

Iowa's Daughters: the First Thirty Years of the Girls Reform School of Iowa, 1869-1899

Douglas Wertsch

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

Recommended Citation

Wertsch, Douglas. "Iowa's Daughters: the First Thirty Years of the Girls Reform School of Iowa, 1869-1899." *The Annals of Iowa* 49 (1987), 77-100.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9218>

Hosted by Iowa Research Online

Iowa's Daughters: The First Thirty Years of the Girls Reform School of Iowa, 1869–1899

DOUGLAS WERTSCH

WHEN IOWA'S LAWMAKERS established the Girls Reform School of Iowa in 1868, Iowa became the first state west of the Mississippi, and the second in the nation, to fund and operate such a school. A portrait of this institution can expand the horizons of nineteenth-century Iowa history. There is little room in the current vision of life in nineteenth-century Iowa for a girls' reform school, preoccupied as historians have been with state politics, settlement and frontier issues, and, more recently, with life in closely knit communities. Juvenile reform would seem to be an issue only for eastern, urban-industrial areas.

Yet there were in Iowa, as elsewhere, people who did not "fit" in their society—and who do not, for that very reason, fit historians' image of life in nineteenth-century Iowa. If we ask why they do not fit, we can shed new light on assumptions about relationships between individuals and society in that time and place. The history of the Girls Reform School of Iowa during its first thirty years of operation reveals especially the importance of the family for defining an acceptable place for women in society.

To uncover the insights that that history offers, one needs a portrait of the girls reform school. How did it come into existence? Who managed the institution and what were their expectations? Where did the young women come from and why were they there? What was daily life like? What were the goals of the institution's founders and administrators?

THE GIRLS REFORM SCHOOL OF IOWA represented a bold experiment in social reform by Iowa's lawmakers. Yet it was not an isolated experiment. Iowans drew on several decades of European and American social reform thought and experimentation. Even more important was their own experience with social reform legislation. During the 1850s Iowans had begun an institution-building phase of social reform; successful efforts to establish institutions for Iowa's deaf, dumb, blind, and mentally ill persons preceded the push for a juvenile reform facility. If the state could improve the condition of the deaf, dumb, blind, and mentally ill, it seemed natural that they could also alleviate the condition of Iowa's deviant children.¹

So in 1858 the fledgling Iowa State Teachers' Association petitioned the General Assembly, calling for the construction of a juvenile reformatory. They abandoned their effort in 1860, claiming "we have memorialized, petitioned, and urged [the legislature] but have been unable to accomplish anything." Governor Ralph P. Lowe took up the cause in 1860 in his biennial message to the legislature. But state legislators did not respond favorably until Governor Samuel Merrill pressed the issue in his inaugural address in 1868, claiming that "every sentiment of an enlightened and Christian philanthropy imperatively demand [sic] the erection of a reform school for . . . juvenile offenders."²

Acting quickly in response to gubernatorial pressure, Iowa's legislators soon created a reform school for delinquent juveniles. During the ten-week period following Governor Merrill's inaugural address, the legislature introduced, debated, and passed the requisite legislation, chose between two poten-

1. The best scholarly works examining Iowa's social reform legislation remain John L. Gillin, *History of Poor Relief Legislation in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1914), and John E. Briggs, *History of Social Legislation in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1915). Discussions of the emergence and development of juvenile reform efforts in the nation at large are available in Barbara M. Brenzel, *Daughters of the State: A Social Portrait of the First Reform School for Girls in North America, 1856-1905* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); Robert S. Pickett, *House of Refuge: Origins of Juvenile Reform in New York State, 1815-1857* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1969); David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston, 1971); and Joseph M. Hawes, *Children in Urban Society: Juvenile Delinquency in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1971).

2. Clarence Ray Aurner, *History of Education in Iowa*, 5 vols. (Iowa City, 1920), 5: 179-80; *Des Moines Daily State Register*, 18 January 1868. See also *Journal of the Iowa House of Representatives*, 1858, 96, 276.

tial school sites, and selected from among their own membership a body of men to oversee the establishment of the school. The trustees continued to act at the same pace; within a few days of their appointment, they met to institute rules to govern the newly created school. By the time the trustees had concluded their meeting, the last preparation was complete: Iowa's reform school had its overseers, its staff, and its site, the former site of a financially troubled Quaker school, White's Manual Labor Institute.³

The first school site was suitably situated in a wholesome rural area near Salem in the state's southeastern corner, far from the corrupting influences of urban centers. The alternate site—a farm between Montrose and Keokuk—was rejected because of its proximity to reputedly decadent river towns and because the committee considered the soil to be of poor quality. White's Manual Labor Institute, by contrast, was surrounded by "well cultivated farms, occupied by the very best class of farmers. . . . There is no village nearer to it than Salem . . . which is almost exclusively composed of members of the Society of Friends." The institute's 1,440 acres constituted soil "of unsurpassed fertility." At the center of the site was "a very fine brick building all enclosed, three stories, including basement, about 35 by 75 feet on the ground, with a large . . . attic. All of the material put into this building is of the best quality and the workmanship unsurpassed."⁴

On October 7, 1868, the school received its first inmate. Unfortunately, the legislature that created the reform school failed to provide adequate funding for the project. So in 1871 the trustees closed the school to new arrivals. At the same time they issued a report that discussed the economic potential of the reform school. The present inmates, argued the trustees, "will at a very modest estimate be worth six hundred dollars per annum" when they reach productive adulthood. Based on an expectation that 75 percent of the 102 inmates would be thoroughly reformed, the trustees predicted "a return of the astounding sum

3. Memorial on Behalf of White's Manual Labor Institute, in *Legislative Documents of the Iowa General Assembly*, 1868, 2-4 (hereafter cited as *Ia Leg Doc*).

