

Settlement Houses Sprouted in Response to Desperate Need (Part I)

A hundred years ago, Bethnal Green was one of the poorest districts in London. In 1879, a priest recorded in despair, "Bethnal Green! A howling wilderness; drunkenness in the back streets, fights in the squares; starvation in the alleys; pauperism rampant; religion nil." A penny pamphlet, "The Bitter Cry of Outcast London" described the condition of London's slums in stark detail and asked how the poor could be expected to live up the high moral standards of late Victorian times when they had to contend with so much.

The government policies of the times depended as much on an attitude of benign neglect as on crude systems of containment, such as the poorhouse. Industrialists championed social Darwinism - the survival of the fittest - and viewed attempts to aid the poor as corrupting and contaminating society. But there were some who were appalled at the terrible poverty they witnessed and repelled by the material ethos of society. In 1884, Cannon Samuel Augustus Barnett founded the original Settlement House, Toynbee Hall. That same year, a group of scholars from Keble College, Oxford launched Oxford House.

Thus the Settlement House, or Neighborhood House, was born, growing from a compassionate desire to aid the poor by settling amongst them. Henry Scott Holland, Canon of St. Paul's, exhorted his followers to demonstrate their religious beliefs with

social action declaring, "The more you believe in the incarnation, the more you care about drains!" The young gentry were urged to "Come and be the Squires of East London" and live amongst the poor to see that the laws were kept and social life enhanced.

Described as: "A neighborhood welfare institution generally in an urban slum area, where trained workers endeavour to improve social conditions particularly by providing community services and promoting neighborly co-operation,"¹ the

Settlement House has thrived since these early days and continues to play a substantial role in neighborhood life.

On the opposite side of the Atlantic, social work as a profession was in its infancy. The poor were dismissed as being extravagant, ignorant, slatternly and shiftless, prone to drunkenness and crime. Their only recourse was to charity, a movement which emphasized the role of the "friendly visitor" - who tended to force their own bourgeois ideals on their beneficiaries without attempting to understand them. They entered the neighborhood to work, and returned to the comforts of their own homes - with the result that the community never developed trust in the visitors or their efforts.

Jane Addams (1860-1935) became a spokesperson and architect for the Settlement House movement in America, and in the process, helped the social work profession come to terms with the forces that shaped and defined poverty, and to widen its comprehension of the poor and their lives.

In 1889, Jane Addams and her college classmate, Ella Gates Starr, visited Toynbee Hall and were impressed with its philosophy

and organization. Fired with the desire of creating a similar enterprise in the United States, they returned to the poor immigrant neighborhoods of Chicago and rented an old mansion belonging to the real-estate millionaire, Charles Hull. They moved into Hull House in the fall of the same year, with a dream of providing a center for the impoverished humanity around them.

Jane Addams was convinced that if she lived amongst the poor and struggled with them in their plight, she would grow to understand how she could best aid them. She wanted to create a center which would elicit a community spirit that worked to improve circumstances for all.

The charter of Hull House stated that its purpose was "To provide a center for higher civic and social life; to institute and maintain educational and philanthropic enterprises, and to investigate and improve conditions in the industrial districts of Chicago."

Jane Addams felt that the person at the bottom of the heap was the one who best understood the failures in the social structure as he had been most directly in contact with those failures and had suffered the most. She was convinced that if it were possible to provide decent housing, good schools and recreational and communal facilities, the human capacity for growth would respond.

She likened the economic and political system to a huge tapestry. If one were to pull a single thread in one of the woven tapestries that told elaborate stories of saints, soldiers and statesmen, one would see all the pieces move. Jane Addams helped define a fresh, holistic approach in the social work profession and engineered the success of one of the best loved settlement houses. (She also pioneered woman's suffrage and pacifist movements.)

Meanwhile, a woman who was to become her colleague and friend, Lillian Wald (1867-1940), was turning her back on a life of luxury and ease. Persisting against the prevailing trend to train as a nurse, she settled in the slums of the lower East side of Manhattan. Following the same line of reasoning as Jane Addams, she felt she had to fit into the neighborhood she was endeavouring to serve. She discovered the settlement house movement and the existence of the College Settlement at 95 Rivington Street (the women's settlement), and University Settlement on Eldridge Street (the men's), both inspired by Toynbee Hall and launched in 1886. Excited to find herself amongst like-minded men and women, Lillian Wald and a friend, Mary Brewster, joined the young women of the College Settlement and worked from this residence until they moved into their own space, an apartment on the top floor of a tenement at 27 Jefferson Street, where they served and nursed the poor for two years. Mr. Jacob Schiff, who had assisted them with funds, now looked for a house in which they could establish themselves on a more secure and effective basis. 265 Henry Street became "The House on Henry Street" or "Henry Street Settlement House," the most famous of all New York City's Settlement Houses. Its directive, in the words of Miss Wald, was "to help those with the fewest options to find a better way of life." Lillian Wald was to live



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At Henry Street in the 1930s



Lillian Wald

¹ The New Columbia Encyclopedia, 1975, Columbia University Press

and work there for forty years.

In 1893 the population of New York City was a million and a half, 75% of which were either new or first-generation immigrants. These people, who had been accustomed to gardens, light and air, found themselves huddled together in a writhing mass struggling with noise, misery and hopelessness. Above all, there was no one to instruct them on the ways of their new country. With 190,000 on 50 acres, the Lower East Side of Manhattan quickly became one of the worst slums in the world.

In the summer of 1893, the entire country plunged into a financial depression which rebounded hardest on the tenement dwellers. Factories closed down or went on part-time schedules and little East side shops were boarded up. Thousands were thrown out of work, with the East siders being the first to go.

