

Recasting the Tribe of Ishmael

The Role of Indianapolis's Nineteenth-Century Poor in Twentieth-Century Eugenics

ELSA F. KRAMER

And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Behold, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael, because the Lord hath heard thy affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.

Genesis 16:11–12

Rainy weather and muddy streets kept many of his flock home on Sunday morning, January 20, 1878, when Rev. Oscar C. McCulloch of Indianapolis's Plymouth Congregational Church delivered a sermon on the problem of the city's poor.¹ Charity was not an unusual topic

Elsa F. Kramer is an editor and a researcher in Indianapolis. She thanks the library staffs of the Indianapolis–Marion County Public Library, the Indiana State Archives, the Indiana State Library, the Indiana Historical Society, and the M. E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives at the State University of New York–Albany for their assistance in gathering the materials cited in this article. She is grateful to William Schneider and Jason Lantzer at Indiana University–Indianapolis for their input on early drafts and to Eric Sandweiss of the *IMH* for his interest in and careful editing of the manuscript.

¹Oscar McCulloch Diary, January 20, 1878, box 1, Oscar C. McCulloch Papers (Indiana State Library, Indianapolis).

within his congregation, which practiced the Social Gospel of applied Christianity—"the alleviation, by physical and spiritual means," as McCulloch's daughter, Ruth, would later explain it, "of poverty, ignorance, misery, vice and crime."² This particular lecture, however, reflected a change in his approach to welfare, away from almsgiving and toward the exclusion of applicants deemed unworthy of relief.

It was coincidence that had brought about this key shift in the well-known minister's attitude: According to McCulloch, his pastoral visits to the poor had acquainted him with the members of one family whose dire poverty so disturbed him that he sought to secure them emergency aid at the Center Township Trustee's office. There he learned, instead, of the family's—and their friends' and relatives'—long history of relief applications. At about the same time, he read a book about "the Jukes," a New York clan that reminded him of the family he visited in Indianapolis. The book's author, Richard L. Dugdale, a researcher interested in the causes of poverty and crime, had become curious about the frequency of family ties among inmates he encountered while inspecting county jails for the New York Prison Association. Although Dugdale's study of criminality among the Jukes (the fictitious surname by which he identified the clan) conceded that environmental factors were as influential as hereditary causes in "giving cumulative force to a career of debauch," McCulloch concluded that charitable aid targeted only at alleviating deficits such as hunger and homelessness encouraged the proliferation of degenerate families such as the Indianapolis clan, whom he labeled the Ishmaelites.³ He began to argue for compulsory social controls designed to prevent the "idle, wandering life" and "the propagation of similarly disposed children," and helped craft legislation to create the State Board of Charities and the Center Township Board of Children's Guardians. The collaboration he created between public and private charities infused the former—which gave relief without regard to an applicant's character—with the latter's strategy of giving based on moral

²Ruth McCulloch, "Plymouth Church—II," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 7 (September 1911), 91.

³Oscar McCulloch Diary, January 20, 1878, box 1, Oscar C. McCulloch Papers; Richard L. Dugdale, *"The Jukes": A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity* (New York, 1910), 26. On Dugdale's work and its impact on other eugenics studies, see Nicole Hahn Rafter, *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies 1877–1919* (Boston, 1988); Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York, 2004).

merit.⁴ He reorganized the Indianapolis Benevolent Society as the Charity Organization Society (COS) and combined its efforts with those of Center Township relief caseworkers in order to identify citizens perceived to be making poverty their profession. Notes from interviews conducted and other public records gathered by these visitors of the poor were ultimately collected in McCulloch's family study, which was intended to provide evidence of "a constellation of degenerate behaviors—including alcoholism, pauperism, social dependency, shiftlessness, nomadism, and 'lack of moral control'" caused by inherited genetic defects and exacerbated by current charitable practice.⁵ The solution, McCulloch believed, was to "close up official out-door relief . . . check private and indiscriminate benevolence, or charity, falsely so-called . . . [and] get hold of the children."⁶

McCulloch's renowned career as a progressivist minister and charity reformer was cut short by his premature death, at age forty-eight, in 1891. Although he had succeeded, by at least some estimates, in reducing the number of Indianapolis citizens receiving public and private relief, he did not live to see the unanticipated impact of his Ishmael study on eugenics, the emerging science of race improvement through selective breeding.⁷ His work, intended to reduce dependence on public welfare, continued for many years to be cited, with other family studies, as evidence of a need for legislative measures to compel mandatory sterilization of "mental defectives" and criminals.⁸ For McCulloch and

⁴Oscar McCulloch Diary, January 20, 1878, box 1, Oscar C. McCulloch Papers; McCulloch, "The Tribe of Ishmael: A Study in Social Degradation," in Isabel C. Barrows, ed., *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction* (Boston, 1888), 154-59; Arthur Estabrook, "The Tribe of Ishmael," 1922, series 2, box 1, folder 7, Arthur H. Estabrook Papers (University Archives, M. E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University at Albany, State University of New York), 25 (hereafter referred to as ERO Notes); Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis: The History, the Industries, the Institutions, and the People of a City of Homes*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1910), 1:606; Genevieve C. Weeks, *Oscar Carleton McCulloch, 1843-1891: Preacher and Practitioner of Applied Christianity* (Indianapolis, 1976), 176.

⁵David Micklos and Elof Carlson, "Engineering American Society: The Lesson of Eugenics," *Nature Reviews Genetics*, 1 (November 2000), 155.

⁶McCulloch, "The Tribe of Ishmael," 8.

⁷ERO Notes, Introduction, 5. The ERO Notes include duplicate drafts of some sections that repeat page-numbering schemes; subheadings have been added to some citations for clarification.

⁸See, in addition to publications by Arthur Estabrook cited elsewhere in this paper, Charles B. Davenport, "Report of the Committee on Eugenics," *American Breeders Association*, 6

others of his day, pauperism had in itself implied an inherited moral problem.⁹ The scientists who revised his Ishmael family documents in subsequent decades would emphasize his casual observations of individual feeble-mindedness to support a more comprehensive agenda for social reform, one that included the institutionalization of adult vagrants, the prevention of any possibility of their future reproduction, and the segregation of their existing children—all to protect the integrity of well-born society's germ-plasm.¹⁰ McCulloch had sought to analyze and solve a social problem through historical narrative; his family studies were later presented as scientific data in support of a larger plan for genetically based social control.¹¹ The transformation of the largely unscientific Ishmael study and its disparaging rhetoric into a tool in support of a Mendelian agenda for racial hygiene can be seen through a comparison of two sets of Ishmael notes. An examination of the first set, based on records gathered by McCulloch and his colleagues in the late nineteenth century, alongside the second, revised set prepared by biologist Arthur H. Estabrook at the Eugenics Research Office (ERO) of the Carnegie Institution at Cold Spring Harbor, New York, after World War I, reflects the changing social context in which the notes were first written and later edited and reveals the value of the concept of inbred deficiencies to civic leaders seeking public support for racial purity laws.

EVOLUTION AND IMMIGRATION

As they are now, most nineteenth-century Hoosiers were politically conservative, valuing individual freedom and small government over social welfare. Nevertheless, after the Civil War they did eventually

(Washington, D.C., 1911), 92–94; Harry H. Laughlin, "Report of the Committee to study and to report on the best practical means of cutting off the defective germ-plasm in the American population: legal, legislative and administrative aspects of sterilization," *Eugenics Record Office Bulletin No. 10* (Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y., 1914).

⁹G. A. Kleene, "The Problem of Medical Charity," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 23 (May 1904), 3–4. Pauperism's "most essential marks seem to be idleness, improvidence, shamelessness, untruthfulness."

¹⁰McCulloch, "The Tribe of Ishmael," 8.