4. Report of the Committee Appointed to Visit Solferino Farms and White's Manual Labor Institute, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1870, 2-4.

of one hundred and eighty millions of dollars." The legislature, apparently eager to see this marvelous promise come to fruition, increased the school's appropriation significantly the following year.⁵

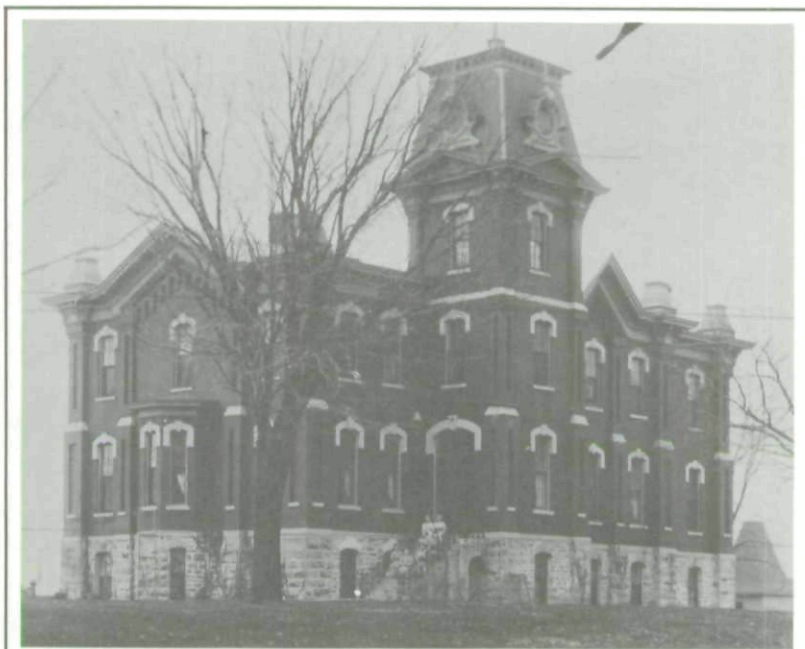
Originally, both boys and girls were supposed to be housed in the reform school, but the number of boys sent there filled it to capacity so quickly that the school could not accommodate girls on a regular basis until 1873, when the boys were removed to a separate facility. When the boys left Salem in April 1873, thirteen girls remained.⁶

When the lease for the Salem property expired in 1878, the legislature appointed a special committee to seek a permanent site for the girls' reform school. The trustees of a Universalist seminary at Mitchellville, near Des Moines, offered to sell their financially troubled facility for \$20,000. The seminary was only two years old and had been built for institutional use, so the legislature, probably influenced by State Senator Thomas Mitchell, the founder of both the seminary and the town in which it was located, quickly approved the committee's recommendation to purchase the site. After a brief stay at temporary quarters in Mount Pleasant, the girls' reform school moved to its permanent home in Mitchellville.⁷ There, for the next 17 years, the school would remain under the supervision of a remarkable couple, Lorenzo and Angie Lewelling.

5. Trustees' Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1870, 9. I have chosen to retain the terms *girls* and *inmates*; although current usage has changed, these terms reflect contemporary usage.

6. Report of the Visiting Committee, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1874, sec. 16b, p. 5.

7. Special Committee of the Eighteenth General Assembly of the State of Iowa, Appointed to Report on the Removal of the Girls' Department of the Reform School, From Mount Pleasant, with view to a Permanent Location Elsewhere, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1880, sec. 21b, p. 5. When the railroad failed to locate an anticipated depot in Mitchellville, Senator Mitchell found his investments in jeopardy. Sale of the seminary to the state clearly offered a way to recoup a portion of his investment. That is not to say that financial considerations were Mitchell's only motivation for founding the seminary; he was clearly a devout, pious, and sincere Universalist. For more information concerning the Mitchell Seminary, see J. M. Dixon, *Centennial History of Polk County, Iowa* (Des Moines, 1876), 58. L. F. Andrews, *Pioneers of Polk County, Iowa and Reminiscences of Early Days*, 2 vols. (Des Moines, 1908), 1: 5-14, contains a brief biography of Thomas Mitchell. The *Des Moines Register*, in an article entitled "The Old Mitchell Seminary," 22 October 1935, supports the possibility that Mitchell may have helped influence the selection process.



The Mitchell Seminary. This is the building the State of Iowa purchased in 1880 as the new site of the Girls Reform School of Iowa.

LORENZO LEWELLING brought excellent qualifications to his position as superintendent of the reform school. The descendent of Quaker ministers, he had trained in college to be a teacher. Besides his religious background and professional training, he brought another crucial asset; his wife, Angie, also a Quaker and a teacher, possessed the will and the skills necessary to assume a critical role at the school. Lewelling emerged from an initial period of disappointment to become a dynamic force at the school, and he and his wife were able to leave their impression deeply ingrained on the philosophy and programs of their successors.

