THE SETTLEMENT HOUSE MOVEMENT & PROGRESSIVE ERA REFORM

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

The settlement house movement emerged out of the Progressive Era, a period in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when a generation of reformers and radicals in the United States confronted businesses that had grown too large; governments that had grown corrupt; and cities that were too crowded, too dirty, too exploitative, and too unhealthy for their inhabitants.

At a time of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and rising immigration, Progressive Era reformers had new ideas about poverty and how to address it. Earlier reformers had blamed the poor for their poverty, believing that those in need were immoral or lazy. In contrast, Progressive Era reformers sought to improve the physical and economic environment that they believed caused poverty.

Settlement house workers—generally wealthy American-born women—believed in helping those less fortunate. The term “settlement” described the practice of settling in the same neighborhood with the people one served. Settlement house workers provided services—e.g. nursing care, social services, arts programming—to a predominantly new immigrant population, and some reformers organized for social, political, and economic justice.

The settlement house model came from London and quickly spread to the United States. The first American settlement house, University Settlement, opened in 1886, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The movement quickly spread. In 1891, there were six settlements in the United States, and by 1910, there were 400.

In 1893, 26-year-old nurse Lillian Wald founded Henry Street Settlement (originally called the Nurses Settlement) on the Lower East Side. Like most Progressive Era reformers, Wald believed that poverty was not the fault of the individual but a social problem that could be addressed by improving the workplace, the home, the school, and the environment. She worked not only to solve the immediate problem of poverty but fought for structural change. To try to create the world she imagined, she made Henry Street Settlement a headquarters for social and civic change.
At the turn of the 20th century, immigrants, mostly from Eastern and Southern Europe, arrived every day by the thousands in New York City. They left their homes behind due to both “push factors” (e.g. lack of work opportunities, political unrest, natural or man-made disasters) and “pull factors” (e.g. job and educational opportunities promised in the United States). Most new immigrants were chasing the “American Dream”: class mobility, safety, and freedom.

The journey from Europe to New York City took two to three weeks on a steamship. Upon arrival in New York harbor, ships passed the Statue of Liberty (built in 1886), which for many immigrants embodied the promise of the American Dream. Before they could begin their new lives in the United States, immigrants had to be processed. Before Ellis Island opened in 1892, immigrants were received at Castle Garden, an immigration processing center at the southern tip of Manhattan in today’s Battery Park. At this time, there were no quotas and few restrictions for immigrants arriving from Europe. After Ellis Island opened, steerage passengers (those with third-class tickets) had to undergo lengthy medical and legal examinations to ensure that they were fit to enter the country.

In the United States, many immigrants reunited with family members or sought out neighbors with whom they had commonalities, such as country of origin, language, or religion. Many new arrivals went to the Lower East Side neighborhood (deemed the “Gateway to America”) for community support and affordable housing.
1. In small groups, look closely at the above image, “Welcome to the Land of Freedom.”

Pick a person in the image and describe his or her facial expression. Based on how the artist illustrated this person, how do you imagine he or she feels? What could he or she be thinking or conversing about? What will happen next? What will he or she say to the person beside him or her?

2. Share your responses with the class.

3. Suggested prompts for group discussion:

   • Frank Leslie’s newspaper catered to American-born readers. Based on this image, what attitude about immigrants do you imagine the newspaper is trying to convey? Why do you think so?

   • In what ways do you think the American Dream was a reality for new immigrants at the turn of the 20th century? In what ways do you think the dream did not match the reality?

   • At the time that this image was illustrated (1887), there were no quotas and few restrictions on the number of immigrants arriving from Europe. Although Europeans could freely enter the country, there was a federal immigration law—the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882—that forbade Chinese immigrants from entering the United States and becoming U.S. citizens. Does this impact the way you think about the American Dream? Why or why not?

   • For many immigrants at the turn of the 20th century, the Statue of Liberty symbolized freedom and opportunity. What is an example from American culture (music, film, TV show, food, a celebrity, a physical location, etc.) that symbolizes American freedom today? Why did you choose this example?

Continuing the conversation

“The Proposed Emigrant Dumping Site” is another image (on the following page) from the same time period that provides an opinion on immigration.

Information about the image to aid your conversation:

   • “The Proposed Emigrant Dumping Site” was published by Judge Magazine on March 22, 1890.

   • Judge Magazine was a satirical magazine published weekly in the United States from 1881 to 1947.

   • The text below the illustration title reads: “Statue of Liberty—Mr. Windom, if you are going to make this island a garbage heap, I am going back to France.”

