

Pennsylvania's Progressive Orphanage: Carson College for Orphan Girls, 1918-1937

David R. Contosta
Chestnut Hill College

The perennially moderate Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was not known in the early decades of the twentieth century as a major focus of the progressive education movement. An exception to this rule was the Carson College for Orphan Girls (renamed the Carson Valley School in 1946), located just outside Philadelphia in the village of Flourtown. From its formal opening in 1918 until the ravages of the Great Depression forced it to close its own elementary school in 1937, Carson College was one of the nation's most progressive orphanages and schools. Carson achieved this distinction through a unique set of circumstances. Among these were a large endowment, the need to prepare orphans in a practical fashion for making their way in the outside world, and, most importantly, the great talent and progressive philosophy of the institution's first president, Elsa Ueland.

Carson College's impressive endowment, initially valued at around five million dollars, was left in 1907 by Robert Neidermark Carson (1846-1907), after whom the orphanage was named. Surprisingly little is known about this man some nine decades after his death, despite the fact that he was an extremely wealthy and important entrepreneur in his day. Carson was born in Philadelphia and appeared to have grown up in rather modest circumstances.¹ Nothing is known about his education, but in the mid-1870s he began to amass a fortune in street railroads (that is, horse-car lines). From there he went on to own large interests in electrified trolley-car companies and in electrically powered inter-urban rail lines.² Sometime during the 1890s the childless Carson decided to leave the bulk of his estate to found an orphanage for girls, to be modeled in certain instances after Philadelphia's Girard College (for boys), which opened in 1848 and was made possible through the beneficence of Philadelphia merchant and banker, Stephen Girard (1750-1831).³ Carson took the word "college" directly from Girard's will, a term that Stephen Girard had used in the French sense, which denoted an elementary or secondary school. This was a somewhat unfortunate choice that would cause much confusion as long as the name Carson College remained in use.

In his will, drawn up in 1903, Robert Carson directed that the orphanage bearing his name be located on "not less than fifty nor more than one hundred acres" of his 225-acre Erdenheim Stock Farm. (As it turned out, the institution was granted about 87 acres.) The property was located just northwest of the Philadelphia city limits near the village of Flourtown and adjacent to the

Philadelphia neighborhood of Chestnut Hill. The will set down a number of other specific provisions or restrictions. Although some of Carson's ideas were enlightened for the time, several would pose difficulties in the years ahead. Among the most troublesome provisions was a limitation on admissions to "poor, white, healthy girls, both of whose parents shall be deceased."⁴ In addition, no orphans could be received from any other institution, and none could be admitted "under the age of six years or over the age of ten."⁵ On the more positive side, Carson directed that the orphans live in individual cottages of no more than twenty-five girls, that they should not be dressed alike, as they were in many orphanages of the time, and that they should be given some sort of vocational training.

These provisions would go into effect only after the death of Carson's widow, Isabel Francis (Flickinger) Carson, an event which occurred in 1912. Meanwhile, several of Robert Carson's nieces and nephews had been contesting the will. The various suits and appeals were not settled completely by the Pennsylvania courts until March, 1914—all of them against the family claimants and in favor of Carson College.⁶

With the litigation finally at an end, the trustees of the Carson Estate appointed a seven-man board of directors for Carson College, as mandated by the will. In 1915 the board held an architectural competition and selected Albert Kelsey (1870-1950) to design the campus buildings. Already an experienced practitioner, Kelsey held a degree in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania. Earlier commissions had included the so-called Pan American Building in Washington, D.C. and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia, both in collaboration with Paul Cret.⁷

Despite the neoclassical lines of his former work, Kelsey might be viewed from the perspective of the 1990s as a late romantic architect. His designs were firmly rooted in associationalist concepts of art and architecture that prevailed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That is, Kelsey and most other architects of the day consciously strove to design buildings and landscapes that caused the beholder to *associate* with certain places, feelings, or thoughts. It was within this tradition that Kelsey set out to fashion a "fantasy" village, in the English Tudor Gothic style, for the new orphanage. Although Kelsey looked to the past for inspiration, he was by no means out of sympathy with progressive reformers and educators during this period, who often lamented the disappearance of older ways of life as the nation was swept into the urban/industrial age.⁸

Although Kelsey's neo-medieval buildings for Carson College were spectacularly beautiful, they would often prove impractical for the institution's everyday needs. No one was more cognizant of these shortcomings than Carson's first president, Elsa Ueland. Hired in the spring of 1916, Ueland (1888-1980) would remain at the head of Carson College (and of the Carson Valley School)

Courtesy of Carson Valley School



Albert Kelsey's Red Gables Cottage (originally known as Narcissus Cottage) at Carson College for Orphan Girls, 1920s.

until 1958, for a total of forty-two years. She then served on the board of directors until 1967. More than any other single individual it was Ueland who made Carson into a leading progressive institution. Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Ueland first became involved in progressive causes through her mother, Clara Hampson Ueland, who was prominent in the women's suffrage movement in her state, as well as an advocate of educational reform.⁹ Elsa herself became a leader in the suffrage cause while a student at the University of Minnesota. Following her graduation from Minnesota 1909, with major studies in sociology and psychology, Ueland became a settlement house worker at the Richmond Hill Settlement in the Greenwich Village section of New

York City.¹⁰ Besides assisting the largely Italian immigrant population in the neighborhood, Ueland participated in suffrage meetings and protests against working conditions in the city's garment industry.¹¹ Soon after arriving in New York, she also enrolled in the New York School of Philanthropy, a pioneer institution to train social workers that later became the Columbia University School of Social Work. As her research project, Ueland did a study of the city's shirtwaist (or dressmaking) trade, concluding that only powerful unions could protect the welfare of laborers in this exploitative industry.¹² Ueland apparently submitted this research to Columbia University for a Master of Arts degree in economics.¹³

That Ueland became involved in labor reform through her work at the Richmond Hill Settlement is not surprising. According to Allen F. Davis, in his insightful study of settlement houses and their connection with urban reform, the settlements played a major role in both creating and sustaining the progressive movement as a whole.¹⁴ As an extension of their attempts to deal with the many problems of urban/industrial life, the settlements became involved in educational reform and were among the strongest advocates of progressive education, including vocational guidance. Ueland became associated with this aspect of progressive education when she enlisted as an "investigator" for a survey undertaken by the Guidance Association of New York City.¹⁵ Ueland's involvement in this project would leave a lasting impression on her and be of great assistance as a model for the vocational training for her orphans at Carson College.¹⁶

