

"Our Sister's Keepers"

The Minneapolis Woman's Christian Association and Housing for Working Women

Lynn Weiner

BACK IN 1888, the Minneapolis Woman's Christian Association commented on the gap between the reality of life for single working women and the popular ideal of domesticity: "A woman's place is at home. So sing the poets, so preach the ministers, so say all men. And no one has thought of the hundreds and thousands of young working women all over the land, some without any home at all, others with no place to pass their evenings but in a crowded, miserable boarding house, from which they would be all too prone to escape into the streets."¹

Female boarders and lodgers — women who worked and lived away from their families — were an increasingly important urban group in the United States after the Civil War at a time when the domestic ideal was

¹ Woman's Christian Association, *Report*, 1888, p. 13. The annual reports of the association (hereafter abbreviated WCA) are scattered among the files of the WCA at 821 Second Avenue South, Minneapolis, the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), and the Minneapolis History Collection of the Minneapolis Public Library (MHC).

² United States Census, 1900, *Statistics of Women at Work*, table 26, p. 198 (Washington, 1907). This census volume presents manuscript data from the 1900 returns for twenty-seven United States cities, including Minneapolis and St. Paul.



A MATRON chats with two guests in the Woman's Hotel at 122 Hennepin Avenue. Since the hotel provided rooms for traveling women, this location near railroad depots was considered advantageous.

dominant. By the turn of the century, more than a third of all urban working women, some 433,000, had traveled alone to the cities.² There they found low-paying jobs, expensive housing, and a strong public belief that young women were ill-prepared to live outside their proper sphere — the home. Philanthropic organizations responded by subsidizing women's clubs that adopted "home-like" rules and regulations. The nation's boarding clubs grew through the 1920s when transformations in social attitudes and demographic patterns caused their decline.

The boarding club movement was especially strong

Lynn Weiner is a graduate student in American Studies at Boston University. She has been living in Minneapolis while working on her doctoral dissertation, "'A Woman's Place': The Persistent Debate Over Women Workers and Morality in the United States, 1866-1978." This article is an outgrowth of her dissertation work. The author is especially thankful to the Minneapolis Woman's Christian Association for permission to use its archives

0026-5497/79/0013-189\$01.75/0

in Minneapolis, where the Minneapolis Woman's Christian Association (WCA) supported a network of lodgings for both women workers and women transients. The WCA believed it had a special responsibility to safeguard young women who lived "away from home and friends." In 1887 WCA leaders affirmed, "We *are* our sister's keepers."³

Minneapolis was second only to St. Paul in the relative numbers of female boarders and lodgers in the city by 1900. More than 9,000 women — almost half of Minneapolis' female labor force — lived apart from their families. Almost 60 per cent of these women were native-born. Thousands of them arrived alone at the Minneapolis railroad depots from small towns and farms throughout Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Another 40 per cent were immigrants, primarily non-English-speaking Scandinavians and Germans who sought positions in domestic service.⁴ A combination of factors — among them, the identity of these boarders, their motivations, jobs, wages, and housing opportunities — resulted in a growing social concern with the morals and living conditions of women living alone in the city.

The unusually high numbers of boarders and lodgers in Minneapolis reflected upper Midwest immigration patterns. In Minneapolis twice as many daughters of foreign-born parents boarded as was the national norm. Most immigrants to America tended to settle in cities, but immigrants to Minnesota before 1890 were likely to settle on farms or in small towns. Rural life was limited for women. The inheritance of farms, for example, usually went to sons rather than daughters. Consequently, there was an unusually large proportion of farmers' daughters seeking work and housing in Minneapolis.⁵

This increase in the population of young women living alone in the city mirrored a number of social and cultural changes. Traditionally, women were expected to remain at home until they married, even if they worked to help support their families.⁶ The middle-class domestic ideology dictated that all women, but especially those who were "respectable," white, and native-born, required the protection and supervision of domestic life if they were to maintain their place in society. Yet, in postbellum years, increasing numbers of young, single women left home to work, motivated by both financial necessity and the desire for independence.⁷ In the upper Midwest, thousands of young women were drawn away from rural homes by the desire and need to find work and excitement in the growing city of Minneapolis.

JOB OPPORTUNITIES for women expanded as Minneapolis developed into a commercial metropolis in the 1880s. A local newspaper noted the growing sphere of the woman worker in 1883:

Every week almost finds her taking up employ-

ments which have before been monopolized by the sterner sex. . . . A lady was noticed behind a drug counter a few days ago filling prescriptions carefully and promptly and was questioned about her position. [She replied]: "Are we not as careful as men? We are not likely to become intoxicated nor have our heads muddled with tobacco, conditions in which so many fearful mistakes are made by drug clerks and there is no reason why we should not show the men what we can do in this as well as other lines of employment."⁸

Newspaper articles and advertisements reported a host of the new women workers in Minneapolis. Female physicians, editors, lawyers, shopkeepers, real estate dealers, and even a grain commissioner — a Mrs. Flora D'Vough, who kept an office with a "ladies' entrance" — were publicized in the city before 1890.⁹

Yet, most women wage earners at the turn of the century worked at traditional female occupations. More than half of the female boarders in Minneapolis labored as domestic servants or waitresses. Almost 20 per cent worked in sewing trades as dressmakers, milliners, seamstresses, and tailoresses. Women boarders also were employed in clerical, teaching, laundry, nursing, factory, and sales occupations.¹⁰

³WCA, *Report*, 1887, p. 43.

⁴United States Census, 1900, *Statistics*, table XX, p. 29, table 28, p. 218–305.

⁵United States Census, 1900, *Statistics*, table 26, p. 198–207, table 28, p. 260–263. Table 26 shows that, nationally, 45 per cent of all female boarders were immigrants, 22 per cent were white, native-born women of native parentage, 21 per cent were the daughters of foreign-born parents, and 13 per cent were Black migrants. For discussion of the work and migration patterns in Minnesota, see Alvin H. Hansen and Tillman M. Sogge, *Occupational Trends in Minnesota* (University of Minnesota, Employment Stabilization Research Institute Bulletin, vol. II, no. 4, July, 1933) and Byron Nordstrom, *The Swedes in Minnesota* (Minneapolis, 1976).