¹¹"The family studies, then, were far more than bad science and self-serving doctrine. They were crafted documents that, through a process of accretion, fabricated a mythology. . . . The literature was able to develop from that point in part because it attracted wealthy patrons who supported the research and publication, [and] in part because it appealed professionally and personally to specialists (and would-be specialists) in social control." Rafter, *White Trash*, 30–31.

enact compulsory (if undemanding) schooling laws as well as legislation to protect child laborers, women workers, and then prison workers. By the turn of the century, Indianapolis even became the national headquarters for several labor unions.¹²

Bigotry against outsiders, however, was rampant, especially during the postwar economic downturns of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, when access to supplies and services was severely curtailed. A new wave of immigrants, particularly eastern and southern Europeans, sought work in Indiana, as did poor whites escaping the poverty of Appalachia or domestic servitude in the cities of the East, and poor blacks escaping continued discrimination in the South.¹³ Unfairly treated black laborers began a mass migration to the North in 1878, resulting, by late 1879, in an influx to Indiana of several thousand migrants from North Carolina and Kentucky.¹⁴ Most of these people arrived destitute. Available work was often only seasonal, and thus many depended on charity for at least part of the year. Hoosiers often resented the newcomers, both for their cultural differences and for their impact on scarce resources, and considered their substandard housing, often in rough neighborhoods or in shacks in woods or river bottoms, as evidence of their feeble-mindedness.¹⁵ Even Rev. Myron Reed, a Congregational minister who worked on charity reform with McCulloch in Indianapolis and later became a labor activist in Denver and one of the founders of the Charity Organizations Society (later the United Way), did not extend his concern for the poor to all those in need. He shared his opinion of European immigrants with other attendees at the 1888 National Conference on Charities and Correction: "Like the insects under the rotten log, they like darkness and confinement."¹⁶

¹²James M. Bergquist, "Tracing the Origins of a Midwestern Culture," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 77 (March 1981), 14, 18–19, 21, 24, 26, 31; James H. Madison, *The Indiana Way: A State History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), 145–46, 166.

¹³All three groups appear to have had representation among the Ishmaels.

¹⁴Emma Lou Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana Before 1900* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), 212–24.

¹⁵The term *feeble-mindedness* was used at that time as "a metaphor for innate criminality and hereditary unfit." Nicole Hahn Raftar, *Creating Born Criminals* (Urbana, Ill., 1997), 87.

¹⁶James A. Denton, *Rocky Mountain Radical: Myron W. Reed, Christian Socialist* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1997); Myron W. Reed, "Minutes and Discussion," in Isabel C. Barrows, ed., *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction* (Boston, 1888), 430.

Because most Hoosiers opposed taxation to support public services such as education and health care, newly arrived immigrants were largely unschooled and their infant mortality rate was high. Those who could not afford the cost of a marriage license, or were prohibited from marrying by anti-miscegenation law, or had been prohibited from marriage while indentured, simply cohabited—behavior considered to be evidence of moral degeneracy.¹⁷ Propertyless laborers tended to vote for working-class politicians who championed individual freedoms, further alienating middle- and upper-class social reformers and their candidates in both political parties, all of whom advocated increased governmental regulation of personal behavior. Many immigrants also provoked the state's native-born middle-class citizenry by ignoring temperance and sabbath laws.¹⁸ Economist G. A. Kleene later observed that those who sought and accepted charity assistance “became abnormal, pitied, perhaps, but socially outcast. A despised beggar class began to form, with traditions and methods of its own. Poor relief became a problem . . . an affair between strangers . . . with all the distrust and deception growing out of this relation.”¹⁹

As McCulloch and other charity reformers looked for a new, more scientific way of understanding and implementing their work, they found inspiration in Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and in Sir Francis Galton's 1865 “Hereditary Talent and Character.” McCulloch's writing shows the impact of this new knowledge upon the traditional, widely held belief that God determined individual human traits. “The science of racial integrity and progress”²⁰ gave church and other civic leaders a new way to explain the importance of environment and reproductive choices to heredity. Although some people embraced the idea of “survival of the fittest” as a reason to encourage high-achieving members of society to have many children, others, equally worried about “survival of the unfit,”²¹ would eventually see in evolutionary theory a justification for controlling the reproduction of people deemed genetically inferior—often nonwhites and immigrants.

¹⁷Thornbrough, *Negro in Indiana*, 207–208.

¹⁸Madison, *The Indiana Way*, 186, 212–13, 215, 220–21.

¹⁹Kleene, “Problem of Medical Charity,” 6.

²⁰William E. Kellicott, *The Social Direction of Human Evolution: An Outline of the Science of Eugenics* (New York, 1923), 8.

²¹Rafter, *White Trash*, 5.

McCulloch's own arguments reflected the minister's attempt to integrate his moralistic biases with the growing scientific evidence. Although he interpreted Darwinian theory to say that "vice is not a diabolical inspiration but the remnant of a previous animal connection slowly being sloughed off," he warned ominously of a pauper class multiplying unchecked "like devil-grass." While he saw the ascendancy of some classes over others as evidence of evolution,²² he cautioned that an underclass of defectives, left unchecked by social measures, would cause the degeneration of society. In his first published reference to the unnamed Indianapolis family that he would come to consider representative of this threat, he asserted that three generations had received public aid, that incest was not uncommon among them, and that many of the children died in early childhood.²³ And although he considered their "relation of antagonism to society" a result of "natural depravity," he admitted that such a view was "not scientific," and he pointed instead to a "constitutional inability to prolonged and sustained labor" as the cause of their degeneracy.²⁴ Center Township caseworkers continued for a decade to seek information in support of McCulloch's theory about pauperism in Indianapolis, but even his own sermons and newspaper columns gave little consideration to other explanations of the families' "antagonism to society."

McCulloch related his "study of social degradation" at the 15th National Conference of Charities and Correction in July 1888. The paper painted a vivid picture of the Tribe of Ishmael, which McCulloch described as an extended group having its origins in circa-1840 Indianapolis and demonstrating a history of poverty and intermarriage through several generations. He emphasized the family's crime, licentiousness, and mental weakness as well as their record of "continuous aid from the township" and other public welfare sources. Comparing their "decaying stock" to the parasitism of a crustacean genus, he cited

²²Oscar McCulloch Diary, March 16, 1877, Oscar C. McCulloch Papers; McCulloch, "The Tribe of Ishmael," 6; Stephen Ray Hall, "Oscar McCulloch and Indiana Eugenics," (Ph. D. diss., Virginia Commonwealth University, 1993), 90.

²³McCulloch, *Organized Charities in Cities* (Indianapolis, 1880); originally published as "Associated Charities," in F. B. Sanborn, ed., *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Conference of Charities* (Boston, 1880), 122-35.

²⁴Newspaper clipping, box 1, folder 2, Oscar C. McCulloch Papers. McCulloch saved the clipping, hand-dated February 2, 1879, about a lecture he gave on "The Treatment of the Guilty" following the execution of two criminals.

an “irresistible” inherited dependency that overrode any ability for self-help. He criticized the members of morally minded church organizations and philanthropic societies for providing such families with the unrestricted private aid that encouraged nomadic lifestyles and ill health.²⁵ Finally, using genetic models of inheritance, McCulloch argued that the best way to alleviate human suffering was through legislated controls on charity and child welfare.

THE INDIANA NOTES AND THE ERO NOTES

McCulloch’s study of the Ishmaels benefited from his close personal and professional relationship with Center Township Trustee William Smith King, who helped him to investigate applications for public relief.²⁶ The township gave McCulloch’s Indianapolis COS access to case histories on six thousand families who had received aid. McCulloch also relied on the work of Frank Wright, credited with making the original histories that McCulloch consulted. Wright was a reporter for the *Indianapolis Sentinel* from 1883 through 1887; served as township trustee, charity organizations clerk, and visitor of the township poor in 1888 through 1890; and was an agent of the Board of Children’s Guardians by 1895.²⁷

Although McCulloch had access to a huge collection of documents concerning individual Ishmaelites, subsequent research has been challenging. Fifteen thousand original pages of descriptions, collected prior to McCulloch’s death and stored by the COS, were, according to a later account, “inadvertently thrown away about 1895.”²⁸ Today, along with a set of genealogical trees of 400 families and an index to the discarded

²⁵McCulloch, “The Tribe of Ishmael,” 1, 3, 8; Oscar McCulloch Diary, January 20, 1878, box 1, Oscar C. McCulloch Papers..

