

Savage Girls

The 1899 Riot at the Mitchellville Girls School

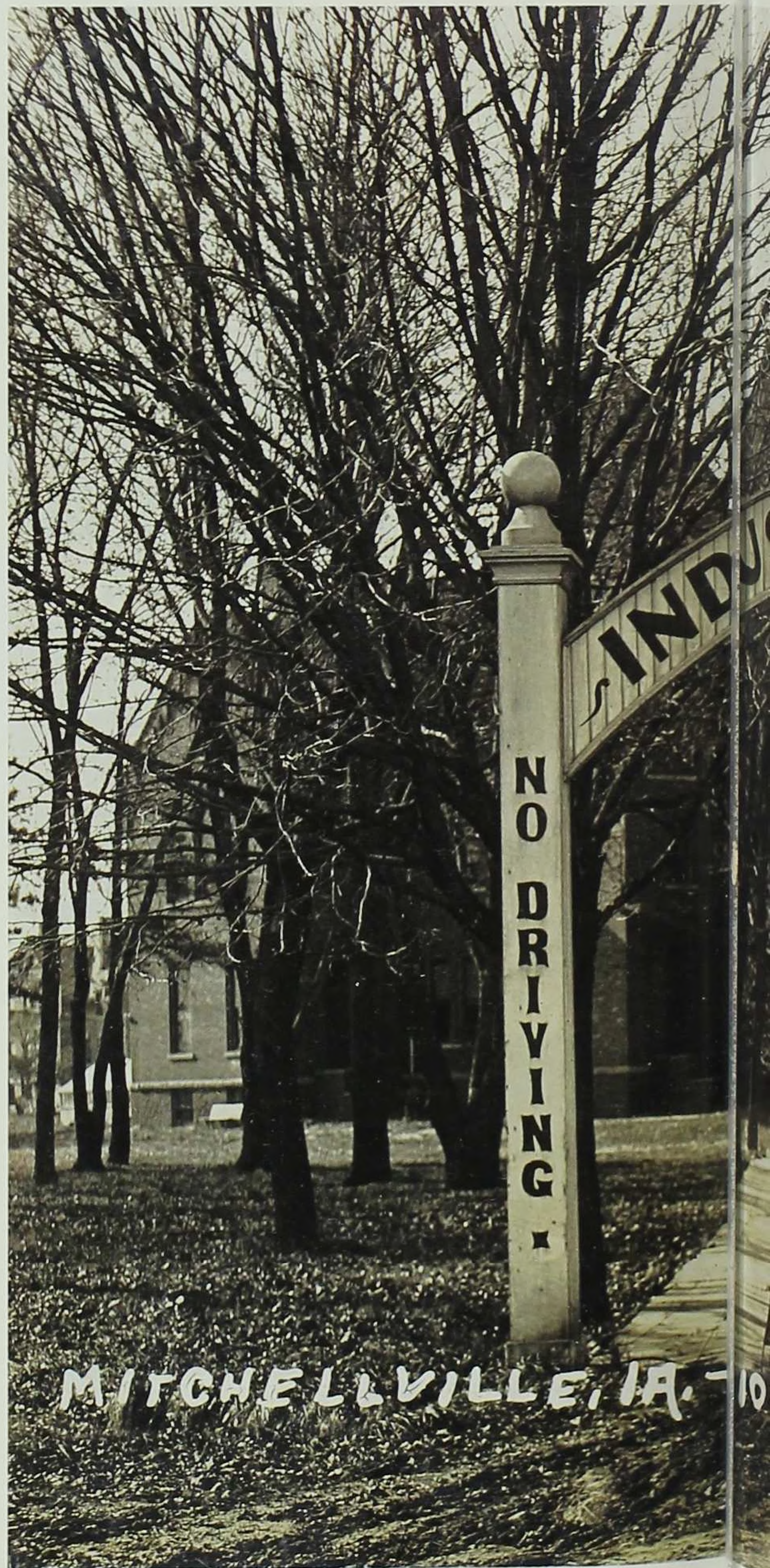
by Sharon E. Wood

On a cool October Sunday in 1899, as church bells tolled over the village of Mitchellville and residents strolled to worship, murmurs of discord were already stirring at the State Industrial School for Girls just outside of town. That evening, the inmates rose in open rebellion, and by midnight bells were ringing out over Mitchellville again—this time calling the citizenry to quell a riot so vicious and destructive it defied the most fundamental beliefs of observers: who had imagined that girls could be so savage?

From dusk until nine the following morning, as many as 200 girls and young women reveled in their moment of freedom, dancing, drinking, and destroying nearly everything in sight. When posses of men summoned from Mitchellville attempted to storm the buildings, the inmates fought back, successfully repulsing the attack. Even the Polk County sheriff and his deputies needed several hours to restore order.

In the aftermath of the mayhem, Sheriff Jim Stout marched about 70 “ringleaders” to a special train, which carried them 15 miles to Des Moines and to the cold, cramped quarters of the Polk County jail. There the girls languished for weeks while the authorities puzzled over what to do with them. The debate that followed provoked excuses, explanations, and accusations from all sides: the State Board of Control, which administered the industrial school; a grand jury charged with investigating the riot; newspaper editors and columnists; organizations concerned with child welfare; and the girls’ families. Back at the industrial school, two more short riots in the days following signalled that the trouble in Mitchellville was far from over.

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MITCHELLVILLE, IA.—109

SHIRI (OWA CITY) ORIGINAL COURTESY OF JAMES BERANEK

tion the most basic assumptions about race and gender shared by Americans at the turn of the last century—assumptions that underlay the reform program administered at Mitchellville.

In the 1890s, scientific and popular ideas about boyhood were in the midst of a contentious reorientation. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall was beginning to publicize the ideas he would formally present in the two volumes of his 1904 opus, *Adolescence*. Hall proposed that the races of the world were progressing through different stages of evolution, and that only the white, European race had evolved to the highest stage of civilization. This idea was neither original nor particularly controversial—at least not to most educated whites of the era. Educated non-whites, like Harvard Ph.D. W.E.B. DuBois, vigorously disputed this assumption.

