

Next to Godliness: How Pittsburgh Settlement Houses Taught Sanitization and Americanized Immigrant Women and Children from 1890 to 1930.

In modern American culture, evidence of public health campaigns is everywhere. Signs reminding you to wash your hands or sneeze into your elbow are a result of decades of public health campaigns. Simple tenets of public health and hygiene now engrained into our lives largely began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the United States, before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, knowledge of and attention to hygiene practices remained among the upper class and as a social custom, indicated a polite, genteel persona. By the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century, attention to hygiene increased, and soon, cleanliness and hygiene practices found themselves within America's middle class and over time, became an American standard and an important part of cultural assimilation. Often, immigrants arriving in the United States between 1890 and 1930, were not familiar with new American standards of cleanliness and sanitation, and impoverished conditions meant that many immigrants did not possess the necessary hygiene resources; yet, charity organizations attempted to remedy these issues. From 1890 to 1930, Pittsburgh's Kingsley Association and Woods Run Industrial Home instructed immigrant women and their children in hygiene and sanitation to dispel "Old-World" traditions, prevent disease, and assimilate these immigrants into the modern, industrial culture of Pittsburgh.

Settlement houses emerged within urban centers in the United States throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as charity organizations aimed at alleviating poverty and poor living conditions through aid to immigrants and the lower-class. Settlement houses provided basic needs, such as food and clothing, but also education services and space for recreation. Settlement houses acted as centers of education and morality for poor, densely populated areas. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rapid industrialization in the United States drew many people from rural to urban

settings in search of work. Industrialization in the U.S. also attracted many immigrants looking for better economic opportunities—opportunities found increasingly within industrial mills and factories. Movement among Americans from rural to urban areas, compounded with increasing immigration resulted in massive growth among cities; but increased growth created crowded and unsanitary living conditions. In a pioneering 1907 sociological study called, *The Pittsburgh Survey*, one journalist reported that a single two-room tenement house in Pittsburgh's Homestead neighborhood housed seven people, including two children.<sup>1</sup> Settlement houses provided crucial resources to those living in industrial-era crowded, dirty cities.

While Pittsburgh's settlement houses operated under the same philosophy as other settlement homes in the United States and abroad, Pittsburgh's settlement houses were specially tasked with accommodating the city's large immigrant population, who were largely drawn to the city for its heavy industrial manufacturing.

In 1893, the Kingsley House first opened in Pittsburgh's present-day Wilkinsburg neighborhood, but later moved to Pittsburgh's Hill District neighborhood in 1901 once coke industrialist, Henry Clay Frick, purchased a mansion in the Lower Hill District for the organization. By the time the Kingsley Association arrived in the Hill District, a large immigrant population already inhabited the neighborhood. From the 1870s to the 1890s, Jewish migrants settled in the Hill District, escaping religious persecution and economically depressed conditions in Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> After the 1890s, an influx of Italian, Syrian, Greek, and Polish immigrants settled in the Hill, in addition to Black people from the South, as part of the post-Civil War Great

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Houses of a Mill Town* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), 145.

<sup>2</sup> Pittsburgh Neighborhood Alliance, *An Atlas of the Hill Neighborhood of Pittsburgh 1977* (Pittsburgh: self-pub., 1977), 2.

Migration.<sup>3</sup> The Hill District attracted many immigrants because of its proximity to the city's manufacturing hub located along the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers.

In 1919, the Kingsley Association relocated to Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood upon receiving recommendation from a survey conducted by the University of Pittsburgh.<sup>4</sup> East Liberty, located on the eastern side of Pittsburgh, was home to some of the city's wealthiest citizens in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; however, in the 1860s, a railroad station was built in the neighborhood which connected East Liberty to other areas of the city.<sup>5</sup> By the 1920s, Greek, Italian, Jewish, and German immigrants inhabited the neighborhood, in addition to Black migrants from the South.<sup>6</sup> This 1919 survey, conducted by the sociology department at the University of Pittsburgh, identified issues within the neighborhood, including a lack of public bath facilities, undernourished children, and "lazy" idle children with no opportunities for recreation.<sup>7</sup> The report recommended that a settlement house open to remedy some of these ills, thus prompting Kingsley's move to East Liberty.<sup>8</sup>

The Woods Run Settlement House opened in 1895 in the Woods Run neighborhood of Pittsburgh, now generally known as the North Side.<sup>9</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Woods Run's citizens were largely of German and Welsh descent, but by the early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, much of the

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<sup>3</sup> Pittsburgh Neighborhood Alliance, *Atlas of the Hill*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> "Guide to the Kingsley Association Records, 1894-1980, AIS.1970.05," Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.

