

# **FROM SETTLEMENT HOUSES TO NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS: A HISTORY OF THE SETTLEMENT HOUSE MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES**

By Judith Ann Trolande

In 1886, Stanton Coit opened the first settlement house in the United States, Neighborhood Guild. Like some of his university student counterparts in England, he had previously chosen to live on his own in the slums while attending graduate school, in his case at Columbia University. He also worked with Felix Adler, founder of the Society for Ethical Culture, then earned a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin, and, in 1885, spent three months as a resident at Toynbee Hall. On his return to the United States, he acquired a building on New York's Lower East Side, a heavily immigrant and very poor and crowded slum, and invited the neighbors in for lectures, theatricals, clubs, and other recreational activities. Neighborhood Guild's purpose, like that of Toynbee Hall, was twofold: first, to meet the immediate needs of the neighborhood through a daily program of direct services, mostly of an educational/recreational nature and, second, to bring about more basic social reforms. The settlement method included having interested well-to-do people "settle" in the slums by living in the settlement house. Learning about poverty from first hand experience, these Settlement workers would gain added insights into its causes and added legitimacy in their arguments for its solutions. They would replace the typical nineteenth century charity worker's air of superiority with one of neighborliness, and help the poor form their own organizations to improve their lot.

Actually, Coit sought to go one step further than the usual settlement in neighborhood organization. He envisioned organizing the working class into a series of clubs, each club consisting of about one hundred families living along the same street or on the same block. Through its local neighborhood guild and other guilds, each club would be allied with the others, forming a vast working class network to agitate for reforms (1). This highly organized approach failed to take hold in the 1880's, although it does resemble some community organizing efforts in the 1960's. When Coit returned to England in 1888 to accept the major Ethical Culture ministry there, Neighborhood Guild almost collapsed. In 1891, two of its original founders, Charles B. Stover and Edward King reorganized it as University Settlement. By this time, around a half dozen settlements existed; and the Toynbee Hall idea quickly spread. By World War I the United States had around 400 settlement houses.

The 100th anniversary of the founding of Toynbee Hall is a significant date from which to assess the development of the settlement house movement in the United States. Why was the Toynbee Hall concept so readily accepted? How was it adapted to meet special conditions in the United States? What have the settlements accomplished? How have they changed over the years? And finally, how does today's neighborhood center compare to the early settlement houses?

### **Common Conditions in the United States and England**

The Toynbee Hall idea was so readily received in the United States because England and America had much in common. The United States followed England in

industrializing and experienced some of the same by-products in growing urban slums. That may be why England exported so many social institutions to the United States, ranging from the Y.M.C.A. to the Charity Organization Society. England had a more rigid class system, but industrialization was widening the gulf between rich and poor in the United States. As slums emerged, the rich, away in their fashionable neighborhoods, lost daily contact with the poor. The settlement house provided a meeting ground where the well-to-do as board members and volunteers and the poor as clients could come together to try to solve social problems and bridge class differences.

Among cultural currents stimulating the formation of settlement houses was a growing emphasis on social responsibility in religion - Christian Socialism in England and the Social Gospel movement in the United States. Like Canon Barnett in England, a number of the leading male settlement workers in the United States had prepared for the ministry but sought to serve the poor in a secular, or religiously neutral, setting. Besides Stanton Coit, these included Robert A. Woods of South End House in Boston, Graham Taylor of Chicago Commons (2), and George Bellamy of Cleveland's Hiram House. The secular approach took on added importance in the United States because the educated, well-to-do settlement workers were usually protestants at a time when Catholics and Orthodox Jews filled the slums. For the settlement worker to emphasize religion was to create a barrier between himself and the poor he sought to help.

Furthermore, in both countries, intellectuals were increasingly emphasizing the environment, not individual character, as the basic cause of social problems. As the

social sciences developed, the slum became worthy of study. The settlement house provided a useful base for launching these studies. One result, published in 1895, was *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (3), similar in purpose to Charles Booth's *Labour and Life of the People of London*.

