

Clara Spence: New York's Adoption Pioneer

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Born in Albany, New York, in 1859, Clara Spence was a member of the new middle class. She graduated from Boston University's School of Oratory in 1879, after which she attended London University, where she honed her acting skills. She came to New York City originally aspiring to be an actress but, upon the death of her mother in 1883, she shifted her talents to teaching at private schools for girls. In 1892 she founded her own school in a brownstone at 6 West Forty-eighth Street. It was in this school that Clara Spence began a nursery for abandoned babies.

The treatment of orphans before the 1890s followed a dreary route from institutional care to indentured service or, in the case of the thousands of children in Charles Loring Brace's orphan trains, relocation to families hundreds of miles from their homes. There, as Marilyn Holt notes in her book, *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America*, they were often valued for their labor potential rather than accepted as members of the family.¹ In her study of the history of child custody in the United States, Mary Ann Mason corroborates this fact when she says that "labor was still the main attraction for prospective families in the early days of placing out."² Clara Spence offered adoption as an alternative to institutionalization or relocation. Adoption, which we now take for granted, was an anomaly at a time when to adopt a non-relative was considered a brave and bizarre act, because of genetic uncertainty and social stigma. Clara Spence dedicated herself to the cause of abandoned infants and introduced her students to adoption as a new and fulfilling form of social work.

1. Marilyn Irvin Holt, *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out In America* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 3.

2. Mary Ann Mason, *From Father's Property to Children's Rights: The History of Child Custody in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 109.

However, it was her personal involvement that inspired her students, who witnessed the transformation of babies who came from institutions and were “built up” for adoption on the top floor of her school. They were also aware of Clara Spence’s adoption of two children of her own in 1909 and 1915. As a result, in 1915, the alumnae of the school opened the Spence Alumnae Society nursery through which several hundred babies were placed in adoptive homes. In 1921 Clara Spence brought thirteen children from Great Britain to the United States to be adopted into American families, anticipating what has today become a vast network of international adoption. By her willingness to defy public opinion and risk social ostracism, Clara Spence not only managed to make adoption an accepted practice, but one that became the method of choice for hundreds of families. It was largely because of her work and influence that New York became recognized as a leader in child welfare reform and adoption in particular.

As historian Steven Mintz notes in *Huck’s Raft*, his work on the history of American childhood, attitudes toward children and their rearing have gone through many configurations since colonial times. The period during which Clara Spence exercised her greatest influence was between 1890 and 1920—generally accepted as the high watermark of progressivism. In his book, *Children in Urban Society: Juvenile Delinquency in Nineteenth-Century America*, Joseph Hawes observes that, although Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* had appeared in 1859, only in the latter part of the century did social reformers seize upon his theory of evolution and the role of environment.³ The Progressive Era saw the child as a means of hope and opportunity for world betterment, and regarded childhood with new respect and as a subject of intense study. As Mintz says, the child was “put under a magnifying glass.”⁴ What observers thought they found as they peered through the glass was a “recapitulation” of human development from savagery to civilization.⁵ If that was truly the case, then it followed that the child could act as a predictor of the future path of the human race. As

3. Joseph M. Hawes, *Children in Urban Society: Juvenile Delinquency in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 110, 114, 198–200.

4. Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 185–99.

5. Mintz, 190.

one observer noted in 1904, "The child [is] the tiny prophecy of future possibilities."⁶ The same year, psychologist and Clark University professor G. Stanley Hall announced that "we have found the only magnet in the universe that points steadfastly to the undiscovered pole of human destiny."⁷ Sigmund Freud seemed to confirm this theory when he presented a series of lectures at Clark University in 1909 in which he stated: "[T]here arises out of the child, with its peculiar gifts and tendencies, the so-called normal man."⁸ By emphasizing that it was the child's response to life around him that was the seedbed for his adult behavior, Freud made the child, rather than the adult, the focus of attention.

It was not enough to applaud the child, however; this new insight needed to be put to some practical use. John Dewey, whose daughter went to Miss Spence's School, saw the child as the vehicle for implementing social reform by inculcating the student with an altruistic way of thinking, and "saturating him with the spirit of service."⁹ A contemporary of Dewey, Clara Spence acknowledged that "To-day the prevailing feeling is that it is hard, almost impossible to reform adults, that it is more intelligent to begin with the children of our generation."¹⁰ Belief in the child's role as social reformer greatly enhanced the importance of children, prompting Henry James to note in 1907: "Children throughout the United States are an immense matter, are almost the greatest matter of all."¹¹

The following pages tell of the evolution from the harsh methods employed in dealing with hapless, often unwanted, infants to a more humane treatment resulting from a recognition of their worth and value to society. The acceptance of adoption and the role that Clara Spence played in implementing that goal is the subject of this article.