²⁶Stephen T. Ziliak, “Self-Reliance Before the Welfare State: Evidence from the Charity Organization Movement in the United States,” *Journal of Economic History*, 64 (June 2004), 438. “The data in the family history studies . . . in Indianapolis were secured entirely from the Indianapolis members of these families. . . . No field work was done by McCulloch’s investigators away from Indianapolis due to lack of funds.” ERO Notes, Population, 32.

²⁷Records of the Marion County Commissioners show one payment to Wright as a “visitor of the poor of Center Township from April 1st, 1888 to April 1st, 1889”; R. L. Polk’s *Indianapolis (Marion County, Ind.) City Directory* (Indianapolis), 1881 through 1890, 1895.

²⁸ERO Notes, 10. At page 32, however, the pages are said to have been thrown away in 1892 because of “the value of this data not being recognized at this time” and that they “gave only data about the pauperism, nothing about the traits and habits of the individuals.”

records, at least two versions of the Ishmael studies that include information on family traits survive in archives. Scholars researching the Tribe have relied on McCulloch's 1880–88 publications, which summarize the caseworkers' findings,²⁹ as well as on his vivid narrative introduction to the notes comprising the extant case histories. An apparently complete typescript of these original family narratives, available at the Indiana State Archives, provides full names and some neighborhood locations of at least 160 families, including the Ishmaels and their friends and relatives.³⁰ Few of the surnames identified match those to be found on McCulloch's 1888 pedigree diagrams or in the relief records of the Indianapolis COS—all of which may have been made up to protect the privacy of those listed.³¹ And despite the notetakers' focus on pauperism, the list of persons named and numbered in the original notes includes some described as having never applied for charity. The cover sheet to this Indiana set of the family histories indicates that they were "copied from notes made by J. Frank Wright from 1880 to 1890" and "loaned to A. H. Estabrook," the Carnegie Institution biologist, "by Mr. Wright in 1917." Estabrook then gave this copied version of the case histories to the Board of State Charities of Indiana on July 25, 1922.³² Variations in writing styles, typewriter fonts, and other internal inconsistencies in these Indiana Notes—especially date references beyond the years indicated on the title page—suggest multiple authors over many years.

²⁹For a description of caseworker methodology and visitor notes, see Ziliak, "Self-Reliance Before the Welfare State," 442–44, 454–56.

³⁰Referring to the various family pedigree studies, Rafter asks why "*none* of the works trace[s] bad immigrant or urban families" and says that the Ishmaels were "in no way integrated into urban life." Rafter, *White Trash*, 13 n16. The occupations and street locations described in the Indiana Notes, however, indicate that many of the families lived and worked in or near downtown Indianapolis at least part of the year. Estabrook says in the ERO Notes that "most of the Tribe lived in or near the city of Indianapolis" and as a result "there is little consanguinity . . . probably due to the fact that mating was not restricted by geographical boundaries to selection from a few individuals in the same family relation." ERO Notes, 38.

³¹Hall, "Oscar McCulloch and Indiana Eugenics," 110. Those families identified in the Indiana State Archives document are grouped under the following surnames: Ishmael, Smith, Eads, Hatton, Bartlett, Morrison, Ross, Williams, Uphold, Harrington, Cunningham, Rogers, Barnaby, Hulen, Bogert, Earle, Wilson, Logsdon, Lynn, Otis, and Owens. Dozens of additional names are listed within those entries.

³²"The Tribe of Ishmael. Copied from Notes made by J. Frank Wright 1880 to 1890" (Indiana State Archives, Indiana Commission on Public Records, Indianapolis). Hereafter referred to as Indiana Notes.

TABLE VII
Racial classification as shown by marriage licenses

CONTRACTING PARTIES	ACTUAL RACIAL MAKE-UP	YEAR	COLOR GIVEN IN LICENSE	CHILDREN MARRIED AS
Alphonso Brown and Belle Jones.....	IW × IW	1885	Col × Col	Antonio and Dean, both W
Aaron Brown and Daphne Brown.....	IW × IW	1884	Col × Col	"A" as I, "B" and "C" as W
Rupert Brown and Mirandy Hill.....	IW × W	1888	Col × Col	Mick as N(1) and W(2); Nora and Sisy as W
Roland Ross and Isetta Brown.....	W × IW	1887	Col × Col	Helena and Levan as W; Ichabod as I
Lambert and Winifred Brown.....	IW × IW	1881	Mul × Mul	Annie as W
Leander and Minerva Brown.....	INW × IW	1881	Col × Col	Josephine and Inez as N; Vera W
Gus Jones and Lois Miller.....	IW × W	1875	Col × Col	Christina, Ulysses, Bruno, Job and Lloyd as W; Leslie and Israel as I; Louis as N
Hugo Jones and Hulda Brown.....	IW × IW	1890	Col × Col	Bessie as W; Hank as I
Burton Jones and Addie Long.....	IW × IW	1892	Col × Col	Jacob as I
Abraham and Felice Johnson.....	IW × INW	1875	Black × Black	Timothy as N; Rex as W
Timothy and Deborah Johnson.....	INW × INW	1897	Col × Col	Donald and Salome as I
Hiram and Henrietta Jones.....	INW × IW	1875	Col × Col	Paul as W
Carl and Geraldine Black.....	INW × NW	1875	Black × Black	"A" and Beatrice as W; "E", Wilder and Lucia as I; Beryl as N, and W
Dwight and Alice Jones.....	INW × IW	1892	Col × Col	Douglas as W
Austin and Roxanna Brown.....	IN × IW	1879	W × W	Leroy, Hettie, Adelbert, Melissa and Augusta as W; "C" and "G" as N; Althea as I
Leander Brown and Beulah James.....	INW × IW	1908	W × W	Franklin and Lorman as W; Rebecca as I
Ulysses and Helena Jones.....	IN × IW	1902	W × W	"B" as I
Bruno and Cilla Jones.....	IW × INW	1900	W × W	Leah and Winnie as W; Charlotte and Crystal as I

I, Indian; N, Negro; W, White.

Table on the Racial Makeup of a Virginia Family
Arthur Estabrook and the ERO studied multi-racial families, including the Wins of Virginia
Arthur H. Estabrook and Ivan E. McDougle, *Mongrel Virginians: The Win Tribe* (Baltimore, 1926)

Arthur Estabrook's interest in McCulloch's "three generations" of intermarried poor families originated during his term as an investigator for the Indiana State Committee on Mental Defectives (1916–18) and continued during his subsequent work on hereditary human traits at the Carnegie Institution's Eugenics Record Office (ERO), an organization founded in 1910 as a clearinghouse for data on human traits and heredity.³³ Estabrook was especially interested in the traits of mixed-race groups and in the sterilization of "mental defectives." He presented reexaminations of the Jukes and the Ishmaels at the Second International Congress of Eugenics, held in 1921 at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. His work for the ERO also included *The Nam Family: A Study in Cacogenics* (1912, with Charles B. Davenport) and *Mongrel Virginians: The Win Tribe* (1926, with Ivan E. McDougle), studies that involved bi-racial and tri-racial individuals respectively. He represented the ERO in Virginia from 1924 to 1926 during an analysis of the issues in the Carrie Buck sterilization lawsuit, and served as the president of the Eugenics Research Association 1925–1926.³⁴

Estabrook's activities following his move to the ERO reflected the widening scientific acceptance of eugenics research and a consequent turn toward more aggressive advocacy, on the part of some scientists and social reformers, for strong measures such as sterilization. Such reformers typically presented compulsory sterilization and other eugenic programs as humanitarian in approach and economic in efficiency. Their studies correlated the increase in immigration to the United States (as well as the persistence of allegedly inferior, native-born descendants of families such as the Ishmaels) with statistics on crime and poverty.³⁵ In their 1912 report on a rural Massachusetts family they called the Hill Folk, ERO biologists Florence H. Danielson and Charles B. Davenport asked: "Should the industrious, intelligent citizen continue in each

³³Eugenics Record Office Records, 1670–1964, ms. collection 77 (American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia); Paul A. Lombardo, "Facing Carrie Buck," *Hastings Center Report*, 33 (March–April 2003), 14–17; Garland E. Allen, "The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, 1910–1940: An Essay in Institutional History," *Osiris*, 2nd series, 2 (1986), 225–64.