Settlement also contributed a reform orientation to social work as it emerged as a profession. Social work students benefited from opportunities to live and work in settlement houses, as did other college students. While almost no United States settlements had direct administrative ties to a university, settlements drew heavily on college graduates and students for staff, residents, and volunteers. Their names often emphasized their collegiate image--University Settlement (New York, Philadelphia, and Cleveland all had independent settlements with this name), College Settlement, University of Chicago Settlement, Northwestern University Settlement, and Hiram House (named after Hiram College) are some examples. In addition, the settlement residents' life-style was comparable to that of a college dormitory. Thus, the growth of the social sciences and higher education in general stimulated the development of settlements in both England and the United States.

Likewise, the feminist movement influenced the development of settlements. The first generation of women college graduates felt a special obligation to do something useful with its education. An example was Jane Addams. A twenty-nine year old spinster when she founded Hull-House, she had no interest in teaching; she had left medical school after six months; and she was bored with an endless round of tea parties. She found in

the settlement house something useful to do, a way to be influential, and an alternative lifestyle to traditional marriage. Her situation typified that of many educated women. They moved into settlement houses in such numbers that they quickly came to dominate the movement (4). The majority of headworkers were women, including most of the outstanding settlement leaders. Besides Jane Addams, the most famous settlement head in the United States they included Lillian Wald, director of Henry Street Settlement and founder of its innovative visiting nurse service, and Mary Simkhovitch, head of Greenwich House and a leading activist in public housing movement. When they participated in the feminist movement, they did so from an occupational base that they controlled.

The fact that most of the early headworkers were women left its impact on the program of the early settlement houses. Most daily settlement activities were directed towards children and families, especially the upwardly mobile among the poor. Settlement workers practiced a consensus approach towards social action, attracting well-to-do board members and volunteers, then educating them about the problems of the poor and enlisting their well-to-do supporters' aid in reaching other influential people to achieve social change. To go out in the neighborhood, like Stanton Coit envisioned, and organize the men into block clubs was too aggressive for most women. Also, residence in the settlement house was compatible with the single lifestyle of most women headworkers. It probably strengthened what often became a lifetime commitment to a particular house and neighborhood (5). However, the feminism the women settlement house workers shared was not directed at their neighbors. Instead, it was directed outward, as when Jane Addams seconded Teddy Roosevelt's nomination

for president at the Progressive Party's convention in 1912, when women could not vote nationally.

### **Early Settlement Leaders Ties to Toynbee Hall**

Besides similar social and cultural conditions in the United States and England, specific individuals provided a direct link with Toynbee Hall. In addition to Stanton Coit, other American settlement workers either visited Toynbee Hall before founding their own settlements or knew settlement workers who had. Among the Toynbee visitors were Robert Woods; George Hodges, who founded Kingsley House in Pittsburgh; and Everett P. Wheeler, who created New York's East Side House. In her autobiography Twenty Years at Hull House, Jane Addams described her decision to do something useful with her life, her subsequent visit to Toynbee Hall, and then on returning to Chicago, utilizing "every opportunity to set forth the meaning of the settlement as it had been embodied in Toynbee Hall" (6) prior to the launching of Hull-house in 1889.

Jane Addams did not intend to slavishly imitate Toynbee Hall. She realized that conditions were somewhat different in Chicago; and as a pragmatist, she was willing to experiment. She began with lectures on art and literature, but soon discovered that English and citizenship classes better met the needs of her immigrant neighbors. Hull-House also offered a variety of clubs, classes, and cultural activities along with a day nursery, kindergarten, an employment bureau, the first public playground in Chicago,

and quarters for a number of worthwhile groups and projects, such as a women's trade union group.