6. William J. Shearer, *The Management and Training of Children* (New York: Richardson Smith, 1904), 13.

7. G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York: D. Appleton, 1904), 2: 647.

8. Sigmund Freud, "The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis," lecture 3, Clark University, reprinted in Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud* (Chicago, Ill.: William Benton, 1952) 12.

9. John Dewey, *The School and Society*, lecture 1, "The School and Social Progress," quoted in Martin Dworkin, ed., *Dewey on Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1959) 49.

10. Clara Spence, "Talk on Adoption," July 1, 1921, Spence School Archives.

11. Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 120.

INSTITUTIONAL CARE OF INFANTS IN NEW YORK

In the early part of the twentieth century, the usual options available to destitute or unwed mothers were abandonment, abortion, or infanticide. Adoption of a non-relative was almost unknown. Abortion was a dangerous and often life-threatening measure. Mothers committed infanticide by suffocation, strangulation, drowning, or exposure. Abandonment seemed the safest solution for both mother and child. Many abandoned infants were sent to orphanages, but older children were left to roam the streets. Charles Loring Brace's Children's Aid Society placed over twenty thousand children in homes out of New York City alone in the twenty years after it was founded.¹²

The local orphanages were overcrowded and the New York City Department of Charities sent the overflow to the Idiots and Children's Hospital on Randall's Island in the East River, where abandoned infants, if they survived at all, were thrown in with derelicts, drunks, and the diseased, and where, not surprisingly, the mortality rate was as high as 95 percent.¹³

Public awareness of the problem increased through the efforts of such organizations as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the election of reform Mayor Seth Low in 1901, and the subsequent creation of the Division of Child Hygiene under the direction of Dr. Josephine Baker.¹⁴ In 1905 the Department of Charities closed the Children's Hospital on Randall's Island and henceforth the New York Infant Asylum absorbed the children formerly sent there. By 1907, the asylum cared for over two thousand inmates annually.¹⁵

Located in Manhattan on Amsterdam Avenue at the northeast corner of Sixty-first Street, the Infant Asylum was supported by both public and private funds. Unlike the Children's Aid Society, the Infant Asylum did indenture its children.¹⁶ The City of New York provided approxi-

12. Stephen B. Presser, "Historical Background of the American Law of Adoption," *Journal of Family Law*, vol. 11 (1971-72): 474.

13. Henry Dwight Chapin, M.D., *Heredity and Child Culture* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1922) 170.

14. John Duffy, *A History of Public Health in New York City 1866-1966* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1974), 2: 260.

15. New York Infant Asylum, 35th and 36th Annual Reports, 1905-1907, New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center Archives, 31.

16. New York Infant Asylum, Adoption Records, 1873-1882, vol. 1, 87D, New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center Archives.

mately half of the budget, with the remainder coming from private contributions, investment, and donations of goods and services from local merchants and private individuals. The board of managers consisted of prominent men of wealth and social standing who also had a sense of civic responsibility. The mayor of the city, the president of the board of aldermen, the commissioner of public charities, and the police commissioner were *ex officio* members. Although no women were represented on the board, there was a ladies' committee that, in addition to arranging for holiday festivities, sent its various members on weekly inspection tours of the asylum, which, as one of its members noted "always results in a favorable report. . . ."¹⁷ This comment was justified in that the staff of the asylum was as experienced and well-trained as the standards of the day permitted.

But no hospital or orphanage, no matter how well managed, could provide the main ingredient necessary for a happy, healthy child—mothering. Institutionalized infants with large heads, extended abdomens, and skeletal bodies, weighing a mere eight pounds at eight months, confirmed the fact that the lack of emotional nurturing negated the benefits of even the most hygienic conditions or nutritious diet.¹⁸ In 1907 the highest number of infant deaths at the New York Infant Asylum was caused by marasmus—the progressive emaciation due to the inability of the child to properly assimilate nutrition.¹⁹ It was not that nutrition was unavailable. It was that the nurturing required for the proper absorption of nutrients was absent.

GOVERNMENTAL OVERSIGHT OF ADOPTION

In many ways it was considerably easier to adopt a child a century ago than it is today. The 1873 law enacted by New York State defined adoption as "the legal act whereby an adult person takes a minor into the relation of child, and thereby acquires the rights and incurs the responsibilities of parent in respect to such minor."²⁰ This simple,

17. New York Infant Asylum Annual Report (1907), 30.

18. Henry Dwight Chapin, M.D., "The Proper Management of Foundlings and Neglected Infants," speech before the New York Academy of Medicine, January 12, 1911, *Medical Record*, February 18, 1911 (William Wood, 1911), 285. New York Academy of Medicine Archives.

