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Article Summary: Grace Abbott of Grand Island, Nebraska, was noted for her work on behalf of the rights of immigrants and children. She was appointed to the Children's Bureau in Washington, D.C., was named chief of the Bureau in 1921 and was reappointed by three succeeding Presidents.

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Photographs / Images: Portrait of Grace Abbott in 1918; Grace Abbott with her niece Charlotte Abbott about 1917; Grace Abbott in 1899; Hull House in Chicago about 1910; Group photo including Mary Smith, Grace Abbott, Dr Alice Hamilton, Edith Abbott, Sophonisba Breckenridge, and Jane Addams about 1918 (others unidentified); Grace Abbott as a delegate in 1935 to the International Labor Organization Conference at Geneva, Switzerland. Sam Lewisohn, Prentice Gilbert, L Irwin, and Mr Caldwell are identified



Grace Abbott in 1918 after she had been appointed to the Children's Bureau in Washington, D.C. She was named chief in 1921 by President Harding and was reappointed by three succeeding Presidents.

GRACE ABBOTT OF NEBRASKA

By LELA B. COSTIN

"An exemplary public servant . . . one of the [best] half-dozen in the land" is how Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter described Grace Abbott, and he added, "To have known her was to have experienced an exquisite fusion of ability, resourcefulness, compassion and devotion to the underprivileged, the highest administrative skill, and a gay and wise indifference to all that is evanescent in affairs."¹ When she died in 1939 at the age of 60, newspapers throughout the country catalogued the long list of her outstanding accomplishments and the honors which had come to her. A Nebraska newspaper wrote, "Her social work 'style' must have been of a radiant kind because many honors, unsought, have come to her with persistent succession."² And a Chicago newspaper said in simple summary, "The life of Grace Abbott was an unsentimental and genuinely effective contribution towards making the world a more livable planet."³

In physical appearance Grace Abbott had been described earlier like this: "She has a fine, lofty face, with brown eyes that are candid and warm; a wide forehead, from which dark hair is drawn back smoothly; a look of facing with clear, swift directness whatever life has to bring, and a manner that is unselfconscious, frank, eager. . . . She . . . has always been a woman to whom men talk as easily as women do. . . . Her breezy Nebraska manner freshens the stagnant Washington atmosphere and blows mental dust out of corners in a way somewhat terrifying to timid bureaucrats."⁴ Since then, others have used terms like these to describe her: "A trained rational and incisive mind," "eminently practical, yet creative and fearless," "forthright," "vigorous," "decisive," "exciting to work with,"

"possessing a delightful and quick wit," "a champion of children," "untiring in her efforts to reduce infant and maternal mortality and prevent exploitation of children in labor situations," "a pioneer leader for social security legislation."⁵

Although her pursuit of learning and accomplishment for mankind took her from Nebraska to Chicago, to Washington, D.C., to all states of the union, even to capitals of Europe and the seat of the League of Nations in Geneva, she always remained "Grace Abbott of Nebraska." The experiences of her pioneer childhood were closely allied to the characteristics which enabled her to contribute so fully and ably to the public life of her times.

Grace Abbott's sister Edith wrote about their early experiences:

Grace and I always agreed that our most cherished memories were those of our prairie childhood. We were born in one of the oldest Nebraska towns [Grand Island], not far from the once famous Overland Trail, and this western town and state were always 'home'. . . . The old frontier of course, completely vanished with our childhood — vanished like the beautiful herd of antelope that my father used to see from the door of his first law office — antelope grazing on the buffalo grass of the plains. But our memories of those early days always remained very clear. ⁶

And Grace Abbott had much to remember. Each of her parents had an unusual character and was a strong influence upon her development. Her mother, Elizabeth Gardner Griffin Abbott, born in 1844, came from a substantial Quaker family who left the Genesee Valley in New York and bought farms in and around DeKalb County, Illinois. Lizzie, as she was usually called, along with her only brother and her widowed mother spent her childhood in a log house with "a large open fire and a large room just for weaving." The Griffin families and their Gardner relatives in Illinois were abolitionists and worked for the Underground Railroad. In the next generation the Abbott children were to listen avidly to their mother recount her early memories of "the heavy 'bakings' before a wagon suddenly dashed into the yard and how everything disappeared as the wagon dashed out again and how her mother and the Gardners were all excited." Lizzie became an ardent abolitionist herself — wearing black to school on the day John Brown was hanged because "her Gardner relatives believed in some expression of the public sorrow."⁷

Elizabeth Griffin Abbott was an early advocate of women's

rights. As a child of 8 she received from her uncle Allen Gardner a copy of the Declaration of Principles presented by Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the Seneca Falls Convention. The gift carried the condition that she learn to recite the speech, which she struggled to do. Later, as part of their courtship and in an effort to understand and mold their future relationship, she and Othman Ali Abbott sent back and forth between Grand Island and West Liberty, Iowa, where Lizzie was principal of the high school, a copy of John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* in which each made marginal notes for the other to respond to.⁸

Elizabeth was an 1868 graduate from the Rockford, Illinois, Female Seminary, earlier by thirteen years than Jane Addams whose "protege" Grace Abbott was to become. This college had a noted principal, Anna P. Sill, who attempted to pattern her school after Mount Holyoke. It was an intellectually stimulating environment with much debate, except that Miss Sill rather thought that religion was not subject to argument or dissent. School practices included a prayer meeting led by Miss Sill which all were expected to attend. At some point in the service Miss Sill would ask that any girl leave the room if she did not believe the religious views presented. So over and over again, Lizzie Griffin, clinging to her Quaker heritage, would rise and walk slowly out of the room, usually alone.⁹ Her graduation theme was entitled "Iconoclasts," and according to Miss Sill, it was "an interesting paper concerned with reformers possessed of progressive ideas."¹⁰

In Nebraska Lizzie Abbott worked diligently for women's suffrage. When the suffrage amendment was lost, not to be voted on in Nebraska for another thirty years, she persuaded the suffrage group in Grand Island to use its modest balance in money to found the Grand Island Public Library.¹¹ Love of literature and ideas, and a search for truth were part of her legacy to her children. She had known sadness in her childhood, with the death of her father before she was born; the loss of her only brother, killed in the Civil War; and later in her marriage, with the grim trials and disappointments of the depression that followed the panic of 1893. Her letters to Grace show her to have been a loving wife and mother, happy with personal attentions, warm and considerate in her relationships to others, pos-

sessed of a quiet dignity, interested in and determined to educate her daughters as well as her sons.¹²

Grace Abbott's father was a forceful influence on her life. Othman Ali Abbott was a forthright man with vigorous opinions, but tolerant of the views of others. Tall and strong physically, stern yet kind, he was the essence of responsibility toward his family, his neighbors and townspeople, and the citizens of his developing state.