Addams promoted reform in several ways. The kindergarten playground, and English and citizenship classes functioned as demonstration projects. Addams cited the success of these projects to encourage the city to use public funds to make them available throughout Chicago. She also gave speeches, wrote magazine articles and several books, and developed a favorable public image that was useful in promoting reforms. For example, when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people first appeared in 1909, Jane Addams allowed its organizers to use her well-known name as a founder, thus helping that infant civil rights group achieve national stature and credibility. Still another way she furthered social causes was by attracting to Hull-House as residents other gifted reformers. She gave them the freedom and support they needed to develop innovative services that ranged from factory inspection to the creation of an immigrants' Protective League that helped new arrivals solve their initial problems of where to live and how to find work. Yet when Jane Addams campaigned against her corrupt, local alderman, her neighbors voted for him anyway. They might use Hull-House and admire Jane Addams, but the alderman got them jobs, fixed their problems with City Hall, and was one of them. The gulf that existed between Jane Addams and her neighbors was typical of settlement houses elsewhere, but Hull-House was definitely the leader among settlements in the size of its daily program, the outstanding residents it attracted and the amount and significance of the reform activity it generated (7).

## **Accomplishments of the Settlement Movement**

The progressive Era was the heyday of the settlement house movement in the United States. The list of reforms settlement workers helped to further is long. It includes inducing the public schools to add kindergartens, English and citizenship classes, home economics and industrial education. Settlement workers encouraged their local governments to establish playgrounds, laws to regulate low-income housing, and mother's pensions. They supported the juvenile court, other child welfare measures, and occasionally, the labor movement. They also heightened the social consciousness of many people who achieved prominence outside the settlement movement, but who were for a brief time a volunteer or settlement resident. Some of the more prominent were Frances Perkins, the first woman to hold a cabinet position, and Robert Weaver, the first black to serve in the cabinet (both Hull-House residents at different periods) and Eleanor Roosevelt, a volunteer at Rivington Street Settlement prior to her marriage to Franklin. Thus, the settlement houses' historian for the progressive era has dubbed them "spearheads for reform" (8).

Settlement houses were most effective in serving highly motivated immigrants. For instance, soon after Cleveland's Hiram House opened, a sixteen-year-old Russian-Jewish immigrant who could barely speak English, Manual Levine, asked headworker George Bellamy for help. Bellamy found someone to tutor Levine in English and got him into law school. Levine almost flunked out his first year but stayed with his studies,

worked hard, and graduated at the top of his class. He went on to become a municipal judge and repaid his debt to Hiram House as a settlement volunteer. Levine had sharpened his English-speaking skills through participating in a young men's debate club at the settlement. When another Hiram House club had its twenty-five year reunion, even though its members grew up in the worst slum in Cleveland, a number had managed to achieve such professional positions as physician, lawyer, and engineer (9). In other words, upward mobility was possible for some of the poorest immigrants, and Settlements helped them achieve it.

### **The Inter-War Period**

Following the progressive era, settlements ceased to experience dynamic growth. Little public support existed for reform. The spread of joint fundraising among charities in the form of the Community Chest also inhibited settlement house reform efforts. Work with immigrants diminished as quota legislation curtailed their entry into the United States. Furthermore, professionalization of social work in the form of education undercut its reform impulse. Social schools work proliferated; but instead of teaching techniques of social change, they concentrated on casework and individual adjustment (10).

Meanwhile, settlements formed local professional associations and, in 1908, formed the National Federation of Settlements. Then, in 1922, two American settlement workers, Ellen Coolidge and Lillie Peck, helped establish the International Federation of Settlements. When taking a stand on a controversial issue was too risky or ineffective for an individual settlement, the professional associations were to speak out.

The political mood of the United States changed abruptly with the stock market crash in 1929 and the Great Depression that followed. The National Federation of Settlements, along with houses in New York and Chicago that had avoided Community Chest control, campaigned for better welfare programs. Much of what they sought came about as the federal government moved into the welfare field (11). However, private agencies were relegated to the sidelines.

Nevertheless, some settlement leaders, like Henry Street head Helen Hall, remained on the cutting edge of reform. Hall served on the advisory committee that produced the 1935 Social Security Act, which laid the foundations of the present welfare system in the United States. She was part of a minority on the committee that argued that the Social Security Act didn't go far enough in bringing about income redistribution. She also favored national health insurance. While she was president of the National Federation of Settlements, that organization used the Barnett Fellowship to send Jean and Douglas Orr to England to study the British National health insurance system and write a book to familiarize the American public with the concept. (Named for the founder of Toynbee Hall, the Barnett Fellowship provided for American and British settlement exchanges.) While Helen Hall was active as a reformer, she lacked the superb skills at writing, speaking, and projecting a strong, public image of herself that had made Jane Addams so well known (12). With Addams' death in 1935, no comparable spokesperson for the American settlement movement appeared.