After serving in an Iowa regiment during the Civil War (despite his religious background), Lorenzo enrolled in Whittier College, a Quaker school in Salem. There he met Angie Cook, a Red Oak school teacher. After his graduation, they married and settled on a small farm near Salem. But Lorenzo soon grew bored with farm life, so when he learned that the state was looking for a teacher for the new reform school for juveniles near



Lorenzo D. Lewelling, first superintendent of the Girls Reform School of Iowa (1868-1884). (Courtesy of the University of Northern Iowa, Archive Collection, Cedar Falls, Iowa)

Salem, he applied for the job and became the school's first teacher.⁸

Lewelling's first months at the school were disappointing for him. He had taken the teaching position at the reform school in 1869 because it was close to his home in Salem and because it was the first teaching job he had been offered. The reform mission of the school undoubtedly appealed to him, but there is no evidence that he felt any strong personal commitment to the school or attached any particular significance to his role there.

When the trustees refused, during the winter of 1870-71, to admit any additional children to the school because of inadequate legislative funding, Lewelling became concerned that he would lose his job. During his student days, when he had achieved a sort of local fame as a poet, Lewelling had developed a veneration for the poet John Greenleaf Whittier. So Lewelling wrote to Whittier asking for advice about what to do with his life. Whittier replied, "to make [poetry] the end & aim of life seems to me an unprofitable endeavor. . . . I think the work thou art engaged in is higher & nobler than that of a popular writer. It is like that of the Divine Master—doing good. It is a position where a true & good man can accomplish much, for himself and for those entrusted to his care."⁹ A new spirit of dedication marked Lewelling's efforts following his receipt of Whittier's letter. He threw himself into his teaching duties at the reform school and in 1873 was rewarded by the school's trustees with an appointment as the superintendent of the newly created girls' reform school.

As superintendent, Lewelling had wide latitude in how to run the school. The General Assembly had left only a bare outline of instructions which Lewelling was free to interpret and im-

8. O. A. Garretson, "The Lewelling Family—Pioneers," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 27 (1929): 552-53; Minutes, Whittier College Board of Trustees, 16 November 1868, 37, Wilcox Library, William Penn College, Oskaloosa, Iowa.

9. Charles Arthur Hawley, "Correspondence Between John Greenleaf Whittier and Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 35 (1937), 126. Evidence of Lewelling's high regard for Whittier appears in the *Salem Register*, Lewelling's newspaper. Besides frequent references throughout his tenure as editor, Lewelling printed an "extra" on September 1, 1871, devoted almost entirely to the commencement address about the poet which was delivered to the Whittier College class of 1871. See Hawley, "Correspondence," 126-27.

plement to suit his needs and goals. The board of trustees, his immediate superiors, further reinforced his independence. In his first report to the General Assembly, Lewelling thanked the trustees "for the uniform kindness they have shown us, for the undivided sympathy and support they have given us in the work, for the impartiality and wisdom they have shown." The trustees' visiting committee, in turn, praised Lewelling and his wife. After describing the Lewellings in their first biennial report as "enthusiastic in their work," the committee elaborated in their second report, commending Lorenzo, "to whose wise economy and untiring devotion for the welfare of the institution its success mainly is due." The report continued, "Mrs. Lewelling . . . has, by kind treatment and earnest efforts to promote the best interests of the inmates, won their respect and confidence. Her whole heart [is] enlisted in the work."¹⁰ Under this supportive supervision, Lewelling, with his wife's competent assistance, fashioned his reform program.

In fact, Angie was a critical element—perhaps *the* critical element—in the successful management of the institution. When Lorenzo was appointed superintendent of the school, Angie became the school's first matron.¹¹ By temperament and training Angie was well suited for her role at the school. When Lorenzo was away from the reform school attending to the newspapers he founded in Salem and Des Moines or to his responsibilities as a member of the board of trustees of the Iowa State Normal School in Cedar Falls, Angie assumed the management of the institution. In her role as matron, Angie, not Lorenzo, had constant, daily contact with the girls. And more than her husband, Angie took an interest in the girls' lives after they left the school, maintaining a correspondence with many of them. In effect, Angie implemented the reform program that Lorenzo (with her advice, no doubt) had created. The Lewellings were a team within which the attributes of religion, education, and personalities blended to provide the essential element of good leadership.

10. Superintendent's Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1872, sec. 16a, p. 26; Trustees' Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1876, sec. 16a, p. 2; Report of the Visiting Committee, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1878, sec. 14a, p. 6.

11. Throughout Lorenzo's tenure as superintendent, Angie was always referred to in the records as "matron." At times she was listed separately in pay records; at other times she was listed jointly with Lorenzo.

DURING THE FIRST THIRTY YEARS of the school's existence, 804 girls passed through its doors. School records reveal much about their origins and the reasons for their incarceration. Most of the girls were teenagers, the majority came from urban rather than rural surroundings, and half were European immigrants or American blacks, even though Iowa's immigrant and black populations combined never exceeded 18 percent of the state's total population. The girls arrived with a history of experiences that included the death of one or both of their parents, employment at an early age, and, most of all, extreme poverty.¹²

Inmates were committed for any of seventeen possible causes. Sixty-four percent were judged to be incorrigible. Another 29 percent fell into one of four other categories: vagrancy, larceny, disorderly conduct, and prostitution. No more than one percent of the girls were committed for any of the other twelve causes. With little variation among immigrants, blacks, and native-born whites, few of the girls (about 14 percent) were committed for criminal acts. Most were committed instead for violations of social mores.¹³

Nineteenth-century reformers generally believed that the lack of a traditional home environment contributed significantly to delinquency. The constituency of the Girls Reform School of Iowa seemed to support their assumption. Two-thirds of the girls who came to the reform school had lived in families that deviated considerably from the traditional nineteenth-century ideal of a nuclear and patriarchal family unit. Sixty percent of the girls had experienced the death of one or both parents; the parents of another seven percent of the girls were either separated or divorced.¹⁴

12. Intake Docket of the Girls' Reform School of Iowa, 1869-1899, State Archives, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines. Available by permission of Bureau of Adult, Children, and Family Services, Iowa Department of Human Services, Hoover State Office Building, Des Moines, Iowa. The names of all inmates, their friends, guardians, or other associates are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

13. *Ibid.* Criminal acts included assault, burglary, larceny, breach of peace, disturbing the peace, intoxication, attempted murder, and manslaughter. Violations of social mores included incorrigibility, vagrancy, dishonesty, prostitution, adultery, blasphemy, "being a fit subject," immorality, and "self-abuse."