He came by covered wagon to Grand Island in 1867, began the practice of law, and remained there all his life. His "Recollections of a Pioneer Lawyer" provide an enthralling account of his early life, his Civil War experiences, and his interest in and contributions to Nebraska, which he served as the first lieutenant governor.¹³ His daughter Edith said after his death: "Father never lost his belief in western promise and Western development."¹⁴

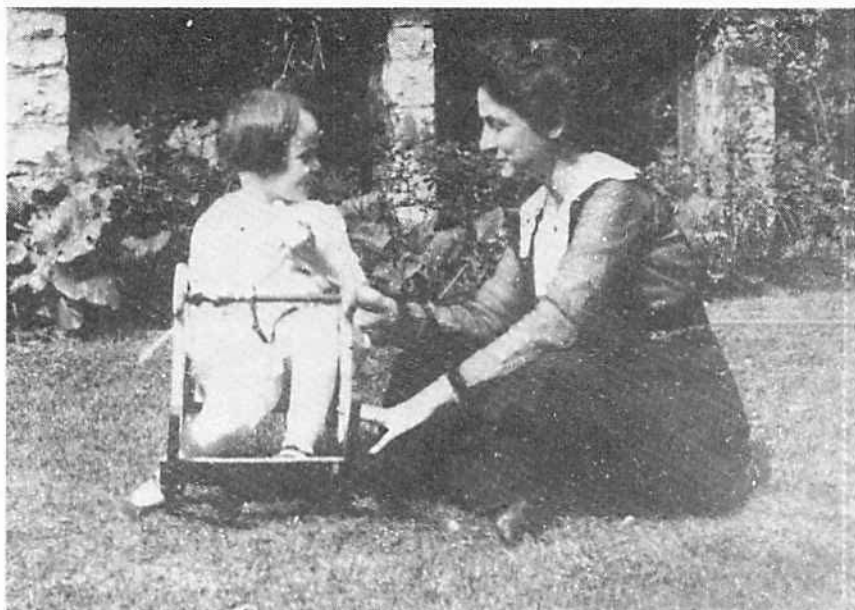
Othman Abbott was descended from a New England Puritan family, although born in Canada in 1842. With his parents and uncles he left Canada in about 1847, probably because the Canadian government sought an oath of allegiance from them although they were still American citizens. Their destination was the Midwest, where they became pioneer farmers in Wisconsin and Illinois. Othman's father purchased a farm in DeKalb County, Illinois, where Othman and his brothers attended school in a log building. "Spelling schools," sleigh rides, and debating societies were winter diversions. Favorite debating subjects were the questions appearing in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, arguments about squatter sovereignty and the homestead laws, as well as the issues of slavery. To hear Wendell Phillips, Othman walked ten miles through almost impassable muddy roads and never forgot it as a thrilling experience.¹⁵

He had an inquiring mind, a capacity for exact observations, and a love of learning. Once when his father made a trip back to Canada to collect payments on their old home, Othman was asked what kind of gift he would like upon his father's return. His choice was a "book on astronomy."¹⁶ Later in Nebraska, his children formed a lasting memory of his appraisal of the evening sky for signs of the weather to come and his careful explanations to them of the vastness of the heavens and the constellations formed by the stars.¹⁷

With the coming of the Civil War, Othman A. Abbott, then 18, enlisted in the 9th Illinois Volunteer Cavalry and was a first lieutenant at its end. His convictions were strong about the abolition of slavery and the preservation of the union of states. A vivid part of Grace's childhood was the hearing of never-ending stories about Lincoln and the Sunday following the attack on Fort Sumter, with its excitement in Illinois. Flags were flown on all the churches, displayed in pulpits, and everyone tried to wear small flags to show loyalty to the union. Grace, her sister, and brothers learned to sing the campaign songs of the election of 1860 and to recite Civil War poems. When Othman's friends, usually Civil War veterans, came to the Grand Island home to visit, there were frequent arguments around the table about campaign strategies, to which the Abbott children listened.¹⁸

The county courthouse and her father's law practice were significant influences upon Grace's developing personality and ambition. She and Edith would accept their father's invitation to come enjoy the tense drama of an important legal case when there was some part of the hearings he thought they might understand, particularly one with "grand oratorical flourishes." He would look up and wave after they had entered the courtroom gallery, and other lawyers sometimes waved or spoke to "the little Abbott girls." It was exciting and Grace would say she was sure she wanted to be a lawyer. Long afterward Edith wrote, "If she had not been a woman she [Grace] would have been a very great lawyer." They saw their father as a "wonderful lawyer" whom they watched with admiration as they waited for the "triumphant challenging questions." He was happy when winning a case: "But father enjoyed everything in those days. He was helping to build a state in the prairie wilderness. And he used to say that his imagination had been fired by the vast expanse of the surrounding prairie country."¹⁹

The Abbott children lived the busy, varied life which a small prairie town provided. Othman A. (Ottie), Jr., was the oldest. Born in 1874, he was admitted to the bar and served for an extended period as district court reporter and as mayor of Grand Island. Edith was two years younger and was to become famous as a scholar — a "social investigator" as she preferred to be called — and as a theorist and dean in higher education for



Grace Abbott with her niece Charlotte Abbott in Grand Island, about 1917.



In 1899 Grace Abbott replaced her sister Edith in the Grand Island high school and taught there eight years

social work. Her devotion to Grace, born two years later than she, was lifelong. They were always very close in their personal lives and in their work. Their personalities and work styles were contrasting and highly complimentary. Arthur, the youngest, was born in 1880. He became a law graduate from the University of Chicago and practiced in Grand Island for most of his adult life.

In their childhood, Edith recalled, "There was always infinite variety with Grace as a companion." In summer they sometimes visited their uncle Marcus Riley Abbott, at his farm near Wood River, Nebraska. Grace learned to drive the phaeton behind the family horse at a young age, and later, like her brothers, rode the young horses with courage and skill.

