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Legislative Reform for Coerced Sterilization in Minnesota, 1925-36

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WSU Student Research & Creative Projects
Abstract / Executive Summary / Final Report

Project Title: Senior Seminar 495

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Faculty Sponsor Name: Dr. Matthew Lungerhausen

Department: History

Abstract (paste below or attach):

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Student Signature:  Date: 12/8/14

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Research Abstract

Motivation:

Eugenic sterilization in contemporary viewpoints, was the achievement of Nazi science, however during the Great Depression there were over twenty states that practiced to some capacity sterilization and/or confinement of the mentally retarded. Legislative statutes pushed by Dr. Charles Fremont Dight of Minneapolis, MN from 1925-1936, offer the reader insight into the progressive stance of what constituted appropriate care for the mentally retarded. State welfare boards had issued that agents of the state were to investigate individuals deemed as mentally retarded and have them committed based on IQ and dependence upon state resources. Minnesota legislature passed a bill in 1925 that legalized a consent law giving, if applicable, the spouse or next of kin the right to sterilize the subject.

Problem:

Charles Fremont Dight found it necessary to petition Minnesota legislature after the 1917 passing of Children's Codes statutes, consisting of thirty-five separate laws proving for the care of the mentally retarded. Dr. Dight tirelessly campaigned for a State Eugenicist to be appointed and work alongside the State Board of Control, in hopes of monitoring and committing new candidates to be sterilized. Alongside the proposed appointment of a Eugenicist, Dight had petitioned for laws that would force all mentally retarded citizens candidates for sterilization. However the Board of Control, along with the public at large saw such provisions as invading the privacy of said individuals. Dight had compared his "heroic" vision of human betterment to the crusade Adolf Hitler waged to better the German race.

Approach:

I investigated Dr. Dight's correspondence with various progressive reformers including Harry H. Laughlin, attorney representing the state of Virginia's upholding of the court case *Buck v. Bell*. Said court case upheld that sterilization of Carrie Buck was in no way threatening and served in her best interest to cure the subject of transferring defective genes by reproducing. Also drawing upon the scholarly works of Molly Ladd-Taylor, a social historian, who investigated the Children's Codes in depth and concluded that Minnesota at large believed sterilization should only be implemented in rare cases of dangerous insanity. Dr. Charles Dight's personal correspondence was investigated to demonstrate what lengths he was willing to go to reform Minnesota laws in order to fulfill racial betterment. Dr. Dight also authored two books and various pamphlets to gain support for a statute that would wage mass sterilization on what he deemed the "feebleminded". I set out to argue that sterilization was a process that should have been used sparingly, which in comparison to California, it was. Coerced sterilization was an inhumane medical practice used against the mentally deficient, using faulty science as a justification.

Results:

State Welfare agencies had concluded that eugenic sterilization should be used sparingly, and that compassion and advocacy for understanding the handicapped was what was needed. Sterilization demand had dwindled by the close of WWII as a result of unearthing the Nazi experiment and gross abuses waged on the mentally retarded of Germany. The United States deciding to understand the handicapped and care for them, set out to establish various foundations advocating the fair treatment of the disabled.

Mildred Thomson, bureau director of the Board of Control, established a coalition that advocating the parents of mentally retarded children, and assisting in their personal decisions in caring for their children. The said association, the National Association of Retarded Children, called for subjects parents to advocate for their individual rights under the constitution as well as for their care.

Conclusion:

The scholarship of eugenic sterilization reform adds to the understanding of why State Welfare Boards issued that sterilization was humane in rare circumstances. Charles Fremont Dight, the subject of my research project, campaigned for executive control over the livelihood of thousands of state wards. Although unsuccessful in his campaign to entice legislation to pass a bill appointing said executive, he waged a crusade on the lives of countless Minnesota citizens in hopes of realizing a utopian scheme of racial betterment. Social prejudice during the Great Depression, influenced policy to eradicate the tax burden mentally retarded persons waged on society, however, total eradication infringed on private right of citizens and did not influence legislative policy to reform the law of consent.

Winona State University Department of History
Legislative Reform for Coerced Sterilization in Minnesota, 1925-36

Ryan Lange

History 495: Senior Seminar

Dr. Lungerhausen

December 11, 2014

To my mother Joanne, and in memory of my grandmother Diane.

Thank you Susanne Jacobsen.

Twentieth century science delivered the decades long argument of selective breeding and Social Darwinism to the masses, instilling a fear in the public that left unaddressed; feeble-mindedness would overtake the population at large. Charles Fremont Dight of Minneapolis, MN, an avid proponent for eugenic sterilization, campaigning through editorials, radio, and scholastic works. Social Welfare in Minnesota looked to control the population through laws of consent, as well as maintaining the population of deficient peoples and committing them to appropriate institutions. Inspired by the Children's Codes of 1917, a set of thirty-five statutes, which created the State Board of Control, a guardianship board dedicated to placing the delinquent in proper state care. Laying the groundwork for eugenic sterilization, the above mentioned statutes, reformed the juvenile courts care of the delinquent and allocated stipends to widowed and single mothers for the care of their children. However the Board of Control's policies and handling of the mentally retarded by the mid 1920s seemed outdated, influencing Charles Dight, along with supporters campaigned for the passing of a sterilization law.