Of even greater importance for her work at Carson was Ueland's decision in 1914 to take a teaching position in the public schools of Gary, Indiana. The Gary Plan, as it was known, was in the forefront of educational reform and was being considered—though it was in fact never implemented—by the New York City public schools. It may be that Ueland went out to Gary in order to learn more about the plan first hand, with the idea of taking her experiences back to New York.¹⁷

The genius behind the Gary Plan was school superintendent William Wirt (1874-1938), who had been a student of John Dewey (1859-1952), by far the most important figure in the progressive education movement.¹⁸ Wirt had had the opportunity to implement comprehensive educational reform largely because Gary was a new city, built from almost nothing a few years before when United States Steel erected a huge new plant on the site. There were no educational traditions to overcome and thus Gary's fledgling school board was willing to hire an educational innovator like Wirt and to give him virtually a free hand.¹⁹

Ueland taught English for three semesters at Gary, and in early 1916 became Wirt's "secretary," or principal assistant. Upon becoming president of Carson College, she would adapt many aspects of the Gary Plan for her orphans. This

Courtesy of Carson Valley School



Elsa Ueland in her twenties.

included Wirt's belief that the school experience should comprise four principal parts: play, exercise, intellectual study, and special projects, all woven together in as many ways as possible. To accomplish this ambitious program, children attended school eight hours each day. The Gary Schools were also open in the evenings for adult education classes, as well as for an array of community activities. School grounds and parks were merged whenever possible, and Gary's public libraries were placed inside school buildings, where both children and adults could come together to share the facilities. Thus the school plant was utilized as fully as possible, saving taxpayers' money—and especially United States Steel's—in the process. To break down the distinction between the often arbitrary world of the classroom and work place, a major goal of progressive educators, Gary's teachers conducted frequent field trips to local museums and work places. In addition, there were constant attempts to integrate the different student experiences: a history lesson and a writing assignment might be coordinated with an art project, dramatic presentation, or field trip into

the community.

Although Ueland was only twenty-eight years old when she arrived in Philadelphia to direct the Carson College for Orphan Girls, her knowledge and experience were impressive. She had been a settlement worker in New York City and part of the most exciting educational experiment of the day—the Gary Plan. Her energy, optimism, and healthy good looks impressed everyone who met her. A tall woman, five feet eight or nine, Ueland had golden brown hair, bright blue eyes, and a slightly ruddy complexion, characteristics that she doubtless inherited from her Norwegian father. According to a writer for the *Philadelphia Ledger*, the new young president of Carson College walked “with almost a stride; the walk of a basket ball player who is never ill.”²⁰ A Scandinavian beauty, it is not surprising that Ueland received several proposals of marriage. But she prized her independence and knew that a professional career was out of the question unless she remained single. Consequently, Ueland never married.

Carson College opened officially on July 1, 1918, although the institution had cared for a half dozen or so girls during the previous year. Enrollment increased impressively from 10 on opening day to 42 in 1919, to 102 in 1925, and to an all-time high of 124 in 1931.²¹ Orphans came to Carson from various counties throughout Pennsylvania during this period, but the great majority of them were from Philadelphia or elsewhere in the southeastern part of the state. As anticipated by the Carson will, these orphans were in fact poor, in that their parents had not left them any money or property that could be used for their support.

The progressive educational philosophy that Ueland brought to Carson College had already evolved over two or three decades and would continue to do so. Containing many strands, there were nevertheless several main characteristics of the movement, according to the educational historian Lawrence Cremin: (1) a desire to broaden the scope of the school to include direct concern for health, recreation, family life, and the quality of the local community; (2) an application of new pedagogical techniques based in psychology and the social sciences; (3) a recognition of the need to tailor instruction to individual students, as well as to different social and economic backgrounds; (4) a belief that American culture should be made more democratic in that all students should be introduced to the best that modern civilization had to offer in both the arts and sciences.²²

Underlying these characteristics was the belief, especially as espoused by John Dewey, that the school needed to adjust to the realities of the urban/industrial age. Because the world had changed so rapidly and would doubtless continue to do so at an ever-accelerating pace, it no longer made sense to have students merely memorize a body of knowledge that educators had believed was eternally true and permanently useful. For Dewey, who was much

influenced by Charles Darwin and other evolutionists, truth itself had evolved in response to changing realities. To prepare students for the future, education should equip them with the mental tools (or instruments) that they would need to understand the world of tomorrow, and thereby to find solutions to problems that no one had yet imagined. (This did not mean that Dewey opposed all memorization, or that he did not believe students had to learn certain skills in order to succeed, as critics of progressive education frequently alleged.)

Schools could not exist in a vacuum from the rest of life, but had to be part of the living, working community around them. Otherwise students would see education as removed from reality, with no connection to making a living or solving their problems. Besides, Dewey believed that children were naturally curious about their world, a curiosity that was often stifled by too much rote learning. By tapping into youngsters' natural inquisitiveness, progressive educators could show respect for their students' individual interests and needs, and in the process strengthen their self-worth and self-esteem. Above all, perhaps, children would not feel like helpless pawns in an utterly mysterious world.²³

In carrying out these ideas, Elsa Ueland and her staff at Carson College worked hard to meet the individual needs of each girl, while offering a well-integrated program that linked school to all other aspects of the child's life. Classroom instruction, field trips, cottage activities, recreation, religious training, and contacts with neighbors in the Flouertown area were coordinated as much as possible so that each aspect of life would enrich the others and provide a sense of security, competence, and self-esteem for the Carson girl. At the same time, Carson College tried to provide realistic vocational training and job experiences so that its graduates could find gainful employment once they left campus, a goal that was doubtless reinforced by Ueland's earlier work in vocational guidance.