14. History of Inmates Docket of the Girls Reform School of Iowa, State Archives, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines. The restrictions that apply to the intake docket also apply to this material.

THE ANNALS OF IOWA

Most of the girls were about the same age. Although girls as young as seven and as old as eighteen were admitted, the inmates were overwhelmingly teenagers. Girls between the ages of thirteen and fifteen made up 71 percent of the school's total population. By contrast, seven-year-olds made up only 0.5 percent and eighteen-year-olds only 0.8 percent (see table).¹⁵

AGE OF RESIDENTS AT TIME OF COMMITTAL

Age	N*	% of residents	cumulative % of residents
5	1	.1	.1
6	1	.1	.3
7	4	.5	.8
8	9	1.2	1.9
9	15	1.9	3.8
10	31	4.0	7.8
11	20	2.6	10.4
12	56	7.2	17.5
13	110	14.1	31.6
14	182	23.3	54.9
15	262	33.5	88.4
16	68	8.7	97.1
17	17	2.2	99.2
18	6	.8	100.0

*Valid cases: 782; Missing cases: 22

SOURCE: Intake Docket of the Girls Reform School of Iowa, 1869-1899, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

In spite of their ages, many of the girls who came to the school had had previous work experience.¹⁶ Although the vast majority of those whose employment history is recorded had been employed as domestics, thirty-three of the girls claimed work experiences that range across a dozen different categories. June, a fourteen-year-old girl brought to the reformatory as an incorrigible, had spent three years on the road playing Eva in "Uncle Tom's Cabin."¹⁷ She was one of three girls who had toured with theatrical troupes. Seventeen had worked as waitresses in hotel restaurants. Some had worked in factories, including broom, cigar, egg, candy, cotton, and button factories. Other occupations included dressmaker's assistant, gluer at a book bindery, nurse-girl, and photographer's assistant.

15. Intake Docket, 1869-1899.

16. *Ibid.* Employment history is noted for 39 percent of the inmates.

17. History of Inmates, case 682, p. 726.

Iowa's Daughters



Four of the ninety black girls brought to the Girls Reform School of Iowa during the nineteenth century.

As their employment record indicates, most of the girls came from the rural state's few urban areas. Sixty-nine percent of the school's inmates came from counties with urban centers, even though in 1885, for example, counties with urban centers—towns and cities with a population of 2,500 or more—accounted for only 55 percent of Iowa's total population. Demographics best explain this phenomenon. Blacks and immigrants, who made up about half of the inmate population, tended to dwell in urban centers, where their concentration made them more noticeable to the native-born white population.¹⁸

Perhaps most significantly, nearly all of the girls shared a background of poverty.¹⁹ Sometimes poverty was sufficient mo-

18. Intake Docket, 1869–1899; *Census of Iowa, 1885*, 164–66, 265–71; Leola Nelson Bergmann, *The Negro in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1969), 33–36.

19. Records are not always complete on the girls' economic status, but it is reasonable to conclude, from the available evidence, that the inmates of the Girls Reform School were from Iowa's lowest economic stratum. School authorities recorded the economic status of 20 percent of the inmates. Of the 20 percent listed, 80 percent were recorded as being from "poor" families. Unfortunately, officials did not provide a definition of the word *poor*, and there was no set federal minimum standard of poverty in use at the time. Of the girls who had fathers, fewer than a half-dozen were professional men; the remainder were unskilled laborers. None of the girls' mothers are recorded as being employed.

tivation for a family to send a daughter to the reformatory. For example, Luella, a twelve-year-old black girl, lived with her very large family in the poorest section of a large Mississippi River town. When her father lost his day-laborer job, the family was suddenly destitute. Learning that the state had recently opened a reform school at Salem, Luella's parents decided to send her there. But they had to have a reason besides poverty to send a daughter to the reform school, so the family chose "incorrigible" as a cause, and went before a county judge. Beside the intake docket's notation of Luella's incorrigibility is a comment explaining that she had been accepted by school authorities because of her family's poverty, not her misbehavior.²⁰

Not all of the girls were desperately poor. Bonnie, a fifteen-year-old, came from a wealthy family and had a good education, including piano and voice lessons—setting her apart from her fellow inmates. Bonnie had placed rat poison in her adopted parents' coffee pot in an attempt to murder them. When confronted with her act, Bonnie was defiant and refused to explain her actions. After her conviction for attempted murder, the governor offered to pardon her if she would agree to live in a Dubuque convent until she reached twenty-one years of age. But she refused the offer, so she became the only girl sent to the reform school for attempted murder.²¹

But the exception only proves the rule. In fact, economic need often transcended all other considerations, even those of religion. Although the school was founded and operated on Protestant principles, it is likely that many of the inmates were Roman Catholic. For these poverty-stricken girls' parents, often unable to care for their children, even a school dominated by Protestant principles must have seemed preferable to the life they were able to offer, even if that meant labeling their daughters incorrigible or vagrant in order to save them. "Better Protestant than prostitute," one scholar has designated this attitude.²² For such girls, the reformatory was a temporary refuge, a way to save them and to lessen the family's burden.