## **The Post-War II Years**

Following World War II, American settlements experienced the disruption of their traditional methods of "settling" in the slums and developing neighborhood relationships. This occurred because under pressure from social work schools and community Chests, settlements began hiring large numbers of social work school graduates. The new professionals brought many changes. They abandoned residence in the settlement, arguing that their professional expertise counted for more than insights that could be gained living in the neighborhood, and their credentials meant they had more to offer those they sought to help as professionals than as neighbors. These new professionals were more likely to be male than female. In the 1950's men outnumbered women as headworkers for the first time since the start of the movement. To the new professionals, work in a particular settlement was not a life-time commitment, but one job on a career ladder. The settlement house relationship to its neighborhood suffered.

In many cases, the neighborhoods themselves underwent cataclysmic changes. During World War II, black migration northward gathered momentum and continued to be strong into the 1960's. A number of formerly white slums went black, sometimes within just a couple years. Urban renewal and the construction of massive public housing projects contributed to the total disruption of some neighborhoods. A number of settlements, including Hull-House, were in the way of freeway or other major public construction projects and were torn down. Even if settlement workers had maintained long-term commitments to particular neighborhoods, the rapid and almost total turnover in those neighborhoods would have negated the value of such commitments. As for the settlement buildings that were torn down, settlement boards chose to replace them

either with smaller buildings, rented quarters, or community space in public housing projects. To economize, some settlements merged with settlements in other neighborhoods to develop "multi-center" operations, further diluting their role as the focal point of a particular neighborhood. No longer was the settlement building a visual landmark for the neighborhood, nor did many settlements have very strong neighborhood relationships.

### **The war on poverty**

Nevertheless, Henry Street Settlement under Helen Hall's leadership played a crucial role in shaping the War on Poverty. Henry Street linked the 1950's concern with juvenile delinquency to a proposal to saturate the Lower East Side of New York with social services. A settlement-dominated community council was to coordinate these services. However, to gain federal funds for what became Mobilization for Youth, the lower East Side settlements had to yield control to a board and project administration dominated by Columbia University's School of Social Work. Richard Cloward, part of the team running the project, held a low opinion of settlements. He, along with other leading academics like sociologist Herbert Gans, thought that settlements had lost touch with their neighbors, were too dominated by the "establishment, and were old-fashioned (13). The mobilization for Youth that served as the prototype for the War on Poverty was largely run by Columbia University personnel with minimal settlement involvement.

In spite of the fact that the War on Poverty sought to rejuvenate slum neighborhoods, settlements were on the periphery of the anti-poverty efforts. Saul Alinsky's conflict style of community organization was in vogue; the settlements' consensus methods of achieving social change were not (14). However, the anti-poverty program brought with it a lot of grant money, much of it available to private agencies. Thus, even though they were suffering from a variety of problems, settlement houses were able to significantly expand their programs by applying for and receiving federal grants. Unfortunately, the War on Poverty was short-lived, much of the grant money dried up, and settlements were left once again with minimal budgets.

### **The Black Ascendancy within the Settlement Movement**

The major significance of the War on Poverty for the settlements was its emphasis on "maximum feasible participation of the poor" in policy-making positions. That coincided with the most dynamic phase of the civil rights movement. Settlements had had a mixed record serving blacks. For example, although Jane Addams endorsed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Hull-House for years had only one club that served blacks, and that club was isolated from the rest of the settlement house program. To fill the void, some settlements were established around the time of World War I and in the 1920's to serve only blacks. These settlements had a special mission. In a city such as Minneapolis in the 1930's where most settlements avoided social action, Phyllis Wheatley House stood out for its social activism on behalf of blacks. In other words, black settlements had a more consistent commitment to social action, especially civil rights, than their white counterparts. With the War on poverty,

growing black neighborhoods increasingly demanded black settlement staffs. By the early 1970's, black settlement directors were in the majority. They demanded that the National Federation be more responsive to black concerns. One result was that in 1972, the National Federation of Settlements became the first national social service organization with a general clientele to be headed by a black, Walter Smart (15).