⁶Arthur Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1917). Exceptions were the New England mill operatives, who left their farm homes to board in dormitories run by the textile mills in the antebellum era, and domestic servants. See Edith Abbot, *Women in Industry* (New York, 1928) and Lucy M. Salmon, *Domestic Service* (New York, 1901).

⁷For a fuller discussion of the development of the population of women boarders and lodgers, see Lynn Weiner, "A Woman's Place": The Persistent Debate Over Women Workers and Morality in the United States, 1866–1978," chapter two (Doctoral Dissertation-in-Progress, Boston University).

⁸*Daily Minnesota Tribune* (Minneapolis), March 4, 1883, clipping in WPA Annals collection, box 91, Minnesota Historical Society division of archives and manuscripts.

⁹WPA Annals, box 91, files 1–4.

¹⁰United States Census, 1900, *Statistics*, table 28, p. 260–263.

Most of these women earned desperately low wages. In the 1880s the state Bureau of Labor estimated that the average woman worker in Minneapolis was paid from \$3.00 to \$4.00 weekly. At the same time, the cost of living for female boarders was estimated at \$6.00 a week.¹¹ Low wages existed in part because it was popularly assumed that working women lived with their parents and were seeking extra luxuries or supplemental "pin money." As late as 1904, one employer suggested that women worked strictly for "the excitement, the opportunity for ogling customers, and display of cheap finery."¹²

Boarders and lodgers, however, had to find housing on their "pin money" salaries. Working women had several options in Minneapolis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They could rent rooms from relatives, hotels, commercial boarding houses, and private families. Sometimes these accommodations included meals, but often lodgers cooked for themselves or ate out in restaurants and cafes. Over half of the women received room and board as partial compensation for their labor and lived in servants' quarters. The organized boarding clubs and women's hotels, such as those sponsored by the WCA, provided another housing possibility during this period.¹³

Not all of these options, however, were equally tenable. Eva McDonald Valesh, in one of a series of articles on Minneapolis working women published in the *St. Paul Globe*, reported in 1888 that Minneapolis landlords

often preferred male to female boarders, because they believed women gossiped, demanded extra attention, and "were always poking about every corner of the house." Landlords were also often unwilling to rent to women because they suspected female renters lessened the "respectability" of their lodgings.¹⁴

Finances further restricted housing opportunities. Valesh reported that the "better class of boarding houses charge such high rates that but few girls can patronize them." Women obtaining housing in a "respectable" area faced extra costs. The Bureau of Labor noted that "it is also difficult for a girl to obtain a room in a respectable locality without going a distance from the center of the city, which necessitates the paying of carfare."¹⁵

In the 1880s the cheapest Minneapolis boarding houses charged from \$2.50 to \$3.50 weekly.¹⁶ Many women could not afford even these meager accommodations. Instead, they combined with other working women to rent rooms without board and faced long hours of cooking, washing, and cleaning after work. One woman informed the state Bureau of Labor in 1888 that:

Four of us hired a large room. We cooked, sewed, washed and ironed for ourselves and managed to live. Our wages were \$3.00 per week apiece, but our clothes were always so shabby that we didn't go to parties evenings or to church on Sunday. We were so tired after doing our work that we had no time to read or do anything but sleep.¹⁷

The state labor commissioner, John Lamb, was among those who decried the living conditions of poorly paid women workers. "These are the girls whose surroundings are harsh and dangerous," he wrote in 1888. "They are not able to secure good wages, because girls with homes and merely nominal expenses can work very cheap. . . . This is a deplorable condition of affairs, brought about by extreme competition. It is well worthy of serious consideration by all people who feel interested in the cause of humanity."¹⁸

The "deplorable condition of affairs" caught the attention of Minneapolis reformers. A "purity crusade" was sweeping through American cities in the late nineteenth century, and the supervision of housing for working women became a tactic in the campaign.¹⁹ The nature of urban prostitution combined with the rigid interpretation of "woman's sphere" to cause reformers to fear for the morality of the female boarder and lodger, who was in turn believed to threaten the moral fabric of society.

The low wages paid to women underscored the belief that the working woman was but a step from prostitution. The "social evil" was highly visible in Minneapolis, as it was quasilegal from the 1870s through 1910. Prostitutes paid monthly fines to the municipal court and were then allowed to practice their trade freely within certain districts. Local newspapers routinely publicized these

¹¹ Minnesota Bureau of Labor Statistics, *First Biennial Report*, 1887-1888, p. 183. *St. Paul Globe*, May 1, 1888, p. 4.

¹² Minnesota Bureau of Labor, *Ninth Biennial Report*, 1903-1904, 1:129.

¹³ Minnesota Bureau of Labor Statistics, *First Biennial Report*, 1887-1888, p. 131-196. For a discussion of housing opportunities nationally, see 50 Congress, 2 session, "Working Women in Large Cities," United States Department of Labor, *Fourth Annual Report*, 25.

¹⁴ Eva Gay, "Search for Homes," in *St. Paul Globe*, August 5, 1888. Eva McDonald Valesh, using the pen name, "Eva Gay," wrote a lengthy series of articles on working women for the Minneapolis Sunday edition of the *St. Paul Globe* from March 25, 1888, through August 3, 1891. The author of this article is indebted to Rhoda Gilman of the Minnesota Historical Society staff for bringing the "Eva Gay" articles to her attention. Ms. Gilman has a chapter on Valesh in Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter, eds., *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays*, 55-76 (St. Paul, 1977).

¹⁵ *St. Paul Globe*, August 5, 1888, Bureau of Labor, *First Biennial Report*, 189.

¹⁶ *St. Paul Globe*, August 5, 1888, Bureau of Labor, *First Biennial Report*, 183-186.

¹⁷ Bureau of Labor, *First Biennial Report*, 188-189.

