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## Author didn't disguise contempt for her subjects

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by [Luther Granquist](#)



State School for the Feeble Minded

In his 1910 biennial report, Dr. Arthur C. Rogers, the superintendent of the Minnesota School for the Feeble Minded and Colony for Epileptics at Faribault, requested funding for field workers to compile detailed family histories of residents at that institution. Rogers emphasized the need for accurate collection of information which would be of scientific value, facts which would, as he stated, “promote the cause of prevention” of “mental deficiency.” The Minnesota Legislature provided funds for the expenses involved and the Eugenics Records Office in New York provided two trained field workers. During the next several years, Sadee Devitt and Marie Curial traveled throughout Minnesota and compiled histories of 549 families of persons who had been sent to Faribault. Rogers died early in 1917. His research assistant, Maud Merrill, compiled an account of several of these families living in an area of ravines and caves near the Mississippi River, probably in Goodhue County. She stated that this account was one of a series that Rogers had planned. He was named senior author when the book was published in 1919. The book’s subtitle, *A True Story of the Social Aspects of Feeble-Mindedness*, suggests some kind of scientific presentation, but the title, *Dwellers in the Vale of Siddem*, which refers to the location of the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, proves otherwise. Merrill did not disguise her contempt for most members of these families, whom she called “grandchildren of the devil.” She noted that other people in the area called them “timber rats” and “bark eaters.” She called them “ugly cancers of the social system” and a nest of “social incompetents, degenerates, defectives, and criminals.” She used descriptions such as “miserable reprobate,” “stupid,” and “shiftless.” All this to warn the people of Minnesota that “from the standpoint of eugenic consideration the existence of such communities as the Vale of Siddem makes our present efforts to care for the feeble-minded quite idle.”

After Rogers died, the field studies did not continue. Nothing further was done with the family history data until, years later, Sheldon and Elizabeth Reed, geneticists at the University of Minnesota, updated it and published a detailed analysis.

Merrill went to Stanford, got a Ph. D., and spent an illustrious career there revising the Stanford-Binet intelligence test.

*Dwellers* never attained the notoriety of comparable books like *The Jukes* or *The Kallikak Family*, but it stands today as a stark reminder of the attitude in that era which well-regarded and highly respected professionals had toward many persons with disabilities and their families. *Dwellers in the Vale of Siddem* is available on the Developmental Disabilities Council website at [www.mnddc.org/past/pdf-index.html](http://www.mnddc.org/past/pdf-index.html) A reprinted version is available at [www.kessinger.net](http://www.kessinger.net)

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