<sup>5</sup> Pittsburgh Neighborhood Alliance, *An Atlas of the East Liberty Neighborhood of Pittsburgh 1977* (Pittsburgh: self-pub., 1977), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Pittsburgh Neighborhood Alliance, *Atlas of East Liberty*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> University of Pittsburgh Department of Sociology, *East Liberty Social Study*, 1919, Kingsley Association Records, 1894-1980, AIS.1970.05, Archives of Industrial Society, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.

<sup>8</sup> University of Pittsburgh Department of Sociology, *East Liberty*.

<sup>9</sup> "Guide to the Neighborhood Centers Association Records, Pittsburgh, 1890-1954, AIS.1964.28," Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.

population consisted of Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian immigrants.<sup>10</sup> Woods Run residents worked in nearby factories located along the Ohio River. Living conditions in Woods Run, however, were cramped and dirty, and the neighborhood's residents were impoverished. In 1930, 90% of the neighborhood's population was considered poor, working-class.<sup>11</sup> The Woods Run Settlement House acted as a refuge from these conditions.

Using two of Pittsburgh's settlement houses as a case study, the Kingsley House and the Woods Run Settlement House reveal concerted efforts to teach immigrant women and their children about sanitization and hygiene practices, as an extension of larger Americanization efforts. While settlement houses certainly engaged in outdoor, neighborhood sanitation, such as street cleaning initiatives, the scope of my research is limited to domestic sanitation efforts promoting disease prevention and American notions of cleanliness within the home. In response to crowded, dirty, and disease-ridden living conditions often among poor immigrants, settlement houses created educational programs in hopes that immigrant women and children would learn the virtues of cleanliness and assimilate into American society. These educational initiatives operated on the assumptions that immigrants had either no knowledge of hygiene or knowledge rooted only in tradition and superstition. A brochure for the Woods Run Settlement House claims that they serve a "Polyglot population—handicapped by ignorance, superstition, and poverty."<sup>12</sup> Only through explicit instruction in modern methods of cleaning, hygiene, and disease prevention would these immigrants learn how to assimilate into industrial American society and become moral, upstanding citizens.

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<sup>10</sup> Albert J. Kennedy, *Social Conditions in the Twenty-Seventh Ward*, 1930, 259, Neighborhood Centers Association Records, 1890-1954, AIS.1964.28, Archives of Industrial Society, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.

<sup>11</sup> Albert J. Kennedy, *Social Conditions*, 259.

<sup>12</sup> Woods Run Settlement House, brochure, [1920-1927?], Neighborhood Centers Association Records, 1890-1954, AIS.1964.28, Archives of Industrial Society, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.

From the late 1800s onward, new revelations about germs and disease raised expectations for cleanliness and launched women's new roles as household microbial defenders. From the period 1890 to 1930, many different factors were blamed for disease spread including dirt, fecal matter, miasma, dust, insects, and unclean food.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of which theory of disease spread was popular at the moment, women were responsible for maintaining a home's health and staying up-to-date on the latest innovations and theories in sanitary science. For mothers, the stakes for modern domestic instruction could not be higher, as a dirty household could mean life or death for your child, as well as public scrutiny of your homemaking abilities. Cleanliness and disease vigilance increased as science revealed more information about disease and germs to the public; Americans realized that disease may be lurking anywhere. Keeping a clean home became a point of pride for women and indicated dedication to cleanliness, health, and hard work.

The Kingsley House and the Woods Run Settlement House deployed multiple strategies aimed directly at educating immigrant mothers, one of which was "Mothers' Clubs," where women met and discussed methods for childrearing and homemaking. In their 1926 annual report, the Kingsley House reported that 433 women attended their Mothers' Club in 1926; it is unclear how often this Kingsley House club met or if this count is exclusively new attendees, but it is not an insignificant number.<sup>14</sup> Often, settlement workers taught a skill or idea during each meeting, such as the best way to bathe an infant, or how to cook a cheap and nutritious meal for children. While many women at the meetings certainly knew how to bathe a baby or cook a meal, settlement houses emphasized learning the "modern" way. Additionally, Mothers' Club

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 2-16.

<sup>14</sup> *Annual Report of the Kingsley Association*, 1926, 4, Kingsley Association Records, 1894-1980, AIS.1970.05, Archives of Industrial Society, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.

meetings were opportunities for socialization and through discussion, settlement workers learned more about the community's residents and their needs and desires.

