

MAKING BETTER BABIES: THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY EUGENICS MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

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Carly Leary is a junior studying History and Spanish at the United States Naval Academy. This paper was written for a history seminar class on Theodore Roosevelt and his times taught by Dr. Lori Bogle. Carly took a particular interest in the eugenics movement and better babies contests when her professor mentioned the topic in class.

By 1900, traditional American ideas about the inferiority of non-whites had developed into the eugenics movement, which mirrored John J. Biddison's belief that the human race could be improved through selective breeding. Often called scientific racism, the primary investigative phase of the movement began in the late 1890s when Americans began to desire restrictions on race and origin of immigrants. The movement's heyday occurred during its second stage, between 1905 and 1930, which was marked by suggestions for selective breeding and sterilization as a means of purifying the national breeding stock. Eugenicists developed the notion that crime, illness, and other undesirable traits were hereditary, and that the only way to rid the nation of these misfit beings and achieve a perfect race was to selectively breed the American people while simultaneously sterilize the unfit portion of the population. The simplicity of the idea made it uncommon for anyone to oppose the principles behind eugenics when the idea was first introduced— "if these genetically inferior people were permitted to reproduce unchecked, they would soon swamp the (smart) upper classes and lead the country straight to ruin."¹ To sell these methods to the American public, eugenicists held a series of national publicity events called "Better Baby Contests" and "Fitter Family Contests." The popularity of these contests continued to grow for almost thirty years before they were eventually undermined as the eugenics movement became associated with Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler's idea of a "master race." The final stage, marked by rapid decline, began around

¹ Johnathan Marks, "Historiography of Eugenics.." *National Center for Biotechnology Information*. Web.
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1682158/?page=1>, 1.

1930, as people came to be more critical of the movement's interpretation of facts.²

The term "eugenics," first coined by British statistician Francis Galton in 1883, literally means "the science of being well-born" and "the study of those hereditarily endowed with noble qualities."³ The notions behind the eugenics movement began developing as early as 1880 at a time when millions of immigrants arrived in America. The ideas, however, were initially inspired by Gregor Mendel's genetic discoveries and claims along with other leading biologists of the time. After its introduction to the American public, eugenics became an obsession. During this time, opposition to eugenics became an opposition to both progress and innovation.⁴ "...Eugenics was a common concern that infiltrated the lives of ordinary citizens...The ideology of improving national or racial stock by intentional intervention was useful for both conservation and progressive purposes."⁵ Within a matter of time, eugenics became a part of the American school curriculum and popular culture as evidenced by its prevalence in television dramas and books. By the turn of the century, eugenics played an integral role in the progressive movement, which ultimately aimed to 'reform' America. Progressives were middle and upper class reformers who sought to rationalize and protect the economic and political system beginning with ridding the country of the problems associated with rapid industrialization and massive immigration. Progressives believed that America's traditional racial stock was increasingly undermined by dark-skinned people who resided in overcrowded and chaotic cities. One area of particular concern included the rise in crime and illness among 'unfit' Americans.

One of the leading eugenicists in the country, Henry H. Goddard, conducted a series of pedigrees, which were indicative of the initial investigative stage of the movement. His study of the Kallikak family where he "traced 480 descendants of an immigrant mentally retarded girl," revealed that about half of her descendants exhibited some form of criminal behavior or illness while the other half were 'normal' or

² Ted L. DeCorte, Jr., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and 1978. "Eclectic Buzz: Menace of Undesirables: The Eugenics Movement During the Progressive Era - DeCorte Digital Media (DDM)," posted at *DeCorte and Associates -Smart Women Invest - Christine DeCorte - Nevada Life and Health Insurance - DeCorte & Associates*. Web. <<http://www.smartwomeninvest.com/eugenics.htm>>. 4.

³ Paul A. Lombardo, *A Century of Eugenics in America: from the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era*, (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 2010.), 1.

⁴ Marks, "Historiography of Eugenics," 2.

⁵ Tamsen Wolff, *Mendel's Theatre: Heredity, Eugenics, and Early Twentieth-Century American Drama*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.). 5.

