



Child Care or Child Neglect?: Baby Farming in Late-Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia

Author(s): Sherri Broder

Source: *Gender and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jun., 1988), pp. 128-148

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/190492>

Accessed: 24/08/2008 12:40

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=sage>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# **CHILD CARE OR CHILD NEGLECT? Baby Farming in Late-Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia**

**SHERRI BRODER**  
*Brown University*

*This article examines baby farming as an urban neighborhood-based system of group child care in Philadelphia in the late nineteenth century and considers the dangers and abuses the practice of baby farming posed for parents, children, and baby farmers. It explores reformers' early efforts to regulate the city's baby farms. Finally, the essay also investigates the ways in which the residents of Philadelphia's poor neighborhoods monitored the child-care establishments in their communities that catered to working mothers.*

**I**n July 1879, Janet R.'s neighbors in a working-class district of Philadelphia had good reason to view her boarding establishment for infants with suspicion. Case records of the Pennsylvania Society to Protect Children from Cruelty (SPCC) revealed that

there is every reason to believe that d'ndt is engaged in "baby-farming"; she has now 2 or 3 babies on hand—within the last two months, 3 or 4 babies have been seen taken out of the house dead; the little coffins were placed in a private carriage, and rapidly driven away. There has been no sign of a doctor or undertaker attending the house—no crepe ever appeared on the door or shutters. (SPCC CR 1879, 1080, 877)

"Greatly annoyed by the crying of the infants," the neighbors told the SPCC investigator that eight burials had taken place in as many weeks. None of the deaths had been accompanied by the appropriate mourning rituals. Instead, the defendant, who claimed ironically to

---

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: I am grateful to Wendy Chmielewski, Marvin Natowicz, Mary Trigg, and the anonymous reviewers of Gender & Society for their careful readings and helpful criticisms of this article. I would also like to thank Fred Miller and David Weinberg of the Urban Archives, Temple University, for their generous assistance.*

GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 2 No. 2, June 1988 128-148  
© 1988 Sociologists for Women in Society

receive infants to board from the SPCC, had been seen burying the corpses while accompanied by a friend. Moreover, the defendant had been heard to remark to one of her customers “that it was a good neighborhood for that business and that she was going to take some more.” What did Philadelphians mean when they referred to “that business”?

### THE BABY-FARMING CONTROVERSY

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, *baby farming*, as the boarding of infants in exchange for money was popularly known, was a controversial and risky business for all involved. The term captures the misgivings with which Philadelphians viewed the trade, for baby farming was used interchangeably to refer both to the boarding of infants in exchange for a fee and to their murder in pursuit of profit. Many people suspected that both aspects of baby farming were often united in the same establishment. Convinced that the provision of child care for the children of working mothers in poor neighborhoods was linked to the wholesale murder of infants, working-class and middle-class men and women alike feared that many baby farmers provided child-care services only as a camouflage for the flagrant destruction of unwanted infants. Dr. John Parry, a physician at the Children’s Department of the Philadelphia Hospital in the 1870s, almost equated baby farming with deliberate infanticide. Pointing out that the children of unwed mothers were the primary victims of both infanticide and baby farming, Parry commented:

The poor victims of misplaced confidence have no sooner given birth to their children than they are abandoned by their heartless seducers and turned into the world outcasts from society. . . . One of two courses is open to them—to rid themselves at once and summarily of their burden—by criminal means, or to delegate the care of their children to others, and go forth and earn a livelihood for both. The result is almost equally fatal to the child in either case. (1871, p. 9)

Infanticide and its sister crime, abandonment, had long been traditional recourses for unwed and deserted mothers and for those couples too destitute to care for an additional child. However, tales of a trade organized around the systematic destruction of unwanted babies, with well-known practitioners and stipulated fees, shocked Philadelphians in a way that individual cases of infanticide had not.

In the Gilded Age, baby farming was denounced in the press and in the annual reports of moral-reform societies as a lucrative profession in which a woman could literally make a killing. Infamous female practitioners were believed to “surreptitiously put . . . away young infants, whose birth and existence entail a disgrace under the specious pretext of affording accommodation for nursing children.” As the SPCC *Annual Report* for 1877 explained, “The parties so engaged receive them often when only a few hours old, and by a systematic neglect, usually contrive to put them away within a few months” (1878, p. 36).

The SPCC recognized the dire consequences of working-class mothers’ reliance on the services of baby farms when it told readers in its *Annual Report* for 1883:

The inadequate provisions existing in this City for the care of infants belonging either to the very poor or the degraded classes, is the occasion of much suffering and cruelty towards the children and of fearful temptation to the crimes of desertion and infanticide on the part of those who are by nature or complication of circumstances charged with their care. (1884, p. 19)

In spite of their unsavory reputation, however, baby farms were a prominent feature of working-class life in Philadelphia, as in other late-nineteenth-century American cities. In many—and probably the majority of—cases, baby farming was a legitimate occupation that merely formalized the informal child-care networks of single mothers and other laboring women. Boarding infants enabled some women to earn a living while remaining at home, making it possible for other women to go out to work. Despite rumors concerning the lucrative nature of the trade, baby farms were run by poor women, and the working mothers who availed themselves of the services of these establishments were even more hard-pressed than the women who ran them.