19. New York Infant Asylum Annual Report (1907), 19.

20. Laws of New York, Ninety-sixth Session, chap. 830, section 1.

straightforward statement is the first mention of adoption in the New York State statutes. The procedure for adoption was handled by the court in which the adopting parent, the child to be adopted, and all others whose consent was necessary were to appear before a judge who made the final determination “if satisfied that the moral and temporal interests of the child will be promoted by the adoption.”²¹

EUGENICS AND THE NATURE VS. NURTURE CONTROVERSY

Probably the most difficult challenge that anyone who was working in the field of adoption confronted during this period was the ideological debate over the influence of biological inheritance. In 1865 the Austrian botanist Gregor Mendel discovered that it is possible for physical traits to be passed down from one generation to another. The assertion that organisms developed according to “elements” or genes inherent in their own physical makeup posed a serious challenge to those who subscribed to the efficacy of environmental forces. It was a rare person who could see that the development of human life could be the result of a combination of both the environment and genetic inheritance.

The major premise of the Progressive Movement was the possibility of improving life for the present and future generations. Once the science of genetics had been established it was a short step to the theory of eugenics—or biological engineering—as a means of controlling the quality of the individuals who inhabit the earth.²² In 1883 Francis Galton, an Englishman, coined the word “eugenics” which he created from the Greek root “good in birth.”²³ Impatient with his cousin Charles Darwin’s idea of natural selection, Galton proposed that the evolutionary process could be speeded up by genetic engineering through such methods as arranged marriage and segregation of the “unfit.”²⁴ Galton’s influence reached its peak in America between 1900

21. *Ibid.*, section 9.

22. Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 4, 22, 32, 55; Nicholas Wright Gillham, *A Life of Sir Francis Galton: From African Exploration to the Birth of Eugenics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 357.

23. Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), preface: ix.

24. Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 42. The subject of eugenics is covered in

and 1919. It was not long before well-meaning professionals in science, education, social work, and philanthropy rushed to the conclusion that heredity contained the answer to solving the world's economic and social ills. It was believed that by suppressing the "less fit" elements of society and encouraging the "fit," the whole cultural and social climate of a nation could be improved. Articles on eugenics, bearing such titles as "100 Superfine Babies" and "Parenthood and Race Culture" proliferated in many of the scientific and popular journals of the day, rising in number from 27 between 1905 and 1909 to 122 between 1910 and 1914.²⁵ Even the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, under the heading of "Civilization," advocated "the organic betterment of the race through wise application of the laws of heredity."²⁶

President emeritus of Harvard University Charles W. Eliot and Stanford University chancellor David Starr Jordan were proponents of eugenics, and both attended the First International Eugenics Conference held in London in 1912.²⁷ Harvard was only one of many colleges and universities to offer courses on the subject. Others included Columbia, Cornell, Brown, Wisconsin, Northwestern, and the University of California at Berkeley.²⁸ Bryn Mawr, the prestigious woman's college, had a respected woman geneticist, Nettie Stevens, on its faculty, and offered a course on "Heredity and Eugenics" in its 1912 bulletin. The course description stated: "Our present knowledge of human heredity will be discussed in its relation to eugenic marriages and the future of the race and nation." The college's president, M. Carey Thomas, wrote in a letter that "there is a very great interest in eugenics among our students."²⁹

The proponents of the eugenics movement equated the qualities of "good stock" with middle- and upper-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, who were encouraged to have larger families. Theodore Roosevelt expressed the fear of many prominent people that white,

depth in chapter 2 of Degler's book, 32–55.

25. Anna Lorraine Guthrie, ed., *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature Cumulated 1905, and 1910–1914* (Minneapolis, Minn.: H. W. Wilson, 1914) 742–43 and 865–67.

26. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th edition, 1910–11, 6, quoted in Kevles, 63.

27. Gillham, *Life of Sir Francis Galton*, 345.

28. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 69.