¹⁸ Bureau of Labor, *First Biennial Report*, 196.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the "purity crusade" in a national context, see David J. Pivar, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868-1900* (Westport, Conn., 1973).

transactions, reporting on "fallen women" and their regular appearances before the bench.²⁰ In 1876, for example, the *Minneapolis Tribune* reported that "a soiled dove, under the patronage of Kate Campbell, walked up and paid her fine."²¹

Reformers argued that many of these "soiled doves" were recruited from the ranks of working women. This conviction was reflected in 1888 when a local prostitute reportedly said:

I tried for three years to support life on the wages
I was paid as a cashier in a big store. I gave
up the struggle at last. They call me unworthy
of any decent person's notice now, but I
don't starve and freeze since I quit being respectable.²²

Reformers maintained that prostitution was a constant danger unless "women adrift" could be gathered in before they succumbed to the brightly colored lures of the city. The WCA, emphasizing that young women needed to be taught the difference between virtue and vice, wrote in 1898 that:

Mother Eve was herself disposed to be wayward,
and her daughters inherit the undesirable tendency.
It is much easier to reach the heart of the good,
well-meaning girl than that of her wayward sister.
We would teach both these girls that there are other
riches than Klondike gold. That velvet carpets,
silken shirts and jewelled hands are not necessary
to happy lives.²³

The road to virtue, reformers held, lay in the dissemination of "domestic influences," which included encouraging young women to "adorn homes of their own" and properly raise their own children. It meant the education of rural migrants towards middle-class urban mores, particularly the values of "self reliance, economy and thrift."²⁴ It meant, in short, the extension of the influence of the middle-class home, which would ameliorate rather than change economic conditions.

The erosion of this influence was believed to pose a grave threat to the social order. There was no "place" for women outside the home, and reformers feared that young women living apart from family life could drift too easily from the "third class boarding house" into "low restaurants," dance halls, and, ultimately, prostitution.²⁵

AS YOUNG WOMEN abandoned their parental homes, reformers offered a substitute domestic environment. Supervised boarding clubs for working women developed across the country in the nineteenth century in response to the low wages paid female workers and in an effort to ensure "moral purity." The first organized home in the United States was founded in Philadelphia in 1849 "for the temporary help of those [women] out of employment." In 1856, the Ladies' Christian Union opened a club for working women in New York City. By

1874, fourteen homes had been organized, primarily on the East Coast. Nationally, some ninety boarding clubs housed more than 4,000 women yearly by 1898.²⁶

In Minneapolis, the club movement began relatively early — in 1874, when the WCA established the Woman's Boarding Home in a small house in the downtown area. During the half century that followed, the WCA greatly expanded its boarding clubs, along with lodgings for transients. The WCA's vigorous reform program preceded and probably forestalled the founding of the local Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The YWCA was the major organization concerned with working women in most American cities but was not organized in Minneapolis until 1891. Even then it did not assume the housing work for which it was known nationally but turned instead to activities in education, recreation, and employment for working women.²⁷

The WCA began its work in January, 1866, when twenty women representing local churches gathered to found the first women's benevolent association in the state — the Ladies' Christian Aid Society of Minneapolis and St. Anthony. Their object was "to provide homes for the destitute . . . [and] to provide food, clothing, religious, and literary instruction for the needy, irrespective of class or color."²⁸

The society's first works included soliciting clothing for the freed Blacks of the South, visiting the state prison, and promoting the cause of temperance. In 1873

²⁰A proportion of these fines was allocated to the Minneapolis Bethany Home for work in "the care and reformation of fallen women." See Minneapolis City Council, "Proceedings," 1878-1890, and the annual reports of the Bethany Home, available at the MHS. The best contemporaneous account of prostitution in Minneapolis during this era is the Minneapolis Vice Commission, *Report of the Vice Commission of Minneapolis to His Honor James C. Hugues, Mayor, 1911* (Minneapolis, 1911), copy in the MHC.

²¹*Minneapolis Tribune*, July 28, 1876, clipping in WPA Annals, box 181.

²²*St. Paul Globe*, September 2, 1888, p. 1.

²³WCA, *Report*, 1898, p. 34.

²⁴WCA, *Report*, 1903, p. 23, 1887, p. 24.

²⁵National Travelers' Aid Association, "Early History of Selected Travelers' Aid Societies and Events in the History of the National Travelers' Aid Association," microfilm, 1948, in Travelers' Aid Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota. See also Jane Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (New York, 1912), for an articulation of these fears about young working women.

²⁶Mary Fergusson, "Boarding Homes and Clubs for Working Women," in *Bulletin of the [United States] Department of Labor*, no. 15 (Washington, D.C., March, 1898).

²⁷"History: Young Women's Christian Association of Minneapolis," 1959, mimeographed manuscript in Minneapolis YWCA files.

²⁸Christian Aid Society, "Minutes," 1866-1867, p. 1, machine copy in WCA Papers, MHS division of archives and manuscripts.

the society formally incorporated as the Minneapolis Woman's Christian Association, and, as previously mentioned, the following year the group opened the first boarding home for women in the city.²⁹

While housing was the major activity of the WCA, its remarkable history is replete with philanthropic endeavors. Among its other accomplishments, the WCA was the first poor relief society in Minneapolis, sponsoring a "city missionary" in 1869 to visit the destitute and distribute food and clothing. In 1886 the WCA initiated the founding of the Associated Charities, which later became the Family and Children's Service of Minneapolis. In addition, the WCA sponsored the Jones-Harrison Home for the Aged on Cedar Lake in 1888 and the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House in 1924. The latter now is an independent community center for Blacks on Minneapolis' north side.³⁰

In order to launch the boarding club movement in Minneapolis by founding the Woman's Boarding Home in 1874, the WCA collected funds through bake sales, church suppers, and businessmen's contributions. The home housed eight women and immediately filled to capacity. The WCA, however, faced some public opposition. The only earlier homes for women in Minnesota had been the Magdalen, or rescue homes for prostitutes and unwed mothers, and the WCA had to overcome the notion that its new institution was not "to be a Magdalen Home, as some think."³¹