Baby farming, then, was a system of child care that built on women’s informal neighborhood networks; in its worst abuses it also became a latent system for the disposal of unwanted babies. If most boarding establishments for infants and young children were legitimate, how are we to understand the controversy over baby farming and the widespread confusion over what it entailed? Why did many Victorians readily believe in the perfidy of working-class mothers and child-care providers? How prevalent and how deliberate were the abuses of baby farming?

This article examines baby farming as a local system of group child care and considers the dangers and abuses the practice of baby farming posed for parents, children, and baby farmers. It explores reformers' early efforts to regulate Philadelphia's baby farms. The essay also investigates the ways in which the residents of poor neighborhoods monitored the child-care establishments in their communities that catered to working mothers. The study is based chiefly on the institutional and case records of the Pennsylvania Society to Protect Children from Cruelty (SPCC) and those of the Sheltering Arms (SA), a Philadelphia home for foundlings and unwed mothers and their infants. The SPCC was a child-protection agency established in Philadelphia in 1877 by private reformers who worked closely with the police and magistrate courts; the Sheltering Arms of Philadelphia was organized in 1882 by Bishop Stevens and a group of prosperous Episcopalian women under the auspices of the Protestant Episcopal church. The SPCC addressed a plethora of issues in the 1870s through the 1890s, including drunkenness, neglect, physical cruelty, child labor, begging, street selling, prostitution, and juvenile street performers, as well as cases involving baby farms. Although explicit investigations of baby farming are only a small minority of the recorded cases I examined for the years 1877 through 1901, references to boarded-out infants, women who boarded children, and women's child-care networks are contained in other cases as well as in the annual reports. The minutes, diary, annual reports, and house records of the Sheltering Arms also contain valuable information regarding foundlings and unwed mothers and their infants.

Philadelphia's medical and moral reformers estimated that each year, hundreds of the city's infants were victims of abandonment, infanticide, and deliberate starvation. Parry (1871, pp. 10-13) noted that Philadelphia's coroner frequently rendered a verdict of "death by unknown causes" in inquests of infants found dead in yards, inlets, lots, culverts, on the docks, and under bridges. Other deaths of infants under one week of age were labeled death by strangulation, suffocation, "exposure and neglect," or "found drowned." In one instance, an infant who died from "debility" had his or her "death accelerated by being thrown into Cohocksink Creek." The number of deaths labeled "unknown causes" indicates the difficulties inherent in prosecution (Lane 1979, pp. 90-91, 98-99). The penalty for infant abandonment was imprisonment for 12 months and a fine of \$100, and officials were possibly more likely to prosecute cases of this lesser

crime, for Philadelphia newspapers recorded the arrests of single women and couples who abandoned infants. It is likely that a disproportionate number of the infants who were listed in the annual register of deaths in Philadelphia as having died from "unknown causes" were black (Lane 1979, p. 110).<sup>1</sup>

Although abandonment could lead to an infant's death because of exposure to cold and lack of nourishment, child desertion was not necessarily as final as infanticide, nor was it always certain that whoever abandoned the child did so in order to kill it. It is very likely that many poverty-stricken parents who abandoned infants in public places did so hoping to save rather than to destroy their children. Nonetheless, in an age in which Americans sentimentalized motherhood and childhood innocence, local newspapers reported almost daily accounts of infants drowned in inlets, abandoned on doorsteps or in empty lots, or thrust into the arms of unwitting strangers. In an 1871 lecture on the subject of infant mortality, Parry informed the members of the Philadelphia Social Association:

It must be remembered . . . that very many of the bodies of murdered infants never come under the notice of the Coroner but thrown down cesspools, into culverts, or into the rivers upon the east and the west, they rest until the sea and the earth shall give up their dead. (1871, p. 15)

Given the prevalence of abandonment and infanticide in late-nineteenth-century cities, the reformers' belief that a market existed in Philadelphia for the destruction of unwanted babies was not so farfetched. The controversy over baby farms and the attempt to regulate their use can be understood only when placed in the wider context of infanticide and child desertion, and the emergence of an infant welfare movement in the late nineteenth century. In these decades, members of Philadelphia's reform community campaigned to abolish infanticide, child neglect, and abandonment, to license homes in which babies were boarded for profit, and to provide accommodations for the city's foundlings.

Even if concrete examples of infanticide, abandonment, and child abuse abounded, baby farming was also notorious for other, less tangible reasons. Suspicions about baby farms arose from Victorian misgivings about working mothers and the separation of mothers and their young children. Whether they were regarded as dens of iniquity or merely as child-care facilities for working mothers, baby farms violated cherished Victorian ideals about the proper relation of

women to children and about women's relation to the workplace. At a time when the birthrate of middle-class women was declining substantially, so that middle-class families were raising fewer children more intensively, the idea of caring for infants wholesale was particularly appalling, especially if money tainted the transaction (Smith 1979, p. 226; Warner 1894, p. 206). To many middle-class Americans, baby farms appeared to be based on the premise that woman's sacred duty of raising children could be turned over to the lowest bidder.