20. Intake Docket, 1872.

21. *Ibid.*, 1899. An unidentified newspaper clipping attached to the docket page with a paper clip relates to Bonnie's story.

22. Brenzel, *Daughters of the State*, 77.

The reformatory could also be a means to save girls who had become separated from their families. In some cases, school records explicitly state that poverty was the indirect reason for a girl's admittance. Netty, a fourteen-year-old Irish immigrant, was sent to the reformatory for burglary. The record duly notes that hunger drove Netty to break into a bakery after her parents had deserted her.²³

The saving function of the school is even clearer in a more extreme example. Anna, an eighteen-year-old who arrived in Iowa from Germany in 1870, was the first immigrant girl to enter the girls' reform school. Her father had sent for her and her mother after he joined the United States Cavalry. Unfortunately, upon their arrival in America, Anna and her mother discovered that he had been killed by Indians in Colorado. Then Anna somehow became separated from her mother. She arrived in Iowa alone and unable to communicate with those around her due to her broken, heavily accented English. Raped, and consequently pregnant, Anna migrated from place to place, taking various jobs associated with the fall harvest. When the time came to deliver her child the following spring, she did so alone, in an out-building of an abandoned farm. Weak and ill from her ordeal, she was unable to care for her baby. Apparently in desperation she drowned her infant. Only then did she come to the attention of Iowa authorities, who convicted her of manslaughter and sent her to the reform school. Four months after her arrival at the school she was assigned to work with the younger children and was even paid a salary for her work.²⁴ Although Anna's age and the severity of her crime made her an unusual inmate, she does illustrate the saving function of the reform school.

The school also provided an escape from physical abuse for some girls. Molly, a fifteen-year-old Irish immigrant whose father had repeatedly raped her, was sent to the school after she delivered a still-born baby. The listed cause for committal was incorrigibility; the actual reason was the need to place Molly beyond her father's reach.²⁵ Some girls clearly recognized that the school could offer sanctuary. Theresa, a sixteen-year-old in-

23. History of Inmates, case 620, p. 76.

24. Intake Docket, 1872.

25. History of Inmates, case 795, p. 242.

mate, was placed with a farmer as a domestic. When she felt uncomfortable with her employer, she received permission to return to the school.²⁶

Clearly, the reform school represented a positive experience for Theresa and Anna. They were not alone. Many others maintained a continuing correspondence with school authorities after their release. Their letters demonstrate sincere gratitude to the school, and a belief that the lessons taught there helped them.

THEY LEARNED THEIR LESSONS as a part of their daily life at the reform school, which was designed to implement the Lewellings' reform program by providing the structure and continuity that Superintendent Lewelling believed was necessary to reform the girls. Given the proper environment, "bad girls" would turn into "good girls," according to Lewelling. A major part of that environment was the physical facility where the girls would be shielded from the world. But within the interior of the institution, the environment would be shaped largely by a proper educational program. From the beginning, the system of education at the reform school was based on three phases: common schooling, domestic sciences, and religious instruction. The program prescribed a set regimen for the girls' daily activities and provided them with a skill to use once they returned to the outside world.

The educational program fully embraced the ideology of the common school movement. The assumption that common schooling paved the way to personal and public virtue was widespread in nineteenth-century America. This view had particular significance for the Iowa reform school since Lewelling believed that personal virtue was the trait most lacking in the girls sent to his institution.²⁷

New girls were immediately initiated into the common school curriculum, which consisted of reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, geography, and English grammar. When a girl ar-

26. *Ibid.*, case 709, p. 153.

27. See Walter Hugins, *The Reform Impulse, 1825-1850* (Columbia, S.C., 1972), 140; and Carroll Engelhardt, "Schools and Character: Educational Reform and Industrial Virtue in Iowa, 1890-1930," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (1985): 618-36.

Iowa's Daughters



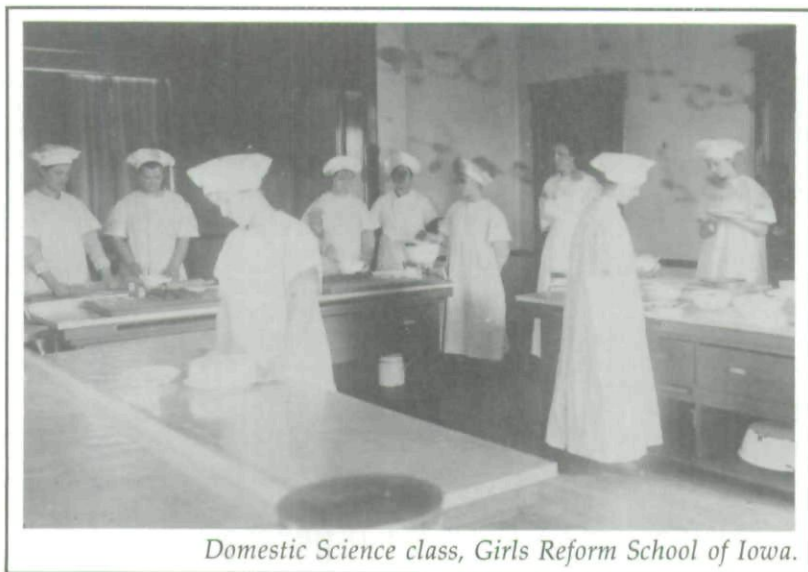
Mitchellville Campus looking north.