What stands out in retrospect about Carson's progressive education program is its resemblance to the Gary Plan. As at Gary, there was a long school day. During the academic year 1921-22, Carson girls went to school from 8:45 in the morning until 4:45 in the afternoon, with an hour and a half for lunch (12:15-1:45). The reason for the extended day, as at Gary, was to allow for the teaching of traditional as well as non-traditional subjects. (The long lunch break was necessary so that the girls could help with noon-time chores back at their cottages.) Also as at Gary, the various grade levels were divided into two groups, or "platoons." While one platoon engaged in academic work, the other took part in non-traditional courses such as "physical training," "sewing," "laundry," "weaving," or "pottery."²⁴

Even the academic subjects were closely paired with allied activities. For example, during the fall of 1922 the ninth graders (who then formed the

Courtesy of Carson Valley School



Carson girls operate their own printing press, mid-1920s.

senior class of Carson's on-campus school) learned history, geography, English, and printing all during one period of two hours and forty-five minutes. The idea here was that students needed to read and write (that is, study English) to pursue history and geography, two related subjects that often overlapped in content. Printing on their own press allowed the students to become more proficient with their language skills.²⁵ In 1928 the eighth graders carried out a similar project when they researched, wrote, and printed their own study of Flourtown.²⁶

Carson arrived at such an integration of studies, as Ueland explained in her Annual Report for 1923, through trial and error—in the best progressive

tradition:

We have always realized the importance of hand-work, of learning primarily through vivid concrete experience, and only secondarily through books. And to secure this, we have hitherto departmentalized our work so that the children have gone from [the] classroom . . . to workshop or studio or laboratory with [a] special teacher and special equipment; and then back again to [the] classroom. . . . But its danger, in over emphasis, is that it may also bring a scattering, a lack of relation and cohesion to the day's experiences.

To obviate this danger, the ninth-grade class had combined history, geography, English, and printing. Besides integrating these activities closely, the combined class had engendered tremendous pride, enthusiasm, and self-initiative among the students. Again, according to Ueland,

They feel that they are 'writing for publication' and, therefore, take pride in a correct and finished piece of work. They are learning to work independently. . . . They are asking relevant questions, not questions which are beside the mark. . . . And, with it all, they are getting a foundation of knowledge of printing itself. . . .²⁷

Music classes also combined standard academic fare with exciting practical exercises, such as having the girls make their own musical instruments in 1921. This project was undertaken by, in Ueland's words, "a genius of a manual training teacher."²⁸ "The children," as she described the class,

are making musical instruments—wind, percussion and string—and begin to play [them]. Of course it is crude, but most fascinating. They get the principles of all musical instruments and are understanding the early attempts at music made by the human race.²⁹

Even the youngest children combined practical exercises with learning. In 1926-27, for instance, the primary class built their own miniature town as part of a unit on communities and how they functioned. According to the children themselves, who contributed an article to the school newspaper (doubtless edited by one of the teachers),

We built a town to see how towns are built, and because we wanted to play with a little town of our own. And because we wanted to be good workmen. And because we wanted to bring our dolls to school and make them walk up and down the streets and go to church.³⁰

Their little town contained a butcher shop, grocery store, drug store, post office, clothing shop, fire house, and church. The girls drew plans for each

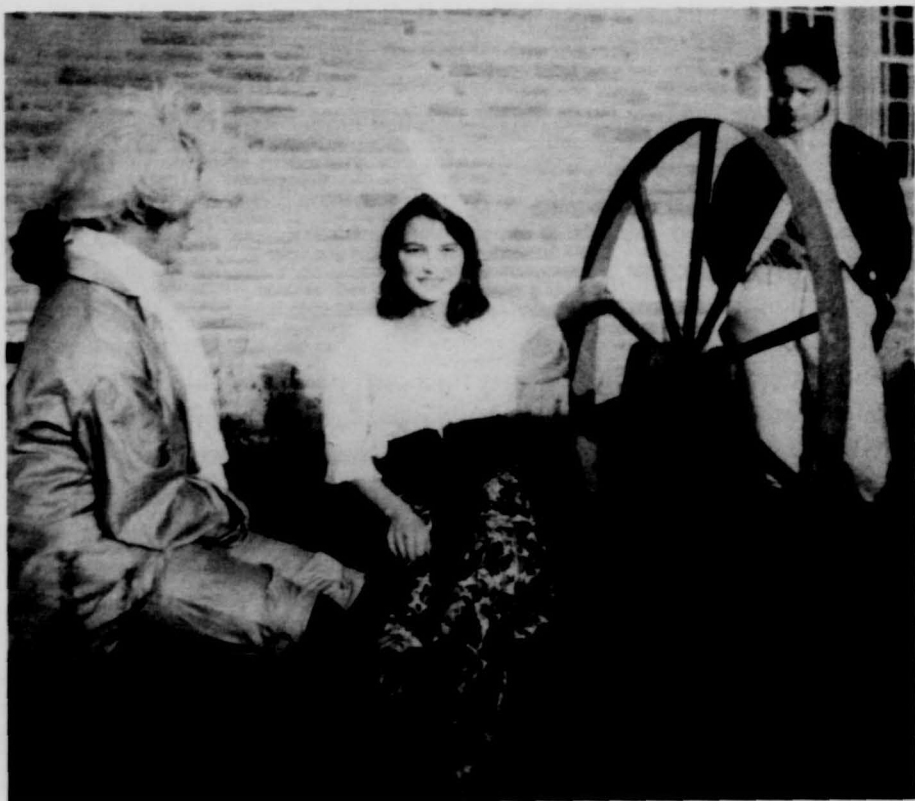
structure, measured and sawed wood, drilled holes, pounded nails, painted and stuccoed walls, and even planted little gardens. During the course of construction they visited a lumber mill to see how logs were turned into boards.³¹

When Carson built two new cottages (called Upper Beech and Lower Beech) in the early 1930s, the girls took advantage of this event to observe, first hand, how real buildings were put up. They visited the docks on the Delaware River to see the raw wood come in from the Pacific Northwest. Then they went to the lumber yard where it was sawed into sizes that could be used for the construction of Carson's new cottages. Once the buildings were rising, the girls visited the sites regularly, where they talked to the workmen, made notes, took photographs, and put together their own project booklet.³² In this way they learned about the elements of building and the geography of those places which had supplied the materials, at the same time that they had opportunities for practicing their writing and photographic skills. By experiencing the whole construction process, they slowly made the new cottages a part of their own lives. At the same time, they learned to appreciate all the planning, labor, and skills that had gone into making the new homes.