Pittsburgh's settlement houses also organized clubs for young girls, known as "little mothers' clubs," where girls received instruction in housekeeping and child care. Immigrant mothers were frequently hesitant in adopting modern methods of housekeeping and childcare; so, settlement houses implemented little mothers' clubs to both train the next generation of mothers and hopefully inspire the girls' immigrant mothers to adopt modern domestic practices. In 1913, Pittsburgh had 19 chapters of the little mothers' club, including at the Kingsley House and Woods Run Settlement House.<sup>15</sup> As community organizations, settlement houses held a stake in their community's future success, and as a result, placed great effort toward educating the community's future. A newspaper article recognized the significance of these clubs, "Each of these six or seven hundred girls is a prospective mother and their knowledge of babies means much to the Pittsburg of the future."<sup>16</sup> The little mothers cared, not only for their siblings but for other children in the neighborhood, alleviating some mothers' burdens. Additionally, settlement workers taught the young girls the basics of housekeeping, including sweeping, dusting, and laundry. Teaching girls proper housekeeping techniques highlighted the importance of keeping homes grime-free and aided in the settlement houses' battles against disease. The Kingsley House constructed a three-room "model flat" as a practice home for its little mothers who fastidiously cleaned the house each day.<sup>17</sup> Instructing girls on cleaning also taught them the merits of hard work, an important value to Americans.

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<sup>15</sup> Maud Carrell, "Great Work Is Being Done By the Little Mothers' Club," *Pittsburgh Dispatch* (Pittsburgh, PA), Sep. 21, 1913.

<sup>16</sup> Maud Carrell, "Great Work."

<sup>17</sup> "Flat on the Hill Houses Small Army," *Pittsburgh Sun* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jan. 9, 1912.

Furthermore, lectures and demonstrations from nurses and other health advisors at the Kingsley House and Woods Run Settlement House gave lectures targeted at immigrant mothers who practiced supposedly “Old World” traditions and superstitions, which included anything from belief in the “Evil Eye,” to breathing into a frog’s mouth as a cure for whooping cough.<sup>18</sup> The Evil Eye is a belief found within Mediterranean, South American, as well as Western and Central Asian cultures that a glare from a jealous individual can inflict harm on people.<sup>19</sup> Women and children are most vulnerable to the evil eye’s effects, which can include illness, death, and general misfortune.<sup>20</sup> Protective charms are often used against the evil eye, which vary widely by culture; Jewish people frequently tie a red string upon themselves; Italians wear a “cornicello,” which means “horn.”<sup>21</sup> Though explicit reference to the evil eye is not found within records from the Kingsley House or the Woods Run Settlement House, there are frequent references to “traditions” and “superstitions.” Many immigrants living within the Hill District, East Liberty, and Woods Run came from cultures with belief in the evil eye, including Italians and Jews, meaning that references to “traditions” and “superstitions” within the records of the Kingsley House and Woods Run Settlement House likely included the evil eye; therefore, instruction from Pittsburgh’s settlement workers likely tried convincing immigrant mothers that diligent cleanliness is what keeps illness away, not protective charms. Historian Nancy Tomes claims that immigrant mothers during this period, “were interested in adopting American ways of cleanliness, but also wanted to preserve their own culture.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Charms and Superstitions in the Treatment of Diseases,” *Medical and Surgical Reporter* 55, no. 6 (August 7, 1886): 190.

<sup>19</sup> Anatlilde Idoyaga Molina, “The Evil Eye as a Folk Disease and Its Argentine and Ibero-American Historical Explanatory Frame,” *Western Folklore* 75, no. 1 (2016): 13-14.

<sup>20</sup> Anatlilde Idoyaga Molina, “The Evil Eye,” 9.

<sup>21</sup> Louis C. Jones, “The Evil Eye among European-Americans,” *Western Folklore* 10, no. 1 (1951): 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> Tomes, *Gospel of Germs*, 188.

Pittsburgh's settlement houses set up baby welfare stations in their neighborhoods to provide direct instruction to mothers, as well as help babies in acute distress. Baby check-ups and childcare instruction occurred both one-on-one and in small groups. Instruction topics included the proper washing and dressing of babies, as well as sanitization of milk bottles.<sup>23</sup> To avoid any language barriers, nurses and settlement workers demonstrated these topics in front of the mothers. From June to October of 1913, the Kingsley House reported that nurses and settlement workers instructed 991 mothers at Kingsley's "Infant Welfare Station," proving the program's popularity.<sup>24</sup> The settlement houses' ultimate goals with baby welfare stations was that immigrant women would see their babies thrive while implementing the modern, American methods of child-rearing and subsequently use these methods for their future children or pass on the information to their friends and family. The Woods Run Settlement House even created a competition out of these baby check-ups, with a silver spoon given as a prize to the ten mothers who most closely followed the nurse's directions.<sup>25</sup> Woods Run Settlement House conducted the silver spoon contest to offer a "concrete reward" to immigrant mothers because it was "uniformly very difficult" for immigrant mothers to adopt new childcare methods<sup>26</sup>; instead, immigrant mothers often selectively implemented bits and pieces from the nurses' recommendations.<sup>27</sup>

More generalized forms of hygiene instruction at the Woods Run Settlement House and the Kingsley House came from lectures and plays hosted within the homes. Public health experts frequently delivered talks to audiences, such as a series of two lectures given by a local doctor

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<sup>23</sup> "Schools for Mothers," *Pittsburgh Gazette Times* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jun. 11, 1911.