Hall's stroke of originality was to propose that each boy, in his development, recapitulated the entire development of his race, passing through the stage of savagery in childhood, and being flooded with the racial memories of his ancestors—and their sexual energy—at puberty. These experiences called for special tolerance by educators. Young boys' tendency toward "savage" behavior should be permitted so boys could evolve through this stage, deriving physical hardness from it while freeing themselves from any savage taint as adults. The sexual energy of puberty should be channeled safely into sports and schooling so that white boys with the richest stock of ancestral energy could evolve into super-men.

While some found Hall's celebration of savage boyhood appalling, many others saw in his work validation for the new cult of vigorous manhood. By 1899, Theodore Roosevelt had completed his self-prescribed transformation from an effeminate bookworm to the heroic Rough Rider of San Juan Hill; not surprisingly, Roosevelt wrote Hall fan letters praising his work. On college campuses, young white men played an increasingly deadly game of football, took up boxing in record numbers, and made headlines for the viciousness with which they hazed underclassmen. Hall's work provided scientific justification for indulging an apparent male propensity for "savage" entertainments.

But where did Hall's work leave adolescent girls? They lingered in an evolutionary backwater. Neither Hall nor most of his contemporaries believed girls could evolve to the highest levels of civilized development. They based their belief on the assumption that females were "generic" while



"GOING TO SCHOOL."
GIRLS INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL — 22—
MITCHELLVILLE, IA.

SPS (OWA CITY) ORIGINAL COURTESY OF JAMES BEHRENS

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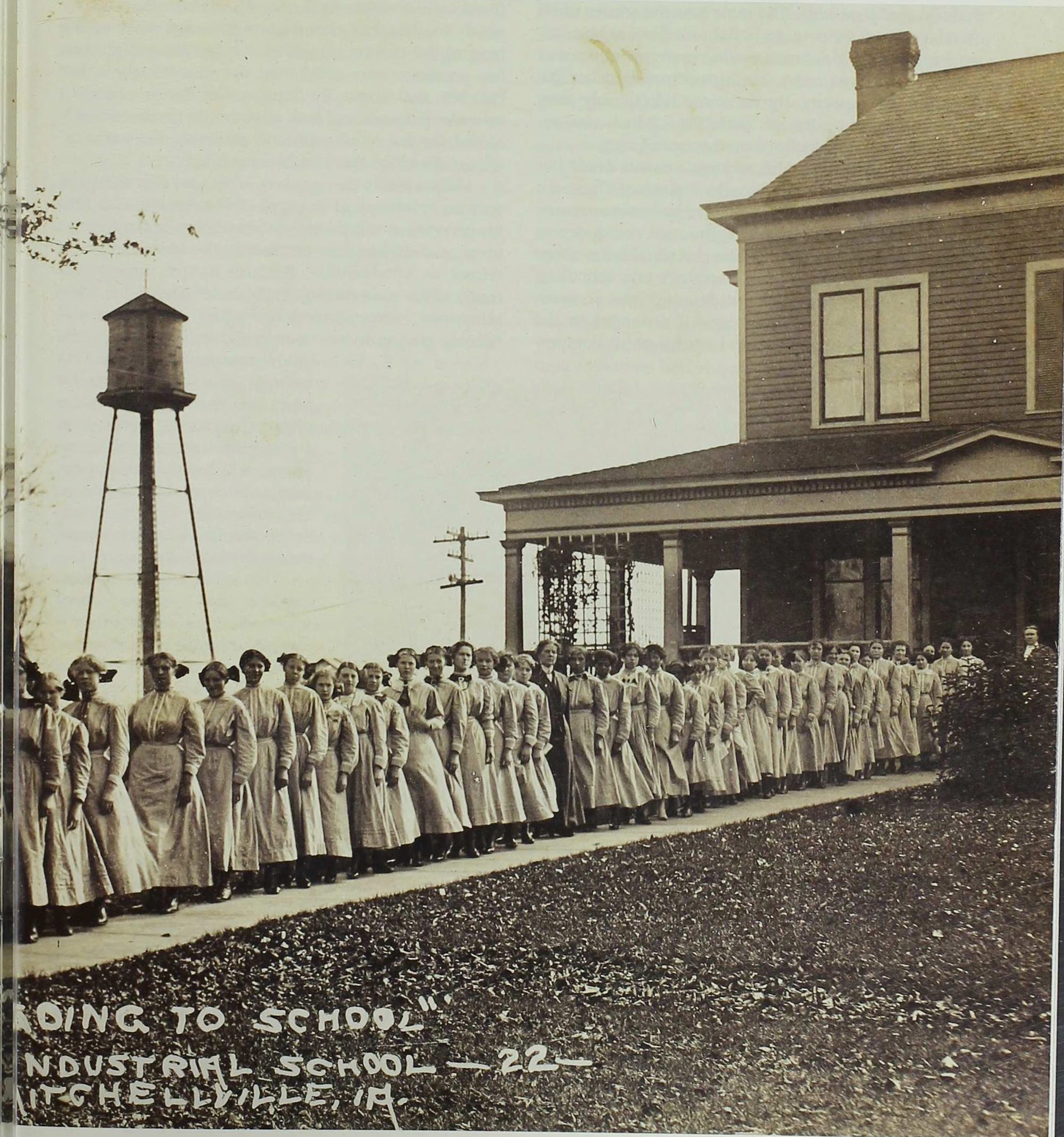
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males were "variable." The male was the source of all developmental innovation in the race, for only he varied from type. No woman could reach the summit of "genius"; she was incapable of transcending her generic mental capacity. By the same token, only men could occupy the rank of "imbecile," which also required dramatic variation from type.

