Oregon State Board of Eugenics [1]

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Oregon State Board of Eugenics

In 1917 the Oregon State Legislature, in Salem, Oregon, passed a bill titled, "To Prevent Procreation of Certain Classes in Oregon." Passage of the bill created the Oregon State Board of Eugenics, an organization [4] that presided over the forced sterilization [5] of more than 2,600 Oregon residents from 1917 to 1981. In 1983, Legislation abolished the State Board of Eugenics, by that time called the Oregon State Board of Social Protection. For more than seventy years, the State Board was involved in the US eugenics movement [6], using theories partly constructed from genetics to control the reproductive health of citizens.

Since the late nineteenth century, US state governments had an interest in controlling the reproductive choices of citizens. Oregon, like many other states, created laws that regulated marriage and prevented the procreation [7] of certain types of citizens that were considered to be degenerate and a burden to the state. For example, an 1893 Oregon law prohibited any man who was epileptic, imbecilic, or feeble-minded from marriage or sexual intercourse [8] with a woman younger than the age of 45. The turn of the twentieth century brought with it a renewed interest in marriage and procreation [7] laws based on science.

The US eugenics movement [6] was grounded in an increasing interest in applying evolutionary science and genetics to solve social problems, as well as in the work of Sir Francis Galton [9]. Galton worked in England and applied statistical methods to the study of human heredity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Supporters of eugenics [10], including lawmakers and political activists, argued that controlling the reproduction of individuals of undesirable stock would keep those with unfit genes [11] from passing them on to the next generation, leading to a more advanced human race. Social engineering had a particularly strong appeal in the US. The Oregon Board of Eugenics was one of many state organizations that permitted the sterilization [6] of inmates in prisons, patients in mental institutions, orphans, and other wards of the state to prevent genes [11] that the state deemed inferior from propagating in the human gene pool.

Bethenia Angelina Owens-Adair, one of Oregon's earliest female physicians, helped write and promote the bill that was used to create the Oregon Board of Eugenics. Owens-Adair was a women's suffrage activist, reproductive rights [12] supporter, and an eugenics [10] advocate from Warrenton, Oregon. The 1909 bill passed the state House and Senate, but the Governor of Oregon, George Chamberlain, vetoed it on the grounds that it did not provide adequate safeguards to prevent the sterilization [5] of people who were mentally sound. Chamberlain stated that without such safeguards, it would be too easy for superintendents of institutions to abuse the power granted to them by the bill.

A similar bill passed the legislature in 1913 and was signed by Governor Oswald West, but to pass into law, it required the approval of Oregon voters in a referendum. The bill included more detailed explanations of the people who would qualify for a court hearing regarding sterilization [5], but the bill did not pass the popular vote. Opposition to the 1913 law came from the Anti-Sterilization League, an Oregonian organization [4] of concerned citizens headed by activist Lora C. Little. Little noted that there was no historical basis to believe that sterilizing criminals would benefit society. She further stated that penal colonies such as Virginia and Australia, which evolved into moral and productive societies, were prime counter-examples. On 4 November 1913, Oregon voters revoked the law with a vote of 53,319 versus 41,767. Little swayed public opinion, but only for a time.

Eugenical policies had growing support throughout the US, and opposition was rare. Harry Laughlin, a promoter of sterilization [5] laws and the assistant director of the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, remarked in 1922's Eugenical Sterilization in the United States [13] that Oregon was the only state that had organized opposition to sterilization [5]. Despite that opposition, Owens-Adair continued to support eugenics [10] legislation every congressional year, and in 1917 she promoted a bill that finally passed and was signed into law by Governor James Withycombe without the need for a voter-approved referendum.

The statute called for the creation of the Board of Eugenics and empowered the Board to conduct hearings about patients at state institutions. Members of the Board included members of the State Board of Health and the superintendent from certain state institutions, including Oregon State Hospital, Eastern Oregon State Hospital, the State Institution for the Feeble-minded, and the
Sources

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