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History Note

The awful price of freedom

by Luther Granquist

In May 1975 the Minnesota legislature repealed a law authorizing sterilization of "feeble-minded" persons committed to the guardianship of the Commissioner of Public Welfare and a law prohibiting a marriage if one of the persons was "imbecile, feeble-minded, or insane." The sterilization law was passed in 1925; the marriage prohibition several years before that. Both laws reflected the strong feelings of the time that mental retardation was hereditary and that "feeble-minded" persons were a threat to society as a whole.

In a speech in 1928 about Heredity as a Factor in Feeble-Mindedness, Dr. J. M. Murdoch, Superintendent of the School for the Feeble-Minded at Faribault, stated that the "lives of feeble-minded persons should be made as satisfactory and complete as our most advanced methods can make them, but we must see that they do not propagate." He said that only those "feeble-minded" persons who had been trained at the institution so that they could get along with supervision in the "outside world" would be considered for sterilization. By the time he spoke in 1928, 155 persons had been sterilized at Faribault with the result, in his words, that "at least 155 lines of descent carrying defective gene have been cut off."

Frederick Kuhlmann, a psychologist who was Director of Research for the Minnesota State Board of Control, the predecessor of the Department of Human Services, agreed in a speech in 1927 that "reproduction is effectively prevented by segregation in an institution." But he emphasized that simply having been sterilized was not a reason to discharge someone from guardianship or from the institution: "To sterilize an immoral moron and then turn her loose is unthinkable. To do so would aggravate an evil much greater than that of feeble-mindedness." We must remember, he added, "that a sterilized moron is still a moron"

From 1925 to 1945 more than 2200 women and men were sterilized in Minnesota. Although the law required consent of a spouse or next of kin, if available, the practice was to sterilize persons before they would be discharged. Faribault's medical and nursing staff held regular "case conferences" to discuss possible placements out of the institution. The minutes of these conferences in 1942 routinely included entries like, "...recommend sterilization and concur in the plan of the welfare board to place her in her aunt's home." After World War II, the number of sterilizations decreased and, as attitudes changed, sterilizations were rarely performed after 1960.

From 1925 until 1959 Mildred Thomson was the person who ultimately exercised state guardianship powers. Speaking shortly after the sterilization law was passed, she emphasized that the county social workers providing "outside supervision" (outside the state institution) must actually be "interested in the likes and dislikes, joys and sorrows of the ward" She admonished them not to speak of "the feeble-minded" in the abstract, but consider each person individually. But she accepted without apparent question the need for sterilization. With sterilization, she said, "we do not have to consider the result of a possible evasion of supervision ... another illegitimate and possible



Mildred Thomson

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