In this scientific model, woman's nature made her steady, conservative, and generic. If she experienced a streak of savagery in childhood, she had no need to indulge it, since neither she nor the race could derive evolutionary benefit from it. Nor did she need to channel the sexual energy of her ancestors into schooling or sports, since she could not develop into a superman. Indeed, such activities posed a danger to the white race. Hall, like all but a handful of his contem-

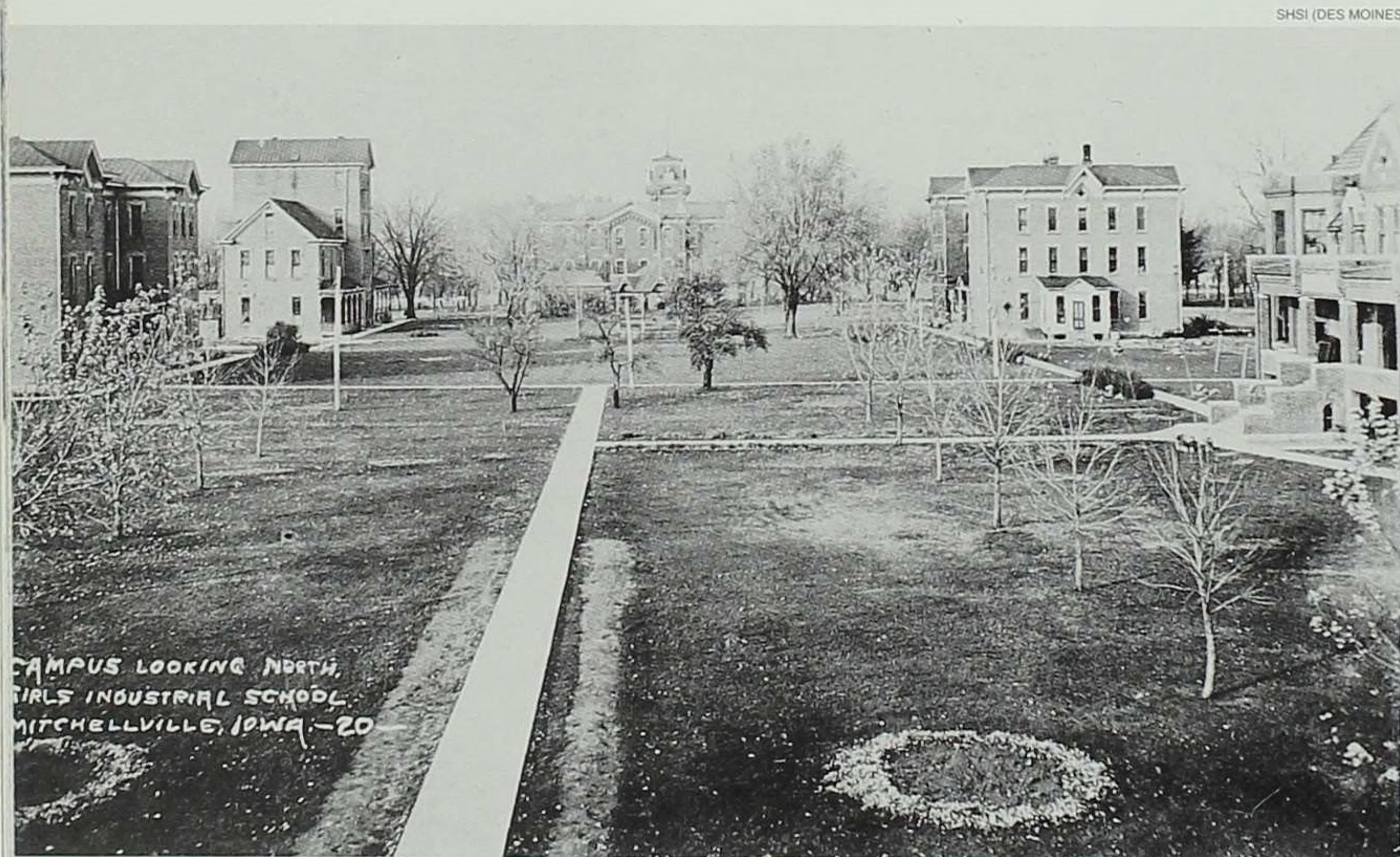
pered by her capacity for motherhood. She was innately modest, her sexual desires aroused only by the longing for children. Instinctively gentle and patient, her passions were awakened only by threats to her children and home. By happy coincidence, woman's inherent patience and lack of ambition made her well-suited for the mind-numbing assembly lines and tedious office jobs she increasingly filled.

Unlike Hall's "savage boy," this scientific model of woman's nature had changed little since the mid-19th century, when it influenced the creation of the first reform schools for girls—including the Iowa industrial school at Mitchellville. Because nature presumably made white girls modest and gentle, when girls were otherwise, then something other than nature—namely, environment—was to blame. Therefore, in the

model reformatory of the 19th century, girls whose home life had led them astray were placed (by parents or court) in a perfected, institutional home. There, wholesome labor, gentle discipline, and good (meaning Protestant Christian) example would allow their innate, womanly natures to emerge.

This was the ideal animating the girls' reform school when the Iowa legislature arranged to create separate institutions for boys and girls in 1873. Over the next quarter-century, girls entering the school followed a routine that divided their time between schoolroom and the various institutional workshops: laundry, kitchen, housekeeping, mending. Their labor subsidized the operation of the school, and in theory prepared

them to be domestic servants after release. For their leisure time, "inmates" (as they were called) were encouraged to pursue such activities as fancy needlework or the study of religious tracts. Twice daily the inmates gathered for Protestant devotions, with Sundays devoted to chapel and Sunday School. They also attended a weekly prayer meeting. Girls who obeyed the rules, labored dutifully, and demonstrated a good Protestant character could accumulate credits that led to their early release. Those whose behavior fell outside the appropriate model remained until age 18.