As such projects demonstrated, Carson College, like the Gary schools, utilized resources in the surrounding community whenever possible. Yet another project, one revolving around a unit on water, made a vivid impression on several of the teachers, who recalled it fondly many years later. They and the girls had begun with the Wissahickon Creek, which ran near the campus, and traced it until it emptied into the Schuylkill River. Then they went to the top of the Philadelphia City Hall, where they could see the Schuylkill flowing into the Delaware River several miles to the southeast. Pursuing the Delaware further along its course to the sea, they took a boat trip down the river to Wilmington, Delaware. Other trips found them at a spring where they made lemonade from the water, and at the local water works, where they could see how water was purified and sent on its way to hundreds of homes. The girls also staged a musical play, "How the Singing Water got into the Tub."³³ They shared these experiences with one another (in addition to the projects that they carried out in the classrooms or the cottages) during morning assemblies (what had been called the auditorium periods at Gary).³⁴

In addition to brief accounts of their projects at assembly time, the students continued to record their results through scrapbooks, notebooks, photographs, and publications from their own press, along with numerous plays, pageants, and tableaux. Among such items that have survived is "The Record of Our Mice," as set down by the first and second grades in June, 1926. They described the mice in great detail, including their sleeping and washing habits, and the way they nurtured their young. As successive generations of mice were born, the children named them and created a family tree for their growing rodent

Courtesy of Carson Valley School



"The Agricultural Age," a scene from the play Yesterday and Today, enacted by Carson College girls during the 1920s and 1930s.

family.³⁵ Although the record did not explain the purpose of this exercise, the teacher may have used the mice to help the girls understand something about nutrition, care of the young, and relationships among family members, in addition to exercising their powers of observation.

During the 1926-27 school year the fifth grade did a project on wool and documented each stage with photographs. The pictures showed them shearing the sheep, washing and carding the wool, spinning and dyeing it, and then weaving it into cloth. A separate series of photographs depicted a group of girls dressed up like Native American Indians and sitting in front of teepees while making dyes from local plants that they had collected. Still another set of photographs showed a play called "Yesterday and Today," staged by the eighth grade throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The five acts took audiences through the "Fear Age," the "Pastoral Age," the Agricultural Age," the "Industrial Revolution," and the "Present Day."³⁶

Such dramas allowed the students to "reenact history" at a time when historical reenactments and pageants were very popular in the United States.

During the Progressive Era in particular, they were used to demonstrate a continuity between the past and present, and to show inevitable progress from the past into present and future times. These pageants and reenactments could also convey a nostalgic theme and were sometimes intended to present the idea that the past was in certain ways better than the present.³⁷ This sentiment was not altogether at odds with the progressive ideas of Elsa Ueland, who like many reformers and educators of the day often held ambivalent views of the industrial revolution and the rapid urbanization that accompanied it. Indeed Carson College itself, with its semi-rural location and Gothic Revival architecture, made about as powerful an anti-urban and anti-industrial statement as one could imagine.

Bespeaking this more nostalgic spirit were the medieval pageants and plays that became annual events in the life of Carson College. The most colorful was the May Festival, which received extensive coverage in the Philadelphia newspapers during the early 1920s. The *Public Ledger* account of May 22, 1920 was particularly full and descriptive:

On the hills of Carson College . . . children . . . frolicked yesterday in a May festival. More than 500 persons watched the efforts of six weeks preparation. . . . The procession of May revelers formed at Mother Goose cottage . . . and proceeded to Sherwood Forest, where the "Gooseherd and the Goblin" was presented. . . . From Sherwood Forest the town crier led the visitors to fair Nottingham Town [the lawn behind Mother Goose and red Gables cottages], where the second part was presented. There Robin Hood outwitted the sheriff in the shooting match. Lettie Laughlin, a child of eleven years, was then crowned Queen of the May. All the formality of the court was expressed in these solemn exercises. She was attended by a corps of ladies-in-waiting, who were all gorgeously costumed. While seated on her jeweled throne, ten nimble misses danced the banquet dance before her. The exercises closed with a maypole dance.³⁸

Such celebrations, like so much else at Carson, were integrated into the school's curriculum as vehicles for studying history and culture, as ideas for writing assignments, or as topics for presentation at assemblies. During the period 1927-31, one of the English classes wove the theme of festivals into its work. The girls researched the history of festivals from ancient civilizations (that is, the Egyptians, Chinese, Greeks, and Romans) through the Middle Ages and up into modern times. They also associated certain modern festivals with those of the past, thereby helping them to understand former ages, as well as to see how the past played an important part in fashioning the present. For example, they connected the American Thanksgiving not only with the Pilgrims and other early settlers, but also with harvest celebrations going back to antiquity.³⁹

Besides what transpired in school, many activities for the Carson girls involved

the everyday operations of the institution, especially in the cottages where they lived (usually no more than a dozen girls per cottage and presided over by a housemother). Because the girls lived as well as learned on campus, they had an opportunity to connect the classroom with “home life” far more closely than in other progressive schools where children went home at night to their own families.

As a part of their regular chores at the cottages, the girls cleaned house and kept their bedrooms neat, cooked meals, washed dishes, raked leaves, pulled weeds, clipped shrubbery, pruned trees, and performed many other tasks. These activities were calculated to make them feel that they were part of a family and that their work was valued, thus building self-confidence and self-esteem. By citing educational reformer Maria Montessori as an authority on how such activities could be lifted from the mundane level to one of personal enlightenment, Ueland explained her views on such practical work to the Carson board of directors as early as September, 1918:

Madame Montessori has demonstrated the educational possibilities in ordinary household tasks. We are trying to realize her spirit [here at Carson], to avoid the usual institution[al] mistake of making housework only drudgery, and to make the most of the educational opportunities in each cottage. To this end, the children have all really *cooked*. The breakfast group, the dinner group, and supper group have actually learned to prepare these meals and to put them on the table. There have been some crises, to be sure. Attempts to beat eggs with the shells on, and to cook rice in the tea kettle after the water had been poured out, are [just two examples]. . . . All have had thrilling[,] creative experiences in making certain dishes for the family and for company.