The bad reputation of baby farms can also be attributed in part to the fact that so many of the infants boarded were illegitimate. Baby farms served a population consisting chiefly of the children of prostitutes, unwed mothers, and those destitute and deserted wives who, although mothers of small children, were compelled nonetheless to earn a living through wage work performed outside the home. Wet nurses were also known to board their own babies in order to accept positions caring for infants of more prosperous families, whose mothers could not or would not nurse their infants (Golden 1987, p. 131). For middle-class observers, wet nurses' reliance on baby farms underscored the mercenary rather than maternal nature of working-class women, who relinquished their own maternal duties—and possibly traded the lives of their own infants—in exchange for hard cash.

The controversy over baby farms was also part of a larger concern about the role of the family in a republican society beset by increasing class tensions. The family was accorded a special role in late-nineteenth-century American political culture. Indeed, the belief that the family held a key position in the transmission of civic values and in the creation of a virtuous and educated citizenry was a basic tenet of republicanism. Hence the health of the nation's families was directly related to the health of the Republic. In this way, family life was politicized, as reformers of diverse perspectives incorporated criticisms of family relations into more encompassing critiques of the transformations wrought by industrial capitalism.

Conservative and liberal middle-class reformers located the source of urban social problems in the family relations of the poor and argued that the improperly socialized children of the urban poor were a threat to the "property, morals, and political life of the Republic" (Brace 1872, p. ii; Stansell 1986, p. 202). The exposés of baby farms, with their depiction of destitute mothers as either unfortunate victims

or deadly killers intent on destroying their own young, fit neatly into the dominant cultural tendency to portray the family life of the laboring class as destructive. For middle-class men and women, and particularly for medical reformers, doubts about the ability of working-class women to mother also underlay criticism of baby farms. In medical reform literature written by men, criticism of unnatural women who were unwilling to mother was class-specific. Abortion was viewed as a crime of pampered middle-class women, while infanticide was perceived as a crime of women in dire poverty (Hodge, 1869; Parry 1871, pp. 26-28; Smith-Rosenberg 1985). Lurid accounts of working-class women drew on class, ethnic, and racial stereotypes of the poor, the Irish, and blacks; they featured working-class mothers who were intent on destroying the infants they had thoughtlessly borne and unscrupulous baby farmers who murdered the children of unwitting mothers (Parry 1871, pp. 26-28; Taylor 1969, p. 41).

While conservative and liberal reformers portrayed working-class women as unnatural mothers intent on destroying their own offspring, labor reformers insisted that it was the poor conditions of working-class life that were hazardous to women and children. Instead of pointing to the incompetence of working-class mothers, labor reformers linked the controversial issue of child neglect to the demand for the eight-hour day. They used child labor as a metaphor for the exploitation of all labor and claimed that by overworking men and women, employers were indirectly creating the inmates of orphanages and juvenile houses of correction (Broder 1988; Sylvis 1872, pp. 208-209; United States Senate 1885, pp. 393-394). In this context, baby farms dramatically highlighted the impact of economic inequality on working-class family life. The high mortality rates that plagued baby farms as well as other institutions for children, such as maternity and foundling wards in almshouses, strikingly illustrated the class-specific nature of infant mortality in late-nineteenth-century American cities. Out of every thousand infants born in Philadelphia in 1870, roughly 175 would die within their first year of life (Condran, Williams, and Cheney 1984, pp. 155-157). One estimate of mortality among infants farmed out in Philadelphia in the same period was a staggering 90 percent (Parry 1871, pp. 8-9).

Clearly, the lack of safe and affordable child care for Philadelphia's poorest children often resulted, directly or indirectly, in death. Although attitudes about child desertion, infanticide, and baby



farming were colored by class and ethnic prejudice, high rates of infant mortality and evidence about the actual extent of abuse provided the material context (however misinterpreted) for suspicions of the consumers and providers of working-class child care. Yet an analysis of baby farms is more complex. While cases of cruelty in baby farms were not isolated incidents, baby farms belong as much to the history of late-nineteenth-century child-care arrangements as to the history of child neglect and abuse.

### **BABY FARMING AS A NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED SYSTEM OF CHILD CARE**

The two aspects of baby farming, child care and child abuse, are historically inseparable. Suspicions of notorious baby farmers influenced middle-class perceptions of legitimate working-class boarding establishments for children, and the routine licensing of baby-care establishments grew out of the surveillance of illicit baby farms.