SHSI (DES MOINES)

Orderly grounds and obedient inmates characterize the following series of six photographs of the Industrial School for Girls early in the 20th century. A far less serene portrait of the school emerged from accounts of the 1899 riot and its aftermath.

poraries, believed that too much mental activity at puberty would sap a girl's limited store of energy, permanently crippling her reproductive organs. They worried that as middle-class girls increasingly attended high school and college, the reproductive strain would dramatically lower birth rates among old-stock white Americans. The result would be "race suicide," or the decline of whites relative to more fertile non-whites.

Civilized woman's nature, as proposed by both science and conservative popular opinion, was de-

By the end of the century, the industrial school had grown from a handful of inmates to about 200. Like most Iowans, nearly all of the girls committed to the home were white, though African-Americans were overrepresented in the school's population. The inmates were grouped into four buildings known as "families," in keeping with the ideal of the reformatory as a perfected home. Each family was under the direction of a woman manager, whose impossible job was to maintain order among as many as 70 inmates, ranging in age from 7 to 18, while offering them motherly attention and a model of appropriate womanly behavior.

While scientific ideas about the nature of womanhood had barely budged since mid-century, standards of institutional administration were changing rapidly. In 1898, the Iowa legislature abolished the school's board of trustees and placed the school under a new central Board of Control, charged with the operation of most state institutions. Centralization was deemed more efficient, and efficiency was increasingly a goal of Progressive Era governments. Given a mandate, the new Board of Control implemented policy changes aimed at modernization and efficiency. It cut the salaries of some employees, and, in a move intended to weed out nepotism but having far-reaching consequences, it prohibited the wives of superintendents from being employed as matrons.

Married superintendent-matron couples were common at public institutions in the 19th century. The practice reflected both the ideal that the institution would be a home, and the assumption that men's and women's roles were natural. If a qualified superintendent was chosen, his wife would naturally be able to fulfill the duties of matron. The duties of the two officers were modeled on those of husband and wife in a conventional middle-class household. The superintendent dealt with representatives of government, supervised male employees, and operated the farm that was often part of such institutions (especially in Iowa). He set overall policy and had final authority in hiring and firing employees. The matron operated the kitchen, laundry, sewing room, and housekeeping functions of the institution and supervised the managers and other female employees. Ideally, she brought a motherly touch to the operation of the institution.

When the Board of Control rejected the superintendent-matron couple, they were at one level embracing professional opportunities for women. No longer would marriage alone qualify a woman as matron; she would need to show training and experience appropriate for the job. Nevertheless, the new policy had the

effect of forcing out at least one effective and well-liked matron, the wife of Supt. A. H. Leonard. Both Leonards resigned, and on October 1, 1899, James N. Miller, a former Des Moines alderman whose only experience in a state institution was performing clerical work at the Marshalltown home for old soldiers, took over as superintendent at Mitchellville.

Miller became the match that touched off a powder keg. Almost immediately after his arrival, inmates began protesting his administration with their feet, running away in record numbers. Miller was not the approachable, fatherly superintendent that A. H. Leonard had been. Where Leonard had encouraged inmates to bring complaints and troubles to him, Miller insisted that the girls speak only to his subordinates. The staff, in turn, was largely inexperienced. Long-time assistants had either resigned over salary cuts or chosen to leave with the Leonards. The former music teacher, Miss Emma Wilson, became the new matron. The distant superintendent and his novice staff proved an explosive combination.

The unrest began early on Sunday, October 22, when several girls escaped from Building No. 2, where the newest inmates were housed. Some were quickly recaptured, but Miss Klinefelter, the supervisor of Building No. 2, decided to punish all 50 residents for the infractions of the few by sending all to bed without supper. The girls rioted briefly when their punishment was announced around 5:30 but soon quieted down. The peace was deceptive. The girls were plotting their real response for after dark.

At 10:30, after they had been sent to bed for the night, several girls who shared a communal sleeping room battered down the locked doors using pieces of furniture. They then fanned across the campus, freeing the others. Together, the inmates vented their fury at the institution. They smashed windows and furniture, arming themselves with clubs made from table legs, knives from the kitchen, and "nice, long, sharp, shiny shears which the Board of Control had recently purchased as an adjunct to teaching the useful art of sewing," as a reporter would note.

An anxious Supt. Miller ordered the bells rung and sent urgent pleas for help to nearby Mitchellville. With a staff of only 13, he could not hope to regain control without assistance. Around 11 p.m., men from the village began arriving on the scene to help restore order. Having been duly deputized, between 20 and 30 men attempted an assault on the largest dormitory building. They were repulsed by "girls armed with

shining scissors, knives and forks, shovels, pokers and other weapons. . . . Wash bowls and pitchers, soap dishes, pieces of lamps and other things were hurled with great force against the citizens," some of whom were badly injured.

By midnight, newspaper reporters from Des Moines had arrived on the scene. Their dispatches depicted the girls as bloodthirsty bacchantes. "At midnight the girls were marching up and down the campus, their hair hanging down their backs, . . . swearing at everyone in sight, brandishing knives and clubs, occasionally picking up brickbats and throwing them through windows which had escaped being broken and terrorizing the community," gasped the *Des Moines Leader*. When several girls cornered the superintendent, "they rushed him and literally chewed him.

more than a touch of irony one reporter observed, "They are entirely without scruples as to whether they ride the diamond [men's] or drop frame [women's] wheel. They ride either with equal grace and satisfaction." Violating the gender conventions of bicycle use was the smallest of their offenses. At every turn the inmates of Mitchellville proved themselves unnatural women: violent, drunk, vulgar, and sexual. Although some of the inmates, perhaps as many as 40, fled the grounds and waited out the violence in the yard of their teacher's home in Mitchellville, these noncombatants went unmentioned in the Des Moines papers.