³⁴Estabrook Papers. Seventeen-year-old Carrie Buck was declared "socially inadequate" and intentionally sterilized in a test of Virginia's 1924 law. Buck and the lawsuit are described in Lombardo, "Facing Carrie Buck."

³⁵William Bacon Bailey, *Modern Social Conditions: A Statistical Study of Birth, Marriage, Divorce, Death, Disease, Suicide, Immigration, etc., with Special Reference to the United States* (New York, 1906).

generation to triple or quadruple his taxes for maintaining these defectives . . . or can steps be taken to . . . prevent the propagation of inevitable dependents?"³⁶ Other scientists openly expressed concern about cacogenics, the deterioration of a specific genetic stock. British biologist and educator William E. Kellicott spoke on the scientific, ethical, and economic impacts of racial purity and implored his audience "to think of the future of our communities and nations and of our race, rather than contentedly to . . . parade with self-satisfied air through our glass houses of Anglo-Saxon supremacy."³⁷ Dr. H. E. Jordon was even more to the point: "Unless some eliminating mechanism be installed the Anglo-Saxon race surely is doomed to the fate of the Greeks and Romans."³⁸

The second "Tribe of Ishmael" document, which Estabrook compiled and edited after World War I, constitutes an important primary document in the evolution of the use of family poverty studies, from the basis for an unscientific appeal for charity reform to the tool of a more nuanced case for the need for racial integrity. These ERO Notes, which include a redacted version of the Indiana Notes, are distinguished by the careful editing or deletion of personal descriptions and the addition of background materials intended to give credence to the theories propounded by Estabrook and other eugenicists of the day. Archived with Estabrook's papers at the State University of New York at Albany, the ERO Notes credit Mary Ogden Dranga, a fieldworker for the ERO, and Kate F. Parker, registrar for the Indianapolis COS, with having revived the study (which had originally ended with McCulloch's death) in 1911.³⁹ Wright is mentioned as having assisted only for short periods, as are Estabrook's first wife, Jessie, and an ERO worker named Corinne S. Eddy. Finally, Estabrook credits William King Smith and Center Township employee Nancy Hicks with having created the original

³⁶Florence H. Danielson and Charles B. Davenport, *The Hill Folk: Report on a Rural Community of Hereditary Defectives* (Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, N.Y., 1912), 33–34.

³⁷Kellicott, *Social Direction of Human Evolution*, 16.

³⁸H. E. Jordon, "Surgical Sex-Sterilization: Its Value as a Eugenic Measure," *American Journal of Clinical Medicine*, 20 (1913), 987.

³⁹ERO Notes, 3. A letter in box 6, folder 2, Oscar C. McCulloch Papers, written by Mrs. Parker to Dr. Carleton B. McCulloch, indicates that she had just been asked on May 7, 1914, by "Mr. [Harry] Laughlin, Superintendent of the Eugenics Record Office . . . to write for his office an account of the work on the 'Tribe of Ishmael' which was done here some years ago under your father's leadership."

records system for interviewing relief applicants from which the Ishmael studies were made. The document carries Estabrook's byline and is marked "semi-final complete" in what appears to be his handwriting; these facts, along with his assertion in the preface that he continued the Ishmael study beginning in 1915, with time away only for military service, suggests that he had the final edit.⁴⁰

The ERO Notes are reportorial in approach and at the same time crafted for persuasion. They reflect a change in cultural and moral tone from the 1880s to the 1920s, eliminating some of the negative commentary of the Indiana Notes and adding praise in some instances, and they also disguise the names of all but the earliest Ishmael family members in an alphanumeric scheme. Those persons selected for description "are chosen to show various characteristics of the Tribe," the "underlying condition" of which is "the well-known story of the uncared for and extremely prolific feeble-minded people."⁴¹ Arranged as if planned for a book, the manuscript begins with background on the development of Indianapolis and its charitable organizations, including statistics on relief in Center Township from 1874 to 1889 and commentary on the trustee's role in local politics;⁴² reprints McCulloch's 1888 essay on social degradation; jumps to Frank Wright's 1890 essay, "Marriage Relationships in the Tribe of Ishmael"; and then includes a previously published short, eulogistic biography of McCulloch. An overview of pauper origins in Indianapolis follows, with emphasis on the arrival of English criminals and indentured servitude in this country during the colonial era, and then includes an explanation of gypsying among the Ishmaels. The family descriptions follow, substantially rewritten from the Indiana Notes and prefaced with a more sympathetic description of the Tribe's migrant origins.⁴³ Although the document includes Oscar

⁴⁰ERO Notes, 7, 3.

⁴¹"The three distinguishing traits of the members of the Tribe of Ishmael are the pauperism, the gypsying and the loose marriage relations." *Ibid.*, 52-53, quote p. 48.

⁴²"Poor aid was used as a lure to secure adherents to the party then in power." *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴³"The different families of the Tribe came to Indiana, separately in most cases, on the general tide of migration west from the original thirteen colonies along the seaboard just following the War of the Revolution. . . . The early immigration into Indiana was mainly from southwestern Ohio and Kentucky. These people in turn had come either from the Carolinas through the Cumberland Gap or Tennessee, or from Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania overland by way of the Potomac River, over the mountains and then down the Ohio River." ERO Notes, Population, 29.

McCulloch's previously published description of the Ishmaels, it eliminates the often-quoted introduction to the Indiana Notes, typical in its style of the earliest records in the study:

Where they came from is not now established. . . . They were, as a rule, a large, raw-boned class, coarse, rough in their manners and ways of life, and primitive in their eating. All was fish which came to their net. They lived in the hills, and hunting was the chief occupation. . . . That the family was of a low and thievish bent is a natural conclusion, and such was the case. . . . It was an ignorant family. There was no pretense of education among them. They were classed separately, and their associates were few except such as they found among the outlaws of the hills and the indians. Their features have always been the same in general outline. Narrow, retreating foreheads, eyes which "look like the eyes of a pig" When on the road they are free and easy, full of a sort of glee and happiness which is not easy to describe unless one can appreciate the lawless feeling which they have when they find themselves travelling so constantly that officers of the law have no terrors for them. . . . The Ishmaels never seem to try to accumulate property to any extent. . . . They seem to be unable to conceive of a life beyond the tomb.⁴⁴

In place of this casual condemnation of the families' physical, cultural, and behavioral attributes, the opening paragraphs of the ERO Notes assert that the Ishmaels were "the typical feeble-minded people that are so easily recognized today." The ERO Notes also offer a more specific historical origin for the Tribe: that the Ishmael families can be understood through an examination of the history of Indianapolis from the time of the new state Constitution in 1851, when "the foreign pauper, meaning the pauper recently arrived in the city, became a problem."⁴⁵

ORIGINS, WANDERLUST, AND GYPSYING

Both the Indiana Notes and the ERO Notes follow their introductions with an account of the Ishmael family's early history. Family

⁴⁴Indiana Notes, 1–2.