The passage of a law came in 1925, when the Minnesota legislature passed the law of consent. The statute had outlined that the spouse or next of kin possess power of attorney over the ward in executing the order to sterilize. As a result of its passing, Dight, from 1925 onward, pushed to further reform the sterilization law, stressing that coerced measures were needed in order to realize racial purity. Playing on anxieties that were on the rise during the Great Depression, he linked criminality to mental retardation, in hopes of gaining support from not only legislators, but also prominent citizens nationwide. Ultimately Charles Dight was unsuccessful in the passing of a coerced sterilization law,

in part due to the success of the consent law, as well as his inability to sway legislature and the Board of Control to create a Eugenics Director.

Dight tirelessly campaigned for the medicinal betterment of mankind. Evadene Burris Swanson exemplified in her 1943 biographical sketch the progressive stance that Charles Dight campaigned to spread. Writing on behalf of the Dight Institute of Human Genetics, Swanson illuminates on his personal correspondences and advocacy for passing sterilization measures. Swanson attributed Dight's interest in eugenics to the hopeful betterment that science could offer to mankind, that in studying the brain, "the exact parts which...we should expect to increase by education and civilization since these parts of the brain specially preside over the moral and intellectual functions."¹ This interest in the human development had encouraged the doctor to expand into the study of eugenics. Swanson attributes the way Dight manipulated educational platforms, as the foundation to his eugenics campaign. Attributing his interest in sterilization reform from the scholarly work of Harry Laughlin, of the Eugenics Research Association. Dight then found approaching the university system would benefit his cause greatly. It was with this knowledge that Dight set out to start his campaign at the highest level, the University of Minnesota.

The Minnesota Eugenics Society, called into question the moral integrity of Charles Dight in the end. With little improvement in his desired goals, he desperately clung to the ideals that the public would be swayed, even after countless rejections in the state legislature and losing public support. Swanson attributes this failure in the way that eugenics originated. The public was not wholly ready for such a measure, and that mass

¹ Evadene Burris Swanson, "The Biographical Sketch of Charles Fremont Dight," *The Dight Institute of the University of Minnesota Bulletin*, no. 1 (1943), 11.

sterilizations would not curtail the issue, but instead, destroy the fabric of individuality. Writing for the University, Swanson did recognize the success of genetics as a direct result of Dight leaving the entirety of his estate to the University. Despite the failure of Dight's dream of a racially pure society, the University of Minnesota by benefit of his estate was able to create an institution for the study of genetic makeup and what contributes to mental retardation. Understanding Dight's background in not only education, but in political campaigns for eugenic reform, informed the populous of the very public and controversial debate eugenic sterilization waged.

Further contributing to the impact of legislative reforms in Minnesota, Minneapolis historian, Gary Phelps addressed in his scholarship the impact that Dight's reforms left on Minnesota. Phelps' 1984 journal article "The Eugenics Crusade of Charles Fremont Dight," observed the fanaticism that Dight waged in his aims to see a unified sterilization law passed. Understanding the failure of the eugenics movement in Minnesota, Phelps attributed the countless petitioning of the Board of Control, but also various senators and private citizens, to the distancing many made from associating with Dight. Instead, Dight had made countless attempts at securing much needed support, and even at the Board's insistence, would not back down. Dight had then campaigned more vigorously with the help of the society he chaired as president, in hopes of attaining the support he desperately needed. With the failure to persuade the Board of Control in supporting a new eugenics bill, Dight's correspondence became more combative and desperate for the much-needed support in getting a drafted bill to legislature.

As the president of the Minnesota Eugenics Society, Dr. Charles Dight had reached out to countless leaders in the scientific community. Scrutinizing the Board of

Control in the process, Dight more or less sunk his own ship, and The Eugenics Society was, by 1930, at a standstill with reformists unwilling to listen to Dight's propaganda. Phelps argued, like that of Swanson, the endless propaganda Dight had written in hopes of the eventual appointment of a State Eugenicist ultimately cost him his credibility. The next bill, petitioned in 1931 had, "...still called for a 'state eugenicist' but stipulated that the position should be appointed by the governor, not the board of control."² However persistent Dight set out to be, the sterilization program never took hold after the 1930 legislative session, and as former proponents distanced themselves from his cause, he was left to channel new mediums to air his message for reform. Dight stopped at nothing to gain support for his proposed bills. The evidence that Phelps drew upon in his argument, demonstrate the excessive campaigning Dight undertook to try and pass a eugenics statute that would sterilize all feeble-minded.

