



Iowan Cora Bussey Hillis (inset) and the National Mothers' Congress in Des Moines, May 1900.

CONGRESS PHOTO: SHSI (DES MOINES); INSET: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

# Cora Bussey Hillis

## Woman of Vision

■ by Ginalie Swaim

It was another hot summer day in Des Moines. Young Cyrus Hillis sneaked out of the house, ran through the morning shadows and down to the Des Moines River. His friends were already there, their feet squirming in the mud, their voices full of nervous excitement. The bridge looked higher than usual that morning, and far below, the spring rains had filled the river to the top of the banks. The current was dark and fast. After dares and double-dares, the first boy ventured out, inching his way along the siderails on hands and knees. He was

a yard out when the next boy hoisted himself up to the rail. Then the third.

Back home, Cyrus's mother, Cora, sensed something was wrong. Checking his room, she found he was gone. All day she wondered where he'd gone off to. As darkness settled, wonder turned to worry. She sat up waiting, her thoughts returning to her own childhood and a haunting memory when she was 17 on an Eastern beach. The undertow had swept a young girl out beyond her depth. Finally, the girl had been pulled to shore, blue

and swollen, and laid on the sand. Cora had wiped the sand from her face while rescuers revived her.

Eventually Cyrus came home. Cora was relieved, but she couldn't take her mind off of it. Every summer there were drownings in the river. Boys will be boys and Iowa summers could be miserably hot, Cora decided, so it was time to do something.

That summer—1894—Des Moines watched as 36-year-old Cora Bussey Hillis set out to create a safe public swimming facility for the children of Des Moines. She campaigned for building funds, enlisted the support of the press, and rounded up a huge supply of rental bathing suits for poor children. The bathhouse on the river was a success, judging from the 4,000 who dashed in and out that first week.

It was a simple, sane idea, one that Des Moines could be proud of. The citizens sat back, relieved, watching their children splash safely in a supervised swimming area. But Cora could not sit back. She knew that children needed more than a bathhouse. In the years to come she would become their spokesperson. She would prod legislators to pass more humane child welfare laws, teach parents how to create healthy, stimulating home environments, and inspire educators to establish a major research center for the study of children. Nationally she would win respect and prominence. And yet, in her own home, she would suffer incredible personal losses that would weaken her health but strengthen her resolve to improve the lot of the child.

**B**orn in Bloomfield, Iowa in 1858, Cora and her parents, Cyrus and Ellen Bussey, moved to New Orleans after the Civil War. Her father was successful in business and sent her to a private girls' school run by the niece of Jefferson Davis. As the daughter of a Union brigadier general, Cora won friends slowly. But, like her classmates at the Sylvester Larned Institute, she grew to fit their image. She adored fancy gowns, read volumes of Sir Walter Scott, and played croquet under the magnolias. She observed her friends' flirtations, wryly recording each episode in her journal: "Then the indignation within her broke its bonds. . . . I felt that I was 'de trop' but could not reasonably leave them alone together. He emphatically denied ever having spoken of her save as a most prized friend. He said that he would as soon think of blaspheming his mother as of her. . . . I enjoyed their quarrel exceedingly. Tea was announced and after that an hour more of dispute."

Of her own flirtations less is recorded. She hoped to find a man who would "weigh the great things of the world," a noble man, because she considered herself,

matter-of-factly, "worthy of a great good man. I feel within myself a power undeveloped which in future years shall command homage for me. I have a delicate sensibility. Some things which I see little affect others—give me actual pain."

Cora's two-year diary when she was 17 and 18 shifts between detached, objective observations of society's trappings and subjective, over-descriptive adolescent sighs, a polarity that shows up in her writing all her life. Traveling to the northeastern coastal cities with her family, she dismisses Yale University as a "line of dusty, rusty, dingy, dirty four story ordinary red brick buildings with an old forlorn looking chapel in the middle." She writes off her friend's fiancé as "a foppish conceited little fellow who parts his yellow hair in the middle and looks dissipated." She learned to expect eloquence from the pulpit, and was disappointed when ministers delivered weak sermons. Indolence she labeled her major weakness, but the Southern leisure class did not offer her much of a challenge to change her ways.

In Isaac Hillis, a young lawyer she met on a family vacation in Keokuk, Iowa, she found her noble man, and married him in December, 1880 after a long engagement. Cora and Isaac moved to Kansas City, only to be called back when her mother was struck ill with Bright's Disease. In less than a year Ellen Bussey died, leaving invalid sister Laura—"Lollie"—in Cora's hands to raise. That same year General

Bussey lost most of his fortune in a business venture.

After their first child Ellen was born in 1883, Isaac and Cora, Ellen and Lollie moved to Des Moines, where he was an attorney and an abstractor. Cyrus was born, and then Philip. Cora settled into her role as wife and mother. But she could not confine her energies only to her children and home. Needing the stimulus of society as well as the

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Cora, as a new bride.



Attorney and husband Isaac  
Lea Hillis.

warmth of home, she helped incorporate the Des Moines Women's Club in 1887 and raised funds by lecturing on the fine arts at teas held in her home.

The family moved to a bigger house, then to another after fire destroyed that one. By the mid-1890s, they had settled into a large Victorian house on the north edge of town—at 1625 Sixth Avenue. Within the next 30 years, a flood of letters bearing that return address would awaken Iowa to its greatest resource—children.

About this time—early in 1893—Cora and the three children set out by train to visit Isaac's parents in California. In late April they headed back home, full of new experiences and ideas. But tragedy awaited. Philip, nearly two, contracted meningitis. Near Denver the train wrecked and the child was thrown from the berth. Baby Philip came back to Iowa in a coffin.

