

The Fourteenth State

Vermont's eugenics experience of the 1920s

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Those involved today in genetic engineering -- designed to eliminate genes that produce certain diseases -- might do well to consider the eugenics experience that occupied many Vermonters and others in the 1920s and early 1930s. The movement was thoroughly researched in "Breeding Better Vermonters," by Nancy L. Gallagher, published in 1999 by the University Press of New England.

The intellectual thrust of this movement was driven by its scholar-promoter, Prof. Henry F. "Harry" Perkins, who headed the University of Vermont zoology department.

As author Gallagher describes it, Perkins's vision of the study of eugenics in Vermont coincided with the interests of such state agencies as the Department of Public Welfare. This was a time when Vermont operated institutions like the Brandon State School for the Feeble-minded and the Waterbury State Hospital for the Insane (both were later renamed). These and other institutions such as the State Prison at Windsor were studied to develop a census of the "feeble-minded" and other "defectives" who, it was thought, should not be allowed to reproduce. Other studies sought "pockets of degeneracy" in certain rural hollows and listed "notorious families" whose genealogies would disclose in-breeding.

The author draws parallels among Prof. Perkins's interests, demographic shifts in early 20th century Vermont, a general anxiety about declines in population and the economy, and threats ostensibly posed by those of different ethnic origins and traditions. Indeed, the Yankee-oriented folks who promoted eugenics clearly harbored suspicions about French-Canadians, Irish, Italians, or "others" who had migrated to Vermont during the previous half-century or so.

Hard to believe today, but this contagious enthusiasm led in 1931 to Vermont's Sterilization Law, passed by votes of 22-8 in the Senate and 140-75 in the House (the House then had 246 members), and supported by Governor John Weeks. It was titled "An Act for Human Betterment by Voluntary Sterilization." Section 1 read:

"Henceforth it shall be the policy of the state to prevent procreation of idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded or insane persons, when the public welfare,

and the welfare of idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded or insane persons likely to procreate, can be improved by voluntary sterilization as herein provided.”

Among opponents were the Catholic Church in general and the Catholic Daughters of America in particular. Pope Pius XI had unequivocally opposed eugenics as well as any form of family planning that interfered with natural functions of the body.

Eugenics spread by implication, author Gallagher explains, to the Vermont Commission on Country Life, a statewide effort to boost the economy and stimulate the quality of intellectual life. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, the Arlington author, was prominent in this attempt to renew a Vermont that had lost population and hundreds of hill farms. She was criticized for even a tangential link to eugenics.

While Vermont was a leader in the eugenics movement, by no means was it alone, for 23 other states also passed sterilization laws during this time. Many took justification in Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’s 1927 opinion, rendered in *Buck v. Bell*, that sterilization of mentally deficient persons, like vaccination for smallpox, fell within police powers of the state. This is all spelled out in Nancy Gallagher’s book, which was an expansion of her master’s thesis on bioethics at UVM.

In Vermont and everywhere else, enthusiasm for eugenics was fairly quickly eclipsed by the rise of Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany. Yet it remains a cautionary tale.