Addressing the sociological pandemonium sterilization played in the Minnesota sterilization reform, Molly Ladd-Taylor instead argued in her essay "The 'Sociological Advantage' of Sterilization," that the Children's Codes enacted in 1917 policy contributed to the organized sterilization movement. Elaborating upon more than merely tax and state aid relief, of which was proposed by Swanson and Phelps, Taylor stated, "...at least 1,843 Minnesotans (79 percent of them women) were legally sterilized by June 1946."³ Economic uncertainty and a general phobia of the mentally deficient added a new dimension to understanding sterilization reform, which played into Dight's tactics of

² Gary Phelps, "The Eugenics Crusade of Charles Fremont Dight," *Minnesota History* 49/3 (Fall 1984), 107.

³ Molly Ladd-Taylor, "The Sociological Advantages" of Sterilization: Fiscal Policies and Feeble Minded Women in Interwar Minnesota," in *Mental Retardation in America* ed. Steven Noll and James W. Trent Jr. (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 282.

propaganda to encourage action immediately. Although Taylor mentioned little of Dight, only acknowledging that his attempts to reform the statutes in place, were a failure from the start, it is important to remember that Dight, along with his proponents believed that the feeble-minded posed a very real threat to the security of the public at large.

Another proponent to sterilization that is also important to consider is the likelihood of criminal acts and insanity were in large measured by IQ tests that determined if a ward is subject to sterilization. Basing low IQ and poverty to an inability to parent properly, “Some welfare boards ordered IQ tests for parents and children living ‘under deplorable conditions’ and had entire families committed to state guardianship as feeble-minded.”⁴ Significant to the bettering of society, Taylor asserted, in compliance with Phelps’ article, that Fred Kuhlmann, Board of Control research head, pressed for IQ testing as well as the sterilization of mentally retarded persons. And that in the eyes of science, would better the populous at large. However the failure of eugenic sterilization was vastly different, instead of asserting blame on Dight, Taylor puts blame on a welfare policy that had, in the end become too greedy and repressive of rights.

In assessing the current scholarship of Charles Dight, it is easy to excuse his reforms as too extreme for passage, however it is important to reevaluate his motives for pressing reform, as well as reflect upon the practices the Children’s Codes implemented. With the argument of Molly Ladd-Taylor setting a pretext for the believed failure of the Children’s Codes, as well as the welfare agencies grave misjudgments, new light can be shed on why the sterilization laws, as Dight interpreted their implantation had failed. A response to the outdated measures of institutionalizing the feeble-minded, Dight set out to

⁴ Molly Ladd-Taylor, “Eugenics and Social Welfare in New Deal Minnesota,” 127.

enact a law bestowing total control over total reproductive rights. Which adds to the debate of welfare minded policy during the Great Depression.

Charles Dight, in keeping with his progressive political stance had turned to various media to expand his message. In a 1921 editorial featured in the *Minneapolis Daily Star*, Dight brings apocalyptic images to mind by discussing the end of civilized man. He highlighted a reversal in societal norms because of the prevalence of feebleminded persons occupying the same sphere as those with above adequate IQ'S. "While it is cheering to believe that our civilization will be as good in the future as it has been in the past, yet its decay would only be a repetition of what took place in the civilization of Egypt, Persia, Greece and Rome."⁵Therefore arguing that the future of our race was being dictated by the actions of today, Dight would then approach legislation to help in his fight.

Looking to the casework of Harry H. Laughlin for guidance in what program would be best for Minnesota's feebleminded, Dight read Laughlin's treatise on sterilization, *Legal Status of Eugenical Sterilization*. Calling into question the reproductive rights of Carrie Buck, who after being raped and impregnated had been committed to state care. Upon her entering state care, Carrie was deemed mentally unfit to have children. In this landmark case, the Virginia Supreme Court upheld coercive sterilization of the mentally unfit. Laughlin substantiated the argument for coerced sterilization, "These pedigrees prove conclusively that both feeble-mindedness and other intelligence levels are, in most cases, accounted for by hereditary qualities,.....,salpingectomy in the female has but little psychological effect other than

⁵ Charles F. Dight, *History of the Early Stages of the Organized Eugenics Movement for Human Betterment in Minnesota* (Minneapolis, MN: Wesley Temple, 1935), 57.

sexual sterility...”⁶Laughlin concluded that there were no psychological effects as a result of the sterilization process and that Carrie Buck may then carry out a relatively peaceful confinement. Thus in Laughlin’s observation of the Virginia law, the court upheld the coerced movement of eradicating a potential state burden. Laughlin witnessed that, “Various witnesses having personal knowledge of Carrie and of her family history and of her relatives testified that she was feeble-minded and immoral, that her child was not normal...”⁷The court had upheld that the Buck family was in no significant danger psychologically by being sterilized, which in turn would influence Dight in his eugenics debate.