Several months later Isaac was born, and Cora's heartache eased a bit. She poured her energies—what were left after mothering three children and Lollie—into the women's club, the bathhouse, and a rose parade in Des Moines, which she modeled after the Ventura Floral Parade in California. She began to write, selling stories to *Midland Monthly* and a regular column to *Iowa Homestead*. Her days were busy, full of tender mothering and good-hearted civic responsibilities, but she lacked a central focus, a cause.

Philip Hillis was Cora's and Isaac's third child.



Then, in 1898, a batch of news stories and cartoons from Eastern papers arrived at Cora's door. General Bussey, now prominent in the Republican Party in Washington, D.C. had clipped them out for his daughter, thinking she might be interested in this event called a "mother's congress." She was.

Sifting through the journalists' sarcasm and ridicule, Cora found an idea that struck home: "to save the race through the child." Perhaps here was a purpose that would answer her sense of loss over Philip's death. She read on: "We aim to substitute enlightenment for ignorance in regard to maternity—to make of every household a home by educating the fathers and mothers in true parenthood by bettering the conditions of the home,

multiplying its pleasures and creating more ideal surroundings for the children."

Cora was intrigued. She convinced her editor at *Iowa Homestead* to send her to cover the next National Mothers' Congress in 1899. She served as the delegate from the Iowa Child Study Society, a group of about 200 members who at that time were distributing educational pamphlets to teachers. At the University of Iowa two professors were beginning psychological investigations of children. And H. E. Kratz, president of the Child Study Society and superintendent of Sioux City Public Schools, wrote her, "There is a willingness to listen to discussions of this kind, and on the whole, the outlook for advanced work on Child Study is very encouraging."

Cora set out for Washington in February. On the 13th, the day before the congress was to convene, 35 inches of snow fell on Washington. While the blizzard slowed other delegates and postponed the conference until February 16, it didn't stop Cora. On the morning of the 14th she was the first delegate to arrive.

During that week, Cora became close to Mrs. Theodore Birney, who, with Mrs. Phoebe A. Hearst, "a millionairess of most generous impulses," had founded the congress three years earlier. Midweek Cora overheard Mrs. Birney and another board member discussing proposed sites for the next congress. The women considered Kansas City, Chicago, Denver, San Francisco. To Cora, the choice was obvious: Des Moines.

That day Cora wired the board an invitation from the mayor of Des Moines to hold the next congress there. Then she wired the mayor to tell him what he had just done. She asked for backing of her idea from the Des Moines Women's Club and got it. The congress ended in a few days. Having done what she could in Washington, Cora set to work back home, gathering letters of invitation from prominent Iowans and literature describing Des Moines's hospitality. These she forwarded on to Washington.

Sixteen cities in the western half of the United States were competing for the congress. But Cora and her hometown won. By early April Mrs. Birney wired her



As both mother and social activist, Cora Bussey Hillis valued Iowa's children.

announcing Des Moines as the next site. The press was jubilant, calling it the "most interesting national convention of modern times" and "a triumph for the most wide-awake city in the west." The congress would draw three times as many visitors to Des Moines as any Chautauqua had, they predicted, and a good deal of money. And all the credit went to Cora, "one of the brainiest and original of Iowa women." Cora had given Des Moines another reason to be proud of itself.

Now that she had won the congress she had to produce the Iowa delegates, and so set out to organize mothers' clubs across the state. She didn't expect it to be easy. Years later she recalled, "Here was I, bidden to preach a new gospel to a state full of mothers, the majority of whom really believed they already knew all there was to be known about child-care." Everywhere she announced that "the coming of the Congress to Des Moines means that for the coming year we will be the center of interest to all the educators, professors and club people of the country. The attention of people in all the colleges and schools will be turned towards us, and the thought of all the great intellectual minds will be given to the city. It will give Des Moines more prominent advertising than any city of the west has ever had before."

Through a pyramid structure, Cora, as state regent, appointed county regents who appointed regents in each town to form clubs. Hints for setting up clubs, enlisting the interest of fathers, and coordinating with teachers were mailed out, and programs and reading lists prepared. "There was not a penny to buy stamps, and I could give little beside myself and my personal allowance and what I could raise by personal effort. Yet the work prospered," she wrote. "I tell all this to you who are working to encourage you to forget yourselves in your work—your limitations—your fatigue and discouragement over slow results. Keep before you only the righteousness of the cause and its ultimate success."

She cautioned women not to create a club for the sake of having a club, but to help parents and teachers in need, to improve conditions in the schools, to provide for neglected and delinquent children—in short, to focus on children. Clubs sprang up across the state, generally after her encouraging visits, and took on various projects. Some provided clothes for needy children; some made sanitation inspections at the schools. A rural club obtained a covered vehicle to transport young children to the one-room schoolhouse; others dealt with temperance. Clubs instructed girls in home economics, boys in manual labor skills, and impoverished mothers

in the healthiest and easiest ways to care for house and family.

When the National Congress opened in Des Moines May 21, 1900, Iowa boasted 644 mothers' clubs (under various names) representing 21,200 members. The Des Moines auditorium had a capacity of 4,500 and in some daytime sessions speeches were repeated to overflow audiences in the YMCA. Hotels were booked up and Des Moines families hosted delegates in their homes.

Civic pride and anticipated profits must have generated the overwhelming support that the press had given the congress in the previous year. For when the congress actually convened, the press reacted with confusion and complaint to the issue—a congress of *mothers*. It must have been a confusing, threatening redefinition of an age-old social role, and many were not yet clear what it meant.

