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Julia Lathrop *Justice, Not Pity*

The justice of today is born of yesterday's pity.—JULIA LATHROP, National Conference of Charities and Corrections, 1912

The parents who came in the cabin of the *Mayflower* and those who sank in the steerage of the *Titanic* had the same profound impulse.—JULIA LATHROP, "The Children's Bureau," 1912

The present time is one in which it requires unusual courage to be courageous. A weary acceptance of apparent defeat is easier.—JULIA LATHROP, quoted in Jane Addams, *My Friend, Julia Lathrop*, 1935

She [Julia Lathrop] took her citizenship seriously. . . . The nation's children and their mothers were her own heritage and hope in the American commonwealth. —GRAHAM TAYLOR, quoted in Jane Addams, *My Friend, Julia Lathrop*, 1935

Why do babies die? The lady traveler pondered the question with intense concentration as she crossed the marble concourse of Washington, D.C.'s Union Station in the late spring of 1912. The awful question cut across every category of life in the United States. Hanging unanswered, it shadowed families and communities and darkened the nation's very future. Of the 2.5 million babies born in the United States in 1911, 300,000 did not survive the first year of life. *Why do babies die?* The question itself was tragic. No one could think it political. That, in fact, was its attraction and its promise. The lady traveler knew that was its brilliance.¹

Julia Lathrop was the traveler. Arriving by rail at the gleaming white Union Station, she was now in the largest passenger depot in the world and architect Daniel Burnham's Beaux-Arts triumph. The slender, well-dressed, sloe-eyed Lathrop, at fifty-four years of age, might have been taken for someone's great-aunt arriving for a visit. No Washington political figures hailed her in the swirl of passengers or in taxicab lines at the terminal entrance. She ap-



Julia Lathrop, c. 1912.
(Library of Congress)

peared to be merely a respectable, well-groomed older lady amid the horse-drawn vehicles jostling with motorcars and electric streetcars. She was little known outside her home state of Illinois, where she'd lived all her life. She cut no figure in this intensely political Washington environment. She knew, for the time being, that was just as well.

Yet Julia Lathrop was poised to become a political force on the national scene. President William Howard Taft had recently appointed her as the first chief of the newly created U.S. Children's Bureau. As chief, she was set to be the human face of a momentous change in federal policy. She felt the weight of opportunity—and risk—at this late-middle-life moment in life when many slowed down and eased toward retirement. American life these days was defined by speed. Advertisements gloried in the "speed" of manufactured products from razors to canned food, and pundits called this "the age of hurry" and proclaimed speed the new American religion. Born back before the Civil War, Lathrop felt she needed to prove herself to be a fast-paced twentieth-century professional woman. She couldn't afford to be weary but must guard her health to maximize her energy. To avoid the notorious swamp fevers of Washington, she'd signed a lease for an apartment at the Ontario,



Union Station, Washington, D.C., the largest passenger terminal in the world.
Artist's projection, 1906. (Library of Congress)

located in the northwestern Kalorama area, where the building caught the freshest breezes and boasted that its location was "free from malaria." She would need every ounce of strength for the task before her. Not since the founding of the republic had the federal government accepted responsibility for any societal well-being across the nation. The mandate of the Children's Bureau reversed that longstanding, ironclad policy.²

How far this reversal went, however, was an agonizing question. New and novel priorities, Lathrop learned from experience, were diabolically difficult to put into place. The gleaming white, classical public buildings of the capital city rose on every side, and this railroad terminal, with its imperial Roman arch and vaults, was the glory of modern capitalism itself—and yet the nation lacked a national birth registry. No one knew for sure how many babies were born in the United States, or where they were born, or who their parents were. The mortality figures were a good estimate, but only an estimate. To Lathrop, this was no mere numbers game. The stakes were literally life-or-death. For social Darwinists, infant deaths simply weeded out those who were unfit to live in a world ruled by the law of survival of the fittest. But this could not explain why annually more babies died per thousand in the United States than in Norway, Ireland, Scotland, and even Bulgaria.³

The American mortality crisis was further compounded, Lathrop knew, by high rates of childhood disability. In Chicago and downstate Illinois, she'd seen children who were stunted, chronically sick, and crippled. If they lived, fragile infants became fragile children. She knew that much of this death and disability was preventable. One major cause was sheer human ignorance. In

large numbers, mothers across the country knew nothing about prenatal and infant care. Many mothers, for instance, were ignorant of the mortal danger of contaminated or adulterated milk. She wanted the first projects of the fledgling Children's Bureau to be easy-to-read, free advisory pamphlets that blanketed the country. They would be titled, simply, *Prenatal Care* and *Infant Care*.

The new Children's Bureau, nonetheless, was by government standards a small-scale experiment. Her long-range plans were far reaching, but Lathrop knew she had to put them on a back burner for now. Politically, it would be suicide to begin like an ambitious empire builder. Every skeptic and opponent of the new bureau would pounce and attack. Every misogynist would have a field day ridiculing the new lady chief. Besides, Congress had not budgeted enough money for major programs. For now, there could be no close-up field studies of infant mortality in typical American communities. For the time being, there could be no nationwide baby fairs like those staged last year in New York City and Chicago. In these cities, trained nurses offered mothers an afternoon's babysitting while they strolled exhibits and heard short lectures on child rearing in many languages, from French to Chinese. There was also an open-air demonstration school where fresh air could ward off tuberculosis. And there was a model playground to show safe play, off the dangerous streets. A woman like New York City's Mrs. Clarence Day, known as Vinnie, would surely see the playground as a major improvement on the manure pit where the children of the Day family's coachman had spent their open-air hours.⁴

Only if Congress loosened its purse strings could the new bureau sponsor such important fairs across the nation. A bigger budget was also vital for projects such as a national "Children's Year" to reinforce the need for the public protection of maternity and infancy, for healthy recreation, and for free public schooling for all. Lathrop knew that other bureau issues must eventually include children who were orphaned, child labor, and the juvenile courts. What the Children's Bureau needed, at the core, was a professional staff of about seventy-five, organized into five divisions—statistical, library, industrial, hygiene, and social service. Lathrop asked herself, Could she get it done?⁵

Congress had launched the new bureau on a shoestring, only \$25,640 for the first year. Lathrop felt the cruel irony that children's well-being was worth a mere fraction of the annual \$1 million that Congress spent on the Bureau of Animal Industry in the Department of Agriculture. Cows and pigs fared better than children. She feared that if the budget wasn't expanded in years to come, the Children's Bureau would only limp along, and its clients—

the nation's children—would be victimized by neglect. Her own name would be shorthand for failure and defeat.⁶

Determined to change this state of affairs, Lathrop counted on friends and allies to advise her and a network of supporters to lend her their energies. The Children's Bureau owed its very existence to eleven years of steady effort from "organizations of parents, labor unions, health workers, social workers, and women." This coalition had nominated her to President Taft. Lathrop must not fail them.⁷

Titanic forces, however, were already massing against the nascent bureau. Arriving for her swearing-in ceremony early in the humid, drowsy Washington summer, Lathrop had no illusions about a honeymoon period for the Children's Bureau. Washington was a political minefield, and the bureau was already in jeopardy. Congressional debates had exposed dark suspicions that government officials would invade American families' privacy and usurp parental rights. Some congressmen and senators took the position of a contemporary fictional character: "When the State presumes to teach a mother how to feed her child, . . . the State goes too far." Lathrop knew that doctors suspected that the bureau would encroach on their turf. They could rise up to do battle with intense lobbying. And existing agencies jealously protected their domains. The Department of Education sensed rivalry, as did the Public Health Service. Political timing was dicey. The next election, just two years off, could send a different party to the White House, ousting her in favor of a new political appointee. She'd heard that certain individuals, male and female, already coveted her position and planned campaigns to wrest it from her.⁸

Was she a strong enough leader? Not in the usual sense. Not like the thundering woman labor union organizer in the coal fields, Mother Jones. Not like the political militant Emma Goldman. An appreciative physician in Illinois wrote of Lathrop as a person who does "a tremendously important share of the world's work" through "personality and character." He admired her as someone who "creates a meeting ground" for those who "otherwise could hardly blend." Nearly a century later, a writer named Malcolm Gladwell was to identify persons like Lathrop as "connectors." He was to recognize those like her, past and present, as individuals with a wide and varying circle of acquaintance. Their leadership consisted, he said, of their "particular and rare social gifts." Such connectors, said Gladwell, "manage to occupy many different worlds and subcultures and niches." They lead, he said, by creating a "tipping point."⁹

Lathrop knew for certain that she was about to inflame things by refusing to staff her new agency with political appointees. She insisted that exper-

tise must trump cronyism. She'd seen more than her share of political appointees' incompetence in Chicago and refused to let careless, stupid, lazy sycophants infect the Children's Bureau. No one must mistake her grace and good manners for weakness. No matter who begged her to hire a relative or a political payback "friend," the answer was no, no, and no. On this matter, she was adamant: her fledgling agency needed to be staffed by well-qualified professionals under the merit-based civil service system. She needed, for a start, an expert statistician. It was crucial that the Children's Bureau achieve "the sternest statistical accuracy" because, as she said, "the noblest human passion of pity must never be founded upon anything but truth." The work of the bureau "must guard against the easy charge of sentimentality and must be able to present all its statements dispassionately with scientific candor."¹⁰

Congress, all the while, would be watching the bureau like a hawk. No group would celebrate its collapse more joyously than certain southern senators and congressmen. Their hostility was the most unforgivable of all. They feared the bureau might crimp the profits of the textile mill owners and cotton planters of Georgia and other Deep South states by stopping the epidemic of cheap child labor in their treacherous mills and fields.