Setting his sights on petitioning for a criminal code in Minnesota, Dight had turned to newspaper editorials hoping the public would take notice. In an editorial *Killing vs. Vasectomy*, Dight had linked potential criminality to the mentally retarded, stating, “It is an established fact that the insane, epileptic, feeble-minded moron and criminal classes give back to society the insane, epileptic, feeble-minded and criminally inclined individuals.”⁸Dight’s editorial instilled fear in the public that all mentally retarded persons would turn out as criminals. Dight had also tried to gain public support through a controversial “Fitter Families Competition,” which was to be hosted at the State Fairgrounds, breaking people into two groups based on genetic makeup. The said intelligence tests called into question the individual’s ability to verbally communicate as well as problem solve.

⁶ Harry H. Laughlin, *Legal Status of Eugenical Sterilization* (Chicago: The Fred J. Ringley Co., 1930), 22.

⁷ Harry H. Laughlin, *Legal Status of Eugenical Sterilization*, 23.

⁸ Charles Dight, “Killing vs. Vasectomy,” *Minneapolis Daily Star*, January 5, 1923, Charles Fremont Dight Papers, box 8, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

The sterilization bill that Dight as the head of The Minnesota Eugenics Society proposed to in 1925, the legislative act, called for spousal consent:

Section 1. When any person has lawfully been committed as feeble-minded to the guardianship of the state board of control the said board, after consultation with the superintendent of the state school for feeble-minded, a reputable physician, and a psychologist selected by said board, and after a careful investigation of all the circumstances of the case, may, with the written consent of the spouse or nearest kin of such feeble-minded person, cause such person to be sterilized by the operation of vasectomy or tubectomy. Provided, that if no spouse or near relative can be found the board of control, as the legal guardian of such feeble-minded, person, may give its consent.⁹

The proposed bill, which passed into MN law that same year and was first used in 1926, had given Dight hope that the next step would be the appointing of a Eugenics Director. The said law first being used, “On January 8, 1926 the new law was first put into effect when six adult mentally females were sterilized at the Faribault State Hospital.”¹⁰Dight then set out to petitioned again for a revised law that would include a larger spectrum of patients.

Dight then felt the need to reemphasize the link between criminality and feeble-mindedness. This time he turned to editorializing in Minneapolis’ *Lake District Life*, in 1926, Dight’s article “Eugenics a Crime Preventative,” claimed yet again that the act of sterilization was a humane feature of deterring crime in Minnesota. “Sterilization is painless; can be done in five minutes and the man goes immediately about his work. It is never done as a punishment but to protect society: to protect the unfortunate person

⁹ Sterilization by Vasectomy or Tubectomy—Feeble Minded Persons Committed to Guardianship of Board of Control—Consent to Operation 1925.

¹⁰ Gary Phelps, “The Eugenics Crusade of Charles Fremont Dight,” *Minnesota History* 49, (Fall 1984): 103.

against himself, and for race betterment.”¹¹ Yet again, Dight viewed coerced sterilization as solid foundation for crime prevention, and is completely harmless to the patient.

Corresponding with the legal scholar Harry Laughlin in 1927-28, Dight found himself supported by the man who had originally inspired his eugenic crusade in Minnesota. In their letters, Dight and Laughlin discussed what steps needed to be taken in reforming the voluntary sterilization statute. Laughlin claimed, “Eugenical sterilization would perhaps make more headway if it came directly to the point and concerned only sexual sterilization for the purpose of preventing offspring...”¹² Laughlin concluded the ideal that by concentrating merely on sexual sterilization, the courts might be prompted in agreeing that the mentally retarded and sterilization go hand in hand. Dight then turned to radio in hopes to gain the much-needed audience for such a measure to pass. In his March 12, 1928 broadcast over WRHM, Dight brought to light that, “The school for feeble-minded at Faribault, Minnesota, has generally about 1,900 inmates with several hundred defectives waiting outside to be entered. In August 1926 the Minnesota State Board of Control had in its care 13,196.”¹³ By airing these statistics over the air, Dight hoped to persuade the public of the statute’s needed reform. He then set his sights on obtaining national support.

Dight had written then to the California attorney, and President of the Human Betterment Foundation, E.S. Gosney. Gosney was California’s chief sterilization

¹¹ Charles Dight, “Eugenics a Crime Preventative,” *Minneapolis Lake District Life*, Feb. 5, 1926, Charles Fremont Dight Papers, box 8, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul MN.

¹² Harry H. Laughlin to Charles Dight, April 9, 1927, letter box 7, Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

¹³ Charles Dight, March 12, 1928, *Radio Talk*, WRHM, Minneapolis, Charles Fremont Dight Papers, box 5, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

proponent, who campaigned to have criminals and other delinquents castrated.