By 1876, the home was so pressed for space it closed and reopened two years later in a three-story, many-gabled house not far from the central business district. The new home contained twenty-four rooms, including one for penniless transients. By 1878, some 700 working

women had registered at the home; by 1883, that figure had doubled to 1,400.³²

The WCA opened a second club, the "Branch," in 1885. The new club was intended for poorer women, "combining the features of transient lodgings and a cheap home for women and girls." The Branch, which advertised its services at the city railroad depots, accepted penniless women, women with children, older women, and even "fallen women," but only for one night. Eight more WCA clubs opened from 1900 through 1928.³³

Four of these clubs opened in the years from 1915 to 1920, reflecting the peak housing activity of the World War I era. At that time the numbers of single working women increased in Minneapolis, and so the WCA enlarged its housing capabilities. The WCA compared the situation of women workers with that of male soldiers. Where soldiers were housed, fed, and guided by the government, the WCA wrote, the working woman "must in the main fight her own battles and clothe and feed and lodge herself as she can."³⁴ By the end of the war the boarding clubs of the WCA, combined with those of other local organizations, could house more than 1,000 of the city's approximately 18,000 female boarders and lodgers.³⁵

Many of these clubs were funded by gifts from local businessmen. In 1900, for example, former Governor John S. Pillsbury donated a house to replace the Branch. Located at 819 Second Avenue South, the club was named for his wife, Mahala Fisk Pillsbury. It housed young women until the present Mahala Fisk Pillsbury Club was erected in 1956 at the same location. Governor Pillsbury wanted especially to aid the young women with no place to go:

I want to reach the poor girls who are really poor, not those who are well-to-do or who are capable of self help. I could ask no greater reward than to know that the home Mrs. Pillsbury and I will make for the girls will be remembered in their dark hours. If a girl is thrown out of employment, or for any reason loses her bread-earning power, we want her to feel that she is not without a friend.³⁶

WHILE THE women of the WCA were primarily concerned with long-term boarders, they sustained a growing interest in unemployed and transient women. The first two clubs reserved rooms for penniless migrants, and the association also sponsored a "ladies room" at the city's privately sponsored charitable coffee house, which operated during the economic crisis of the late 1870s.³⁷

In 1893 the WCA united with the Minneapolis YWCA to provide an expanded service for transient women. Together, the two organizations sponsored a "Travelers' Aid" matron at the city railroad depots — environments considered especially dangerous for unpro-

²⁹For general histories of the WCA, see WCA, *Report*, 1942, and *Woman's Christian Association of Minneapolis, 1866-1966*, a booklet published in 1966 by the WCA for its 100th anniversary. Most of the later WCA reports also contain brief, updated histories of the organization's work.

³⁰WCA, *Report*, 1942, p. 15-16, 23. The papers of the Phyllis Wheatley House are in the MHS division of archives and manuscripts.

³¹*Minneapolis Tribune*, May 3, 1874, clipping in WPA Annals, MHS.

³²WCA, *Report*, 1942, p. 17; 1883, p. 35.

³³WCA, *Report*, 1886, p. 9; 1942, p. 23. WCA "Branch Minutes," October, 1885, handwritten manuscript, WCA files.

³⁴"Stranger Girls," c. 1919, typewritten manuscript, WCA files.

³⁵Other boarding clubs in Minneapolis were sponsored by such organizations as the Augustana Lutheran Church and the Volunteers of America. See the Minneapolis Council of Social Agencies, *Yearbook*, 1919, in the Minneapolis Historical Collection, and Minneapolis Woman's Cooperative Alliance, *Fifth Annual Report*, 1920, in the Gilman Family Papers, MHS division of archives and manuscripts.

³⁶*Minneapolis Journal*, September 12, 1900, p. 1.

³⁷Nina B. Tice, "History Scrapbook," in WCA files.



OPENED IN 1900 for housing of young women was the Mahala Fisk Pillsbury Club, 819 Second Avenue South. This view was taken in 1910. Donated by former Governor John S. Pillsbury, who especially wanted to help poorer girls, the club building was named for his wife. It was replaced in 1956 by the present eight-story Mahala Fisk Pillsbury Club erected at the same location.

tected young women.³⁸ The interest of the WCA and the YWCA in Travelers' Aid was shared by boarding house proponents across the country. In 1877 the Boston YWCA organized the nation's first Travelers' Aid department to meet incoming trains and boats in order to protect and guide unescorted women. In 1903 the WCA saw a similar need in Minneapolis:

Many young girls in our great Northwest are attracted to the city by hearing of the many advantages of such a place. They arrive at the stations and realize they are homeless and friendless, and many without money. . . . We may imagine the emissaries of Satan are employed with earnestness among such, but we rejoice that Christian women are also busy, and are often enabled to assist them to good homes or positions.³⁹

The railroad depots in Minneapolis were considered especially critical because of the large numbers of women transients flowing through the city. In 1910 the state Bureau of Labor estimated that more than 100 unescorted women passed through the Minneapolis stations daily. The head of the Minnesota Department of Women and Children, Mary L. Starkweather, contended that the problem of unattached women in train depots was severe enough to merit the attention of local government. In 1910 she argued that "The state pays men to visit . . . at every railway station . . . to care for live stock. . . . But is not one girl of greater value? Are girls less valuable than game? Pigs of more importance than people? . . . It is recommended that the state take as good care of its girls as it does of its game."⁴⁰

But it was to be private rather than public organizations that sustained public interest in the morality of working women. The Travelers' Aid matrons supported by the WCA and YWCA met Minneapolis trains from 6:30 A.M. until 10:30 P.M. In their efforts to protect women and children from "moral danger," matrons distributed religious tracts, provided addresses and train information, and directed women to housing and employment agencies. They counseled young runaways and pregnant teenagers and occasionally advised penniless young women to return to their country homes. With these services, Travelers' Aid workers eased the transition to urban life for thousands of rural women. By 1915, there were five Traveler's Aid matrons working in the city's train depots.⁴¹

³⁸ "History: Young Woman's Christian Association of Minneapolis," 1959, YWCA files. For information on Travelers' Aid, see National Travelers' Aid Association, "Early History," and the papers of the Travelers' Aid Society of Minneapolis in the Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota.