‘uncontroversial.’ Goddard concluded that “feeble-mindedness is hereditary and transmitted as surely as any character,” and wrote a book about this study which supported the rise in eugenics in America.⁶ Richard Dugdale, another eugenicist, investigated the Juke family to support the idea that criminal behavior and other unfit traits were biological traits passed onto the next generation. The Jukes were “an unusually large family with a high incidence of criminal behavior, alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, mental retardation, and insanity.”⁷ Dugdale eventually concluded that “the social ills of the family members were *somehow* transmitted from generation to generation.”⁸ His research did not prove causation; however, his findings did fit the premise of the eugenics movement. By limiting the production of unfit Americans with negative traits, and producing more fit citizens with better genes, the country would be well on its way to reform.

The eugenics movement reached its height during the second and most influential phase from around 1905 until 1930, during which “more and more progressive reformers became convinced that a good proportion of the social ills in the United States lay in hereditary factors.”⁹ Conservative progressives had little concern for the rights of people, rather their main interest was the prevention of “breeding” by those with criminal, insane, epileptic, retarded, and other impoverished tendencies unfit for society. Soon after the rise in the movement, eugenics further divided into positive and negative realms. Galton described positive eugenics as encouraging the fit members of society to reproduce and negative eugenics as preventing the reproduction of the unfit in society.¹⁰ He claimed, “Negative eugenics aims at checking the deterioration to which the human stock is exposed, owing to the rapid proliferation of what may be called human weeds.” While he believed that negative eugenics would help to reform the breeding stock, he also said that “negative eugenics is not enough...If we want improvement, progress, the creation of superior types of humanity..., we must look to positive eugenics.”¹¹ The dual idea of procreation and selective breeding among fit people and

⁶ DeCorte, “Eclectic Buzz,” 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ Wolff, *Mendel's Theatre*, 3.

¹¹ Donald J. Childs. *Modernism and Eugenics Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and The Culture of Degeneration*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

sterilization and elimination of inferiors was formed.¹² While social Darwinists were more in favor of letting nature take its course with the unfit in society and supported positive eugenics, progressives and eugenicists, on the other hand, wanted to rid the nation of misfits as soon as possible through forced sterilization.¹³ President Franklin Delano Roosevelt reaffirmed sentiments of progressives when he stated, "A race must be strong and vigorous; it must be a race of good fighters and good breeders... The prime duty of a good citizen of the right type is to leave his or her blood behind in the world; and we have no business to permit the perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type."¹⁴



Better Baby contests thrived among positive eugenics supporters, and were highly anticipated events throughout the country. These events promoted selective breeding by judging young children and eventually entire families. They were "one of the most popular expressions of public health and race betterment in rural America."¹⁵ Citizens believed the contests were a positive influence, because the incentives to win the contests—including money, trophies, medals, and more—encouraged healthy habits among families. Pictured above, is a baby being examined at one of these contests.¹⁶ Coherent with popular sentiments of the time, rationale for these contests exploited desires to improve one's country:

¹² "Eugenics - Positive And Negative Eugenics - Social, People, and Procreation - JRank Articles ." *Medicine Encyclopedia - JRank Articles Web*. <<http://medicine.jrank.org/pages/2210/Eugenics-Positive-Negative-Eugenics.html>>.

¹³ DeCorte, "Eclectic Buzz," 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ Alexandra Minna Stern, "Making Better Babies: Public Health and Race Betterment in Indiana 1920-1935." *Public Health Then and Now* 92.5 (2002): 742.

¹⁶ "EugenicsArchive.Org: Image Archive on American Eugenics Movement." Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement. <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/list3.pl>, Image #2244.