Remarking on Minnesota's inadequate laws, Dight pointed out, "Three defects in our present sterilization law make it wholly inadequate. First it does not apply to prevent procreation of the large number—about 90,000 to 100,000 feeble-minded persons who are at large in the state."¹⁴In this statistic, he brought to Gosney's attention that the feeble-minded would become the burden of the masses. In response, Gosney had sent Dight a copy of an outline created in hopes of bettering the human race. Gosney's outline stated under section 2, "The state itself should not perform sterilization purely as a therapeutic measure, without the application or consent of the patient or someone legally authorized to speak for him, together with medical opinion indicating the necessity of the operation."¹⁵Dight decided to ignore Gosney's observations, then turning to create a bill that called for the creation of a Eugenics Director. The 1929 bill outlined the authority of the Eugenics Director and was the first of three proposed measures suggesting the position's creation:

Section 1. The state board of control shall appoint a special agent of that board who shall have expert knowledge of human biology, heredity, and eugenics, and who shall be known as eugenics director. It shall be the duty of the eugenics director to devote his time to all public records which will aid him in securing the name, age, delinquency or mental defect he may believe to be unfit to procreate by reason of mental deficiency, and on demand the person in charge of such records or any person of such mentally deficient person shall supply the eugenics director with the name, age, address, and history of such person or persons in their care and the address of their near kin or legal guardian.¹⁶

¹⁴ Charles Dight to E.S. Gosney, April 30th 1929, letter box 7, Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

¹⁵ E.S. Gosney, *Outline of a State Law for Eugenic Sterilization*, undated, box 7, Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

¹⁶ Charles Dight, "A Bill," 1929, box 5, Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

This new bill instead of appointing the spouse or next of kin as guardian, gave the eugenics director full privilege to decide whether a person is to be sterilized. The executive decision therefore, had been taken away from family and given directly to the state. This early campaign outlines what Dight was trying to get passed all along, a state-policing agency. That is, a central executive committee who would decide who could and could not reproduce.

Molly Ladd-Taylor sheds light on individual cases like that of Rose Masters, a woman who fell into the trap of the state welfare boards due to her family's gross poverty. Also playing on the size of her family, Taylor argued the family's unfair treatment. The Masters family was being supervised by social workers due to Rose's mental inadequacy as dictated by the state IQ testing, she had ten children considered normal. However with the influx of children, the welfare agents had committed her to the Faribault school, "In testimony that the Supreme Court found decidedly unconvincing, the psychologist dismissed all social or behavioral indicators of intelligence; in his view, IQ was all that mattered.¹⁷This social racism had called for the sterilization of a woman merely based on her IQ, however the Supreme Court had reversed, in the end, the initial order to commit Rose and the Higher-Court made a startling declaration. "Feeble-mindedness, viewed from a sociologic rather than a purely medical standpoint, is not necessarily a 'permanent' and 'incurable' condition."¹⁸In this statement, the court had deduced that IQ alone was no reason to issue institutionalizing and sterilizing of a human being.

¹⁷ Molly Ladd-Taylor, "Eugenics and Social Welfare in New Deal Minnesota," in *A Century of Eugenics in America* ed. Paul A. Lombardo (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 133.

¹⁸ Molly Ladd Taylor, "Eugenics and Social Welfare in New Deal Minnesota," 133.

The idea of a eugenics director or any super legal status given to any particular individual is dangerous in any context. It is important to remember that in the early twentieth century, any mode of behavior that may be observed as irregular could land an individual in a hospital, if not sterilized outright. As exemplified in Ladd-Taylor's essay, "Supposedly incompetent mothering, often reflected in poor home conditions, was another rationale for sterilization."¹⁹ We can assess from this concept, that women were institutionalized for trivial reasons, none of which had made much sense at all. Dight would more than likely assert that the women were hysterics that were passing morally bad traits to their offspring, or were capable of passing said traits to the offspring. Like that of mentioned Rose Masters, even though she was mentally ill, her children were normal. The Masters family, living in poverty, was under scrutiny by the state welfare boards and in compliance with Dight's eugenic argument, Mrs. Masters reproductive rights would be viewed with scrutiny. The Children's Codes therefore acted yet again as an influence in deciding an individual's reproductive rights.

In hopes of convincing the Board of Control to support the 1929 bill, Dight outlined the powers the eugenicist would possess. "He shall have access to all public records which will aid him in securing the name, age, place of residence, and history of persons who by reason of previous delinquency or mental defect he may believe to be unfit to procreate..."²⁰ In reality, this had infuriated the Board of Control, as Blanch La

¹⁹ Molly Ladd Taylor, "The "Sociological Advantages" of Sterilization: Fiscal Policies and Feeble Minded Women in Interwar Minnesota," in *Mental Retardation in America* ed. Steven Noll and James W. Trent Jr. (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 291.