³⁹ WCA, *Report*, 1903, p. 51.

⁴⁰ Mary L. Starkweather, "Report of the Department of Women and Children," in Minnesota Bureau of Labor, Industries and Commerce, *Twelfth Biennial Report, 1909-1910*, p. 619-620. A similar metaphor was used in Thomas Russell, *The Girls Fight for a Living: How to Protect Working Women From Dangers Due to Low Wages*, 146 (Chicago, 1913). For information on Mrs. Starkweather, see "Minnesota's Bureau of Women and Children," 1913, typewritten manuscript, Department of Labor and Industry Papers, Box 31, State Archives.

⁴¹ Minneapolis Travelers' Aid Society, *Reports*, and letter from Sarah Slater, Minneapolis Travelers' Aid Committee, to



THE RESIDENCE (above) of Mr. and Mrs. William H. Dunwoody at 52 Tenth Street South was given the WCA in 1905 for the Woman's Boarding Home. This view of about 1940 also shows the annex added by 1908. These buildings were replaced in 1965 by the imposing new Kate Dunwoody Hall, whose garden court is pictured.

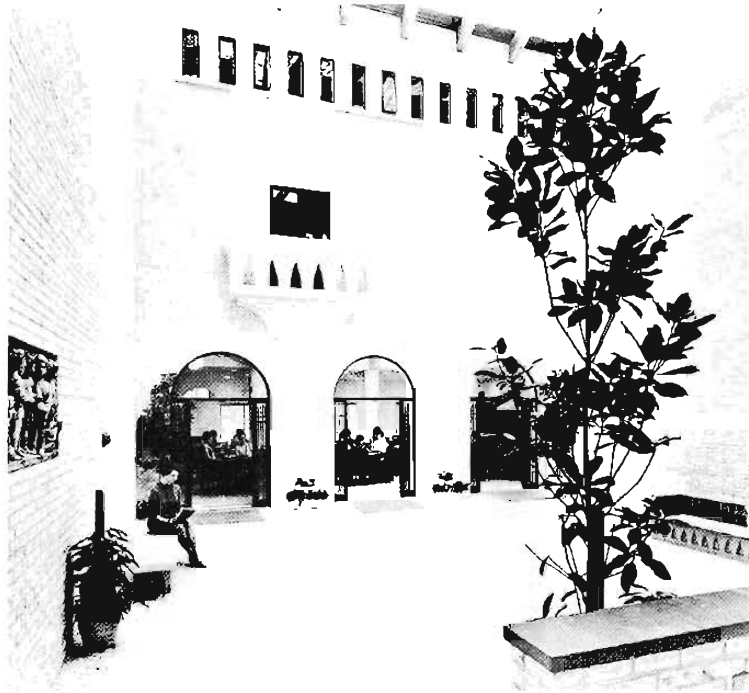
Travelers' Aid work expanded to housing in 1902, when the WCA rented sleeping rooms for transients near a downtown depot. The first building entirely for women transients, the Travelers' Aid Home at 724 Third Avenue South, was purchased in 1909 "to provide a temporary home under healthful influences" for women travelers and newly arrived migrants seeking employment. The home charged from fifteen to fifty cents nightly and accepted lodgers for up to two weeks' residence. In 1909 the WCA and YWCA split the Travelers' Aid responsibilities. The YWCA agreed to fund the depot ma-

the Virginia. Minn., YWCA, March 2, 1922, both in Box 1, Minneapolis Travelers' Aid Society Papers; Travelers' Aid Committee, "Minutes," July 2, 1915, WCA files. See also Mrs. A. Y. Merrill, "A History of the Work of the Transient Home for Girls Committee of the Woman's Christian Association," 1940, typewritten manuscript, WCA files.

⁴²Travelers' Aid Committee, "Minutes," 1909-1915, WCA files; Merrill, "A History"; WCA, *Report*, 1942, p. 19.

⁴³The author calculated these figures from Travelers' Aid reports and Transient Home for Girls minutes in the WCA files.

⁴⁴WCA, *Report*, 1898, p. 34.



trons, while the WCA took on the task of housing transients. The Travelers' Aid Home became the Transient Home for Girls in 1912 and moved to a new site at 1714 Stevens Avenue. Four years later, the WCA established the Woman's Hotel at 122 Hennepin Avenue near the Great Northern Railroad Depot. The hotel was one of the first of its kind in the United States.⁴² More than 4,500 women and children patronized it in nine months in 1916; from 1922 through 1935, the hotel provided almost 480,000 nights of lodging to women looking for work or just passing through the city.⁴³ The hotel's location changed through the years. It moved in 1922 to the eleventh floor of the St. James Hotel, 12 North Second Street, and in 1929 opened its last home at 1015 Marquette Avenue. It was discontinued in 1935.

FOR THOUSANDS of women with steady jobs, home was a WCA boarding club. There they experienced an environment characterized by a relatively homogeneous group of lodgers, strict rules, and, above all, a pervasive "domestic influence." Association officials wrote in 1898 that "We welcome all honest women but prefer to aid the young and inexperienced. The innocent, unsophisticated country girl comes all unprepared for a city life of trial and temptation. She comes fresh from green fields, and the liberty of home life, to work in [a] stuffy factory, or dusty office."⁴⁴

Most of the club boarders were "country girls" in the 1880s, although many immigrants (including Scandinavian, Irish, German, Canadian, Polish, and Bohemian women) registered at the homes. Despite the evangelical



Christianity of the WCA, Jews as well as gentiles were admitted. Only white women, however, were allowed to register, and Blacks applying for housing were referred to private boarding houses. In the WCA clubs, as in most clubs nationally, boarders were typically white, under the age of forty, childless, and "respectable."⁴⁵