If only Lathrop had more time to allow the bureau to garner support and to placate skeptics and block enemies. There wasn't a minute to lose—which was the reason she used her own money for this trip, for the federal bureau funds weren't yet released. She'd memorized the bureau's mandate. It was dedicated to "the welfare of children and child life among all classes of people."¹¹

The phrasing gave her the cue for the first bureau research project, to be launched immediately. She would explain that it was friendly to families. "The only basis for including any family," she'd say, "was the fact that a child had been born in the family during the selected year, thus giving a picture . . . of the whole community." In all honesty she could call it an "entirely democratic inquiry" that overrode all partisanship.¹²

That was the brilliance of the project. It hinged on a question that did not seem one bit political. Having spent over two decades in Chicago in bruising bare-knuckle politics, she'd learned the value of appearing to be above the fray. In her own gracious and ladylike way, she could exploit the low-key, "experimental and tentative" start here in Washington because it served a kid-glove infighter like her.¹³

The huge Capitol dome and the thrusting Washington Monument, however, were a cautionary lesson in power. The very skyline spoke of male authority on a continental scale. Yes, Lathrop's Chicago was a metropolis, and her home state of Illinois a middle-western hub state of the union. But the



"Why do babies die?" 1902. (Library of Congress)

city was local, the state regional. This was national. The entire United States of America was now Julia Lathrop's provenance. The care of its children was in her hands. Her personal qualifications, such as they were, in no way guaranteed success. What if she became a casualty of good intentions washed down the Potomac? Time was not on her side. The research project was her Children's Bureau lifeline, and the key question hung like a dangling hook: *Why do babies die?*

IF AN INTERVIEWER had asked Miss Julia Lathrop what specific turning point set her on the path to the nation's capital, Lathrop would pause in thought. She'd then reach back to a certain evening lecture in Rockford, Illinois, in the autumn of 1890. Miss Julia Lathrop had no idea, back then, that the lecture she planned to attend at the Rockford Female Seminary would change her life. She couldn't imagine that it would tap into her deep, unspoken discontent. At the time, such negative feelings were a deeply kept secret, even from herself. She had grown up in a hometown of Victorian-era customs and was, to all appearances, well settled in modern Rockford, a thriving northern Illinois industrial city with a census of 23,584, the third-largest Illinois city after Chicago and Galena. Transit was on Rockford's mind in 1890. Construction had just begun on the new State Street bridge, which would have two sidewalks, and the city's horsecars had vanished in the wake of the marvelous new electrified streetcars. A stitchwork of railroad tracks through Rockford carried cargo and passengers to and from every direction of the country.¹⁴

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Tichi, Cecilia. *Civic Passions: Seven Who Launched Progressive America (and What They Teach Us)*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uncc/detail.action?docId=475210>. Created from vcu on 2020-07-12 02:43:38.

Rockford's prosperity matched the Lathrops' own, for Julia was the daughter of leading citizens with deep roots in the community. A prominent attorney and U.S. congressman, William Lathrop was a Lincoln Republican who'd come west to Illinois in the mid-nineteenth century. His wife, Adeline Potter Lathrop, was descended from a Rockford pioneering family and was a member of the first class admitted to the seminary in 1844, when it was housed in a converted horse barn. The seminary now symbolized the city's growth, for it occupied an eight-acre campus on the Rock River and was one of the proudest local institutions, soon to be renamed Rockford College. Adeline was an active alumna, and her husband a member of the board of trustees. Of the couple's three boys and two girls, Julia (b. 1858) was the oldest and had studied there for a year—the U.S. centennial year of 1876—before going on to Vassar College for her A.B. Since then, she'd lived at home. With one or both parents, Julia regularly attended educational lyceum lectures at the seminary. The rhythms of her days were the rhythms of her family and community.

This night, however, was special. A capacity audience from the Rockford community was certain to turn out because the speaker, Miss Jane Addams, was a northern Illinois woman who was remembered as a superior student and outstanding debater just a decade ago at the seminary. Addams's topic was to be her new passion, the settlement house movement.¹⁵

Julia Lathrop had a special incentive to attend. Miss Addams was an acquaintance. Active in drama in her college days, Julia spent part of a school vacation helping the younger Addams and other young women students stage the witches scene from *Macbeth* for a seminary performance. Addams herself well remembered Julia for her "vigor and originality" and recalled being awed by "this brilliant young woman who came from a real woman's college," Vassar. Julia, in turn, was curious about Addams, who was rumored to have suffered a bout of nervous depression in the years following her seminary graduation. Addams then traveled abroad to Europe and England, where she'd become inspired by a new kind of philanthropic organization. It was at Toynbee Hall in London's impoverished East End, where young men of Oxford and Cambridge universities tried to make "the lives of the East End poor more wholesome and beautiful than they could be without such help." Following a visit to Toynbee Hall, Addams returned to the United States and read the current work of American social theorists, especially Richard Ely and Henry Demarest Lloyd. Addams became deeply involved in an American version of the Toynbee Hall venture.¹⁶

Lathrop, by contrast, had come straight back to Rockford after graduating from Vassar in 1880. She didn't want to teach school, although she adored

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Tichi, Cecilia. *Civic Passions: Seven Who Launched Progressive America (and What They Teach Us)*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uncc/detail.action?docId=475210>. Created from vcu on 2020-07-12 02:43:38.

children, so she'd worked in her father's law office, doing clerical work and reading law, as many apprentice attorneys did at this time. When she passed the Illinois bar exam, she continued in her father's office as a paralegal. People complimented her good humor and easy laughter that never came at others' expense. No young men suitors came her way. Perhaps she didn't expect beaux, for she thought herself rather homely, neither tall nor curly haired. Her enormous brown eyes showed a certain shyness and what one observer called "an almost Italian salience." In her early thirties, she continued to live in the house that her father built.¹⁷

No one knows whether, on this night, Julia Lathrop felt the bind of an educated, single woman like herself. No one knows whether she felt the yoke of daughterly duty weigh her down as she sat beside her father and heard glowing introductions of Miss Addams in the gas-lighted hall. She could hardly ignore the contrast between Jane Addams's life and her own. She, the former worldly, "brilliant," older woman from the eastern college, sat silently in the audience. The former seminary schoolgirl, who was two years younger than Julia, took her place at the lectern and prepared to speak as an authority. Addams, Rockford people knew, was gaining prominence these days in Chicago. The august Chicago Woman's Club enthusiastically welcomed her into membership. The club was a twenty-year bastion of female civic power and authority in the booming metropolis of the American Midwest, and it adopted Addams's Hull House as an innovative reform project. Addams's reputation was on the rise. The younger woman had become, somehow, Julia Lathrop's senior.¹⁸

At last, Miss Addams began to speak. At five feet, four inches tall, she could be called "a slip of a girl," and there was nothing dramatic about her appearance on the platform. Julia, who appreciated good clothes, took note of Addams's dark dress of heavy material, her bustle, her sharp and even severe silhouette that was the fashion of the day. With her brown hair pulled back and pinned into a serviceable bun, Addams stood with her head thrown a little forward. Avoiding grand gestures, she simply fingered a string of beads and sometimes clasped both hands behind her back. Truth to tell, she looked rather weary. Her voice, however, was "clear and agreeable," and "she modulated it pleasantly in the lower registers," making certain that it carried to the farthest listeners in the back of the hall.¹⁹

Everyone was interested. "There was so much freshness and glow of information" that was "gathered at first hand" as she spoke of the goals of Hull House. She eased her audience into the core of the talk rather like a bathers who must be eased into icy lake waters in the summertime. It would not do to shock. Addams's speech opened with the sorts of phrases familiar to



Jane Addams, 1910.
(Library of Congress)

churchgoing Protestants each Sunday, phrases that circulated in civic clubs and other high-minded gatherings. Listeners heard such terms as "a higher social morality," "established virtues," and "moral energy." Addams spoke their language. Julia had no idea that Addams was on a secret mission. She hadn't the vaguest notion that the speaker had a special target audience in mind, namely, single women who returned to live at home after college. Julia had no clue that this talk was meant for her.²⁰