All the Abbott children were encouraged by their parents to try to hold their own in a controversy; argumentativeness was not seen necessarily as an undesirable characteristic. It was Grace who was most adept at finding extraordinary and convincing reasons for not doing what she didn't want to do. As a child she had a disarming frankness — "she was different; and her teachers were a little bewildered by her honest work and her sudden gay remarks that led to a harmless but disconcerting excitement." She was determined about many matters including the scratchy, starched dresses and sunbonnets of summer wear. When her Quaker grandmother had neatly tied the sunbonnet in a bow under Grace's chin, she would promptly push it back and pull at the knot until it was loose, and her manner of doing so caused her grandmother to say, "Ah Grace, thee is a little rebel."²⁰

Church suppers and socials, picnics, medicine shows, German lessons, a circus, even revival meetings of fundamental sectarian groups in Grand Island, all these Grace entered into with zest:

Her resources were endless — and always unexpected. She was not able to run faster or farther than my brothers, although she often challenged them so vigorously that she made us all expect to see her 'come out first'. But she always knew how to find the thickest cat-tails and the longest bulrushes in the old prairie slough. She knew where the violets were earliest, largest, and thickest in the spring, where the prairie flowers could be found in the endless monotony of the buffalo grass in the summer, and where the wild grapes grew in a hidden thicket near the river. She was more amusing than the rest of us: full of undreamed-of possibilities and wonderful stories.²¹

But all this was to change during the Panic of the 1890's. In the days of poverty and distress in Nebraska, Othman Abbott

suffered serious financial losses. Edith had been graduated with honors from Omaha's Brownell Hall in 1893, and at 16 began teaching in the Grand Island high school. It was hard and demanding work. Ottie left the University of Nebraska, found work in a grocery store, and began to read law with his father. Grace, not able to go to Brownell Hall as planned, finished high school in Grand Island and enrolled in the new small college there. Arthur found summer work in the beet fields.²²

After college graduation at age 19, Grace took her first teaching position in the fall of 1898 in the Broken Bow high school. She was determined to succeed and entered into the life of the small town, then about 1,200 persons.²³ She taught seven classes a day — plain and solid geometry, algebra, Caesar, German, rhetoric, and English literature.²⁴ But in the spring she contracted a serious case of typhoid fever. She was cared for in Broken Bow in a makeshift "hospital," and when she was well enough to leave, her father and mother took her home for a long convalescence.²⁵ Thirty-five years later, when she was carrying out one of her duties as chief of the United States Children's Bureau — speaking on a weekly radio program having to do with the work of the bureau — she received a letter from a former school teacher colleague in Broken Bow. Grace replied to her: "Of course I remember you and the old days in Broken Bow. I can never forget it for it was my first job and my first work away from home, and I felt when I came down with typhoid fever that spring that I had failed completely and utterly."²⁶

Othman and Lizzie Abbott's four adult children helped each other financially when they could and tried to save money to help their parents or to use for more education. In the fall of 1899, Grace was well enough to resume work. Edith took her own small savings and went to the University of Nebraska to finish a degree she had begun work on in summer sessions. Grace replaced her in the Grand Island high school and taught there for eight years.²⁷ Why did she finally leave Nebraska when it meant so much to her? Twenty-three years later, after having attained recognition nationally and internationally, and while she was being widely supported for appointment as the first woman in a President's cabinet, she explained:

I always was happy in Nebraska, but there isn't much opportunity for a girl in a small city, and it seemed inevitable that I leave. A boy can come home from college, begin the practice of his profession, and advance rapidly in his hometown. But when a girl comes back, what can she do? She can teach, but after she's done that she finds that she has reached the top, that there is nothing more for her.²⁸

Much more awaited Grace Abbott when she left for the University of Chicago in the fall of 1907 to study law and political science.

In less than a year she had been offered and had accepted an opportunity to live at Hull House and direct a newly formed agency, the Immigrants' Protective League. European immigration was by then more than one million persons per year, and large numbers of them poured into Chicago and its west side where their problems became evident to Jane Addams and the Hull House residents.

In 1908 "Hull-House and the old West Side were still a part of a vast city wilderness; . . . The streets were atrocious - badly paved or not paved, rarely cleaned or never cleaned; there were horses everywhere, and filthy, rotting stables . . . and alleys; the tenements, many of them wooden shacks that had been built on the prairie before the 'Great Fire,' were beyond description; and there were sweatshops and 'home finishing' on every side of us as we came or went. Great foreign colonies had been established, where English was seldom heard. We were in the midst of an Italian neighborhood adjoining a large Greek colony . . . There was a large Bulgarian colony along Halsted Street to the north, and the old Ghetto to the south, as picturesque as it was insanitary."²⁹

But Grace loved vigorous activity, personal challenge, and colorful differences among people and places. Her capacity for leadership in the social welfare movement and her extraordinary ability to organize and administer began rapidly to take form.

Hull House was an exciting and intellectually stimulating place to live. There were then about twenty-five women and twelve men residents of varying professions and interests. There were music teachers, art teachers, club leaders, social workers, lawyers, newspaper reporters, doctors, and a few successful business men who wanted to work with a social reform group. "Our political opinions varied widely and our arguments not infrequently began at the breakfast table; and during the day the various participants in the current controversy seemed to have sharpened their weapons and prepared for the new arguments that were sure to be heard at the dinner table."³⁰ Grace, who was known to thrive on controversy, wrote happily to her parents, "This is the place to get radical opinions."³¹ Some of



Hull House, Chicago, about 1910. Identified below are (middle row) third from left, Mary Smith; then Grace Abbott, Dr. Alice Hamilton, Edith Abbott, Sophonisba Breckenridge; (seated) fourth from left, Jane Addams, about 1918.



the most remarkable women of the century who were challenging the stereotype of woman were interested in her and began to influence her — not only Jane Addams but Julia Lathrop, Florence Kelley, Sophonisba P. Breckinridge. Hull House became in effect her training ground for future monumental accomplishments in professional government administration.

Each day Grace Abbott directed the activities of the Immigrants' Protective League. With support from board members like Judge Julian W. Mack, Professors Ernst Freund, George H. Mead, and Miss Breckinridge, and businessman-financier-philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, the young director soon uncovered a whole series of situations to challenge the pioneer field of public welfare administration. There were problems among the new immigrants which required immediate attention: (1) accommodations for those temporarily stranded; (2) help to men whose families were attempting to join them and had been detained, often arbitrarily, at Ellis Island; (3) children who needed to be enrolled in school and parents who needed explanation and support in seeing that they attended; (4) translation of papers which immigrants were being urged to sign; (5) help in securing money due them from steamship companies and exploitative employment agents. There were problems of poverty, public health, adult education, and justice in the courts. Considerable attention was given to the "lost immigrant girl" who was expected but never arrived in Chicago. There were visits and help for the single, unaccompanied girls without relatives or other reliable friends in the bewildering city.

The professional approach which Grace Abbott evolved was a dynamic and far-sighted means of linking two facts of social work, currently termed "advocacy" and labeled "innovative." The two components were: family centered casework and protective services for individuals and families in trouble; and use of the courts, government's regulatory authority, and other influences for social action to change conditions creating the problems.