Lillian Wald found herself being exposed to the grimmest lesson in economics; an over-rapid expansion had come to an abrupt halt and no provisions had been made to handle the inevitable calamity. Each day she accomplished whatever she could, working against an avalanche of want. From her work as a nurse, moving amongst the tenement dwellers to care and heal, grew "The Visiting Nurse Program." Responding to children's curiosity and energy, she sponsored innumerable clubs for all ages and purposes: Classes for mechanics, painting, sewing, cooking and housekeeping — classes to inform people how to shop and cope in their new land. She worked in the local schools to integrate education with the realities of life, and established a free "Penny Lunches" program.

Out of plays and pageants at The House sprouted "The Neighborhood Playhouse" (1915) which presented plays and trained actors and actresses. In the process it developed prestige and permanence. Growing out of these early beginnings, "The Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre" is a present day feature on East 54th Street, and is itself responsible for the careers of many successful performers, as well as for the creation of "The American Place Theatre," which is going into its fourth decade of presenting new plays by contemporary American playwrights.

When Lillian Wald moved to the East side in 1895, thousands of children were employed in deplorable conditions, children who never visited a classroom. Lillian Wald was responsible for "The Children's Bureau" and in 1902, "The Child Labor Committee of the Neighborhood Workers' Association" came into being.

In 1908 Miss Wald suggested that the Red Cross, chiefly identified with wartime activities, undertake a program of public health. As a result, this organization's new Department of Town and Country Nursing was formed to teach standards of health and sanitation in remote areas.

The house became a center for national causes as Lillian Wald mediated discussion for proponents of the Russian Revolution, launched a Pacifist Movement in response to World War I, a Women's Suffrage Movement (1920), and ongoing work helping women organize themselves to protect their jobs and improve their working conditions.

By 1909 there were 1,413 public health nurses registered in

the US. Three years later Lillian Wald was the first president and chairwoman of the National Organization for Public Health Nursing. By 1931 there were nearly ten thousand public health nurses, and their numbers have increased steadily ever since.

After 40 years of dedication, in 1933 Lillian Wald relinquished her position to Helen Hall, who was to guide Henry Street Settlement for the next 35 years. Innovation and assistance to the community continued unabated. A Credit Union to combat the loan shark racket in 1937; a Home Planning Workshop to help community members repair furniture and mend appliances, make clothes and mend shoes, one of the earliest programs in a public housing facility, and in 1946, Henry Street's Mental Hygiene Clinic, one of the first in the country, serving more than 500 people annually.

In 1972, the Urban Family Center was founded, one of the first transitional housing facilities for homeless families. Today it houses 100 families in individual apartments in six buildings. Each building has its own live-in social worker, and the participants are given job training and taught basic education as well as independent living skills. Ninety-five percent move on to permanent housing.

In 1993 Henry Street Settlement celebrated 100 years of service to the community.

Following the bank of the East River in an uptown direction, one arrives at the Upper

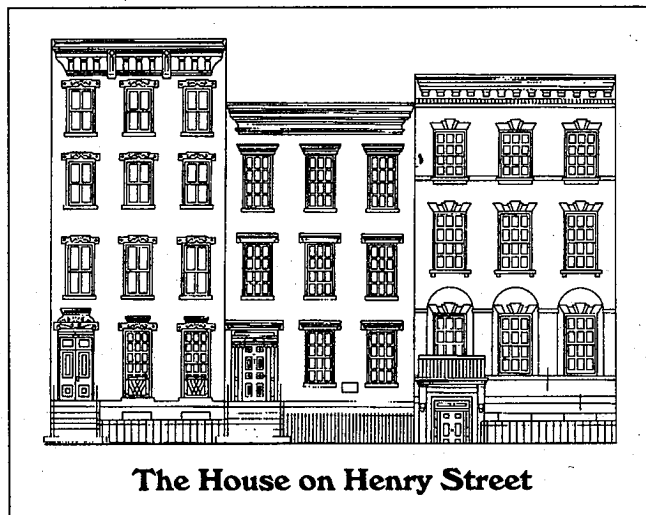
East Side, and finds its sister settlement, LNHA, or the Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association.

The community it serves is one of the most diverse in the world. More than 204,000 live on 3000 blocks, an area more densely populated than London or Tokyo. Although the community's image is one of wealth, over 15,000 live below the official poverty level and an equal number exist on the margin.

In the early days of the settlement house movement, the entire East Side was carpeted with teeming tenements interspersed with factories. In the Lenox Hill area the factories included a confectioners, a cigar factory, a steam laundry, a storage and carpet cleaning company, and the Long Island Pickle Works. Where the United Nations stands today, there were slaughter houses and tanning factories. The majority of the residents were Italians, along with Bohemians, Slavs, Irish, Jews and Germans. Men worked in the hotels or factories, or as laborers, porters, carpenters, and painters, while women found work in the cigar factories or laundries, or washed and cleaned for private families. A 1919 investigation found that they "find little time for rest or recreation; the proper stimulus for developing them physically and mentally is noticeably lacking."

This report lamented that the factories emitted "steam and noxious odors," that they were noisy and cut off light and sunshine, causing some tenement dwellers to live in perpetual darkness. It also complained about the continual traffic of trucks, wagons, autos etc. driving over 1st Avenue's cobbles, and the additional noise created by the elevated trains on Second Avenue. The emerging picture is one of desperation and deprivation as over-crowding in dismal quarters is darkened by landlord exploitation.

(to be continued in our next issue!)



The House on Henry Street