Within two hours, Sheriff Stout arrived from Des Moines with a detachment of ten deputies. They proceeded to capture and disarm the girls one at a time, handcuffing them and locking them in the basement

of the only secure building left, the school's chapel. According to a reporter on the scene, the girls fought so wildly it took two men about 30 minutes to drag each girl from the dormitory to the chapel, a distance of only 75 yards. On Monday, about 70 girls—considered the ringleaders—were taken by train to the Polk County jail in Des Moines, there to wait weeks in a cold, cramped, dirty cell while authorities squabbled over what to do with them.

The riot had caught people by surprise. The outbreak itself was unexpected, but more important, the behavior of the rioting girls stunned those who witnessed it and those who read of it. According to the *Des Moines Daily News*, word of the riot had initially alarmed a group of visitors in the village of Mitchellville, who feared for

their safety until they learned the institution housed only girls. "But the crowds who went out to the grounds were amazed at the wreck," the report continued. "They could not believe that girls could do so great damage."

The level of violence perpetrated by the female inmates was a source of wonder—and amusement—to reporters. In the hands of these girls, the common articles of women's lives, like sewing shears and crockery, became formidable weapons. The reporters felt



Inmates learned sewing and needlework skills, considered useful for later work as hired domestics or as wives and mothers. In the 1899 riot, frustrated by administrative changes, girls took up "nice, long, sharp, shiny" sewing shears as weapons.

. . . The girls, who had no clubs with which to pound him, vented their enthusiasm by getting him with their teeth." Inside a dormitory, the girls broke out liquor from the laboratory and fermenting fruit juice stored in the cellar, drinking themselves into a state of "hilarity." They "pounded" the pianos, "while can-can and hoochie-coochies were done by a score of girls at a time." Other girls took advantage of the mayhem to escape, many by stealing bicycles ridden out from the village by spectators and deputies. With

called upon to defend the masculinity of those men who had failed to subdue the girls. "The men folks of Mitchellville are fully as muscular and apparently as courageous as the average of mankind," insisted the *Leader*, summarizing the recent service of local men in the U.S. war with Spain and the Philippines, and invoking memories of the Civil War. "While they had not been unwilling to face the leaden hail of an enemy's fire, they were not made of the kind of stuff that feels capable of arresting a mob of 200 women with the most vicious kind of weapons and very evidently willing to use them." Besides, noted the *Daily News*, the Mitchellville girls "created more confusion . . . than would an army of Filipinos."

Other observers, confronting the same evidence, strove to reassure themselves that the rioters really were girls like any others. Following the riot, a reporter who toured the buildings to describe the damage noted, "They proved that despite their viciousness and recklessness they were still women, by sparing every mirror on the grounds." A member of the Board of Control claimed that the girls were so attached to a new piano that they covered it, even wrapping the legs with shawls to protect them from damage.

Singling out evidence that the rioters revealed womanly vanity (by saving mirrors) or domesticity (by protecting pianos), these commentators tried to ease some of the gender anxiety provoked by early scrutiny of the riot. In its first report, one newspaper proclaimed that "the girls in the reform school are the most unmanageable and vicious set of people that any state institution has to control"—a remarkable claim, since the state penitentiary, for example, harbored men convicted of murder, rape, and violent assaults. Only a minority of girls at Mitchellville had even been convicted of a crime. Between two-thirds and three-quarters had been placed by their parents as "incorrigible." But the girls seemed "unmanageable" because they violated gender expectations, leaving people uncertain how to proceed.

One of the innovations pressed by the Board of Control was the abolition of corporal punishment, an innovation opposed by the school's staff, which used whippings, as well as solitary confinement on bread and water, wiring girls to a log chain in a cement basement, and deprivation of food, as punishments. In the aftermath of the riot, the *Daily News* editorialized against corporal punishment: "public sentiment would promptly condemn brutal force applied to women." But would such sentiment

extend to women who had "chewed" their superintendent? When the sheriff had first attempted to use handcuffs to control the girls, the superintendent, horrified, forbade it, but in the end, handcuffs were used. If the deputized men of Mitchellville truly were more willing to face a hail of bullets than of crockery, was it perhaps because in Cuba or the Philippines, they understood the rules of engagement?

The problem of discipline was only one of the troubles exposed by the riot. As the grand jury investigation documented, the institution was severely understaffed, and salary cuts had demoralized some employees and prompted others to resign. Their replacements were inexperienced, and some attempted to control the inmates by terrorizing them. This was especially true in Building No. 2, where the riot began. Easily able to escape supervision, some inmates had been in the habit of meeting local workmen at a barn on the grounds, "for purposes not at all conducive to good morals and good discipline," as the grand jury reported. Indeed, there was evidence that local men had known about the riot ahead of time, arriving to spirit away escaping girls in buggies supplied with liquor and cigarettes. Following the riot, several men, including one police officer, were indicted for lewdness, indecent exposure, or rape. ("Lewdness," in the legal lexicon of the day, could refer to sexual acts other than intercourse, and rape included consensual intercourse with girls under 15.)

The grand jury, the Board of Control, and writers for various newspapers all agreed that the greatest problem at Mitchellville was the impossibility of separating the "more vicious and criminal class" from the "comparatively innocent children," a situation which turned the institution from a reformatory into a school for vice. But the way in which these authorities understood the division between the "vicious" and the "innocent" reveals how assumptions about "natural" female behavior colored their interpretation of events. Although the majority of girls confined in the school had not been convicted of any crime, it was this group, rather than those actually convicted, who were considered the poisonous influence.

The reasons for this were twofold. First, the law provided that if a girl, convicted by a court and placed at Mitchellville, proved thoroughly unmanageable and a detriment to the institution, she could be returned to her home county to serve out her sentence—most likely in the county jail. However, girls convicted of no crime but merely declared "incorrigible" by the court could be placed nowhere *but* the industrial school. This law was interpreted to mean that

"incurrigibles" could not be sent away from the school unless released for good behavior, or when they reached their majority. In 1898, the legislature raised this age from 18 to 21, effectively increasing the sentences of the oldest girls by three years. This created a large population of long-term rebellious girls and young women—some of whom had been anticipating release within months, only to have it postponed by years.