#### **Working-Class Women as Consumers of Child Care**

Only the most destitute of Philadelphia's white families sent mothers outside of the home to earn wages (Goldin 1981, p. 281). Most families relied on the earnings of male breadwinners, coupled with the critical contributions of children as secondary wage earners (Haines 1981, p. 244). When married women of the working class contributed cash to the family economy, they usually earned income by taking in laundry, running speakeasies in their front rooms, or managing cheap lodging houses and brothels. Other women worked as midwives, turning their homes into lying-in establishments where poor and, especially, single mothers could birth and board their babies and return to wage work.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Philadelphia's single young women were far more likely to work for wages outside the home than were their mothers, often remaining as members of the households of their parents for an extended period of time to assist in supporting their families (Haines 1981, p. 266). Irish, German, and black daughters, in particular, had high rates of labor force participation (Goldin 1981, p. 284). While black women were confined chiefly to service occupations, Irish and German women worked as domestic servants, seamstresses, weavers and millworkers in the city's textile

industry, and as workers in the other industries and trades in Philadelphia's diversified economy in which women were employed.

One group of single working women, however, formed a striking contrast to this portrait of dutiful daughters remaining within their parents' households in order to contribute to the family economy. These were Philadelphia's unwed mothers. Such women faced restricted economic opportunities and the possible loss of family support, just when they were confronted with the responsibility for supporting not only themselves and their families, but a baby as well. Because illegitimacy posed an acute crisis of reputation for unwed mothers and their families, many parents refused to allow unmarried daughters to remain at home with their infants. For instance, Mary G. was admitted to the Sheltering Arms in September 1884 with her two-week-old infant because "her mother was dreadful worried about her and don't allow her to come home on account of the disgrace" (*SA Diary*, September 17, 1884). Other parents were willing to shelter a wayward daughter only if she could arrange other accommodations for her child.

While respectable working-class women condemned illegitimacy, networks of the city's rougher women provided some measure of support for those women in need of child care who possessed enough money to pay for it. For this reason, single mothers and their children constituted the chief clientele of the city's baby farms. These women boarded their infants and young children in order to retain jobs as live-in domestic servants, to go out to work in other occupations, to accept positions as wet nurses, or to remain within the households of parents who would accept the presence of a fallen daughter, but not her newborn baby. The urgent need for child care was also shared by extremely poor wives whose husbands were either unemployed or who had left the city to "tramp" in search of work.

A constellation of other factors also influenced which women were likely to board their children in baby farms. The SPCC records document the use of baby farms by native-born white and black women and by Irish, German, English, and Jewish women, but the extent of their use of baby farms depended on the interaction of a number of factors that were affected by the household and occupational structures of each group. These included illegitimacy rates, the need for married women with young children to earn wages, the availability of other household members who could provide child care, the presence of other wage-working family members and the

nature and regularity of their employment, and the accessibility of institutional sources of aid. In each racial and ethnic group, the poorest of the city's wage-working mothers relied heavily on baby farms as places in which to board their young children, paying between \$1.50 and \$3.00 per child each week.

How well did baby farming serve the needs of such women and their children? How did women reconcile their need for safe and affordable child care with the reputation of baby farms as houses of murder? How did legitimate baby farmers protect themselves from customers interested in the disposal of unwanted babies? To answer these questions, we must situate baby farms in the context of working-class women's neighborhood networks of scrutiny, gossip, and mutual aid in late-nineteenth-century Philadelphia.

#### **Working-Class Women as Providers of Child Care**

Baby farms were the embodiment of an extensive system of mutual aid among working-class women. Baby farming resembled other neighborhood-based exchanges of cash, goods, and services, but baby farming also involved more than a simple commercial transaction. In many cases, the baby farmer and her customer were friends, relatives, or neighbors. Such women were engaged in a pooling of social and economic resources that was critical to their survival, as an example from SPCC case records illustrates.

When the SPCC received a complaint from the coroner that a child had died at Rachel M.'s baby farm in West Philadelphia in the winter of 1896, they sent an agent to investigate the matter. The agent's report documents a complex interplay among a group of black women who pooled money and services, as health and employment changed over time. Usually, Rachel M. took care of four children, ranging in age from 3 months to 8 years, who belonged to three different mothers. At the time of the investigation, Rachel claimed that she was paid \$1.50 per week by Eda's mother, Eliza Q., who lived at service. Martha and John S. were boarded with Rachel while their mother, Ella S., worked out as a cook, earning \$4.00 per week. Stella O. had been adopted by Rachel. Thomas J., the child whose death had prompted the investigation, was the son of another adopted daughter of Rachel's, who worked at service in a home near the University of Pennsylvania. Rachel was periodically ill and unable to mind the business herself. The SPCC agent noted that at these times:

Ella S. then comes there, and stays with her and does her work such as Dfndt [Rachel M.] cannot do and they put their earnings together & they live in common; but when Mrs. S. is employed, cooking, she pays Dfndt \$2 per week for the children. . . . The woman S. sleeps at Dfndt's house when not at service. (SPCC CR, 1896, 15911)

Commenting that "Dfndt is very poor and does whatever she can to make a living," the agent also noted that Rachel relied on two other home-based sources of income. She and the children occupied a "good-sized room with one single and a large double bedstead" that was "comfortably furnished"; she rented out two rooms on the second floor of her six-room house. In her front room, Rachel kept a number of trunks "belonging to colored girls who are out at service," who paid Rachel money to store their worldly possessions.

