Sisters Who Changed America: Edith and Grace Abbott

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When you were 10 years old, did you go to school, or did you hammer rocks and pick out the coal deep inside a dark, dusty mine? Did you hunch over a sewing machine stitching shirts in a noisy factory ten hours a day six days a week?

Between 1890 and 1910 nearly one in five American children ages 10 to 15 worked for pay rather than attending school. At the turn of the 20th century, society did not view children as individuals with rights. They were their parents' property, and so was any money they earned.[1]



Boys breaking coal in a Pennsylvania mine, 1911, Lewis W. Hines, Library of Congress, National Child Labor Committee Collection LC-DIG-nclc-01133, No publication restrictions.



Girls sewing curtains in Boston, 1917, photo by Lewis W. Hines, Library of Congress, National Child Labor Committee Collection, nclc 05192 https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/nclc.05192. No publication restrictions.

[1] Shuman, M. (2017) "The History of Child Labor in the United States – part 1: Little Children Working," Monthly Labor Review, Jan. 2017, doi.org/10.21916/mlr.2017.1; Virginia Commonwealth University Social Welfare History Project, C. Paul, "National Child Labor Committee: Founded April 25 1904"; *Art to Zoo*, News for Schools from the Smithsonian Institute, "In the Playtime of Others: Child Labor in the Early 20th Century," December 1988.

Child labor horrified Edith and Grace Abbott and they did their best to stop it. They also worked to secure voting rights for women, stop the exploitation of immigrants, secure better pay and safer conditions for working women and saved the lives of thousands of mothers and babies from preventable complications of pregnancy and birth. In addition, they helped create the profession of social work and laid the foundations for the nation's public assistance system. How did two girls born on the Nebraska frontier in the late 1800s, a time when women were expected to devote themselves to home and family, accomplish all this?

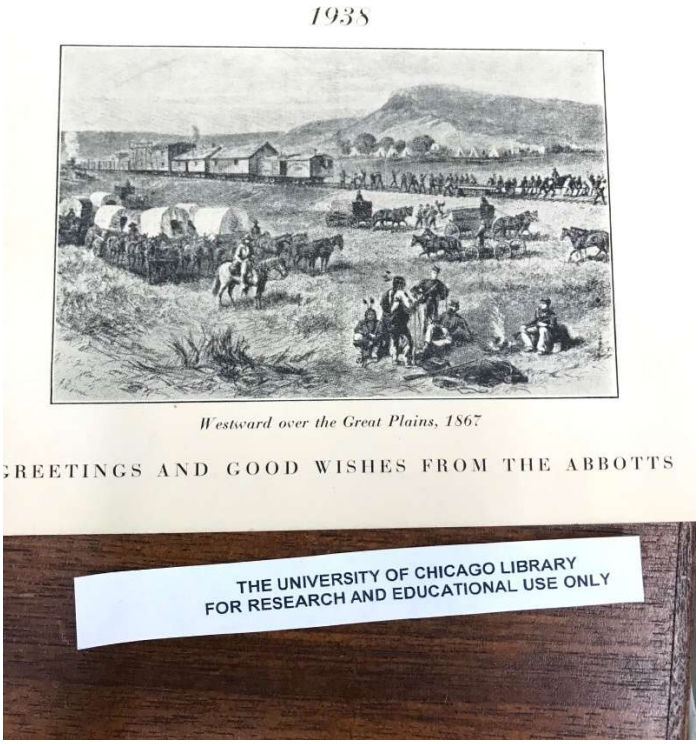
Chapter 1: Childhood in a Small, Prairie Town

"Make way for the Overland Express!"[2] Grace would yell as the sisters galloped along the trail. Edith and Grace played pioneers driving their covered wagons, the chariots of the West, to the California Gold Rush in search of treasure. Sometimes they pretended to be heroic Pony Express riders delivering important messages from distant, exotic cities. Between adventures, they listened to the meadowlarks singing along the Overland Trail. They climbed cottonwood trees and watched the antelope graze on buffalo grass on the endless prairie. They hunted for velvety violets and juicy wild grapes along the Platte River.

The Abbott sisters loved their little prairie town, and they loved listening to their parents tell stories of the pioneer days. In 1867, their father Otham and his brother trekked west from

[2] Sorensen, J. (2015) The Life and Work of Grace Abbott from the Writings of Her Sister, Edith Abbott. University of Chicago Press. p. 41.

Illinois in a covered wagon to seek their fortune, stopping in Grand Island, Nebraska. They hoped the new state would offer opportunities to buy land and make a good living.[3]



Author's photo of Abbott family's 1938 Christmas card featuring covered wagons crossing Nebraska, University of Chicago's Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, April 2022

Their mother Elizabeth grew up in a log house in Illinois. Her Quaker family so strongly opposed slavery that they risked arrest to help enslaved people escape to freedom on the Underground Railroad.[4] Elizabeth taught school while she and Otham courted, much of the time

[3] Abbott, Othman, "Recollections of a Pioneer Lawyer," Chapter 18; History of Hall County p. 566-567.
[4] Sorenson, J. 2015. A Sister's Memories: The Life and Work of Grace Abbott from the Writings of her Sister, Edith Abbott. pp. 24-27.

through writing letters. Following the custom of the time, she left her job when they married, never seeking employment outside the home again.

Together the Abbotts built their family and helped build their frontier community. Elizabeth raised money to build the town's first hospital and helped establish its first public library. Otham, the first lawyer to open an office in Hall County, helped write Grand Island's city charter and Nebraska's state constitution. He won the election to become Nebraska's first lieutenant governor in 1876, the year Edith was born.[5] The Abbott's civic actions shaped the town in which Edith and Grace would grow up and their daughters' understanding of community.

For entertainment, Edith and Grace often walked the dusty roads from their wood farmhouse to the county's cupola-topped brick courthouse. They'd sit in the balcony for hours listening to their father present cases. He loved to talk about the law and politics, and the girls loved to listen. At home, he explained the strategy, arguments, and evidence in his latest case. He and Elizabeth also debated political issues, and they encouraged their children to join in.

Grace, who was two years younger than Edith, didn't need much encouragement. She frequently debated with her mother and grandmother about clothes. Grace longed to wear bright dresses, not the dark ones they bought for her. She absolutely hated the red-flannel long underwear she had to wear in the winter and the scratchy sun bonnets the adults insisted she wear in the summer. One day when Grace's grandmother told her to put on a stiffly starched dress she refused.

[5] Sorenson, J. 2015. A Sister's Memories: The Life and Work of Grace Abbott from the Writings of her Sister, Edith Abbott. pp. 60-61.

The old Quaker woman pleaded with Grace to wear the dress and to keep it clean, saying, "I want thee to look like a proper child."

Grace replied, "But Grandmother, I don't want to be a proper child, I want do things." [6]



Edith Abbott about 5 years old, 1881, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center, apf1-00001



Grace Abbott at about 3 years old, 1881, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center apf1-00026

One evening, a group of German immigrant neighbors knocked on the door and anxiously asked for Mr. Abbott. The cause for their visit and distress? The German government

[6] Sorenson, J. 2015. A Sister's Memories: The Life and Work of Grace Abbott from the Writings of her Sister, Edith Abbott pp. 87-88.

had summoned their sons to serve in the Kaiser's imperial army. They were terrified that if their boys returned to Germany, they'd never see them again. Could Mr. Abbott help?

Otham carefully reviewed the documents. He then explained that their sons couldn't be forced to join the German army since they'd become naturalized American citizens. He told his neighbors not to worry; he knew exactly how to stop the disturbing draft notices. The weight of worry visibly lifted off their shoulders. Edith and Grace beamed with pride. Their father could stand up to anyone, even the German Empire, and fix any injustice.[7] They dreamed of being like him.

Their mother also battled injustice. Elizabeth taught her children that all people deserved freedom and should be treated equitably. The ban against women voting especially angered and frustrated her. Elizabeth clearly remembered the moment she became an ardent suffragist at age eight. An uncle gave her a copy of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's revolutionary1848 speech. It proclaimed that women have a moral right to vote and to legal recognition as individuals. Back then, the law regarded a single woman as part of her father and married women as part of their husband. Men held the legal right to make all decisions and to own all property. Elizabeth knew this was wrong and told her daughters: "I was always a suffragist, and even if you are little girls, you can be suffragists, too, because it is right and just." [8] Edith and Grace wanted to be like their mother too.

Mr. and Mrs. Abbott worked to put a constitutional amendment granting women voting rights before the Nebraska legislature in 1882. The famous suffragist Susan B. Anthony travelled

[7] Sorensen, J. (2003) "A Prairie Childhood" by Edith Abbott: An Excerpt from The Children's Champion, A Biography of Grace Abbott. p. 74
[8] Sorensen, J. (2003) pp. 55.

to Grand Island to give a speech urging people to support this amendment. Edith and Grace couldn't wait to see Miss Anthony and hear what she would say. Imagine their excitement when they learned Miss Anthony would spend the night at their house. With only three bedrooms for their parents, grandmother, the girls and their two brothers, hosting an overnight guest required sacrifice. Edith, then six years old, proudly helped the suffragist cause by sharing her bed with Miss Anthony. [9]

Despite the Nebraska suffragists' best efforts, the amendment failed. While disappointed, they did not give up. The struggle for women's suffrage would continue and as young women Edith and Grace would contribute more to the cause than sharing a place to sleep.

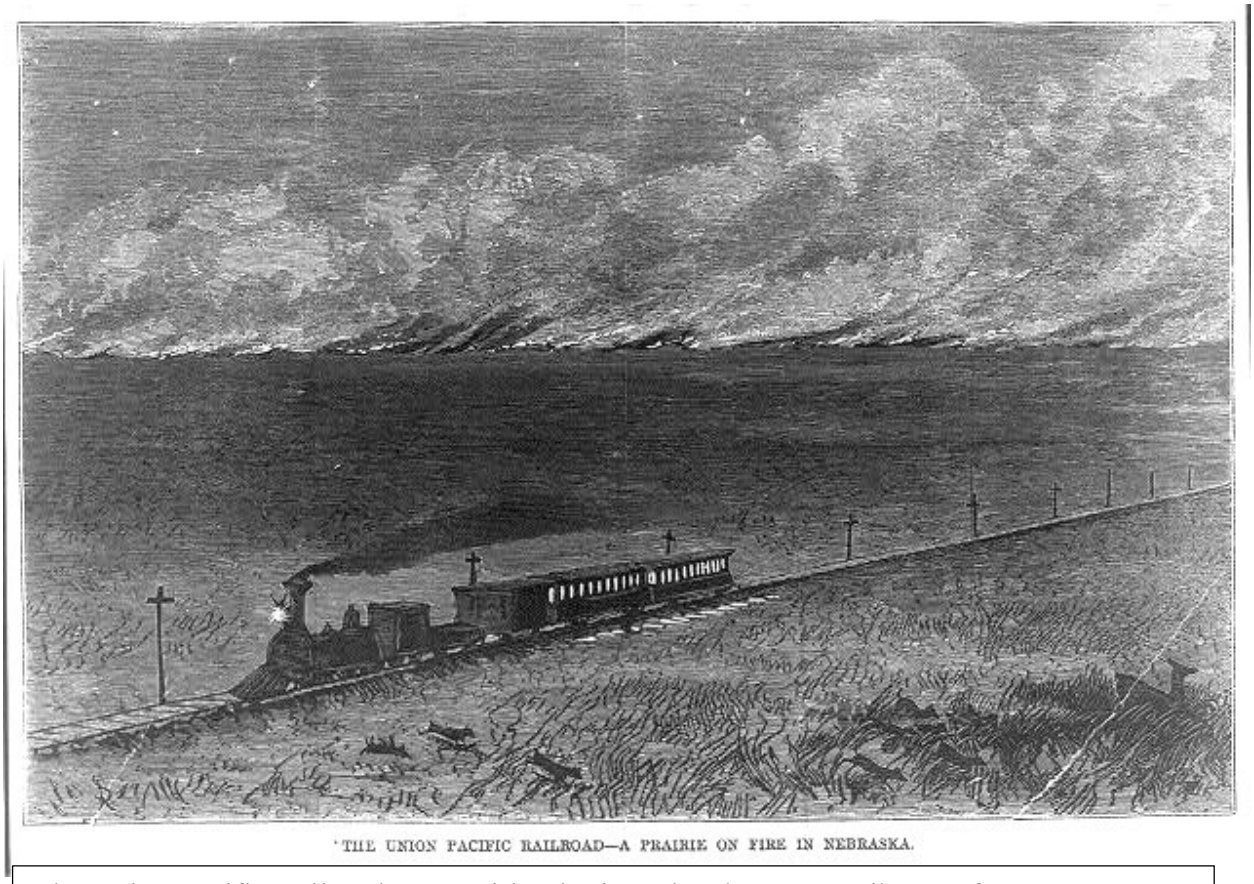
Chapter 2: Rugged Co-operation

Edith and Grace enjoyed many adventures on the prairie, but sometimes an occasional grave along the Overland Trail interrupted their carefree play. They'd wonder what had happened, why did that person die? When Mr. and Mrs. Abbott told the children stories about the difficulties pioneers faced they always ended happily. Through hard work, perseverance, and courage the pioneers overcame countless obstacles to transform Nebraska from dry grassland to a bountiful farmland. To be a pioneer, the sisters learned, you had "to accept temporary defeat in the confident belief in ultimate victory…" and keep trying.[10]

Edith and Grace didn't just hear stories about tough times, they lived through them too. Blizzards swept the plains, killing the cattle that people depended on for food. Hail, tornadoes,

[9] Sorensen, J. (2003) pp. 56-57.
[10] Abbott, Edith. 1939 "A Sister's Memories," *Social Service Review* 13(3): 351-407.

and swarms of ravenous grasshoppers destroyed crops, wiping out farmers' income for the entire year. Lightning strikes during summer storms sparked fast-moving prairie fires. One fearful night Edith and Grace huddled together on their front porch watching the ominous red glow of a prairie fire on the horizon and wondered if it would come burn their home to the ground. [11] Edith began to see life as "a struggle with invisible forces."[12]



The Union Pacific Railroad – A Prairie Fire in Nebraska, 1869, Library of Congress LC-USZ62-35692, no known restrictions

[11] Sorensen, J. (2003) "A Prairie Childhood" by Edith Abbott: An Excerpt from The Children's Champion, A Biography of Grace Abbott. p. 98

[12] Ibid p. 95

When disaster struck, the citizens of Grand Island helped each other. When a neighbor became lost in a snowstorm, Mr. Abbott braved the bitter cold and howling wind to rescue him. When scarlet fever killed a neighbor's young child, Mrs. Abbott took the grieving mother blooms from her prized oleander tree and wept with her.[13] The Abbott sisters learned that to survive, people not only had to work hard, they had to work together. It took what Edith called "rugged co-operation."[14]

Chapter 3: School Days

Mrs. Abbott considered books the only things worth giving and receiving as gifts, and they filled the house. The family often read together in the evenings by the fireplace, the children especially loved Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.[15] Given this home environment, Edith and Grace naturally loved learning and school. With her big, brown eyes, Edith quietly observed and analyzed all that went on around her. She strove to please her parents and teachers. Grace couldn't sit still. She challenged her parents and teachers whenever she disagreed or didn't understand them. One day an exasperated teacher exclaimed, "Grace, I don't know what to do with you. I'll have to talk to your mother." Grace replied, "But Mother doesn't know what to do with me either and sometimes I don't know what to do with myself." [16]

Edith grew into a slender, elegant beauty with light hair. When the Abbott sisters walked into a room, probably all eyes turned to her rather than her shorter, sturdier dark-haired little sister. However, attention would soon shift to the vivacious Grace. She loved parties, meeting

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[13] Ibid p. 44.
[14] Ibid. p. 95

[15] Sorensen, J. (2003) "A Prairie Childhood" by Edith Abbott: An Excerpt from The Children's Champion, A Biography of Grace Abbott. p.85
[16] Ibid p. 78

people, talking, and playing games. Edith was shy and felt uncomfortable in social gatherings. She preferred home and the classroom.

Because Mr. and Mrs. Abbott believed the key to success was a good education, they sent Edith to a college prep high school over a hundred miles away in Omaha. Edith grew terribly homesick living in Brownell Hall, writing home that she was "completely unhappy."[17] Despite her loneliness, Edith drew upon her pioneer spirit, and she graduated at the top of her class.



Edith as a graduate of Brownell Hall in 1893, wearing her scholarship medal. University of Chicago Library, Special collections Research Center, apf1-00024



Grace Abbott as a high school student, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center apf1-00027

[17] Ibid. p. 102

When Grace reached high school, her parents could no longer afford private school. At Grand Island High School Grace channeled her boundless energy into debate. She particularly liked to argue for women's right to vote. After one debate, her younger brother Arthur boasted, "Grace is such a grand fighter." [18]

Upon high school graduation, middle- and upper-class boys of the Victorian Era entered college or a profession, many also engaged in politics. In contrast, a woman's place, according to beliefs of the time, was in the home. So strong was this social expectation that historians call it the "cult of domesticity."[19] The Abbott sisters, however, wanted something different.

Chapter 4: "Invisible Forces" Knock the Abbotts off Track

When Edith graduated high school in 1893, her mother arranged a special trip for her and Grace to attend the World's Fair in Chicago. This once-in-a-lifetime spectacle covered hundreds of acres along Lake Michigan and offered exhibitions on everything from anthropology to zoology. It displayed the latest technology, like moving pictures and electric light bulbs. In the international pavilions visitors immersed themselves in scenes from distant, exotic places, like a Cairo street or an African village.

The central exhibition area featured grand Neoclassical buildings that looked as if they had been transported from ancient Rome. Their bright white exteriors gleamed in the sunlight.

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[18] Ibid. p. 58

[19] Keisster, L. and D. Southgate (2012) Inequality: A Contemporary Approach to Race, Class, and Gender, Cambridge University Press, p. 228; The Cult of Domesticity: Definition and History thoughtco.com/cult-of-domesticity-4694493, accessed 3/29/2022

Serene pools and canals surrounded the buildings, reflecting their beauty. This "White City" must have dazzled the teenaged Abbott sisters.