The second reason "incurrigibles" were considered more dangerous than convicts was that "incurrigible" was generally understood to be a euphemism for "sexually experienced." Therefore, living in close quarters with incurrigibles, "[convicted] juvenile offenders, innocent of moral lapses, grow up, in spite of

When incurrigibles were mixed in with "children" convicted of crimes, "vice was disseminated as a disease," and children learned "practices" too dangerous to be mentioned in print. Indeed, in the grand jury report, sexual knowledge and venereal disease were described as "contagions" in strikingly similar language, and both were rife within the confines of Mitchellville. A thief, apparently, might reform, but sexual knowledge was a permanent condition.

In response to these revelations, and in an effort to eliminate sources of sexual knowledge, the next state legislature voted to bar certain categories from commitment to Mitchellville. "Married women, pregnant women, prostitutes, and other vile and depraved characters. . . [whose] contaminating effect is felt through-

out the school," according to the Board of Control, were among those singled out as dangerous. Grouping these categories of women together—and giving the odd impression that marriage makes women "vile and depraved"—reveals clearly that it was sexual experience itself, even sexual experience in marriage, that seemed dangerous.

The response of the Board of Control and the legislators suggests that to these men, girls were endangered by the presence of other, dangerous, girls. But an editorial in Iowa's suffrage paper, *The Woman's Standard*, argued that the riot was the direct result of "Mitchellville Masculine Management." The *Standard* charged that "the most powerful passion on earth lies concealed in the charm or gravitation of sex. If

this shoots over any one's head we would say it again and say it differently. Some men and some women in some circumstances are as helpless in the presence and power of this passion as steel filings under a magnet. . . . The masculine management of a girls' reform school is a mistake. There should not be a man in it, not even to care for the furnaces."

Like so many other observers, the editors of *The Woman's Standard* blamed the unrest at Mitchellville on the sexual corruption of the inmates. But instead of tracing the infection to contacts between "innocent"



"Here they learn to do good, plain, substantial cooking under competent instructors," read a biennial report. On a 1907 school postcard, an employee noted: "I have no bad girls in the kitchen now at least they wont turn on me for they know better."

all that teachers and matrons can do, under influences which are most vicious," the grand jury remarked. While it may seem odd that a pickpocket or shoplifter could be called "innocent of moral lapse," the distinction reflects the way sexual restraint was viewed as a primary, even biological component of white woman's nature. Theft was a superficial misdeed; sexual misconduct, however, violated a girl's essential nature. (In fact, shoplifting was interpreted by some physicians as the particular affliction of women, who could not control the impulse to gratify their innate vanity.)

and "vicious" girls, the *Standard* declared that sexual corruption was the inevitable result of mixing girls with men. Instead, its editors sought to claim the administration of girls' reformatories as a province for professional women.

The *Standard* was not the only paper to blame male administration for endangering the morals of the girls. A month after the riot, the *Des Moines Leader* printed an exposé of conditions at the school. The source was a Miss Magruder, who took a job as an assistant in Building No. 2 in the aftermath of the riot, but stayed barely four days. Her eyewitness account documents a prison on lock-down: girls held in solitary confinement in their cells for several weeks, marched out only at mealtimes and then forbidden to speak, permitted neither reading materials nor sewing to fill the endless hours of isolation.

Even worse, in her eyes, was the punishment for girls who violated the rules or challenged the staff's authority. Several girls accused (falsely, said Magruder) of whispering through their transoms were "marched to a dark room in the basement" and confined on bread and water. When their supervisor demanded still greater punishment, Supt. Miller and two other men brought the girls one at a time from the basement to his office. "The punishment consisted of taking them across the knee and applying lashes with a hard rubber tube as big as my wrist. The punishment was done in such a way as to violate any sense of modesty the girls might have, and it was severe," explained Magruder.

Magruder's language, as reported by the *Leader*, seems calculatedly ambiguous: did Miller himself take the girls—young women probably 15 to 19 years old—across his own knee, raise their skirts, and whip them with a rubber hose? Or did he and the two men simply observe beatings performed by one of the women on the staff? Either way, the report dwells on the sexual impropriety of this episode and of another in which girls were forced to bathe in sight of a male sheriff's deputy. How could a reformatory expect to restore girls to their "natural" state of sexual reserve, when it continually violated that reserve?

As reports on conditions at Mitchellville became increasingly scandalous, another side of the debate broke out over the fate of the 70 or so "ringleaders" taken by special train to Des Moines. Once in the city, the girls had been marched up Fourth Street from the depot to the county jail between columns of police. As hundreds gathered, the girls "jeered at the crowds, boasted of the part they had taken in the riot and begged the bystanders for cigarettes, tobacco, and

even whiskey." The curious thronged the jail for days, and some girls delighted in perching in the windows and shouting to passersby, until the exasperated jailer erected a fence to screen the windows from the street.

Within a day of the rioters' arrival, child welfare advocates had begun to protest their incarceration. The Iowa Humane Society first raised questions about the crowded conditions in the jail, protesting that ventilation was poor and sleeping quarters inadequate. As parents poured into town on every train, hoping to reclaim their daughters, longtime educator and political firebrand Leonard Brown took up the girls' cause, arguing that detaining them in the jail was illegal. "The girls are so crowded that the confinement is injuring their health and they are commencing to get sick," he warned, further informing the newspapers that "they are so situated that male prisoners confined in the jail can converse with them and . . . the conversations are anything but decent." Brown offered a veiled threat that he would seek their release under a writ of habeas corpus. The girls had never been arrested, were not held to appear in court, and most had never been convicted of a crime, he pointed out. Since they had been committed to the industrial school, not the county jail, there was no law to hold them in jail.