They are also learning something of food values and costs, and of the planning of meals. We want them to learn not only how to carry out a single recipe in a domestic science class, but how to put the meal on the table, everything hot at once, how to plan it within a certain money allowance, how to market intelligently at the ordinary grocery store.⁴⁰

Besides the everyday chores in and around the cottages, the girls participated in the work of the Carson farm (located on the grounds), which produced a great deal of the food consumed at the college. During the summer in particular, the girls were assigned to groups for farm work. They tilled and harvested crops, fed the animals (horses, pigs, chickens, sheep, and cows), and processed and preserved a variety of fruits and vegetables. Accounts of this work often appeared in the student newspaper, known as the *Jabberwock* in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In the edition for December, 1930, a girl recounted her experience digging potatoes one day after school:

One of the farm people would run the tractor with the potato digger hitched on

Courtesy of Carson Valley School



Carson girls canning fruit, early 1920s.

to it. . . . Then everybody would run and try to get the most potatoes in her basket. . . . After almost all the potatoes . . . were picked up, Miss Ueland thought it would be nice to have a picnic. . . . [There were] two nice bon fires with a table near, with hot dogs. We toasted our hot dogs and roasted our apples and had a good time.⁴¹

As this student account notes, much of the children's farm work was tied to some mild form of competition, combined with companionship, cooperation, and a festive reward at the end. Work in the vegetable gardens at each of the cottages involved many of these same elements, with a display of produce and an awarding of prizes in each category at the end of the season.⁴²

In addition to tending gardens, the girls were given some responsibility for

livestock. Beginning in 1924 several of the cottages had their own chickens. The girls collected the eggs, which then ended up on the breakfast table or as ingredients in various recipes. The girls even helped to build the chicken houses. They also raised pigs. When one of the sows gave birth to eight piglets, small groups of girls went together to buy them—on credit—for five dollars each, constructed pig pens, and fed their pigs all summer long with garbage from the cottages. At the end of the season they sold the pigs for an average profit of \$20.00 per animal.⁴³

Some of the jobs that the older girls did on campus were, in fact, part of Carson's program of vocational training. The advancing ages of those girls who had been admitted to Carson in its earliest years also made vocational preparation imperative by 1923. According to Ueland this was the greatest single challenge to the institution: "To fit our girls for independence at eighteen, in the world as it is," she wrote, "is our greatest problem; and if we do it well, it will be our greatest contribution to educational thinking."⁴⁴

Carson particularly emphasized giving the older girls vocational experiences during the summer months, when they were freed from the demands of the regular school year. During the summer of 1922, two girls worked as assistants to Carson's swimming teacher, two helped in school offices, and four worked in the laundry. Others found employment off campus: four went to Philadelphia every day to work in offices; three went into the city for jobs at a children's hospital; two went to nearby Ambler, where they worked at a horticultural school; and two went to New York as apprentices in a school of weaving. In the summer of 1926 fifteen girls had summer jobs at Carson, while ten were employed off campus.⁴⁵

These working girls were not permitted to squander their summer earnings, but were expected to contribute a portion for their room and board at Carson. Allowing the girls to spend their wages as they liked, Ueland feared, would make them "just as extravagant and irresponsible as . . . 'flappers' of the present time. . . ."⁴⁶ As an extension of this concern, Ueland advocated a "pretty strict parental control [by the Carson housemothers] . . . with regard to the expenditure of money, as well as the clothing worn, and the use of powder, paint, etc., by either our high school or working girls."⁴⁷

In an article about the Carson program in general, school director Phoebe Allnutt set down the many positive benefits of the girls' work experiences:

It teaches them to be resourceful, . . . and resourcefulness means a trained intelligence. . . . There is something about work that fills a real need that is both stabilizing and satisfying. . . . Most important of all, perhaps, this type of program makes possible a far greater variety and richness of experience for children than can be had otherwise. Without a variety of experience, children cannot learn to make choices. . . . A child whose school life is too closely directed does not have a chance to develop this power, and so, when face to face with a decision to be

Courtesy of Carson Valley School



Nursery school children, 1920s.

made, will probably follow the line of least resistance.⁴⁸

Meanwhile Carson had opened a new program that offered opportunities for vocational training on campus. This was a nursery school for children in the surrounding neighborhood—both boys and girls—under the age of six. Its purpose was to give on-site training to the older girls in child care, who might later find jobs in this area. Even for girls who did not pursue child care as a profession, work in the nursery school would be an invaluable experience for those who might become mothers themselves, especially since they were not growing up in households with infants or toddlers.⁴⁹

The curriculum of the Carson College Nursery School was as progressive as the program for the orphans themselves. Indeed, the whole idea of nursery

school, or play school as it was often called in the early years, had emerged out of the progressive education movement. It emphasized the need for a child-centered environment where small children could use their own creative imaginations to explore the world around them and make sense of it through play. In the words of Lawrence A. Cremin, the play school was "a child-sized community in which the inhabitants, through play, might grasp the essential truths of the universe."⁵⁰

The first director of Carson's nursery school, C. Madeleine Dixon, believed that even the youngest children needed to have the chance to explore the world in a safe and affirming environment. They thereby gained self-confidence and self-esteem by learning new skills and insights at their own pace. Thus according to the report on the Carson nursery program, drawn up by Dixon in September, 1926, children would experience the "joy of finding out things" on their own. Though the children were well cared for, Dixon added, the staff was careful "not to superimpose learning."⁵¹ In Carson's country setting, Dixon was also happy to report, children could experience "the constant changes of out door things where . . . [they] can know a little of the fundamental hardships through being in a world where speed and the use of machinery are not inevitable."⁵²

Dixon's report went on to list some further activities of the nursery school. Under "individual chores," the children hung up their clothes, gathered and changed flowers on the tables, fetched wood for the stove, and helped to serve lunch. "Group pursuits" included feeding the chickens, cleaning the aquarium, and tending gardens. "Nature study" led them to explore along the Wissahickon Creek, to care for pets, to hunt dye stuffs on the Carson property, and to collect clay from stream banks. Like the orphan girls in the primary division at Carson, the nursery school children tried their hands at construction. In 1927-28 they built a new playhouse. With considerable help from the teachers and workmen, one would suppose, the children mixed cement, put up a stone fireplace (complete with spikes for hanging pots and pans), and pounded shingles onto the roof. They also sang songs, played percussion instruments, put on little plays, and shared their projects with the older children during assembly time.⁵³

Besides helping preschool children discover themselves, yet another explicit purpose of opening the nursery school was to link Carson College and the local community. By the spring of 1925, at the end of its first year of operation, the nursery school was drawing non-orphaned children (ages two and a half to six and a half) from Flourtown, Chestnut Hill, Germantown (in lower northwest Philadelphia), and the Oak Lane section of the city.⁵⁴ The following year its enrollment reached approximately 100 youngsters, and by 1929 the nursery school was accepting children as young as eighteen months.⁵⁵ Parents paid only enough annually to cover the expenses of the program (\$150 per

child in 1928), for the main purpose of the nursery school was not to raise revenue for the institution.⁵⁶ Yet the nursery school would more than pay its way by putting Carson girls in touch with local parents and in providing them with an avenue for child care positions in area homes. It also enabled Carson to maintain a positive profile in the local community.

