

# To Be of Use: Women of the Settlement House Movement

Christine Whittaker Sofge examines how early social activists helped immigrants and the poor.

THEY WERE THE "first generation of college-educated women" — young, idealistic, ambitious. But, in the 1890s, women's and men's roles were strictly defined and segregated. Finding occupations that allowed women full expression of their newly acquired knowledge and talents wasn't easy. For many of these young women, the answer was social work in the settlement house movement.

## A Radical Idea

In the late 19th century, the problems of expanding industrialization began to weigh on the public consciousness. Extreme poverty, hazardous working conditions, shoddy housing and serious health problems afflicted the growing numbers of the working class crowding into North American and European cities.

In 1873, Samuel Barnett, a curate in the Church of England, moved to his new parish in the East End of London. Appalled at the dismal conditions he saw, he turned to the universities for help — not for charitable gifts, but to bring the upper and working classes together in the hopes of finding solutions to the tragedy of poverty.

The Universities Settlement (later named Toynbee Hall) was established in London in 1884. Students lived as neighbors with disadvantaged citizens and worked to improve local conditions. They provided adult education, holidays for children, art exhibitions, assistance to Jewish immigrants and training for



Jane Addams helped make Hull House in Chicago one of the most prominent settlement houses in North America.

teachers and social workers. Their goal was that "university men might get to know workmen and their problems through contact and discussion, and through teaching, research, public service and sociability, contribute something in return." This was the beginning of the settlement house, or social settlement, movement.

Barnett's idea was truly radical. Few students or visitors to Toynbee Hall came away unchanged. Many went on to establish their own settlements, both within the United Kingdom and throughout the world. Over the next two decades, more than 20 settlements were founded in the UK alone.

The first North American set-

tlement, the Fred Victor Mission, was begun in 1884 in Toronto. In 1886, Stanton Coit founded the Neighborhood Guild in the lower east side of New York. And although the first houses were staffed by university men, women's settlement houses were soon established, the most prominent of which was Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago, founded in 1889 after Addams' 1887 visit to Toynbee Hall. By 1910, North America was home to more than 400 houses.

In other countries, the settlement house movement never became quite as widespread or influential as in the UK and North America, but settlement houses could be found all over the world. In France, the charitable *Maisons Sociales* of Madame de Pressence and *L'Oeuvre Sociale*, originally organized in the

1870s, were expanded in the 1890s to provide settlement house services.

In Helsinki, a *Workers Home* was founded in 1890. Although the home lasted only 17 years, the settlement house movement was started up again in 1918 with the *Evangelical Society of Industrial Areas* and *Kalliola Settlementti*.

In the Netherlands, *Ons Huis* was founded in Amsterdam in 1892. In Tokyo, *Kingsley-Kan* was established in 1897. Germany gained a settlement house with *Hamburger Volksheim* and Austria with *Wiener Settlement*, both in 1901, and in Stockholm *Birkagarden* was founded in 1912. Settlements were also established in Russia and Hungary during this period.

## Serving the Needy

The character and mission of the settlement house varied. Some settlements focused primarily on the educational aspects, maintaining strong ties to universities. In others, the religious aspects were most important, with the settlement houses providing the strong moral guidance of the founding religious institutions. Still other houses focused on the needs of a particular disenfranchised population, such as Jewish immigrants, or provided housing for the needy.

In the US and Canada, settlement houses found a special niche: serving urban immigrants. With the expanding industrialization of the late 19th century, a source of cheap labor was needed. Immigration was encouraged by manufacturers and even governments, but the large-scale immigration into urban centers had unanticipated impacts. The numbers of urban poor swelled with immigration, while living conditions in the cities deteriorated. The need for a solution was critical and the settlement house movement strove to fill that need.

The services provided in the North American settlements varied from house to house. One of the most prominent settlement houses in North America was Hull House in Chicago. Under the inspired leadership of Addams, Hull House provided everything from well-baby care to job clubs, English and "Americanization" lessons, social clubs and recreational opportunities, art and music classes and public baths. The need for such assistance became readily apparent. In 1893, a depressed economy pushed more people into poverty and made the situation for the immigrant poor quite desperate. At one point, Hull House's 25 resident women were seeing over 2,000 needy people a week.

Being situated in the community they served, settlement house workers gained first-hand knowl-



Settlement houses' childcare was the model for government-run kindergartens.

edge of the needs of the people and the ability to tailor their responses to meet those needs. That is not to say that every program was a success. At one time, Hull House provided public kitchens, supplying free, wholesome meals to their community. These were poorly attended because the immigrant population preferred their ethnic foods prepared in their traditional manner.