“better Babies mean better mothers and fathers, better homes, better cities, a better nation, a better world.”¹⁷

Federal agencies such as the Better Babies Bureau led the way spreading the contests throughout the nation as government sanctioned events. “The work of the Bureau was “to encourage the holding of Better Babies contests as an aid to preventive medicine and a method of helping parents to start children, physically and mentally, toward individual health and efficient citizenship.”¹⁸ The Bureau did its best to make the contests sound appealing in newspapers and magazine articles. Some articles, using emotional appeals, even attempted to display these contests as a civic duty.¹⁹ The Bureau would receive letters from secretaries of state, state fair committees, and others inquiring what they must do to plan such events. After receiving a surplus of these letters, the Bureau compiled paperwork and pamphlets to help officials plan a Better Baby contest in their state or county. Anxious mothers soon bombarded the Bureau with questions asking what they could do to bring their babies “up to the standard.”²⁰ The Bureau printed “Hints to Mothers Who Want Better Babies” to satisfy hopeful parents. These folders contained eight pages of information and charts to help parents groom their babies to the ideal.²¹ The folders went in depth about the steps a mother must take in order to maximize the chances of her son or daughter being a “Better Baby.” Those working for the Bureau believed that what they were doing was truly making the world a better place. From a bright and sunny workplace with posters of the contests hung everywhere, to the hundreds of letters received daily by hopeful mothers, “...nobody can work in this Bureau without feeling that the world grows better every day.”²²

The literature of eugenics emphasized that mothers should nurse their children. After a year, the child could transfer to natural foods, while completely avoiding ‘indigestible’ food. Sleep emerged as the next most important consideration. The list of considered factors was extensive, including the number of people who slept in the same room as the child, the degree to which the windows were open, and the thickness of the pajamas worn by the child. If these directions were followed exactly, the

¹⁷ Richardson. "\$17,000,000 For Better Farms- 30,000 For Better Babies!," 95.

¹⁸ Roger H. Dennett, "How To Make Babies Better." *Women's Home Companion* 50 (1913): 24.

¹⁹ Richardson. "\$17,000,000 For Better Farms- 30,000 For Better Babies!," 122.

²⁰ Dennett, "How To Make Babies Better," 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Richardson, "The Better Babies Bureau," 29.

child was guaranteed to have no more sleepless nights. The folders even encouraged exercise, particularly with companions as often as possible because additional children encouraged more exercise. The folder's last emphasis was simply common sense, "as nothing can ever be written, and no new discoveries in the field of medical science can ever be made, which will take the place of common sense in bringing up a baby."²³

However, during the eugenics movement, scientists and doctors were very successful in convincing the American public that "the Better Babies idea [was] really an important scientific discovery—more important than many discoveries of cures for disease, for it [would] greatly lessen disease."²⁴ It led the people to believe that these contests were an integral part of health reform in America. Dr. Ada E. Schweitzer's work as the head of the Better Baby program flourished because of the outstanding concern for public health and eugenics at the time.²⁵ She responded in kind about the complaints of the contests' by making arrangements with the Better Baby Bureau and the American Medical Association to work together in order to create a standard score card.²⁶ Schweitzer was responsible for launching the Better Baby movement in Indiana, making it one of the best case studies about how these contests worked.²⁷

Her main goal, however, was to lower the infant mortality rate throughout the United States. In her 1920 annual report, Schweitzer publicized that she had completed conferences in 27 different Indiana counties and examined over 8,000 children. Schweitzer expanded the movement by hiring more nurses in addition to holding special classes for mothers and mothers-to-be and "achieved significant successes, particularly declines in the number of underweight babies and in the infant mortality rate."²⁸ By 1926, the infant mortality rate in Indiana had dropped to number four in the country.²⁹ "While Schweitzer certainly viewed the contests as a facet of a more extensive betterment project, she alleged that the 'gates of heredity' were closed after the baby left the womb. It was essential to first restrict birth to only the most fit, through marriage and

²³ Dennett, "How To Make Babies Better," 65.

²⁴ Richardson, "How Healthy Are The Babies in Your Town?" 122.

²⁵ Alexandra Minna Stern, "Making Better Babies: Public Health and Race Betterment in Indiana 1920-1935." *Public Health Then and Now* 92.5 (2002): 742.

²⁶ Stern, "Making Better Babies," 748.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 747.

²⁸ David J. Bodenhamer, and Randall T. Shepard, *The History of Indiana Law*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006.) 75.