⁴⁵ERO Notes, 4, 5.

patriarch Benjamin Ishmael arrived in Kentucky from Maryland or Virginia. Once there, Ben “took a farm of refuse land” (possibly a military bounty land) in Nicholas (later Bourbon) County.⁴⁶ Both sets of notes describe him as large, ignorant, rough, and dishonest. The Indiana Notes introduce his wife, Jennie, as being “large in build, ignorant, dirty, lazy, but as ready to fight as her husband,” while in the ERO Notes “nothing is known of Jennie Ishmael.”⁴⁷ According to the Indiana Notes, the couple moved west in the early 1800s and were “never heard from again”; the ERO Notes acknowledge that Ben’s will was filed in Nicholas County in 1822.⁴⁸ Of the eight children described in the Indiana Notes, only one, Samuel, is “counted in with the good citizens,” having been reformed by his Methodist wife; Samuel’s grandson William later attended medical school under the tutelage of Dr. William N. Wishard of Indianapolis, “who reports him to be a quiet, orderly man, of the class who are frequently found to be very successful practitioners in rural communities.” The ERO Notes add that Samuel (“Abe”) and his wife owned real estate.⁴⁹

With only one of the grandchildren found acceptable in the Indiana Notes, Estabrook made a special effort in the ERO Notes to distinguish three of Ben and Jennie’s offspring from the others, fleshing out the sketchy details from the Indiana Notes and giving them and all their

⁴⁶Indiana Notes, 3; “Colonial Ancestors,” Benjamin Ishmael, online at <http://colonialancestors.com/cgi-bin/ancestors.cgi/?Williams>. Also, “The parish records of Virginia in the latter part of the seventeenth and first part of the eighteenth century show the names of many Tribe families some with property and some as servants. . . . It is reasonable to assume that some of the Tribe families would go back to the paupers, criminals and lewd women sent from England to the colonies.” ERO Notes, 31.

⁴⁷Indiana Notes, 1–2, 5–6; ERO Notes, 68–69. Hugo Leaming notes that descriptions of Ben Ishmael in the Indiana Notes are remarkably similar to those of the nonreligious, independent, wandering outcast Ishmael Bush in James Fenimore Cooper’s novel *The Prairie* (1827). Hugo P. Leaming, “The Ben Ishmael Tribe: A Fugitive ‘Nation’ of the Old Northwest,” *The Ethnic Frontier: Essays in the History of Group Survival in Chicago and the Midwest*, eds. Melvin G. Holli and Peter d’A. Jones (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977), 116–21. See also William H. Goetzmann, *James Fenimore Cooper: ‘The Prairie,’* in Hennig Cohen, ed., *Landmarks of American Writing* (New York, 1969), 75–87, online at <http://external.oneonta.edu/cooper/articles/other/1969other-goetzmann.html>

⁴⁸Indiana Notes, 3; “Colonial Ancestors”; ERO Notes, 69.

⁴⁹Indiana Notes, 3; ERO Notes, 71–72. Dr. Wishard graduated from Indiana Medical College in 1874. He became the city hospital’s eighth superintendent in 1879, at the time McCulloch began his Ishmael study and when most of the patients were among the city’s poorest residents. Dr. Wishard, after whom the hospital was eventually renamed, was thus helpful to Estabrook in reconstructing details of the Ishmael families and friends.

progeny fictitious first names “to protect the self-respecting members of this family.” Two of the three settled in Kentucky, “one being of a much higher social and intellectual status than the other,” and the third moved from Indiana to Missouri. Only “the salient facts” are said to be included in the ERO Notes, so “that the story of the family may be free from uninteresting details.” References to events during the “World War” indicate these records were compiled after 1918. Estabrook wrote, “It is evident that the new bloods mating into the Ishmael germ plasm are having their influence in bettering the general mental and social levels of the group.”⁵⁰

It was Ben and Jennie’s eighth child, John, whose descendants made up the so-called Tribe of Ishmael as identified by McCulloch. On John’s life, the Indiana Notes remain essentially intact in the ERO version: “John was a vagrant and given to much wandering, and it is not improbable that he was in Ohio for some years before he reached Indianapolis.” Whether he traveled with his parents or remained on their farm is unclear, but he arrived in Indianapolis in the early 1820s and, being “diseased . . . could go no further,” according to the Indiana Notes. Yet in the ERO Notes John was “in the habit of making annual excursions, in the summer time, to the Ohio River country below Cincinnati.” Some time after 1830 these trips, “which in after years were referred to as ‘Gypsying,’” took a northward route instead, toward the Wabash River. The charity relief record of John Ishmael’s descendants in Indianapolis, who were “generally diseased,” begins in 1840.⁵¹

John, according to the Indiana Notes, was “the earliest known of these ‘American gypsies,’” and married Betsy Harbet, a “half-breed Indian” whose “wandering blood” revealed itself in the succeeding generation’s “poison and passion.” A grandson said she might have been Dutch, because no one could understand her when she spoke; Estabrook said in the ERO Notes she was “devoid of mirth” and no doubt feeble-minded. “She did not take kindly to a civilized life,” according to the Indiana Notes, which added that Betsy’s predilections helped to account for the family’s travels. The apex of the northern route of their “gypsying” was an Indian reservation on the Wabash, where “John and

⁵⁰ERO Notes, 66, 70, 112.

⁵¹Indiana Notes, 4–5; ERO Notes, 13, from McCulloch’s 1888 paper. Estabrook says that Ben and Jennie had ten children. ERO Notes, 70.

his mongrel brood were so like the Indians in their habits of life, so lazy, so filthy, so primitive in their habits, that they were readily admitted to the reservation, with liberty to hunt and fish, which was refused the genuine sportsmen and professional huntsmen and trappers." As development in the area reduced the family's hunting opportunities, they headed west into the Illinois prairie. The length of their stays varied but the family returned to Indianapolis for the winter.⁵²

According to the Indiana Notes, John and Betsy's children included Tom, "a rambler, and of a generally trifling disposition," who was living in 1891 "about three miles northeast of Tipton in a three-cornered log cabin,"⁵³ and Jim, whose marriage, like the marriages of his wife's sisters, "took place upon some of the annual gypsy tours to the Wabash." As the named source of some of the background material in the Indiana Notes, Jim's son George receives kind treatment: "George is the most intelligent of all the Ishmaels and has done some work and really does think at times. Once he said, 'I reckon ours is the oldest family in the world, I have heard tell of one of our family being named in the Bible.' George once refused charity when he was sick. He has been on many a gypsy trip." Called "Alfred" in the ERO Notes, George becomes "keen and shrewd . . . more industrious than any of the others." In both sets of notes his first wife is said to have had "some negro blood"; in the ERO notes she has suffered from "epileptic seizures," and all three of his wives are described as "feeble-minded."⁵⁴

In both sets of notes Jim's daughter Sarah was "a tall, raw-boned woman, once described by a policeman as the 'Ishmael who walks like a man and talks bass.' She is one of the most persistent wanderers, and spends most of her time upon the road between Indianapolis and points in Illinois. It has often been stated that this woman has buried a number of children born to her in fence corners or on the banks of streams which thing she did while on her wanderings. If so," the Indiana Notes

⁵²Estabrook, *Eugenics, Genetics and the Family*, 403; Indiana Notes, 13, 6, 5; ERO Notes, 86.

⁵³Indiana Notes, 7. The Tipton County Historical Society has no record of such a structure but finds five of the Ishmael men listed in the Civil War Regiment Rosters. E-mail to the author, November 22, 2006.