The fair's midway, dominated by the world's first Ferris wheel, offered an array of entertainments that included escape artist Harry Houdini and ragtime pianist Scott Joplin. Stands lining the midway offered curious new foods, like hamburgers and carbonated drinks.[20] What sight most captured Edith's imagination?



Palace of Mechanic Arts and lagoon at the World's Fair, 1892, photo by Frances B. Johnston, Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-116999, no known restrictions

Across from the midway rose the Gothic buildings of the newly opened University of Chicago.[21] The university's first completed building, the majestic limestone Cobb Hall, looked

[20] Encyclopedia of Chicago (encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1386.html; accessed 8/30/21); PBS American Experience "Chicago: City of the Century – World's Columbian Exposition of 1893"
[21] The Encyclopedia of Chicago, University of Chicago (encyclopedia.chicago.history.org/pages/1289.html)

like England's famed medieval university at Oxford. Edith had read that top scholars conducted groundbreaking research and taught there. Best of all, it was one of the few universities that admitted women students. Edith knew immediately that she must attend the University of Chicago. She could not have foreseen at the time how large a role it would play in her life.

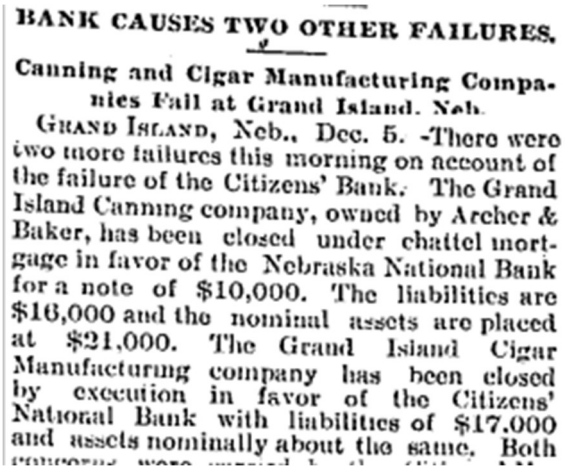
The high of the World's Fair suddenly plunged into a shocking low. In the early 1890's invisible forces of nature, mostly droughts, destroyed acres and acres of crops across the nation. With nothing to sell, farmers couldn't pay the mortgages on their farms to the banks. The widespread agricultural calamity caused the nation's banking system to collapse. The "Panic of 1893" kicked off an economic depression that lasted nearly five years. The bank where Mr. Abbott had saved the children's college money failed. In a flash, all their money vanished, crushing Edith's college dreams. [22] What would she do now?



BANKS CONTINUE TO FAIL.

Institutions in Illinois, Missouri, Nebraska and Indiana Close Their Doors.

New York Times, July 12, 1893. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.



BANK CAUSES TWO OTHER FAILURES.

Canning and Cigar Manufacturing Companies Fail at Grand Island, Neb.

GRAND ISLAND, Neb., Dec. 5. -There were two more failures this morning on account of the failure of the Citizens' Bank. The Grand Island Canning company, owned by Archer & Baker, has been closed under chattel mortgage in favor of the Nebraska National Bank for a note of $10,000. The liabilities are $16,000 and the nominal assets are placed at $21,000. The Grand Island Cigar Manufacturing company has been closed by execution in favor of the Citizens' National Bank with liabilities of $17,000 and assets nominally about the same. Both

Chicago Daily Tribune, Dec. 6, 1893, p. 3. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

[22] Sorensen, J. (2003) "A Prairie Childhood" by Edith Abbott: An Excerpt from The Children's Champion, A Biography of Grace Abbott. pp. 103-105; Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago. pp. 13-14.

Edith shook off her shock and disappointment and analyzed the situation. The crisis called for rugged cooperation -- her family needed money. Since teaching was one of the few professions open to women, Edith took a job at Grand Island's high school. She taught math, English, and history and earned $15 a month.[23] She was only sixteen years old, younger than some of her students. Suddenly Edith was no longer a high school student, but a working adult with authority, and she had to act like it.

Edith didn't give up on her college dream though. Like the pioneers, she pressed on through the temporary setback. She saved some of her salary to take correspondence courses with the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. The postal service linked Edith to lessons and provided her a way of turning in homework. While not the college experience she'd dreamed of, it enabled Edith to progress towards a bachelor's degree.

In 1896, the presidential candidates, William McKinley (R) and William Jennings Byran (D), clashed over how to pull the nation out of the depression. Their debate sparked Edith's interest in economics.[24] Given her family's recent financial troubles, she recognized how deeply the economy affected people. She saw that, like the weather, the economy was another invisible force that shaped people's lives.[25]

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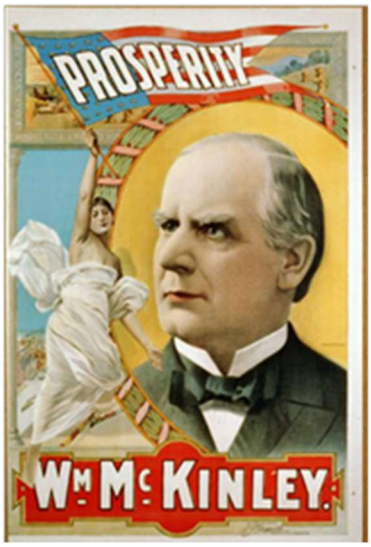
[23] Ibid. p. 105

[24] Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago. pp. 11-15.

[25] Sorenson, J. 2015. A Sister's Memories: The Life and Work of Grace Abbott from the Writings of her Sister, Edith Abbott. pp.106



Bryan campaign poster, Library of Congress, CN2001697077



McKinley campaign poster, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, CN2002719963

Edith started taking courses in economics, the science of how a society organizes its limited resources to produce the goods and services that people want. Simply put, economists figure out how to get the most out of what you have. Edith wanted to understand how the economy worked in general and how to end the depression in particular.

Eventually Edith saved enough money to move to Lincoln and take college classes in person. She must have been thrilled to get back into the classroom as a student. While taking college courses, she supported herself by teaching in the Lincoln public schools. Her life was finally back on track, or so she thought.

A letter from her mother announced another crisis: "My dear it is very hard for me to write this to you but there seems no other way….I have shed tears over this and papa told me how much he hated to ask you for money."[26] Edith recognized how dire the situation must be, so

[26] Abbott, Edith and Grace. Papers [Box 83, Folder 1] Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

she sent her parents most of her college money. She reminded herself that this was just another bump on the trail and that, with persistence, she would eventually succeed. And she did. Edith completed her undergraduate degree in 1901, with honors, roughly six years after she began her first college class.

Meanwhile, Grace enrolled at the newly opened college in Grand Island, saving money by living at home. She majored in political science, the study of how societies make the rules that govern our lives. She wondered how the democratic process worked and how elected officials made decisions. Grace also took law courses so she could understand how to write laws and how courts worked.[27] When she graduated, Grace followed in Edith's footsteps, teaching at Grand Island High School. Always up for action, she also coached the girls' basketball team and directed the student theater.

The Abbott sisters both earned college degrees despite the social expectations for women and their family's financial problems. Still, neither Edith nor Grace felt prepared to do the important work of their ambitions. Neither sister was quite sure what that important work would be, but they sensed that they would find it if they just kept looking.

Chapter 5: Beyond College

As Edith finished her undergraduate degree in Lincoln, she dreamed about attending the University of Chicago's graduate school. Only a few women attended graduate school in the

[27] Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago. p. 16

early 1900's and Edith was determined be one of them.[28] She saved enough money to take a few summer classes in Chicago, getting her foot in the door. She so impressed her professors with her intellect and drive that they offered her a scholarship.[29] At last, Edith could immerse herself in graduate studies at the University of Chicago. She'd made her dream come true.

Edith moved into Green Hall, an imposing Gothic building on campus that looked more like a fortress than a women's dormitory. Professor Sophonisba Breckinridge, an independent-minded woman from Kentucky trained in political economy and law, served as Green Hall's headmistress. Meeting Professor Breckinridge would prove more fateful than Edith could have possibly imagined.



Edith Abbott, University of Chicago Campus, 1902/3, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center apf1-00013



Sophonisba Breckinridge, Bain News Service, Library of Congress, CALL NUMBER: LC-B2- 1379-4[P&P] REPRODUCTION NUMBER: LC-DIG-ggbain-07524.

[28] Rossiter, M. (1982). "Doctorates for American Women, 1868-1907," *History of Education Quarterly* 22(2): 159 – 183.

[29] Abbott, Edith and Grace. Papers [Box 2, Folder 14] Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

While less academically driven than Edith, Grace realized that staying in Grand Island limited her professional opportunities. She loved the idea of seeing more of the world and living near her sister. After Grace saved enough from her teaching salary, she followed Edith to the University of Chicago to study political science.

Chicago presented a whole new world to the Abbott sisters. So many people, so many factories and stockyards, such crowded housing, and so few open places where children could play. No vast prairies or antelopes here, just tall buildings and horse-drawn carriages crowding the streets. Instead of fragrant wildflowers, the stench of manure rose from the roads. But, Chicago buzzed with activity and opportunity.



One of the busiest streets in the world--State St. Chicago, c. 1903, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-stereo-1s12682

Edith studied women's role in the economy and would become the nation's leading expert on the subject. When she finished her Ph.D. in economics in 1905, she was one of only 28

women in the entire nation to earn this top degree.[30] Out of the nearly 7 million women in their twenties, 28 Ph.D. degrees means only 0.000004% of young women reached this high level of education! Edith was a pioneer in women's higher education. [31]

The year following Edith's Ph.D. graduation held both sadness and adventure. In March, the Abbott sisters' childhood hero, Susan B. Anthony, died. Despite Anthony's decades of work, American women still couldn't vote in national elections. In the Fall, Edith took her first overseas trip thanks to a scholarship at the London School of Economics. Her favorite teachers in London, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, used scientific methods to study and find solutions to social problems such as poverty. The idea of using quantitative skills to investigate challenging social problems fascinated Edith.

When she returned to the U.S. the following year, Edith found her job options limited. While more universities had opened their doors to women as students, most hadn't opened them to women as professors. She found a position at a women's college near Boston and began her academic career. Edith knew she was fortunate to secure this job, but she missed Grace and Chicago.

Chapter 6: Launching Careers with a Mentor's Help

Between 1900 and 1915, over 15 million Europeans left their homes and braved the

[30] U.S. Census Bureau 1975, "Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970," Chapter H Social Statistics, Series H 751-765, Institutions of Higher Education –Degrees Conferred by Sex: 1870 - 1970.
[31] Population total for women in their twenties reported by the Census Bureau, National Intercensal Tables: 1900 – 1990, National Characteristics by Age, Sex and Race 1900s.

Atlantic hoping to find better lives in the United States.[32] They knew little of the English language or American customs. They were sitting ducks for hustlers.

A group of concerned Chicago citizens created the Immigrants' Protective League (IPL) to prevent the exploitation of immigrants coming to the city. The League also helped immigrants adjust to their new home. Sophonisba Breckinridge played a key role in this effort. When it came time to hire a director for the new organization, she knew the perfect candidate.

As a student, Grace impressed Professor Breckinridge with her organizational skills and energy. Grace was skeptical about accepting the directorship since she had not yet finished her graduate program. Could she successfully direct the Immigrants' Protective League and finish her Ph.D.? She had her doubts, but the job offered her the authority and resources to do something important, so Grace accepted the job.

Meanwhile, Edith worked as an economics professor at Wellesley College, a women's college near Boston. Only women's colleges would hire women as economics professors at the time, so she didn't have many options.

Edith saw no reason why gender should determine which university a person attended. She found the lack of student diversity in socioeconomic background as well as gender, dull. Worst of all, the job isolated Edith from what really intrigued her, the problems of working-class women.[33]

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[32] Library of Congress "Immigrants in the Progressive Era," loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/progressive-era-to-new-era-1900-1929/imigrants-in-the-progressive-era, accessed 10/1/21.
[33] Fitzpatrick, E. (1990) Endless Crusade: Women Social Scientists and Progressive Reform, Oxford University Press, p. 81

Edith wrote to her former professor and mentor, Sophonisba Breckenridge, and explained that she wanted to find a new job. Breckinridge admired Edith's intellect and analytical skills, so she happily offered Edith a job. In fact, she offered Edith the perfect job.

Nisba, as her friends called her, invited Edith to join her as a professor at the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy. She wouldn't be an economics professor, but Edith would use her economics training. Her job would be to create and lead this private school's new social research department.[34] The department would teach and apply the scientific methods in which Edith was now so skilled, to analyze social problems in Chicago and devise policy solutions.

In 1908, Edith returned to Chicago and she and Grace moved into Hull-House, America's most famous settlement house. Social reformers Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded Hull-House in 1889. Instead of pioneers settling the West, Hull-House residents settled in a poor, immigrant neighborhood on Chicago's west side. Addams and Starr created this vibrant social service center by rehabilitating a dilapidated brick mansion in a neighborhood that Chicago's economic boom had bypassed.

Chicago at this time was one of the largest and fastest growing cities in the world, but the area around Hull-House struck the Abbott sisters as a wilderness. Their neighbors lived in wooden shacks and filthy tenements; few had electricity or running water. The place stunk. The restored Hull-House offered tranquil beauty amid the foulness and neglect. Edith found the contrast "wonderfully strange." [35]

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[34] Abbott, E. (1950) "Grace Abbott and Hull House, 1908-21, part 1," *Social Service Review* 24(3): 374-94.

[35] Sorenson and Sealander (2008). The Grace Abbott Reader. pp. 3- 4.



Author's photo of Hull-House Museum, Chicago, April 2022.



Children on Chicago Streets; Chicago, IL. Source: ICHi-03820. Chicago History Museum. Reproduction of photographic print, by Lewis Hine.

Hull-House's mission to study social problems and devise solutions appealed to Edith and Grace's intellectual and social justice inclinations. The Abbott sisters recognized that dealing with the problems of a rapidly growing, industrializing city required "rugged co-operation," and they were determined to play their part. Hull-House residents taught classes on English, art, cooking, sewing, and American citizenship. They learned about their neighbor's lives and the barriers they faced. They helped their neighbors find jobs and provided daycare so women could be confident their children were well cared for while they worked.

Hull-House residents, women and men from different political backgrounds and professional interests, studied a variety of social problems, like inadequate housing and lack of medical care, and worked to develop solutions. They understood that solving social problems requires political influence. That's why Hull-House residents worked to secure the vote for women, a cause dear to the Abbott sisters' hearts.



Hull-House Parlor/Library 1925-29, photo #47 in Mary Ann Johnson's "The Many Faces of Hull-House," University of Illinois Chicago Library Special Collections and University Archives Department, https://n2t.net/ark:/81984/d3c53f86x



Jane Addams, circa 1914, Library of Congress, digital ID cph.3a13016

In addition to enabling residents to work on interesting and important social issues, Hull-House offered single women like Edith and Grace the rare opportunity to live independently of parents or a husband, and the Abbott sisters relished this opportunity.

About twenty-two women and half as many men typically lived in the Hull- House complex. Edith and Grace loved talking with the other residents and learning from their different perspectives. Residents formed a family, a rather argumentative one at that. They would begin debating an issue from the morning newspaper at the breakfast table before going to work. They would resume the debate at dinner, offering new evidence and ideas they'd developed during the

day. This atmosphere felt familiar to the Abbott sisters and reinforced a valuable lesson: to "have both affection and respect for those who did not agree with us."[36]

Fellow resident Alice Hamilton, a doctor, captured what residents found so appealing about Hull-House: "…life there satisfied every longing for companionship, for the excitement of new experiences, for constant intellectual stimulation, and for being caught up in a big movement for social change…"[37]

Edith and Grace had found the perfect place to launch careers doing important work.

Chapter 7: Making a Difference for Women's Rights

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Hull-House's Jane Addams stood out as a leading advocate for women's right to vote. So many civic groups invited her to speak that she couldn't keep up with all the requests. When she found herself overbooked, she'd rush through Hull-House shouting, "I need an Abbott to make a suffrage speech."[38]

Audiences likely expressed disappointment when Edith or Grace, rather than the famous Miss Addams, walked on stage. Nevertheless, the sisters summoned their pioneer spirit to overcome any anxiety and would soon win the crowd over. Making these speeches, while sometimes nerve-wracking, helped Edith and Grace refine their speaking skills and build their confidence. They also enjoyed doing their part for the cause.

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[36] Abbott, E. (1950) "Grace Abbott and Hull House, 1908 -21, Part 1," *Social Service Review* 24(3): 374-394, p. 378.
[37] Hamilton, A. (1943). Exploring the Dangerous Trades: The Autobiography of Alice Hamilton. Boston, MA: Little, Brown. p. 69.
[38] Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, p. 50.

Edith also used her writing skills to promote women's right to vote. For example, she published an article in 1906 admonishing upper-class women for talking about women's suffrage but not taking action.[39] She also took the police to task for roughing up women marching in support of suffrage.[40] The reserved Nebraska school girl had grown into a woman unafraid to challenge authority when she thought it was wrong.

Edith, Grace, and other Hull-House residents accompanied Jane Addams to the Progressive Party's presidential convention in August of 1912 at Chicago's Coliseum. Miss Addams' speech supporting Theodore Roosevelt's nomination ended with wild cheering by the roughly 2,000 attendees. The Progressive party's support for "votes for women" raised the suffragists' hopes that finally the federal government would enact legislation recognizing women's right to vote. The November election results, however, dashed their hopes -- Roosevelt lost the election to Woodrow Wilson.[41]

The 1912 election wasn't a complete loss for Illinois suffragists, however. Several Progressive party candidates won seats in the state legislature. Grace travelled to the state capitol with a group of suffragists to lobby for a bill that would allow Illinois women to vote in some elections. In 1913 the bill passed. The following year roughly 15,000 suffragists marched through Chicago along Michigan Avenue to encourage women to register to vote in the upcoming election.[42] Marchers dressed nicely to project respectability and seriousness. They swirled their hair up neatly under stylish hats. They wore their best dresses, full-length per

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[39] Abbott, E. (1906) "Woman Suffrage Militant," *Independent*, LXI (Nov. 29, 1906), pp. 1276-78.
[40] Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, p. 36.