### **Neighborhood Centers Today**

Under Walter Smart's leadership in the United States, the settlement movement is very different from the settlement movement spawned by Toynbee Hall almost one hundred years ago. In many United States settlement neighborhoods today, black have replaced Italian, East European, and other immigrants. Also, most settlement house directors are black holders the M.S.W. Thus, they have a new kind of relationship with the neighborhood they are serving, one based on common racial heritage and professionalism rather than actual residence in a settlement house. The settlement house program itself places more emphasis on specific social services and less emphasis on general recreation. Some of these services are federally-funded projects, although the political conservatism of the last decade has made it harder for settlements to obtain grants. Symbolizing today's professional, service-oriented approach is the recent decision of the National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers to change its name to United Neighborhood Centers of America. However, the essential Toynbee Hall idea of meeting the needs of the neighborhood through immediate services combined with a commitment to social reform continues.

## NOTES

- 1 Stanton Coit, Neighborhood Guilds: an Instrument of Social Reform (London: Sonnenschein, 1891; Arno reprint, 1974).
- 2 Louise C. Wade, Graham Taylor: Pioneer for Social justice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) is one of the few book-length biographies of a settlement leader other than those about Jane Addams.
- 3 Hull-House Maps and Papers, Jane Addams, editor (New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1895).
- 4 John P. Rousmaniere, "Cultural Hybrid in the Slums: the College Woman and the Settlement House, 1889-1894", American Quarterly 22 (Spring 1970), 45-66.
- 5 Stephen Kalberg, "The Commitment to Career Reform: The Settlement Movement Leaders", Social Service Review 49 (1970), 608-658.
- 6 Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull House (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 89. Several other early settlement leaders followed Jane Addams example and wrote books about their neighborhoods and settlement houses. These included Mary K. Simkhovitch, Twenty-five Years of Greenwich House 1902-1917. (New York: Greenwich House, 1927), and Mary Simkhovitch, Neighborhood: My Story of Greenwich House (New York: Norton, 1938); Graham Taylor, Pioneering on Social Frontiers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1930); Graham Taylor, Chicago Commons Forty Years (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936); Lillian D. Wald, The House on Henry Street (New York: Holt, 1915); Lillian D. Wald, Windows on Henry Street (Boston: Little Brown, 1934); Robert Woods, The city wilderness (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918); and Robert Woods, The Neighborhood Nation-Building (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1923).

Jane Addams also produced a sequel, The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House (New York: Macmillan, 1930). These books helped to publicize the settlement house movement.

7 The best biography of Jane Addams is Allen P. Davis, American Heroine: The life and Legend of Jane Addams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). See also Daniel Levine, Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition (Madison State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1971).

8 Allen F. Davis, Spearheads for Reform: the social settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914 (New Oxford University Press, 1967).

9 Judith Ann Trolander, "Twenty Years at Hiram House. Ohio History (Winter 1969), 31.

10 Clarke Chambers, Seedtime for Reform: American Social Service and Social Action 1918-33 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963).

11 Judith Ann Trolander, Settlement Houses and the Great Depression (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975). See also Judith Ann Trolander, "The Response of Settlements to the Great Depression", Social Work 18 (September 1973), 92-102.

12 Hall's autobiography, Unfinished Business (New York: Macmillan 1971) is nowhere near the literary masterpiece that Addams' Twenty Years at Hull House is.

13 Herbert Gans, "Redefining the Settlement's Function for the War on Poverty", Social Work (October 1964), 3-12.

14 Judith Ann Trolander, "Social Change: Settlement Houses and Saul Alinsky, 1939-1965", Social Service Review 56 (September 1982), 346-365.

15 Ann Trolander, Professionalism and Social Change: Frpm Settlement Houses to Neighborhood Centers, 1939-79 (unpublished manuscript).