²⁰ *A Bill for an Act Defining Persons Unfit to Procreate by Reason of Mental Deficiency and Providing for Their Sterilization*, box 6, Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

Du's response was less than polite. She fired back, "We would suggest that instead of a bill in its present form, that you either have this appointment made by the State Board of Health and have that board take the responsibility for your sterilization throughout the state or that you create a separate board for that purpose."²¹ La Du did not find the Board of Control as the appropriate authority, which by 1939 would be irrelevant. Under investigation by the American Public Welfare Association, county welfare agents would be heavily criticized for their committing and sterilizing of wards deemed unfit.

After the Board of Control rejected Dight's arguments for a bill to reform the laws concerning sterilization, he had turned to publicizing what he found to be their neglect. Dight had criticized the Board for their behavior in the 1929-31 session of legislation, where he claimed they had let too many feeble-minded persons become wards of the state and that the allocation of taxpayer's money was not being used properly:

At that very time the State Board of Control had in their care 1,130 feeble-minded persons who could not be housed in the overcrowded state institutions, yet that board opposed a good measure to prevent more feeble-minded persons coming to it, although the board had asked for \$10,745,000.00 for use until the legislative session in 1931. The State Board of Control in April 1929, also opposed a joint resolution providing for the appointment of an interim commission to investigate the prevalence of feeble-mindedness in Minnesota, its evil results and to recommend to the 1931 legislative measures for the prevention of feeble-mindedness.²²

Dight was essentially attacking the establishment and wanted to ridicule the Board of Control for not actively assisting in passing a measure that he viewed, as necessary for the preservation of the establishment.

²¹ Gary Phelps, "The Eugenics Crusade of Charles Fremont Dight," *Minnesota History* 49, (Fall 1984), 105.

²² Charles F. Dight, *History of the Early Stages of the Organized Eugenics Movement for Human Betterment in Minnesota* (Minneapolis, MN: Wesley Temple, 1935), 36.

What is more interesting is that many of the alleged feeble-minded victims of sterilization may not have been mentally ill. One major proponent to Molly Ladd-Taylor's argument brings to light the idea that those accused of being mentally ill or feeble minded were among the countless victims of a state manipulating its powers. Taylor observed that even a social worker who had doubts in practicing the procedure recollected that it, "has worked out well in families where there were already enough children and the mother and father were convinced that there should not be any more."²³ By preying on parents with low IQs, social workers could easily convince the family and the state Board of Control, as well as courts that these parents should be sterilized in order to save on state resources. Fred Kuhlmann, a member of the Board of Control and proponent to IQ testing, supported more supervision over the feeble-minded. "In 1935, a law backed by Kuhlmann provided for, but did not fund, a statewide census of the feeble-minded with the aim of identifying all mentally deficient Minnesotans in order to begin supervision and control at an earlier age."²⁴ Kuhlmann's observation shows that those who were deemed inadequate needed supervision, adds to the debate over equality and the individual's right to privacy.

Charles Dight, again looking to California for guidance as to how Minnesota should direct its organized eugenics movement. Dight observed in his book *History of the Early Stages of the Organized Sterilization Movement for Human Betterment in Minnesota*, "In California alone about 6,000 feeble-minded and insane persons have been

²³ Molly Ladd-Taylor, "The 'Sociological Advantage' of Sterilization: Fiscal Policies and Feeble Minded Women in Interwar Minnesota," in *Mental Retardation in America, A Historical Reader*, ed. Steven Noll and James W. Trent Jr. (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 295.

²⁴ Molly Ladd-Taylor, "The 'Sociological Advantage' of Sterilization: Fiscal Policies and Feeble Minded Women in Interwar Minnesota," 294.

sterilized: (at this time, 1935, more than 10,000).”²⁵Further pushing this reformed bill, Dight stated, “This bill does not require any commitment of mental defectives to the State Board of Control, and scarcely, if at all, increases the labor of that board beyond the appointment by it of a special agent who would assume the duties specified in the bill.”²⁶This line of propaganda, once again, pushed for the appointment of a eugenics agent who would assume the duties of the Board of Control and make the decisions before the court as to who shall be coerced for sterilization. The cost to the state, is one of the telling agents behind Dight’s argument. Pointing to the Faribault institution, “Ten inmates with an average stay of 41 years, have cost the public more than \$100,000.”²⁷This clearly is a ploy to aggravate the public into supporting a legislative measure, which, if applied successfully, begs the question of why society does not try to change it. Minnesota’s Board of Control bureau head, Mildred Thomson’s response to sterilization was less severe than the proposed reform of Dight, but equally detrimental.

Thomson’s stance on caring for the mentally retarded took on the sociological aspect of sterilization. That is, that selective sterilization was appropriate and eugenics was not an accurate means of assessing an individual’s mental capacity. Stating the wards, “even though grown...are really children,” and instead she, along with other members of the board were in favor of, “selective sterilization, with consideration of the

²⁵ Charles F. Dight, *History of the Early Stages of the Organized Eugenics Movement for Human Betterment in Minnesota* (Minneapolis, MN: Wesley Temple, 1935), 34.