Brown enlisted the Des Moines Ministerial Association in his campaign, persuading them to send a delegation of prominent clergymen to ask the Board of Control for immediate action. But former governor William Larrabee, a member of the board, dismissed the ministers' request, asserting that the board had no authority to return the girls to Mitchellville. While the ministers and Larrabee sparred, Brown kept up a steady stream of shocking revelations to the newspapers. A prostitute confined in the jail, he claimed, told one of the girls that "she had an excellent form for a sporting woman and would make a great success in the business." Promising to secure the girl a job in a brothel after her release, the prostitute then "stripped the girl of her clothing and taught her how to dance the couchie-couchie." A reporter for the *Daily News* investigated the story, and was informed by the jail staff that "there was nothing in it" and that "the girls knew the couchie-couchie long before they were inmates of the county jail of Polk."

For their part, the girl inmates of the Polk County jail seemed in no hurry to leave. Unlike their counterparts under lock-down at Mitchellville, they shared a camaraderie and a spirit of conspiracy that made the crowding and the stench

bearable (during a stay of several weeks, the girls were never permitted a bath nor a change of clothes). The girls apparently believed if they could avoid being returned to Mitchellville, they would be sent home, a view that had some basis in law.

Their stay in the county jail quickly became a contest of wills—and the girls seemed to be winning. When Sheriff Stout tried to return several girls to the school the week after the riot, the school staff revolted. Supt. Miller, facing wholesale resignation of his women managers, refused to receive them. The rioters regarded their return to the jail in Des Moines as “a direct victory,” the *Daily News* reported. “The cells fairly rang with shouts of triumph.”

Indeed, if a letter printed by the *Leader* is authentic, the girls saw themselves as revolutionaries, casting

will have if it takes all we are worth,” they concluded, signing themselves, “Members of the government cell.” Patrick Henry may have been more eloquent, but he could hardly have been more sincere.

Over the next few days, however, Sheriff Stout was successful in moving a dozen or more girls back to Mitchellville. Many had become ill in jail, and were either glad to go to the school’s infirmary, with its warm beds and clean sheets, or were too weak to resist transfer. With deputy sheriffs patrolling the halls of the school, the managers apparently withdrew their threats of resignation. In the jail, the remaining girls simply hardened their resistance. They rallied themselves by composing songs “of which Miller is generally the subject and, of course, Miller always gets the worst of it,” the *Leader* reported. Perhaps inspired by

the grand jury before which they were testifying, they held mock courts “in which some one of their number is compelled to take the part of Miller and is invariably convicted of some heinous offense.”

The Des Moines papers repeatedly printed the promising news that all the girls were about to be transferred back to Mitchellville, but as the weeks passed, the jail remained packed with girl rioters—testimony to the success of their resistance, and to continuing antagonisms among the various authorities. Having failed to force the Board of Control into the dispute, firebrand Leonard Brown next sought to organize a petition of demands among the girls—only to find himself barred from the jail by a furious Sheriff Stout. Neverthe-

less, 19 girls presented their own petition bargaining for early release, but were no more successful than Brown.

Gradually, Stout began transferring small groups of girls to Mitchellville every few days. True to their promise, girls from the jail rioted again at Mitchellville, on November 12, “smashing out window glass with chairs, breaking up furniture and battering down . . . doors.” Before they could start a full-scale uprising, the instigators were “hustled off to the basement and locked up in secure quarters” by the special deputies posted at the school.



Four young African-American women and a driver ride in a farm wagon. African Americans made up only a minority of the young women at the industrial school.

their actions in military language. “We will never surrender,” they proclaimed. “We are fighting for freedom.” Insisting that any promises made to them must appear “in black and white in the papers,” the girls sought to make public opinion their ally. Miller, they urged, “is an incompetent man. He will never be able to quell the disturbance that has arisen in the school.” The *Leader* presented the letter as evidence of the “incurable dispositions” of the rioters, but it also reveals their canny ability to marshal familiar language in their own cause. “We want liberty and liberty we

By mid-November, fewer than half the original rioters remained at the jail—though newspaper reports differed as to the actual number. The *Des Moines Leader* reported that 19 remained on November 16, but Susan Glaspell, the “News Girl” columnist at the *Daily News* counted 30 a day later. Glaspell, who grew up in Davenport, had graduated from Drake University only months before and was getting her first experience as a cub reporter at the *News*. At 23, she was not much older than some of the girls herself, and she was struck by a sense of connection with them. “What would I have been like if I had never known a good mother or a good home, if my ancestors had been depraved and my friends had been worse, if I had been turned into the streets when able to walk and had since had the enobling ideal of being as bad as I possibly could be held exclusively before me?” she wondered. Unlike other reporters, who tended to focus on the girls’ rebelliousness and depravity, Glaspell wrestled with the need to see them as ordinary, perhaps even like herself. Visiting them at the jail, Glaspell observed that “they had on blue calico uniforms in which some of them looked pretty and some looked ugly. Their hair was fixed thirty different ways and they had thirty different expressions.” Seated on the cold stone floor, staring at her as she stared at them, they seemed, simply, “like other girls.”

But conversation led her to see other things as well. “They all had an air of bravado. . . . They wanted me to understand they were having the time of their lives and were not soliciting sympathy,” she reported. When they sang for her, it was “in perfect time and tune and with hearty relish”—and apparently with no reference in their lyrics to Supt. Miller. When a woman came through the jail carrying a baby, they “rushed to the door and began clamoring for it excitedly. . . . The hard little faces were softer then and when the lady let them take the baby and pass it around their eyes shown with delight. They handled it carefully and caressingly, petting it just as anyone would.”

Girls who responded to a baby “just as anyone would” were girls whose innate maternal nature remained intact, in spite of all the savagery they might express. But this sentimental moment was not quite the final image of Glaspell’s report. When one girl observed, “It’s too bad to have a poor little baby in the jail,” Glaspell responded, “Well, don’t you think it’s too bad to have you girls in here too?” Another replied, “Oh, we don’t mind,” stamping the scene with bravado by “an airy toss of her head.”



Later an award-winning playwright and novelist, Susan Glaspell was a cub reporter in Des Moines when she befriended the girls held for weeks in the Polk County jail.

