

Looking Towards Rural America: Fitter Family Contests, Eugenics & the Modern 1920's

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Headlined “Blue Ribbon is Possibility for Humans,” a United Press article on the 1914 National Conference for Race Betterment drew attention to a speech in which Dr. John Harvey Kellogg anticipated the development of “human stock shows.”¹ According to the article, Kellogg, a founder of the Race Betterment Association, “advocated tacking human pedigrees to every perfect individual” with “blue ribbons for the most perfectly developed.” Though the news surely appeared sensational to some readers, it remarkably foreshadowed what was to come in the American eugenics movement. Along with eliminating the “feebleminded” through restrictive policies such as immigration restriction, anti-miscegenation and compulsory sterilization laws, eugenicists also aimed to promote the health and reproduction of those deemed biologically “fit.” While much of this brand of “positive eugenics” consisted of moral exhortation, it also became a cultural phenomenon in the form of “Fitter Family” contests, not unlike the “human stock contests” that Kellogg had envisioned.

Held at state and county fairs across the country throughout the 1920's, “Fitter Family” contests exported eugenic ideals to rural white families. The competition was not meant to be entertainment for fairgoers but a scientific event aimed at promoting the importance of both personal hygiene and good genes for a proper upbringing. Yet the choice of the farm family as the model for improving health and heredity points to the contests' significance beyond the history of eugenics as a marker of the cultural tensions in 1920's American society. While

¹ “Blue Ribbon is Possibility for Humans.” United Press. *Aberdeen Daily Press*, Jan. 10, 1914.

eugenicists, child welfare activists and medical specialists aimed to improve rural health with modern science, they also used eugenics to appeal to the nostalgic ideal of the agrarian family. The popularity of “Fitter Family” contests among farming communities reflected the conflicting desires of progressive reformers to conserve traditional values of the home and family while negotiating the modernizing impulse of the 1920’s.

In 1920, the first Fitter Family contest took place at the Kansas Free Fair in Topeka. Organized by Florence Sherbon, a physician, and Mary Watts, a director of the Iowa Parent-Teacher Association, the contest originated out of their experience hosting “Better Baby” contests.² As early as the 1908 Louisiana State Fair, women concerned about child welfare held health competitions for infants, awarding the healthiest babies a certificate and trophy cup.³ Despite some similarities to 19th century child beauty pageants, the contests celebrated scientific expertise as pediatricians conducted anthropometric analyses and variations of the Binet-Simon intelligence test to judge the physical, mental and social development of the participating children.⁴ Thus, while the women who organized the contests were typically not physicians, they shared a Progressive Era faith in science and objective knowledge.

By 1913, the *Woman’s Home Companion* magazine had created a “Better Babies Bureau” to sponsor such contests resulting in a nationwide movement with contests being held in all but three states by the next year.⁵ The popularity and mass production of “Better Baby” contests also resulted in standardization. Out of concern over the mutability of the judging criteria, the

² Laura Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

³ Steven Seldon, “Transforming Better Babies into Fitter Families: Archival Resources and the History of the American Eugenics Movement, 1908–1930,” (2005) *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 1492(2), 199-225. Seldon reports that the first Better Baby contest was held at the 1908 Louisiana State Fair in Shreveport under the title “Scientific Baby Contest” but other historians have cited the 1911 Iowa State Fair (see Laura Lovett) or the 1913 Colorado State Fair (see Richard Meckel).

⁴ Seldon, “Transforming Better Babies into Fitter Families,” 207-209.

⁵ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 136. Alexandra M. Stern, “Making Better Babies: Public Health and Race Betterment in Indiana, 1920-1935,” *American Journal of Public Health* (May 2002), 748.

American Medical Association and the Children's Bureau developed a standardized scorecard to determine the winning babies.⁶ Better Baby contests reflected and contributed to the transformation of child welfare into a scientific specialty and a health industry. However, at the same time, they not only ensured that children's health remained an area accessible to mothers but rendered it central to the responsibilities of motherhood.

Although Better Baby contests were for infants, they ultimately targeted their mothers. Armed with knowledge about their children's health, mothers could take steps to prevent illness and take pride in their child's development. By raising awareness of the importance of infant health and development, Better Baby contests reflected social scientists' strategy to reduce infant mortality through maternal education. Upon its inception in 1912, the U.S. Children's Bureau fixated on the issue of infant mortality, a decision that historian Molly Ladd-Taylor argues reflected both the political acumen and personal feelings of the women who ran it.⁷ Headed by Julia Lathrop, the Children's Bureau employed a class of educated middle-class white women who embraced and elevated women's role in progressive reforms. They targeted inadequacies in child and maternal welfare as the root of urban poverty and corruption in society. As an indicator of health disparities, infant mortality represented an imperative for public intervention and reform on behalf of disadvantaged mothers. Starting from educating poor and immigrant mothers in urban centers, the Children's Bureau progressed to mounting a National Baby Week in 1916 that emphasized the need for universal maternal education.⁸ The week-long event featured lectures, baby clinics, the distribution of infant hygiene literature, a mother-baby parade,

⁶ Stern, "Making Better Babies," 748.