The immigrant received prompt, individual help to alleviate stresses. In doing so, data were collected about the immigrant's experiences throughout the long journey; how much was being paid for board; the occupation, wages, hours, and other condi-

tions of work; the remaining link and obligation to home in the native country. Lecture series were set up to give new immigrants the kinds of information they most needed in their new environment. Studies were published and solutions sought to the larger problems which investigation had uncovered.

Attention was focused on the need for some guarantee to the immigrant of safe arrival in Chicago. Even though conditions had been improved by federal immigration authorities at the port of arrival, from the time they were placed on trains, hopefully to their desired destination, immigrants were without guidance or supervision. As a result of the language barrier, the confusion of the journey and the railroad station upon arrival, and their vulnerability to exploitation by unscrupulous persons, many failed to reach their friends or relatives.³² Grace Abbott secured the cooperation of the Chicago and Western Indiana Railroad who furnished a two-story building and turned over to the league the supervision and control of immigrant arrivals. The league's purpose was "to give the help which the very large numbers arriving at this station so badly needed, but also to show that official supervision was necessary and practical."³³

Protective legislation at the federal level was sought to guarantee a safe arrival, and it was secured in large part as a result of league efforts and Grace Abbott's convincing testimony to Charles Nagel, the secretary of commerce and labor under President William Howard Taft's administration.³⁴

Grace had become a liberal immigrationist; she held respect for and confidence in the "new immigrant." In January, 1912, she made a hurried and unexpected trip to Washington. President Taft was holding a public hearing on legislation for a "literacy test" as a basis for admission of immigrants. As Edith wrote her mother:

No one goes to speak for the Immigrants except representatives of Polish and Jewish Societies and all of the 'Patriotic Organizations' like the Sons and Daughters of the Revolution, Mayflower Descendants all go to speak against immigration [so] it means a great deal to have someone like Grace who is an older American than most of them, there to speak on the other side. . . . This time Mr. Oswald Garrison Villard of New York [grandson of the great William Lloyd Garrison] also went on so Grace had at least one good supporter besides the foreigners themselves.³⁵

The literacy test as passed by Congress was vetoed by President Taft who later "told our friend Mr. Rosenwald that 'it was

Grace Abbott's statement' at a hearing he had held that persuaded him to veto the literacy restriction."³⁶

Within the limits of this article, mention only can be made of Grace Abbott's four-month leave of absence from the league in 1912 to go at her own expense to Europe to study the homes and culture in Croatia, Slavonia, and Galicia, original homes of many immigrants she was called upon to help. She was also on leave in 1913-1914 to serve as secretary to a special immigration commission appointed by the Massachusetts Legislature to investigate the status of the immigrant in Massachusetts. In six months she had her report completed and received this commendation from one of the members of the commission:

She planned and carried through a comprehensive investigation of conditions and wrote a report of which it was said 'on State Street' that it was the ablest State paper ever issued in the Commonwealth. The program proposed covered over fifty recommendations in the fields of education, medicine, housing, protection of savings, justice and civil rights, naturalization and distribution of the influx of newcomers of whom the State was then receiving well over one hundred thousand a year.³⁷

Her clear and analytical thinking and ability to look at individuals and groups free of stereotypes had stood her in good stead.

Other activities concerning public questions filled Grace Abbott's Hull House years. Like others at Hull House she was an enthusiastic supporter of the Progressive Party and Theodore Roosevelt's candidacy for President in 1912. "Things are very busy these days," she wrote her mother. "All the Progressives are here and here means at Hull House."³⁸ She gave suffrage speeches, lobbied in the state capital for reform legislation — regulation of private employment agencies, improvement of public employment offices, protective regulation of the hours and conditions of female employment. She was a member of the Women's Trade Union League and joined in the struggle of a group of oppressed workers in a growing and successful industry. Sidney Hillman was to recall thirty years later that in the garment workers' strike of 1910:

Grace Abbott joined our picket line, helped to collect funds for food and shelter, spoke at our meetings, presented our case to the public, and appealed to the city administration to arbitrate the strike. Grace Abbott had recognized the basic issues of the struggle and realized the need for the introduction of orderly industrial-relations machinery in the clothing industry. . . . Thus, back in 1910 and later during the strike in 1916, Grace Abbott helped to show that labor disputes are not private encounters between employers and employees but that they are of profound social and economic import and affect the entire community.³⁹

In 1915 Grace Abbott was one of the American delegates to the Women's Peace Conference at The Hague, Netherlands. In the following year she organized the Conference of Oppressed Nationalities, which met in Washington, D.C., under the auspices of the American delegation to the Congress-After-the-War of the International Conference of Women for Permanent Peace. Its purpose was to aid in formulating public opinion with regard to the rights of submerged nationalities, and spokesmen at the conference were American representatives of the Irish, Belgians, Serbians, Albanians, Syrians, Croatians, Russian Jews, Lithuanians, Poles, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Bohemians, and Finns.⁴⁰

In April, 1917, Grace Abbott was appointed director of the Child Labor Division of the Children's Bureau and joined Julia Lathrop in Washington, D.C. The employment of large numbers of children, particularly in the textile mills of the South — as had been true of the mills of the North in earlier years and of other factories and tenement industries — had evoked national and even international criticism. The struggle begun by reformers in the previous century to control the exploitation of children in industry finally resulted in the passage by Congress of the first child labor law. The Children's Bureau in the Department of Labor was assigned responsibility for its administration and enforcement.