⁵⁴Indiana Notes, 9, 16; ERO Notes, 90–91. Another source of background material was George's daughter-in-law Kate Thornton, a native of Ireland, who had "a great deal of intelligence, and she had much of the information to be found here, in all of which she was afterward proven to be correct." Indiana Notes, 12.

conclude, “it must be true of her friends and relatives.” The ERO Notes add: “That she was a harlot goes without saying.” Her second husband, described in the Indiana Notes as “a remarkable compound of rogue and tramp” and “a leading character among the gypsy crowd” who made “his wives go out and beg from house to house and thus support him,” is “feeble-minded” in the ERO version.⁵⁵

Based on the surnames listed in the Indiana Notes, and despite the frequent references to “gypsies” and “gypsying,” the Ishmaels described seem not to have had Romany origins, although they may have befriended, married, or traveled with some Romnichels (English Gypsies) when the latter came to North America after 1850. Although both sets of notes use the term to emphasize a tendency toward vagrancy, it was common slang; census takers of the era often called all travelers and migrant workers Gypsies.⁵⁶ Visitors or caseworkers who wrote the Ishmael records equated the family’s continuing preference for nomadism with a biologically determined wanderlust, a temptation irresistible to improvident vagrants burdened by easy charity,⁵⁷ but it was more likely an economic practice typical of seasonal workers.⁵⁸ Improvidence—the inability or neglect to anticipate future needs—was a target of McCulloch’s charitable reforms, yet some planning ahead might be inferred if the traveling families actually returned to Indianapolis for public aid each winter.

According to the Indiana Notes, John and Betsy Ishmael’s grandchildren included Henry, “one of the most persistent of the gypsying crowd,” and France, who left his wife after she lost her eyesight. “He

⁵⁵Indiana Notes, 8–9, 25–26; ERO Notes, 92. These remarks are typical of the subjective nature of both sets of notes and the unfounded conclusions about the data collected.

⁵⁶Bart McDowell, *Gypsies: Wanderers of the World* (Washington, D.C., 1970), 23. “Gypsy” was also used metaphorically to indicate a nonwhite person. Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals*, 88 n2.

⁵⁷Benjamin C. Marsh, “Causes of Vagrancy and Methods of Eradication,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 23 (May 1904), 38.

⁵⁸Marlene Sway, *Familiar Strangers: Gypsy Life in America* (Urbana, Ill., 1988), 112. It may also have been a matter of convenience. In Act I, Scene I of Madge Dishman’s play “The Bridge,” based on the Indianapolis Ishmaels and performed by the IUPUI University Theatre Department in December 1987, an Ishmael called Walker has this exchange with a local minister who visits the poor:

Walker: *Just cause folks go to see their kin don’t make’m gypsies.*

Rev. Macklin: *Why do you river people go traveling every spring?*

Walker: *Hard to pull a wagon through snow and ice. So we go visitin’ in good weather.*

would go to Illinois with the gypsying crowds. . . . Twice she was forced to go to the poorhouse because he would not live with her.”⁵⁹ Many individuals in the case histories, though absent for long periods on gypsy trips, are also identified by the Indianapolis neighborhoods they called home. The Indiana Notes include references to families living in a log house on Tennessee Street; above Indiana Avenue on the bank of the canal; on the edge of Possum Hollow; in “Dumptown,” ownerless land behind a cemetery near White River; in predominantly black Bucktown and Sleigho; in tenements and houses of ill-fame; or in shacks or hovels in “the haunts in the swampy ground along the river and creeks.”⁶⁰ Many lived in the area near the city hospital (where Wishard Hospital now stands), the only such facility open to nonwhites and the poor in the late 1800s.⁶¹ The neighborhood, near Military Park and once the site of a Civil War staging ground and an area of severe smallpox outbreak, “was regarded as a place to be avoided by all decent people.”⁶² The implication that the poor posed a public health danger made the arguments for their segregation more compelling,⁶³ and when institutionalization proved too costly, eventually bolstered the calls for their eugenic sterilization. Poverty and social status became “the phenotypic expressions of genotypic inferiority.”⁶⁴

THE ‘CRIMINAL POOR’

Applicants for relief were often criticized in the Indiana Notes for lacking shame about their needs and for their willingness to discuss

⁵⁹Indiana Notes, 10.

⁶⁰Ibid.; Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, 1:434; George S. Cottman, “Old-Time Slums of Indianapolis,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, 7 (December 1911), 170–72.

⁶¹Rafter wonders if Charles Davenport later “deliberately misquoted McCulloch in order to make the evidence against the Ishmaels even more damning” by excising the final phrase in McCulloch’s “Another son in the third generation had a penitentiary record, and died of delirium tremens and *went to the medical college*” (McCulloch, “The Tribe of Ishmael,” 51, italics added). The phrase actually refers to the common practice of sending some paupers’ remains to the school for classroom dissection. Rafter, *White Trash*, 23 n27.

⁶²ERO Notes, 120; Thurman B. Rice, “The ‘Tribe of Ishmael’ Study,” in *One Hundred Years of Medicine: Indianapolis, 1820–1920* [*Monthly Bulletin of the Indiana State Board of Health*, 55 (1952)], 233.

⁶³Rafter, *White Trash*, 28.

⁶⁴Allen, “The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor,” 245.



An ERO photo of a house belonging to one of the Ishmaelites
Estabrook and his colleagues at the ERO documented many Ishmaelite houses,
stressing the public health risk of their unclean living conditions

American Philosophical Society

their circumstances with visitors and caseworkers. One woman “had no scruples in asking for charity, so utterly good-for-nothing was she, and so little did her husband do for her, that she must have suffered sometimes for the necessities of life.”⁶⁵ That her suffering forced her to ask for help and that her self-disclosure was required in order to receive assistance are not acknowledged. Some needy applicants gave false names or addresses to get around charity restrictions or to avoid home visits; their untruthfulness was regarded with the same disdain as if they had been impostors, and could result in equally swift denial of aid.⁶⁶

The Indiana Notes also stigmatized the poor for their living conditions:⁶⁷

“She was raised in dirt and the condition seemed natural to her.”

“His home was always in some dark, filthy old tenement and he carried with him a smell so rank that it would not have been tolerated in any livery stable.”

“She was frequently an applicant for charity, and, whether the result of her plans, or her habitual condition, she was invariably found to occupy some old hovel which would have been regarded unfit as a cow-shed.”

“She lived in White Row [a slum on White River], which certainly does not speak well for her character.”

“The family sunk lower and lower, and there were fewer efforts to clean up and consequently more dirt of the kind which characterizes the criminal poor.”

⁶⁵Indiana Notes, 108–109.

⁶⁶Descriptions of the families in the Indiana Notes were reconstructed after “the Township Trustee’s office became more rigid in the enforcement of the rules against chronic paupers.” Indiana Notes, 72.

⁶⁷Cleanliness was a particular concern of McCulloch’s. An undated news clipping stuck into his diary in early 1881 describes how he and other civic leaders proposed to build free bathhouses for the poor in White River. Based on similar structures in Boston, the bathhouses were eventually erected along the canal at the southern edge of Military Park but burned down and were not replaced.

The Indiana Notes blamed dependence on charitable aid, rather than poverty itself, for these environmental conditions. "Misapplied charity is a millstone about the necks of those to whom it is given, and (not entirely their fault either) drags them down from a low level to one yet lower, —frequently to the lowest possible level. . . . A diet of pauper bread breaks down the best of poor families, and the greatest unkindness to the poor is to encourage them to ask and accept charity—something for nothing."⁶⁸ The ERO Notes point instead to below-average mental ability as the cause of the families' problems. Estabrook argued that "scientific knowledge of feeble-mindedness was meager and not at all common" in the late nineteenth century. "It is very evident," he wrote, "in view of the present day information concerning mentally defective peoples . . . that the very great majority of the Tribe men and women were high-grade feeble-minded folk." He identified willingness to work as a trait linked to mental ability, giving higher intelligence grades to family members who had steady employment.⁶⁹

In the Indiana Notes even the military service performed by many of the early Ishmaels and their associates could be seen as a negative influence on their industriousness: "Truth told, Joe, as well as the other members of [his] family who went into the army was nearly ruined by it; for there they were cared for by the Government, and thus they had no care upon their minds. . . . The drudgery of army life, and the monotony of the camps, as well as the excitement of the actual clash of arms, was suited to their natures; but the monotony of civil life, coupled with the necessity of planning and thinking ahead . . . was too great a task for such sluggish intellects, and so, on their return from the war where they made good soldiers, they came back to civil life where they certainly were not good citizens."⁷⁰

On rare occasions in the Indiana Notes, the role of environment in the behavior of the "criminal poor" is considered:

It is a little strange that the several generations have so invariably produced a large number of criminals (social and civil), but like so many other matters, are apt to be attributed to 'heredity.'