Addams explained that just the year before, 1889, she and her woman friend, Ellen Gates Starr, had founded a settlement house, one of several that would soon spring up in American cities, notably in New York and Philadelphia. The two women partners called their Chicago settlement a "centre for a higher civil and social life." They named it Hull House in tribute to the Charles J. Hull family, who'd built the Italianate-style house back in the 1850s, when Chicago's Halsted Street was a country retreat—that is, before affluent families like the Hulls fled to Lincoln Park and other North Side locations, thereby abandoning their former Chicago neighborhood to industrial development and swarms of immigrants.²¹

Hull House, as Addams carefully explained, was not to be a charity or a Christian mission. The Hull House participants must not be religious

zealots. They must, however, make a passionate commitment in a spirit of cooperation. The ethical principle of the house was "egalitarian or democratic social relations" across all social classes. The version of democracy that was embraced at Hull House, Addams emphasized, included economic and social opportunity, even though the audience found her rather vague on this point.²²

Then the speaker plunged to the heart of the matter, and her message was as pointed as the tip of a hat pin. Addams and Ellen Starr faced a particular challenge right now. They expected other women to join them, and Hull House badly needed new members. The two partners had spent money and elbow grease repairing and freshening up the dilapidated Hull mansion over the past year. With a housekeeper in place, they felt pressed to expand their duo into a community. Eventually, they wanted to include interested men, but for the moment they sought women. The clock was ticking. Hull House needed the energy and vitality that new residents would provide. They needed recruits. Tonight's seminary lecture was one of a number that Addams had scheduled in the northern Illinois area. Julia Lathrop may or may not have made eye contact with Addams in these moments, but the speaker's message reached Lathrop with the impact of a telegram with her name on it.²³

The homebound, college-educated American woman, Addams said, was by definition a woman filled with discontentment and contradiction. "Perplexities often occur when the daughter returns from college" only to find that her family expects her to "grace the fireside and to add lustre to that social circle which her parents select for her." Quartered in the household, the educated single woman feels eager to assume her "social obligation . . . as a citizen of the world." Thwarted in this, she instead becomes guilt ridden, frustrated, betrayed. The family's grown sons, her brothers, are encouraged to go forth and establish careers and take part in public life, but the daughters are not. They depart with parental blessings only if they marry and continue in traditional domestic life. Otherwise, their futures are blocked. If single and sequestered in the family home, Addams observed, some such women dissipate their energies in "accumulation" or consumerism. Others sicken.²⁴

This state of affairs must stop, Addams insisted in her warm voice as the auditorium gas jets slightly hissed. Modern conditions now made change necessary, even imperative, she insisted. The educated woman who has been the "charm and grace of the household" from her infancy must now be set free to assume "duties outside of the family" in order to serve the state and society in the "larger sense." This "larger sense" meant an expansion of

democracy in modern America. Educated women must be agents of this expansion.²⁵

So far, Addams reminded the audience, democracy had been strictly political, according to the founding fathers' belief that "political equality alone would secure all good to all men." A century of practical experience exposed glaring shortcomings in the political pathway, including election corruption and the denial of voting rights. These problems urgently needed correction, Addams admitted.²⁶

But she insisted that the very idea of democracy cried out for a new, expansive definition. "Democracy has made little attempt to assert itself in social affairs," said Addams. Now it must. Basically, it needed to evolve beyond the political and into the social realm of life. The "social function of democracy," Addams said, operates "on the theory that the dependence of classes on each other is reciprocal." To rethink democracy in these new terms was the immediate challenge. The theory of social democracy must be tested and given shape by the hard work of practitioners. Those who were best qualified to work on the newest forefront were the nation's educated women.²⁷

Educated women? Julia listened with rapt attention, her mind awl. Addams, it seemed, spoke personally to her. The lecture, she realized, outlined her life up to this point—and projected it to a suddenly fascinating future. In Addams's terms, Julia's college years weren't merely a finishing school to burnish her with "delicacy and polish" so that she could serve as an ornamental, "outward symbol of her father's protection and prosperity." Addams showed Lathrop's past as the prelude to a future filled with purpose and usefulness. Framed by Addams, Lathrop's life so far was preparation for the activism of a citizen.²⁸

Addams turned to the specifics of Hull House and its neighborhood. She did not sugarcoat the facts. The area's immigrant residents were a poor, polyglot population striving to survive in crammed, filthy tenements without proper sanitation, she said. Many of the surrounding streets were unpaved and littered with trash and garbage. Settlement house life was not for the faint of heart, Addams emphasized, knowing her recruitment effort would fail if candidates for Hull House residency felt misled and fled. Doubtless, some Rockford women in the auditorium at this moment shuddered at her descriptions of "gilded vice." Settlement house life was not their cup of tea.²⁹

Not Julia. She grew more intensely interested as Addams vividly described a Hull House neighborhood street "lined with shops of butchers and grocers, with dingy and gorgeous saloons." The streets are "inexpressibly dirty," Addams said, continuing frankly to compile a list of miseries. "The number

of schools [is] inadequate, factory legislation unenforced, the street-lighting bad, the paving miserable and altogether lacking in the alleys and smaller streets, and the stables defy all laws of sanitation. Hundreds of houses are unconnected with the street sewer."³⁰

Beside her, Julia's father doubtless felt agitated. Knowing his daughter, he could guess the impact of Addams's words. It wasn't the description of the dismal facts of Chicago that bothered him, but the psychology the lecturer set in motion. He'd never call his daughter a sentimental woman, but Julia had a weakness for life's unfortunates, no matter what the circumstance. The picture of human beings trapped in slum life was sure to stir her sympathies. She was vulnerable to appeals like Addams's.

Where this boundless sympathy came from, he could only guess. Maybe it started with Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and little Julia's childhood in the Civil War years. Perhaps he himself played a part in it, for in court he'd defended a deranged woman client who'd killed her husband and won the landmark case on the grounds that the woman was a victim of emotional insanity. He also knew the work of Dorothea Dix, the crusader for the cause of the mentally ill. Dix lectured in Illinois in the 1840s, and people talked about her for years afterward. Possibly Julia overheard conversations or listened to his household musings on the injustices done to the insane. In the future, William Lathrop was to joke that his daughter was only interested in "someone who was lame or blind or insane." He said that he and Mrs. Lathrop thought that Julia was "only interested in people who are in trouble." In childhood, Julia once spent the night in a stall in the barn for fear that a sick horse was lonely. This evening at the seminary, William Lathrop perhaps saw the color rising in his daughter's cheek in the greenish gaslight as they listened to the lecture. He had reason to worry more and more as Miss Addams went on. She was "not a forceful speaker, but she spoke with conviction and sincerity and held her audience." An attorney and politician like Lathrop had to appreciate that.³¹

"The older and richer inhabitants seem anxious to move away as rapidly as they can afford it," said Addams about the Hull House area of Chicago. "They make room for newly arrived immigrants who are densely ignorant of civic duties."³²

Julia was indeed fascinated and excited. All her life, she'd heard stories of immigrants' arrivals in primitive Rockford of the 1830s, 1840s, and early 1850s—for instance, the Swedes who brought the scourge of cholera and were quarantined in tents. They were physically exhausted and emotionally wracked from weeks or months of ocean voyaging and overland travel by wagon and rail to Rockford. Infected by cholera, they were sequestered and

cared for by kindly but firm American locals who took responsibility for their well-being and for Rockford's public health. She'd also heard of vice-ridden days when pioneer Rockford was a den of cardsharp gamblers. The tales of the early days measured the distance to modern Rockford with its mills, schools, churches, and modern amenities. Yet there was an air of excitement when those old stories were told and retold. A listener could feel that he or she had missed out on the great adventure here in the middle West.³³

Suppose Jane Addams's Hull House was the new great adventure. Suppose that the numerous miseries that she listed were really opportunities. Suppose that Hull House represented the pioneer moment of the future.

Addams was nearing her conclusion. She called on parents, especially fathers, to recognize that families benefited when educated daughters contributed their talents to the larger world. She then returned to the ideals of the new social democracy, and her phrasing recalled her studies in elocution and debate here at the seminary. A "higher civil life" in a democratic country, she said, must be fostered through "common intercourse." She faced her listeners and made certain to articulate every word. "The blessings which we associate with a life of refinement and cultivation can be made universal and must be made universal if they are to be permanent."³⁴

Addams paused, then posed a challenge in deliberate, cautionary terms that reminded alert listeners of social turmoil in recent years, especially labor strikes and the deadly Haymarket riot that had erupted so close by, in Chicago, in May 1886. "The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain," Addams warned. It "is floating in mid-air, until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life."³⁵

Julia heard these words as a summons. Addams was recruiting the educated woman to help secure the social "good." Such a woman might be pivotal in turning society's precariousness into stability. The nation's founders, Addams reminded everyone in the hall, had set democracy on its political course. One century later, she was in Rockford to insist that democracy must be rethought and renewed. Couched in veiled terms, her warning was also utterly clear. Americans who failed to act could expect more Haymarket riots that fractured the social and political order.