²⁶ Charles F. Dight, *History of the Early Stages of the Organized Eugenics Movement in Minnesota*, 34.

²⁷ Charles F. Dight, *History of the Early Stages of the Organized Eugenics Movement in Minnesota*, 35.

individual tempering each selection”²⁸The Board of Control had concluded that sterilization was a necessary measure to not only alleviate tax burden, but in severe cases coerced sterilization was necessary to prevent defects diagnosed as violent from reproducing, which may turn to more dependency on the state. The Board of Control’s stance on sterilization was on par with Welfare Boards across the state. Hoping to still gain the much-needed support for a state appointed Eugenicist, Dight editorialized the greatness that Hitler was carrying out in Germany in their eugenics program.

Congratulating the European dictator on his scientific expedition, Dight set out to congratulate Hitler on his crowning achievement in establishing a eugenics program in Germany. And being no stranger by this point to creating a public sensation, he had editorialized the event in a Minneapolis newspaper:

LOOKING TO HITLER

To the Editor of the Minneapolis Journal:

The report persistently comes from Berlin that congenital feeble-mindedness and other serious conditions that are inheritable are to be stamped out among the German people. Adolf Hitler is having broad scientific plans formed for this. If carried out effectively, it will make him the leader of the greatest rational movement for human betterment the world has ever seen. The world’s two great needs are co-operating in industry for social, genetic and biological race bettering through eugenics.

--C.F. Dight, Minneapolis²⁹

Hoping to capitalize on the Nazi initiative, Dight’s public campaign for a similar program brought stateside never materialized. This was possibly a failure due to the hands off neutrality stance in the United States, or perhaps even due to the fact that debating such a

²⁸ Molly Ladd-Taylor, “Eugenics and Social Welfare in New Deal Minnesota,” in *A Century of Eugenics in America* ed. Paul A. Lombardo (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 124.

²⁹ Charles Dight to Adolf Hitler, August 1, 1933, Res. 82, Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

program would bring scrutiny to the welfare policies in place in the United States.

Dight's congratulatory comments on Germany's program were not enough to convince legislature to act upon coercive measures on a large scale.

In Dight's self-satisfying book, *Call for a New Social Order*, he described the most desirable human traits: "It was to breed a fixed German type of humanity that would be blonde, with blue eyes, full average stature and weight, with strongly formed nose, square powerful chin, a well balanced temperament and certain cranial features denoting strength and determination of character."³⁰ Outlining what Germany considered the perfect Aryan, he attributed eugenic success to Kaiser Wilhelm II and professor Otto Hauser formulating an extraordinary program of Social Darwinism. Dight also attributed the greatness of such civilizations as China and Rome to the eugenic castration of their citizens deemed unfit who served no purpose but weighing down the regime. "How quickly such decay takes place under bad marriage matings is figured out by modern biologists."³¹ By connecting America's eugenics program to the greatness of the Roman and Chinese empires, Dight hoped his audience would take notice of the vast potential sterilization would have on society. However with virtually no support, Dight again turned to shocking the masses with statistics, in hopes of gaining support.

Once again attempting to substantiate the claim that Minnesota needs a state eugenicist, Dight portrays a pandemic of the potential spread of feeble-mindedness. Editorializing his concerns, he stated, "Minnesota, which is no worse off than other states, has approximately 100,000 persons, including morons, who are so mentally

³⁰ Charles F. Dight, *Call for a New Social Order, Some Activities of Charles Fremont Dight* (Minneapolis, MN: Argus Publishing Co., 1936), 120.

³¹ Charles F. Dight, *Call for a New Social Order, Some Activities of Charles Fremont Dight*, 109.

defective as to make them unfit to reproduce and perilous to their offspring and to society if they do.”³²Arguing that Minnesota was somehow beneath that of other states by allowing such behavior to take place, Dight still believed that Minnesota needed reform. An agreeable solution however, is something that Dight could not offer legislature.

Dight believed that he was reforming Minnesota for the better, trying to entice the public to jump on a bandwagon when the state legislature and courts did not view the situation of feeble-mindedness largely as a monumental concern. Although a few of the themes discussed above were from the era of eugenics in Minnesota, Dight had viewed this issue as comparable to the success of science and the bettering of mankind. Willing to cross state lines in order to expand his gospel of eugenics, Dight had contacted even the governor of Oklahoma, William H. Murray. In a letter dated March 17, 1934, Dight had expressed the urge to conduct a radio program over Oklahoma airwaves, in hopes that if the citizens of the said state were exposed to this theory, they would be aptly supportive of such a measure. Governor Murray was hesitant in enacting such laws for fear that making such swift decisions might be dangerous for the public. “I would not sterilize the ordinary mental derangement, for they have, for the most part, a mere mental sickness that can be cured, and is seldom heredity, except in case of syphilitic blood.”³³Unlike Dight, Murray believed that sterilization should be implemented sparingly, only sterilizing those who posed a serious physical threat to society. Dight’s failure to gain national support reminded him to return home in hopes of securing local support.