[41] Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, p. 49.

[42] Trout, G. (1920) "Side Lights on Illinois Suffrage History," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 13(2): 145-179, p. 169.

Victorian standards, crossed with sashes emblazoned with their cause: "Votes for Women." Gregarious Grace enthusiastically joined the parade. Edith did not, claiming she had too much work to do.[43]

In 1916, Edith confronted her discomfort in large groups and joined roughly 10,000 suffragists marching through Chicago, hoping to influence delegates at the Republican National Convention. She even agreed to lead a group of immigrant women, carrying their banner: "Lithuanian Women Want the Vote." Maybe she had regretted her earlier decision.



20,000 WOMEN IN LINE

Will March at Chicago Today Despite Rain Forecast.

WOMEN SCOLDED BY MALONE

The Washington Post, June 7, 1916, available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers



Chicago Tribune Historical Photos, Women Get the Vote

The persistent rain might have turned back a less determined group, but the suffragists would not be deterred. In the confusion of the massive crowds and blustery weather, Edith lost contact with the Lithuanian women. Despite being drenched and separated from her group, Edith marched on undaunted, holding their banner high.[44]

[43] Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, p. 49

[44] Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, p. 50.

It would take persistent effort by thousands of suffragists like Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, and the Abbott sisters to secure women's voting rights. It took over 70 years since Elizabeth Cady Stanton's revolutionary speech initiated the push for women's suffrage for American women to finally get voting rights in 1920 with the ratification of the 19th amendment.



Ballots for Women Declared To Be Part Of U. S. Constitution

Secretary of State Colby Signs Proclamation Announcing the Ratification of the 19th Amendment.

The Atlanta Constitution Aug. 27, 1920, Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

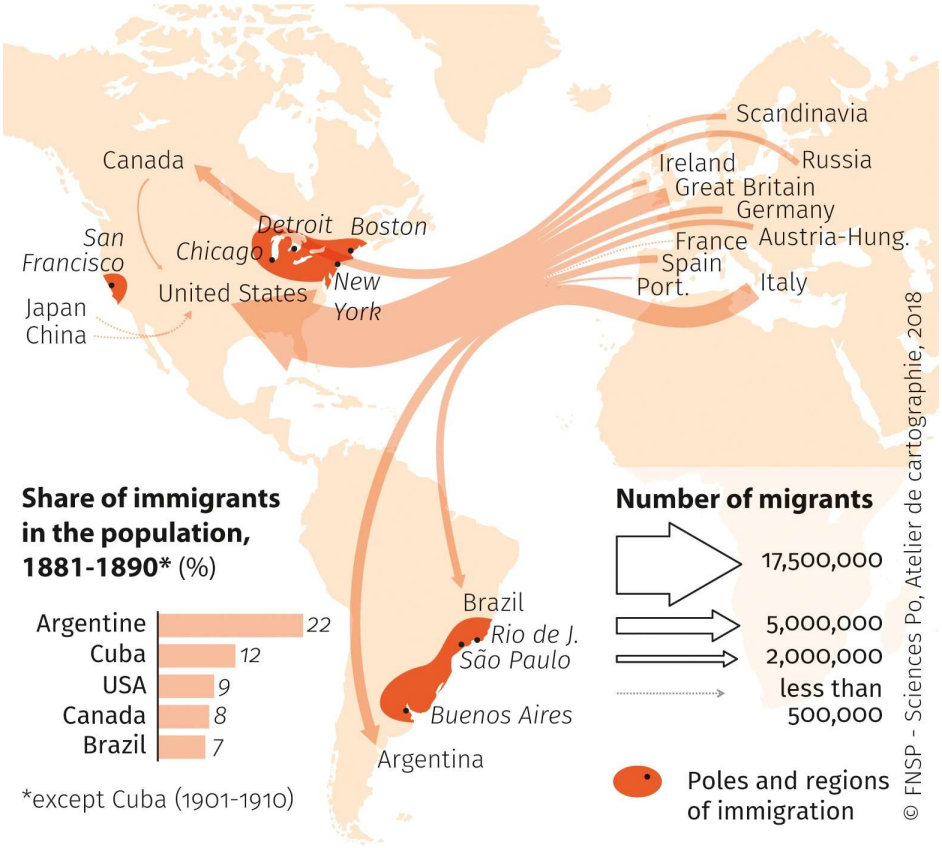
This historic amendment filled Edith and Grace with joy and pride, but they regretted that Susan B. Anthony had not lived to see this victory. And they knew other social injustices remained for them to face. How would they and their fellow suffragists use their new political power?

Chapter 8: Making a Difference for Immigrants

In the early 1900's millions of Europeans immigrated to the U.S., many to Chicago.[45] The previous waves of immigrants mostly came from English-speaking countries, but at the turn

[45] Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, pp. 41-42; Library of Congress, "Immigrants in the Progressive Era," accessed May 3, 2022.

of the twentieth century, immigrants increasingly came from southern and eastern Europe. Most did not speak much English. Many Americans began to view the immigrants with suspicion and feared they would take their jobs.



From the "espace Prologue" of the Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration, Paris.

Great Transatlantic Migration, Late 19th – early 20th Century, Espace modial l'Atlas,

Groups of Italian, Bulgarian, Greek, Polish, and Russian immigrants lived near Hull-House in 1908 when the Abbott sisters moved in. Edith and Grace watched their neighbors struggle to establish new lives. Cab drivers, employment agencies, lawyers, and bankers often took advantage of their limited understanding of English and the U.S. legal system.

When Grace began directing the Immigrants' Protective League, she was just thirty years old and still attending graduate school. She had intended to complete a Ph.D. but found the hands-on work of helping immigrants exhilarating. She loved working face-to-face with immigrants and government officials to solve problems. Grace stopped her graduate studies when she completed a master's degree in political science and then devoted herself to helping immigrants full time. [46]

Grace and her colleagues at the Immigrants' Protective League heard countless stories of employment agencies sending immigrants as far as Arkansas for jobs only to find there were none. One exhausted man told Grace "Everyone cheats a greenhorn." [47]



FRIENDS OF ALIENS AID SUPERVISION

Protective League Joins Fight to Protect Savings in Private Banks.

TELLS OF MANY EVILS.

Miss Grace Abbott Shows How Immigrants Are at Mercy of Others.

Chicago Daily Tribune Nov 24, 1912, Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers

Dishonest employment agencies weren't the only dangers immigrants faced. A Polish Hull-House neighbor learned that a young girl from her country who had immigrated to Chicago on her own languished in a hospital bed with no friends or family to comfort her. This neighbor and Grace visited the girl, which cheered her up, but what she really wanted was to see her

[46] Grace wrote her Master's thesis on the legal rights of married women.
[47] Sorenson, J. (2015) A Sister's Memories, p. 148

family. Grace arranged for the girl to return to her village in Poland, even though they weren't sure she would survive the trip. She did make it home and spent her final days in the warmth of her family.

Female immigrants faced a particularly vicious danger. In the early 1900's, about 20% of unaccompanied immigrant girls and young women who arrived on the east coast and reported Chicago as their destination never arrived.[48] Frantic immigrants came to Grace desperate for help finding their missing daughters, sisters, and cousins. Grace brought the human trafficking



POLICE SEARCH FOR TWO MAIDS.

YOUTHFUL GERMAN NEWCOMERS DROP FROM SIGHT.

Chicago Protective League Takes Up Inquiry, Intimating That Missing Ones May Have Been Inveigled Into Hands of Slavers—Immigration Office Helpless.

[BY DIRECT WIRE TO THE TIMES.]

CHICAGO, Jan. 28.—[Exclusive Dispatch.] A nation-wide search for two immigrant girls was begun today when Miss Grace Abbott, director of the Immigrants' Protective League, called on Chief of Police Steward and, through him, asked the police departments of the various cities between San Francisco and New York to aid in finding them.

Los Angeles Times, Jan. 29, 1911, p. 5.

Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers



MAN IN UNIFORM TRAPPED GIRLS?

Suspected "White Slaver," Masquerading in Livery, Leads Aliens Away.

NUMBER MISSING NOW 27.

Seven Immigrants "Lost" in New York and 20 at Newcastle, Pa.

The Mystery of the Vanishing Twenty Immigrant Girls took on added significance last night. It became the Mystery of the Van-

Chicago Daily Tribune, April 4, 1913, p. 3

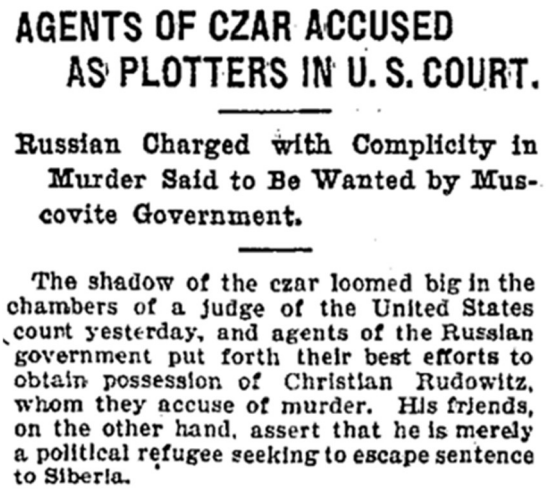
Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers

problem to the public's attention by writing about "lost immigrant girls" in the *Chicago Evening Post*. She hoped that learning about the immigrants' suffering would create public support for programs to help them.

[48] Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago. p. 89

Grace also created a system for meeting immigrants at the Chicago train station. Immigrants' Protective League workers would help new arrivals connect with friends and relatives, find safe housing, or board the correct train for the next leg of their journey. Once Grace got this system running smoothly in Chicago, she convinced Congress to provide safe areas, called immigration stations, inside all ports of entry across the U.S.[49]

Some problems put Grace's legal knowledge and speaking skills to the test. A Lithuanian immigrant named Rudovitz had taken part in a protest against Russia's oppressive rule in his village before immigrating to Chicago. The Russian government wanted the U.S. to deport him so they could try him as a criminal. Grace had to argue her first case against experienced Russian officials before the U.S. Immigration Commissioner. She found local Lithuanian immigrants to testify about the terrible conditions in their home country and the struggle to free themselves from Russian control. She argued that Mr. Rudowitz was a political refugee, not a criminal, and that he deserved asylum rather than deportation.



AGENTS OF CZAR ACCUSED AS PLOTTERS IN U. S. COURT.

Russian Charged with Complicity in Murder Said to Be Wanted by Muscovite Government.

The shadow of the czar loomed big in the chambers of a judge of the United States court yesterday, and agents of the Russian government put forth their best efforts to obtain possession of Christian Rudowitz, whom they accuse of murder. His friends, on the other hand, assert that he is merely a political refugee seeking to escape sentence to Siberia.

Chicago Daily Tribune, Nov. 21, 1908, p. 3. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

[49] Sorenson, J. (2015) A Sister's Memories, chapter 15.

Everyone at Hull-House waited anxiously for Grace's return from the hearing. When she walked in the large, wood-paneled dining room, emotion overcame her. All she could say was "He's free! Isn't it wonderful?" Applause and cheering broke out and residents begged for details.[50] Grace, like her father years earlier, saved immigrants from the oppressive governments they'd fled.

While Hull-House residents and their neighbors cheered the Immigrants' Protective League, many people reacted angrily. They demanded that the government limit immigration, claiming, among other things, that immigrants brought disease. At the National Conference of Social Work, Grace happened to follow a sanitation expert on the schedule. He reported that typhoid fever often originated in poor, immigrant neighborhoods. He explained that many immigrants came from places with access to clean water, so they had not developed resistance to the water-borne diseases common in the U.S. He concluded that the government should restrict immigration to reduce typhoid fever.

Grace then took the podium, but before starting her presentation, she seized the opportunity to offer a rebuttal. She proposed that the sensible conclusion from the sanitation expert's presentation was not that the government should reduce immigration. Instead, she argued that the logical conclusion was that the U.S. government should provide access to clean water to everyone.[51]

The sanitation expert was not the only immigration opponent Grace would challenge. In a letter home, Edith described with satisfaction how Grace handled a minister who had spoken out

[50] Sorensen, J. ed. ((2015) A Sister's Memories: The Life and Work of Grace Abbott from the Writings of Her Sister, Edith Abbott, University of Chicago Press. p.126
[51] Abbott, E. (1939). "A Sister's Memories," *Social Service Review* 13(3): 351-407.

against immigrants: "…his friends are still busy picking up the pieces that remain of him because there wasn't anything left of him that looked respectable when she got through."[52]

Grace used her speaking and writing skills to convince audiences that scapegoating and exploiting immigrants not only constituted a social injustice, it also damaged the economy: "We are absorbing the immigrant into our national life, but the question is, are we doing it intelligently and economically or with a reckless extravagant disregard for the men and women who are lost in the process." [53]

She reminded audiences that immigrants brought skills, knowledge, and labor potential. With protection and guidance, they would contribute more to the economy than if they were left to fend for themselves. She argued that if the nation failed to protect immigrants, it would pay an opportunity cost – losing their productive capacity. Perhaps Edith, the economist, helped Grace with this reasoning. The sisters often read and commented on each other's writing and speeches.

After dealing with countless cases of immigrant exploitation, Grace wondered why so many Europeans came to America. To answer this question Grace decided she must learn about immigrants "at the source." It was unusual for a woman to travel abroad on her own, but in 1911 Grace did just that. She took the White Star ocean liner *Teutonic* across the Atlantic; it had once held the speed record, making the trip in under six days.[54] Overseas travel not only took a long time, it also involved danger. The following year the White Star ocean liner *Titanic* struck an iceberg and sank while crossing the Atlantic, killing about 1,500 people.

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[52] Abbott, Edith and Grace. Papers [Box 83, Folder 5] Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

[53] Sorenson, J. and J. Sealander, editors (2008) The Grace Abbott Reader, University of Nebraska Press, p. 10.
[54] *The Philadelphia Times*, August 14, 1890. "Ocean Record's Broken"

Grace spent three months visiting countries in central and Eastern Europe. Through extensive observation and interviews, she discovered that most immigrants didn't move to America because they couldn't find work at home. There was plenty of work, but the jobs paid little and offered no opportunity for advancement. No matter how hard they worked, many Europeans could never improve their economic situation due to the rigid class system.[55] If you were born a peasant, that's all you and your children would ever be. Despite its problems, they thought that in the U.S. a peasant might be able to work their way up to owning a business and their children could become teachers, engineers, or doctors. As a judge in Hungary explained to Grace: "Whatever is wrong with the United States, idealism still lives."[56]

Grace shared what she learned about immigration and her policy recommendations nationally by publishing her first book, *The Immigrant and the Community* in 1917. At this time, writing was the main way activists and academics promoted their ideas. As communication technology advanced, Grace would adopt new methods to spread her knowledge and advocate policies to combat social problems.

While Grace worked directly with immigrants and lawmakers, Edith worked behind the scenes. Edith and her students collected data on immigrants and the problems they encountered. She used the facts to test accusations immigration opponents made. For example, Edith analyzed crime data comparing American-born and foreign-born men to test the claim that immigrants brought crime. She found that while immigrants made up 54% of the population, they accounted for only 35% of criminal convictions.[57] Edith bluntly concluded: "Charging our high crime rates

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[55] Abbott, E. (1950). "Grace Abbott and Hull House, 1908-21, Part 2," *Social Service Review* 24(4): 493-518.
[56] Sorenson, J. (2015) A Sister's Memories, p. 168,
[57] Lohr, S. (2019). "Edith Abbott and the Origins of Chicago's Crime Statistics," *Significance*, April 2019, pp. 10-11. Recent studies similarly find that incarceration rates are not higher among immigrants than the native-born (Reid et al. 2005; Gunadi 2021).

against the foreign born is merely evading the real difficulties of life instead of trying to solve them." [58]

Establishing the facts about immigration and crime was critical, but it was just the first step. Edith also needed to offer solutions. She recommended that courts provide accused immigrants with qualified translators and public defenders. She also proposed that police departments develop a standard system for tracking crimes that used consistent definitions. Consistent definitions of each crime would improve the data and lead to a better understanding of crime and its prevention. Her recommendations set the stage for the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting System, which remains an important source for crime statistics in the U.S. to this day.[59]



NATIVE YANKEES ARRESTED MOST

Report on Crime Shows Emigrant Less Often in Toils of Law.

MANY BOYS IN TOILS.

The native American and not the immigrant is responsible for most of the crime in Chicago, according to the report of Miss Edith Abbott, investigator for the city council crime commission, made public yesterday.

Miss Abbott's report covers more than 100 typewritten pages and deals with statistics relating to the social status of offenders and conditions in the county jail and other penal institutions in the city. The long array of figures contained in the report were gleaned from the records of the police and of the various courts.

"That our immigrants form the criminal element of population," reads the survey, "is clearly a myth which has had a hardy survival owing to our desire to shift the responsibility for our own faults.

Chicago Daily Tribune November 12, 1914, p. 5. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

[58] Report on Crime and the Foreign Born, U.S. National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement, US GPO 1931, p. 416

[59] Lohr, S. (2019). "Edith Abbott and the Origins of Chicago's Crime Statistics," *Significance*, April 2019, pp. 10-11.

With Grace leading the way and Edith providing support, the Abbott sisters improved the lives of thousands of immigrants. Edith would lead the way on another project that would also change life in America for the better.

Chapter 9: Making a Difference in Social Work

Before the mid-1800's, if you were hungry or homeless you looked to neighbors and local charities for help. As more people moved to cities, large charitable organizations evolved to meet the needs of the expanding urban population. Both private and religious charities depended on donations, which tended to be irregular and inadequate. In addition, the volunteers who worked for the charities had good intentions, but no training.

Edith thought that wanting to help people was honorable, but good intentions weren't enough. She believed that social workers must use social science research techniques to understand the causes of social problems and to devise policies to fix them.

In 1903 sociologist and minister Graham Taylor started Chicago's first program to train social workers and philanthropists in the social sciences.[60] Five years later the program became the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, Taylor served as president and Julia Lathrop served as vice-president. Lathrop, a former Hull-House resident, hired Sophonisba Breckinridge to develop the school's social investigation unit.[61] In 1908, Breckinridge recruited Edith to join them in building the little-known, but growing school.