Ever since the Industrial Revolution had pulled more women into factory labor forces, and the development of "domestic machinery" had reduced the workload of the housewife, women were growing aware that they could participate more in the daily goings-on of society, instead of being cloistered in the home. But tradition was strong and Iowa was largely rural. Granted, Susan B. Anthony and Iowa's own Carrie Chapman Catt had their followings in the state, but women were still 20 years away from winning the right to vote. And now 3,000 mothers were descending on Des Moines, for what purpose? One paper reassured that the meeting "was not made up of ancient maiden ladies who wanted to vote, and women with double chins who demanded equal rights and all the seats in the cars. With few exceptions the delegates were wives or mothers or both, who consider it enough to devote themselves to the business of running things in a satisfactory way at home, leaving politics and mercantile affairs generally to their husbands and sons."

Perhaps these women would not upset the vote or close the saloons, but to many the congress was still a "useless expenditure of money and lavender perfume." The *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* refused to take the congress seriously, reporting: "Opening day Mothers' Congress—pink roses—prayer—pink and blue ribbons—address of welcome—white organdy with lace insertions and pink satin ribbons— . . . health as influenced by dress—marguerites with pink frosting—child study a leading science—fawn colored novelty cloth, embroidered in white silk, yoke of white mousseline and jet— . . . elevating home life—black lace over grey silk bodice—music by the mandolin club—all permanent improvement of the race must come through the mothers." A New York *Tribune* cartoon titled "Mother's Congress"



*The Iowa State Regent drumming for delegates to the Mothers Congress at Des Moines*

"SO, YOU SEE, THERE ARE SEVERAL THINGS THAT WOULD INTEREST YOU, AND I'M SURE YOU WOULD ENJOY YOURSELF VERY MUCH. NOW, CAN'T I PERSUADE YOU TO COME TO OUR NEXT MOTHERS' MEETING?"  
"WELL, YER LEDDYSHIP, YOU'RE VERY KIND; BUT I WAS NEVER A SOCIETY WOMAN!"—(Punch.)

Pasted into Hillis's scrapbook was this cartoon, with the handwritten comment, "The Iowa State Regent drumming for delegates to the Mothers Congress in Des Moines."

portrayed a haggard, ragged mother in the slums replying to a well-dressed matron's invitation to join a club: "Well, yer [ladyship], you're very kind; but I was never a society woman!"

Several newspapers applauded the concept of the congress and assumed the delegates to be as intelligent and competent as any group of professional men brought together, but others accused mothers of abandoning children and husbands at home so they could attend a national tea party. One paper conceded that the congress "has a mission if nothing more is done than to call a halt on the new woman who has invaded every occupation except breaking prairie, and they say she does that in Kansas."

Inside at the congress, speakers and delegates, too, were dealing with this conflict of tradition and new roles for women. Mrs. Birney clarified the congress's stand that women should realize the opportunities of domestic life when considering other careers, and that the goal was to "keep women with families of children from falling behind the times, getting 'rusty' and growing old

before their time. The central object of the whole organization is the child."

The delegates were choosing motherhood, but in the 20th century it was to be an informed, carefully examined decision. One speaker traced back the cultural values attributed to women—delicacy, weakness, and dependence—and studied the paradox of the holiness of motherhood and the impurity of actual pregnancy and birth. It was time to discard stereotyped assessments of male and female roles. When Professor Oscar Chrisman, a speaker from Kansas State Normal School, maintained that men never love and women never reason, that women dress for sexual attraction and that they should be educated mainly for motherhood, his remarks were followed by choruses of hisses and delegates demanding the floor to refute his statements.

The congress was breaking new ground, asking that parenting be recognized as a profession that demands creativity, responsibility, and commitment, and that women, as primary caretakers of the nation's children, had just as much need and just as much right to come together for educational, social, or political goals as did any other profession.

Cora declared the opening day of the congress to be the proudest day of her life. On the closing day, she was unanimously elected president of the newly formed Iowa Congress of Mothers and lost no time in turning her ideas into realities by inspiring and organizing the women of Iowa. Soon after a free children's ward was set up in Des Moines's Iowa Methodist Hospital. Through the Penny Saving System, Des Moines schoolchildren learned to save money—nearly \$2,500 in four months in a city-wide account, in fact. Sewing circles were mobilized to help flood victims or truant children who needed clothes.

Meanwhile, despite meager finances, Cora prepared for the 1902 Iowa congress, focusing on an issue introduced in the final speeches at the last congress—legislation creating juvenile courts. Cora had been corresponding with other states which had passed similar bills, and in the 1901 *Suggestions*, the publication of the congress, she quoted extensively the Honorable Harvey B. Hurd. Hurd had coauthored with Lucy Flower the Juvenile Court Act of Illinois, the first state to pass such a law. Before juvenile courts were established, children had been dragged through the long

legal process as adults—detained in police stations and jails, tried as adults, and often sent to prisons. There they had received “an education sufficient to have made them pretty well-posted criminals by the time they got out,” wrote Chicago juvenile court judge Richard S. Tuthill. A juvenile court system, on the other hand, would provide separate courts, detention homes, and probation officers. Hurd argued that it was the state’s duty to act as *parens patriae* for neglected children. Mature judgment could not be expected of a child, nor should he be punished as harshly as an adult.

When the 1902 Iowa Congress of Mothers convened, Cora led the 200 delegates to the Capitol. During short recesses she addressed the House and Senate, giving notice that “Two years hence we will present a juvenile court and probation law, and earnestly request the legislators to study the literature of the movement as it appears in the current press.”