³² Charles F. Dight, *Call for a New Social Order, Some Activities of Charles Fremont Dight*, 110.

³³ William H. Murray to Charles Dight, April 19, 1934, box 5, Charles Fremont Dight Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

The 1935 legislative year passed another bill regarding the feeble-minded, this time to better track the wellbeing of the mentally deficient and to implement care. The notable proponent to this law was that of Fred Kuhlmann, who was the research head of the Board of Control, and a Dight supporter. The 1935 law was different however, because Kuhlmann pushed for the creation of provisions, which would monitor the mentally deficient in a new statewide program, with local agencies looking out for the feeble-minded and creating agencies for their care. The Board of Control then started to reform the care for the handicapped, asking for more compassion in place of coerced measures. Dight, no longer the advocate for coerced sterilization faded into the background, as coerced sterilization was an act Minnesota never intended to pass. Legislators then pushed the Board of Control to create provisions to better implement humane care for the disabled. Mildred Thomson, now a proponent to reforming the care of the disabled set her sights on a national campaign.

Mildred Thomson set out to reform care given to the mentally handicapped. She had established a measure that instead of punishing handicapped youths, parents would look out for the best interest of their children. “By encouraging parent activists to start their own organization, the National Association of Retarded Children, instead of joining the professionally oriented American Association for Mental deficiency, she acted as midwife to the parent reform movement.”³⁴ Thomson, by setting the organization in motion, empowered the parents of the mentally retarded to stand up for their children’s rights. Thus, opening the door to future advocacy and reform in the care of the

³⁴ Molly Ladd-Taylor, “Eugenics and Social Welfare in New Deal Minnesota,” in *A Century of Eugenics in America* ed. Paul A. Lombardo (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 134.

handicapped in the United States. Thomson stayed on as the Board of Control bureau director until 1959, and during her tenure campaigned for reform in the treatment of the mentally retarded.

The executive powers that Charles Dight had attempted to gain, if not for himself, than for an ally of his group, the Minnesota Eugenics Society, by creating a policing power who would dictate who shall have children. Blame can easily be directed at Dight for his attempted reform, but it is important to remember that in the 1920s, feeble-mindedness, along with such issues as alcoholism, was viewed as a detriment to society. Sterilizing the mentally ill was thus seen as a service to the public at large, and the welfare boards throughout the state had monitored their subjects under much scrutiny in hopes of alleviating the burden on the taxpayer. Despite their ultimate failure, the Children's Codes set in motion a program that had supervised the livelihood of feeble-minded Minnesotans and encouraged the cultivation of sterilization measures. Mildred Thomson expressed through her own crusade the importance of caring for wards of the state and instituting a measure that would protect the rights of the mentally retarded and encourage the parents of said individuals to protect their children.

Charles Dight had wished for the system to be unquestionably reformed, having a genuine fear that by ignoring the issue of the feeble-minded the system would somehow collapse on itself and the state would go into bankruptcy. In his attempts to reform the society at large he not only played on fear, but the aspects of degenerative genetics and paving a way of feeble-mindedness that would surpass the population at large in a short amount of time. The prescribed remedy according to Dight and his supporters, including Charles Lindbergh, was a social construct rooted in racism and fear. Sterilization was

drastically reformed in the sense that the state had anticipated to reform how the welfare boards cared for their wards. The procedure was to be examined under a microscope in hopes that the reforms carried out could someday counter the sterilization and Children's codes.

Although sterilization reform was unsuccessful in Minnesota, Dight had campaigned to make the state a utopian dream of Aryan supremacy with aims to possibly follow the Nazi doctrine. There is a general fear in wondering what would have happened if the proposed law of a eugenicist would have passed. Would the Nazi doctrine have crossed over the Atlantic and been facilitated here in the U.S. and also is the concept of how far it would have gone. Dight, a proponent to eradicating criminality in Minnesota, believed that sterilization would solve all of society's problems. The heart of Charles Dight's war on the feeble-minded was that he was truly a believer that the idiocy that was so prevalent in the twentieth century community of scientists could easily be eradicated through this procedure of sterilizing the unwell.

Although the general aims to sterilize the mentally retarded may have seemed noble at the time, we can now view these procedures as inhumane. The general influx of sterilization was based on a social anxiety and an unawareness to treat the patient with dignity. The eugenics movement had gained a morbid reputation by the 1940s, with the unearthing of Nazi Germany's program to exterminate subjects viewed as inferior. With such a stigma, the eugenics movement was rejected wholeheartedly, and instead replaced with genetic theory and study of genes. Minnesota was left with a legacy of reform, even if in vain, the eugenics movement in this state was alive for one decade, and with it the

reformers and progressives sought to cure the population of this plague, which was, as they saw it, ignorance overtaking the masses.

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