Glaspell left the jail still puzzled by the girls. They struck her as “naturally bad,” but she found it a “difficult task to specify the percent of that badness for which they were responsible.” And if the girls were not responsible, did they deserve the harsh treatment some urged? Looking at the debates that positioned Leonard Brown against the sheriff, the ministers against Larrabee, the grand jury against the Board of Control, and the girls against Supt. Miller, Glaspell wondered: “Out of it all will there come something both practical and humanitarian which can shape lives almost predestined to misery?”

In the end, change was more superficial than substantive. The remaining jailed girls were ultimately returned to Mitchellville, and several employees were forced to resign—including Matron Wilson and a family manager especially associated with brutal corporal

punishment. The legislature passed laws trying to restrict the kinds of "dangerous girls" who could be committed to the school, and permitting the transfer of "unruly and incorrigible women and girls over fourteen" from the reform school to the Industrial Reformatory for Females at Anamosa. Supt. James Miller might have remained in his post, but he gained further public enmity for refusing to accept the governor's pardon of one of his inmates, a girl whose family sought to transfer her from Mitchellville to a private reformatory operated by the Catholic Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Omaha. Not only did Miller refuse to release the girl to the custody of the Catholic priest who brought the pardon, but he attempted to have the priest arrested. Miller's anti-Catholic bigotry apparently tipped the balance, and he too resigned his post.

nine years paved the way for another outbreak of violence at Mitchellville. In July 1909, the change favored by *The Woman's Standard* finally came to pass, and Miss Hattie Garrison, a Cedar Rapids schoolteacher and principal, was appointed superintendent. By the following spring, rage at her administration erupted in riot. On the 11th of March, 25 girls broke out of the school and walked all the way to Des Moines to present evidence of brutal treatment to John Cownie, a member of the Board of Control. They were arrested before they reached him, and three days later, the entire population of the industrial school rose in revolt. Along with charges that Garrison had choked one young inmate and punched her in the face were more general complaints. Garrison had abolished dancing and decreed baseball and basketball unladylike, limiting the girls to sports like croquet and lawn tennis. Through the long months of an Iowa winter, she permitted the inmates no outdoor recreation at all. By March, it was hardly surprising that the pressure cooker at Mitchellville was primed for another explosion.

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Baseball and basketball at the school were ended in 1909 by the new superintendent Hattie Garrison, who allowed only more "ladylike" sports of croquet and lawn tennis.

In April 1900, with a new superintendent, F. P. Fitzgerald, the school returned to a troubled equilibrium. Fitzgerald, supported by the Board of Control, expanded the teaching staff and the number of families (now called "cottages"), with the goal of giving girls more individual attention. He organized an orchestra at the school, and lively activities like baseball, basketball, dances, and winter snowball fights helped absorb the girls' energy. Fitzgerald's image of appropriate womanly behavior seemed more expansive than that of his predecessors.

In a twist of paradox, Fitzgerald's departure after

girls seemed unclear, and no American reformatory for girls experimented with their application. Meanwhile, standardized intelligence tests introduced in 1908 led some to argue that delinquent girls were "feeble-minded." A classification with no precise parallel in the clinical lexicon of the late 20th century, "feeble-mindedness" implied not only limited cognitive skills, but inability to make moral judgments and propensity to be swayed by the will of others. A feeble-minded girl could not be reformed; no perfected, homelike environment could alter her fate. Even more disturbing, her condition would be passed on

Public responses to the riot of 1899—and its echo a decade later—reflect lingering confusion over the nature of adolescent girlhood. By 1910, psychologist G. Stanley Hall had already begun to explore the new ideas of Sigmund Freud, turning his back on his own theories of the savage stages of boyhood. But in those early years, the significance of Freudian theories for

to her children. Institutions increasingly saw their role as custodial rather than reformatory. Some states—including Iowa—sought to treat “defective and delinquent” citizens by surgical sterilization, seeking to stem the reproduction of congenital criminals. The Iowa legislature passed its first eugenic sterilization law in 1911, though apparently no girls from Mitchellville were considered for treatment.

But in 1899, institutions like Mitchellville operated in a setting of conflicting interpretations of girls’ delinquency. To some, all girls were naturally good and needed only to be protected and reawakened to their innate modesty and maternal gentleness. To others, the fact that some girls—the incorrigible girls of Mitchellville—violated expectations of natural goodness, meant that such girls were too unnatural to be reformed and could only be controlled through rigid discipline enforced with brutal punishment. Far more boys and men found their way into Iowa’s courts, jails, reformatories, and prisons. But the girls and women, though fewer in number, were a more perplexing social problem, as the debate over “savage girls” suggests. ❖

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Harmony prevailed within the school’s orchestra—but far less among the inmates in 1899 and 1910, when they rose up in rebellion. Throughout the decade, music, cooking, and sewing were taught as ways of leading the inmates towards their “innate natures”—maternal gentleness, sexual reserve, and womanly goodness.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Accounts of the riot and its aftermath appeared in the *Des Moines Daily News*; the *Des Moines Leader*; *The Woman’s Standard*, 12 (2nd ser.), no. 11 (Jan. 1900): 1; and the *Davenport Democrat and Leader* (March 13, 1910, p. 2; March 15, 1910, p. 1; April 6, 1910, p. 2). My thanks to Lois Craig for calling my attention to a transcript of an article from the *Mitchellville Index*, in the Mitchellville Collection, Box 4, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa-Des Moines. See also: John E. Briggs, *History of Social Legislation in Iowa* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1915), 384, n. 461; *First Biennial Report of the Board of Control of State Institutions of Iowa* (Des Moines: State Printer, 1900), p. 175; *Seventh Biennial Report of the Board of Control . . .* (1910), pp. 10-11; and F. Andrews, *Pioneers of Polk County, Iowa* (Des Moines: Baker-Trisler Co., 1908), 29-30.

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An annotated copy of this article is held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City).