Within those next two years Cora generated a lot of press. About her hometown she discovered, “In Des Moines we have a miserable system of taking care of these little folks. The only place for the detention of these young people is one small room, the most of which is cut up into pigeon holes just large enough for a cot and a chair. In these the children sleep and during the day are all allowed to mingle in the small remaining space. The contaminating influence of a few bad boys in this cage with a number of little girls can readily be realized. There have been as many as thirty there at once. These children are fed but black coffee with bread and molasses with soup for dinner.”

She urged ministers to sermonize on the issue. Support from labor unions, civic clubs, welfare groups, and professionals poured in. In December she presided over a symposium at the YMCA, quoting Judge Tuthill: “Heretofore the state has only given the policeman with his club, police cells, jails and prisons to children, who, before they knew what crime really was, committed some act which in an adult would be a crime; punished them for it, and threw them into constant companionship with mature criminals where their delinquency speedily developed into criminality.” Judge Gifford L. Robinson of the State Board of Control brought the issue home, stating that 20% of Iowa convicts were under age 20 and 90% from the poorer classes.

The next month Judge Ben B. Lindsey came into the picture. The 34-year-old judge of juvenile court in Denver was known for both his enthusiastic, eloquent speeches and for his successful system. He claimed that only nine out of 359 first offenders came back through his courtroom on a second offense. Other states with juvenile courts claimed similar success rates.

By February 3, the bill had been drafted by Cora and Chester C. Cole, a former Iowa chief justice and then dean of the Drake Law School. The bill called for a juvenile court in every county for children under 16. It created probation officers and detention homes. It forbade the confinement of children with adults. In April, after modifications, the bill passed both houses unanimously, perhaps because there were no appropriations for probation officers or detention homes. These funds would have to come later. It was a predestined victory, but Cora had worked hard to point out the obvious need and to prick the conscience of Iowa. Later she would analyze what she had undertaken—“to try to overturn a century old system of Jurisprudence; introduce juvenile courts, and compel reluctant judges to turn from the business of safeguarding the almighty dollar long enough to save some little immortal child. I must do all this and yet be, in my own home, the kind of mother whose children would reflect honor on herself and her home.”

But tragedy seemed to hover over Cora’s home. She had searched her heart for some divine reason when her sister Lollie died while visiting relatives in Alabama. Cora had written her cousin Florence: “I think I know how a wild bird must feel when it beats its wings against the fatal bars which shut it in. I have beaten against the bars until my heart is sore and my spirit is broke. They say ‘He doeth all things well,’ but I do not understand. I never yet saw the *well* in Mama’s case, nor do I see it in Lollie’s. I suppose I am wicked but I can’t be reconciled and I won’t be a hypocrite and say I am when every atom in me rebels at being robbed of Mother, my lovely boy and the only sister I have. You see I am in a bad way.”

It was not over. In early August, 1903, eight months before her legislative victory for the children of Iowa, Cora’s nine-year-old son Isaac died of a ruptured appendix.

In 1904 Cora began speaking at county Farmers’ Institutes. Her speeches, titled “A Field Worth Cultivating,” “Seed Worth Sowing,” or “Child Culture Vs. Corn Culture,” were slated between talks on fencing, manuring fields, and breeding hogs. She urged Iowa farmers to give as much care and attention to their children as to their crops and livestock, a theme Iowa would hear again. Children must not be neglected “in father’s passion for adding farm to farm or the mother’s house-keeping fury.” Wrote a rural newspaper, “She succeeded in taking the attention of the farmer for the time from corn, cattle, hogs, and rotation of crops and centered it

upon the home, the boy, and the tired mother." Eventually she helped organize a woman's department within the institutes for greater integration of home and farm.

In October, 1906 she resigned as president of the Iowa Congress of Mothers, but she continued to give her energies and talents to the organization, later holding national office, as it evolved into the Congress of Parent-Teachers Associations.

There is a pause here in Cora's public life. One hopes she finally took time to rest, to cook her superb Creole dishes, to develop prints in her darkroom, or to feel the solid satisfaction of working with wood and simple tools. Surely she deserved such pleasures. The house sparkled as the Christmas of 1906 approached. But then eight-year-old Doris came home ill from school, where she had been exposed to scarlet fever and diphtheria. Ellen, the eldest child, also caught the fever. On Christmas Eve Cyrus carried his little sister downstairs to see the tree and the presents. On the night of New Year's Day, Doris died.

Cora nursed Ellen back to health, but the emotional and physical drain were tremendous. She could not recover from this fourth tragedy. For months, decimated with grief, she sought seclusion.

Cora gradually picked up her causes again, carrying them to more Farmers' Institutes, to mothers' congresses, to President Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission on which she served, to Des Moines citizens for city beautification plans. The winter of 1909-10 she headed south for New Orleans, where friends and family and nights out at the opera house made her feel 25 again, instead of twice that age. And packed along with the fancy gowns and jewels she loved, she brought her favorite causes, speaking on child welfare and helping to establish a night school for the poor children of New Orleans.

But there were always more setbacks. A year later surgeons at the Mayo Clinic discovered and removed a blood clot in her throat and her recovery lasted several months. Illness was not new to Cora. In her letters she often mentioned she was unwell, but seldom gave details. Migraine headaches often forced her to bed, but unexpected company or a suggested outing would get her back up again. Surely her health suffered from the public demands and family tragedies of these years, but in some sense she thrived on work and on challenge.



Tragedy continued to haunt the Hillis home. Above: Isaac Jr. and Doris Hillis.