29. M. Carey Thomas, *Official Papers*, Letterbook 50, p. 181.

Anglo-Saxons would become extinct if the birthrate among that group did not increase, and the term “race suicide” was first used in 1901.³⁰ In their study of the history of prejudice, *Typecasting: On the Arts and Sciences of Human Inequality*, Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen note that the surge of immigrants arriving on America’s shores from southern and eastern Europe and their relatively higher birthrate than that of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants “was seen as a mounting calamity”³¹ among members of the upper and middle classes, who rushed to form genealogical societies. An article in the *New York Herald* for May 19, 1895, noted that “the libraries are haunted by persons engaged in tracing family lines and resurrecting coats of arms.” The article continues, “There has been a wonderful awakening of interest in the question of what blood flows in our veins.”³²

One of Galton’s major and best-known supporters in the United States was the biologist Charles B. Davenport. Davenport was the director of the biological laboratory in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Unable to use live human beings for research, Davenport traced family histories by soliciting information on thousands of genealogical forms that he mailed to medical, mental, and penal institutions. It was when a young biologist, Harry Laughlin, joined the Cold Spring Harbor group and became superintendent of the Eugenics Record Office in 1910 that simple record-keeping and genealogy took on a darker meaning. As Harry Bruinius notes in his book on the history of forced sterilization, “Harry emphasized the ‘vicious elements’ of civilization rather than the wellborn.”³³ Both he and Davenport interpreted the finding of their surveys to show that moral as well as physical characteristics were inherited. In their view, pauperism was the result of laziness, and prostitution was caused not by economic necessity but by “innate eroticism.” Hence, social ills, they concluded, were the result of inherited factors.³⁴ American eugenicists exaggerated the alleged dangers of perpetuating

30. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 74.

31. Elizabeth Ewen and Stuart Ewen, *Typecasting: On the Arts and Sciences of Human Inequality, A History of Dominant Ideas* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 281–83.

32. *New York Genealogical and Biographical Society Newsletter*, Fall 2000: 67.

33. Harry Bruinius, *Better for All the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and the Quest for Racial Purity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 188.

34. Kevles, *In The Name of Eugenics*, 4, 53, 71.

what one alarmist characterized as “vicious blood.”³⁵ Feeble-mindedness became an obsessive concern and was fostered by the results of studies made at those institutions where criminals, paupers, and “wayward” girls were most likely to be incarcerated.

In 1904 Alfred Binet, a Frenchman, devised a system for measuring intelligence, and by 1908 the tests were introduced into American scientific circles. Using Binet's methods, Dr. Henry H. Goddard, director of research at the Training School for Backward and Feeble-minded Children in Vineland, New Jersey, published a study in 1912 titled *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-mindedness*, that became a benchmark for studies on the subject and corroborated what biologists like Davenport and Laughlin had been preaching all along: that feeble-mindedness was indeed hereditary, not only from one generation to the next, but even into the third and fourth. Such prognostications shot fear through the hearts of Americans who were grappling with the social ills created by an expanding population. Goddard, who is credited with creating the word “moron,” and many otherwise intelligent and respectable citizens, including Theodore Roosevelt, believed that the only sensible solution was sterilization or segregation of the individuals until they were too old to reproduce. By 1915, twelve states had sterilization laws.³⁶ At the same time, the biologists and sociologists who studied the matter tended to come from the white middle class, and almost all of them were native-born Americans of Anglo-Saxon Protestant heritage.³⁷

Adoption, needless to say, was out of the question, for as Henry Goddard asked in an article in 1911, what family would be so “short-sighted [as] to take into its midst a child whose pedigree is absolutely unknown.”³⁸ It was against this background that the early proponents of adoption were forced to contend. Nevertheless, it was just that cause to which Clara Spence dedicated the major portion of her life.

35. Elof Axel Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (Woodbury, N.Y.: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001), 9; Franklin H. Giddings, Introduction to Richard Louis Dugdale, *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity* (New York: Putnam, 1910.), v.

36. Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1992), 162.

37. Hamilton Cravens, *The Triumph of Evolution: American Scientists and the Heredity-Environment Controversy, 1900-1941* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 54.

38. Henry H. Goddard, “Wanted: A Child to Adopt,” *The Survey*, October 14, 1911: 1003-06.

CLARA SPENCE'S DAUGHTER

In January 1909 the White House Conference on Dependent Children adopted fourteen resolutions all aimed at replacing the institutional method of child care with home care. The next month Clara Spence personally adopted a one-year-old girl from the Children's Aid Society. The judge had no objection to her application even though she was a single parent nearing the age of fifty.³⁹ The adoption of the little girl who had been abandoned in a hallway on Madison Avenue would confirm her belief in the power of environment over genetics. Rather than leaving her to languish in an orphanage, she would see that, as her daughter, she would be provided with the finest material, educational, and cultural resources available. Equally important to her was the fact that Eliza was not burdened by any genetic or social history. She was what Edith Wharton describes in her story, "The Mission of Jane," a "mere dateless fragment of humanity projected against a background of conjecture."⁴⁰ Had Clara Spence not adopted her, it is very likely that the little girl would have been sent out west on one of the orphan trains.

