Off-Beat Oregon: How a little-known activist stopped state forced-sterilization

By Finn J.D. John
For The Sentinel

In 1913, the Oregon state legislature passed a eugenic-sterilization law that had been written for it by one of the state's most prominent citizens.

The law's author was Bethenia Owens-Adair, the first female medical doctor in Oregon history. She had retired from practice eight years earlier and devoted herself to three big social-activism projects: women's suffrage, the temperance movement — and eugenics.

She was winning all three of these battles. The previous November, Oregon voters had enacted full voting rights for women in state and local elections. Prohibition, she knew (or at least strongly suspected), would follow just as soon as all the newly enfranchised women could get to the polls for the 1914 election.

And the sterilization law's passage that year represented victory on the third front: eugenics.

Essentially, eugenics is an attempt to apply the techniques of dog breeding to the enhancement of the human gene pool.

One could not, of course, simply kill the less desirable specimens, the way dog breeders once did. But one could, with the right kind of legislation, spay or neuter them. And that, essentially, was the solution Dr. Owens-Adair recommended.

Her victory had been a long time coming. She'd first introduced a eugenics bill in the legislature, with the help of her state rep. in 1907. It would have required that "habitual criminals, moral degenerates and sexual perverts" — including people caught engaging in "the crime against nature" — a euphemism for homosexual activity — "or other gross, bestial and perverted sexual habits" — should, before being released from state institutions (prison, insane asylum, juvenile detention, etc.) be sterilized.

The bill didn't pass in 1907. Eugenics hadn't quite come into its own as a topic of popular interest yet.

Time was on its side, though. In scientific circles, the theory of hard Darwinian gene-driven evolution was becoming dominant. And it wasn't much of a leap from "our genes control our lives" to "hey, that drunk guy in the corner of the bar must have really lousy genes, let's do something to keep him from passing them on."

That sentiment didn't have enough support in 1907. Or in 1909, when Dr. Owens-Adair reintroduced it. But in 1913, it did — enough support to override the governor's veto. (Gov. West took care to explain, though, that while he agreed with the bill's sentiment, he didn't think it provided enough protection against possible abuse.)

But that's when the irresistible force that was Bethenia Owens-Adair encountered the immovable object that was Lora Little.

Lora Cornelia Little was born in 1856 in Minnesota. She married an engineer in the late 1880s, and settled into the life of a rural housewife. Soon the couple had a son, Kenneth.

The turning point in her life came in 1896 when her son was vaccinated for smallpox. Over the subsequent year or so, the little tyke started getting ear infections, and finally he caught diphtheria and died.

Lora Little was crushed. And angry. Very, very angry — especially as well-meaning social-hygienists, many of them physicians, started pushing for the vaccination that had, she thought, killed her son to be made mandatory for all Minneapolis schoolchildren.

Little developed a cordial and enduring hatred of the mainstream medical profession, and over the subsequent decade she developed a medical philosophy of her own — one somewhat similar to that of Sylvester Graham (the inventor of the Graham Cracker).

Diseases of all types, she posited, were symptoms of an unbalanced life; and eating right (whole grains, lots of vegetables, very little meat) and living right (no booze or unnecessary sex, getting proper sleep, etc.) was the key to staying healthy and never getting sick.

Drugs upset that balance. Vaccinations and inoculations upset that balance.

Mainstream doctors (or "allopaths," as they were perjoratively called), who used those tools, were hurting people — people like little Kenneth — in their battle to establish their medical tradition as the dominant one.

In 1898 Little started publishing a magazine called "Liberator." The magazine was a big success, although it appears to have wrecked her marriage. In 1906 she built on that success to publish a book, a work in the spirit of the muckrakers titled "Crimes of the Cowpox Ring: Some Moving Pictures Thrown on the Dead Wall of Official Science," in which she recounted her experience in losing Kenneth.

Her book, magazine, and copious letters to the editors of local newspapers made a significant contribution to anti-vaccine sentiment in Minneapolis.