   • The Statue of Liberty was a gift from France to the United States. It was dedicated in 1886.

   • William Windom was a U.S. Senator from 1870 to 1883. In 1890, when this image was published, Windom was the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury.

What attitude about immigrants is this political cartoon trying to convey? How does this compare with the “Welcome to the Land of Freedom” image?
After arriving in New York City, many immigrants continued onto the Lower East Side, known as the “Gateway to America.” Some immigrants and their families found aspects of what they were seeking in the United States—jobs, education, upward mobility. On the other hand, for many, these opportunities did not come to pass or came with great sacrifice.

On the Lower East Side, the streets were lined with tenement apartment buildings, the neighborhood’s most common housing type. Most of these were narrow, five- or six-story buildings, with small rooms. Windows, light, and ventilation were practically nonexistent. These small, dark, airless homes served dual functions; by day, many tenement homes became workplaces.

At the turn of the 20th century, New York City was the center of the garment industry for the United States. Approximately half of all immigrants worked in the needle trades, which featured long hours of repetitive work. Clothing manufacturers, in an effort to reduce overhead costs, hired workers who labored at home. This garment production took place in the living spaces of tenement apartments. To make ends meet, every family member, including young children, often had to work. A complex web of economics, injustice, and inequality meant there was often little hope of escaping the brutal cycle.

1. **Introduction to Rose Gollup Cohen:**

   - Rose Cohen was born in Belarus in 1880 and immigrated with her aunt to the United States when she was 12 years old (1892). When she arrived, she joined her father who lived on the Lower East Side.

   - Rose worked in a garment factory that operated out of a tenement apartment.

   - In 1918, she wrote an autobiography called *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side*.

   - In this memoir, she talks about receiving nursing care and educational opportunities from Henry Street Settlement founder Lillian Wald.

2. **Additional information about Rose Gollup Cohen:**

   Rose Cohen recounts a visit from Lillian Wald in her autobiography, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on The Lower East Side*. Cohen describes how, when she was ill at home, a visit from Wald blossomed into a friendship:

   “I opened my eyes and saw a woman, a stranger, sitting beside the couch. Neither in looks nor in dress had I ever seen anyone like her in our neighbourhood. She was also beautiful and distinguished.

   ‘How do you feel?’ she asked me. Her lips smiled but her eyes remained almost sad. She spoke to mother in German, gave her a card and went away. I spelled out the printed name on the card, Lillian D. Wald, 265 Henry Street.”

   Later, Cohen wrote in her journal:

   “Miss Wald comes to our house, and a new world opens for us. We recommend to her all our neighbours who are in need. The children join clubs in the Nurses’ Settlement and I spend a great deal of time there. Miss Wald and Miss Brewster treat me with affectionate kindness.”

   More information about Rose Gollup Cohen is available through the Jewish Women’s Archive: [https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/cohen-rose-gollup](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/cohen-rose-gollup)

3. **Complete the worksheet (included below) while listening to the excerpt from Rose G. Cohen’s memoir, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side***.

4. **Play the audio clip from Rose G. Cohen’s memoir (performed by Jessica Underwood Varma).**

   The actor is reading in a Yiddish accent (reflective of Cohen’s real accent). Play audio clip twice if necessary.

   Access the audio here: [Rose Gollup Cohen audio clip](#)

5. **Share your answers from the worksheet in pairs.**

6. **Suggested prompts for group discussion:**

   - In this audio clip, you heard about a Lower East Side sweatshop from Rose G. Cohen’s perspective. Although this is one point of view, Cohen describes an experience similar to that of many Lower East Siders at the turn of the 20th century. What are the downsides of working in a garment shop like the one Cohen describes? If the conditions are so terrible, why do you think she continues to work there?

   - How can Cohen raise awareness about the workplace conditions? How can she improve her situation? What options does she have?

   - What is a modern-day example of an industry where the conditions are unsafe and/or the work is underpaid?

   - Today, do you think expectations of what immigrants will encounter in the United States match the realities of what they find here? Why or why not?
ROSE GOLLUP COHEN WORKSHEET

Name:____________________________________________________________

Directions: Listen to the Rose Gollup Cohen audio clip and answer the questions below.

1. Describe Rose G. Cohen’s work environment. What details does she share?
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

2. How does Cohen feel about the garment shop where she works?
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   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

3. What do you not know about Cohen’s workplace or about her life from this audio clip?
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   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
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4. If you could ask Rose G. Cohen a question, what would you want to know?
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   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
Activity #3

How Can You Respectfully Serve a Community That’s Not Your Own?