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[60] VCU Libraries Social Welfare History Project, History of Social Work Education and the Profession's Structure, H. Chaikin, 2013; Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy and Practice, Our First Century.
[61] Jabour, A. (2019) Sophonisba Breckinridge: Championing Women's Activism in Modern America, University of Illinois Press. p. 98

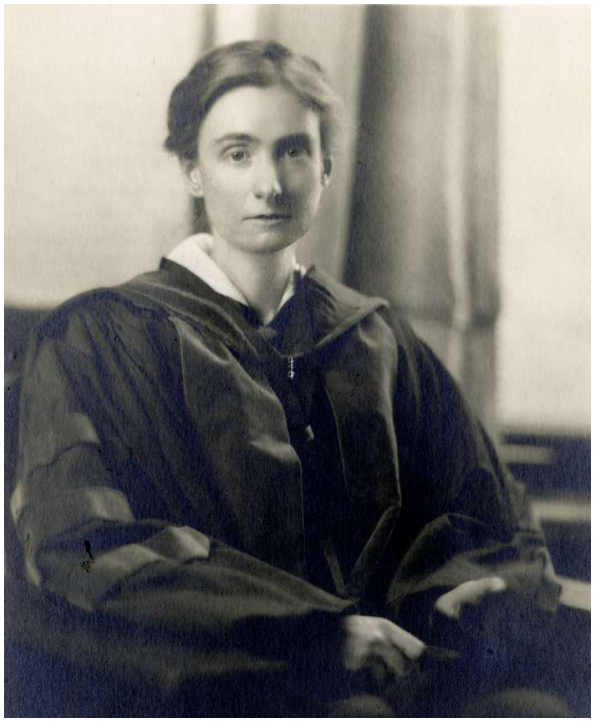
In addition to investigating social problems like inadequate housing, juvenile delinquency, and child labor, Edith and Nisba created the school's curriculum, hired new professors, and recruited students. Despite working long hours and significantly improving the program, they received no raises and weren't even provided their own offices.

In the summer of 1914, the school faced such serious financial problems it couldn't pay Edith and Nisba. They tried to convince Taylor that the school would receive greater financial support, as well as professional recognition, if it joined the University of Chicago. The two women also challenged Taylor's vision for the school. He emphasized teaching social workers how to deal with individual clients and emphasized the client's responsibility for improving themselves. In contrast, Edith and Sophonisba argued the school should train students to understand how the social structure trapped people in poverty. Understanding the features of society and the economy that impoverished people would enable social workers to develop policies to improve the lives of many people, not just one at a time. In short, Taylor wanted to train students to be effective caseworkers, while Edith and Nisba wanted to train students to be social policy leaders.[62]

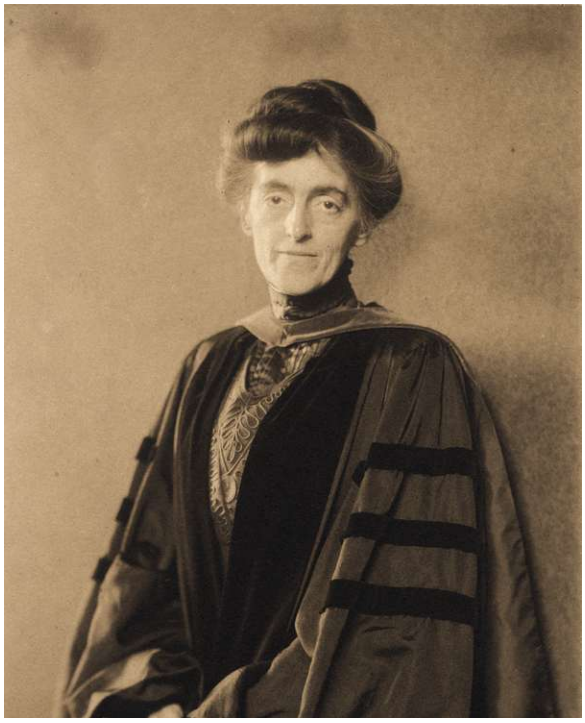
When Taylor took medical leave in 1920, he put Nisba in charge. She discovered that the school's financial problems were so severe that she feared bankruptcy. She presented the University of Chicago with a plan to move the School of Civics and Philanthropy there. Edith summarized the argument: "…only in a university, and only in a great university, could a school of social work get the educational facilities that advanced professional students must have if they were to become the efficient public servants of democracy."[63]

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[62] Costin (1983) pp. 63- 66; Jabour (2019) pp.113-117.
[63] Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice, University of Chicago, Our First Century.



Edith as a University of Chicago Professor, 1919, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center, apf1-00003



Sophonisba Breckinridge as a University of Chicago Professor, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center

By the time Taylor returned, the move to the university was too far along to stop. The University of Chicago's new School of Social Service and Administration became the nation's first graduate school of social work.[64] Edith and Nisba had made a huge step in transforming social work into a profession, like law or medicine. And this new profession was open to women.

Not everyone was happy with the move, however. Taylor and his supporters thought Nisba and Edith had treated him badly. After all, he had started the school and had hired Nisba. There was also the matter of two women challenging a man for leadership rather than being subservient. From Edith and Nisba's perspective, Taylor had left the school in a huge mess, and they'd done what was necessary to save it.

[64] Jabour. p. 116

In moving the school, Edith and Nisba secured full-time positions for themselves in social work at a time when the University refused to hire women professors in their areas of expertise – economics, political science, and law. However, after their initial excitement, Edith and Nisba realized the move hadn't solved all their problems. The university had placed the social work school in the business college, and the dean there didn't think much of it.

After four years languishing in the business school, an influential Hull-House supporter, Julius Rosenwald, convinced the university to move the social work school out on its own. Edith and Nisba finally secured full control of the School for Social Service and Administration. They agreed Edith would be dean. No woman had ever led a university graduate program before, so Edith became a pioneer in academic leadership.

Edith and Nisba labored tirelessly to create a rigorous social work education program that taught a blend of casework, social science research, and social activism. Their approach became known as "The Chicago Plan" and formed the foundation of modern social work education.[65] Some faculty members criticized their social activism, arguing Edith and Nisba were too emotionally involved with the people they wished to help to be scientific. Edith responded, "…I know that a great physician also cares about the human beings he is taking care of and, like him, we can be kind without being sentimental."[66]

These two Victorian ladies raised admission and academic standards. They doubled the number of courses offered in the first three years. The number of students tripled within 10 years as the school's reputation for excellence grew. Edith specialized in teaching courses on the

[65] Jabor pp.120- 139.
[66] Diner, S. (1977) "Scholarship in the Quest for Social Welfare: A Fifty-Year History of the 'Social Service Review,'" *Social Service Review* 51(1): 1 – 66.

history of labor and public assistance while Nisba focused on U.S. law and the role of government in addressing social problems. They worked together so closely that students nicknamed them "A and B."

Both Edith and Nisba developed reputations as memorable teachers, but students found Edith less approachable. She spoke directly and set high expectations for those around her, which could be intimidating. A male student once commented: "She really is a beautiful woman, but she scares me spitless."[67] A female student called Edith a "severe task master."[68]

Edith could get so engrossed in her work that she forgot that other people had lives and interests outside of social work. For example, rumors circulated that Edith once assigned a female student some statistical analyses to complete during her honeymoon.[69] Edith's lack of interest in fashion probably enhanced students' apprehension. While hemlines rose through the decades, Edith continued to wear full-length Victorian dresses, usually black (her Quaker grandmother would have approved!). [70]

Once when a student's thesis couldn't be found, Nisba knew to search Edith's house. Edith worked there most evenings, often in bed. She'd prop herself up against the headboard with a lap table to write on, surrounded by piles of books and papers. Nisba wryly explained: "Miss Abbott really isn't a housekeeper."[71]

Nevertheless, Edith inspired her students. One recalled that listening to Edith lecture made her feel "involved in the causes in which she was engaged and ready to do battle by her

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[67] Taylor, E. (1977) "The Edith Abbott I Knew," *Journal of Illinois State History* 70(3): 178-84. p. 182
[68] Letter from Elinor Brink, Abbott, Edith and Grace. Papers [Box 83, Folder 10] Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

[69] Costin p. 198
[70] Fitzpatrick p. 215
[71] Jabor p. 127.

side."[72] Another praised her, saying, "…the material unrolled before me like a great drama, and my mind was opened to ideas that have influenced my entire life."[73]

Sometimes Edith recited poems to add emotion punch to her lessons, and she could be empathetic and understanding. When a student's mother in New York fell gravely ill, Edith arranged for her to continue her coursework at the New York School of Social Work. Upon Edith's death, this student wrote, "…the most significant legacy she bequeathed to me was a feeling that I should strive to achieve a high degree of excellence in everything I should undertake." [74]

While a bit scary and eccentric, Edith cared deeply about her students' professional development. She pushed them to excel and helped place them in good jobs when they graduated. To help students and faculty communicate their research findings and establish their professional reputations, Edith and Nisba created the first professional journal in social work, *Social Service Review*.

Some faculty and administrators found Edith domineering. When questioned about this, the university's president, Robert Hutchins, recalled that Edith spoke directly and authoritatively.

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[72] Wisner, E. (1958) "Edith Abbott's Contributions to Social Work Education," *Social Service Review* 32(1): 1- 10.
[73] Costin, p. 197
[74] Letter from Elinor Brink, Abbott, Edith and Grace. Papers [Box 83, Folder 10] Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library



Edith Abbott, the only woman at the table, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center apf1-00011

He also expressed admiration for how in meetings with powerful men Edith "…could not only assert herself but she could get her way." [75]

Together Edith and Nisba shaped social work into a modern profession open to women. By improving social work education, they expanded the availability and raised the quality of social services throughout the nation. They also used the social work school as a base of authority to enable women like Julie Lathrop and Grace attain government positions in which they could directly shape the nation's social policy.

Chapter 10: Making a Difference for Women Workers

When Edith and Grace arrived in Chicago in the early 1900's, the city had already witnessed two of the nation's biggest labor protests. In 1886, workers gathered in Haymarket Square to demand better wages and working conditions. Someone in the crowd threw a bomb, killing eight people. Despite the lack of evidence that they played any role in the bombing, four

[75] Costin pp. 194-196

labor leaders were hanged.[76]

During the depression that followed the "Panic of 1893," the Pullman Company, which produced rail cars, cut wages by nearly 25%. However, it didn't cut the rents it charged workers living in the company town just south of Chicago. The American Railway Union, 4,000 workers strong, walked off the job in protest. The strike spread across the nation, shutting down rail traffic west of Detroit. Supply chains broke down, making the economic crisis even worse. When President Cleveland sent federal troops to Chicago to force the strikers back to work, a riot erupted. Troops fired into the crowd of protesters, killing thirty.[77]

Otham Abbott had fostered both a strong belief in women's rights and strong opposition to labor unions in his children. He believed workers should pull themselves up on their own and



The Condition of the Laboring Man at Pullman, Chicago Labor Newspaper July 7, 1894, available through Wikimedia Commons.

[76] Luciano, P. (2019) "The Labor Movement has Deep Roots in Illinois – Here's Why," *Chicago Sun-Times* August 30, 2019.
[77] Ibid.

little Edith and Grace absorbed this lesson.[78] As teenagers, however, the Abbott sisters read gripping newspaper accounts of how industrial workers endured long hours, often in dangerous conditions, and received low pay. Edith and Grace began to question their father's opposition to unions.[79]

When Edith began her graduate studies at the University of Chicago, she wanted to learn how the economy determined wages. Her interest started to evolve when she took Sophonisba Breckinridge's course on the legal and economic position of women. This class raised questions that intrigued Edith. How many women were employed and in what kinds of jobs? Why did women earn lower wages than men?

Many people used gender stereotypes to argue that women shouldn't work in industry and if they did, they deserved lower pay. Edith especially rankled at the claim that women were unreliable and inefficient employees. She also questioned the claim that women workers were suddenly surging into factories and taking jobs away from men.

To determine the truth, Edith decided to study women workers. Other economists, all men, thought it would be impossible to find information on working women before 1860. Edith plowed ahead anyway, driven by curiosity. Through painstaking research through reams of old government records she documented that women produced textiles, shoes, cigars and printed materials early in the nation's history.[80]

Edith's meticulous research enabled her to refute authoritatively the stereotypical arguments against working women. She proved that women had worked in manufacturing from the beginning of industrialization rather than suddenly flooding the labor market at the turn of

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[78] Costin, p. 11
[79] Sorensen, J (2015) A Sister's Memories, pp. 72-73
[80] Fitzpatrick, E. (1990) Endless Crusade: Women Social Scientists and Progressive Reform, Oxford University Press. pp. 170-73

the twentieth century. Edith also dispatched claims that women were not good workers by explaining that profit-seeking firms would not hire women if they were as unreliable and inefficient as critics claimed.

Did firms pay women less because they were less productive than men? No. Edith explained that gender discrimination channeled women into just a few job sectors, like textiles and sewing. Since they had few alternatives, women had to accept low wages or not work at all. This explains how such occupational segregation enables firms to offer women lower wages.

Edith even challenged the whole notion of jobs based on gender. In a 1905 issue of the popular magazine *Harpers Weekly* she declared: "Just how the line of delineation between 'women's work' and 'men's work' should be drawn or why such a line should be drawn at all, I confess that I am unable to understand."[81] Edith made it her mission to help women earn as much as men did so they could achieve financial security.

When Edith completed her Ph.D. in economics in 1905, she found herself in a surprising situation. Professor Breckinridge, a devoted union supporter, recommended Edith to the Women's Trade Union League in Boston. They offered Edith a job as their labor expert. She harbored doubts about working for a union, but the job would enable her to continue studying women workers. Edith accepted and wrote to Grace "…tell Papa I haven't gone over to the Trade Unionists…"[82]

Several months later Edith still felt uncomfortable working for the union. She wrote to Grace, "I am afraid I am too conservative for the Labor people." [83] She could still hear her

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[81] Edith Abbott, "Are Women Business Failures?" *Harper's Weekly* 49 (April 8, 1905) p. 496. An article by Mark Twain appeared on the same page.

[82] Costin, p. 29
[83] Ibid.

father's anti-union voice in her head, so she began to look for a way out.

Edith's reputation for outstanding research reached the Carnegie Institution, an organization in Washington D.C. devoted to scientific innovation. She'd found the way out of the union job and Boston. Carnegie hired Edith to work on the industrial history of America, a perfect fit for her interests and skills.

Edith enjoyed living in the nation's capital and became quite productive. She published several articles about women in industry in the *Journal of Political Economy*, a prestigious academic journal then and now. She co-wrote one of those articles with her former professor and mentor, now friend, Nisba Breckinridge. In it, they made the then-shocking claim that: "Women have always worked."[84]

In 1906, Edith received a yearlong scholarship to the London School of Economics. This year abroad would challenge and change her. She wrote Grace "There's no doubt about this being the most fascinating place in the world."[85] She lived near the expansive British Museum and watched English suffragists protest for women's right to vote. She studied economics, statistics, history, and government. Her favorite professors, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, introduced her to using scientific methods developed in the natural sciences, data collection and statistical analysis, to study social issues. She was hooked!

The Webbs also introduced Edith to the Fabian Society, England's first political think tank. This group argued that the government should change the organization of society and the economy so that the working class could escape poverty. This appealed to Edith's concern for laborers, especially working women. They also argued that to improve wages and working

[84] Abbott, E. and S. Breckinridge (1906) "Employment of Women in Industries: Twelfth Census Statistics," *Journal of Political Economy* 14(1): 14-40, p. 14.
[85] Costin p. 31

conditions industrial workers needed to unionize.[86] These new voices began to crowd out her father's.

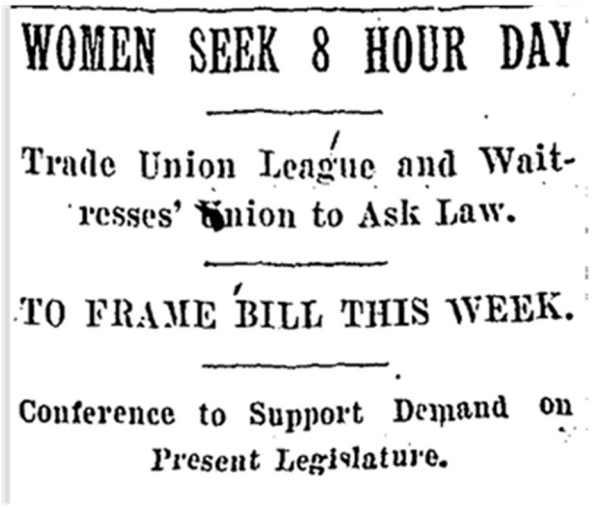
In addition to her studies, Edith also worked with a religious charity to assist London's unemployed. Working for St. Hilda's taught Edith to conduct home visits and interview the unemployed. She paid particular attention to the challenges they encountered when seeking work or applying for government aid. She noticed that men seeking a job had no job, but women seeking work usually already had a job. Since women's wages were so low, they needed to work more than one job to get by.[87] She also learned that most of the unemployed wanted to work rather than rely on charity or government aid.

As Edith got to know London's unemployed as individuals rather than as just statistics, she began to appreciate the magnitude of the difficulties workers faced in the new industrial economy. She wrote home about her evolving views on poverty and labor unions. Her father disapproved, responding, "If I were there I would have to vote against you."[88] Edith found herself torn between her growing recognition that laborers' hard work didn't necessarily raise them out of poverty and her father's firm belief that individuals could support themselves and their families if only they worked harder.

When Edith and Grace moved into Hull-House in 1908, they both worked directly with struggling American workers. Grace, who had always felt more comfortable challenging her father, joined the Women's Trade Union League of Chicago immediately. She and other union members, as well as Jane Addams, traveled to the Illinois capitol in Springfield to lobby the

[86] The Fabian Society: Our History, https://fabians.org.uk/about-us/our-history/, accessed 1/28/22
[87] Goodwin. (1997) Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform: Mother's Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1929, University of Chicago Press p. 96
[88] Costin p. 33

legislature. They wanted lawmakers to set a limit on daily work hours, nicknamed the "Girls Bill" since so many young women worked eleven to twelve hours days at their factory jobs.[89]



WOMEN SEEK 8 HOUR DAY

Trade Union League and Waitresses' Union to Ask Law.