⁷ Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 81-82.

⁸ Richard A. Meckel, *Save the Babies: American Public Health Reform and the Prevention of Infant Mortality 1850-1929* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 147-148.

and even “best mother contests” in over 4,000 communities across the country.⁹ Similar to “Better Baby” contests, these methods of health education alluded to the concept of scientific motherhood and the need to empower mothers with scientific knowledge.

While the Children’s Bureau prioritized urban and immigrant welfare, rural education and outreach was a major objective of the Better Baby contests. Historian Marilyn Holt notes that as new urban professionals, women at the Children’s Bureau tended to criticize country life as unsanitary and hazardous.¹⁰ Better Baby contests constituted an effective and orderly means for rural education but also reflected a certain elitism on the part of social workers and health professionals. According to Holt, the *Women’s Home Companion* instituted a separate category for children from towns with populations of under one thousand because they doubted rural children could compete against children raised in the city.¹¹ By reinforcing an urban-rural binary, the contests pitted modernity against archaism. As Laura Lovett recounts, a Kansas physician wrote to Lathrop that “instead of going into the country districts and trying to persuade the farmer folk to do what we want them to do, this plan proposes to put them on their mettle and let them do for themselves...what we should have difficulty in getting them to do in any other way.”¹² The conviction that farmers remained obstinate in their backwardness while science and technology advanced the rest of society characterized progressive attempts at rural uplift. The Better Baby contests showed that, despite their concern over the problems that urbanization and industrialization created, health reformers were at best equivocal about the merits of regressing back to a simpler agrarian past.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Marilyn Irvin Holt, *Linoleum Better Babies & the Modern Farm Woman 1890-1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 106-108.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹² Lydia DeVilbiss letter to Julia Lathrop in Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 137.

The popularity of Better Baby contests provoked Florence Sherbon and Mary Watts to make the contests open to children of all ages as well as their parents, grandparents, and other relatives as a family unit. Sherbon and Watts had initiated the Iowa Better Baby contest in 1911 and in the following years, Sherbon worked as a field agent for the Children's Bureau in rural Indiana.¹³ As pioneers of the Better Baby movement, Sherbon and Watts valued the use of health competitions to reach a mass audience. Expanding the contest to include entire families not only seemed natural given its success but also marked a methodological improvement as health professionals could now educate participants about personal hygiene while investigating the importance of heredity. In many ways, the shift from focusing on the child to the entire family symbolized an ambitious scientific advancement in the application of genetics to improve human welfare.

Under the slogan of "Fitter Families for Future Firesides," the new and improved contest suggested that infant mortality was not merely a product of maternal neglect but also a result of inborn genetic deficiencies. Likewise, healthy children reflected the strong constitution of their parents. Anticipating the debut of the Fitter Family contest at the 1920 Kansas Free Fair, an article in the *Kansas City Star* titled "Judge the Parents, Too" praised the notion of a "human stock" contest driven by "the battle cry, 'Better breeding as well as better feeding.'"¹⁴ Similarly, in a summary report of the contests, the Kansas Bureau of Child Research asserted that the Fitter Family contest "demanded that the Better Baby be supported by a Family, fit both in their inheritance and in the development of their mental, moral, and physical traits."¹⁵ The focus on

¹³ Stern, "Making Better Babies," 745.

¹⁴ "Judge the Parents, Too," *Kansas City Star*, Aug. 18 1920.

¹⁵ Kansas Bureau of Child Research, "Fitter Families for Future Firesides A Report of the Eugenics Department of the Kansas Free Fair 1920-1924" Eugenics Committee of the United States of America (1924). From the American Philosophical Society. Accessed at << <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/index2.html?tag=196> >>

the family as a social and biological construct underscored a eugenic interest in regulating reproduction to purify society. Whereas Better Baby contests emphasized teaching mothers how to keep their children healthy, Fitter Family contests used science to foster feelings of hereditary privilege and duty.