Suddenly, Julia Lathrop was at a crossroads—or was it the edge of a cliff? Her Rockford life was comfortable and secure. It was also patterned and predictable. She played her part in a family script. Whatever Addams's social democracy was to be, it would take shape from women who joined her project. Was it pure egoism to think that she, Julia Clifford Lathrop, might play this new part in life—in the life of the nation? But how? It would take leadership, and she'd always been "timid and shy." The thought was thrill-

ing—and dismaying, for the likelihood of wounding her parents was horrifying.³⁶

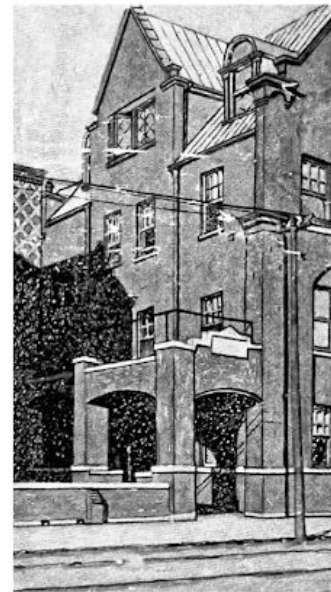
Suppose she summoned all the diplomacy she had learned from observing her politically astute father. She would propose a trial residency at Hull House, perhaps comparing it to the length of a college semester, just a season. She'd made a few wise investments in Rockford businesses these last years while working in her father's law office, so money would not be a problem if she spent carefully. And she'd promise to come home to Rockford frequently for visits. Would Addams and Starr accept her on that basis? Would her father and mother approve? It was her most fervent hope. More, it was her rock-solid plan.

"THE BEST 'RESIDENT' we have had," wrote Addams of Julia Lathrop just after Christmas 1891. The newcomer from Rockford, as Addams and Starr agreed, must have a private room on the third floor of Hull House, where heavily upholstered furnishings were rejected in favor of light-framed and bentwood pieces, potted palms, and scatter rugs. The atmosphere was "wholesome" and "rather Spartan." Julia's room was furnished with a bed, a bureau, a bookcase, and two chairs, one of them armless in order to accommodate a lady's full skirts. Her dresses, skirts, cloaks, and other hanging clothing might have been concealed behind curtains, and a washstand hidden behind a screen. She doubtless brought books, pictures, and a few decorative objects, or "impedimenta," as Addams and Starr had also done. She also had a desk at which she was eventually to sit writing letters, reports, and proposals in the quiet nighttime hours while others slept.³⁷

The newcomer from Rockford was no longer "Julia," or "Miss Lathrop," as she had been at Vassar. At Hull House, she answered to "J. Lathrop," a moniker of affection and serious purpose. She began to call Addams "J. A." in return.³⁸

But how, exactly, was she to help advance the new social democracy? Addams's advice was reassuring but vague. "Look around," she advised. "See what the neighborhood needs. Then decide what you can do best and do it. If that doesn't work, try something else. You'll find your way."³⁹

Perhaps something outdoors needed attention. Addams's description of the neighborhood was on the mark. As winter turned to spring and summer, one saw a seasonal kaleidoscope of wretchedness. There was scarcely a tree or blade of grass in all the Nineteenth Ward, which was now home to some 50,000 people, the most densely packed section in Chicago. Its wooden plank sidewalks became slimy and slippery after a rain, and the cedar paving blocks loosened from the streets and floated about. Drainage was haphazard,



Hull House illustration on cover of *Jane Addams's Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 1910. (Collection of the author)

and mud so thick that crossing a street was impossible at certain intersections. And the stench—the alleyway garbage boxes overflowed, and outdoor privies were so close to the houses and to backyard shanties that people had to shut their windows tight on the hottest days. Addams—J. A.—filed complaints, but the City of Chicago replied that garbage hauling was contracted out. The contractor, not the city, bore responsibility. Children, meanwhile, used the garbage boxes as if they were chests of toys, and putrid waste became playthings for street games. City officials seemed not to care one bit. Addams submitted a bid for the garbage contract herself, but her bid was ignored.⁴⁰

The Nineteenth Ward, nevertheless, demanded J. Lathrop's participation as a "social obligation." Living at Hull House, she was committed to a "reciprocal dependence of classes upon each other." That meant going door-to-

door on Halsted and the nearby streets—State, Polk, Clark. It meant doing her utmost to meet the foreign immigrants as neighbors instead of “perils.” Just last year, 1890, the prominent clergyman and reformer Josiah Strong described the typical immigrant as a European peasant with meager or false training in morals and religion, a narrow horizon, and “low” ideas of life.⁴¹

J. Lathrop, nevertheless, must venture out to meet these people as neighbors. In snow, in mud, in stench, she must go. Dressed in street wear, she buttoned her shoes and set forth. A proper lady paid calls. That was her strategy at first, to join the women of Hull House in visits required by etiquette. The neighbors were invited to call at Hull House in return. By temperament, Lathrop was a good listener. Almost immediately, she found herself absorbed in the many “piteous recitals” of persecution and hardship both in foreign lands and here in Chicago too. She heard of faraway farmlands so depleted and gullied that whole villages, facing starvation, were forced to emigrate. She heard of eastern European families who fled to save their men and boys from the military conscription that was basically kidnapping by the Russian and Austro-Hungarian armies. She heard Russian and Polish Jews’ accounts of flight from mobs of Christians who rampaged at Christmastime against Jewish neighbors they blamed for murdering Jesus Christ.⁴²

She heard, too, the travails of American life here in Chicago. Women in shabby black shawls wept in the Hull House reception room as they pleaded for help when their sons or grandsons were arrested for stealing milk or coal. The police took the boys away. Could Miss Addams help?⁴³

Often, she could. Her network of Chicago acquaintances was yielding results that were beneficial to the neighbors. Similar pitiful “thefts,” however, were doubtless happening all over the city—the nation—without a Hull House to intercede for the children and their families. Those children ought not to be arrested as criminals in the first place, Lathrop knew. Children ought not to have to steal food and fuel to provide for their families. Better-off Americans needed to recognize this and support a fairer system. It was a goal of social democracy, though the task seemed overwhelming. And the role that J. Lathrop might play in it was nowhere in sight.

She had to start somewhere. Hull House, Lathrop had seen at once, was an oasis for neighborhood residents who were drawn to its fast-expanding schedule of readings, classes, lectures, concerts, and club meetings. An impressive group of volunteers conducted and arranged events, including professors from the new University of Chicago. Perhaps Lathrop could launch a new club, something intellectual to use her education and to interest the many Hull House neighbors who hungered for the life of the mind even while earning a living by washing floors or driving an ice wagon. There were

Greeks in the neighborhood, and Addams and Starr had put out classical Greek busts, plaster casts of museum originals. Lathrop started a Plato Club, which attracted “elderly men who had read philosophy of sorts all their lives” and turned out to be closed minded and quarrelsome. The young philosophy professor who occasionally led the club, John Dewey, appeared confounded by their opinionated rants.⁴⁴

For Lathrop, the Plato Club had a certain quirky vibrancy, but it did not advance the cause of social democracy. Professor Dewey’s ideas of democracy nonetheless came close to the Hull House idea. He regularly lectured at the house and became good friends with Jane Addams. They had much in common. Like her, he found rigid class divisions to be harmful to democracy. He rejected the “class divisions of industrial capitalism” that gave owners and managers all authority but reduced workers to mere mechanical function, like cogs in a machine. Those at the top were diminished, Dewey argued, by their certitudes, their protocols, and their severance from other human beings, while those who were labeled “laborer” were denied their human “full expression.” Intelligence and spirit were quashed in both groups.⁴⁵

Dewey’s ideas on education were consistent with his thinking on industrial-era mistakes. The philosopher’s theory of education was especially relevant because Lathrop now was a teacher herself, having convened a Hull House class on literature. Dewey rejected the class-based hierarchy of the traditional “scholastic” lecture, in which knowledge was dictated by the expert and absorbed by the mute, passive, regimented student. This flawed system retarded social change because most schools were “designed not to transform societies but to reproduce them.” Society’s so-called expert was a creature of a system that needed reform, the student its virtual prisoner.⁴⁶