She traveled across Iowa inspiring and instructing, still managing to spend more time with family than did her socialite friends out playing progressive euchre.

Her stamina and will must have been remarkable. Certainly her intuitive powers were. Cora's family grew used to watching her hunches come true. One morning she awoke from her dreams to tell her family of a terrible disaster at sea, and detailed vividly the chaos on deck as passengers and lifeboats went overboard. Later the news reports came in of the sinking of the "unsinkable" *Titanic*.

She worked to pass a Vital Statistics Bill in the Iowa Legislature in late 1912. Accurate registration of birth and death information was one of the first steps needed to reduce the incredibly high infant mortality rates in the United States. But the bill never got beyond the Appropriations Committee. Senator Thomas H. Smith wrote to Cora, "They wanted to save the little appropriation required that they might invest it in hog serum or in some other way add to the health and comfort of cattle and hogs." It was becoming an old and grating song to Cora, this choice of livestock welfare over child welfare.

But Iowa needed statistics, and if the lawmakers wouldn't provide the means, someone else had to. The Des Moines Child Welfare Association was formed as a branch of the Department of Public Safety. As the Baby Saving Campaign took shape, committees were appointed to handle birth registration (thus registering over 90% of Des Moines's births in one year), free ice and pure milk distribution, visiting nurses, and Cora's project, the fresh air camp.

Cora secured the finances to set up the camp—

including a large screened nursery—at Good Park and supervised the camp the second month. Besides lecturing on packing nutritious lunches, discarding patent medicines and whiskey as colic cures, avoiding loan sharks, and bathing and feeding children, Cora and the nurse rocked babies while the mothers slept undisturbed for the first time in years. Temperatures hovered around 100 the summer of 1913, but 117 mothers and children left the camp revived and educated. Cora left the camp bitter and angry. “Whatever good was done to a family by a rest at the camp would be quickly undone if they returned to the house from which they came . . . crowded two and three to a lot, treeless, sun baked, near undrained ponds, filthy outhouses. . . .” She surveyed over half the realtors in Des Moines and found only two decent homes available for fair rents. Some of the landlords of the most deplorable homes were Des Moines’s wealthiest men. This time all of Des Moines was not so proud of itself.

**B**y the next year, an idea that Cora had carried with her for years, keeping it glowing like a coal on a cold hearth, finally burst into flame and consumed all of her energies and the imagination of countless Iowans.

The story had started when Cora was 12. Lollie, then two, had contracted a serious spinal disease. For years her parents had searched for doctors who could cure her. They had prescribed several different treatments, but their diagnoses had all been equally grim. When

Cora’s mother died, the bride of only a few weeks had carried on the search. No two doctors agreed and yet they all warned Cora that her sister, at best, would be bedridden for life. Cora rejected this, and in the house on Sixth Avenue, she had set out to educate Lollie in moments when the invalid was strong enough to study. Lollie and Cora had proven the doctors wrong when Lollie completed high school and entered a local college at age 17. Along with Cora’s growing distrust of the medical profession’s ability to adequately deal with Lollie, she developed related doubts as she raised her own children. “I waded through oceans of stale textbook theory, written largely, I fancy, by bachelor professors or elderly teachers, with no actual personal contact with youth,” she wrote later. “I discovered there was no well defined science of child rearing, no accepted standards on which all might agree. I found that all knowledge of the child was theoretical and most advice experimental.”

More was known about the development of a dog or a cow than about a child’s growth. And, particularly in Iowa, applied science had helped farmers produce superior crops and livestock and meet every problem with well-researched solutions. In fact, at the Pan-American Exposition in 1901 Iowa claimed 285 of the 289 agricultural prizes awarded.

But as Iowa’s farm products picked up more blue ribbons and Cora immersed herself into child welfare work, the number of citizens in institutions cried bitterly to her. She answered back, sometimes with moving eloquence, other times with hard statistics and cost analyses. Could not applied science based on the study of the normal child result in a dependable science of child-rearing, so that some of these cases in the asylums and jails might have been prevented? Cora was sure of it, but it would be years before she would find others who were as convinced as she.

Late in 1901 Cora approached the president of Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts at Ames with her idea. She described the problem and outlined the solution: scientific investigation of everything related to child life. President Beardsheer thought it over, but told Cora that while the idea was sound, it was too new. There were neither the trained workers nor the money. A visit to the next president at Ames a few years later was again fruitless. Meanwhile Cora took every opportunity to educate the public. In every speech she stressed that children as well as hogs and cattle should benefit from applied science.

In 1908 she turned towards Iowa City. State University of Iowa President George E. MacLean listened so attentively that, as she spoke the familiar words, the

Hillis holds babies at the fresh air camp she helped organize.





idea took on the form of a research station, a laboratory where normal children would be studied extensively. MacLean's interest was sincere, but so was the University's need for a \$150,000 state appropriation for a women's dormitory. But now MacLean, too, started speaking publicly of the idea.

While the next University president told her she could help most by procuring a set of chimes for a campanile, Cora persisted, watching as public opinion crystallized. Later she wrote, "A great poet has said: Men get opinions as boys learn to spell, by re-iteration chiefly. And I re-iterated endlessly. I developed an amusing facility in directing discussion to child-welfare channels."

In 1914 she approached her fifth University president, Thomas Macbride. He listened and replied: "I believe we can do something along this line." He directed her to Dr. Carl Seashore, Dean of the Graduate College,

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**Carl Seashore adopted and set Hillis's idea into motion.**

who adopted the idea and appointed a faculty child-welfare committee to develop working plans. As state chairman, Cora organized support.