In a rapidly industrializing society where the gap between rich and poor was vast, settlement house workers saw living and working in low-income neighborhoods as a way to cross class boundaries and to provide support to an impoverished community. By 1890, some of the most distinguished settlement houses on the Lower East Side were already established: University Settlement (1886), the Educational Alliance (1889), and the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood House (1890).

Before moving into a permanent home at 265 Henry Street in 1895, Lillian Wald had “settled” two years earlier into a tenement apartment on Jefferson Street to provide nursing services to the local community. “The mere fact of living in the tenement brought undreamed-of opportunities for widening our knowledge and extending our human relationships,” Wald wrote. These new neighbors introduced Wald and her nursing school colleague Mary Brewster to the community life of the neighborhood. The nurses’ initial goal was to build trust.

Wald and Brewster emphasized that their neighbors knew their surroundings in a way they could never fully grasp. To find those most in need of medical help, they spoke to tenement landlords, janitors, shop owners, and religious leaders. Due to language barriers, religious and cultural differences, and lack of access to information, approximately 90 percent of sick people on the Lower East Side went without care. The Henry Street visiting nurses knew they had to go to their neighbors.

Throughout her time as the director of Henry Street Settlement, Wald emphasized treating all clients with dignity and respect, despite their living conditions or circumstances. She believed that all people, regardless of income, race, national origin, or gender, should have the opportunity not only to survive, but to thrive. Wald had nuanced views on assimilation and Americanization; she embraced immigrants’ cultures and saw their contributions to the United States as valuable. Wald also knew it was not enough only to provide services to the neighborhood; she also fought for structural change and protections through local and national laws.

1. Individually or in pairs, read the excerpt from Henry Street Settlement founder Lillian Wald’s memoir, *The House on Henry Street*, published in 1915.

   Access the excerpt here: [The House on Henry Street by Lillian Wald, pages 1-8](#).

2. Suggested prompts for group discussion:

   **Document analysis:**
   - Wald writes about caring for a sick woman who was left to die because she couldn’t pay her medical bills. On page 6, Wald states, “All the maladjustments of our social and economic relations seemed epitomized in this brief journey and what was found at the end of it.” What does Wald mean by this phrase?
   - Why does Lillian Wald decide to move to the Lower East Side? What does she believe she can contribute to the neighborhood?
   - On page 8, Wald describes herself as “naive.” Why does she believe she was naive?
   - What factors should Wald have considered before she moved to the Lower East Side to help the local community?
   - What steps do you think Wald should have taken to get to know her neighbors?

   **Connecting to your own life:**
   - Have you ever had a similar experience to Wald’s “Baptism of Fire,” an experience in which you learned about something that was going on in the world and were shocked? How did you find out about this situation? Why did this new information affect you so strongly?
   - Have you ever helped a community that’s not your own? How did you go about building trust?
• What are the factors you should consider before assisting a community that is not your own? How should you approach the work?

• Have you ever encountered someone who was trying to help you who was not from your community? How did they behave? In what ways was their approach effective or not effective?

• The term “settlement” described the practice of living in the same neighborhood with the people one served. Although the settlement house movement spanned the 1880s to 1920s, can you think of any examples of a modern-day settlement house? What are the benefits and drawbacks of the settlement house model?

Continuing the conversation

Information about the image to aid your conversation:

• This image, originally titled “Christmas Settlement-Workers One Hundred Years Ago and Today” was published in Harper’s Weekly in 1909.

• Harper’s Weekly was a political magazine printed in New York City from 1857 to 1916.

• The magazine was known for featuring illustrations and political cartoons about foreign and U.S. politics, essays, and fiction.

• Some were critical of settlement house workers because they weren’t from the neighborhoods they served. This 1909 cartoon shows a settlement house worker as a wealthy, out-of-touch “do-gooder.”

How does this image convey a different view of a settlement house worker compared with the excerpt from Wald’s memoir?

Activity #4

How Does an Issue Move from “Case” to “Cause”? 

The woman who was abandoned by her doctor, and the walk through gritty streets to reach her—which Wald called her “Baptism of Fire”—changed Wald’s life and how she saw the world around her. “All the maladjustments of our social and economic relations,” she later wrote, “seemed epitomized in this brief journey and what was found at the end of it.” Wald started on a new path, determined to confront, head-on, the pressing problems of poverty. In 1893, Wald founded Henry Street Settlement and the visiting nurses service. The work quickly expanded to include a wide range of social services and arts instruction.