Dewey looked to the Hull House children’s craft and art studios and workrooms for the “native impulses” that he believed were foundational for human development and thus democratic social change. He hypothesized four “impulses”: “to communicate, to construct, to inquire, and to express in finer form.” If society was to evolve for the better, he thought, the place to begin was the school. Dewey was able to test his beliefs as a scientific hypothesis in the Chicago Laboratory School, which was organized as a co-operative community. The school was soon called the Dewey School.⁴⁷

What project, Lathrop wondered, was worthy of linkage with her name? The Hull House clubs and classes were important, but the world beyond hadn’t beckoned. Frustrated, she forced herself to be patient. The invitation to membership in the Chicago Woman’s Club was promising. Acquaintance with so many smart women who worked for the betterment of Chicago was stimulating. And change was stirring in Illinois. In 1892, a new governor,

John P. Altgeld, took office, and civic life began to take a new turn statewide. With his intent stare and his close-cropped hair and beard, the square-jawed, German-born Altgeld looked nothing like Abraham Lincoln. The Lincoln legend that emphasized love and duty to one's fellow men lived on, nonetheless, in Altgeld's vision of governance. He had written a book stating that the U.S. penal system favored the rich over the poor. The chasm between wealth and poverty in the Gilded Age troubled him. In Chicago, a merchant like Marshall Field could spend \$75,000 for his son's birthday party, while thousands of women who clerked in his store earned less than a living wage. It wasn't right. Striving to recapture a lost sense of mutual human obligation within society, Governor Altgeld "turned back toward Lincoln's humanism." He planned to exert moral force in ridding Illinois's charitable institutions of "the spoilsman," those parasites who were rewarded solely for political loyalty, irrespective of competence.⁴⁸

In 1893, in his first months in office, Altgeld appointed Julia Lathrop to the Illinois Board of State Commissioners of Public Charities. It was the state agency charged with the oversight of publicly funded institutions for paupers, the destitute sick, the insane, and dependent children, including orphans.

Lathrop was far from Altgeld's mind on May 1, 1893, when the governor represented Illinois at the opening ceremonies of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago's Lincoln Park. Like many officials on hand on this chill and overcast day, Altgeld fretted that a cloudburst might ruin the outdoor procession to the platform and dampen the spirits of thousands of eager fairgoers. He was also mindful of the proper protocol for a governor consorting with his nation's president, Grover Cleveland, and with a Spanish duke and duchess and other dignitaries and officials. He was not thinking about Lathrop, much less about deadly germs—not yet.⁴⁹

The smallpox outbreak that erupted at the fair and swept Julia Lathrop into action did not occur until midsummer. By then, the fair itself was a smashing success, its classical, electrically lighted White City awesome, its famous Midway an irresistible bazaar of worldwide exotic peoples in authentic native huts. Its amazing Ferris wheel rivaled the Eiffel Tower of the Paris Exposition of 1889–90. Another newcomer to Hull House, Florence Kelley, strolled the Midway with her children and declared the Chicago fair "by far the most beautiful thing I've ever beheld." Through the summer months, some 20 million people came to marvel, including the Clarence Day family of New York City. The senior Days were so impressed that they insisted that Clarence Jr., now on vacation from Yale, make a special trip to Chicago to experience the fair for himself.⁵⁰

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The closing of the fair, however, brought dual miseries to the city. Suddenly, thousands of workers were stranded, jobless in Chicago, as the nation sank into a severe depression. A more immediate threat, however, was what "the World's Fair bequeathed to Chicago"—a sudden outbreak of smallpox. It started with an undetected case in the Midway in midsummer and spread throughout the city by fall. The health department's monthly statement of mortality tallied the deaths, which steadily climbed to 1,407. Most victims lived in the poorer sections like the Nineteenth Ward, where immigrant families had no notion of germs, vaccination, or quarantine. Two residents of Hull House proved to be "the center of the fight against the smallpox epidemic." One of them was J. Lathrop.⁵¹

Her Hull House colleague Florence Kelley (affectionately dubbed "Sister Kelley") had a special goal in combating the outbreak. Kelley, too, had received an appointment by Governor Altgeld, who named her the state factory inspector. Her job was to visit factories to make certain that manufacturers complied with Illinois's workplace laws. Everyone knew, however, that much illegal manufacturing occurred outside the factories, in the tenement apartments of poor immigrant families. These were the sweatshops. A Halsted Street child from Poland, Hilda Satt, observed that her playmates' parents, who worked fourteen hours a day in a clothing factory, could not make ends meet unless they brought home "huge bundles of coats, vests, and pants for the family to finish." The mothers would do "the handwork, sewing buttons, and little children would be put to work pulling the bastings."⁵²

Sewn, assembled, and finished, this ready-made clothing was shipped all over the United States. A smallpox outbreak among tenement clothing workers gave the deadly disease its own shipping route. One newspaper traced "the smooth path for the feet of the smallpox germ" to the "stores where ready-made clothing is sold" and on to the "home where ready-made clothing is bought." The outbreak threatened to become a national epidemic.⁵³

As the pox spread in the city, Kelley requested that tenement residents be vaccinated and that contaminated clothing be burned to prevent further contagion. Chicago city authorities, however, balked at such strict measures, fearing lawsuits from businesses charging loss of trade. The officials urged the useless measure of fumigation. Some denied the existence of smallpox in Chicago.

Kelley and Lathrop went to work. Kelley used her political muscle with the governor to embargo clothing shipments, and Lathrop became her partner in the emergency work of triage. She went into damp basements and climbed the rickety tenement stairs to seek out infected family members. In search

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of smallpox cases, she breathed the fetid, damp air of small, vermin-infested rooms crowded with bed ticking and cookware, with tables and floors piled with stacks of cloth piecework. Lathrop tried not to alarm adults or children as she scrutinized faces for signs of fever and skin that was mottled with a bumpy rash or pustules or scabs. The victims were to be taken by wagon to the city-operated smallpox hospital, or pesthouse. As Jane Addams described it, "Miss Lathrop went back and forth to the crowded pest house which had been hastily constructed on a stretch of prairie west of the city."⁵⁴

Julia Lathrop surely relished the tribute paid to her and to Florence Kelley by Chicago judge Andrew A. Bruce, who named them as the two women who protected public health by "risking their lives in the sweatshop districts of Chicago." The judge declared that Lathrop and Kelley, "working together, saved hundreds perhaps thousands of human lives." Pleasure at the compliment, however, was offset by Lathrop's anguish at the failure of city officials to safeguard the public during the outbreak. The authorities completely caved in to shortsighted business interests. Once the outbreak was known, they connived with shopkeepers and landlords to hide the yellow quarantine cards that were required by a city ordinance to warn the public to stay clear of infected areas. The cards were to be posted in plain sight at grocery stores, druggists, milk depots, and cigar stores. But city officials did nothing when merchants tacked the cards on rear doors or tore them down. Consumers had no way to know they were at risk of exposure to the deadly disease. In addition, the pest hospital was "scandalously mismanaged." From garbage collection to smallpox, the officials failed the public. In a life-or-death crisis, they went missing. For them, self-interest and money were everything. The middle-class public barely murmured a protest. Civic life was a cruel fiction.⁵⁵

Lathrop was about to find out just how fictional—and how far off was the goal of social democracy. In the winter of 1893–94, she was to see the fate of desperate Chicagoans who were forced to turn to public assistance for their survival. As a member of the State Board of Charities, Lathrop inspected the institutions that were charged with the care of those who had exhausted "all the resources of private charity and neighborly aid." These included men, women, and children who were held in a vast complex just across the Chicago city limits on the northwest side. This was Dunning, founded in 1869, an institution whose name struck fear into the hearts of self-respecting Chicagoans. With its insane asylum, its detention hospital, its infirmary, and its agency of last resort for food relief, Dunning signified utter human failure. "The only place where a person without money or a home can go is Dunning." The very name signified the last, abject stop before death and

an ignominious burial in a pauper's grave for "the victims of misfortune, . . . the ineffective criminal, the penniless convalescent."⁵⁶

Dunning included a farm where food crops were raised to defray the costs of operation. The farm fields hid the grim fact, however, of the orphaned children warehoused within, a good many of them afflicted by mental illness or physical disability. In the 1890s, when the U.S. coin of the realm, so to speak, was the five-cent nickel, Cook County, encompassing Chicago, spent \$700,000 annually on "the necessities of a great dependent population." This sum provided salaries for over 500 supervisors and staff. As a public charities board member, Lathrop evaluated the effectiveness of the expense and the services provided. As she said, "The comfort, the recovery, the lives of all these thousands of dependent people hang upon the knowledge, the kindness, the honesty, and good faith of those hired to care for them." She sought to understand the reasons for "the universal dread of the County."⁵⁷