Yet as a eugenic program, Fitter Family contests followed a rigorous exam format that showed the same concern for modern health education and preventative care as the Better Baby contests did. Physicians evaluated both the health and heredity of each family member individually, generating detailed family histories to be used for genetic research. Historian Erica Boudreau details how a team of health professionals and specialists conducted a multifaceted examination to judge the families that was primarily medical in nature.¹⁶ Boudreau stresses that a “eugenic score” which summarized the physical, mental and moral characteristics of extended family members not at the contest was only one out of ten components of the judging criteria. The remaining nine parts made up a comprehensive individual health exam. Each family member rotated through nine rooms in which they relayed their social background, medical history, and diet and recreation habits as well as undergoing psychometric and psychiatric mental testing, a physical check-up, a dental exam, and an eye, ear, nose and throat exam and blood and urine tests including the newly developed Wasserman test for syphilis.¹⁷ The contest organizers collaborated with local physicians to produce a thorough medical exam that reportedly took three and a half hours to complete.¹⁸ Contestants clearly learned a great deal about their health and gained exposure to new medical technologies. Thus, eugenics and public health were not mutually exclusive or conflicting; both relied upon the authority of scientific expertise.

¹⁶ Erica Bicchieri Boudreau, “‘Yea, I have a goodly heritage’: Health versus Heredity in the Fitter Family Contests, 1920-1928,” *Journal of Family History* (Oct. 2005), 371-372.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 144.

Despite the rigor of the examination, the contests aimed to popularize eugenics among rural populations using the language of agricultural stockbreeding. Beginning in the 1890's, local and state governments promoted "scientific farming" practices to help farmers develop their land and maximize production.¹⁹ The state fairs at which Fitter Family contests were held also featured agricultural exhibits that celebrated the science of engineering the best crops and livestock. The contest organizers chose to stage a family health competition in an agricultural fair not to degrade human beings but to elevate human reproduction to the science of plant and animal husbandry. In a reprint of a promotional flyer in the America Eugenics Society's periodical *Eugenical News*, the contest's stated objective was "to apply the well-known principles of heredity and scientific care which have revolutionized agriculture and stock breeding to the next higher order of creation- the human family."²⁰ The concept of incorporating "human stock" into the program of an agricultural fair pushed the science of eugenics to an extreme.

Yet the radicalization of eugenics discourse pointedly stimulated the interest of rural white farming families. The construction of an analogy between cattle breeds and family names simplified and familiarized eugenics for farmers. Mary Watts purportedly explained that "while the stock judges are testing the Holsteins, Jerseys, and Whitefaces in the stock pavilion, we are judging the Joneses, Smiths, and the Johnsons," and found that "nearly every one replies: 'I think it is about time people had a little of the attention that is given to animals.'"²¹ Additionally, her brand of populist rhetoric appealed to both the personal and familial pride of rural whites in their grasp of scientific principles and their industrious farming heritage. Therefore, while eugenicists

¹⁹ Holt, *Linoleum Better Babies*, 23-28.

²⁰ "Human Stock at the Kansas Free Fair," *Eugenical News* (Oct. 1922), 111.

²¹ Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 49-50.

like Watts advocated a policy of selective reproduction, their notion of “human breeding” did not preclude a faith in individual autonomy. Fitter Family competitions merely applied values of self-reliance and ability to the unit of the family.

Sherbon and Watts intended for Fitter Family contests to teach the importance of nurturing and developing hereditary superiority through parental vigilance and the influence of a positive social environment. Similar to many eugenicists of the era, neither Watts nor Sherbon believed in strict biological determinism. Having modeled Fitter Family contests after Better Baby contests, they strongly believed in health education as a means of health improvement, particularly for infants and children. As the prominent eugenicist Charles Davenport argued, having good genes did not equate having good health since “a prize winner at two may be an epileptic at ten.”²² Consequently, even though the Fitter Family contest upheld the heritability of physical, mental and moral traits, it also rejected the argument that genetic character was absolute and immutable. A 1925 article in the *Chicago Tribune* supported the environmentalist eugenics of the Fitter Family contests and urged parents to provide “proper care and correct nurture” for their children in order to develop hereditary virtues and counteract any weaknesses.²³ “Better breeding” did not end with marriage and reproduction but extended into parenthood. In corroboration with Davenport’s example, Watts reported that a family “much below par physically” in 1923 became trophy winners in 1924.²⁴ If anything, the possibility for such rapid improvement countered the fatalism of mainstream eugenic discourse; yet it also represented the admirable end product of hard work and modern science. The power of the family to improve its hereditary status implied the duty to do so as a productive member of

²² Charles Davenport as quoted in “Fitter Families for Future Firesides: A Report of the Eugenics Department of the Kansas Free Fair 1920-1924.”