These boarders worked at a variety of occupations. In 1881 the Woman's Boarding Home matron reported "5 teachers, several clerks, a few sewing women, a missionary engaged in work among the Scandinavians, an elderly lady, also a young girl attending high school. The whole comprising a very pleasant family."⁴⁶ Records also indicate that dressmakers, office workers, factory operatives, laundry girls, cash girls, milliners, students, and domestic servants (on their days off or in between jobs) boarded at the clubs.⁴⁷

By the 1910-1920 decade, most of the WCA boarders were white-collar workers. In 1919 a city-wide survey of boarders living in organized clubs revealed that over a third worked in offices, 12 per cent in factories, and 11 per cent in sewing trades. In contrast, half of the WCA boarders were office workers, 5 per cent were sewing workers, and just 2 per cent worked in factories.⁴⁸ These figures reflect the concern of the WCA with white, native-born women, dispossessed of their status by the need or desire to work. The WCA noted that its boarders included "persons of culture and refinement, whose lives would be made wretched by being obliged to live amid the surroundings of a second or third-rate boarding house in Minneapolis."⁴⁹ For these women, the clubs acted as a buffer between the urban environment and the domestic ideal. While they worked for a living, they still lived "at home," and so their reputation and status remained protected.

Unfortunately, the individual histories of the boarders are lost. The WCA intended to protect the privacy of "their guests," and so the annual reports and unpublished records usually omitted identifications. "Ours is but the history of an institution where those of our own sex striving to maintain themselves in honorable independence, may find the shelter and comfort of a home," the WCA reported in 1884. "The private life and experience of those gathered under its roof, be-

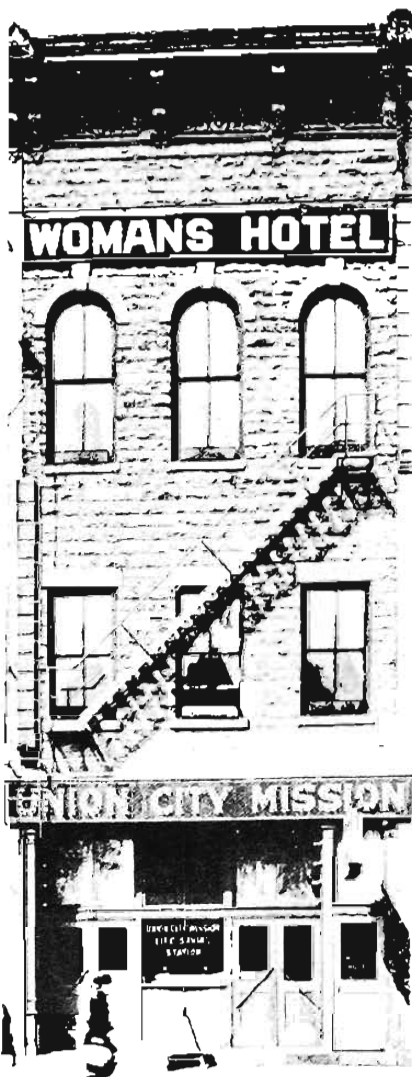
⁴⁵ WCA, *Report*, 1887, p. 42; YWCA, "Survey of WCA Housing," 1919, in WCA files; Woman's Boarding Home, "Minutes," September, 1912. For a discussion of club boarders nationally, see Fergusson, "Boarding Homes."

⁴⁶ Woman's Boarding Home, "Minutes," December 2, 1881.

⁴⁷ WCA Executive Board, "Minutes," December, 1892. WCA files. YWCA, "Survey."

⁴⁸ YWCA, "Survey," Marguerite Wells, "Report of the Sub-Committee on Homes for Working Girls," 2 (Central Council of Social Agencies, Minneapolis, 1917) in WCA files.

⁴⁹ WCA, *Report*, 1885, p. 22, 1884, p. 33.



IN THE Woman's Hotel at 122 Hennepin Avenue, near the Great Northern Depot, guests share the parlor (above). The exterior (left) has a sign omitting the apostrophe.

long no more to the world at large than do our own."⁵⁰

What the records do leave us is a revealing portrait of life in the boarding clubs. At the Woman's Boarding Home, as at all the WCA clubs, a matron supervised household activities. She served as a substitute parent, the WCA suggested, "and knows all her family, and knows their needs, and they come to her just as though they would to their own mother back home for help and advice."⁵¹ The clubs would "sustain virtue" by providing the "place of father, mother, home — blending in the one the counsels, love, and refining influences of the three."⁵²

The matron presided over a strictly regulated home. She admitted applicants who qualified by earning less than a set salary, and who presented "testimonials of character." She saw that lodgers ate meals at the ringing of one bell, and that they turned out the lights at night at the ringing of another. Sunday worship services were mandatory, although in the early years of the home the matron observed that "only a few of present numbers of this household were professing Christians."⁵³ Infringement of the rules resulted in expulsion. Two young women were dismissed from the home in 1903, for example, for "ingratitude."⁵⁴

While strict rules were upheld in the clubs, increased amenities were also available. A parlor — often with a piano — was available to boarders and their guests. The clubs supplied a library of books and periodicals, many of a religious nature, but also such

popular, albeit prescriptive, literature as *Youths Companion* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. The WCA provided a loan fund for boarders in the 1880s, a low-cost vacation retreat on Lake Minnetonka — Janette Merrill Park at Howard's Point — from 1921 through 1946, and a liberal policy towards boarders who were unable to pay rent because of unemployment or illness.⁵⁵

The WCA argued that one way to promote moral purity was to structure leisure time. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," WCA officials cautioned, "and were this work of guiding the leisure hours of young girls looked after, there would be less need of reformatories [and homes for prostitutes]."⁵⁶ In many of the clubs, young women read poetry in literary societies, studied typing and cooking in domestic science classes, and formed enthusiastic athletic teams. Among the teachers at the Woman's Boarding Home was Maria Sanford, professor of rhetoric and elocution at the University of Minnesota from 1880 to 1909. She charged club residents twenty-five cents for each lesson on Browning, Riley, Kipling, and other topics of literature and art.⁵⁷