It was dread mixed with desperation in the fiercely cold winter of 1893–94, which severely strained Cook County because of the nation's "general business depression" and the termination of World's Fair jobs in Chicago. The thousands who had come to the city for job opportunities in the construction and operation of the fair were now abruptly without work. Carpenters, painters, restaurant workers, janitors, unskilled laborers—all were now lumped in one category: unemployed. "Selling our muscular strength in the open market for what it will bring, we sell it under peculiar conditions," observed one spokesman for labor. "It is all the capital we have. We have no reserve means of subsistence. . . . Broadly speaking, we must sell our labor or starve. . . . And for some of us there is other pressure, unspeakable, immeasurable pressure, in the needs of wife and children."⁵⁸

Lathrop saw the pressures mount in those who were suddenly jobless. Reduced to "human debris," they now stood outdoors daily by the hundreds in long lines at Dunning's outdoor relief agency in the freezing winter weather. "Shabby men and shawled or hooded women" came from all parts of the vast city and stood "hour after hour with market baskets high above their heads," the police holding them in check. Of mixed ethnicities, their common language was "persistency, weariness, chill, and hunger." "Now and again a woman [in the crowd] was crushed—in one instance reportedly killed, and the ambulance was called to take her away." A posted sign warned of smallpox but deterred no one. Once finally inside the "great dingy waiting-room of the Cook County Agency," one's paperwork and an interview determined eligibility. Approval meant the promise of a delivery of a bag of coal for heating. It also meant that the market basket would be filled with food packets and "one bar of hard soap." Hunger and cold could be kept at bay for a few days.

The system, Lathrop realized, was grueling and stopgap. It was needlessly punishing and barely supportive.⁵⁹

Oddly, the industrial system that turned workers into "debris" was not thought to contribute to their plight. Private charities blamed these victims. Lathrop, along with Jane Addams, saw the flaws in a concept of charity work that was imported from England and took root in the United States through the widely respected and influential Charity Organization Society, headquartered in New York City. The society approached poverty as personal pathology. The poor, by its definition, were lazy, defective, and vice ridden. They needed to reform themselves with stern discipline and very modest help from private charity. The notion of public or governmental involvement was out of the question for the society because it violated the *laissez-faire* idea in which individualism reigned supreme.

How was it possible, Lathrop asked herself, for democracy based on reciprocal relations among different groups to gain a foothold? How, when jobless, hungry clients of the county were made to feel that destitution was all their fault? And when the more or less well-off public blamed them as well?

Her head spun when Lathrop entered Dunning's steam-heated buildings and saw the rampant neglect and abuse. Inside, the wards of Cook County were spared hunger and frostbite, but men slept crowded on straw ticking in hallways and on floors and mingled with "a melancholy company of feeble and bedridden men and idiot children." Mealtimes meant "very hard" mush and "cheap cuts of meat kept madly jumping in the pot for an hour." Privacy was impossible, and everyone was forced to wear coarse, institutional clothing that stigmatized them as charity cases. The "hideous" clothes of the Dunning children who attended a nearby public school made them the butt of classmates' savage ridicule. Social life was nil because there were no sitting rooms, let alone the "homely comfort" of books or newspapers. The attendants were "too few" to give their charges "proper out-door exercise." Medical care was left principally to interns. The experienced "outside" doctors were seldom seen.⁶⁰

The compulsory segregation by sex was especially distressing because it split couples apart. "Oh—" Lathrop overheard a homeless panic-stricken woman in her nineties exclaim at the suggestion that she and her husband seek shelter at Dunning. "Oh, he'll have to go in with the men; I'll have to go in with the women, and all our own clothes will be taken away from us." Lathrop was dismayed by the "monotony and dullness," the "unutterable dreariness," the "hours of listless idleness" that reduced lives to a state of vegetation.⁶¹

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Or to violence. Some mental health workers, wholly ignorant about insanity, cursed and spit on inmates and sometimes hit them. They treated wards of the state or county as if they themselves were the plantation overseers she remembered from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. No wonder, Lathrop realized, black residents refused to commit their disabled or mentally ill family members to the state or county, fearing to re-enslave them.⁶²

It was all staggering, overwhelming, horrible. The "crudeness of the management" was "shocking." But Lathrop was a witness on official business. She must steel herself and somehow distill this tide of human misery and neglect into data. Pity was easy. It was cheap and passive. Action took work and required efficiency—and hard cold facts. One resource that she brought to her task of evaluation for the charities board was orderliness of procedure. Ten years in her father's law office had instilled the value of proper procedure. Facts were fundamental to law, and she was on a fact-finding mission. Lathrop tabulated the numbers of inmates and their countries of origin, including the United States, Ireland, Germany, England, Sweden, and so on down to the twenty-ninth country. The numbers of admissions in 1893 added up to 5,651. The taxes paid by middle-class people and by businesses ought to be used for good care, for the treatment and rehabilitation for these people. Back on their feet, many could become self-sustaining. Instead, they vegetated while the tax money went down the drain.⁶³

Why? In part because the well-off Chicagoans who would never need Dunning closed their eyes and kept their distance from its realities. Out of sight, the place ran on pure politics. The supervisors and staff were not trained health-care workers or qualified support personnel. They got their jobs through "pull." Dunning, in short, was a jobs program fueled by political patronage. "The charities of Cook County," Lathrop concluded, "will never properly perform their duties until politics are divorced from them."⁶⁴

But how could politics be divorced from civic life? Or rather, how could corrupt politics be weakened and civic life made strong and vital? What could a lady from Rockford do? Climbing Chicago's rickety tenement stairs during a smallpox outbreak was one thing, but reforming a whole system—was it remotely possible? Lathrop came to Hull House to help set democracy on a new course. She wasn't a utopian or Pollyanna. The realist in her struggled to find the foothold for change. But America's "high ideals" could seem like so much "sawdust stuffing" in a doll. Sometimes feeling in a "muddle" and sunk in a Bunyanesque pilgrim's "vale of discouragement," Lathrop kept these feelings to herself. Didn't Archimedes say he could move the world if he had a place to stand? Was Hull House that place? It was more and more of a stretch to think so.⁶⁵

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She hadn't yet reached bottom. The dismal lessons of Dunning multiplied as Lathrop toured other state institutions as a member of the public charities board. She met a few admirable professionals, such as Dr. Adolph Meyer of Kankakee, who showed what could be accomplished with a high level of professional ability—but who became so discouraged by corrupt politics that he left for the private Johns Hopkins Hospital in the East. Lathrop, meanwhile, was learning another ghastly lesson: there were institutions far worse than Dunning. Dutifully traveling the length and breadth of Illinois as a public charities board member from 1893 to 1909, she visited “every one of the 102 county farms or almshouses.” Typical was the Sangamon County Alms House in Buffalo, Illinois, where contracts for “coal, groceries, and supplies” were awarded through cozy deals with local trustees, while the inmates were ignored and sat with hands folded, “staring into space because they had nothing else to do day after day.” The annual almshouse report specified the building repairs, livestock, and fencing—but not a word was written about the inmates, who were officially registered as “olde & infirm, pregnant, insane, perished, destitute, sore eyes, no home, feeble minded, fits, sore gut, pox, child.”⁶⁶

What to do? Her reports alone would not guarantee change. Exposing shameful conditions did not, by itself, spur progress, as Lathrop well knew. If it did, the new popular realist fiction would show measurable results by now. Over twenty years before, in 1871, the novelist Edward Eggleston exposed the horrors of a county poorhouse in his well-received *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*. The book was celebrated for its realism. It described local paupers, including children, who were crowded “like chickens in a coop,” and it showed scenes of “people slightly demented and raving maniacs in the same rooms.” Eggleston wrote the very same phrases that Lathrop could use in her official inspection reports years later: “Shut in these bare rooms, with no treatment, no exercise, no variety, and meager food, cases of slight derangement soon grew into chronic lunacy.” Nothing had changed.⁶⁷

What, then, could she do? The mentally ill and the children especially tugged at her heart—the Dunning children who were humiliated in their hideous clothes and the hapless little ones in the many county poorhouses. And what about the older children who were marooned in the so-called industrial schools for “wayward girls or boys”? These were actually prison schools that ruined children's futures by failing to teach basic job skills. Plus countless so-called street Arab children roamed every American city, including the Hull House neighborhood. They lived hand to mouth, yielding to “temptation” without any notion of “orderly living.” To her horror, Lathrop found that most were illiterate and unable to do simple arithmetic.