TO FRAME BILL THIS WEEK.

Conference to Support Demand on Present Legislature.

Chicago Daily Tribune, Mar. 21, 1909. Available through ProQuest's Historical Newspapers.

The Hull-House experience strengthened Edith's belief that a worker couldn't overcome the darker aspects of industrialization on their own. Perhaps living with Grace and other union supporters gave Edith the courage to finally defy her father's anti-union beliefs when a strike forced her to pick sides.

In September 1910, a large clothing manufacturer in Chicago cut workers' pay and ratcheted up the production levels required for bonuses. Workers, half of whom were women, were already fed up with the sweatshop conditions. Sixteen women walked out immediately, led by eighteen-year-old Anna Shapiro.[90] In the following weeks over 35,000 garment workers throughout Chicago joined the strike.

Sixteen-year-old Anna Rudnitzky led hundreds of workers out of the garment factory where she worked. She explained to a newspaper that she and her co-workers felt "…so dead

[89] Costin . 149
[90] National Park Service, nps.gov.articles/000/women-of-the-1910-chicago=garment-workers-strike.htm

that one never sees nothing but work all day and not enough money to live on."[91] Hard work was not lifting her and her co-workers out of poverty.



The 1910 Chicago Garment Workers' Strike, Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

Edith recalled the strike as "…one of the great experiences of our early years at Hull-House." [92] She assigned her students to interview strikers and collect data on their working conditions and grievances. Grace then used this evidence to write newspaper articles and give speeches advocating laws to ensure workers fair pay and better working conditions.

Grace also helped raise money to support the strikers. Without donations, they couldn't afford food, clothing, or coal when winter arrived. She even marched with the strikers on the picket lines. Sidney Hillman, a garment cutter at the time, wrote that Grace "…showed that labor disputes are not private encounters between employers and employees…they are of profound social and economic impact and affect the entire community." [93]

[91] Rudnitzky, A. (1912) "Time is Passing," *Life and Labor* 2(4): 99.

[92] Sorenson, J. ed., (2015) A Sister's Memories: The Life and Work of Grace Abbott from the Writings of Her Sister, Edith Abbott," University of Chicago Press, p. 151.
[93] Ibid p. 152.



CLUBWOMEN TO TELL ALDERMEN STRIKE FINDINGS

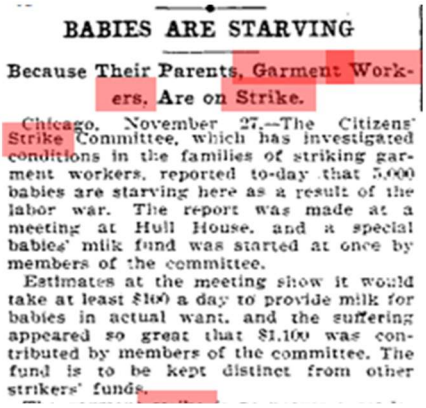
Police Committee Will Hea Charges of Brutality in Garment Trouble.

The fight by clubwomen in the interest of girl garment workers will be taken before the council committee on schools, fire, police, and civil service today. Alderman Thomas Lynch, chairman, invited the women to present facts gathered in their recent investigations.

Miss Ellen Gates Starr and Miss Grace Abbott will submit data and affidavits to support claims of police brutality in connection with the garment workers' strike. The evidence was presented to Chief

Chicago Daily Tribune, Oct. 11, 1915, Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers

Winter cold and prolonged wage loss favored the factory owners, so the strikers secured few accommodations before returning to work. However, the strike had brought workers throughout the garment industry together and led to the formation of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.[94]



BABIES ARE STARVING

Because Their Parents, Garment Workers, Are on Strike.

Chicago, November 27.—The Citizens' Strike Committee, which has investigated conditions in the families of striking garment workers, reported to-day that 5,000 babies are starving here as a result of the labor war. The report was made at a meeting at Hull House, and a special babies' milk fund was started at once by members of the committee.

Estimates at the meeting show it would take at least $100 a day to provide milk for babies in actual want, and the suffering appeared so great that $1,100 was contributed by members of the committee. The fund is to be kept distinct from other strikers' funds.

Cincinnati Enquirer Nov. 28, 1910, Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

[94] Abbott, E. (1939). "A Sister's Memories," *Social Service Review* 13(3); 351-407; Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago. p. 79

Also in 1910, Edith published her groundbreaking book *Women in Industry*, in which she presented her findings from years of studying women workers. She documented women's role in industry starting in colonial times. She detailed how gender roles and occupational segregation produced wages so low that unskilled women workers couldn't on their own earn enough income to escape poverty.

Edith argued that it was unfair to expect working class women to financially support and raise their children, while society denied them access to education and training, and firms paid them below-subsistence wages. This book established Edith as the nation's top expert on working women. She used her growing reputation to push for policies to raise women's earnings, such as establishing a national minimum wage. She also advocated for "mothers' pensions" to supplement working women's wages so they could adequately provide for their children.



WOMAN'S PLACE IN OUR INDUSTRY

Miss Edith Abbott of Hull House, Chicago, Presents an Interesting Study in American Economic History

COMPOSED as the preface shows in the most conscientious spirit of "research," and having for its aim to prove that the so-called modern woman's invasion of the trades does not in fact exist, this book by Edith Abbott, Ph.D., of Hull House, Chicago, is, for all its array of tables and statistics, by no means a dull volume. Miss—or Doctor—Abbott reveals at times an en-

New York Times, Jan. 15, 1910, available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers

In 1915, Chicago garment workers walked out on strike again. Edith used statistics to make their case in an article for the *New Republic*. Pay records showed that the workers made about eight cents an hour. Even working long hours for six days per week, a person couldn't earn

enough to secure a basic living standard at that wage. Edith challenged readers to consider "…whether all the ready-made garments in the world are worth the misery that has been sewed into them."[95]



POLICE USE CLUBS IN STRIKE FIGHT; GIRLS ARRESTED

Day of Turmoil Marks Garment Trouble; Women Will Investigate.

Policemen engaged in three street fights early last night to protect clothing workers who had refused to join the strike and were being followed by the strikers. There were several arrests, five of the prisoners being young women.

Chicago Daily Tribune, Oct. 6, 1915, Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers

Edith also called Chicago's mayor out for failing to control the police, who roughed up the strikers. She argued that threatening violence and waiting the unpaid strikers out might quell a strike in the short run, but "…a controversy settled by starvation is still unsettled." [96] Without improved pay and working conditions, and without a system for fair negotiations between business owners and labor, Chicago would simply face more labor uprisings. If Mr. Abbott read Edith's impassioned article, he probably wondered what had happened to his shy, dutiful daughter.

Edith used her deep knowledge of the history of women in the economy and scientific analysis of their employment conditions to argue on women workers' behalf. She shared her

[95] Abbott, E. (1916) "Cheap Clothes and Nasty," *The New Republic*. pp. 217-19.

[96] Ibid.

knowledge and recommendations by writing articles in academic journals and popular magazines and publishing her landmark book. Grace financially supported striking workers and used her speaking skills and knowledge of government to persuade politicians to support laws that raised wages and lowered daily work hours. Through their teamwork, Edith the scholar and Grace the political activist helped improve the lives of thousands of workers.

One group of workers especially concerned the Abbott sisters and required particular attention – children.

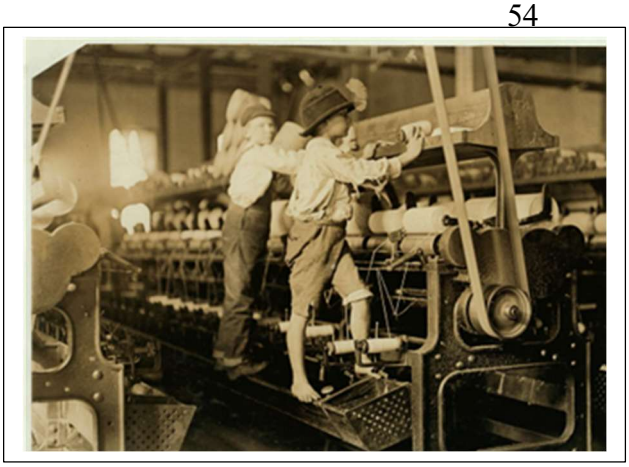
Chapter 11: Making a Difference for Children

Edith and Grace saw many children in the Hull-House neighborhood working long hours in factories, often in dangerous conditions. Jane Addams once reported seeing a five-year old girl working in a textile mill.[97] Working helped their families financially, but the children had little time or energy for school and the harsh conditions damaged their health. Children working in mills breathed airborne lint all day, damaging their lungs. They faced twice the chance of dying before age 20 compared to other children.[98] And child labor wasn't a problem just in Chicago. Roughly two million children across the nation worked for pay in 1900.[99]

[97] Addams, J. (1905) "A Requisite for Industrial Efficiency," digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show13897, p. 131.
[98] Smithsonian's Art to Zoo (Dec. 1988) "In the Playtime of Others: Child Labor in the Early Twentieth Century."
[99] Keating-Owen Child Labor Act of 1916, https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=59, accessed June 16, 2020.



Twelve year old working at spooling in a Texas cotton mill in 1913, photo by Lewis W. Hines, Library of Congress LOT 7479, v. 6, no. 3639 [P&P] LC-H5- 3639



Bibb Mill No. 1, Many Youngsters Here, 1909. Lewis W. Hine, Library of Congress, LOT 7479, v. 1, no. 0488 [P&P] LC-H5- 488

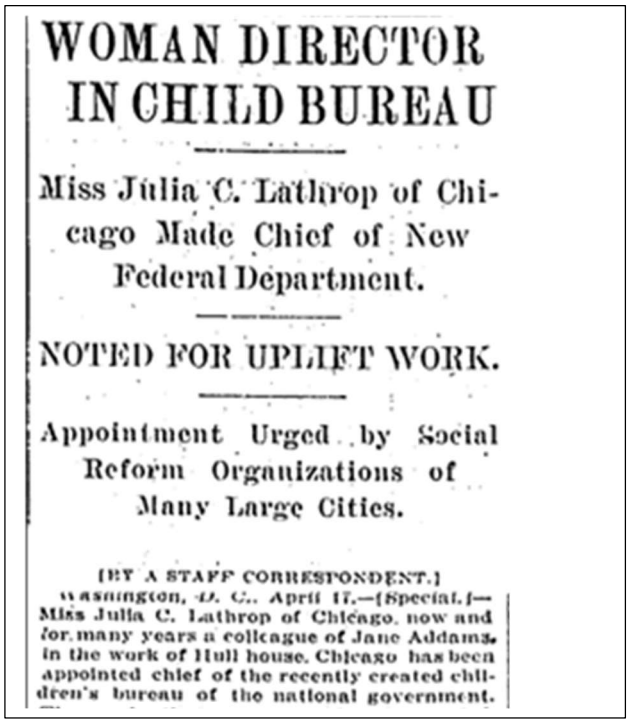
Edith and Nisba successfully pushed the federal government to study the conditions child workers faced. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) conducted an exhaustive investigation of child and women's labor beginning in 1907. This study produced the nation's first scientific documentation of the harsh conditions these workers faced and shocked officials into action.

Jane Addams, Julia Lathrop, Edith, and Nisba worked with other Progressives to convince Congress to create a federal agency dedicated to children's well-being.[100] They used the evidence in the BLS reports to argue that working children needed government protection. In 1912, their efforts produced the Children's Bureau, a division of the Department of Labor. The Children's Bureau was not only the first government agency in the U.S. devoted to improving children's lives, it was the first in the world.

Jane Addams wanted Julia Lathrop to head the Children's Bureau, but no woman had ever been appointed to lead a federal bureau before. Hull-House residents wondered if President Taft would take her suggestion seriously. He did! Julia Lathrop's 1912 appointment made her the

[100] J. Tang and E. Smith, editors (1996) Women and Minorities in American Professions, State University of New York. p. 115

first woman to lead a federal agency. She then hired several Hull-House alumni, creating a pool of women in a position to influence federal policy directly.



WOMAN DIRECTOR IN CHILD BUREAU

Miss Julia C. Lathrop of Chicago Made Chief of New Federal Department.

NOTED FOR UPLIFT WORK.

Appointment Urged by Social Reform Organizations of Many Large Cities.

[BY A STAFF CORRESPONDENT.]
Washington, D. C., April 17.—[Special.]—Miss Julia C. Lathrop of Chicago, now and for many years a colleague of Jane Addams in the work of Hull house, Chicago has been appointed chief of the recently created children's bureau of the national government.

Chicago Daily Tribune April 18, 1912. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers

Grace's work at the Immigrants' Protective League had impressed Julia so she asked Grace to join the Children's Bureau. World War I had halted most immigration by 1917, so Grace accepted Julia's offer, quit her job at the Immigrants' Protective League, and moved to Washington D.C. Edith knew the Children's Bureau work was important, but she also knew she'd miss her sister terribly. Nisba shared Edith's feelings, writing: "We saw Grace Abbott off this morning…very sadly. Life here is a much more dreary waste without her."[101]

Grace's major task at her new job was to administer the recently passed Child Labor Act. This law is also called the Keating-Owen Act because Representative Keating (D of Colorado) and Senator Owen (D of Oklahoma) sponsored it. Progressives had worked for a decade to win

[101] Costin p. 101

passage of this first federal law to set limits on child labor.[102] It prohibited interstate commerce in goods produced by mines that employed children under age 16 and by factories that employed children under age 14. It also limited children's work to eight hours a day, six days a week. Can you image working in a mine or factory that long with only one day off a week?

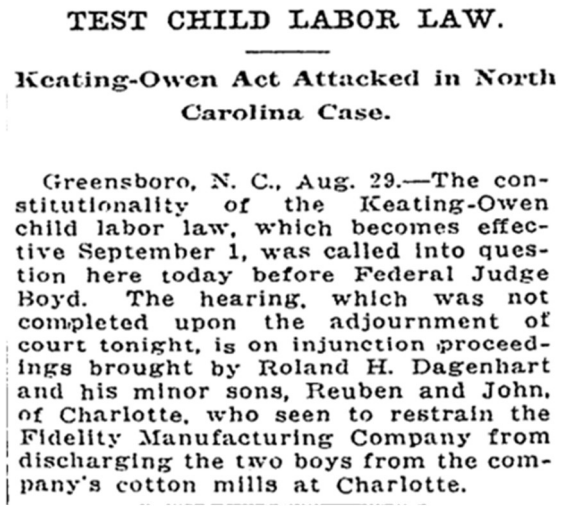
Edith helped by researching child labor. Her evidence showed that working children were more likely to miss school, remain illiterate, get in trouble with the law, and live in poverty as adults. Grace and Julia used Edith's research to convince local officials around the country that implementing the Keating-Owen Act would benefit their communities. Grace also traveled throughout the nation to help officials solve the practical problems they faced in applying the law. [103]

Grace and the Children's Bureau encountered considerable opposition to their efforts to reduce the economic exploitation of children. Business owners wanted to keep their source of cheap labor and many poor parents needed their children's income. One father, Roland Dagenhart, sued the government. He argued the Child Labor Act unfairly deprived his family of the income his 13-year-old and 15-year-old sons earned at the mill. The Supreme Court reviewed the case and declared the legislation unconstitutional in June 1918. Grace and Julia, while initially shocked, didn't give up. They adopted the pioneer attitude, viewing this decision as a temporary setback that they could overcome.[104]

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[102] The law was named for it sponsors Representative Edward Keating and Senator Robert Owen.
[103] Costin, L. (1983) "Two Sisters for Social Justice," University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago. pp. 110-111.

[104] Sorensen, J. (2015) chapters 27 and 28.



TEST CHILD LABOR LAW.

Keating-Owen Act Attacked in North Carolina Case.

Greensboro, N. C., Aug. 29.—The constitutionality of the Keating-Owen child labor law, which becomes effective September 1, was called into question here today before Federal Judge Boyd. The hearing, which was not completed upon the adjournment of court tonight, is on injunction proceedings brought by Roland H. Dagenhart and his minor sons, Reuben and John, of Charlotte, who seen to restrain the Fidelity Manufacturing Company from discharging the two boys from the company's cotton mills at Charlotte.

The Washington Post Aug. 30, 1917. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers



WORK IN COTTON MILLS GOOD FOR THE CHILDREN

According to Southern Factory Owners Who Oppose Keating-Owen Measure.

Washington, February 16.—The employment of child labor in southern cotton mills was defended today by S. F. Patterson, of Roanoke Rapids, N. C., chairman of the executive committee of the Southern Cotton Manufacturers' association, before the senate interstate commerce committee. Mr. Patterson invited members of the committee to visit southern mills to see for themselves how happy and healthy were the children who work in the factories.

The Atlanta Constitution Feb. 17, 1916. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Grace and Julia scrambled to devise another strategy to protect child workers. They persuaded the War Labor Policies Board to require all businesses seeking government contracts related to World War I to comply with the child labor limits set in the Keating-Owens Act. This stopgap policy restored protection to child workers until the war ended a few months later.

Some child labor opponents then proposed a tax on mines and factories that employed children. The tax would discourage child labor, but this proposal had a downside. It would shift authority from the Children's Bureau to the Treasury Department, which worried Grace and Julia. Nevertheless, both travelled to Europe to meet officials in charge of children's programs there and to witness post-war conditions. When they returned, the proposed tax had progressed much further than either of them had expected. They probably questioned their decision to leave the country.

Congress passed the Child Tax Law in 1919, but the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional three years later. Some states then passed their own child labor regulations, but

others did nothing. Grace glumly summarized the situation as a "crazy patchwork quilt of State laws that so unequally protects American children."[105] It struck her as grossly unfair that children in some states worked in factories all day while children in states with protective laws spent their days in school.