The nursery school was one of many ways that Ueland attempted to forge connections between Carson College and its neighbors. Upon being hired in 1916 she had hoped to join with the local school system to forge a cooperative educational program along the lines of the Gary Plan, with Carson girls joining the youngsters in Flourtown for more traditional studies in the village elementary school and then having both sets of children go to the Carson campus for more non-traditional offerings. Once she had established such a model in Flourtown, Ueland hoped to disseminate the Gary Plan—or at least the most important aspects of it—throughout the region, including the Philadelphia public schools. But the conservative local school board would have none of the idea, nor were school authorities in Philadelphia receptive to the Gary Plan. Although Ueland was disappointed with the school board's decision, she was soon excited to realize that Carson College now had the freedom to shape a progressive program without interference from local opinion.⁵⁷ However, Carson did not attempt to open its own high school, and thus its girls attended the Springfield Township High School in Flourtown after it opened in 1924.⁵⁸ At Springfield High they were able to participate in all the extracurricular activities and to make friends among classmates from the village and surrounding township.

Yet another avenue of connection between the Carson girls and the community was attendance at local churches and Sunday schools (religious instruction being a directive of the Carson will, in any case).⁵⁹ The girls (or their former guardians) were free to select a church and were encouraged to make friends among the various congregations, and in fact many of them became active in the various youth groups at church. Some of the Sunday school teachers took a special interest in the Carson girls and did whatever they could to help them along the way.

While church, Sunday school, and high school took Carson girls into the community, Ueland tried hard to provide additional ways, beyond the nursery school, to bring the community into Carson. One of these, again reminiscent of the Gary Plan, was the community library that Carson opened along Bethlehem Pike (the village's main street) in a rented house that Ueland dubbed Darwin Hall (in honor of the famous evolutionist Charles Darwin, whom she much admired). Since Flourtown had no library at the time, the facility was well received after it opened in February, 1919. It provided an informal meeting place for the Carson girls and their neighbors.⁶⁰

Even more significant was the community playground that Carson College

built along Bethlehem Pike near the library, on a large vacant lot that it owned. It contained swings, seesaws, sliding boards, volley ball nets, basketball hoops, chin-up bars, climbing equipment, a baseball diamond, and a running track. In 1924 Carson even contemplated building a swimming pool on the playground, which would likewise be open to the entire Flourtown community. Though the pool project was never carried out, the board did vote money in the summer of 1920 to construct an outdoor dance floor on the playground for both Carson girls and village youngsters.⁶¹

Although there was no pool at Carson, Ueland did succeed in organizing a community swimming hole along the Wissahickon Creek just north of the campus. Swimming had been taking place for many years at this bend in the creek, where water piled up naturally to form a wide pool of moderate depth. Because of drownings, accidents, and some rowdiness at the site, Ueland decided soon after Carson opened to provide life guards and supervision at the creek during the summer months. Carson also cleared the site of limbs and other debris each spring and built bath houses for changing into and out of swimsuits. The creek became a major source of recreation for the Carson girls every summer and yet another point of conjunction between Carson and the village.⁶²

During the winter months Carson offered "gymnasium instruction" to the older Flourtown boys. Village boys and girls in their teens were regularly invited to dances and other parties at Carson, which they reportedly attended in substantial numbers. And Carson used every opportunity to lend its facilities for meetings or other activities by local organizations.⁶³

During her early years at Carson, Elsa Ueland often reflected on her many challenges in presiding over an orphanage for girls. She shared these reflections in interviews for newspapers and magazines, in articles that she herself wrote for the periodical press, and in talks before professional meetings and before the Carson staff itself. Running through all these is an emphasis upon what might be called the non-material needs of each child. She was not arguing that physical beauty and ample shelter were unimportant in providing for the emotional development of children. Rather, she believed that too many orphanages and child-care institutions emphasized their physical plants and other material requirements at the expense of less visible but very crucial elements for a healthy development. In a paper that she delivered in 1924 before a meeting of the Children's Division of the National Conference on Social Work, she declared,

We are more and more evaluating our work [today] in terms of non-material . . . standards. We are thinking less of our front lawns and bronze gateways,—thinking even less of our infirmary equipment,—and more of the subtler, non-material, emotional needs of children.⁶⁴

Courtesy of Carson Valley School



Learning through play about limited means and economic choices, early 1920s.

In an article entitled “Celery Child or Strawberry Child,” published by *The Survey* magazine, a periodical that was widely read among social scientists, reformers, and progressive educators of the day, Ueland elaborated on what she considered to be the five most important emotional needs of all children, including those in an institution like Carson.⁶⁵ The first was a “need for ‘mother,’ or for some person who feels like mother.” Carson College attempted to meet this requirement through its cottage housemothers. Second, the child should have “a place that feels like home.” At Carson children were given the freedom to decorate their own bedrooms, to rearrange the furniture “until they finally feel that the room and everything in it fits them better.” A third necessity, “economic experience,” was closely related to this sense of belonging in a homelike atmosphere. Helping to make choices about the cottage budget reinforced a child’s sense of attachment to a household at the same time that it helped her to learn about limited means and economic choices.

