

SOCIAL CHANGE: HULL HOUSE

An economy makes progress when people have a better standard of living—more of the things they need to live. Many innovations such as the building of the railroads benefited many Americans. Still, at every time in American history, some Americans have been left out of the general progress or even have been hurt by it. Throughout that history, though, some Americans have worked to bring about reforms, to introduce social changes that would give more people a greater share in the economy. These reformers have not worked for profit themselves. What are the reasons for their innovations? Read about conditions one reformer reacted to, and then decide how she might have brought about an innovation in society.

Jane Addams was reformer who worked in Chicago and who had an impact beyond the city. In 1915, she founded the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. In 1931, she became the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. But it is her work in Chicago that we will look at here, work that began in the late 1800s.

In 1889, Jane Addams wrote about a poor neighborhood in Chicago:

Hull House once stood in the suburbs, but the city has steadily grown around it and its site now has corners on three or four foreign colonies. Between Halsted Street and the river live about ten thousand Italians...to the south on Twelve Street are many Germans, and side streets are given over almost entirely to Polish and Russian Jews. Still farther south, these Jewish colonies merge into a huge Bohemian colony, so vast that Chicago ranks as the third Bohemian city in the world. To the northeast are many Canadian-French, clannish in spite of their long residence in America, and to the north are Irish and first generation Americans. On the streets directly west and farther north are well-to-do English speaking families, many of whom own their houses and have lived in the neighborhood for years; one man is still living in his old farmhouse...

...The streets are inexpressibly dirty, the number of schools inadequate, sanitary legislation unenforced, the street lighting bad, the paving miserable and altogether lacking in the alleys and smaller streets, and the stables foul beyond description. Hundreds of houses are connected with the street sewer...The older and richer inhabitants seem anxious to move away...They make room for newly arrived immigrants who are densely ignorant of civic duties...An unscrupulous contractor regards no basement as too dark, no table loft too foul, no rear shanty too provisional, to tenement room too small for his workroom, as these conditions imply low rental.

To understand Jane Addams' work, it is important to understand the problems she faced trying to bring about change in this neighborhood.

1. What kinds of problems would immigrants to Chicago have faced in 1900?
2. The people who lived in the Hull House neighborhood were not alike. What kinds of difficulties would those social differences have caused Jane Addams as she tried to organize a program to improve the neighborhood?

Case Study: American Economic Development

SOCIAL CHANGE (continued)

Jane Addams set up a program of education, health support, and day care at a building in Chicago called Hull House. She also spent a lot of time at City Hall demanding improvements in poor neighborhoods. Here are some of the changes she brought about:

--She maintained three baths in the basement of the Hull House during the first two summers, and based on the need she demonstrated for those baths, the city built the first public bathhouse in Chicago.

--She and Ellen Gates Starr transformed Hull House from a family home into the first settlement house in the United States, a complex of thirteen buildings, housing a kindergarten, gymnasium, theater, art museum, boys club, and rooms for classes, lectures and social and political meetings.

Questions to Discuss:

- A. What skills would Jane Addams have needed to succeed?
- B. What reasons might have motivated her to work for these social changes?
- C. What resistance did she probably encounter?
- D. Look at the list of accomplishments. Some, such as the kindergarten, clearly meet a community need. The kindergarten gave supervision and education that young children need. But other projects, such as the theater and art museum, might not be on the priority list for some social reformers. And three bathtubs might seem like a very small change. What do Jane Addam's projects show about what was important to her?
- E. What impact do you think her accomplishments had on the community?
- F. Some people at City Hall may have welcomed Jane Addams, but others may have said "here comes that woman again." Not everyone welcomes a social reformer, and such a person may be difficult to deal with. What social reformers are at work in your community now, and how do people in government, business, labor, and the community in general perceive them?

Now, consider your own community.

1. What economic problems exist? Write a description of them similar to Jane Addams' profile of Chicago slums in 1889. Be sure to include social problems such as gangs, drugs, and crime. Those social problems have economic impact. Discuss that impact as you describe the problems.
2. What kinds of innovations would improve the community in terms of those problems?
3. What kinds of difficulties would someone face trying to bring about those innovations?
4. How—and why—might a member of your community bring about improvements despite resistance?