Case File 385a.

⁵⁷ Matron’s Comments, Midnight Mission Case File 384a.

control). When individual difference and institutional constraint came into conflict within the walls of the Mission, the result was a volatile environment that led some inmates to flee, others to resist (both actively and passively), and still others to adjust their own individual values in order to conform to the social norm.

While studies of Progressive institutional structures can reveal what reformers of the era believed, they only tell half the story. When we look beyond these structures and at the subjects of their ministrations, the inmates cease to be a faceless mass of adolescent female transgressors and become individuals who illustrate the tension between Progressive notions of morality and propriety and new gender and class values during a period of social change at the dawn of the twentieth century.

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