Obviously, baby farming was not always as impersonal and cold-blooded as it was depicted in sensational accounts. While many wary baby farmers under investigation by the SPCC (CR 1893, 13209) claimed they "did not know the name of mother or child or where to find the mother," it is doubtful that this was an accurate description of the relationship between a baby farmer and her customers in the majority of cases. Certainly, baby farmers were unlikely to accept charge of an infant without being certain of who would pay the fee. Records also reveal that many working women who were able to visit their children did so, indicating that baby farmers and their customers were likely to know of each other's whereabouts. When Emma M.'s boarding establishment was under investigation, she told an SPCC agent that Annie J., who boarded her 2-year-old daughter Emma, "works every day and comes there at night and takes care of the child" (SPCC CR 1896, 15698).

Frequently, kin ties underlay arrangements between baby farmers and their clientele. For instance, Maggie C., the 8-year-old illegitimate daughter of Bridget C., boarded with her aunt. While she lived at service, Bridget probably earned about \$2 a week in cash along with her room and board; she paid her sister \$1.50 per week to care for the child (SPCC CR 1893, 13212). This economic arrangement between sisters illustrates two significant points about baby farming. First, in some ways baby farming was no different from other economic arrangements among working-class relatives who pooled income and services to increase family resources. Possibly, some women who had routinely contributed their wages to a family economy before the birth of their children continued to do so in an altered form once they

became working mothers. When a woman's baby farmer was her sister or her adopted mother (as in the cases cited above), baby farming became a different variation of an earlier family economy, albeit one that now centered around the needs of working women and their children. The knowledge that baby farmers were often well-known and trusted family members or neighbors, rather than practitioners of a deadly trade, explains the willingness of working women to board their children.

At the same time, baby farming was also a home-based occupation. Although some baby farmers were simply boarding the children of a neighbor or a sister on a temporary basis and accepting money to cover their expenses, other women remained in the business for years, seeking new infants to board to replace those who died or were removed by their mothers. While couples very occasionally managed boarding establishments, almost all of the cases brought to the attention of the SPCC mentioned a woman proprietor. Like other women workers in predominantly female occupations, baby farmers appear to have been initiated into the trade by other women, usually relatives. Case records note mother-daughter teams, as well as establishments run by sisters (SPCC *CR* 1893, 12721).

### **THE ABUSES OF BABY FARMING**

If baby farming had advantages as a home-based source of income for women, there were obvious occupational hazards involved in boarding other women's infants for profit. Abandonment of infants at baby farms was a common mode of desertion throughout the 1880s and 1890s in Philadelphia. Mothers burdened with an infant they could not care for could leave the child at a baby farm and then disappear without paying the weekly boarding fees. In this way, baby farmers often served as unwitting and unwilling agents in the process of abandonment. Rather than growing rich off murders committed for profit, many baby farmers were themselves vulnerable to abuse by their customers. Many women who brought abandoned infants to the Sheltering Arms claimed that they had arranged to board the child for a fee, but that payments had stopped after several weeks. Charlotte Abbey, physician at the Sheltering Arms in the early 1890s, observed that the children were the real victims:

In work among deserted children a frequent source of infant suffering has been recognized. Those who have taken an infant to board and

failed to receive a payment have great difficulty in being relieved of the care of the child, and the little one suffers. (*WDAR* 1894, p. 11)

Nonpayment of fees for boarding a child allowed an ambivalent mother to abandon a child gradually, and from a distance. An indirect form of desertion, it removed the responsibility for determining the infant's fate from the shoulders of one woman and placed it on those of another. Because baby farming was widely perceived to be a way of disposing of unwanted children, it is possible that some mothers who deserted their infants at legitimate boarding establishments misunderstood the nature of the agreement they had made. Other women never intended to desert their infants but were simply unable to make the weekly payments. Afraid to inform the baby farmer of her plight for fear that she would refuse to board the child on credit, such a mother might be forced to rely on her baby farmer's goodwill and hope that maternal instincts would triumph over business acumen.

As businesswomen as well as surrogate mothers, baby farmers were firm in their conviction that their responsibilities for infants ended when mothers defaulted on the weekly payments. Such women were adamant in their refusal to take no for an answer when they sought to dispose of their "stock" at the Sheltering Arms. In late 1883, records noted that a "colored woman came to leave a child that was left on her hands wanted to leave it wether or no" (sic; *SA Diary*, December 29, 1883). Another time a lady manager at the Sheltering Arms threatened to send a detective after "an elderly German woman a pedler [sic] she called herself" who declared that if she could not deposit at the Sheltering Arms an infant left on her hands she would "leave it on the street" (*SA Diary*, February 9, 1884).