Over the Christmas holidays, the small group (Cora was now president of the Iowa Child-Welfare Association) churned out plans and letters from her house. As drafted, the bill asked for a \$50,000 annual ap-

propriation to establish a research station as part of the University. Through study, it would establish norms for every phase of early childhood, develop methods of care and treatment to bring about balanced growth and correction of defects, and disseminate this information to Iowa parents.

Years of contacts with individuals and groups across the state were paying off. Cora had no computerized mailing lists or major expenditures, but she organized her support. Within eight days every major group in the state—political groups, labor unions, Parent-Teachers Associations, professional and fraternal bodies, the clergy, to name but a few—had been instructed to flood the legislators with mail. And flood they did.

The bill was out of committee and passage looked promising, even though the appropriation requested

had been slashed to \$25,000. Suddenly Cora had to leave for Washington. Her father was dying of pneumonia. She came home two weeks later to more bad news.

During her absence another bill had come up. It appeared that the sheep of Iowa needed a barn for their ten-day stay at the state fair each year, and this barn would cost \$25,000. Well, Iowa was proud of her sheep and her state fair, all right, and what a chance to show them off. There was only so much money, after all, and Iowans didn't need an extravagant bunch of scientists telling them how to raise their children. The sheep won.

Representative Moore of Guthrie was not alone in railing against the so-called "economy advocates" of the House: "You cut out publication clauses to save a few cents, you kick against every little appropriation that comes along, you forget the interests of the children, you forget the interest of advancement in order to save a little money, then turn and put the whole business into a sheep barn."

**A**s 1917 approached, Cora restocked her arsenal for the next general assembly. This year she found even more support. A bad fall had confined her to bed for five weeks, so she set up headquarters in her bedroom. Within two weeks she had the support of 30 state organizations representing half-a-million Iowans. Other states were considering the idea of studying child life, and Cora feared that her talented professors at Iowa would be pulled away. There could be no more waiting.

She told the state the money was an investment, not an expenditure. In nine years Iowa had spent 18 million dollars on the thousands of citizens in state institutions. If only four children per year per county were helped by the work of the station so as to not become delinquent or defective wards of the state, the money saved would pay for the station. If only ten children per county were helped to make their grades, the money saved in repeated education would again cover the cost.

To Governor Harding she claimed the requested appropriation was impossible to reject: "The amount asked is so small—in a state like Iowa—the price of a postage stamp per capita, three puffs of a good cigar, half a glass of milk, half of a good apple, one third of an orange—two sticks of chewing gum—such a trifle per capita that is good politics as well as good business sense."

She appealed to state pride: "The eyes of the educational world are on Iowa." She reiterated points she had made in a letter to legislators two years earlier where she had not minced words: "Defeat of the Child's Welfare Bill will mean the death warrant to hundreds of

Iowa's babies and a life-long handicap through neglect of curable preventable defects to many of Iowa boys and girls . . . are you willing to assume such a terrible responsibility?"

The bill stalled in a House committee, so Cora hobbled to the State House on crutches to get it reported out that day and passed a few days later. But in the Senate the bill faced the opposition of eleven members of the Appropriations Committee. W. A. Jessup, now president at the University and a strong supporter of the bill, was giving up hope. Cora went back to Sixth Avenue to do her homework, "to study those eleven men. Two were democrats and Catholics, somewhat aloof from the majority. One was a pessimist, two were old fogies of limited education and narrow outlook. One firmly believed that instinct could teach any mother how to care for her children. 'It was nature's plan,' he argued, 'A cat could care for her kitten, a mother should be able to care for her child.' Each of the others had some particular bias which it took time to unravel. I never personally spoke to any of these gentlemen, but I know that for ten days thereafter, they had many calls and letters from unexpected sources, from the Bishop of the Diocese to the mother of ten, doctors, members of the Board of Control and state officials. Still no action was taken."

Then World War I was declared. The research station bill was apparently "put to sleep" in committee. State expenditures were directed toward preparing for

the war. All across the nation, America's best lined up outside recruitment offices, and appalling numbers were turned away after the physical exams. Many of the physical handicaps reported stemmed from childhood and poor upbringing.

One morning Cora seized on the *Des Moines Register* headlines announcing that 209 of 250 boys had failed their physicals the previous day. By noon every legislator in both houses found on his desk a letter suggesting that the mothers of these 209 "rejected young patriots" no doubt had raised them by tradition and instinct, and that a little well-distributed scientific guidance on child-raising 30 years ago might have put America in a better position now to defend democracy.

The bill passed. Cora's greatest dream and most difficult challenge was a reality. She wrote to Seashore, "For a time I shall feel lost. In putting away some of my material the thought came, this is like putting away the clothes of the child I had lost, so much a part of me has been this work."

Cora trusted deeply in science and so she left the research up to the staff at the station. But she remained in constant touch with Seashore and Dr. Bird Baldwin, the director. Like the proud mother of a child genius, she was determined that the research station should gain national prominence and leadership, and yet remain at the service of the Iowans who had produced and paid for it. Since then, the Iowa Child-Welfare Research Station has been renamed the Institute of Child Behavior

CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Day Message	
Day Letter	Blue
Night Message	Nite
Night Letter	N L

If none of these three symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a day message. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.

# WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM



NEWCOMB CARLTON, PRESIDENT

GEORGE W. E. ATKINS, FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT

CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Day Message	
Day Letter	Blue
Night Message	Nite
Night Letter	N L

If none of these three symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a day message. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.