²⁹ Stern, "Making Better Babies," 747.

sterilization laws, and then to create only the most desirable children through scientific child rearing and motherhood.”³⁰

Schweitzer wholeheartedly advocated the contests, yet realized that the contests themselves were not capable of transforming below-average babies into perfect ones. While her main work was parental and societal education about Better Baby contests as well as in planning and executing these events, Dr. Schweitzer admitted that some forms of negative eugenics, such as sterilization and planned marriage, were also necessary for the betterment of American racial development.

Indiana was not the state of origin of Better Baby contests, yet this state provides critical information necessary to understand the events surrounding and encapsulating the contests. Before the contests even began in Indiana, the state passed the country’s first eugenic sterilization law in 1907.³¹ The state also developed additional classes, films, and radio shows after the Towner Act passed in 1921.³² “Administered by the US Children’s Bureau, this act provided matching funds to states that approved ‘enabling legislation’ and established agencies devoted to infant and maternal welfare.”³³ Public health was a top priority for Indiana, making Better Baby contests even more ideal. Beginning around 1913, the contests were popular, and included demonstrations for the mothers regarding feeding techniques and other tools. The contests became not only a way to win money and prizes but also a way for women to gain education, a social benefit which the public appreciated. Raising ‘Better Babies’ adopted the same language as raising cattle or corn.³⁴ By 1915, Indiana had climbed to sixth in a nationwide ranking of the State Board of Health based off the effectiveness of their social programs.³⁵ The Indiana Child Creed, “an awkward patchwork of eugenic, public health, Protestant, and Progressive ideas,” became a part of the Indiana cultural language in 1915. The creed reads:

Every child has the inalienable right to be born free from disease, free from deformity and with pure blood in its veins and arteries. Every child has the inalienable right to be loved; to have its individuality respected; to be trained wisely in mind, body, and soul; to be protected from disease, from evil influences and evil

³⁰ Ibid., 749.

³¹ Stern, "Making Better Babies," 743.

³² Bodenhamer *The History of Indiana Law*, 75.

³³ Stern, "Making Better Babies," 743.

³⁴ Alexandra Minna Stern, "Making Better Babies: Public Health and Race Betterment in Indiana 1920-1935." *Public Health Then and Now* 92.5 (2002): 747.

³⁵ Ibid., 743.

persons; and to have a fair chance. In a word, to be brought up in the fear and admonition of the Lord.

That state is delinquent which does not ceaselessly strive to secure these inalienable rights to its children.³⁶

The appearance of this creed at the local, state and federal level marked the beginning of better baby work in Indiana.³⁷ It was the “epigraph the *Indiana Mothers’ Baby Book*,” and a copy was sent to every Indiana mother after she had given birth.³⁸



*The photograph above was taken at one of the Indiana Better Baby Contests, and the three babies pictured were likely winners. It is interesting that the babies appear in classical Greek or Roman clothing, suggesting an ideal or paradigm of nobility.*³⁹

But cracks soon appeared in the underlying logic of these contests. Charles B. Davenport, a well-known biologist and eugenicist, said that “a prize winner at two may be epileptic at ten.”⁴⁰ This doubt began to increase in participants. Even though a “perfect” baby may be winning prizes at a young age, there was no telling what their health would be like in ten, fifteen, or twenty years. This issue led to the concept of Fitter Family contests. A report by the Eugenics Department suggested that the

³⁶ Bodenhamer, *The History of Indiana Law*, 74-75.

³⁷ Stern, “Making Better Babies,” 744.

³⁸ Bodenhamer, *The History of Indiana Law*, 74.

³⁹ Alexandra Minna Stern, “Making Better Babies: Public Health and Race Betterment in Indiana 1920-1935.” *Public Health Then and Now* 92.5 (2002): 743.

⁴⁰ “Eugenics Archive.” *Fitter Families for Future Firesides: A report of the Eugenics Department of the Kansas Free Fair, 1920-1924*, June 1928.

strength of every living thing depends on heredity and environment; therefore, Fitter Family contests would be more useful to the eugenics movement. The contests not only judged the “Better Baby” but also the respective family. The sign below, a ‘flashing light sign,’ could be seen at fitter family contests as a call to action.



