

Way We Were

A look at Chicago's past / By June Sawyers



Chicago's Jane Addams with some of her young charges of the 1920s.

Jane Addams? Hang the traitor! many cried

To immigrants, children and the poor, she was a friend. But to many newspaper editors, ward bosses and businessmen, she was the enemy. Jane Addams is now generally revered as the pioneering social worker who founded Hull House and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, wrote 12 books and hundreds of articles, received 14 honorary degrees and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. But in her day she was regarded by many as "the most dangerous woman in America."

Hull House was a haven for unpopular movements and new ideas. Modeled after Toynbee Hall in the Whitechapel district of London, Chicago's first settlement house, or community welfare center, welcomed the nonconformist and the eccentric, the revolutionary and the radical along with the poor and the outcast of society. English socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb and novelist H.G. Wells visited, architect Frank Lloyd Wright lectured and educator John Dewey discussed Greek philosophy. In such a heady atmosphere, Hull House was an easy target for those who saw visions of communist conspiracies. Denounced as a "hotbed of anarchism," it was at one time called the key link in an elaborate network of "red" subversives.

Although no arrests were ever made at Hull House, police were often assigned to keep an eye on its meetings. One night when a group of immigrants were passionately discussing political theory, a club-twirling police officer reprimanded resident Alice Hamilton: "Lady, you people oughtn't to let bums like these come here. If I had my way, they'd all be lined up against a wall at sunrise and shot."

Staffers became wary of newspaper reporters, who on the prowl for a "good story," would often twist whatever they saw into something sensational.

Bitter opposition against Addams first surfaced

in 1892, when her staff, shocked by conditions they saw in clothing-industry sweatshops, urged the passage of factory and child-labor legislation. When the state a year later passed a law forbidding the employment of children under 14 and limiting women to an 8-hour workday, Addams and her cohorts were branded as radicals. Manufacturers, many of whom relied on cheap immigrant labor, denounced the law, calling it the way to ruin and a threat to the very foundation of the free-enterprise system. Said one unhappy businessman, "Jane Addams ought to be hanged to the nearest lamppost." [Two years later, in 1895, the law was declared unconstitutional by the Illinois Supreme Court].

Addams served as labor arbitrator in the 1894 Pullman strike, the 1905 teamsters strike and the 1910 garment-workers strike. Her pro-union stance in these and other assignments prompted one merchant to write in 1916 that Hull House "has been so thoroughly unionized that it has lost its usefulness and has become a detriment to the community as a whole."

Neighbors were suspicious, too, of her settlement house, especially in its infant days. Located in a dilapidated Near West Side area of crowded tenements, unpaved alleys and side streets and small family-run shops, the house was surrounded by as many as 19 different immigrant groups, among them Italians, Germans, Poles, Russian Jews, Irish and French-Canadians. Most lived there not by choice but only because they had to; so why, they asked, did this strange woman choose to settle among them in that blighted neighborhood?

It was Addams' pacifism, however, that aroused the most malicious criticisms. When she traveled during World War I to The Hague in the Netherlands to urge world leaders to end hostilities through arbitration, she was quickly ridiculed for her idealism and naiveté. Newspapers across the country launched bitter attacks against her. At one point several members of the American Legion labeled her "pro-German." Others condemned her as a pacifist traitor.

Jane Addams, who died in 1935, certainly felt much pain from these attacks on herself and her work. But her critics have long been silenced, their opposition an almost-forgotten aspect of her life. Today the Hull House Museum, at 800 S. Halsted St. on the University of Illinois at Chicago campus, is an honored memorial to her work and accomplishments on the urban frontier. ■