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0686 CR RALEIGH HOTEL WASHINGTON DC

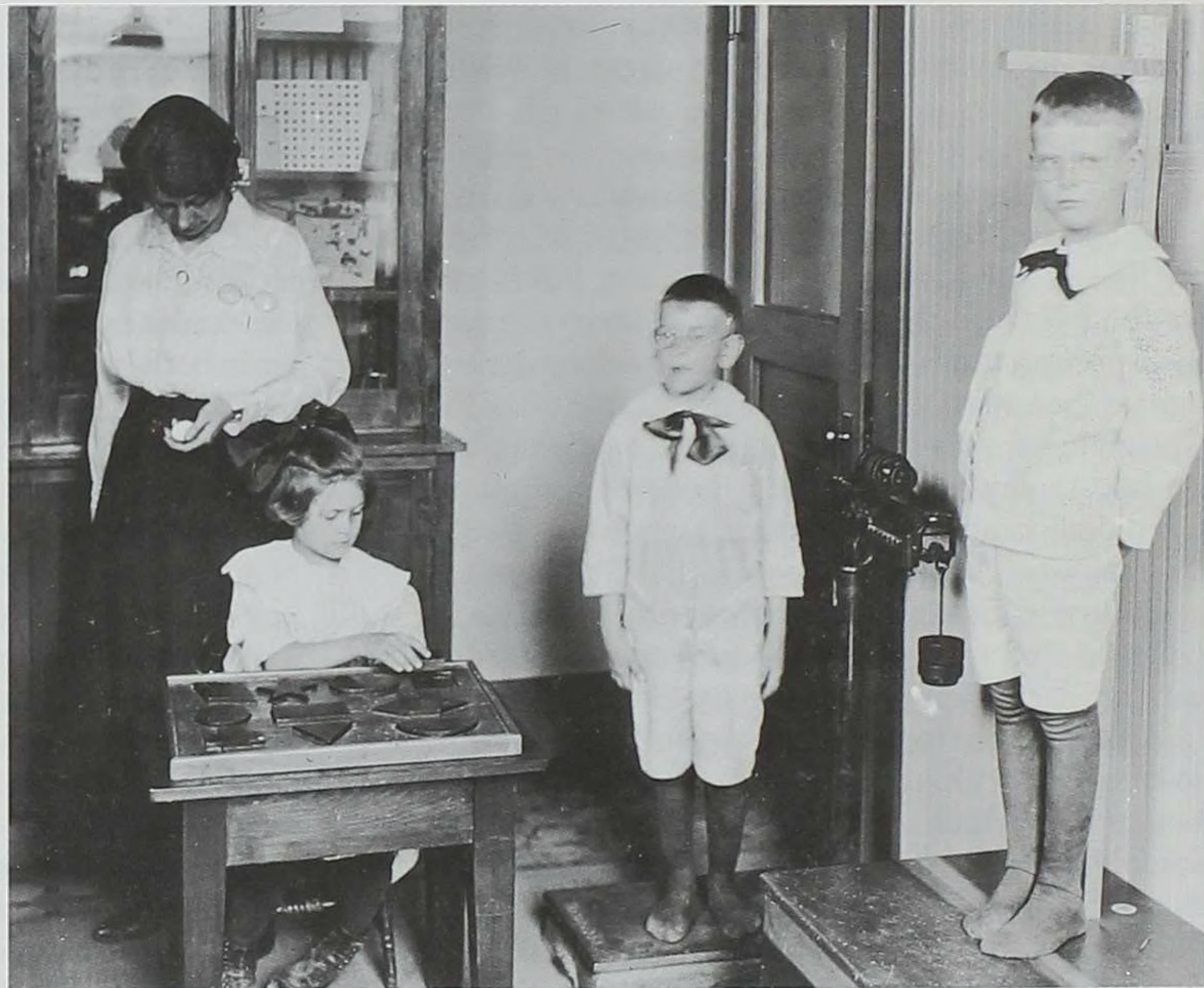
CHILD WELFARE BILL SIGNED APRIL TWENTY FIRST AM SAVING PEN FOR YOU

W L HARDING GOVERNOR.

SHSI (IOWA CITY)