Six years later, in 1915, Clara Spence adopted a little boy. Her partner, Charlotte Baker, adopted a girl in 1911 and a boy in 1914, completing what was one of the first single-sex adoption families. The progressive educator Elisabeth Irwin, who founded The Little Red School House on East Sixteenth Street, and her partner, Katharine Anthony, also adopted two children.⁴¹

CLARA SPENCE'S NURSERY

By 1909, the enrollment at Miss Spence's School had increased to such a size that it became necessary to expand the facilities. Through the good offices of the railroad financier John Stewart Kennedy, Clara Spence was able to raise a hundred thousand dollars and buy two adjoining houses at 26 and 30 West Fifty-fifth Street. It was to the top

39. Children's Aid Society letter to author, July 25, 1986.

40. Edith Wharton, "The Mission of Jane," in John Angus Burrell and Bennett A. Cerf, eds., *An Anthology of Famous American Stories* (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1953), 482.

41. Obituary for Elisabeth Irwin, *New York Times*, Oct. 17, 1942.

floor of the first building that many institutionalized babies went to be "built up" for adoption.

One afternoon a boarding student returning to her bedroom at the school found a small, blanketed bundle in her bed. As she recounted years later, the baby "if you could call that wizened little fact that lay among the covers a baby, [had] skin like a transparent film over the tiny skull; the fold of the cheeks hung loose and soft and wrinkled without firmness of flesh underneath." The student "drew back in instinctive revulsion as a claw-like hand batted the air aimlessly," and when the infant gave a feeble wail the girl fled, only to be intercepted by the housekeeper. She explained that this little mite of humanity had just arrived from the hospital, which had neither the time nor the personnel to give her the special care she needed and without which she would not survive.⁴²

The infant was only one of the many tiny babies who spent their earliest days of life on the top floor of Miss Spence's School until permanent homes could be found for them. Almost all were victims of institutional care. The scrawny, emaciated figures resembled newborn birds, some with skin so thin that they had to be turned periodically to avoid bruising. Their digestive systems often could not hold more than a few drops of milk at a time, and they had to be fed with an eyedropper.⁴³

No more than eight babies were to be cared for at one time, and they flourished under the personal, loving care of the nursery staff. The students at Miss Spence's School loved seeing the babies when they were brought down from the nursery into the classrooms, and "it was no unusual sight to go into Miss Spence's study and see a baby in a clothes basket peacefully sleeping there."⁴⁴ One story, which cannot be verified but illustrates the point clearly, involved a couple who visited the school in the hope of walking out with a baby in their arms. Clara Spence produced a little waif recently arrived from an institution. The infant had not had time to benefit from the "building up" process and was still suffering from institutional deprivation. The couple left hastily and

42. Carol Spence Prentice, *An Adopted Child Looks at Adoption* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1940), 3.

43. *Ibid.*, 50.

44. Charlotte S. Baker, "Impressions of Forty Years," *Spring Bulletin* (1948): 28, Spence School Archives.

flustered without the baby. When the couple returned some weeks later, Miss Spence presented the unsuspecting parents with the very child they had previously rejected. This time, however, they did walk out with it in their arms, never knowing the truth.⁴⁵

The information recorded in adoption files was scanty and rarely, if ever, contained genetic information. However, sometimes they did identify one of the parents and might also indicate whether the child had been born out of wedlock. It was common practice to alter such records.⁴⁶ Clara Spence did more than alter them. She burned them. One of her students recalls seeing her “coming up the basement stairs from the furnace room with a triumphant gleam in her eye. ‘I’ve just burned all the papers about little Stanley or James,’ she would say. ‘Nobody can ever know anything about his history now. His secret dies with me.’ And it did. Moreover, the adopting parents were told only what [she] wished them to know.”⁴⁷ The children’s new identities would be created from the loving and wholesome environments into which she would send them. No traces of their genetic pasts were to remain. Their lives would begin anew with a tabula rasa on which could be written whatever the new parents chose. Like many of her contemporary progressives, Clara Spence believed that it was the future, with its promise of hope, not the past that was important. She would have disposed of Davenport’s and Laughlin’s genetic histories with equal fervor. Five years later, the biologist Herbert William Conn, who ironically was the predecessor to Davenport at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, wrote a book in which he stated: “Progress in mankind may be brought about by deliberate attention, by intelligent guiding of events, by a conscious modifying and controlling of the environment, and by the improvement of the education imparted to the growing minds of the children, so that each generation may be in a little better position than the last.”⁴⁸

45. Prentice, *Adopted Child*, 54–55.

46. E. Wayne Carp, *Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 49.

47. Prentice, *Adopted Child*, 57.

48. Herbert William Conn, *Social Heredity and Social Evolution: The Other Side of Eugenics* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1914), 319.