There is evidence that some boarders chafed at both the public image and the regulations of the clubs. In 1885, twenty-eight residents of the Woman's Boarding Home petitioned the WCA board to change the name of the club, "as the present name is obnoxious on many accounts." They probably believed the name to be too reminiscent of a charitable or public institution. Their petition was tabled, and two years later some of the boarders destroyed the name plate on the building.⁵⁸ In 1888 several boarders at the Branch were reported to have "grumbled a bit about the evening rules, no one being allowed out later than 10 p.m., unless by special permission."⁵⁹

But other WCA boarders expressed their appreciation of the association in the pages of their newsletter, "Annals of No Man's Land," published by committees of boarders beginning in the 1910–1920 decade. The "Annals" printed poems, news articles, gossip, and aphorisms about and by club residents. Much of this literature emphasized the importance of friendships made between women who had arrived in the city as strangers. One poem, about the Pillsbury club, typically expressed this theme:

P is for the port in distress,
I is for the incense of friendship.
L is for two lights in the fog,
S is for the spirit of kinship.
Little bachelor girl finally finds "home."
Maybe it isn't so bad after all
To go limping along alone.⁶⁰

THE DECLINE of the boarding club movement in Minneapolis reflects both changing social attitudes and

⁵⁰ WCA, *Report*, 1884, p. 32.

⁵¹ "Woman's Place is in the Home," 2, typewritten manuscript, WCA files.

⁵² WCA, *Report*, 1881, p. 22.

⁵³ WCA, *Report*, 1881, p. 32: Woman's Boarding Home, "Minutes," December 2, 1881.

⁵⁴ WCA, *Report*, 1903, p. 34.

⁵⁵ Branch, "Minutes," November 5, 1889, and April 1, 1890, in WCA files, WCA, *Report*, 1975, p. 15, and 1889, p. 33–34, Woman's Boarding Home, "Minutes," October 4, 1878.

⁵⁶ WCA, *Report*, 1888, p. 14.

⁵⁷ "History of the Woman's Boarding Home, 1874–1911," manuscript in WCA files. For brief biographies of Maria Sanford, see Edward T. James, et al., eds., *Notable American Women*, 3:223–234 (Cambridge, Mass., 1971) and Geraldine Bryan Schofield and Susan Margot Smith, "Maria Louise Sanford: Minnesota's Heroine," in *Women of Minnesota*.

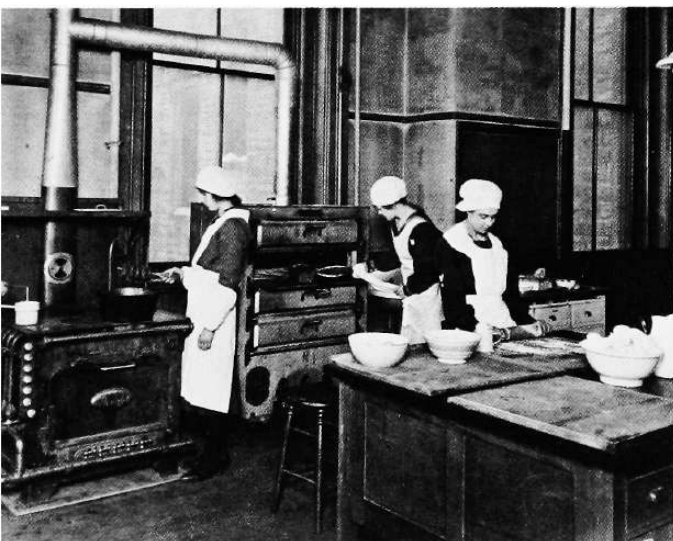
⁵⁸ Woman's Boarding Home, "Minutes," June 5, 1885, and May, 1887.

⁵⁹ Gay, in *St. Paul Globe*, August 5, 1888.

⁶⁰ "Annals of No Man's Land," October, 1924, p. 11. Another poem with a similar theme was published in a later version of the newsletter — the "W.C.A. News" — on June 5, 1933: "There are Marguerite, Dorothy, Diane, and Hazel, / Evelyn, Alma, Georgina, and Mabel . . . / There are typers, marcellers, and girls who keep books, / And girls who are marvelous, wonderful cooks . . . / Some are students, and some are teachers, / Oh! The girls at 'Marquette Corners' are wonderful creatures." The newsletters are in the WCA files and the MHS.



AROUND a piano at the WCA's Transient Home for Girls, young women and their matron (facing camera) join in "The evening song," as the picture is captioned. The WCA clubs strived for an upright, homelike atmosphere.

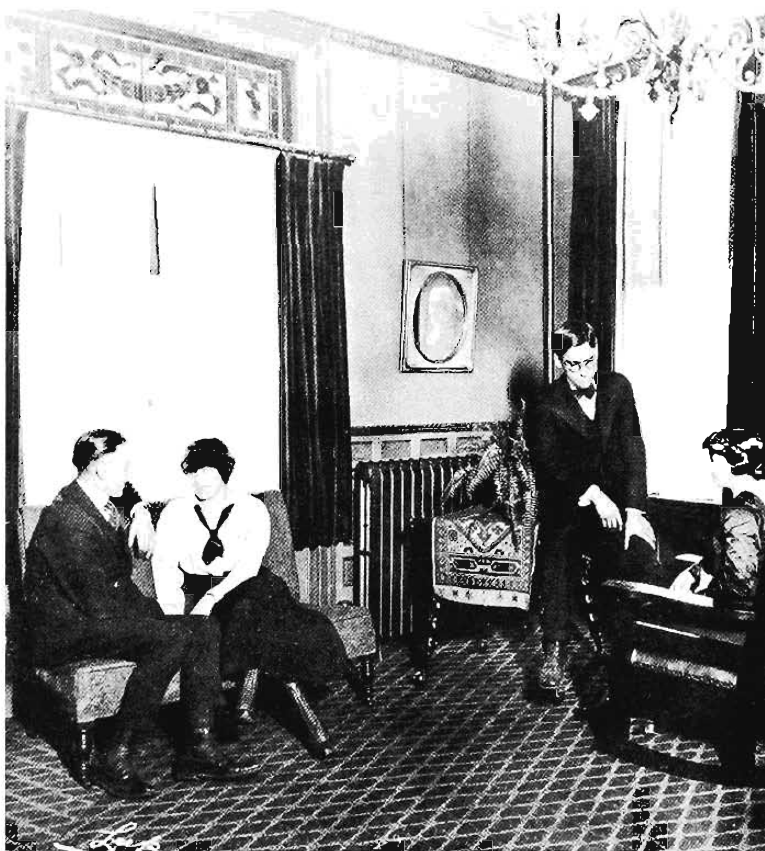


FOOD IS PREPARED in a WCA boarding home kitchen (above), after which young boarders and matrons lunch together (above, right). The caption for the picture at right reads: "The matrons enjoy the Victrola with the girls."