## The Romantic Adventure

Although many men's settlements were also established in North America, the settlement house movement mainly captured the imagination of upper-class and middle-class women. Men had many choices of useful employment and political influence open to them, while women had just begun to gain entrance to colleges and universities. The employment prospects for these women were quite limited. The settlement house movement provided an ideal opportunity to be of use. The charitable activities of the houses were deemed appropriate for women, and yet offered a sense of purpose and a taste of adventure otherwise unavailable to women of the late 19th century. In the words of Alice Hamilton, physician and pioneer in industrial medicine: "When I look back on the Chicago of 1897 I can see why life in a settlement seemed so great an adventure. It was all so new,

this exploring of the poor quarters of a big city. The thirst to know how the other half lives had just begun to send people pioneering in the unknown parts of American life."

The women residing in these houses also found companionship and intellectual stimulation in the company of other young women. This camaraderie was not available elsewhere in their lives.

At this time, the US was also undergoing a third Great Awakening of religious fervor and in Canada, members of churches founded many

settlement houses. Noble causes — such as working to improve the lot of the disadvantaged — had acquired a romantic status. It became acceptable, and even noble, to pursue an altruistic career in place of the traditional romantic ideal of marriage and children. The stigma of spinsterhood was erased, or at least lessened, for women who "married" such a career instead of a husband.

## Political Power

One uniquely American aspect to the settlement house movement was the rise to political power of many of the key women. The settlement house movement provided an opportunity for women to directly witness the conditions under which poor immigrants lived, learn of the struggles and difficulties and to see firsthand the effects of unjust policies and laws. The reaction to these injustices grew into an activism that would have repercussions for generations to come. The women of the settlement house movement began to fight for social reform.

The ranks of activist women included Addams, first American woman awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (in 1931 with Nicholas Murray Butler), Frances Perkins, first female secretary of Labor, Hamilton, pioneer in industrial medicine, Eleanor Roosevelt, first lady and peerless social reformer and many more. And for every

woman who attained fame, hundreds carried the torch on a more local level.

In the US, the reformers were most effective in changing social policies and laws to protect children. The establishment of a Children's Bureau and changes in child labor laws were a direct result of

the activism of settlement house women. Government-run kindergartens were modeled on those provided in settlement houses. Changes were also sought in other areas, though often with less success. One notable exception was the establishment of a workers' compensation system for workers injured on the job.

But perhaps more than the direct political changes, the settlement house women were effective in changing attitudes. Today we take for granted in the US that there is government-sponsored health care for the destitute, programs for adult-education and the arts and protections against the exploitation of workers. These changes in American policies and attitudes were begun by the advocacy of the settlement house women. The reforms were continued and expanded by President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies. Over time, these have evolved into the elaborate social welfare system of the US today.

In other countries, settlement house women also advocated for social reform and helped to change policies and attitudes, but the individual women didn't achieve the prominence, political power or notoriety of the US activists.

**The Decline of the Movement**

In some ways the settlement house movement was a victim of



Hull House offered a number of activities for the community such as sports, arts classes and skill-building courses.

its own successes. One of the great advantages of the settlement house was its flexibility to conform to the needs of the population and the desires of its residents. Settlement houses were ideal places to try out new ideas on how to help the poor — ongoing field experiments to learn about the new discipline of “social work” (a phrase not coined until the early 20th century). Many of the leading social workers of the early 20th century trained in settlement houses.

The professionalization of social work began with the establishment of the first school for social workers in 1898 (the New York School of Philanthropy). Whereas the efforts of the settlement house movement focused on how societal influences affected the poor, the first theorists in social work emphasized the afflicted individual, drawing extensively from the medical model. As the numbers of professional social workers grew, the efficacy of untrained volunteer “charity workers” using “old-fashioned” ideas was called into question. The settlement house movement began to lose its romantic appeal.

The nascent political activism of the movement also hastened its decline. In particular, the highly vocal peace activists, such as Addams, suffered a drop in popularity when WWI broke out. Women involved with the labor

movement — those who called for more and stronger unions, helped to organize unions and even walked the picket lines with striking workers — became less popular. These activities were seen as unbefitting for women and as inspired by political, rather than charitable, motivations.

Although settlement houses still offered the same basic services that they always had, when the popularity of the leaders diminished, the romance of the movement waned, and with it, the financial support.

These factors contributed to the decline of the settlement house movement in the mid-20th century. But settlement houses never did die. In the US and Canada, they evolved into “neighborhood centers” and “community services” and are now smaller, staffed by professionals who don't reside on site. The services offered have changed with their neighborhoods and the realities of small budgets, but many of these centers trace their heritage to a settlement house that never closed. Toynbee Hall — the place that started it all — is still there, serving a new generation of needy Londoners.

In the US, settlement house women left a legacy of change in social attitudes, social programs and government regulations. In other countries, settlement houses also had a positive influence on social policy, but the social reforms of the 20th century are not as clearly attributable to the movement or the women who served in it. But regardless of their impact on government regulations and social attitudes, the settlement house women affected their communities in concrete, positive ways.