Some baby farmers did desert infants left on their hands. The *SPCC Annual Report* for 1883 recounted how:

a woman was seen in the vicinity of 5th and Christian Sts. with a bundle in her arms which she appeared anxious to conceal by the wrappings of her shawl. She was noticed to be acting in a suspicious manner, to frequently look around and behind her as if she were being watched; finally she was observed to lay her bundle carefully down on a stone step of a dwelling-house and walk stealthily away. In that bundle was wrapped an infant a few months old, deserted in the middle of winter in the open streets (*SPCC AR* 1884, p. 19).

When investigators traced the woman back to her house, they found a number of malnourished children and an infant corpse lying

on a table awaiting burial. Investigators reported that the woman routinely accepted infants to board from mothers who agreed to pay a certain sum for their care. At first, the payments would be promptly made, but after a while, they would cease. At this time, "if reports were to be believed, it was a common thing for her to dispose of her stock" by deserting infants in alleyways (*SPCC AR* 1884, p. 19; Spogle 1887, p. 290).

It is difficult to determine in such instances if baby farmers were responding to the problem of nonpayment or carrying out an implicit agreement with the mother to get rid of the child after payments ceased. Although neighboring women readily pressed charges at the SPCC office against mothers they suspected had struck such deadly bargains, explicit agreements of this sort remain hard to document (*SPCC CR* 1877, 183). A desperate mother on the verge of abandonment could instead place her child with a notorious baby farmer. While fully aware of the risks involved, she did not have to face outright her desire to be rid of the child. Other women who placed their children with negligent baby farmers unwittingly were trying to do the best they could under difficult circumstances. For example, shortly after her birth in November 1885, Lucy C. was placed to board since her own mother was too ill to nurse her. In early December, Lucy's caretaker was discovered lying intoxicated on the street with the baby; Lucy was found "feeding out of a bottle containing soap and water" (*SA HR* December 10, 1885, p. 56).

Child abuse at baby farms took other forms as well. In the 1890s, investigations linked unlicensed maternity homes or combination baby-farm and lying-in facilities to a deplorable "traffic in children" (*SPCCAR* 1894, p. 20; *WDAR* 1899, p. 11). Undercover work revealed that babies were bought and sold at private maternity hospitals; the transactions were carried out by midwives and baby farmers who sought to profit from the desperation of unwed mothers, who paid other women to deliver their babies and put them up for adoption. Promising confidentiality, the proprietors of private lying-in hospitals received a "surrender fee" to cover the alleged expenses of confinement and adoption. Advertisements offering babies for adoption, which probably served as coded messages that indicated a midwife's willingness to accept unwanted infants for a fee, appeared in English- and foreign-language newspapers (*SPCC CR* 1901, 19640; *WDAR* 1899, p. 11). According to case records, the traffic in children entailed several different types of transactions: Midwives sold children

to other women, boarded them with baby farmers, and paid other women small sums to adopt the infants after they received larger sums, usually about a \$50 "surrender fee," from the unfortunate mother (SPCC *AR* 1886, p. 24).

### THE REGULATION OF BABY FARMING

In the Gilded Age, the practice of baby farming was shaped by sensational accounts in the press and by the efforts of reformers to regulate the trade. Although boarding establishments for children were in existence in the early part of the nineteenth century, "baby farming," as Victorians understood it, was constructed as reformers attempted to regulate the trade in the late 1870s. In this way, pervasive perceptions of baby farming altered actual practices. As the concern over the "evils of baby farming" became more pervasive, boarding establishments for children were regarded with suspicion; even the wail of a baby could suggest the ghoulish possibility of criminal violence. It was then incumbent on women who boarded children to prove that they did not engage in criminal acts.

In the 1870s and 1880s, legitimate baby farmers began to rely on the medical services of physicians to document their concern for the children entrusted to their care in a way that middle-class reformers could understand and respect. The informal exchange of social and financial resources among neighboring women was transformed into a formal system of child care, and the unofficial monitoring of neighborhood baby farmers was supplemented by formal licensing and regulation.

The Pennsylvania Society to Protect Children from Cruelty was instrumental in lobbying for the initial legislation regulating boarding establishments for children, and SPCC agents worked closely with the police in attempts to enforce the law after its enactment. Before the law regulating baby farms was passed by the Pennsylvania legislature in 1885, despite reports from neighbors, SPCC agents found it "almost impossible to put a stop to the practice of baby farming, which was known to exist to a considerable extent, but there were such inherent difficulties in successfully tracing the ill-treatment, that the injury done by the unscrupulous was left unpunished" (SPCC *AR* 1886, p. 8). While the legislation did not necessarily make it easier for the SPCC to track down criminal baby



farms, it required individuals who boarded infants under two years of age to possess a license. Most significantly, the legislation authorized members of the State Board of Charities and officers of the SPCC to inspect the premises of baby farms.