Grace, Julia, and their supporters continued working to secure nationally consistent limits on child labor with a renewed sense of urgency. They pushed for a constitutional amendment to give states the right to regulate, even ban, child labor. Grace testified before Congress and gave speeches to civic groups, especially pro-suffragist organizations, promoting the amendment. In a speech to the American Red Cross, Grace emphasized the need to take immediate action: "The only time we can care for children in any period of life is now. If a schoolchild does not get what he needs, he will permanently bear the effect of that lack. If you postpone assistance until a more convenient time, you postpone it indefinitely as far as that child is concerned…"[106]

When Congress passed the Child Labor Amendment in 1924, only six states ratified it, so it never became law. Through continued persistence and determination, Grace, Julia, and their network of child welfare advocates eventually convinced Congress to set national limits on child labor. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 has withstood constitutionality challenges to this day.

A generation had passed between the Owen-Keating Child Labor Act and the Fair Labor Standard Act. What had happened to children during the long struggle to limit child labor? A reporter visited the Dagenhart family to see what had become of the boys. The Supreme Court's ruling had sent them back into the mills for 11-hour shifts. Both men were illiterate, and the long

[105] Sorensen, J. and J. Sealander (eds.). The Grace Abbott Reader, University of Nebraska Press 2008. p. 42
[106] Ibid p. 61.

hours of labor and persistent poverty had stunted their physical growth. One spat out his resentment: "Look at me! A hundred and five pounds, a grown man and no education."[107]



Grace Abbott, director of the Industrial Division, Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, 1917-1919, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center apf1-00030

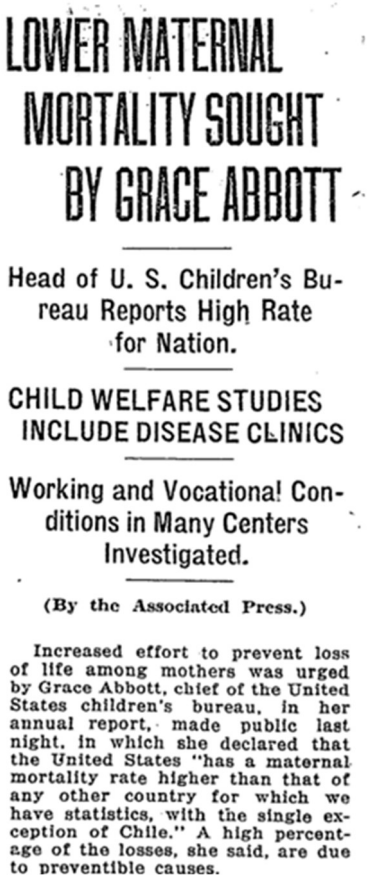
Why did it take so long to protect children from labor exploitation? Grace offered two reasons: "the selfish interest in the exploitation of children by the few and the patient toleration of injustice …by the many."[108] Today most Americans are surprised to learn that such a long, difficult struggle to limit child labor was ever needed. Many are also surprised to learn that millions of children still work in the U.S. While children no longer work in mines, many still labor in difficult conditions, particularly in agriculture. [109]

[107] Ibid p. 205
[108] *The Metal Trades Department Bulletin* 9(2): 7.
[109] GAO (2018) "Working Children Federal Injury Data and Compliance Strategies could be Strengthened under Fair Labor Standards Act," GAO-19-26; 2018 Fact Sheet Childhood Agricultural Injuries in the United States, National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety; Human Rights Watch (Dec. 9, 2015) "Teens of the Tobacco Fields."

Chapter 12 Making a Difference for Mothers and Babies

Up until the early 1900s, pregnancy was very dangerous. Nearly everyone knew someone who had died or nearly died in childbirth or whose baby had died. While Americans sensed that the nation lost many young women and babies, no one really knew how many.

When Julia Lathrop left the Children's Bureau in 1921, President Harding appointed Grace to replace her. This made Grace the highest-ranking woman in the federal government. Her top responsibility was to push Congress to pass the Maternity and Infancy Protection Act, also known as the Sheppard-Towner Act.[110] This legislation provided federal funding for state public health programs aimed at reducing maternal and infant deaths.



LOWER MATERNAL MORTALITY SOUGHT BY GRACE ABBOTT

Head of U. S. Children's Bureau Reports High Rate for Nation.

CHILD WELFARE STUDIES INCLUDE DISEASE CLINICS

Working and Vocational Conditions in Many Centers Investigated.

(By the Associated Press.)

Increased effort to prevent loss of life among mothers was urged by Grace Abbott, chief of the United States children's bureau, in her annual report, made public last night, in which she declared that the United States "has a maternal mortality rate higher than that of any other country for which we have statistics, with the single exception of Chile." A high percentage of the losses, she said, are due to preventible causes.

The Washington Post, Dec. 7, 1925. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers

[110] Named for its sponsors Senator Morris Sheppard (D of TX) and Representative Horace Towner (R of IA).

Grace and her team at the Children's Bureau first scientifically measured the size of the problem. They found that 76 babies died in their first year per every 1,000 born, the infant mortality rate. That amounted to 129,000 babies in 1921.[111] In addition, complications from childbirth killed so many mothers that it was the second leading cause of death among non-elderly women.

Once Grace and her team established that the problem was large, they needed to figure out what to do about it. Grace consulted with Julia, thinking long and hard about the best way the government could improve the health of mothers and babies. They debated strategy vigorously, often over afternoon tea.[112] Passersby probably thought the two middle-aged women wearing proper hats and sipping from dainty teacups were discussing the latest fashions or the escapades of some troublesome family member rather than life-saving public policy.

Grace and Julia decided that the program should be universal, open to everyone. They also decided that a public health education campaign would be the best approach. They would educate state and local officials about how the federal government could help them develop programs tailored for their communities' needs. They would educate midwives and medical professionals on practical steps to reduce illness among mothers and babies. Finally, they would teach women how to care for themselves during pregnancy and childbirth. They argued that these weren't matters only doctors could understand.

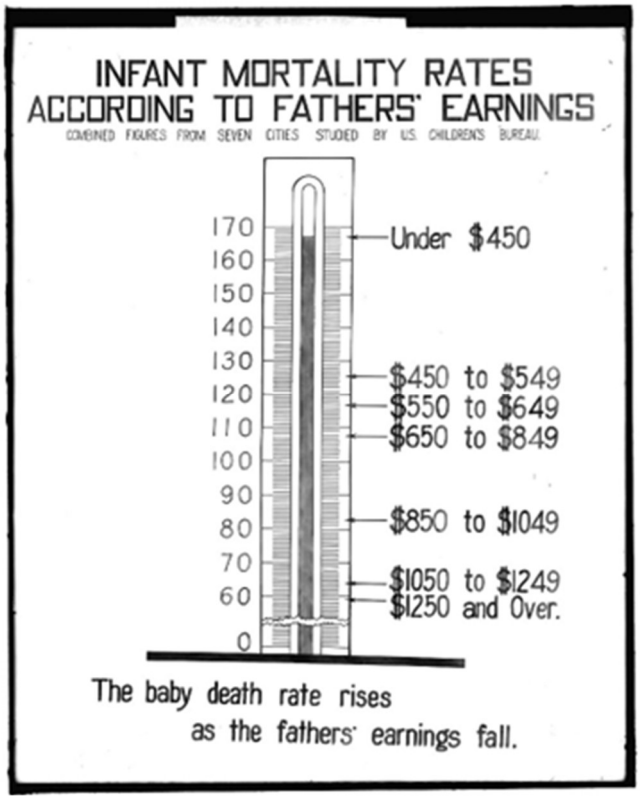
To decide what health lessons to teach, the Children's Bureau investigated the causes of maternal and infant mortality. They found that most women received no prenatal care. They also

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[111] *Public Health Reports* 36(43): 2680-86, Oct. 28, 1921

[112] Abbott, E. (1939) "A Sister's Memories," *Social Service Review* 13(3); 351-407.

discovered that poor hygiene by the people delivering babies frequently led to fatal infections. Good handwashing practices would save lives at very little cost. But their research also unearthed a disturbing pattern that could not be fixed with soap and water. Babies born in low-income families died at twice the rate of those born to families with more economic resources.[113]



Children's Bureau Poster, Library of Congress, LC-H25-91593

Under Grace's leadership, the Children's Bureau produced and distributed millions of informational pamphlets about pregnancy and infant care. They organized health fairs across the country where women could learn from nurses and doctors and get checkups for themselves and their children. Grace also adopted the latest communication technologies. She produced films and hosted a radio show to spread prenatal, birthing, and infant care information across the

[113] Costin, L. (1983), p. 132.

country. In fact, Grace's NBC radio program, "Your Child," made her the first female broadcaster with a national audience in the U.S.[114]



Photo from "Unladylike 2020: Grace Abbott."

In addition to educational programs, the Children's Bureau created a network of visiting nurses to make sure women in remote areas received health education and prenatal care. One visiting nurse reported she had to ride a mule to reach her patients up in the Kentucky mountains![115]

To persuade state and local governments to participate, Grace worked with hundreds of state and local officials. She testified before Congress and other political committees to explain the law and its benefits. She rallied the support of women's groups, especially suffragist organizations. The previous year women's right to vote had become law, so Grace encouraged

[114] Sorensen, J. (2011). Grace Abbott: Social work pioneer, reformer, Hull House resident and chief of the Children's Bureau. *Social Welfare History Project*. Retrieved from http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/organizations/childrens-bureau/abbott-grace/
[115] Costin, L. (1983), p. 137.

women to use their new political power to pressure their representatives to support the new health programs for mothers and infants.

Grace even lobbied her brother, Ottie, who had become mayor of Grand Island. She reported that the infant mortality rate in his city was 85.7 compared to 50.4 for Nebraska as a whole. Grace asked him to send her contact information on all babies born in the city so the Children's Bureau could send its "Infant Care" pamphlet to their families and signed the letter "Yours for a lower rate."[116]



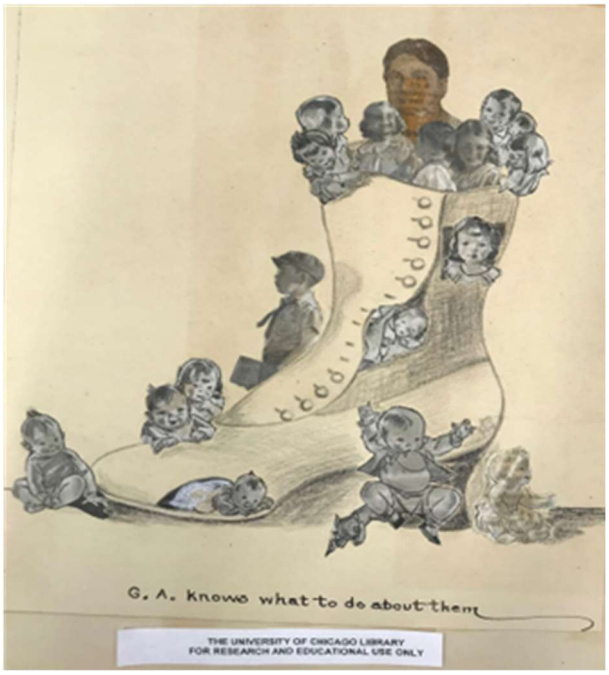
Poster for the Year of the Child 1918-19, Francis L. Mora artist, Library of Congress, POS - US .M67, no. 4

You might think everyone supported the drive to improve maternal and infant health – who wouldn't want to save mothers and babies? Surprisingly, Grace and the Children's Bureau

[116] Abbott, Edith and Grace. Papers [Box 88, Folder 6] Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

encountered tough, sometimes vicious, opposition. One senator questioned how Grace and her colleagues could know anything about babies and motherhood since they were "old maids." [117] Some opponents argued that health was not the federal government's responsibility, even though the Department of Agriculture spent millions of dollars to help farmers keep their pigs healthy without any controversy.

The American Medical Association (AMA), an organization dominated by men, argued that the Maternity and Infancy Protection Act opened the door to socialism. Anti-suffragist organizations, having lost that battle, turned their energies to fighting the woman-led Children's Bureau. They published articles claiming Grace and her supporters were socialists or communists, and likened Grace to Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.[118] One publication claimed: "This bureau [the Children's Bureau], headed by one woman [Grace], will become the most despotic influence in the country."[119]

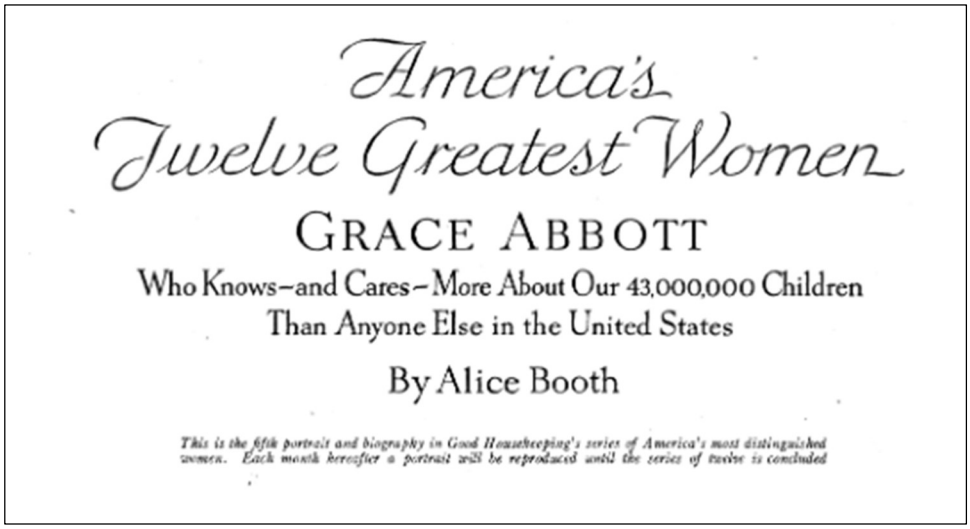


Author's photo of a page in Grace Abbott's scrapbook, University of Chicago Library, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, taken April 12, 2022

[117] Costin, L. (1983) Chapter 6
[118] Ibid.
[119] Sorensen, J. and E. Abbott (2004) "The Maternity and Infancy Revolution," Maternal and Child Health Journal 8(3): 107 – 110.

Edith was stunned. "Could that 'one woman' really be my dear little sister, Gracie?"[120] Grace didn't let the opposition stop her, she kept her cool and persisted. Over the next eight years, the Bureau hosted roughly 125,000 child health fairs, created 2,000 child health centers, and distributed millions of educational pamphlets. Grace eventually convinced the public that the federal government owed the nation's children basic healthcare and education.

Grace's decades working on behalf of mothers and children gained national recognition. In 1931, *Good Housekeeping* readers voted Grace the fifth most distinguished woman in America.[121] That same year she received the National Institute of Social Sciences Gold Medal. In her acceptance speech, Grace described the battle to secure federal support for Children's Bureau programs as slogging through a traffic jam. Many causes competed for federal money,



America's
Twelve Greatest Women

GRACE ABBOTT

Who Knows—and Cares—More About Our 43,000,000 Children
Than Anyone Else in the United States

By Alice Booth

This is the fifth portrait and biography in Good Housekeeping's series of America's most distinguished women. Each month hereafter a portrait will be reproduced until the series of twelve is concluded

Good Housekeeping, v. 92, n. 5, May 1931, page 50. Available at Cornell University Library Digital Collections.

[120]Ibid

[121] *Good Housekeeping,* "Grace Abbott: Who Knows – and Cares – More about Our Children than Anyone Else in the United States," Alice Booth, May 1931.

clogging the way to the Capitol. The military drove in tanks, the Department of Agriculture on ploughs, and the Department of Commerce in limousines. Amidst it all, Grace had to take "a very firm hold on the handles of the baby carriage and …wheel it into the traffic."[122]

When Grace resigned from the Children's Bureau in 1934, President Roosevelt wrote to her saying she had "…rendered service of inestimable value to the children and mothers and fathers of the country, as well as to Federal and State governments."[123]



MOTHERS AND BABIES SAVED

Statistics Show Benefits of Sheppard-Towner Act

Infant and Maternal Deaths Cut in Many States

Los Angeles Times, April 23, 1928. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

While the Abbott sisters lived apart during Grace's time at the Children's Bureau, they continued their close working relationship. Grace worked out front using her political, administrative, and leadership skills. In the background, Edith provided support through her research and by recommending her best students when the Children's Bureau needed to hire staff. Edith and Nisba also cultivated support for child and maternal health programs by publishing articles about them in *Social Service Review*.

[122]J. Sorenson and J. Sealander (2008). The Grace Abbott Reader, University of Nebraska Press, p. 70.
[123] Abbott, Edith and Grace. Papers [Box 94, Folder 2] Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Through rugged co-operation and persistence to help mothers and infants, the Abbott sisters pioneered public health policy in the U.S. Modern research confirms that the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act saved the lives of thousands of infants and women.[124] This success, however, came at cost. Grace's health suffered from the long hours of work and chronic stress. Edith never forgave those who fought Grace and the Children's Bureau for her sister's early demise.[125]

Chapter 13: Making a Difference for People Living in Poverty

As children, Edith and Grace knew the poor in their hometown as individuals who had suffered some misfortune. Their parents taught them to be kind to their struggling neighbors; they were people "whom we should try to help."[126] As they grew older, the Abbott sisters witnessed how invisible forces, like the weather and the economy, could throw families into financial peril. As a young adult in graduate school, Edith observed the tough conditions industrial workers faced. She began to investigate why their wages didn't generate enough income to lift them out of poverty.[127] Edith explained, "…the most intriguing and tormenting problem of political economy is the ancient and baffling question, 'Why are the many poor?"[128]

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[124] C. Moehling and M. Thomasson (2014) "Saving Babies: The Impact of Public Education on Infant Mortality," *Demography* 51: 367 – 386. Also, K. Siefert (2008) "An Exemplar of Primary Prevention in Social Work: The Sheppard Towner Act of 1921," *Social Work in Health Care* 9(1): 87 – 103. DOI:10.1300/J010v09n1_08

[125] Abbott, E. (1939) "Grace Abbott: A Sister's Memories," *Social Service Review* 13(3): 351-407, p. 394

[126] Sorenson, J. (Ed.) A Sister's Memories: The Life and Work of Grace Abbott from the Writings of her Sister, Edith Abbott, University of Chicago Press 2015, p.33.