The fourth need, that for “freedom”—and the fifth, that for “adventure”—were also connected. In speaking of freedom, Ueland actually meant an

autonomy and independence, combined with a sense of civic responsibility, that should belong to every family unit. Carson provided for this by planning the girls' activities at home as well as with the Flourtown community. The child's urge for adventure, on the other hand, had much to do with individual freedom and self-initiative. Carson thus made a conscious effort not to be too protective, to allow the girls to explore the world on their own—one of the hallmarks of progressive education. In her concluding remarks about such adventures, Ueland summed up the entire article by comparing child rearing to the cultivation of two very different kinds of plants. The choice was between what she called the "celery child" and the "strawberry child":

The celery type of young girl may be very attractive (made tender and delicate by being shut away from contact with the elements), she cannot fight her way alone in a stormy world at the age of eighteen. The strawberry grower hardens his plants by exposing them to the cold before the final transplanting from the hot bed to the garden. It takes more courage to expose growing children to the blasts of outside experience than to expose strawberry plants. But such a course may be the best assurance for a strong and hardy future.⁶⁶

In stressing the emotional and developmental needs of her Carson girls, Ueland again showed herself to be in the forefront of the progressive education movement, which in the early 1920s was beginning to stress what was then called "mental hygiene."⁶⁷

Ueland's other published articles during this period included "Every Child—Where and How he Plays" (1925) and "The Rights of the Child" (1925).⁶⁸ Ueland also participated in professional meetings, where she was in great demand as a speaker. She addressed the Milwaukee Conference on Social Work in 1924 and the National Conference of Social Work in 1924 and 1926. In addition, Ueland and other members of the staff put together a photographic exhibit about Carson College for the Progressive Education Conference in 1926. (At about the same time Ueland began serving on the executive committee of the Progressive Education Association, the leading national organization of progressive educators.) In the spring of 1925 Ueland gave a talk before the Alumnae Conference at Vassar College.⁶⁹ Other meetings and conferences took place at Carson—at Ueland's invitation. For example the Institute of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare came for three days in July, 1925, and in December, 1924, Stanwood Cobb, the president of the Progressive Education Association, gave a talk at Carson. Welcome too were visits from college and university students. Education classes from Swarthmore College came to tour and observe in March, 1925, and that May students from the Pennsylvania School of Social Work did likewise.⁷⁰

Students, educators, and the general public could also learn about Carson

from a number of positive stories that appeared in newspapers and magazines of the period. These included the *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine* (February 14, 1926), *The Christian Science Monitor* (December 21, 1928), and *The Survey* (April 1, 1924). The latter carried an article entitled "The New Pied Pipers" in which author Neva R. Deardorff compared Carson with several other well-known orphanages, including Philadelphia's Girard College and the Hershey Industrial School in Hershey, Pennsylvania. In her opinion Carson was by far the most impressive, "one of the pace makers in the field of institutional care of children."⁷¹

The Pennsylvania Secretary of Welfare, Ellen C. Potter, who was responsible for seeing that institutions like Carson were inspected on a regular basis, praised the school as well. In a letter dated January 10, 1926, the secretary had nothing but congratulations to shower upon Carson College:

We visit this institution, as we have written [to] you before, not to 'inspect' it in the sense that we must supervise a very large number of institutions throughout the State, but rather to learn what new and interesting things have been done since the time of our last visit, as well as to get concrete examples that we may take to other institutions. Needless to say, we have always succeeded in our quest, through the generous cooperation of Miss Ueland and her devoted assistants.⁷²

By the end of its first decade of operation, Carson College had made its mark nationally as a highly successful progressive institution. Few, including Elsa Ueland herself, had any reason to believe that the situation would change anytime soon. But a number of factors by the middle 1930s forced Ueland and her staff to scale back their program dramatically. Of foremost importance was the Great Depression, made worse in Carson's case by some particularly bad investments by the trustees of the Carson Estate during the late 1920s. After reaching a high of \$175,000 in 1928, income to the institution plummeted to just \$34,000 in 1935. The situation became so dire that Ueland and her board were forced to close their on-site elementary school in 1937 and to place the girls in the local public school.⁷³

During the late 1930s and early 1940s Carson also began to experience serious enrollment problems that stemmed from several sources: greater life expectancy for parents, the availability of Aid to Dependent Children through the Social Security Act of 1935, and a mounting preference for foster care (over institutions) within the child-welfare community. All these factors meant that there were fewer orphans as time went on—and especially full orphans, as directed by the Carson will. But Ueland's progressive outlook, which had always placed an emphasis upon addressing real and changing needs, helped the institution survive. In the late 1930s Carson College obtained leave from the courts to admit half orphans, that is children who had one parent still alive,

and in the early 1940s Carson began a long evolution towards admitting both boys and girls. In 1965, after Ueland had stepped down as president but while she remained as a member of the board of directors, Carson obtained permission from the courts to admit African American youngsters. During the past three decades the institution had also taken more and more children who were referred to it by public welfare agencies, with board payments coming from the various counties.

Although it has faced many difficulties, the Carson Valley School, as it was known after 1946, is still a viable child-care institution as the twentieth century nears its end. By contrast, most of the orphanages that had existed at the time of Carson's founding have been forced to close. Of course, Carson's residents are no longer orphans in any traditional sense of the word, and are now being defined as "neglected and dependent children." Most of them have suffered from some form of abuse and come to Carson with serious school problems. Although they require a much more structured environment than the orphans of the 1920s or 1930s, Carson still seeks to equip them with the practical life skills that they need to cope in the real world. In that sense the progressive spirit lives on at Carson and forms one of its most important legacies.