After May 1885, the licensing and inspection of child-care establishments in Philadelphia subjected informal networks among women to legal restrictions concerning the amount of space and number of caretakers required to board a given number of children. This legislation was intended to promote infant health and safety and to set the terms by which a baby farmer could be considered criminally negligent. Reformers also intended regulation to weed out those baby farmers who killed through incompetence, as well as the more notorious baby farmers who allegedly deliberately murdered unwanted infants. As they recognized the links between lying-in homes, the sale of infants, and the boarding of infants at more disreputable baby farms, reformers expanded their efforts to license baby farms to encompass the regulation of lying-in facilities, too.

The legislation that permitted designated officials to inspect private residences where women were engaged in baby farming generated little public consternation in Philadelphia, as proposals to enact similar legislation did elsewhere. In England, a prominent suffragist, Lydia Becker, was a vocal opponent of bills to regulate baby farms, which she perceived as male efforts to control women's domestic work (Behlmer 1982, pp. 33-34).

Outside of the SPCC, there were two distinct yet overlapping approaches to the problem of baby farming in Philadelphia. Although men doctors and women moral reformers cooperated, they emphasized different aspects of the issue and its solution. Both groups relied on the rhetoric of women's seduction and betrayal at the hands of men and depicted unwed and deserted mothers as victims as well as the perpetrators of crimes against children. For men doctors, however, discussions of baby farming were part of a larger consideration of the medical aspects of infant mortality and of the perceived unwillingness of all women, rich and poor, to devote themselves to motherhood (Parry 1871, pp. 26-28). They defined the problem as one of medical neglect, and considered the licensing and regulation of baby farms a plausible solution. Women moral reformers also deplored the quality of working-class maternal care and the plight of unwed mothers. They were more likely, however, to see the resort to baby farms as a sad

consequence of the sexual double standard, which punished women who transgressed but allowed the fathers of their children to escape scot-free.

Like men medical reformers, women physicians were interested in issues of infant health and welfare, but like women moral reformers they were equally concerned with the separation of mothers and infants that baby farming entailed. Women physicians joined moral reformers in the movement to found institutions for unwed mothers and their children. The Sheltering Arms was established in 1882 by women reformers in Philadelphia as an alternative to the city's baby farms and as a place where unwed mothers could remain with their infants. Like other late-nineteenth-century women reformers, the founders believed that motherhood itself had redemptive powers and that caring for her child could reform the unwed mother and keep her from further indiscretion (*SA AR* 1888, p. 7; also see Brace 1872, pp. 416-17; Gordon 1985, p. 188; Warner 1894, p. 212; *SPCC AR* 1886, p. 16; *WDAR* 1899, p. 16).

Child abuse in baby farms mobilized not only Philadelphia's middle-class residents but also working-class men and women. Baby farmers themselves responded with apparent equanimity to demands that they procure licenses, although they often failed to comply with the law until after a visit from an SPCC agent. Some baby farmers may even have welcomed the opportunity to have their premises inspected, certified, and set apart from illicit establishments. Although the evidence is scanty, the issue of safety must have concerned the working-class mothers who boarded their children at least as much as it concerned the city's more prosperous Victorian reformers. For parents forced to board their babies with women they did not know, the possibility that their child was in the hands of an incompetent or criminal baby farmer must have evoked horror: could the same woman who might kill another woman's baby for a fee be content to nurture a child for smaller recompense?

While the city's professional and reform community used their skills and influence to regulate baby farming and to provide a wide array of services for destitute mothers and their children, working-class Philadelphians monitored baby farms within their own neighborhoods. They scrutinized boarding establishments for children, noting the quality of medical care provided and the display of appropriate signs of mourning when an infant died. They took notice

when too many mothers went in and too few children went out. They watched for signs of suspicious burials and listened for incessant crying, which might indicate vicious abuse or neglect. Most of all, they informed authorities such as the SPCC if they suspected malpractice.

Notorious baby farmers faced strong condemnation in the poor neighborhoods where their trade was based (Ross 1986). Neighbors who were close-mouthed and uncooperative when SPCC investigators inquired about the sexual and drinking habits of their neighbors considered the abuse of baby farming a far different matter. The eagerness of neighbors to inform the authorities when they believed infants were being abused and their readiness to bring complaints to the SPCC, an upper-middle-class agency alternately feared and hated by a significant minority of the city's working class, testify to their disapproval of the seamier side of baby farming.

### CONCLUSION

Rather than exposing a criminal working-class population intent on destroying its own young, an examination of baby farming in late-nineteenth-century Philadelphia attests instead to stark patterns of inequality between men and women, blacks and whites, natives and newcomers, and rich and poor. For every child who ostensibly died by drowning, suffocation, or deliberate neglect at the hands of a notorious baby farmer, many more were killed in effect by the harshness of life for the city's destitute, deserted, and single mothers and their children. The late-Victorian penchant for sentimentalism and scandal encouraged popular perceptions of "unscrupulous" and "mercenary" midwives and "unfortunate" and "unnatural" mothers and their "innocent babes." It was easier for Philadelphians to conceptualize the abuses of baby farming as a problem of criminals and their victims, to be solved by legislation, licensing, and law enforcement, than to admit to the existence of profound social and economic inequality. Yet, as some reformers themselves understood, this approach had limitations. Legal regulation was important, but regulation alone could not eradicate the underlying problems of poverty, the inadequate child-care provisions for poor women and their infants, and the stigma of illegitimacy that drove unwed mothers to baby farms and illicit lying-in homes.