⁶⁸Indiana Notes, 43, 56, 63, 83, 85.

⁶⁹ERO Notes, 252–53, 257–59.

⁷⁰Ibid., 66.

I regard this as erroneous, and I have only arrived at this conclusion after years of study of the conditions. Physical and mental conditions are inheritable conditions; morals are no more a matter of inheritance than shoes. . . . 'Blood will tell' is the common answer which condemns this class. It is the answer of selfishness or of ignorance of conditions. . . . Given good moral surroundings, healthy conditions of civil life [a family] would have compared with the rest of the community else our civilization is a failure and we are all degenerating.⁷¹

Other comments acknowledged the role class played in perpetuating poverty: One young woman,

not a bad looking girl . . . might have been a good woman if she had been permitted by our social system. But she recognized the fact that her family was bad, her choice of husbands was poor, she had no education, and the standard of morality had never been known to her people. She knew the station assigned to her in life, and she did not complain.

One man was "an anarchist of course, and he has the instinctive, envious dislike, so characteristic of his people, of anyone in a better condition than himself." Therefore, "with people of this grade it is not fair to draw too strict a line for morals and *particeps criminis* cannot always apply to them."⁷²

Weaknesses perceived in the Ishmaels' behavior and intelligence were often described in the Indiana Notes with some attempt at levity. "He was a lover of music, as was evidenced upon one occasion when he was seen sitting in an outhouse performing on an old French harp, his younger brothers sitting by him and drinking in the harmonious outpouring." Another man "was formerly one of a gang of hoodlums in the [city] hospital district. Afterwards he became a ward politician." Of one woman, the Indiana note takers wrote, "[i]f she ever did any work it is

⁷¹Ibid., 121–22.

⁷²Indiana Notes, 50, 51. For an examination of the ways the mythical concept of the "bad seed" has been perpetuated, see Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals*.

still a secret." One man was "very ignorant and very happy in his ignorance." Another, a barber, "is something of a dude. Parts his hair in the middle." One woman eloped with a fellow dubbed "an equally precious scamp." Comments were just as likely to be scathing in their insensitivity: One man "was one of the most beastly and degraded of characters, and there was probably nothing too vile for him to do that could be suggested." Another was an "idle river rat." One who lost an arm and a leg in a train accident was "more unindustrious and shiftless than before." Especially dismissive criticism was reserved for the women; most were generally unchaste, engaged in incest or prostitution, or "specifically diseased," a euphemism for sexually transmitted infection. One was "mentally weak, but this may have been the result of her vicious life or it may have been the cause of her own degradation." Another was "a rather nice old lady, everything considered." Yet another "made many gypsy trips and was never happier than when tramping. That she was a prostitute goes without saying."⁷³

Such remarks typify the Indiana Notes, which lace benign facts with innuendo, add insults to the injuries of poverty, and condemn morals when there is no other information available. Estabrook's ERO Notes delete some slurs but otherwise rely on vague attributions: "he was spoken of as," "she was reputed to have been," "they were considered to be." The note takers' generalized conclusions demonstrate the lack of scientific method in their records. "Assuming, as is the rule in these pages when nothing is known to the contrary, that the family was in no wise objectionable, the only explanation for the entrance of this man in this book is upon the Emersonian theory that sometimes all the virus of a family is drawn off in one vial," say the Indiana Notes. "It has never been charged that she was a prostitute but it was a life she knew all about, as most of her associates were of the vilest possible character." One woman is described as having been seen by others cutting rings off the hands of victims killed in an explosion. Of one family member "there is nothing known . . . except that he was a very worthless man with some bad habits, lazy, and some vicious tendencies." Another woman "is lazy, dirty, and untruthful, and I have never doubted but she was unchaste after her marriage."⁷⁴

⁷³Indiana Notes, 40, 73, 64, 18, 71–72, 46, 26, 39, 119, 41, 25; ERO Notes, 168.

⁷⁴Indiana Notes, 42, 44, 27, 38, 45; ERO Notes, 75.

Any sex outside of legally sanctioned marriage was regarded as immoral and criminal in that era. Yet while “one of the strange things in the history of the Ishmaels is that separations and divorces were not so common as would be expected among such people,” the families were also said to “monopolize the divorce courts,” where cases were seldom concluded because of the petitioners’ inability to pay for the proceedings and lawyers. Nevertheless, the “laws governing marriage and divorce . . . are too lax . . . [and] should be tightened,” Frank Wright wrote in his essay that appears in the ERO Notes. “This stratum of society seems to thrive by neglect, and cannot be crushed out by the laws which we have. Heroic treatment is sometimes necessary to effect a cure for disease.”⁷⁵

RACIAL INTEGRITY

Indiana’s 1842 prohibition against miscegenation was still in force in the late 1800s to prevent the “amalgamation of whites and blacks.” A person with one black great-grandparent was considered to be “colored” or “negro.”⁷⁶ Marriage between a white person and a person of more than one-eighth “negro blood” remained illegal in Indiana and many other states but some of the married couples recorded in the Ishmael study had apparently skirted those laws. Center Township notetakers often included descriptions of individuals’ complexions in the charity records.⁷⁷ The inclusion of these observations of hereditary makeup alongside information such as criminal background or marital history implied that race was somehow genetically linked to pauperism, a significant inference in a city where the “colored” population was growing rapidly.⁷⁸ Some individuals are described as mulatto or octoroon while others have “a trace of Negro blood”; some are “very dark” or “swarthy.”⁷⁹ One married couple, he with “a trace” and she a mulatto, had a “funny little yellow boy.” One woman who was “very white and

⁷⁵Indiana Notes, 14; ERO Notes, 20, 39, 40, 22, 21, from J. Frank Wright’s presentation to the National Council on Charities and Correction, 1890.

⁷⁶Thornbrough, *Negro in Indiana*, 126.

⁷⁷“Assumptions about native white superiority were both widespread and unselfconsciously expressed” during this era. Rafter, *White Trash*, 8.

⁷⁸In Indianapolis in 1900, 9.4 percent of the population was black, a high ratio for big cities of the era. Thornbrough, *Negro in Indiana*, 229, quoting from the U.S. Census.

⁷⁹Indiana Notes.

possessed very regular features” had a sister whose “very fair white skin” struck the note taker as a strange thing to find in such a poor woman. Another woman, who lived with a mulatto man, “would have been a white woman had she used soap.” A married couple lived on “a dirt street, with houses approaching the shack type, negroes and whites living together.” One man was “a mulatto . . . born a slave in Virginia, but in some manner secured his freedom. . . . His third and last wife was a very black woman. She had a little property and this was [his] motive for marrying her.” Another man “was a mulatto but seems to have owned a little property.” And another “was of much better mentality than his wife though not of average ability even for a mulatto.”⁸⁰

Although *ad hominem* comments on race were deleted in the ERO Notes, there is no question that Estabrook resumed study of the Ishmaels in 1915 because of their perceived value to eugenic arguments on racial integrity. The materials he crafted in support of his theories on feeble-mindedness for his 1921 presentation to the Second International Congress of Eugenics were archived at the Eugenics Record Office not under “Criminality” or “Mendicancy” (begging or vagrancy) but with files on “Race,” listed between “Negro” and “American Indian–Negro.”⁸¹ Where the Indiana Notes had attempted to document a causal relationship between pauperism and inbred degeneracy at the end of the nineteenth century, the ERO Notes emphasized the social and economic costs to twentieth-century society of unregulated procreation by the “extremely prolific” lower classes.⁸² “The underlying condition of the whole Tribe is seen to be feeble-mindedness,” Estabrook asserted, which in poor conditions causes “the anti-social reaction of pauperism, crime, and prostitution.”⁸³

Such assumptions minimized Estabrook’s ability to see simple survival as a motivation for at least some life choices. Men in the study were criticized for the inefficiency of what little work they could find hauling

⁸⁰ERO Notes, 136.