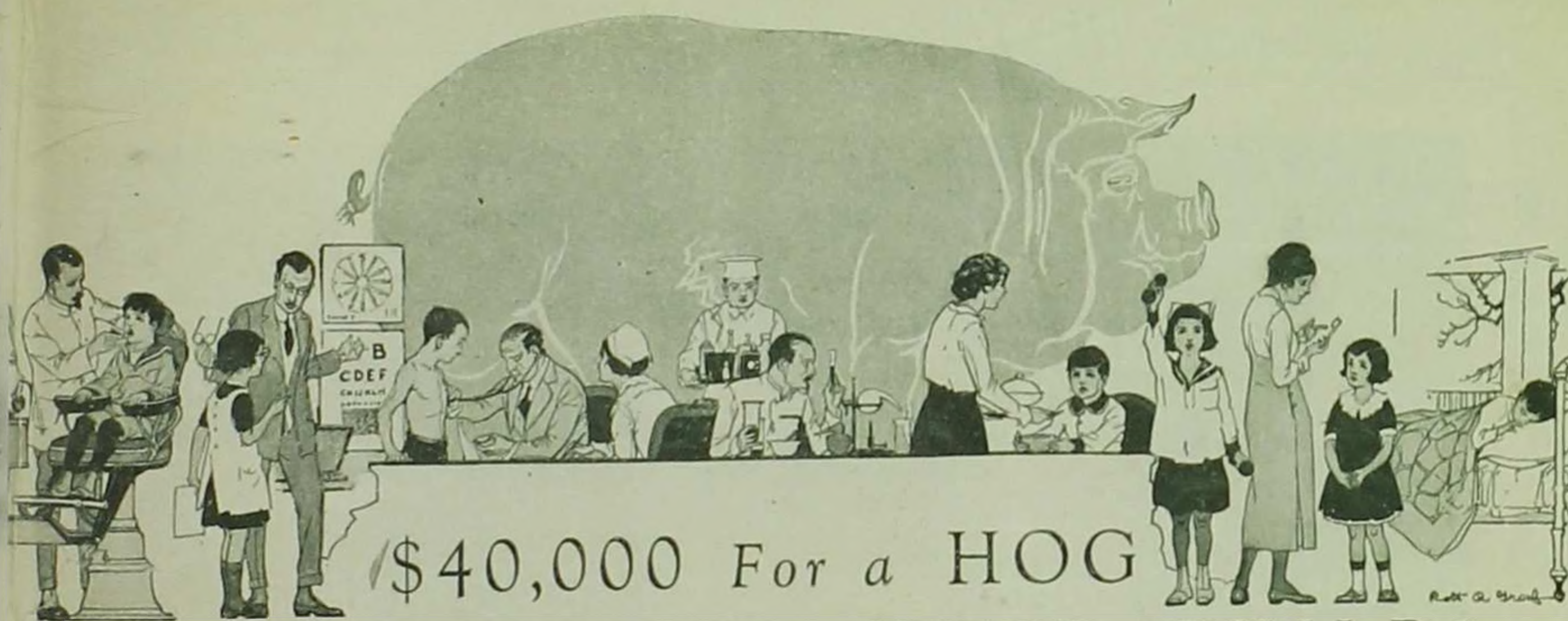


Early scenes from the Child-Welfare Research Station directed by Bird Baldwin (above).



ABOVE AND BELOW: UNIVERSITY OF IOWA LIBRARIES (SPECIAL COLLECTIONS)





## \$40,000 For a HOG HOW MUCH FOR YOUR CHILD?

The State of Iowa spends money to raise normal children. How about your State? This is the story of the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station

By DR. BIRD T. BALDWIN, DIRECTOR, and ANNE O'HAGAN for THE DELINEATOR

The September 1921 *Delineator* magazine helped spread the idea nationally of Iowa's Child-Welfare Research Station's role in helping "fathers and mothers in the business of raising a magnificent crop of boys and girls." The article detailed the evolution of Hillis's vision and how "Iowa has begun to give parents as much assistance in their problem as it gives poultrymen, dairymen and corn-growers in theirs."

and Development, but it has remained true to its original purposes, listing over 2,000 publications and major research breakthroughs concerning physical growth rates, factors affecting children's I.Q.'s, speech retraining for cerebral palsied children, and teacher discipline.

The research station got off to a fitful start as the war pulled away some of the staff. But to Cora this only underlined the necessity of child study. All over the world nations were taking inventory of their natural resources, gearing up factories, and conserving materials. But Cora believed children were a nation's greatest natural resource and she demanded that they be raised to reach their potential: quality American citizens ready to lead the world in pursuit of a lasting peace. Towards this goal, she proposed to Herbert Hoover and President Woodrow Wilson a nation-wide survey for outstanding youth, physical and mental measurements of all American children, and compulsory feeding and housing standards. The scope of her proposition was so broad and the product so nebulous that it seemed only a vision, her usual persuasive eloquence lost in her eagerness to reconstruct her country and her world after the chaos of the Great War.

Cora turned 60 in 1918, the year of her husband's death. She wrote President Wilson offering to serve at home or abroad to carry out her proposals. This plan never took shape, but in the next six years as she traveled widely serving on national commissions and boards, she was her own ambassador. The juvenile bill and the research station were her credentials, and her eloquence still moved people to action. A sidetrip after a 1920 Dallas convention took her to the inaugural ceremonies of President Alvaro Obregon in Mexico. Seated next to Mrs. Obregon during a dinner, Cora talked of

her life work. Within two months Mexico held its first conference on child welfare.

In the summer of 1924, while vacationing in Minnesota with her son Cyrus, the steering gear on the car broke and they crashed into another car. Cora was killed.

Friends and colleagues were stunned with the grief and sorrow that had devastated Cora again and again when her three children and sister Lollie died. "Our hearts are burdened with the needless suffering in the world, with the cry for help from the countless thousands of victims of *preventable* maladies and sorrows," she had written. "In the watches of the night we have thought of it all . . ."

Cora's sensitivities were acute and her visions reached beyond her own life and beyond Des Moines, Iowa to a "regeneration of the race through enlightened parenthood." And yet the list of her concrete achievements in child welfare is the result of tempering these visions with a political shrewdness, a respect for facts, and exhausting years of hard work. ❖

*This article first appeared in the November-December 1979 Palimpsest. Its author, Ginalie Swaim, became the editor of the Palimpsest in 1986 and continues today as editor of Iowa Heritage Illustrated.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The major source for this article was the Cora Bussey Hillis Papers in the Manuscript Collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City). The papers had been gathered, arranged, and donated to the Society by Hazel Hillis Modine, who married Cora's son Cyrus in 1928, three years after Cora's death. Also helpful were articles written by Mrs. Modine about Cora's work: "Securing the Juvenile Court Law in Iowa," *Annals of Iowa*, January, 1942; "The Formative Years, 1900-1950," *The First Fifty Years* (Iowa Congress of Parents and Teachers, 1950); and an unpublished paper written in 1975.