PAYDAY (above) finds a young woman giving a matron money for room and board while a third woman talks on the telephone at a WCA club. Matrons served both as substitute parents and enforcers of strict rules. The caption for the parlor scene (upper right) in the old Kate Dunwoody Hall reads: "Callers are of course welcome in a WCA home."



AT RIGHT: It's reading time in a girls' room at a WCA club. Rooms like this were spacious and reasonably well furnished. Clubs supplied books and periodicals, often of a religious nature.

changing demographic patterns. The expansions of the war years culminated in increasing club vacancies in the 1920s and 1930s. WCA officials suggested at first that the decline was related to the depression of 1920–21, as they had in previous years observed the relationship between the city's business conditions and migration patterns.⁶¹

The trend away from the clubs continued despite the economic fluctuations of the decade. In 1927 the WCA "noted with alarm the tendency of the young girls to flock to apartment houses and crowd three, four, five into one room. That way of living is not wholesome for girls and we are doing all possible to make our homes attractive and are hoping that this will prove to be but a passing condition."⁶²

It was not to be. By the 1920s, women had become more sophisticated and more independent. The first generation of boarders and lodgers had effectively paved the way for the broadening of "women's sphere." As one historian states, the urban "new woman" of the period after 1910 lived by an internal morality, rather than the external authority imposed by the family and the small town.⁶³ The "new woman" became, in effect, her own "keeper" outside the home, and consequently the moral imperative of the boarding clubs weakened. A social worker, reflecting the "new independence," maintained in 1917 that:

From my own point of view, and that of most of my friends, most of us being working women, a boarding house life, even the best of its kind, is a poor apology for living, and we all agree if we had the problem of home finding to face we would settle it by combining and taking an apartment that is the opinion of the majority of working women with whom I have talked, whether they be teachers or stenographers or college students or shop girls.⁶⁴

Changing cultural attitudes, however, were only one factor in the decline of the clubs. The relative numbers of female boarders and lodgers fell in Minneapolis as city growth stabilized and the state became urbanized. Immigration rates also dropped, as new laws restricted the influx of foreigners to the United States in the 1920s.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the state minimum wage law was passed in 1914, easing, in a limited way, the wage situation for self-supporting women.⁶⁶

The WCA, however, did not die out. Instead, the organization survived by adapting to changing times. The transient lodgings, for example, ended in 1936 when Travelers' Aid became a United Fund service for all

travelers — male as well as female. That year, the WCA committee in charge of the Woman's Hotel turned to a new project — the housing of older, unmarried women. Lindley Hall, which opened for "mature women" in 1941 at 1725 Second Avenue South, is said to have been the first club of its kind in the country.⁶⁷ In 1972 the Clara Doerr Club, which had opened in 1925 at 1717 Second Avenue South to accommodate up to ninety-four working women, was leased to Opportunity Workshop as housing for retarded young people receiving occupational training.⁶⁸ And, in 1979, the WCA maintains three boarding clubs in downtown Minneapolis for a diminished but still visible population of young women migrants seeking inexpensive, supervised housing in the city.⁶⁹

⁶¹ See, for example, the Branch, "Minutes," June, 1894, and WCA, *Report*, 1922, p. 3.

⁶² WCA, *Report*, 1927, p. 10.

⁶³ James R. McGovern, "The American Woman's Pre-World War I Freedom in Manners and Morals," in Jean E. Friedman and William G. Shade, *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought*, 237–259 (Boston, 1973).

⁶⁴ Wells, "Report of the Sub-Committee on Homes for Working Girls," 6.

⁶⁵ Conrad Taeuber and Irene B. Taeuber, *The Changing Population of the United States*, 59 (New York, 1958). Joseph Adna Hill, in *Women in Gainful Occupations, 1870 to 1920*, 105–106 (Census Monograph IX, Washington, 1929), suggests that the female boarding population decreased as cities passed their peak growth. While he does not present data for Minneapolis, he states that the percentage of boarders in St. Paul decreased from almost half the female labor force in 1900 to 28 per cent in 1920.

⁶⁶ The first minimum wage legislation in Minnesota and effective in Minneapolis set salaries at between \$8.75 and \$9.00 weekly for women workers. See Minnesota Minimum Wage Commission, *First Biennial Report, 1913–1914* (St. Paul, 1914).

⁶⁷ WCA, *Report*, 1942, p. 19; *Woman's Christian Association of Minneapolis, 1866–1966*; Merrill, "A History," 3. Lindley Hall today accepts men as well as women residents.

⁶⁸ WCA, *Report*, 1975, p. 22.

⁶⁹ They are the Mahala Fisk Pillsbury Club at 819 Second Avenue South, Kate Dunwoody Hall at 52 Tenth Street South, and Mabeth Paige Hall at 727 Fifth Avenue South. The latter has admitted young men to residency since September, 1975.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS on p. 194 and p. 196 (bottom) are from Woman's Christian Association, *Fiftieth Annual Report, 1916–1917*, p. 52, 60; all the others published with this article are from the files of the Woman's Christian Association office at 821 Second Avenue South. Of these, the two on p. 195 were taken by Norton & Peel, and the kitchen picture on p. 198 was taken by C. J. Hibbard. All the other photographs were made by Lee Brothers.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).