MISS SPENCE'S SCHOOL SOCIETY

An important part of Clara Spence's mission was to imbue her students with a sense of service. As she said in the school's first commencement speech in 1898: "No matter how different your individual circumstances may be in the future . . . you all these years have been preparing for service. If the school has been faithful to its charge, each one of you should have an earnest desire to help others."⁴⁹ Moreover, she continually exhorted her students to understand that because of the unusual advantages they had received in their environment, it was their "special duty and privilege" to do so. Many of the early graduates of Miss Spence's School had been engaged in social work since 1898 through their activity with tubercular children at the Henrietta Industrial Home for Crippled Children. In 1911 they applied for, and were officially granted, incorporation as Miss Spence's School Society by the New York State Board of Charities.⁵⁰ In 1915, however, they learned that their work was being taken over by the various school districts, and that it was time to look for another avenue of social service. The obvious solution was right within the school itself.

A regular monthly meeting of the directors of the Society was held in the parlor of the school at 26 West Fifty-fifth Street at ten o'clock in the morning of Thursday, February 4, 1915. The members present discussed the prospect of enlarging the scope of the Society's work, of which children were still to be the focus. By October of that year, they had decided to pursue the course of child adoption. That such a decision was made is not surprising considering the fact that as students they had frequently seen babies brought down from the nursery into the classroom and were well aware of Miss Spence's adoption work. Their decision was a natural progression, and in October 1915, they filed an amendment to the certificate of incorporation to include as its purpose:

The care, boarding and keeping of orphan, pauper, destitute,
friendless or nursing children until such children are placed out,

49. Clara Spence, Commencement Speech, 1898, Spence School Archives.

50. Certificate of Incorporation, New York State Board of Charities, Albany, April 12, 1911, Spence-Chapin Archives.

indentured or adopted or are returned to the sources whence obtained or placed under the care of some other society, association or institution.⁵¹

It was a daring undertaking considering the fact that none of the members had any experience in social work, nursing, or child care, other than what they themselves had experienced as children or mothers. By November, they had leased a suitable house for the nursery at 232 East Sixty-second Street, and the first meeting was held there in January 1916. The president was Mrs. Lyman Beecher Stowe, formerly Hilda R. Smith, Class of 1902. The balance in the treasury was \$7,113.77, and with that amount they paid the rent and utilities, hired a trained nurse at a hundred dollars a month, a cleaning woman at twenty-five dollars a month, a man to maintain the furnace at nine dollars a month, and the iceman who filled the icebox that soon proved to be inadequate for the needed supply of milk. They also had the expense of paying for medicines and furnishing the house with cribs and other nursery paraphernalia. Dr. Charles Kerley agreed to be a consulting physician and a member of the advisory board. Both he and the other consulting physician, Dr. Davenport West, waived the two-dollar-per-visit fee.⁵² The New York State Charities Aid Association acted in an advisory capacity as well as being a model.

From the outset, the board made the decision to limit the number of babies cared for at any one time to eight, that being the number that the pediatrician, Dr. Henry Dwight Chapin, had determined to be the maximum number that would allow for sufficient personal attention to each child.⁵³ The board members set up three working committees: Child Finding, Child Caring, and Child Placing, all headed by alumnae of Miss Spence's School. By April, the chairman of the Child Placing Committee could report that five children had been placed, and that there were twenty-five families on the waiting list for adopting chil-

51. Amended Certificate of Incorporation of Miss Spence's School Society, October 1, 1915, Spence-Chapin Archives.

52. Clara Spence to Emilie Kellogg, December 15, 1915, West Collection.

53. Spence School Society Minutes, June 29, 1916, Spence-Chapin Archives. Coincidentally, Dr. Chapin and his wife, Alice, bought a house at 444 West Twenty-second Street for their nursery the same year. Elizabeth Taylor Russell, "The Story of Spence-Chapin," Spence School Archives, Box 39, file 1.

dren.⁵⁴ Although adopting parents preferred girls to boys and the girls had to be “golden haired and blue-eyed,”⁵⁵ nevertheless, in 1922, one year before Clara Spence died, The Spence Alumnae Society received its first African-American applicant, and when a satellite branch in Harlem was opened, it became the first voluntary all-African-American adoption and foster care agency in New York State.⁵⁶

Clara Spence was very much involved in the Society's activities. She not only attended meetings on occasion, she also provided babies from her own sources. In the spring of 1917, Miss Spence spoke to the board members, who were still all alumnae of her school, about their work:

First, I want to congratulate you on the work for little children you have accomplished during the last year. It is splendid and I am sure you all feel it to be worth while. Now the aim of this Society is to make the life of a homeless little baby fuller and richer, and the life of a lonely, childless home fuller and richer, and less selfish. That is its beneficent aim. Every narrow, personal wish should be subordinate to that blessed beneficent aim for which your Society stands.