[127] Edith's dissertation was titled "Wages of Unskilled Labor in the United States, 1850 – 1900." She published key portions of this work in the *Journal of Political Economy* (v. XII in June 195 and v. XIV in January 1906.

[128] Abbott, Edith and Grace. Papers [Box 5, Folder 2] Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

After completing graduate school in 1905, Edith worked briefly for a women's labor union in Boston and then for a research institute in Washington D.C. In 1906, Edith moved to England to study at the London School of Economics on a one-year scholarship. This experience reshaped her thinking about poverty.

The history of England's public assistance system fascinated Edith and the debate about its reform captivated her. The Poor Laws, first adopted in 1601, assumed that people were poor due to personal failings, like laziness or immorality. Edith's favorite London professors, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, worked to end the Poor Laws. They argued that people usually lived in poverty due to forces beyond their control. For example, Britain's rigid class system barred the lower classes from opportunities to develop their potential and improve their economic situation.

Since traditionalists thought personal shortcomings caused poverty, they argued that policy should encourage poor people to improve their behavior. They preferred the old system of poverty relief provided by local charities. If the government provided any assistance, it should be minimal, they argued; otherwise, people would lose their incentive to work.

The Webbs argued that the structure of the economy and society ensnared the working class in poverty. An individual could work hard and behave well yet remain poor in a capitalist economy with a rigid class system. They argued that government policy needed to change the social and economic structures that prevented workers from improving their circumstances.

The Webbs and other Progressives also argued that local charities and governments didn't have enough resources to provide for all the poor citizens due to urbanization and industrialization. There were just too many people in need in the growing big cities. They

proposed that the government create a national public assistance program that provided a decent standard of living for everyone. [129]

Initially Edith opposed this approach, writing to her father that she "…would vote against the Progressives. I don't like experimenting with the public money when poor people pay so much of the taxes…"[130]

In addition to her academic studies, Edith worked with a religious charity, St. Hilda's, which assisted the unemployed. As Edith studied the English Poor Laws and worked directly with London's unemployed, she began to recognize the class system and industrialization as invisible forces that helped perpetuate poverty. She struggled to reconcile her previous views of poverty and the government's role in helping those in poverty with these new ideas and experiences. While she rejected the socialist argument that government should control the economy, she recognized that individual workers faced tremendous obstacles to achieving economic security on their own.

By the time Edith returned to Chicago in 1908 to become a professor at the School of Civics and Philanthropy, she'd concluded that most people wanted to earn their own living rather than rely on either charity or government aid. She continued to believe in individual responsibility, but she believed the government was also responsible for its citizens' welfare.

Edith adopted two principles on how to handle poverty that would shape the rest of her life's work. First, local charities and governments were unable to provide adequately for the needy. Reducing poverty requires government intervention to tear down the barriers to self-

[129] https://fabians.org.uk/about-us/our-history/
[130] Abbott, Edith and Grace. Papers [Box 83, Folder 1] Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

sufficiency. Second, government assistance should be universal – the system should assure everyone a decent standard of living.[131] If everyone benefitted from a program, then more people would support it and those who used the program would not feel stigmatized.

Edith and Sophonisba Breckinridge, her former professor and mentor, began a life-long partnership focused on improving government programs to support those struggling with low income, beginning with the city of Chicago. Because Edith and Nisba witnessed deplorable housing in the Hull-House neighborhood firsthand, they decided to pioneer the application of scientific methods to investigate housing conditions in low-income areas of Chicago. The head of the city's Sanitation Bureau advised them not to bother investigating conditions in Black neighborhoods, but they did anyway. They regarded housing as fundamental to the well-being of all individuals, regardless of race or ethnicity.

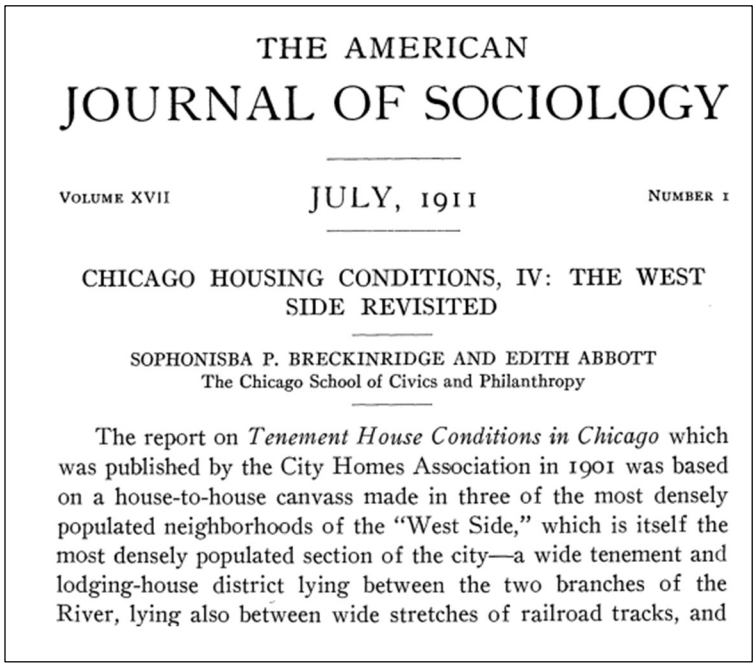
Professors Abbott and Breckinridge, nicknamed "A and B," taught their students how to collect data by surveying residents' homes and living conditions. They statistically analyzed the data to measure the extent of various housing problems and to identify meaningful patterns. For example, they reported the number of cases of leaky roofs and sewage standing in tenement basements. They documented the share of families living in overcrowded and poorly ventilated rooms in each neighborhood. Many working-class families lived in one or two rented rooms in what had been a single-family house. Entire families often slept in one bed.

Families generally rented space month-to-month, an unstable living situation that created insecurity and anxiety. Other families and unrelated lodgers lived in other rooms of the house, and they would all share the kitchen and a toilet or outhouse. No one had any privacy, and the

[131] Goodwin, J. (1997) Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform: Mother's Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1929, University of Chicago Press, pp. 95-97.

crowded conditions enabled disease to spread easily. Some families kept pigs, chickens or goats in their basements, adding to the unsanitary conditions. Edith and Sophonisba deemed the conditions "demoralizing" as well as unhealthy.[132]

Edith and Nisba presented their findings in a series of reports published from 1910 to 1915.[133] Their scientific approach convinced city officials that the sensational newspaper stories about horrible housing conditions were not exaggerations, but the norm in poor neighborhoods. They also showed that the city failed to collect trash regularly in poor areas and that garbage was sometimes dumped in immigrant and Black neighborhoods. Their work persuaded the city to update its sewage treatment and trash collection programs.[134]



THE AMERICAN

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VOLUME XVII JULY, 1911 NUMBER 1

CHICAGO HOUSING CONDITIONS, IV: THE WEST SIDE REVISITED

SOPHONISBA P. BRECKINRIDGE AND EDITH ABBOTT
The Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy

The report on *Tenement House Conditions in Chicago* which was published by the City Homes Association in 1901 was based on a house-to-house canvass made in three of the most densely populated neighborhoods of the "West Side," which is itself the most densely populated section of the city—a wide tenement and lodging-house district lying between the two branches of the River, lying also between wide stretches of railroad tracks, and

Available through JSTOR

[132] Breckinridge, S. and E. Abbott (1910) "Chicago's Housing Problem: Families in Furnished Rooms," *American Journal of Sociology* 16(3): 289 – 308; "Chicago's Housing Problem V: South Chicago at the Gates of the Steel Mills," *American Journal of Sociology* 17(2): 145-176; Housing Conditions in Chicago, III: Back of Yards," *American Journal of Sociology* 16(4): 433-468.
[133] The Housing Problem in Chicago (1910 – 1915) *American Journal of Sociology* volumes 16-21.
[134] Ibid p. 100-103.



Photograph by R. R. Earle

A ONE-ROOM APARTMENT

Occupied by the owner and his family in a house containing four other apartments

"Chicago Housing Conditions, IV: The West Side Revisited, E. Abbott and S. Breckinridge, *American Journal of Sociology* July 1911 v. XVII n. 1.

situation objectionable.

TABLE XVII

NUMBER OF FAMILIES DEPENDENT ON SPECIFIED TOILET ARRANGEMENTS

Provision	Number	Percentage
Privy vault	9	2
Yard closet	302	55
Basement or cellar closet	41	8
Hall closet	48	9
Private (within the apartment)	135	25
No report	8	1
Total	545	100

"Chicago Housing Conditions, V: South Chicago at the Gates of the Steel Mills, S. Breckinridge and E. Abbott, *American Journal of Sociology* v. 17, n 2, Sept 1911, pp. 145-76

Edith and Nisba noticed a pattern between family income, home conditions and children's mental health and behavior. In many families living in poverty, young children had to work to help support the family. In their investigations, A and B learned of a little boy caught stealing. He worked selling newspapers and his parents beat him when he didn't bring home enough money, so he stole some.

Many children worked long hours, had no time for play or money for simple pleasures, and faced harsh or desperate parents at home. The desire for relief often led such children to steal or run away. Edith and Nisba concluded, "…poverty itself is often a direct and compelling cause of delinquency."[135]

Because they thought "deprivation rather than depravity" was the problem, Edith and Nisba used their housing study to argue that the government should provide a minimum standard of housing for everyone. They reasoned that reducing poverty would alleviate the conditions that often motivated child delinquency. Edith also proposed setting a minimum wage so all workers could afford adequate housing. These ideas would prove harder to achieve than the improvements in Chicago's municipal sanitation practices.

County officials learned of Edith's statistical skills and hired her to assess whether building a new jail was worth the cost. Economists call this type of study a cost-benefit analysis because it compares the cost of an action to its benefits. An action is worth taking if the benefits exceed the costs and it's not worth taking if the costs exceed the benefits.

[135] Breckinridge S. and E. Abbott (1912) The Delinquent Child and the Home, Russell Sage Foundation: New York, Chapters 4 and 6, quote on p. 70

Edith's research confirmed that jail conditions were harsh and that building a new jail would raise them to meet state standards. She estimated that the jail's benefits would exceed the costs, but she didn't stop there.

Edith discovered that 90% of the men and boys in the jail had not been convicted, they were awaiting trial. Nearly all were poor. Arrestees with money paid bail and waited for trial in the comfort of their homes. The poor couldn't afford bail, so they suffered in the jail's harsh conditions until a court heard their case. Similarly, men convicted of non-violent crimes who had money paid their fines and left, but the poor could not afford to pay their fines. The real jail problem, Edith concluded, was poverty.[136]

Edith argued that different treatment of prisoners by economic class was both unjust and inefficient. Why should only the poor suffer in the harsh conditions of the jail while those with money returned to their families and jobs? Furthermore, holding thousands of men and boys in jail awaiting trial or in lieu of fines was expensive to taxpayers and likely harmed inmates' physical and mental health. Since most prisoners had either not committed any crime or had not committed a violent crime, the costs of jailing them outweighed the benefits in terms of public safety. She also recommended that people waiting for trial be held in a different facility than those convicted of a crime or be released on probation.[137]

[136] Abbott, Edith (1915). The Real Jail Problem, Chicago: Juvenile Protective Association.
[137] Ibid.



JAILS MAKING MANY CRIMINALS, REPORT SHOWS

More than 7,000 Persons Held Without Bail Not Convicted.

"The Real Jail Problem" is the subject of a booklet published yesterday by the Juvenile Protective association in an effort to save in the future some of the victims of the law's delays. The text was written by Miss Edith Abbott of Hull house.

Chicago Daily Tribune, Nov. 4, 1915, p. 12. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Edith also researched child labor and maternal and infant health. That work also showed that poverty also played a critical role in maternal and infant deaths. Since poverty caused so many social ills, she and Nisba intensified their calls for establishing a national basic living standard. [138] While such a policy would entail substantial public expense, they argued it would reduce criminal justice costs, improve health and education, and thus raise labor productivity. It would also provide social justice by making sure everyone had access to basic resources regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion or family structure. Edith and Nisba likely would support today's advocates for Universal Basic Income (UBI), the regular payment of cash benefits to everyone.[139]

[138] Jabor p. 83

[139] For a brief summary of the UBI debate, see www.procon.org/headlines/universal-basic-income-top-3-pros-and-cons/



Edith Abbott, 1919, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center apf1-00005

Edith and Nisba made little progress in convincing the political leaders of their day to enact a national minimum living standard or a federal minimum wage. Most politicians then held the traditional view of poverty and public assistance, blaming poverty on personal failings rather than on large, impersonal forces moving through society. It would take the widespread misery of the Great Depression to force many people to reconsider their attitudes about the causes of poverty and the government's role in providing aid.

Chapter 14: The Great Depression and Social Security

Until the early 1900's, if your parents made so little money that they couldn't provide adequate housing and food, you'd be taken away and placed in an orphanage or workhouse. Hull-House residents witnessed the trauma caused by breaking up poor families in Chicago and thought there had to be a better way.

Jane Addams attended a White House conference on the care of children convened by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909. She and the other attendees rejected the practice of institutionalizing children just because their parents earned little income. They recommended that the government pay "mothers' pensions" so parents could afford necessities and raise their children at home. The conference group argued that keeping families together would cost the government less than placing children in orphanages and would improve child health and development.



PRESERVE HOME, SAYS ROOSEVELT

In Speaking of Care of Dependent Children.

Conference on Little Ones Is Opened at the White House. State Aid Urged Where Poverty Exists in Home—Roosevelt on Types of Children.

The Atlanta Constitution January 26, 1909. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.



MOTHERS' PENSIONS CUT JUVENILE CRIME

Judge Neil Tells Benefits of the Aid Illinois Gives to Poor Widows.

HOPES TO EXTEND SYSTEM

East Side Committee Appointed at Meeting to Push Fight for New York Law.

Judge Henry Neil of Chicago, who procured the passage of the amendment to the Illinois Juvenile Court law, which was the first widowed mothers' pension act in this country, yesterday afternoon told a large crowd in the

New York Times, January 11, 1915. Available through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Two years later, Illinois created the nation's first family pension. A Cook County judge, frustrated by having to send children to orphanages because their parents couldn't make enough money, proposed the family pension bill to the state legislature. Grace lobbied to support it, writing and visiting legislators explaining why they should support mothers' pensions.

Illinois adopted "the mothers' pension" program, but only poor families in which the father had died, become disabled or had deserted were eligible. Based on the state's positive results, other states began their own "mothers' pensions" programs. These programs failed to meet Edith's ideal of universality, but she saw it as a step in the right direction.

The Abbott sisters supported Herbert Hoover in the 1928 presidential election because of his impressive humanitarian record. He had created and managed a private organization that provided food relief in Europe during World War I, and he supported children's programs at home. When Hoover won, Edith gushed, "I can hardly believe that anything so good as Herbert Hoover in the White House can come to pass."[140]



EXTRA! The Evening Star. EXTRA

WITH SUNDAY MORNING EDITION

WASHINGTON, D. C., TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 1928

HOOVER IS ELECTED

REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE NAMED 30th PRESIDENT IN GREATEST ELECTION

Upstate Balloting Wipes Out Smith's Early Lead in New York City.

RESULT CONSTRUED GENERALLY AS VICTORY FOR CAUSE OF DRYS

First Sign of Smith's Defeat Comes in Concession of Loss in New York by Many Sources.

BY G. GOULD LINCOLN.

ALABAMA

ARKANSAS

The Choice of the Nation

HOOVER LEA... IN AREAS ... NATIONAL CAPI...

Zihlman Running Stron... Sixth District—Gamb... Ahead in Fifth.

BRUCE-GOLDSBOROUG... CONTEST VERY CL...

The Evening Star, Washington D.C. Nov. 6, 1928, Library of Congress, Chronicling America

[140] Costin p. 166.

Then in 1929 the stock market crashed. The invisible force of economic depression swept through the country, throwing millions out of their jobs and homes. Unemployment soared to over 20%. Poverty, homelessness, and hunger spread across the nation. All the social problems Edith and Grace had worked so hard to solve suddenly became much, much worse.



Great Depression Timeline, Z. Williams, Sutori.com.



"African American family living in crowded quarters, Chicago." Photo taken by Russell Lee, 1941. Library of Congress LC-USZ62-22188.

Throughout the Great Depression, the Abbott sisters lived apart but still worked as a team. Edith lived in Chicago, leading the University of Chicago's social work school. Grace lived in Washington D.C., leading the Children's Bureau. They summoned their pioneer spirit to work harder than ever to ease the widespread suffering caused by the Great Depression.

President Hoover had long believed that private charities could provide for the nation's poor citizens. Even after years of nationwide economic collapse, he clung to this belief. The Abbott sisters were stunned that he continued to refuse to offer federal aid to the millions of poor, struggling families. They set out to change his mind.