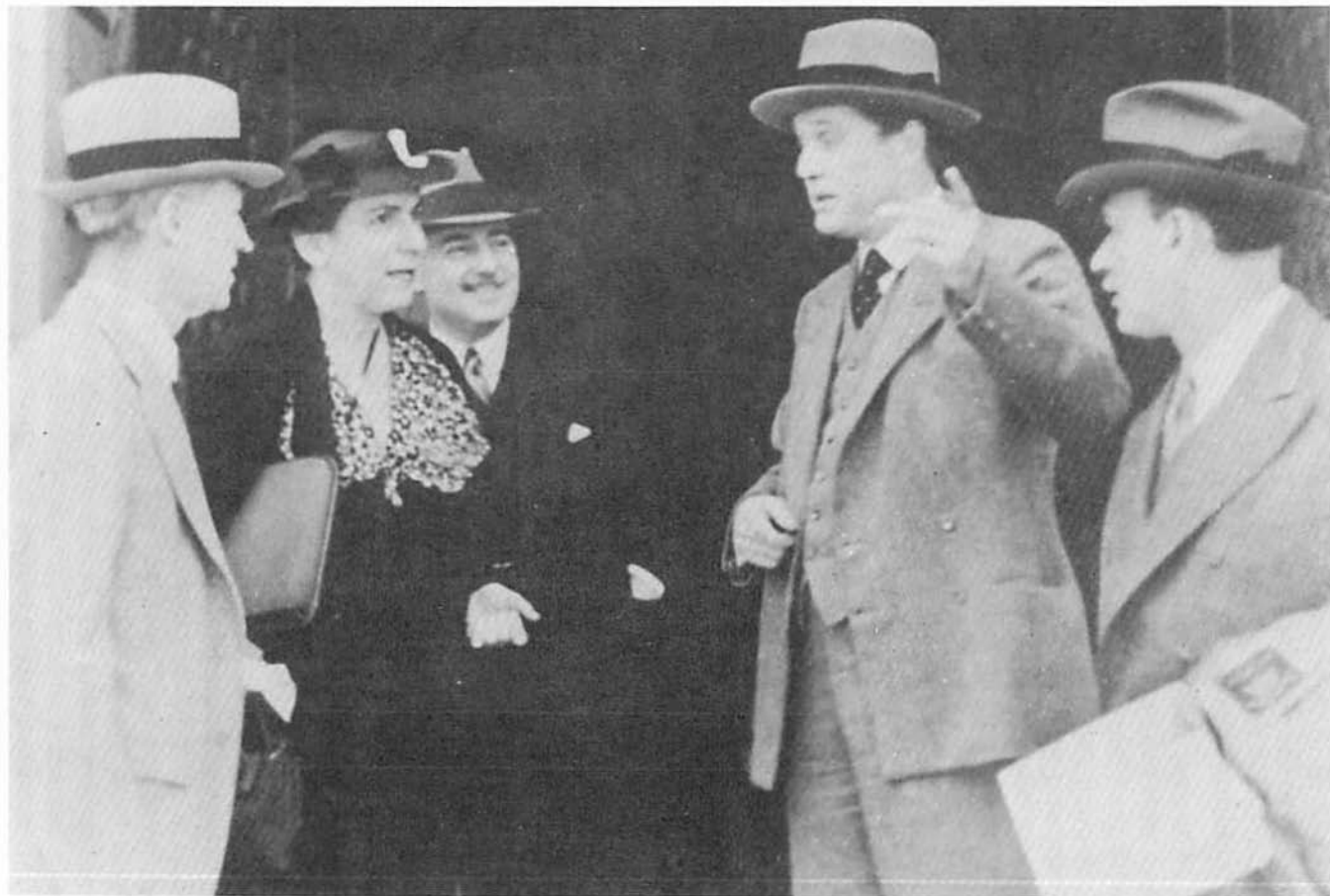
Although the federal legislation was declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court a year later,⁴¹ Grace Abbott made marked progress in evolving an acceptable and effective basis for federal-state-local administrative relations in social welfare programs, a pattern which she was to build upon and demonstrate in a trenchant way during the administration of the Maternity and Infancy Act in the 1920's. Practice strategies were essential, ones which took into account the diverse characteristics among the states, since this new kind of protective legislation was to be enforced locally. Selecting and organizing a field staff, establishing a systematic means of determining a child's legal age for the purpose of issuing work certificates (often in dispute since there was yet no uniform system of birth registration), carrying out inspections of textile mills and other places of children's employment, consulting with federal, state, and local officials in the writing of administrative rules and regulations — to all these duties Grace Abbott applied her

ability to distinguish between important questions of principle which could not be compromised and other minor questions of administrative policy.⁴²

Although federal child labor enforcement came to an abrupt end with the Supreme Court decision, Grace Abbott continued with the Children's Bureau for another year to carry out further collection and evaluation of social facts. The court decision had come at a time when there was unusual need for the protection of children in exploitive work situations. For over a year before the entrance of the United States into World War I, children had been drawn into industry to help fill contracts by American manufacturers and belligerent nations. The situation became more acute with America's entrance into the war. In many states the result was a harmful lengthening of the working day for children and other violations of state laws.⁴³

Grace Abbott accepted an appointment as consultant to the new War Labor Policies Board created by President Woodrow Wilson; the purpose of the board was to fill the need for a scientific agency to determine general policies in the arbitration of contracts in war-related industries. Her knowledge and experience with problems of women and children in industry were invaluable. She was able to influence the board to adopt a regulation providing that protective standards of the invalidated federal child labor law should be made a condition of all federal government contracts.⁴⁴

For the rest of her life Grace Abbott was to seek a legal means to give nationwide protection to children against the cruel diminution of their childhood and loss of opportunity for schooling and normal development which resulted from their premature employment in mills, mines, factories, canneries, and on farms. After a second federal child labor law was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court,⁴⁵ she was forceful in securing agreement among reform groups on the necessity for a constitutional amendment to regulate child labor, in finding legal wording of the proposed amendment which would satisfy different points of view, and in rallying support for its passage by a large non-partisan majority of Congress. But in face of a misrepresentation and propaganda from reactionary political and industrial employer groups with vested interests in its defeat, not enough states ratified the hard-won amendment.



Grace Abbott was a delegate in 1935 to the International Labor Organization Conference at Geneva, Switzerland. From left are ——— Caldwell, Institute of Steel and Iron, technical advisor to employees; Miss Abbott; Sam Lewisohn, employers' delegate; Prentice Gilbert, American consul; L. Irwin.

With the coming of the New Deal in 1933, and essentially on the urging of Grace Abbott and her successor . . . Katharine Lenroot — prohibitions on the employment of children in interstate commerce were written into the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, and when the courts upheld the constitutionality of the act, the cause was finally won. Unceasing agitation . . . was the price of ultimate achievement.⁴⁶

The full development of Grace Abbott's uncommon abilities took form with her appointment in 1921 to succeed Julia Lathrop as chief of the Children's Bureau. The law which had created the Children's Bureau in 1912 set forth its duties as follows: "To investigate and report upon all matters pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people."⁴⁷ It was the clear intent of the statute to create an independent investigative or research agency in the comprehensive field of child welfare.

Julia Lathrop, the first chief, had earned high praise for her nonpartisan, objective, and vigorous pursuit of the bureau's purpose. She was determined to preserve in the transition to a second chief the non-political administration which had prevailed through her tenure under Presidents Taft and Wilson. But in early 1921 and the new administration of President Warren G. Harding, there was an influx of Washington job-seekers and pressure to name loyal party workers to new appointments.