In all these matters we need a broad view, a wide horizon. . . . To sink one's personal opinion for the sake of the welfare of the child, for its future, is not only our duty, but should be our pleasure and privilege.⁵⁷

After only one year of operation, the Society had placed twenty-three babies and had sixty-seven prospective parents on the waiting list, with applications coming in from Maine, Virginia, Minnesota, Georgia, and Hawaii.⁵⁸ In the meantime, Clara Spence continued to carry on her own adoption work from the nursery at the school. On January 4, 1917,

54. Spence School Society Minutes, February 2, 1916; April 6, 1916, Spence-Chapin Archives.

55. Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 193; Henry Dwight Chapin, “Babies Wanted,” *Review of Reviews*, August 1928.

56. Andrew Billingsley and Jeanne M. Giovannoni, *Children of the Storm: Black Children and American Child Welfare* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 184.

57. Clara Spence, Informal Talk Given at the House of the Spence Alumnae Society, March 1, 1917, Spence School Archives, Box 6, folder 11.

58. Spence Alumnae Society Minutes, November 2, 1916; Executive Committee Minutes, January 4, 1917, Spence-Chapin Archives.

she telephoned the Society to report that she had just placed her ninety-ninth baby.⁵⁹

The Spence Alumnae Society was not the only organization involved in adoption. Many women in New York City who possessed the financial means necessary to obtain suitable quarters and the services of a nurse and staff, set up similar nurseries. Louise Waterman Wise, whose work paralleled that of the Spence Alumnae Society, but was limited to placing Jewish children, also established a nursery, and Dr. Henry Dwight Chapin and his wife, Alice, began a similar nursery in their home.⁶⁰ Another unidentified woman offered her house to the New-York Infant Asylum in 1908 for use as a nursery accommodating eighteen children,⁶¹ and other women began to transform cottages on their country estates for the purpose of "fitting up babies for adoption."⁶²

The increased interest in children also raised the status of motherhood to a position of importance. Respect for mothers reached its peak in the early 1900s and culminated in the national recognition of Mother's Day in 1915. A new literary market aimed at mothers and dealing with the subject of child care and child development sprang up, accompanied by new magazines specifically addressed to mothers, such as *The American Mother* and *The Mother's Journal*. Organizations that dealt with the subject of mothering were created as well. One, the School of Mothercraft, in New York City, invited the public to a lecture entitled "Mothercraft in Education," which was to be followed by the singing of "a suite of national lullabies."⁶³ The pediatrician Emmett Holt's manual on *The Care and Feeding of Children* became the bible of all literate mothers.⁶⁴ Ironically, the interest in motherhood coincided with an increase in the number of middle- and upper-class women who were putting off childbearing in order to pursue their education, a career, or simply a life of leisure. Both birth control information, which was avail-

59. Spence Alumnae Society Executive Committee Minutes, January 4, 1917, Spence-Chapin Archives.

60. The Spence and Chapin nurseries merged in 1943 and the organization is known today as Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children.

61. New-York Infant Asylum, Annual Report (1908).

62. *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 1921, sec. 7, p. 6: 2.

63. Invitation from the School of Mothercraft to Dean Virginia Gildersleeve, Barnard College Archives.

64. Mintz, 191.

able in most women's magazines, and private abortion⁶⁵ enabled them to delay pregnancy until it was too late and, as C. C. Carstens, Director of the Child Welfare League of America explained, "she realizes that there is something missing in her home. Then she turns to adoption as the easiest way out."⁶⁶ It was these wealthy, white women who came to Clara Spence for help in adopting, and it was her promotion of adoption to a segment of society that had previously shunned it that was her unique contribution. The acceptance of adoption by these women also reflected what Viviana Zelizer points out in her book, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, that no longer was the child's economic worth a matter of importance but rather it was replaced by the emotional and sentimental value of the child to the mother.⁶⁷

CHILD WELFARE BECOMES AN INTERNATIONAL MATTER

The First World War and the resulting orphan population had given an international aspect to the welfare of the child. In 1919, at the invitation of Julia Lathrop, the director of the Children's Bureau, representatives from Serbia, France, England, Italy, Belgium, and Japan traveled to Washington, D.C., where they exchanged information on a variety of child welfare topics ranging from the care and education of expectant mothers, to provision for the health of the child following its birth. Although England was far ahead of the United States in pre- and post-natal care, in the area of adoption the United States was far ahead of Great Britain, which did not have any legal provision for adoption at all. Although interest in adoption had increased in Great Britain after 1914, it was hampered by British attitudes toward primogeniture and the blood line. In the words of one British commentator, writing for the *Contemporary Review*, "There is a general vague impression that adoption does not do. Adopt a brother's orphan or a little destitute cousin and the world will approve. . . . After all, says the world, it is your own flesh

65. See George B. Mangold, *Children Born Out of Wedlock: A Sociological Study of Illegitimacy* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1921), 3: 81; James C. Mohr, *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy, 1800-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 46. Abortion became such a frequently used technique that a movie made in 1916—*Where Are My Children?*—dealt with the subject of unborn babies.