<sup>24</sup> *Annual Report of the Kingsley Association*, 1913, Kingsley Association Records, 1894-1980, AIS.1970.05, Archives of Industrial Society, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.

<sup>25</sup> "Woods Run Settlement Work," *City and Suburban Life* (Bellevue, PA), Nov. 2, 1912.

<sup>26</sup> "Woods Run Settlement Work," *City and Suburban Life*.

<sup>27</sup> Tomes, 188.



explaining the difference between “friendly” and “unfriendly” bacteria.<sup>28</sup> One play produced by the Kingsley House titled, *Mother Goose Up to Date*, espoused the virtues of modern sanitary practices through nursery rhymes. In one scene, the “Old Woman Who Lives in a Shoe” asks Mother Goose how to prevent her children from dying of tuberculosis because many of her children have died and she only has two children left. Mother Goose, who has six healthy children, asks her son to explain he stays healthy, to which he replies:

There is a boy in our town,  
And he is wondrous wise;  
He never has his window shut,  
But in the good air lies.  
He always goes to bed at eight,  
And sleeps all thro’ the night;  
And in the morning he feels fine,  
For good air makes him bright.<sup>29</sup>

Mother Goose’s son proudly proclaims that keeping his window open at night keeps him from contracting tuberculosis. After seeing this performance, an Italian mother reportedly said, “Now I see why you all time open window; I go home, I take nail out window, get much air,” further evidence of efforts at discouraging “old-world” traditions.<sup>30</sup> Direct instruction in health and sanitation matters through engaging lectures and plays highlights the settlement houses’ more creative approaches within their education programs.

Records from the Kingsley Association and the Woods Run Settlement House reflect these organizations’ understanding of Americanization as directly tied to their hygiene initiatives. Improving sanitization throughout the city builds a stronger, healthier population; a

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<sup>28</sup> Board of Trustees Minutes, 1894, Kingsley Association Records, 1894-1980, AIS.1970.05, Archives of Industrial Society, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.

<sup>29</sup> “A Health Play,” *The Kingsley Record* 22, no. 2 (March 1920), 2-3. Kingsley Association Records, 1894-1980, AIS.1970.05, Archives of Industrial Society, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System

<sup>30</sup> “A Health Play,” *The Kingsley Record*, 2-3.

population that is capable of fighting wars, securing economic prosperity, and promoting American democratic values to the world. While Pittsburgh's settlement houses met immediate needs within the city, on a larger scale, their programs Americanized immigrants and fortified American power.

One limitation in studying Pittsburgh's settlement houses is the city's extreme pollution and how that may have affected educational programs within these organizations. During my selected time period, 1890 to 1930, air pollution in Pittsburgh, on many days, turned the skies gray. The city's heavy industrial activity polluted the air with chemical-laden smoke and soot. A common anecdote in Pittsburgh is that you could leave your home in the morning wearing a white shirt, but arrive home in the evening with a gray shirt. Potentially, the extent of Pittsburgh's visible pollution set the city's settlement houses on a particularly zealous mission of cleanliness. Perhaps Pittsburgh's settlement houses particularly emphasized cleanliness and hygiene on account of the city's pollution and implemented more educational programs than settlement houses in other American cities. Even so, records from the Kingsley House and the Woods Run Settlement House provide valuable insight into sanitation and hygiene rhetoric of the time period, even if taken to an extreme in Pittsburgh.

Industrialization and immigration grew American cities rapidly in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, creating crowded conditions and a crisis of cleanliness. From 1890 to 1930, the Kingsley House and the Woods Run Settlement House's comprehensive cleanliness and hygiene programs taught Pittsburgh's immigrant women and children modern domestic science and promoted American assimilation. Pittsburgh's settlement houses directed immigrant women and children to abandon traditional practices and beliefs surrounding cleanliness, disease, and childcare and instead, embrace America's sophisticated "modern" and "scientific" standards.

Investigating the history of sanitation initiatives within immigrant communities provides valuable insight into the rhetoric of disease and dirtiness and its supposed stemming from America's poor and immigrant communities. Analyzing archival records from the Kingsley House and the Woods Run Settlement House reveals concentrated efforts toward "cleaning up" Pittsburgh and its large immigrant population, not only to better the surrounding community, but the nation at large.

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