Grace Abbott, the choice of Julia Lathrop, had the backing of organized groups of progressive women, social workers, and persons of scientific orientation interested in child welfare. However, she had no political party backing, and in fact had no firm party identification. Although her father was, as Edith Abbott said, "one of the best of the rugged individualists,"⁴⁸ Grace had supported Theodore Roosevelt as the Progressive candidate for President in 1912 and almost surely had voted for Woodrow Wilson in 1916.⁴⁹ During her professional life she had not considered her political affiliation as a qualification for any position to which she aspired. Faced with a threat to the integrity of the Children's Bureau, Miss Lathrop skillfully interpreted the situation to persons like Florence Kelley of the National Consumers League, Harriet Taylor Upton, vice-chairman of the Republican National Committee, Julius Rosenwald, a friend of Herbert Hoover, and others able to command a following. After four months of negotiation, Grace Abbott was

appointed chief of the Children's Bureau, with some slight but amusing last minute competition between Senators George Norris of Nebraska and Medill McCormick of Illinois as to which state had the right to claim her.⁵⁰

From then on, it was Grace Abbott's clearly recognized competence and her ability to marshal support from women's groups on almost any issue which counted. She was reappointed chief of the Children's Bureau by Presidents Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. At one point James Farley noted that Grace Abbott, who had been one of the top-level women in Washington under Hoover, was a Republican:

Although she militantly championed children's rights, ambitious Democrats tried to use Miss Abbott's party affiliation as an excuse for Farley to force her out. Eleanor [Roosevelt] advised Farley to write the woman who was after Dr. Abbott's job "that no change is being made in the Children's Bureau and that Miss Abbott has the backing of most of the organized groups of women interested in child welfare."⁵¹

Grace Abbott served as chief of the Children's Bureau for thirteen years. For her, most of these were halcyon years. The days were crowded and demanding and she was happy with her "grand new job."⁵² Its arena was ideal for her talent for cutting through distracting or distorted information and grasping the basic issues in overlapping concerns and communicating them to others. This might be to a congressional committee, a newspaper reporter, a group of state and local government officials, unfriendly textile mill owners, or women across the country. She was never afraid of making and acting on decisions, once she had the facts. She attracted highly competent men and women to the Children's Bureau, probably because she tried to discover individual capabilities and tailor them to their best use.

In meeting the Bureau's statutory charge, it was Grace Abbott's responsibility to supervise the planning and direction of numerous social research projects. She insisted upon a scientific approach to fact-finding, an objective analysis of data, public reporting of the results, and a search for social remedies to the problems which had been documented. The array of studies completed during her Children's Bureau years yields impressive evidence "pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people." In one of a series of studies on child labor, the Children's Bureau staff went to the oyster and shrimp canning communities on the Gulf of Mexico

coast where they found children employed as oyster shuckers and shrimp peelers. Women and children stood all day bending to reach clusters of oysters from cars which ran on tracks into the cannery, an open shed. Most of the children were under 14 years of age, in some instances as young as four and five. Lack of proper facilities and procedures resulted in lacerated and diseased hands because of sharp oyster shells, shrimp acid, and shrimp thorns; and injuries were common from falls on wet, slippery floors or from being run down by oyster carts.⁵³

Child employment in anthracite coal mining in the Shenandoah district were also studied. The way in which children were located for the study is representative of the thorough, person-by-person search used. "A preliminary canvass was made of every house and apartment in the area studied, and the name and age of every child in the family, together with other identifying data, were noted. . . . Altogether schedules were secured for 3,136 children."⁵⁴ Young boys were found working long hours in enveloping black dust and the constant noise of coal running from chutes or being sorted in shakers. Boys as young as 12 were used in some of the most hazardous underground work.

A number of studies were made of the relation of farm labor to child welfare and school attendance. Detailed information on work, schooling, and other factors affecting their development was obtained for approximately 12,000 children under 16 years of age in fourteen states. Grace Abbott made it clear: "It seems unnecessary to point out that helping father with the chores and mother with the dishes or doing other work which develops a sense of family solidarity and has real training value for children is not classified as child labor."⁵⁵ A primary concern was the fulltime employment of the children of migrant agricultural workers. The retardation which resulted from their sporadic school attendance was documented. Concern was also high about the menace to the physical and social development of children which stemmed from the lack of adequate housing in the migrant camps and other environmental threats.

Grace Abbott was concerned too about rural children who were expected as a matter of course to work hard for long hours during school days on family farms. At the request of the Child-

ren's Code Commission of North Dakota the Children's Bureau made a study of child labor and schooling in that state:

The boys and girls included in the study appear to have done almost every variety of work performed on the farms of North Dakota. . . . Many heavy and more or less hazardous farm processes involving special physical strain, the handling of machinery or dangerous implements, or the driving of four-horse or five-horse teams were commonly performed by children from the age of 10 years up. . . . Boys as young as 8 years of age, had worked with two-share plows drawn by four or five horses. Boys as young as 7 years of age and girls as young as 10 reported the driving of stackers and hay forks, harrowing, and raking hay.⁵⁶

Such findings cause Grace Abbott to point out:

The protection of the city child from premature employment has in large measure been secured by the votes of country legislators, who were shocked to find young children working in the mines, before furnaces, at dangerous machinery, or for long hours at monotonous indoor tasks. The advantages of farm work as compared with factory work do not need enumeration. But with the improvement in rural schools by State distributive funds and by other means, we should make sure that the farm boys and girls are given the same opportunity to attend school and to profit by group games and other forms of recreation as are the city children.⁵⁷

There were other important studies. Children of illegitimate birth and dependent children under the supervision of child-caring organizations were studied and important issues raised about what children should become wards of the state. There were studies of guardianship, custody, adoption, and the practices of juvenile courts, followed by efforts to help set standards for the court. One of the most significant studies was of maternal mortality in fifteen states, which analyzed the facts in the case of each maternal death. Another was a series of child-health studies — one of which was to identify the causes and community means of preventing rickets in cooperation with the New Haven Department of Health. The rickets study began a long personal and collegial association between Grace Abbott and Dr. Martha M. Eliot. As the Depression of the 1930's worsened, a study was made of the transient and needy boys who rode the freights back and forth across the country. In other studies as well, the harmful effects of the depression upon children were documented.