66. Christian Carl Carstens interview, *New York Times*, Jan. 27, 1922, 13:2.

67. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child*, 171.

and blood. . . . If you must adopt a child, you should do as the Hindus and see that it is your own caste."⁶⁸

In an attempt to initiate cooperation between the two countries, the Spence Alumnae Society, formerly known as Miss Spence's School Society, authorized at its January meeting in 1919, the sending of its reports and information concerning the scope of its work to the National Child Placing Association of Great Britain.⁶⁹ The creation of a committee to work out an affiliation between the Spence Alumnae Society in establishing a nursery such as theirs in London and the ability to bring babies from Great Britain for placement in the United States was decided upon at the April meeting in 1920.⁷⁰ Clara Spence agreed to be chairman and, with her backing, the British-American Adoption Committee was established. On the morning of Saturday, May 14, 1921, thirteen British babies left Southampton, England, on board the Cunard liner *Aquitania*, bound for the United States, where they would be adopted into American families. In the only known interview that Clara Spence ever gave, she told a *New York Times* reporter:

I am glad to tell of the work of our committee in the hope that little children may be benefited. These little ones, who form the advance party, are in good health and will be placed in homes in this country where they will be happy and have a chance to become useful citizens. They will go into homes where there are no children and where they will have every opportunity and, we are confident, every happiness.⁷¹

Even before the ship had docked in New York Harbor, word of the arrival of the babies had spread across the country, and telephone calls from Chicago and Boston were already flooding the wires. The next morning a headline on the front page of the *New York Times* announced a "Clamor to Adopt Pilgrim Babies."

68. J. H. Macnair, "Case for Adoption," *Contemporary Review*, London, May 1914 (vol. 105): 704–11.

69. Spence Alumnae Society Minutes, January 20, 1919, Spence-Chapin Archives.

70. Spence Alumnae Society Minutes, April 1, 1920, Spence-Chapin Archives.

71. *New York Times*, May 13, 1921, 2:8.

Later that spring, Clara Spence followed up the success of the *Aquitania* undertaking by going to London to give a talk at the home of an alumna of the school who was the daughter of the United States Ambassador, James Whitelaw Reid. In her talk she promoted the virtues of adoption by saying:

It is not only a sane and sensible thing that the homeless child should go into the childless home, but there is no philanthropic work comparable with this in hope. What imagination and faith, even romance are awakened, as one thinks what a difference it will make to hundreds of lives in the future, because this child, instead of being left in a degrading environment, or turned into a dull, mechanical purposeless non-entity housed in an institution, has been given a loving Father and Mother. Let us be able to say to every child who comes handicapped into the world, "Ye shall no longer carry the spirit of bondage," but ye have received the spirit of Adoption.⁷²

A few months prior to her death in 1923, an editorial in the *New York Times* noted that "babies are being taken into homes in numbers and for reasons that mark a new era in the huge task of caring for parentless children."⁷³ Although she was not alone in the work, Clara Spence played a leadership role in the creation of that "new era."

CONCLUSION

Clara Spence achieved her work during what historian John Milton Cooper, Jr., calls the "pivotal decades: 1900–1920," when there were many people with socially progressive ideas. Some like Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, and Margaret Sanger approached the problem of the discrepancy between the rich and the poor from the bottom up. They personally went into the slums and worked with the problem first-hand. Clara Spence did not go into the slums. She chose to approach the problem from the top by preaching to the children of the richest New Yorkers the moral and ethical virtue of service so that they, in their

72. Clara Spence, Talk on Adoption at Lady Ward's, Spence School Archives, Box 6, folder 10.

73. *New York Times* quoted in *The Literary Digest*, April 14, 1923: 36.

adult life, would make a difference in improving the conditions of those less fortunate. Although many of her students went on to serve in their communities, the area for which they are best known is that of adoption and the creation of their nursery, which merged with that of Henry and Alice Chapin in 1943. Known today as Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children, the organization continues to serve the needs of children of all creeds, colors, and nationalities.