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Many never slept in nightclothes or between bedsheets. Instead of blankets, one little girl slept under newspapers. When no tobacco was at hand, boys smoked their own shoelaces. If they built bonfires or played ball in the street or jumped on and off moving railroad cars, the boys were arrested and sent to “lockups” with hardened criminals. The system was grotesque.⁶⁸

She was a witness, but it was time to act. Each boy who was jailed in the lockup and each “wayward” girl who was sent to an industrial school measured the desperate need for a separate court system for juveniles. Since the Civil War, Lathrop knew, the women's organizations in Chicago had worked on the court project. Among others, two wealthy, spirited women leaders had recently decided the moment was ripe for a renewed effort. To head it, they had their eye on Julia Lathrop, judging her temperament just right for the task. Jane Addams's nephew, James Weber Linn, who spent much time at Hull House, spoke for them when he wrote of her spark, her laughter that was “as good as an argument,” her great wit and humor. “She always kept her head and her temper,” he said. “She did what her hand found to do” and “was contented to wait for results.”⁶⁹

It was now the 1890s, and the juvenile court was long overdue. The new campaign must succeed. Everyone in Chicago knew that Lucy Flower (Mrs. James M.) was a genius at persuasion, and Louise DeKoven Bowen (Mrs. Joseph T.) was simply indomitable. The formidable pair pressed Lathrop to become president of the newly formed Juvenile Court Committee. Did she have qualms? Yes. She reminded them of her frequent travels over hundreds of miles for the demanding charity board work and of her Hull House duties too. The reputation of the house was growing, and numerous visitors needed hosting in the evenings. J. A. expected residents to dine with visitors and explain the workings of Hull House. It took hours.

Bowen and Flower swept objections aside, knowing Lathrop could charm the officials into cooperation in a pleasant, genteel atmosphere of “harmony” as “a means to an end.” They'd doubtless observed Lathrop's exquisite diplomacy, which her friend, Alice Hamilton, the medical doctor from Hull House, found so remarkable when she went along for a site visit to an institution for the insane. As usual, J. Lathrop looked “becoming” and authoritative in her uniform-like “dark blue tailored suit with a Chinese blue shirt-waist.”⁷⁰

To Hamilton's amazement, the “sulky and suspicious” hospital superintendent had “thawed” under Lathrop's “skilful handling” and cordiality. Hamilton heard the man then “pour out all his troubles” and turn “mellow” as they concluded their tour of the institution and returned to his office. The doctor expected a “friendly” departure.⁷¹

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Instead, a captivated Hamilton watched Lathrop sit down and "proceed gently but with devastating thoroughness to go over the whole situation." Lathrop, said Hamilton, reminded the superintendent that "if things were rotten it was he who must shoulder the responsibility" because "after all he was the one in authority." J. Lathrop, what's more, "left him no doubt at all as to how rotten things were." Hamilton was braced for the man's icy retort. It didn't come. Despite Lathrop's "severity," the superintendent listened with "amazing meekness" and promised henceforth to "do his best." The episode stiffened Hamilton's own resolve ever afterward to "say the disagreeable things which it is so much easier to leave unsaid." This was the velvet-glove toughness that moved Louise Bowen and Lucy Flower to tap Lathrop for the juvenile court project.⁷²

Lathrop knew the power of a lady went only so far. Her power was persuasion. Chicago women had applied it to elected officials on the issue of juvenile courts since the Civil War years, without success. The juvenile court was still a dream.

Yet today's clubwomen were strong, influential, and numerous. This time, they formed a coalition. The Chicago Woman's Club was to be at the forefront, but consolidated with "other clubs of women, other organizations, civic and philanthropic." Lathrop said yes. Allied with them, she pressured the Illinois legislature to create the juvenile court. Success of successes: the Law for the Care of Dependent, Neglected, and Delinquent Children was enacted in January 1899.⁷³

Lathrop, like the clubwomen, concealed her shock at the terms of the law. The cunning legislators provided no salaries for the court officers the law required. Undaunted, the wealthy Bowen and Flower spearheaded a drive to raise money to pay probation officers. They knew "absolutely nothing" about juvenile courts and learned that "no literature on juvenile courts existed." No matter. The women knew that a probation officer must love children and have "the strength of a Samson and the delicacy of an Ariel." They raised the money, and the court opened with a salaried staff in place in the following July.⁷⁴

They taught Lathrop a cardinal lesson about political strength: that a cluster of organizations could band together and multiply power many times over. Social democracy could be advanced through different organizations acting in concert. Coordination and energy and timing could overcome political inertia. Women did not yet have the right to vote in the state of Illinois—and would not achieve that right until 1913. Nevertheless, women's groups joined together and accomplished a political goal that served the most vulnerable population, the children. A coalition could be a juggernaut for progress.

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Lathrop learned a discouraging lesson too. Voluntary organizations had a built-in weakness. They were haphazard. Crudely put, a volunteer was an amateur. Lathrop may have recalled an anecdote that was told about Abraham Lincoln by a Rockford man of her father's generation. In 1850, Ralph Emerson, a cousin of Ralph Waldo, remembered the remark of a young lawyer, Lincoln, who said that self-schooled attorneys like himself trusted too much to "the inspiration of the moment." Lincoln vowed to "study law" in order to compete with "college trained men who . . . study on a single case perhaps for months." This was the kind of professionalism that lawyers and physicians and engineers were developing in the latter years of the nineteenth century and anticipating in the twentieth. Leading medical schools within universities were now emphasizing specialization, research, and clinical science. The shop-floor engineer was giving way to the university-trained professional, and attorneys were increasingly trained in university schools of law, not in the offices of local lawyers.⁷⁵

What about those who tried to meet the challenges of modern society—family problems, workplace problems, housing, health care, and so on? They, too, badly needed professional training. Politicians would not provide good leadership on these complex matters. The reeking, overflowing garbage boxes and the smallpox episode were proof of their dangerous laxity. The corrupt Nineteenth Ward alderman, Johnny Powers, was a perfect specimen of the breed. A constant thorn in the side of Hull House, Powers was dubbed the "Gray Wolf" for preying on a defenseless public. Powers "traded votes for favors" and excelled at bribery. As the garbage and horse manure piled up, he wooed the ward's gullible poor with Christmas turkeys.⁷⁶

Well-meaning citizen volunteers, meanwhile, found themselves overwhelmed when faced with complex social problems. Each "solution" opened a Pandora's box. Louise Bowen remarked that the city's problems seemed obvious until the Juvenile Protective Association tried to help; then found they "hardly knew where to begin."⁷⁷

What Julia Clifford Lathrop knew from the Chicago years was that one must record the facts of these lives as hard data, including numbers. The facts, what's more, must speak loudly and clearly to the better-off public as if through a new device, the megaphone. A favorite writer of hers, Mrs. Stowe, wrote that "the muscles are dependent on the brain and nerves for power to move." A progressive movement, Lathrop understood, required the muscle, brain, and nerves of many individuals and groups acting together for a common purpose. The juvenile court movement in Chicago proved that point beyond doubt. The traditional feminine "power of tenderness and sympathy" was important, but taking the reins was everything. These days, the driver's

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seat belonged to the "sociologist and statistician" and social worker. This was the seat of hard facts and figures, statistics, and careful research. Men had claimed the seat in economics and other fields. As far as Lathrop could tell, hard data belonged to women as well. In this modern moment, a woman ought to know how to seek and get hold of her facts and figures. Jane Addams might rely on wellsprings of hidden wisdom, but Lathrop did not. Some said that this was the age of the engineer. If so, she allied with it. As a social reformer, she was a social engineer. Her mother, Adeline, had long lamented that Julia was not spiritually moved to join the church. At the turn of the twentieth century, Julia had found her intellectual center and her faith. Ever the lady, she gazed at the world as a social scientist.⁷⁸

Lathrop's efforts were now two-pronged in the 1900s and 1910s: first, to help create a modern professional school for social work training and research; second, to help make the volunteer-amateur citizen as effective as possible. For the latter, she went to her Hull House desk late at night, set out pens, and opened her inkwell. Drawing on more than ten years' experience, she composed a training manual for citizen-visitors who evaluated public institutions. It would be a pamphlet, as welcoming as a hot cup of tea and yet coldly scientific as an evaluation tool.

The visitor's encounter must be reliably courteous, she emphasized, and the task approached in a spirit "of friendly co-operation and helpfulness . . . tact and patience." This amounted to a code of conduct. No matter what the mood or temperament of the visitor, he or she would behave in a standardized way. Visitors also needed focus. Left to their own devices, they could be distracted by trivialities and miss the critical factors. A woman like New York's Vinnie Day would probably swipe a white-gloved finger across a surface to check for dust specks yet ignore the drugs and mechanical restraints that subdued patients who ought to be taken out for fresh air and exercise. The visitors also needed to understand the laws that governed the institutions, so Lathrop cited the provisions of the Illinois state statute on "lunacy," trusting that those in other states who might chance to see her pamphlet would research their own laws.⁷⁹

A checklist was also important. Drawn up as a chart, it gave site visitors clear categories for convenient documentation over a series of visits. Under "Buildings," for instance, a visitor could check "Fire-escape" and make a quick note. Under "Care of Inmates," she or he could find "Cleanliness" and jot a comment. There must be practical advice too, for instance, on supplying decks of cards and chess sets for recreation, and ridding bedding of lice and other vermin.⁸⁰

Lathrop concluded her pamphlet with the heading "Need of a Standard."

