



Children in the courtyard of Hull House.
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Settlement House Movement

by Andrew Matzner

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Beginning in the late 1880s, the settlement house movement soon became an important part of the American urban landscape, and flourished up through the first half of the twentieth century. Settlement house workers were middle and upper class volunteers who moved into buildings in poor and working-class neighborhoods in order to advocate for improved social and work conditions, and to offer services not provided by the government.

Many of the settlement house volunteers were women. As Lillian Faderman has exhaustively documented, it is significant for glbtq history that a number of these women formed close, lasting relationships with one another while living and working in settlement houses. Indeed, their decisions to repudiate their social responsibilities as wives and mothers and instead find fulfillment in same-sex partnerships was indicative of the changing nature of women's place(s) in the sex/gender system at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States.

Origins

The American settlement house movement was influenced by British responses to urban poverty caused by the industrial revolution. In 1884 Canon Samuel Barnett established Toynbee Hall in London, with the idea that social reformers could more effectively address problems by actually living in the same location as the people they were serving.

Stanton Coit officially began the movement in the United States in 1886 by founding the Neighborhood Guild (later known as University Settlement) in New York City. Residing in settlement houses, which essentially acted as neighborhood centers, volunteers worked mainly with immigrants and the lower classes to help them achieve a better quality of life.

With a view to fostering upward mobility, their tasks included teaching adult education, offering Americanization and English classes, providing vocational training, developing various neighborhood clubs, and organizing recreation activities for both children and elderly adults. Settlement house workers also served as political advocates, drawing public attention to issues such as urban poverty and dangerous working conditions.

Transforming Roles for Women

In the late 1800s, gender relations between white middle- and upper-class men and women began to undergo major changes. With the advent of the early women's movement, suffrage campaigns, and new opportunities to enroll in colleges, more and more women were choosing to pursue interests and professional careers that led them away from marriage and out of the domestic sphere.

These "New Women," living independently of men, were able to form tightly knit communities that were centered around work (volunteer or paid), school, and political and social activism. Some of these women

developed strong emotional relationships with one another.

However, during this time period people generally did not conceptualize their sexuality as either heterosexual or homosexual, and even women who lived in close, monogamous lifelong partnerships (known as Boston marriages) did not necessarily think of themselves as "lesbians." Therefore, the question of whether the "New Women" engaged in sexual relationships with each other is open to debate.

It is difficult to know exactly how such women defined themselves, and what role, if any, homoerotic contact played in their relationships. At the very least, these women may be viewed as "women-identified," since they spent much of their lives in the company of other women.

The "New Women" were instrumental in fostering and expanding the settlement house movement in the United States. According to the prevalent discourse of the time, the involvement of women in social welfare was only natural, as it was believed that their "maternal instincts" made them more suitable than men to cure society's social ills.

This general view of middle- and upper-class women as non-sexual mothering beings, dedicated to the betterment of society apparently allowed partnerships such as Boston marriages to occur without public comment or censure. Indeed, one of the most important figures in the settlement house movement--and the "mother" of the modern social work profession--was Jane Addams, whose long-term relationships with female "companions" rarely received attention.

Jane Addams and Hull House

Jane Addams (1860-1935), who came from an upper-class background, was a pioneer of the social welfare movement, and helped to found both the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Addams' deep involvement in social justice and feminism, which included prolific writings on these issues, was ultimately recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

Addams was first motivated to open a settlement house while still a young woman. After graduating from Rockford Female College in 1888, Addams visited Europe with her close companion, Ellen Starr, who had been a fellow student at Rockford. During their travels, the two women were exposed to extreme poverty and urban decay. In London, the pair, interested in learning how British social welfare reformers were dealing with such problems, visited a settlement house called Toynbee Hall, where Oxford students not only worked, but also lived with the poor whom they were serving. Inspired, Addams and Starr returned to the United States, and in 1889 established Hull House in Chicago in an immigrant neighborhood.

Hull House offered a myriad of social services. For example, volunteers taught educational courses, provided child care for working mothers, offered kindergarten and vocational classes (long before either became commonplace), and cooked meals for the poor. At the same time, living in a settlement house provided them, as well as other female volunteers, with a space in which women were not bound by heterosexist obligations of marriage, child rearing, and domesticity. Such an environment gave women opportunities to explore both short and long term emotional and physical relationships with other women.

Working as partners at Hull House, Addams and Starr drew national attention by creating a blueprint for social change, and in the wake of their success, hundreds of settlement houses sprang up all over the country. Addams and Starr maintained their relationship for about fifteen years, until they drifted apart. In the mid-1890s, Addams began a romantic involvement with Mary Rozet Smith, a younger, wealthy woman who was a benefactor of Hull House. This partnership--viewed as a marriage by both women, according to Faderman--lasted more than forty years, until Smith passed away from pneumonia. Addams herself died a little over a year later.

Contemporary Legacies

Settlement house volunteers eventually became professional (that is, paid) social reform workers. Jane Addams in particular was highly influential in the development of the social work profession, which attracted mostly women. The settlement house movement continued to exist throughout the twentieth century, although as time passed social workers stopped living in the settlement houses themselves, and the name dropped out of use.

Today, the settlement house heritage lives on through institutions more popularly known as community or neighborhood centers (including local YMCA and YWCAs). Nevertheless, the goals of building community solidarity and providing local residents with much needed services have not changed. What does need to change, however, is the historical denial of the passionate, committed same-sex relationships that played such an important part in the lives of many American social welfare pioneers. It is only through the efforts of scholars such as Lillian Faderman that these issues are finally beginning to be addressed.

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