Notes

1. *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, March 11, 1911.
2. *Philadelphia Record*, October 16, 1907; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, October 16, 1907.
3. *Bulletin*, October 23 and 24, 1907.
4. Will of Robert N. Carson, p. 11. See n. 24.
5. *Ibid.*
6. These legal disputes were reported extensively in the Philadelphia press. For an account of the final settlement see *Public Ledger*, March 9, 1914.
7. On Kelsey see Sandra L. Tatman and Roger W. Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects, 1700-1930* (Boston, 1985), pp. 437-438.
8. On this matter see Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia, 1986) and R. J. Clark (ed.), *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1876-1916* (Princeton, 1972).
9. Although Elsa Ueland did not set down any systematic recollections about her family or childhood years, other members of the family more than made up for her. There is a work that Elsa's sister, Brenda Ueland, wrote about their mother, entitled "Clara Ueland of Minnesota," an unpublished typescript that may be found in the archives of the Carson Valley School. Brenda's own autobiography, simply entitled *Me* (New York, 1939), likewise contains much material on Elsa's childhood in Minneapolis. Their brother Sigurd Ueland issued his own memoirs in 1971, called "Sense and Senility," a mimeographed copy of which has been deposited in the Carson Valley Archives. Their father Andreas Ueland also authored an autobiography, published under the title *Recollections of an Immigrant* (New York, 1929).
10. *Who's Who in America*, 1928-1929, XV, 2097; *Bulletin*, November 24, 1916; *Public Ledger*, November 24, 1916.
11. Ueland's years as a settlement house worker in New York (1909-1914) were recorded in the diaries that she kept as well as in frequent letters to her parents. These may be found in the Carson Valley Archives.
12. A condensed version of her research was published as "The Shirtwaist Trade" in *The Journal of Political Economy*, December 1910, pp. 816-828.
13. *Who's Who*, 1928-1929, XV, 2097.
14. Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* (New York, 1967).
15. Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist: The Emergence of Social Work as a Career, 1880-1930* (New York, 1969), pp. 36-37; Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York, 1961); Davis, *Spearheads for Reform*, pp. 53-54.
16. Ueland's investigations resulted in a report entitled "A Study of Eighty-Seven 'Working Paper' Boys Who Left One School in District 9, Manhattan, in the Year 1911-1912."
17. *Who's Who*, XV, 2097; Raymond A. Mohl to Elsa Ueland, October 11, 1973; Ronald D. Cohen and Raymond A. Mohl, *The Paradox of Progressive Education: The Gary Plan and Urban Schooling* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1979), p. 24.
18. Dewey himself had high praise for the Gary Plan. See John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow* (New York, 1925), pp. 182-194. Another booster of the Gary Plan was reformer and critic Randolph Bourne, a writer for *The New Republic*, who published *The Gary Schools* (Boston, 1916). Not everyone who wrote about the plan was so positive. The most important of its detractors were Abraham Flexner and Frank P. Bachman, *The Gary Schools: A General Account* (New York, 1918).
19. Adeline and Murray Levine, "Introduction," to Randolph Bourne, *The Gary Schools* (Cambridge, Ma., 1970 [1916]), pp. xii-xxxix.
20. *Public Ledger*, November 14, 1916.
21. The author took these figures from various Annual Reports and minutes of the board of directors.
22. Cremin, *Transformation of the School*, p. viii.
23. The best comprehensive work on progressive education remains Cremin, *Transformation of the School*, cited above. Also enlightening is Arthur Zilversmit, *Changing Schools: Progressive Education Theory and Practice, 1930-1960* (Chicago, 1993). On Dewey as a reformer see Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York, 1995).
24. Notes on School Program, 1920-22. All primary sources on Carson College cited in this article, with the exception of the minutes of the board of directors (and the minutes of the various board committees) are located in the archives of the Carson Valley School at Flourtown, Pennsylvania. These included various school publications, reports, memoranda, teaching plans, student scrapbooks, correspondence, and the like.
25. *Ibid.*

26. *Flourtown: A Study by the Eighth Grade* (Flourtown, Pa., 1928).
27. Ueland, President's Annual Report, January 19, 1923.
28. Ueland to her mother, July, 1921.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *The Jabberwock*, June, 1927.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Student Scrapbook, "Our New Cottages."
33. Harriet R. Smith to Ueland, April 10, 1941; Greta M. Murray to Ueland (undated but probably written in early 1941), Notes on Trips.
34. A good description of these assemblies appeared in a document called "Notes on School Program, 1921-1922."
35. "The Record of Our Mice," Little School, June, 1926.
36. "Yesterday and Today," School Program, 1927-31.
37. See, in particular, David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1990), pp. 71-101.
38. *Public Ledger*, May 20, 1920.
39. Festivals, School Programs, 1927-31.
40. Ueland to the Management Committee, Report: July 1 to September 20, 1918.
41. Alice May Steiner, "A Potato Party," *Jabberwock*, December, 1930.
42. Management Committee Minutes, April 19, 1922, Urban Archives, Temple University. The board minutes through 1979, as well as the minutes of the various board committees, may all be found at this repository. Copies for some years are also in the archives of the Carson Valley School.
43. *Ibid.*, March 19, 1924.
44. Management Committee Minutes, February 17, 1922.
45. Vocational Report, November 16, 1926.
46. Management Committee Minutes, September 26, 1923.
47. *Ibid.*, November 26, 1924.
48. Phoebe C. Allnutt, "Adventures in an Institution," *The Family*, June 1923, n.p.
49. Memorandum to board, undated but probably sometime in 1928.
50. Cremin, *Transformation of the School*, p. 204.
51. Dixon also published a book that was based almost entirely on her experiences with the Carson College Nursery School, *Children are Like That* (New York, 1930).
52. The Carson College Nursery School (brochure), September, 1926.
53. *Ibid.*; *The Jabberwock*, February, 1928.
54. Present School Groups and their Work, Teachers' Meetings, 1924-25.
55. Ueland to her father, July 6, 1929.
56. Board Minutes, October 17, 1924, May 18, 1928; Allnutt to Mrs. Gould, June 19, 1928.
57. Ueland to Russell L. Pullinger, Secretary, Springfield Township School Board, May 20, 1918; Pullinger to Ueland, July 15 and 25, 1918, October 2, 1918; Ueland to her mother, July 16, September 10, 1918.
58. In 1923 they had attended the Ambler High School, several miles away in the village of Ambler, until the Springfield High School could be completed.
59. Board Minutes, September 20, 1918.
60. *Ibid.*, February 19, 1919.
61. Management Committee Minutes, May 15, 1925.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Board Minutes, May 20, 1930.
64. Ueland, "A Re-Evaluation of Methods of Child Care: The Case of Children in Institutions," June 26, 1924.
65. Ueland, "Celery Child or Strawberry Child: Handicaps of Institutional Life for Children," *The Survey*, February 15, 1924. (This article would appear to have been a reworking of her Annual Report of February 17, 1922, which she had entitled "Handicaps of Institutional Life.")
66. *Ibid.*
67. Zilversmit, *Changing Schools*, pp. 15-16.
68. These appeared, respectively, in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, September 1925, pp. 1-6 and *Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Session of the Minnesota State Conference, Second Session of the Institute of Social Work*, September 19-25, 1925.
69. Management Committee Minutes, June 13, 1924, September 18, 1924, March 19, 1926, April 16, 1926; Board Minutes, January 21, 1927, April 15, 1927; entry for Elsa Ueland in *Leaders in Education: A Biographical Directory* (New York, 1932), p. 945.
70. Management Committee Minutes, December 12, 1924, March 18, 1925.
71. Neva R. Deardorff. "The New Pied Pipers," *The Survey*, April 1, 1924, p. 36.
72. Ellen C. Potter, M.D., Secretary of Welfare, to John Gribbel, June 10, 1926.
73. Board Minutes, September 22, 1937.