rived at the school, Lewelling placed her in one of two grades or classes according to academic ability. Group one went to the classroom following breakfast each weekday, while group two went to domestic science classes. Then after lunch the two groups exchanged places.²⁸

The school room was, according to Lewelling, a "place of attraction, and study a real pleasure, rather than a kind of mechanical drudgery for the girls." The girls apparently did enjoy their studies, because they asked permission to form their own literary society in 1878, even though that meant study in addition to their regular homework. They also performed well in their regular classes. An impressed visiting committee appointed by the General Assembly in 1882 reported that the girls' academic achievements were "second to none in our public schools of the same grade in any of our towns and cities."²⁹ That perception is especially noteworthy because so many of the girls at the school were immigrants with only a rudimentary educa-

28. Superintendent's Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1878, sec. N16, p. 47; Report of the Visiting Committee, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1878, sec. 14a, p. 6.

29. Superintendent's Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1878, sec. N14, p. 55; Report of the Visiting Committee, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1882, sec. D5a, p. 4.



Domestic Science class, Girls Reform School of Iowa.

tion before arriving at the reform school. For them to achieve academic excellence demonstrates that the common school was a highly successful part of the reform school's program.

The common school remained in session all year and formed the foundation of Lewelling's reform program, but successful reform, in Lewelling's terms, ultimately depended on the girls' achievements in the domestic sciences. There was no activity for which a girl could gain surer or swifter reward. Lewelling viewed the domestic sciences as so vital to the reform process that no inmate would be released until she had mastered them.³⁰ Some of the girls came to the school with other skills, even other prior work experience. But once they arrived at the school, their other skills were ignored; all of the girls were trained as domestics.

Social and economic realities, as well as ideological concerns, contributed to the heavy emphasis placed on training in the domestic sciences. The domestic sciences helped—or forced, as the case may be—the girls to assume a role considered by school officials and those they needed to satisfy as proper for females. If they could not find good husbands, the girls at least acquired job skills that would "fit the girls for earning a living for

30. Superintendent's Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1880, sec. N21, p. 57.



Sewing class, Girls Reform School of Iowa.

themselves when they leave the school."³¹ Also, as family domestics, the girls were guaranteed a surrogate family life, which so many of them lacked. As domestics, they would also be living under the authority and supervision of employers who could, it was thought, continue to provide the influence and guidance the girls needed to advance in their reformation.

There were other even more practical benefits. The work performed by the girls during their domestic training contributed to the operation of the school itself, and reduced operating costs. By learning to sew their own clothing, the girls saved the institution the costs of purchasing clothes.

Religious education was the third and final part of Lewelling's reform program. From the start, Lewelling made prayer meetings, Bible classes, daily group worship, and private, meditative activities an integral part of school life. As the son, nephew, and great-grandson of Quaker ministers, Lewelling saw little advantage in elaborate worship services; he much preferred simple, even plain, services. By providing periods of quiet each day Lewelling hoped to lead his girls to a religious awareness rather than subjecting them to protracted periods of formal worship. At first the Quakers of Salem held Sunday services at the school. As time passed, visiting clergy from various Protestant denominations—Roman Catholics, Epis-

31. *Ibid.*, 1878, sec. N14, p. 55.

copalians, and non-Christian clergy were excluded—offered Sunday worship services.

Lewelling discouraged religious revivals or other emotionally charged events. Rather, he sought to create an atmosphere of gentle, but constant, pressure which he hoped would lead the girls toward religious contemplation. Although his reports to the General Assembly often mentioned the religious aspect of his reform program, or the importance of religion in the genuine reformation of the girls, Lewelling never recorded a single instance of "conversion" or any similar religious experience of any girl. By eliminating worldly temptations and providing an atmosphere of contemplation, Lewelling hoped to encourage each girl to reach the proper conclusions about religion.³²

Daily life for the girls settled into a routine that remained unchanged throughout the nineteenth century. The day began at sunrise with the ringing of a bell. The girls were expected to rise, make their beds, and straighten their rooms. Next they went to the "facility" (outhouse). Then they returned to their rooms for private prayer and meditation. With prayers over, the girls proceeded to the morning meal, which consisted of red meat, bread, butter, gravy (either hot or cold), and coffee. On weekdays the girls went to their classes immediately after breakfast; on Saturday they could participate in musical or athletic activities. It was exceptional in the days of the one-room country school for students in Iowa to have the opportunity, as these girls did, to participate in a school band, orchestra, or baseball team. The girls were encouraged to participate in such activities and were even provided matching uniforms.³³

Each day at noon the girls returned to the dining room for dinner, where various types of beans (baked), soup, bread, hominy, fruit pie, rolls or bread pudding, and coffee were most often served. Following dinner the classes were reversed: girls who had attended the common school in the morning received do-

32. *Ibid.*, 1870, sec. 19, pp. 21, 26; *ibid.*, 1872, sec. 21, pp. 16-17, 19, 23; *ibid.*, 1873, sec. 16a, p. 26; *ibid.*, 1877, sec. 14, p. 55; *ibid.*, 1880, sec. 21, p. 6; *ibid.*, 1882, sec. D5, p. 79; *ibid.*, 1885, sec. D5, p. 83; *ibid.*, 1889, sec. D5, p. 14; *ibid.*, 1893, sec. D5, p. 27; *ibid.*, 1895, sec. D5, pp. 31, 36.