⁸¹Eugenics Record Office, Race Series I Trait Files, online at <http://www.amphilsoc.org/library/mole/e/ero.htm#boxfolder1>. “Names and place identifiers are removed from all personal photographs and pedigrees in the Archive,” and photos showing people have been removed.

⁸²ERO Notes, 33. Estabrook inflates the size of the Tribe in 1888 to ten thousand individuals. Circa 1920, “Hal is the only person belonging to the Tribe, with the exception of those who have been institutionalized because of mental defect or disturbance, whose power of procreation has been cut off by legal authorization on eugenic grounds,” *ibid.*, 172.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 52–53.

ashes or wood, cutting ice, scavenging the dumps for marketable items, or scraping the grease off the White River to sell to the soap companies. Women who turned to prostitution—even those who did so after their husbands had died or gone to prison—were simply licentious, seeking to satisfy their own sexual desire rather than to satiate their hunger.⁸⁴

McCulloch's published materials also provided support for other eugenicists' publications and policies on racial hygiene and sterilization, including Charles B. Davenport's eugenics report to the American Breeders Association and Dr. Harry C. Sharp's "Indiana Plan."⁸⁵ In the meantime, anti-miscegenation laws were reinforced in 1905. Compulsory sterilization of the institutionalized feeble-minded became legal in 1907. Public relief reforms were enacted. Hunting and fishing laws grew more restrictive. A vagrancy law was passed in 1913. The swampy dump near the city hospital was filled in to accommodate the growth of the Indiana University Medical Center campus. Every man's hand really was against the Tribe of Ishmael in Indianapolis, and so was nature: the White River broke through its levees in March 1913 and washed away any makeshift homes still in its path. Yet while Estabrook acknowledged that the Ishmael families were largely dispersed or assimilated by 1920, he nevertheless asserted that they were "still as dangerous to society from the eugenic standpoint," so long as the feeble-minded among them continued to reproduce with others of the same mental ability. These feeble-minded individuals, he wrote, could be easily recognized by their un- or underemployment; low income; history of institutionalization; history of application for relief; lack of training or education; below average mentality; and laziness, shiftlessness, improvidence, and lack of ambition. Estabrook believed that preventing procreation by such persons would eliminate many social ills, including the problem of poverty itself.⁸⁶

The ideological impact of family pedigree studies such as "The Tribe of Ishmael," writes science historian Garland E. Allen, persisted

⁸⁴Ibid., 203, 227.

⁸⁵Davenport, "Report of the Committee on Eugenics"; H. C. Sharp, "The Indiana Plan," in *Proceedings of the American Prison Association*, 36 (1909), 36–48. See also J. N. Hurty, "The Indiana Movement" [abstract], *Indiana Medical Journal*, 26 (February 1908), 310–11; Thurman B. Rice, *Racial Hygiene: A Practical Discussion of Eugenics and Race Culture* (New York, 1929); and Edwin W. Bishop, "Eugenics and the Church," *Eugenics: A Journal of Race Betterment*, 2 (1929), 14–19.

⁸⁶ERO Notes, 34, 230–31, 252.

until “academic geneticists began to come to the fore over the exaggerated claims about genetic differences between races and ethnic groups that emerged as a result of the immigration debates” following World War I.⁸⁷ In 1920 the Eugenics Record Office became part of the Department of Genetics at the Carnegie Institution, which ceased funding the ERO in 1939. No scholar re-examined the Ishmael studies after the time of the ERO’s closing in 1944 until the 1977 publication of historian Hugo Leaming’s essay on the Tribe of Ishmael, which appeared in a collection of articles about ethnic group survival in the Midwest. Leaming’s retelling of the Ishmael story relied heavily on the Indiana Notes, and asserted that the antagonism aimed at the Ishmaels seemed so excessive that it “can only be explained by racism” in response to the intermingling and intermarriages of whites with other racial groups.⁸⁸

A PEDIGREE OF POVERTY

Researchers continue to read between the lines of the family pedigree studies for evidence of more than name-calling, yet one by one the myths behind the stories are being exposed. Paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, who studied various editions of *The Kallikak Family*, a pedigree study first published in 1912, found evidence that the photos had been altered to make some family members look more feeble-minded.⁸⁹ Details of a study of the Cullers family in Putnam County, Indiana, conducted by caseworkers from the Eugenics Record Office in 1916 and discovered by former Indiana State Archivist Robert Horton in 1992, were revealed in the *Indianapolis Star* in 1996. Members of the family interviewed for the article had strikingly different memories of beloved ancestors who

⁸⁷Allen, “Social Origins of Eugenics,” 250.

⁸⁸Leaming, “The Ben Ishmael Tribe,” 121. Leaming traced his own ancestry to a tri-racial isolate group; his personal interest in black nationalism prompted him to look at a possible connection between the Ishmaels and African Islam. It is easy to see how inferences associated with a biblical tribe of Midianite outcasts might have fueled sentiment against the Indianapolis Ishmaelites, but Nathaniel Deutsch, a religious studies scholar who has recently studied the families, finds no historical merit in an Islamic connection and traces the Ishmael surname to seventeenth-century Wales. E-mail messages to the author, Wednesday, October 11, and Friday, October 13, 2006.

⁸⁹Henry H. Goddard, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (New York, 1912); Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, rev. ed. (New York, 1996). Gould’s assertions about the photos have been challenged. Goddard’s alleged deceptions are also detailed in J. David Smith, *Minds Made Feeble: The Myth and Legacy of the Kallikaks* (Austin, Tex., 1985).

had been labeled undesirable by the ERO.⁹⁰ Similarly, a chance discovery in 2001 of a poorhouse graveyard in Ulster County, New York, led investigators to old records showing the real identities of the individuals Richard Dugdale studied. Many of the Jukes were not criminals or defectives and some were actually prominent members of society. Yet Arthur Estabrook had reviewed Dugdale's data in 1915 and pronounced the Jukes a continuing threat to society.⁹¹

As a profile of poverty and racism in early Indianapolis, the records on the Ishmaels have great value to historians, genealogists, and sociologists. Oscar McCulloch's nineteenth-century works are essential to studies of charity organization and reform; viewed alongside Estabrook's later revision, their value in support of the growing emphasis on negative eugenics in the 1920s becomes clearer. Because both sets of notes contain errors, inconsistencies, innuendo, and conjecture, they lack the objectivity and rigorous methodology needed to make the data truly useful to genetic science. They nevertheless constitute one of the most influential family pedigree studies of the eugenics era, "an affirmation of class position and entitlement" that used Mendelian laws "to map social worth" and "used the cover of science to blame the victims for their own problems."⁹² "The Tribe of Ishmael" survives as a loaded label for Indianapolis's most unwanted—the dependent, unacculturated, outcast Others, destined to wander in search of a better life. Despite its intended implication, first in the work of McCulloch and later in that of Estabrook, the epithet endures today as a reminder that race is not a marker for potential and poverty is not written into DNA.



⁹⁰Kate Wiltrout, "Long-Forgotten Files Tell a Tale of Social Policy Gone Wrong," *Indianapolis Star*, February 25, 1996, pp. 1, 8.

⁹¹Scott Christianson, "Bad Seed or Bad Science: The Story of the Notorious Jukes Family," *New York Times*, February 8, 2003, pp. B9, B11.

⁹²Rafter, *White Trash*, 16, 6; Allen, "Social Origins of Eugenics."