For some time Grace Abbott and her staff had been compiling monthly relief reports, collected by mail and telegraph from social agencies in cities of at least 50,000. In 1930 at the request of President Hoover's Emergency Council for Employment, the Children's Bureau began to furnish monthly reports

to the council and other agencies. The Bureau of the Census had not collected such data, and in those critical times the Children's Bureau was the only federal agency with reports relating to unemployment relief. The work was expanded in 1932 because of its importance to federal, state, and local planning for aid to the unemployed.⁵⁸ In 1934 alone, the Children's Bureau distributed 1,763,797 of its various publications to government and voluntary agencies and the general public. Almost 800,000 were the popular and frequently revised ones on which so many mothers relied: *Prenatal Care*, *Infant Care*, *The Child From One to Six*, and *Child Management*.⁵⁹

Congress in 1921 added to Grace Abbott's responsibility by passing the Maternity and Infancy Act (frequently called the Sheppard-Towner Act). A plan for such a program had been submitted by Julia Lathrop in her annual report in 1917; Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin of Montana first introduced it for passage in 1918. The act provided a new form of social welfare grant-in-aid to the states and gave responsibility to the chief of the Children's Bureau for its administration and for research in maternal and infant care. Problems of childbirth and care of babies were not new to Grace Abbott. During her days with the Immigrant's Protective League in Chicago she had been concerned about the services of midwives, the neglect of pregnant women, and the conditions under which women gave birth.⁶⁰

Early studies by the Children's Bureau had found that the United States had unusually high rates of maternal and infant mortality. At the time the Maternity and Infancy Act was passed, the death rate for mothers in childbirth was higher than rates in most foreign countries which had statistics of birth and death; the infant mortality rate was higher than the rates for five such foreign countries.⁶¹ The purpose of the new legislation was to promote maternal and child health programs. Among the services offered were: campaigns to secure registration of all births (eighteen states still had no birth registration in 1923);⁶² conferences with mothers about maternal and child care; distribution of supplies for mothers who were unable to go to a hospital for the birth of their babies; medical and nursing care for mothers and infants at home, particularly in remote areas; nutrition classes; efforts to improve services of midwives; and an increase in numbers of public health nurses and physicians, particularly in rural areas.

The act provided that states develop plans on the basis of need and provide matching funds in order to receive grants-in-aid. Conferences and advice were provided by the Children's Bureau. Between 1921 and 1929 forty-five states (including Nebraska) cooperated with the bureau in using federal funds⁶³ before Congress failed to renew the act. In spite of widespread support for maternity and infancy programs among women's groups and evidence of successful implementation in the states, some opposition to the passage of the act and to its renewal had persisted. Briefly stated, opposition came from groups such as these: the American Medical Association which saw it as a wedge which might lead to "state medicine"; medical cultists who opposed any public health program, even vaccination and quarantine; states rightists, who overlooked federal grants for highways, soil surveys, forest fire prevention, county extension agents, control of venereal disease, and other causes; offshoots of antisuffrage organizations such as Woman Patriots and organizations like the Sentinels of the Republic, who viewed the entire maternity and infancy act as a communist plot by feminists intent upon international control of children. This latter opposition, often scurrilous, frequently singled out Grace Abbott for personal attack. Then there was Senator James Reed of Missouri who in an effort to destroy the legislation, used ridicule in harsh statements about "spinsters who wanted to control maternity and teach mothers how to rear babies."⁶⁴

Significant, though more subtle, opposition came from President Hoover who disappointed countless women who had supported his election as "a friend of children." Although he made perfunctory statements for the act's renewal in 1929, he did little or nothing to press for its passage. He was not disinterested in the program but wanted to follow the plan of Ray Lyman Wilbur, his secretary of the interior and a personal friend. Wilbur, a physician, sought to have the administration of the maternity and infancy program and other health work of the Children's Bureau transferred to the Public Health Service, a move that had greater significance than a mere administrative transfer of functions.⁶⁵ His plan produced intense controversy which dominated the 1930 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection. Grace Abbott was at the center of the drama, and with immense courage and the support of a large majority of the delegates, she forestalled efforts to transfer the Children's Bureau health functions and maintained its indepen-

dence.⁶⁶ For Grace Abbott the failure of Congress to renew the Sheppard-Towner Act was a deep disappointment, but she never lost sight of the needs of mothers and their children nor surrendered her efforts to secure the basic protections for them which the act had provided. With the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935, that goal was reached and Grace Abbott was largely responsible.

In 1934, President Roosevelt created a Committee on Economic Security to develop a workable social security program. Edwin E. Witte, a University of Wisconsin economist and expert in the field of social insurance, was appointed executive director of the committee. Grace Abbott was appointed to serve on its advisory council. Witte summed up Grace Abbott's contribution to the writing and passage of the Social Security Act as follows:

I regarded Miss Grace Abbott as one of the most useful of the Americans of the present generation. . . . She, above everyone else, was responsible for the child welfare provisions which occur in the Social Security Act. . . . Miss Abbott never let me forget that we must do something for the children, to have even a reasonably adequate social security bill. I recall vividly that many of the people in our technical committee who had most to do with the formulation of the social security program, said that such matters as infant and maternity services, crippled children's services, and even dependent children's services had nothing to do with social insurance. . . . As it turned out, the child welfare provisions brought to the bill most valuable support and they turned out to be among the most popular provisions of the measure. . . . I also recall what Miss Abbott did for social security at the most crucial stage of its consideration in Congress. . . . The story has never been told how very near the committee [Ways and Means] was to ditching the entire bill. . . . Miss Abbott realized how very critical the situation had become.

She was instrumental in bringing together a number of people genuinely interested in getting the Social Security Bill through Congress in that session. She took the lead in organizing a small committee to contact leaders of public opinion in all walks of life, who joined in a statement presented to Congress urging action upon the pending social security bill and expressing the idea that it was necessary to make a start if social security were ever to be improved. . . . I am satisfied that the Congressional Session of 1935 was the last for several years in which the Social Security Act could have been passed, and I give Miss Abbott much of the credit for getting this measure through Congress when it appeared to be lost. Miss Abbott, was indeed, a high minded woman and a great champion of the underprivileged.⁶⁷

Grace Abbott left the Children's Bureau in June, 1934, to assume a professorship in public welfare at the School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, where her sister Edith was dean. The immensity of her activities and influence during her years in Washington can not be covered fully in these pages. For example, no mention has been made of her international work with the League of Nations, which she undertook at

the request of the State Department. This was pioneer work in international social welfare which helped to lay a foundation for later worldwide cooperative research, consultation and education.⁶⁸ Nor has discussion been given to the numerous honors which were accorded her. Some of these follow:

In 1931 she was given the gold medal award of the National Institute of Social Sciences and termed "by far the most important social worker in public life today." In that same year she was chosen as one of America's twelve greatest women by a nation-wide popular magazine poll. She was elected president of the National Conference of Social Work in 1923, only the fifth woman in fifty years to hold that office. In 1932 she was given a distinguished service plaque by the Nebraska Conference of Social Work. She received widespread popular support for appointment as secretary of labor when that post was vacant during President Hoover's administration. She received six honorary degrees, including one from the University of Nebraska; memorial fellowships were set up in her name. Children's homes in South Dakota and a children's treatment center in Illinois were named for her. A Liberty ship was christened the *Grace Abbott*. Her two-volume *The Child and the State* became a classic still used by students and researchers interested in socio-legal aspects of family and child welfare.⁶⁹

During the years 1921-1939 Grace Abbott made frequent trips to Nebraska to visit her family in Grand Island and to attend to Children's Bureau business and other public welfare matters. She endured two extended periods of bed rest in Colorado — the common treatment for tuberculosis. When her tuberculosis was diagnosed, her physician suggested a treatment location in New York state but she asked to go to Colorado instead: "It's closer to Nebraska and that's important to me."⁷⁰ During her exile, as Edith Abbott called it, Grace remained in close communication by letter, telegraph, and staff visits with Washington and the Children's Bureau.