## NOTE

1. For statistics on the differential mortality by race in American cities, see 1879 life tables for Baltimore and Washington, DC (United States Census Office 1883).

## REFERENCES

- Behlmer, George. 1982. *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870-1908*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brace, Charles Loring. 1872. *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them*. New York: Wynkoop and Hallenbeck.
- Broder, Sherri. 1988. "Politics of the Family: Political Culture, Moral Reform, and Family Relations in Gilded Age Philadelphia." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University.
- Condran, Gretchen, Henry Williams, and Rose A. Cheney. 1984. "The Decline in Mortality in Philadelphia from 1870-1930: The Role of Municipal Services." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 108:153-77.
- Golden, Janet. 1987. "Trouble in the Nursery: Physicians, Families, and Wet Nurses at the End of the Nineteenth Century." Pp. 125-37 in "To Toil the Livelong Day": *America's Women at Work, 1780-1980*, edited by Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Goldin, Claudia. 1981. "Family Strategies and the Family Economy in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Role of Secondary Workers." Pp. 277-310 in *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Theodore Hershberg. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gordon, Linda. 1985. "Single Mothers and Child Neglect, 1880-1920." *American Quarterly*, 37:173-92.
- Haines, Michael. 1981. "Poverty, Economic Stress, and the Family in a Late Nineteenth-Century American City: Whites in Philadelphia, 1880." Pp. 240-76 in *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Theodore Hershberg. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hodge, Hugh. 1869. *Foeticide or Criminal Abortion. Lecture to the Course on Obstetrics, and Diseases of Women and Children*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lane, Roger. 1979. *Violent Death in the City*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Parry, John. 1871. *Infant Mortality and the Necessity of a Foundling Hospital in Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Social Science Association.
- Ross, Ellen. 1986. "Labour and Love: Rediscovering London's Working-Class Mothers, 1870-1918." Pp. 73-96 in *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940*, edited by Jane Lewis. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- . 1983. "Survival Networks: Women's Neighborhood Sharing in London before World War One." *History Workshop* 15:4-27.

- Smith, Daniel Scott. 1979. "Family Limitation, Sexual Control, and Domestic Feminism." Pp. 222-45 in *A Heritage of Her Own*, edited by Nancy Cott and Elizabeth Pleck. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. 1985. *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Sprogle, Howard. 1887. *The Philadelphia Police: Past and Present*. Philadelphia: n.p.
- Stansell, Christine. 1986. *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Sylvis, James (ed.). 1872. *The Life, Speeches, Labors, and Essays of William H. Sylvis*. Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, and Haffelfinger.
- Taylor, George Rogers. 1969. "'Philadelphia in Slices' by George G. Foster." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 93:232-72.
- United States Census Office. 1883. Pp. 773-77 in *Census of 1880: Mortality and Vital Statistics*. Part 2. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- United States Senate. 1885. Committee on Education and Labor. *Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee*. Vol. 2. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Warner, Amos. 1894. *American Charities*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.

### ARCHIVAL SOURCES

The Urban Archives, Temple University, Philadelphia, provided these sources:

- Pennsylvania Society to Protect Children from Cruelty (SPCC)
  - Annual Reports, 1877-1930 (AR)*
  - Board Minutes, 1877-1926 (BM)*
  - Case Records, 1877-1901 (CR)*
- Sheltering Arms (SA)
  - Annual Reports, 1883-1912 (AR)*
  - Board Minutes, 1893-1898 (BM)*
- Correspondence
  - Diary, 1883-1887*
  - House Records and Register, 1884-1890 (HR)*

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, provided these sources:

- Women's Directory Annual Reports, 1894, 1898, 1899 (WDAR)*

### OTHER SOURCES

- Morantz-Sanchez, Regina. 1985. *Sympathy and Science: Women Physicians in American Medicine*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Petchesky, Rosalind. 1985. *Abortion and Woman's Choice*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Philadelphia Society for Organizing Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicancy.

*Manual for Visitors Among the Poor.* 1879. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott.

*Public Ledger.* Philadelphia: 1877-1879.

Zelizer, Viviana. 1985. *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children.* New York: Basic Books.

*Sherry Broder received a Ph.D. in American social and women's history from Brown University in 1988. Her research on baby farming is part of a larger study of reformers and working-class family life in late-nineteenth-century Philadelphia. She is currently revising her dissertation, "Politics of the Family: Political Culture, Moral Reform, and Family Relations in Gilded Age Philadelphia" for publication.*