Wald’s work often was informed by a “case to cause” model. She was inspired by individual situations that her clients faced to make an argument for structural change through laws and protections at city, state, and national levels. There are many examples of “case to cause” in her work.

Wald believed it was not enough to provide services her neighbors; it was essential to fight for structural change. She was a public health pioneer, an advocate for the rights of immigrants, an activist on behalf of women and children, and an early civil rights leader and co-founder of the NAACP, a civil rights organization focused on equality for people of color.

1. Below are three examples from Lillian Wald’s work that demonstrate the “case to cause” model.

- Example #1: Founding of Seward Park, the first city-built playground in the United States
  
  "Backyard playground in nurses’ settlement, 265 Henry Street, ca. 1902." Jacob Riis, 1902. Museum of the City of New York.
At the turn of the 20th century, the only places for children to play on the Lower East Side were in the dirty and crowded streets and inside of the tenement apartments.

Lillian Wald observed the dangerous and unsanitary conditions of neighborhood play space. She believed that all children, regardless of family income, deserved safe spaces to play.

In the mid-1890s, Wald opened a playground in the backyard of the Settlement’s headquarters at 265 Henry Street. Complete with a sandbox, gymnastics equipment, swings, and hammocks, Wald’s backyard was constantly full of neighborhood children. In the mornings, there was an informal kindergarten and in the evenings, it was a space for teenagers to socialize and labor organizers to meet.

Wald’s backyard playground was a blueprint for building playgrounds around the city. With Charles Stover of University Settlement, Wald founded the Outdoor Recreation League. They advocated to the city government to clear land to make space for parks and playgrounds. Through the League, they built nine playgrounds in Manhattan.

One of these playgrounds is the Lower East Side’s Seward Park, built in 1899. It became the first city-run playground in the United States when the city assumed its operation in 1903.

Lillian Wald used a specific example of a problem faced by someone in her local community (“case”) to inform change on a larger scale (“cause”). In this example, what is the “case” and what is the “cause”?
Wald recognized that thousands of children on the Lower East Side were going to school hungry, making it hard for them to learn.

Inspired by the Children’s Aid Society, Henry Street Settlement began providing meals to neighborhood children and pushed the schools to do the same. Wald and settlement homemaking advisor Mabel Hyde Kittredge advocated for meals to be provided onsite at schools at an affordable price.

Aware that poor children might be stigmatized by receiving lunch, she pushed for all children in the public school system to be fed at mid-day.

In the early 1900s, the city government invested in a pilot program at P.S. 21 on Mott Street on the Lower East Side. The school sold healthy lunches for three cents each.

By 1919, the New York City Board of Education began providing lunches in schools throughout Manhattan and the Bronx. By 1921, school lunches were provided in schools throughout the five boroughs of New York City.

By 1935, the United States federal government had an active role in providing school lunches around the country and in 1946, it passed the National School Lunch Act, to provide free and low-cost meals to eligible students around the country.

Lillian Wald used a specific example of a problem faced by someone in her local community (“case”) to inform change on a larger scale (“cause”). In this example, what is the “case” and what is the “cause”? 
Example #3: School nurse program in New York City public schools

• Lillian Wald observed that illness kept students from going to school and staying on track in their classes.

• Wald met a 12-year-old neighborhood resident, Louis, who was missing school due to a skin condition called eczema. This common condition was keeping Louis from attending school, and he was falling behind.

• Wald was inspired by both Louis’s situation and the use of school nurses in England to advocate to the city to ensure that nurses worked onsite in schools.

• As a trial run, a nurse from Henry Street Settlement was placed in a public school. Mary K. Simkhovitch wrote in *The Commons*, “The nurse would visit each school daily, working in a makeshift dressing room to follow the directions of a physician, treating mild skin infections or conjunctivitis, conditions that normally would have caused a child to be sent home. For those students who had been sent home, she monitored them and provided the treatment that would allow them to return to class.”

• In October 1901, the city placed the first nurse on its payroll.

• Wald reported, “With the equipment of the settlement bag and, in some of the schools, with no more than the ledge of a window or the corner of a room for the nurse’s office, the present system of thorough medical inspection in the schools and of home visiting was inaugurated.”

Lillian Wald used a specific example of a problem faced by someone in her local community (“case”) to inform change on a larger scale (“cause”). In this example, what is the “case” and what is the “cause”?

Connecting to your own life

What is an example of a specific event, person, or circumstance that inspired you to take action on a larger scale?