²³ Doris Blake, “Fitter Families’ Campaign Advises Looking to Heredity,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 10, 1925.

²⁴ “Eugenics at State Fairs,” *Eugenical News*, (Feb 1925), 17.

society. Fitter Family contests taught the public that they could manipulate their heredity and the environment to a significant degree so that one's fitness was in largely in his or her control.

As Fitter Family contests transformed racial betterment into a private responsibility, they attracted a stratum of rural society that valued innovation and progress. Although the contests contained elements of social control that projected the image of urban scientists intruding upon the agrarian world, rural families were far from passive in their participation. Watts claimed that fair records showed that fully one third of all entries in the 1924 Kansas Free Fair were "repeaters," many of whom attended the contest every year.²⁵ Since the contests were voluntary, the contestants were a self-selecting group who desired to confirm and improve their health. The contest organizers did not impose eugenic values onto the contestants so much as channel their aspirations for modernization into racial betterment.

Historian Erica Boudreau conducted a quantitative analysis of over three hundred participants of the 1925 Fitter Family contests that revealed that they came from a predominantly white, native-born, married, female, Protestant, well educated, middle class demographic.²⁶ Her findings suggest that despite their rural residence and agricultural occupations, the participants represented a fairly well off sector of the dominant white mainstream of American society. Therefore, the sustenance of rural life did not necessitate opposition to progress and modernity. As educated white middle-class women orchestrated and promoted Fitter Family contests to their rural counterparts, a racialized and gendered ideology of progress appealed to both urban and rural women. Even though the contest had shifted to judging families rather than babies, it continued to elevate women's role as mothers and empower women to defend the autonomy of the family.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Boudreau, "Yea, I have a Goodly Heritage"

Using a eugenic framework, Fitter Family contests celebrated traditional agrarian ideals of the home and family in a modern context. By educating participants on the health effects of heredity and parenting, the contest organizers drew attention to the importance of the family. They believed that a successful eugenics project required “stimulating the interest of intelligent families and arousing a family consciousness.”²⁷ As a symbol of propriety and morality, the family was the ideal representative for racial betterment. According to Lovett, Sherbon envisioned her work igniting a movement aimed at “strengthening the family as the organic racial and social unit.”²⁸ However, the perceived need to strengthen the family suggested a nostalgic mentality as much as a progressive one. The Fitter Family contests portrayed the ideal family as educated, scientific and forward-looking but ultimately loyal to its small-town roots. The virtues of farm life remained central to the discourse of a movement that sought to restore white middle-class values. A report of the Kansas contests captured the nostalgia for a rural American past in a statement declaring that “it is highly appropriate that this movement should rise out the vigorous, progressive, rural life of the present day, which is giving to the world not only material sustenance but a very important and substantial reserve vigor of brain and body.”²⁹ In their assessment, rural life was not antiquated but “progressive” in its production oriented work ethic and physical and mental vitality. Thus, the Fitter Family contests modernized the farm family without sacrificing its traditional values; indeed, their rhetoric of racial betterment accentuated the purity and independence of rural America.

Moreover, the Fitter Family contests’ nostalgia for the farm family constituted a defense of traditional values during an era of cultural upheaval. Lovett uses the concept of “nostalgic modernism” to articulate the dualities of the Fitter Family contests by arguing that the

²⁷ “Fitter Families for Future Firesides A Report of the Eugenics Department of the Kansas Free Fair 1920-1924.”

²⁸ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 153.

²⁹ “Fitter Families for Future Firesides A Report of the Eugenics Department of the Kansas Free Fair 1920-1924.”

idealization of the past provided a sense of order and security in a rapidly modernizing society.³⁰ Lovett situates the Fitter Family contests in the narrative of early twentieth century nationalism and pronatalism. In this view, Sherbon and Watts sought to mitigate racial degeneracy evidenced by the proliferation of non-Nordic immigrants, a declining national birth rate, and the emergence of the “modern woman.” While the Fitter Family contests can be viewed as a form of cultural backlash against the “Roaring Twenties,” such a perspective can undermine the cultural tensions within the contests themselves. The Fitter Family contests constantly negotiated the dichotomies between urban and rural, modern and anti-modern, and health and heredity. However, the lack of a strict ideology does not detract from the significance of the competitions so much as it highlights the paradoxical nature of the social and cultural politics of the 1920’s. Clearly there was no consensus that the dawn of a new age of modernity marked progress in society; rather a deep cultural ambivalence permeated American life in the 1920’s.

³⁰ Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, 11-16.

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