Edith carefully researched the impacts of the Depression. She documented that local

charities and governments couldn't meet the flood of requests for aid.[141] When the Secretary of the Interior reported that on his tour of the nation he'd seen "no abject poverty in any of the great centers of population," Edith knew better.[142]

Edith bravely stood up to Secretary Wilbur despite his high rank and set the record straight. She retorted that "Secretary Wilbur apparently did not visit Chicago…"[143] She provided evidence that Chicago's relief agencies had run out of money to help people pay rent months ago. Evictions followed and a couple of hundred people, half of them children, had moved into the Angelus Building. The Angelus had housed a gracious hotel in the days of World's Fair but functioned as a shelter of last resort at this time. The furnace rarely worked, so residents burned coal in their apartments for warmth. The electricity had been turned off, so residents, Edith indignantly exclaimed, "were using kerosene lamps – in Chicago, in the twentieth century!"[144]

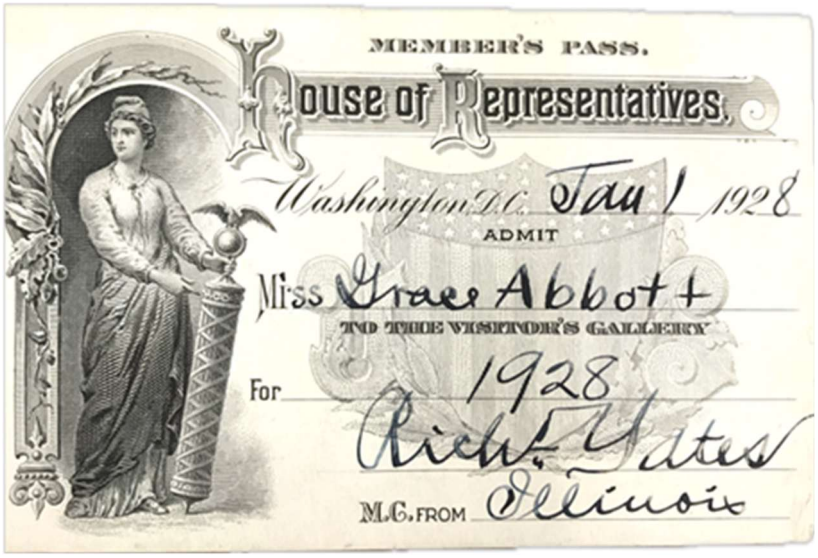
The miserable conditions in the Angelus Building exemplified the nationwide suffering during the Great Depression. Edith argued that a national crisis required a national program of public assistance. She challenged Hoover's policies; writing in *The New Republic* that Americans by the millions would continue to suffer if the administration clung to the antiquated notion that poverty relief belonged on the local level. She pushed the government to modernize public assistance laws: "The principle of local relief belongs to parochial England of the sixteenth century and not to modern America." [145]

Meanwhile, Grace used her leadership position at the Children's Bureau to explain the facts produced by Edith's research to politicians and the public. She recommended that the

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[141] Abbott, Edith (1931) "Relief Statistics for 1930," *Social Service Review* 5(1): 109-110.
[142] *Wall Street Journal* Sept. 8, 1932 "Secretary Wilbur Sure Upturn Near."
[143] Abbott, Edith (1932) "Poor People in Chicago," *The New Republic*, October 5, 1932, p. 209.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Abbott, E. (1932) "The Fallacy of Local Relief," *The New Republic* LXXII(72), November 9, 1932, pp. 248-50.

federal government use the state offices created for mothers' pension programs to provide federal aid quickly. She also recommended that the government expand eligibility to families in which the father was present and healthy, but unemployed.

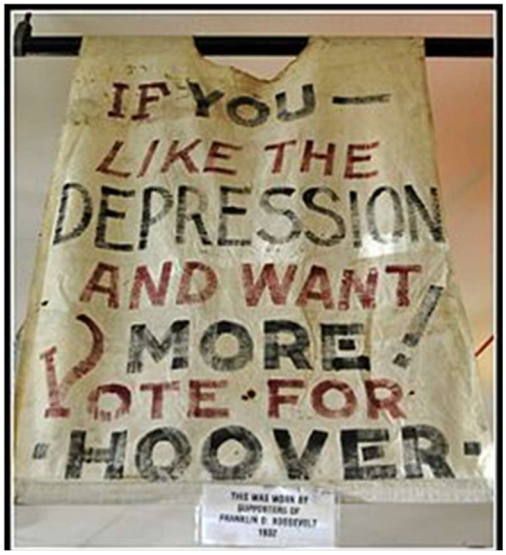


Author's photo of Grace Abbott's Congressional Pass, University of Chicago's Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, April 2022

Despite the work by the Abbotts and their network, Hoover refused to change his mind. The Abbott sisters, as well as millions of other Americans, lost faith in the President and turned to his challenger, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in the next election.



FDR Campaign Tire Cover, 1932, WikiMedia Commons, Public Domian



Tony Fischer, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Soon after moving into the Oval Office in January 1933, the new president initiated major reforms, collectively called the New Deal. Roosevelt convened a group of experts to devise a plan to provide Americans a basic level of economic security. The head of the Committee on Economic Security, Edwin Witte, asked Grace to join. He wrote, "We badly need your thought and experience developing a program for mothers and children to be a part of a general program for economic security."[146] Because of her expertise on labor and poverty, the committee recruited Edith to work on the employment and public assistance portions of the plan.



Edith and Grace Abbott, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center apf1-00009

[146] Abbott, Edith and Grace. Papers [Box 54, Folder 1] Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

Grace recognized that the Committee on Economic Security would require all her attention. Worn down by years leading the Children's Bureau and two bouts of tuberculosis, Grace resigned her job and returned to Chicago. She and Edith rented a spacious, two-story red brick house near the university on Woodlawn Avenue. Like many Victorian houses, their home had high ceilings, beautifully crafted mahogany woodwork, and a large living room with a deep window seat overlooking the front yard. They decorated the public areas of their home with etchings, photos, and prints, and even displayed their childhood rocker.[147]

Grace joined Edith and Nisba as a professor at the University of Chicago, creating the trio "A^2B."[148] She and Edith recognized the importance of their opportunity to develop the nation's public assistance system and they dove deep into their work for the Committee on Economic Security." [149] While not formally on the committee, Nisba helped the Abbott sisters with this task.

Providing federal assistance to the millions of Americans impoverished by the Great Depression would not only ease the widespread suffering, but it would also spur the economy. When people have less money to spend, businesses lose sales. When sales fall, businesses hire fewer workers. Then more people lose their jobs and have less to spend, making the economic situation worse.

Edith and other economists thought the government could break this downward spiral by putting cash in people's hands. With more money in their pockets, people could buy groceries, clothing, medicine, and other goods. Their spending would raise business sales and companies

[147] Baker, H. (1936) "The Abbotts of Nebraska," *Survey Graphic* 25: 370 – 372.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Jabour p. 251.

would need to hire more workers. In this way, government assistance could help shorten the depression.

The Committee on Economic Security produced the Social Security Act, which Congress passed in 1935. This act established the basis of the federal public assistance system we have today and stands out as one of the nation's most consequential pieces of legislation. Social Security provides workers with protection against injury, illness, and unemployment. In addition, after Edith's decades of promoting a national minimum wage, the Social Security Act finally made it law -- 25 cents per hour.

Most of the Committee members focused on helping unemployed men because they viewed earning income as a male responsibility. The Abbotts, however, kept fighting for the legislation to provide economic security for women and children too. Thanks largely to their persistence, the Social Security Act transformed states' "mothers' pensions" programs into a federal program to help low-income mothers provide for their children.[150] Contrary to Edith's ideal, however, this program was means-tested rather than universal. Only families who could prove they were sufficiently poor qualified for the Aid to Dependent Children program.[151]

The Social Security Act gave responsibility for Aid to Dependent Children to the Social Security Board, rather than the Children's Bureau. The A^2B team feared this would weaken the Bureau, but Grace still testified before Congress in support of the Social Security Act. While the Act didn't do everything the Abbott sisters wanted, they rejoiced when it passed. Edith ranked it up with women's voting rights in its impact on the nation.[152] Frank Bane, the Social Security

[150] Goodwin, J. (1997) Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform: Mothers' Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1929. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. p. 190
[151] The Aid to Dependent Children program has been amended over the years and is now called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).
[152] Costin p. 226

Board leader, praised Edith and Nisba, saying they "…gave us the greatest help in organizing government for the administration of welfare programs. Edith and Sophonisba – what a pair!"[153]



Sophonisba Breckinridge and Edith Abbott, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center apf1-00008

For the rest of her life, Edith continued pushing to make federal aid to families universal, writing in 1951 that "Social Security is still not social security if we give only to those who can prove that they are destitute."[154] She recommended that the government replace Aid to Dependent Children with a child allowance available to all families. Edith likely would have supported the Child Tax Credit implemented to help families during the COVID-19 pandemic and the efforts to make it permanent.[155] She probably would also have supported the idea of "Baby Bonds" – savings accounts set up for all newborns in which the government deposits a larger sum the lower the infant's family income.[156]

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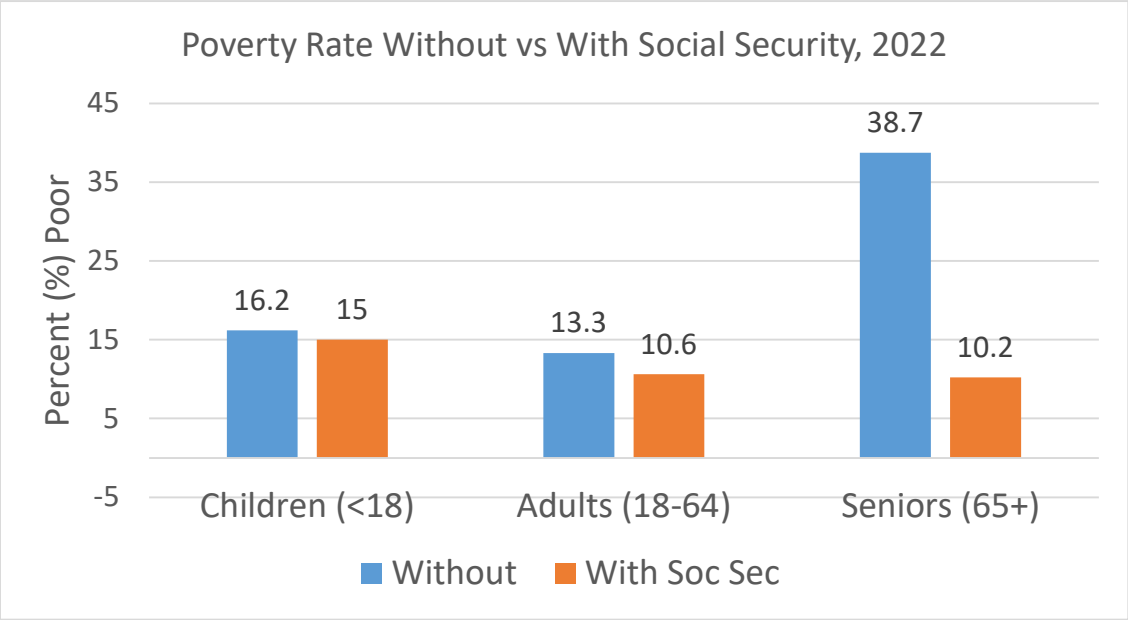
[153] Abbott, Edith and Grace. Papers [Box 83, Folder 10] Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

[154] Abbott, E. (1951) "The Hull House of Jane Addams," *Social Service Review* 26(2): 334-338, p. 337.

[155] https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/covid-19-pandemic-underscored-child-tax-credits-power-alleviate-family-poverty

[156] https://socialequity.duke.edu/portfolio-item/baby-bonds-a-universal-path-to-ensure-the-next-generation-has-the-capital-to-thrive/ and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qlzjohcBkmg

While the Social Security program falls short of the Abbott sisters' ideals, the program has reduced poverty significantly. A recent report finds that Social Security lifts more Americans out of poverty than any other federal program.[157] While Social Security reduces poverty among all age groups, that bar graph below shows it lowers poverty the most among the elderly. Social Security benefits reduce poverty among seniors from 38.7% to 10.2%, a drop of 28.5 percentage points. In contrast, it reduces child poverty by only 1.5 percentage points, from 16.2% to 15%.



Author created this Excel graph using data from "Social Security Lifts More People above Poverty Line than Any Other Program," by K. Romig, January 31, 2024, Center on Budget Policy Priorities.

[157] Roming, K. (2022) "Social Security Lifts More People Above the Poverty Line than Any Other Program," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/10-25-13ss.pdf, accessed April 20, 2022.

Chapter 15: The Abbott Sisters' Legacy

Edith and Grace Abbott blazed trails in American social policy. They worked together closely, each using her particular skills and position to achieve their common goal of social justice. Edith pioneered a blend of social work and activism in academia. She taught hundreds of social work students over her lifetime and shaped the educations of all those who followed

In terms of research, Edith specialized in collecting and analyzing data from an economic perspective and then developing policy recommendations. She communicated her work through writing investigative reports, academic journal articles, and books. Despite having published over a hundred works, many histories of the field of economics generally overlook Edith's contributions.[158]

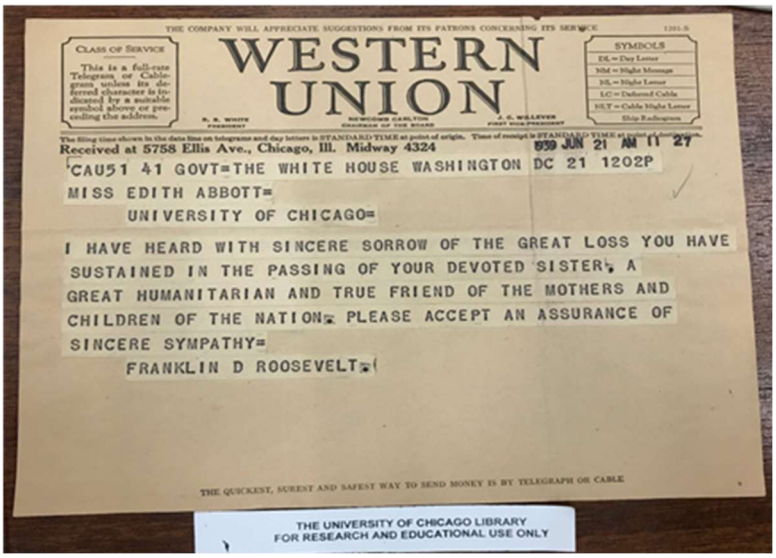
Grace specialized in explaining what the research meant to voters and policymakers. She used her political knowledge and speaking skills to pioneer the creation of federal public health and public assistance policy. Grace enjoyed debating with congressional members and her good humor usually left them charmed, if not convinced. Edith summarized the sisters' teamwork, "I could assemble the facts and write the report, but Grace had the gift of applying the proper legislative remedy."[159]

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[158] Dimand et al. (1995). "Women of Value: Feminist Essays on the History of Women in Economics," Edward Elgar Press: Brookfield. p. 3 notes that Joseph Dorfman's five volume collection "The Economic Mind in American Civilization 1606-1933" fails to mention Edith's publications, while documenting male economists who had published much less.

[159] Sorensen, J. (2010, December 13). Edith Abbott (1876-1957): Social reformer, author, administrator and educator. *Social Welfare History Project*. Retrieved **[7/14/2020]** from http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/people/abbott-edith/

When Grace died in 1939 President Roosevelt sent a telegram to Edith expressing his condolences, calling Grace "…a great humanitarian and true friend of the mothers and children of the nation."



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MISS EDITH ABBOTT=
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO=

I HAVE HEARD WITH SINCERE SORROW OF THE GREAT LOSS YOU HAVE SUSTAINED IN THE PASSING OF YOUR DEVOTED SISTER, A GREAT HUMANITARIAN AND TRUE FRIEND OF THE MOTHERS AND CHILDREN OF THE NATION. PLEASE ACCEPT AN ASSURANCE OF SINCERE SYMPATHY=
FRANKLIN D ROOSEVELT=

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Author's photo, University of Chicago's Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, April 2022

Edith pioneered women's leadership at universities while Grace pioneered women's leadership in the top levels of government. Today, women lead almost a third of the nation's colleges and universities[160] and held nearly half of the cabinet positions, as well as the vice-presidency, during the Biden Administration.[161]

Edith and Grace not only worked together, they worked within an expansive network of other reformers dedicated to social justice. Making the nation more prosperous and equitable takes the rugged co-operation of a great many people.

[160] Whitford, E. (2022) "Women Earn More Under Female Presidents, Study Shows," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 26, 2022.
[161] The Biden-Harris Administration, Cabinet

Epilogue

> "Edith Abbott and Miss Breckinridge for as long as I knew them looked frail, as if a breath of wind might blow them away. Grace Abbott looked hardy and robust; you expected Grace Abbott to protect you."[162]
>
> Helen R. Wright, former student and colleague

Edith may have looked frail, but she outlived both her younger sister and Nisba. Grace fell ill first. Edith cared for her in their home until Grace died in 1939. Nisba then moved in with Edith and they continued their social justice work. Both women caught a virus in 1947. Edith recovered, but Nisba did not. Like Grace, she died at home with Edith at her side.[163]

Two years after Nisba's death, Edith moved into her old room at Hull-House seeking familiarity and companionship. However, so much time had passed, the place no longer felt like home. The young residents viewed her more as a curiosity than as a colleague. Eventually her health declined so much that she moved back to Grand Island. She spent her final years in the old Abbott family house with her younger brother and his family. Edith died in 1957.[164]

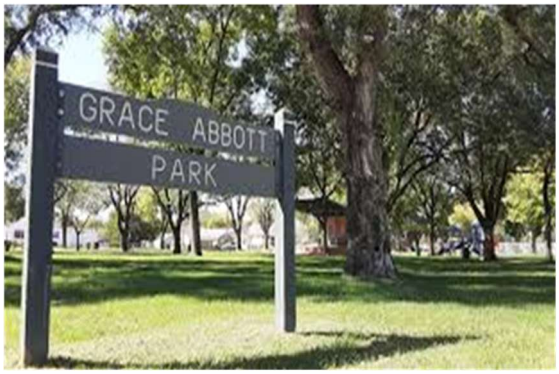
Edith and Grace left an enduring mark on the nation, and you can see physical reminders of their legacy in both Grand Island and Chicago. Their hometown named its library for Edith and a city park carries Grace's name. After all, Edith was known for her scholarship and Grace for her action. The town celebrates Abbott Sisters Day each March 20th and the library

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[162] Wright, Helen R. (1954) "Three Against Time: Edith and Grace Abbott and Sophonisba P. Breckinridge," *Social Service Review* 28(1): 41 – 53, p. 41
[163] Jabour, chapter 10.
[164] Costin, chapter 10.



Author's photo, taken April 2022



The Grand Island Independent, Oct 10, 2022

hosts a Victorian tea party each September to commemorate Edith's birthday. The University of Chicago's social work school dedicated its building to Edith in 2021, naming it Edith Abbott Hall.[165] A bench in front of their red brick, Victorian home on Woodlawn Avenue commemorates their work as founding mothers of social work.



Author's photo, taken April 12, 2022

[165] UNP Blog March 20,2009; The Grand Island Independent March 21,2021; gilbrary.org/services/youth-services/children-s/Victorian-tea-party

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