33. Report of Visiting Committee, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1880, sec. N21a, p. 5; Trustees' Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1884, sec. D5a, p. 45; Superintendent's Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1878, sec. N14, p. 55.



Girls baseball team of the Girls Reform School of Iowa.

mestic science training in the afternoon and vice versa. At the conclusion of the school day the girls went to their rooms to pray and to prepare for supper. The lightest meal of the day, supper usually consisted of baked fish, syrup, bread, and coffee. The girls spent their evenings occupied with daily homework assignments from the common school and other amusements approved by the staff, such as reading or participating in the literary society or Bible classes conducted by the girls themselves.³⁴

Superintendent Lewelling rarely wrote about discipline. When he did, it is clear that he endorsed the statement set forth by the trustees in 1874: "We must . . . speak kindly to [the inmate], and tell him how he can be useful and happy; . . . stir up the feeling of self-respect that has . . . been crushed by the treatment of others; find that tender place in his heart, that moral principle, which has been so nearly extinct." Superintendent Lewelling agreed that the girls under his care were worthy of respect and deserving of pity. It was "best to deal gently with the erring, for too often their evil habits are but the unwelcome heritage bequeathed by a vicious and depraved parentage." Clearly, to Lewelling, the girls themselves were not evil, only their habits. The riddle in Lewelling's mind was how to manage a school in-

34. Superintendent's Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1878, sec. N14, p. 55; Report of the Visiting Committee, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1880, sec. N21a, p. 5; Trustees' Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1884, sec. D5a, p. 45.

habited by dozens of girls with so many evil habits and at the same time to avoid becoming a "mere military machine" of discipline.³⁵

The system of discipline Lewelling devised was innovative in two respects, at least as compared with the system in use in places such as the New York House of Refuge. First, it was absolutely nonviolent; second, it was simple. The system consisted of a series of "marks" and "credits." Lewelling had the power, as superintendent, to release any inmate at his discretion once she had lived at the school for twelve months. In addition to demonstrating her mastery of the domestic sciences, an inmate had to accumulate a minimum number of marks in order to be eligible for release. When the girls misbehaved, they were sent to their beds, where they had to remain until they repented and were "willing to do better." Lewelling's system of discipline apparently yielded the results he sought: there were few attempted escapes, and none of the three groups responsible for reporting to the legislature mentioned disciplinary problems.³⁶

"The 'family,' " Lewelling wrote in a revealing passage, "is the sacred and exalted ideal of a perfect Reformatory."³⁷ This ideal was enacted in the regimen of daily life at the reform school. Daily life was the forge where reformation was to take place. Every day, through the normal routine of the school, each girl was encouraged and instructed to supplant the attitudes and lessons of her previous life with the lessons and attitudes the school offered. By assimilating the new skills she was taught at the school, the inmate, school authorities believed, would both reform and prepare herself to live a successful and acceptable life after she left the school. Lewelling believed that common schooling and religious instruction would provide each inmate with the tools needed to achieve personal virtue, while training in the domestic sciences would guarantee each girl both employment as a domestic in a proper family environment and a more successful life if she married and had a family of her own.

35. Trustees' Report (for both the boys' and girls' reform schools), in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1874, sec. 16, p. 9; Superintendent's Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1876, sec. 16, pp. 48-49.

36. Appendix to Superintendent's Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1882, sec. D5, pp. 91-92.

37. Trustees' Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1874, sec. 16, p. 9.

THE LEWELLINGS' REFORM PROGRAM was not always successful, of course. They did not expect it to be. Superintendent Lewelling claimed a success rate of 70 to 75 percent. Ironically, because of Angie Lewelling's deep and abiding interest in the girls' continuing welfare, we have a record of spectacular failures and tragedies as well as modest successes. In 1878 Angie began a docket she labeled "history of inmates." At first it was based entirely on her personal correspondence with the girls, but she later supplemented this with information gained from newspapers, other state agencies, and friends of the girls. Angie's successors continued the practice until 1909. The docket's record of successes and failures alike reveals much about Iowa authorities' expectations for the reform school's residents.

The docket includes about twenty marriage announcements from newspapers. School authorities were especially proud of Patty, an Irish immigrant who entered the school at age fourteen as an incorrigible. After her release she married a professional man and worked with him at a state social reform institution. Patty kept in touch with school authorities, even occasionally visiting them with her children. Margaret, who came to the school in 1898 at age thirteen as an incorrigible, married a farmer the year she left the school. And Adrian, a seventeen-year-old whose father had remarried and whose stepmother had sent her to the school as an incorrigible, also married when she was released. She joined the Methodist church and lived a quiet life on her farm in northwest Iowa.³⁸

Despite success stories like Adrian, Patty, and Margaret, tales of failure and even tragedy dominate the docket, perhaps because school authorities had to depend on other state agencies and the girls' friends for information about many of the girls' lives after they left the school. Bizarre, tragic, or remarkably successful tales were more likely to be reported than commonplace success stories.

Alma, for example, escaped from the school but was arrested by the Polk County Sheriff two days later in Des Moines. While awaiting transportation back to the reformatory Alma met and escaped from jail with Clay Thomas, a "notorious

38. History of Inmates, case no. 732, p. 176 (with attached newspaper clipping); case no. 713, p. 157; case no. 746, p. 190.