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She urged repeated inspections at sites across Illinois, deliberately making the pamphlet a data file. It could cross-reference information from one visitor to the next, from one county or state institution to the next, until the picture of treatment statewide came clearly into view. The coyly titled *Suggestions for Institution Visitors* represented a newer way of thinking. It moved effective action out of the realm of personalities. Instead of hit-or-miss, it enabled a dependable assessment. It provided the machinery for putting results above political favoritism.

Lathrop glimpsed even greater possibilities for the future. Her *Suggestions for Institution Visitors* was the kind of instrument to cross the boundary line from one state of the union to the next, until the nation had a measured view of its treatment of those who depended on public funding for their lives. This was the mental outlook that belonged to sociology, social work, and statistics. These, in turn, were the components of civic life, of social democracy.

Suggestions for Institution Visitors was published in 1905, just when Lathrop accepted a second charities board appointment that would run to 1909. Her schedule was crammed, and in the freezing Chicago winter, she now shuttled excitedly from Hull House to a building on Michigan Avenue, where a new, irresistible opportunity awaited her. A school for social research and the professional training of social workers was just launched in Chicago, and Lathrop eagerly became a faculty member. The school's founder was himself a settlement house director, a Protestant minister named Graham Taylor who recognized the limitations of settlement houses as educational institutions. They were not meant to sponsor research. They were not created to train practitioners for a new discipline. Only a school could do these things. In 1903, Taylor rented space in a downtown Chicago building and taught a semester-long course to twelve fledgling students in the new profession of social work. Lathrop soon came into his orbit and stepped up to teach a course on public charities, covering the topics dear to her heart and mind: public relief, institutions for the insane, and public responsibility for the disabled and the chronically ill.⁸¹

Lathrop was afire. The new school could take social work and research in a wholly new direction. If it could survive financially and keep its independence, it was the perfect platform for major breakthroughs in public thinking about assistance to those in need. Above all, Lathrop knew, professional social work must not be a glorified version of the charitable "friendly visit" to the homes of the poor and luckless. The traditional caseworker who treated clients as criminals who had deliberately committed the crime of poverty was a version of the Dunning relief station with its winter food basket. The worker who offered mere palliatives was a distant cousin of Johnny Powers

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with his Christmas turkeys. The organization that promoted these views was the Charity Organization Society, based in New York City. Dangerously old-fashioned, it impeded social democracy because it pushed low-wage and chronically ill and disabled people to the margins, where they remained social outcasts in the minds of respectable people like the senior Clarence Days.⁸²

Gazing eastward, Lathrop would not be surprised to learn that the senior Clarence Day—Father—contributed to the Charity Organization Society, for its notion of charity pleased the true believers in *laissez-faire*. The soft-hearted Mother—Vinnie Day—tucked envelopes with contributions to hospitals, orphanages, the fresh-air fund. But she gave no thought to social work or its conception, even as the Charity Organization Society gained strength in their city. Lathrop knew it was Chicago's turn to talk back. It was Chicago's turn to set the new reform agenda.⁸³

Lathrop became the first director of the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy. At her insistence, *civics* was a key term in the name. The school exposed the ways in which the conditions of modern industry contributed to poverty. It taught that the state or government must play a positive role to rectify abysmal social conditions. This role was justified by a merit system—the civil service system—that officially sidelined the spoils system of politics. The horrible assassination of President Garfield by a frustrated office seeker in 1881 had prompted the passage of the Pendleton Act two years later. The waste and graft of the spoils system, it was hoped, would yield to the efficiency and economy of a civil service workforce of professionals who were hired on the basis of competitive examinations. The Pendleton Act did not abolish political patronage, but it set political appointees apart from those placed in the merit service. Oversight of the new system was entrusted to three civil service commissioners. During the Altgeld years, Lathrop had helped put this system in place for the recruitment of physicians at the state hospitals. It worked. It gave her confidence that the high-quality experts within the civil service could be the arm of government best able to strengthen social democracy. "The study of the apparatus of government formed a central component of the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy."⁸⁴

Toward these ends, Lathrop knew, the Chicago school must become a leading center for social research in this modern age of fact-based science. Everyone who was involved in the push for the juvenile court in the late 1890s remembered the scramble to make do with anecdotes about street boys and exploited girls. Anecdotes, however, were not data. *Scientific* was now Lathrop's byword, and she worked for rigorous social research that was

undertaken by the most sophisticated methods for the collection and analysis of data—and policies then developed from the data. In 1907, a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation let Lathrop create a department of social research at the School of Civics and Philanthropy. It was thrilling to be able to recruit a new generation of professionally trained younger women to undertake it. The Abbott sisters, Edith and Grace, together with Sophonisba ("Nisba") Breckenridge, all with their Ph.D.'s, augured well for the post-Gilded Age future.⁸⁵

The school survived, and Lathrop reluctantly left it as she left Chicago when the Children's Bureau position drew her to Washington in 1912. The irony was palpable: she who had criticized the failings of American politics for years was now to work in its national epicenter. From now on, Lathrop kept her eye on the School of Civics and Philanthropy at long distance from the Children's Bureau headquarters on the fifth floor of the Department of Labor. Finally, in 1920, the school became a part of the University of Chicago. Renamed the School of Social Service Administration, it conferred master's and Ph.D. degrees.

By then, Lathrop had lived in Washington, D.C., for eight years, serving the entire time as Children's Bureau chief. She missed Chicago terribly, and she loved hosting Florence Kelley and Alice Hamilton in her apartment when duty brought them to the capital. The Hull House old friends swapped ideas, plotted strategy, and vented their secret grievances while enjoying Lathrop's homemade omelets or brown buttered oysters.

The eight years—1912 to 1920—of her directorship of the Children's Bureau were dynamic, not a minute to spare. The bureau's first small staff of fifteen expanded to seventy-five, and Congress accordingly increased the budget. The chief breathed easier when the prenatal and infant care pamphlets of 1913–14 became runaway successes printed in the multimillions and requested by members of Congress for their constituents. Baby fairs were staged, together with an annual Baby Week and a 1918–19 American Children's Year, all to reinforce the needs for the public protection of maternity and infancy, for wholesome recreation, and for free public schooling for all. The registration of births nationwide was an enormous undertaking, and the bureau enlisted the help of committees of women, mostly members of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, to canvass and organize birth records in all forty-eight states. The pamphlet-manual Lathrop wrote for institution visitors stood her in good stead as the bureau organized the massive birth registration drive.⁸⁶

How did Lathrop weather the constant political storms of Washington? More important, how effective was the Children's Bureau under her direc-



Children's Year poster, 1918–19, cosponsored by U.S. Children's Bureau and Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense. (Library of Congress)

tion and beyond? One recent historian of the agency, Kriste Lindenmeyer, points out that an ever-expanding Washington bureaucracy tended to lessen the power and influence of the bureau over the course of the twentieth century. She emphasizes a point all too familiar to Lathrop and her colleagues, that "minors are a particularly vulnerable constituency who have little power in a government controlled by adults" and that "the most defenseless children tend to come from socioeconomic groups with little political voice." In the Lathrop era, moreover, the bureau's conception of the "whole child" was the child of a traditional patriarchal family, with its male breadwinner and stay-at-home wife-mother. Neither Lathrop nor the younger researchers and civic groups who worked with the bureau were able to recognize that social democracy must be expanded to include the single-parent family and the mother who worked outside the home.⁸⁷

Lindenmeyer, however, points out that the Children's Bureau "contributed significantly to the growing recognition of childhood as a period of life demanding special attention and direction." She adds that its studies were often "the first 'scientific' investigations into the circumstances of particular groups of children." Its data led to "the nation's first maternal and infant health care program (the 1921 Sheppard-Towner Act), child labor regulation,

and the inclusion of children's programs in the 1935 Social Security Act." As another bureau historian has remarked, the Children's Bureau became "the central, and in some cases the sole, source of authoritative information about the welfare of children and their families throughout the United States."⁸⁸

The U.S. Children's Bureau continues today as part of the Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. According to its mission statement, "The Children's Bureau seeks to provide for the safety, permanency and well being of children through leadership, support for necessary services, and productive partnerships with States, Tribes, and communities." Inclusive and comprehensive, the statement reflects the continuing legacy of Julia Clifford Lathrop and those who worked with her. Her statement to the National Education Association in Milwaukee on July 5, 1919, speaks clearly to twenty-first-century America and to a globalized world. "We cannot help the world toward democracy if we despise democracy at home," she told the educators. Democracy, she explained, "is despised when mother or child die needlessly. It is despised in the person of every child who is left to grow up ignorant, weak, unskilled, unhappy, no matter what his race or color."⁸⁹