Grace Abbott died June 19, 1939, of multiple myeloma. Her strong heart and her courageous approach to illness kept her working for the causes she believed in almost to the end of her life. A few months after her death, Edith Abbott wrote:

Grace and I often talked over the vivid memories which we shared of the pioneer days in our part of the Great Plains. . . . And we used to say that if we lived in Chi-

cago a hundred years, we could never forget the call of the meadow larks along the roadside; the rustling of the wind in the corn; the slow flight of the sand-hill cranes over the prairie creek near our home; and the old Overland Trail, a mile from the main street of our town — where the wild plums were hidden and the bittersweet berries hung from the cottonwoods in the early fall.⁷¹

NOTES

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3. *Chicago Daily News*, June 20, 1939.
4. "Champion of Women and Children. The Story of Grace Abbott," *The World Tomorrow*, September, 1931.
5. Descriptions from newspaper clippings, in Family Papers and from interviews with persons who knew Grace Abbott.
6. Edith Abbott, "Grace Abbott, A Sister's Memories," *The Social Service Review*, XIII (September, 1939), 351-352.
7. Edith Abbott, "Memories of a Prairie Childhood," unpublished manuscript. Family Papers.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Othman A. Abbott, "Recollections of a Pioneer Lawyer," *Nebraska History Magazine*, XI (1928), 145.
10. Rockford, Illinois, College, Howard Colman Library. Notation from Miss Sills' scrapbook, 31.
11. Othman A. Abbott, "Recollections," 151.
12. Family Papers.
13. Othman A. Abbott, "Recollections," 1-177.
14. Edith Abbott, "Memories."
15. Abbott, "Recollections," 16-21.
16. *Ibid.*, 13.
17. Edith Abbott, "Memories."
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Edith Abbott, "A Sister's Memories," 353.
22. Family Papers.
23. *History of Custer County, Nebraska*. W. L. Gaston and A. R. Humphrey (Lincoln: Western Publishing Co., 1919), 197.
24. Grace Abbott to Edith Abbott, September 7, 1898. Family Papers.
25. Family Papers.
26. *Edith and Grace Abbott Papers*, University of Chicago. Letter from Corvallis, Oregon, 1933.
27. Family Papers.

28. *Omaha World-Herald*, July 6, 1930.
29. Edith Abbott, "A Sister's Memories," 355.
30. Edith Abbott, "Grace Abbott and Hull House, 1908-21, Part II," *Social Service Review*, 24 (September, 1950), 377.
31. Grace Abbott to Othman A. and Elizabeth Griffin Abbott, undated, Family Papers.
32. *Annual Reports 1909-1917*. The Immigrants' Protective League. Chicago, Illinois.
33. *Fifth Annual Report of the Immigrants Protective League for the Year Ending January 1st, 1914*, 8.
34. *Seventh Annual Report of the Immigrants Protective League for the Year Ending January 1st, 1916*, "Address of Hon. Charles Nagel," 20.
35. Edith Abbott to Elizabeth Griffin Abbott, undated, probably January, 1912, Family Papers.
36. Edith Abbott, "Grace Abbott and Hull House, 1908-21. Part II" *Social Service Review*, 24 (December, 1950), 493.
37. *Ibid.*, 497.
38. Grace Abbott to Elizabeth Griffin Abbott, December 12, 1912, Family Papers.
39. Sidney Hillman to Edith Abbott, cited in Edith Abbott, "Grace Abbott and Hull House, 1908-21. Part II", *Social Service Review*, 24 (September, 1950), 393-394.
40. *The Survey*, 37 (November 25, 1916), 214.
41. *Hammer v. Dagenhart* 247 U.S. 251 (1918).
42. National Archives, Washington, D.C., Children's Bureau Papers, box RG 102 Child Labor.
43. U.S. Department of Labor, Children's Bureau. *Seventh Annual Report of the Chief, Children's Bureau. Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1919* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), 21-23.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
45. *Bailey v. Drexel Furniture Co.*, 259 U.S. 20 (1922).
46. Clarke A. Chambers, *Seedtime of Reform. American Social Service and Social Action 1918-1933*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), 203.
47. U.S. Department of Labor, Children's Bureau, *Ninth Annual Report of the Chief, Children's Bureau, to the Secretary of Labor. Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1921* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), 5.
48. Edith Abbott, "Memories."
49. Grace Abbott to Sophonisba Breckinridge, undated, and Othman A. Abbott to Edith Abbott, November 13, 1922, Family Papers.
50. Julia Lathrop to Grace Abbott, April 6, undated, April 8, April 15, May 31, June 4, 1921, Family Papers.
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52. Edith Abbott to Elizabeth Griffin Abbott, undated, Family Papers.
53. U.S. Children's Bureau Publication No. 98. *Child Labor and the Work of Mothers in Oyster and Shrimp Canning Communities on the Gulf Coast* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922).

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58. U.S. Department of Labor, Children's Bureau, *Twentieth Annual Report of the Chief, Children's Bureau, to the Secretary of Labor. Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1932* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932), 1-2.

59. U.S. Department of Labor, Children's Bureau, *Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Secretary of Labor. For the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1934* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 91.

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63. U.S. Department of Labor, Children's Bureau. *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Chief of the Children's Bureau to the Secretary of Labor. Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1929* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1929), 1.

64. For a fuller account of the Sheppard-Towner Act and opposition to it see J. Stanley Lemons, *The Woman Citizen, Social Feminism in the 1920's* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 153-180.

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67. Edwin E. Witte to Edith Abbott, October 18, 1939, Edith and Grace Abbott Papers, University of Chicago.

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70. Edith Abbott, "Children's Bureau and Washington Years."

71. Edith Abbott, "A Sister's Memories," 352-353.