Negro Criminal." The couple moved to a small town on the outskirts of Des Moines, where they lived until they were discovered and forced to leave town for their miscegenation.³⁹

Even more tragic are the cases of Annie and Elizabeth. Annie was one of the first girls committed to the school, and one of the few to escape, after staying only sixteen days. The final notation next to her name in the school's docket reports that she was fatally shot on Christmas morning in an Illinois "house of ill repute." During an argument between two male patrons, one man tried to shoot the other but missed and killed Annie instead.⁴⁰

Elizabeth's case was more disappointing to the school staff because she had been released for good conduct. Brought in as an incorrigible, Elizabeth had appeared to reform herself quickly. At the request of the school's staff, the governor pardoned Elizabeth. She went to Des Moines ostensibly to be a domestic, but instead went to a house of prostitution. When school authorities learned of Elizabeth's status, they asked the county sheriff to arrest her and return her to the reformatory. After the sheriff arrived at the house to arrest her, she pulled out of his grasp and ran to her room. The sheriff followed her, only to find her lying on the floor, dead; Elizabeth had committed suicide by drinking a bottle of carbolic acid.⁴¹

The more satisfying reports were much less dramatic; a letter to Mrs. Lewelling in 1881 said simply,

My Dear Mrs. Lewelling:

I almost wish I were back going to school again, but I have plenty to do to employ my mind. I have a sweet little babe one year old; have been married for three years in June. Pa just thinks the world of my husband. I am talking of going home for a visit; but this time would rather come and see you—shall I come? Now write me a good long letter and tell all about the school. With love to all, I am

Yours,⁴²

39. *Ibid.*, case no. 681, p. 125.

40. *Ibid.*, case no. 713, p. 157.

41. *Ibid.*, case no. 710, p. 154.

42. Superintendent's Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1882, sec. D5, p. 75.

Both positive and negative reports reveal much about Angie Lewelling's relationships with the girls as well as about the Lewellings' expectations for them.

They also came in handy when Superintendent Lewelling was forced to defend the institution in 1880.⁴³ In his spirited defense, all of the girls cited by Lewelling as evidence of the school's success were living with families after their release from the school. Nine were married with families of their own; two were living with families, either their own or adopted; and five were working as family domestics. If we may judge by his reports, Lewelling believed, or assumed that the legislature believed, that the family was the only acceptable environment for the school's former inmates. To be with families, in whatever capacity, was all the proof Lewelling needed to pronounce the girls' lives—and the school's mission—successful.⁴⁴

Lewelling's defense apparently served its purpose. His reform program remained intact throughout his and several succeeding administrations, and no one publicly challenged the school or its program ever again in the nineteenth century.

FOUNDED TO TRANSFORM YOUNG WOMEN considered socially deviant into productive citizens, the Girls Reform School of Iowa provided reform and refuge, perhaps in equal measure. One wonders if the school's founders and administrators really expected to "reform" or simply to provide a surrogate family for displaced girls. If this way of stating the issue suggests that the

43. The sources and the form of the criticism are unknown. Since Lewelling's defense appears in his reports to the legislature, it seems likely that it was a legislative controversy. But neither the *Des Moines Register*, the records of the school, nor the journals of the Iowa House and Senate reveal any pertinent information. A defense as spirited and thorough as Superintendent Lewelling's, however, amply demonstrates that some type of criticism did occur. See the new section entitled "Results of Our Work," in Superintendent's Report, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1880, sec. N21, p. 57, and *ibid.*, 1882, sec. D5, pp. 74-77. There is no evidence of the legislature's reaction, if any, to Lewelling's new enclosures. But because they were discontinued after 1882, it seems likely that the criticism ceased or abated following Lewelling's defense of the school.

44. This attitude was maintained by Lewelling's successor, who noted in the docket that "Addie was paroled May 9, 18__ and has made an honest effort to succeed, but failing to secure a place to work, I brought her back to the school until a home could be secured for her." She no longer needed to be "reformed," but as long as she had no home, her reform was incomplete. History of Inmates, case no. 528, p. 202.

authorities compromised their original goals in the process of carrying them out, one could restate the function of the school more positively by suggesting its preventive rather than corrective function; it provided a surrogate family until the young women were able to find their own way into a suitable family situation.

The characteristics of the girls who were labeled deviant and committed to the institution probably made it inevitable that refuge would at least partially replace reform as the institution's primary function. The reform school housed a disproportionate number of blacks and immigrants. Most of the residents were incarcerated for behavior termed "incurable" rather than for criminal behavior. In several instances, poverty was a sufficient cause for incarceration.

The nineteenth-century view of the family as the forge for shaping productive citizens was a key element in the school's goals and practices. Most of the residents came to the school from nontraditional homes. Lorenzo Lewelling structured the institution's daily life to provide a family-like atmosphere, and Angie Lewelling provided a caring maternal figure to guide the reformation process.

The reform program reinforced the goal of preparing the girls for a proper family life. The elements of religious training, common schooling, and—most important—training in the domestic sciences served, at least in theory, to domesticate "incurable" girls into traditional homemakers or domestic servants. Most telling, the Lewellings measured their success by the number of former residents who found homes in families—through marriage, adoption, or employment as domestics.

Nineteenth-century Iowa, like its urban and industrial contemporaries in the east, had its share of displaced persons. For Iowa's legislators, displacement was often sufficient cause to seek the reform of the displaced person. In the administrators, the daily life, and the program of the girls reform school, we can begin to understand the assumptions made by Iowa's leaders about the nature of acceptable behavior by children and women in nineteenth-century Iowa, as well as about how those whose behavior was deemed unacceptable should be reformed.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa 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. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.