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The sign reads “Some people are born to be a burden on the rest... Learn about heredity. You can help correct these conditions.” The top box says, “This light flashes every 15 seconds. Every 15 seconds \$100 of your money goes for the care of persons with bad heredity such as the insane, feeble minded, criminals and other defectives.” The sign then had four boxes below, two of which were labeled “America needs less of these” and the other two read “America needs more of these.” The two boxes that read ‘America needs less of’ state: “This light flashes every 48 seconds...Every 48 seconds a person is born in the United States who will never grow up mentally beyond that stage of a normal 8 year old boy or girl,” and “This light flashes every 50 seconds...Every 50 seconds a person is committed to jail in the United States. Very few normal persons ever go to jail.” One of the boxes describing what America needs more of said “This light flashes every 7 ½ minutes. Every 7 ½ minutes a high grade person is born in the United States who will have the ability to do creative work and be fit for leadership. About 4% of all Americans come within this class.”⁴¹ Appropriately, the electrical wires are attached to

⁴¹ "EugenicsArchive.Org: Image Archive on American Eugenics Movement." <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/list3.pl>, Image #5.

these boards in order to signify progress of the time period. The boards served as an educational tool, translating old ideas about the superiority of races into scientific form. By displaying signs like this, the Fitter Family contests educated and convinced people about fit and unfit citizens. The statistics were important because they made the ideas behind the eugenics movement more believable to the reader.

In 1930, the third and final stage of decline of the eugenics movement began, and the beginning of a rapid collapse in all the ideas and ‘facts’ about eugenics became evident. Many people began to believe that nothing they were taught about heredity was factual as almost all claims lacked evidence. As mentioned earlier, Dugdale’s conclusion in his research about the Jukes family was the social ills of the family were *somehow* transmitted from generation to generation. Although Dugdale was a recognized eugenicist, anyone could have made the conclusion that these ills were *somehow* being transmitted.

According to the article titled “Menace of Undesirables: The Eugenics Movement During the Progressive Era” by Ted DeCorte, there are three major events which rushed the decline of the eugenics movement. The Depression of the 1930s triggered the first marks of decline, during which both fit and unfit Americans were suffering from the effects of rampant inflation and unemployment. The unfit appeared no worse off than the fit in nearly every aspect of well-being. Second, different scientists published research demonstrating that there were metabolic causes for many of the illnesses found in the Juke and Kallikak families. This meant that the research completed earlier by Goddard and Dugdale which claimed all of these illnesses to be hereditary, was not accurate. Hitler-style eugenics ultimately contributed to the final decline of the eugenics movement.⁴² Americans were appalled by the events in Nazi Germany, and did not want to be associated with the horrific regime or its methods.

Ultimately, “realization of the full implications of eugenics abruptly halted racial reforms in the United States.”⁴³ Unbelievably quick in origin, the movement seemingly vanished, practically forgotten by all Americans and is left out of the common history narrative. It is nearly impossible to find signs of opposition to eugenics during its height, and although most would agree that the entire eugenics movement was immoral and unjust, scientists today often pretend the movement never even existed. Those who do not deny the movement completely often justify it by “rewriting it as a fringe movement populated by a few zealots

⁴² DeCorte, "Eclectic Buzz," 11.

⁴³ Ibid.

and pseudoscientists.”⁴⁴ Ironically, many people holding this opinion have not been scientifically-trained themselves. Reading about Better Baby and Fitter Family contests now makes these ideas seem ridiculous, but during the Progressive movement, Americans were looking for essentially any reason for the country’s “decline.” Placing the blame on immigration and racial inferiority became the scapegoat of the time.



*The photograph above was taken during the Holocaust, and shows a misplaced child being examined in order to determine whether or not he is racially ‘pure.’ This picture is similar to the one on page six from a Better Baby contest, showing the similarities between the events of the American eugenics movement and the Holocaust in Nazi Germany.*⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Johnathan Marks, "Historiography of Eugenics.." *National Center for Biotechnology Information*. Web. 1 Oct. 2012.

<<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1682158/?page=1>>. 2.

⁴⁵ Category. "Holocaust: A Photograph of a Child Receiving Medical Examinations in the Bad Schallerbach Home for Displaced Children." *20th Century History*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2012.

<<http://history1900s.about.com/library/holocaust/blchildren8.htm>>.