And then, in 1911, she moved to Portland and settled in the Mount Scott neighborhood.

She immediately opened a health institute, the Little School of Health, and began seeing patients and teaching classes. She also began writing letters to the editor of the *Portland Morning Oregonian* — lots of letters. She started a column in the neighborhood weekly, the *Mount Scott Herald*, titled "Health in the Suburbs."

She was a force to be reckoned with in her new home. Portraits of her show a poised, confident woman in the high celluloid collar and necktie commonly worn by businessmen of the day, with steady, fearless eyes.

And it was a year or two after Little established herself in Portland that Bethenia Owens-Adair launched her successful bid to get mandatory sterilization of "undesirables" legalized.

Now, of course, eugenic sterilization was not Little's primary target. That, in memory of little Kenneth, would always be vaccination. But she saw the two issues as closely related. In both cases, mainstream physicians were asserting control over other people's bodies. And she also saw that the same spirit animated both acts — the technocratic spirit of the Progressive movement, the spirit that looked to mold and guide society in more virtuous ways by whatever means the relevant experts thought best, with scant regard for individual rights.

"A bull in a china shop is a gentle, constructive creature compared with a lot of prim and more or less pious folks when they want to clean up society and the world," she wrote in her column in the Mount Scott Herald. "Mr. Sudden Reformer sees something he does not like in one of his fellow citizens.

Very likely it is a reprehensible thing. Plenty of evils exist in the lives and habits of all classes. This would be a thing of which Mr. Sudden Reformer is not himself guilty. Therefore he hates it with a mighty loathing. Dwelling on it, he works himself into a frenzy."

Little now worked herself into something of a frenzy as well. Reaching out to fellow anti-allopaths as well as civil libertarians, she joined (or possibly founded) the Anti-Sterilization League, accepted the position of vice-president, and took on the job of collecting enough signatures to refer the law to the voters in November under Oregon's then-new Initiative and Referendum system.

The *Portland Morning Oregonian*, which was a vigorous supporter of the Owens-Adair law, spluttered and fulminated against the "panicky, superstitious individuals" who were trying to block it; but this was a hard case to make in the same newspaper that had been publishing Lora Little's articulate and convincing (if frequently misguided) letters for years.

And as Governor West had pointed out, there really were some serious issues with the law — besides the obvious one, of course. Portland attorney C.E.S. Wood, a prominent Progressive who many doubtless thought they would find on the other side, was one of the most outspoken about the need to stop the law.

"Their chief argument was that under the proposed law the assent of only two persons was needed to authorize surgical mutilation of the most helpless members of society," historian Robert Johnson writes. "History demonstrated, the opponents asserted, that people with this kind of power tend to abuse it."

It was an argument that resonated with the public. And so, to Dr. Owens-Adair's dismay, the voters quashed the law by a substantial majority; 56 percent of them voted to throw it out.

Dr. Owens-Adair had lost the battle, but not the war. She took the critique of C.E.S. Wood and Oswald West to heart, and her next eugenic-sterilization bill contained more checks and balances, more processes of notification and appeal, and called for an actual state eugenics commission to provide oversight.

And in 1917, it passed.

But by that time Lora Little was out of the picture, having left town to join the national American Medical Liberty League. In the end, perhaps she was less of a force of nature than she seemed. She left town just after the 1916 elections, in which she had thrown all her resources into a losing ballot-measure battle against her old enemy, mandatory vaccination, which she predicted would be "thrown down hard at the polls by a people who like to think they own the blood in their veins and feel it is their business what goes into it."

She had a point. But the extenuating circumstances in mandatory vaccination — herd immunity, the disruption of mass-casualty epidemics — were a lot more compelling than they were in eugenic sterilization, and her campaign fell just 474 votes short of passage.

As for Owens-Adair's sterilization act, it went into effect and over the subsequent 75 years the state of Oregon quietly sterilized more than 2,600 people — troubled youths in juvenile detention facilities, insane-asylum inmates, members of poor families selected by social workers, and penitentiary prisoners

Finally, in 1983, the state eugenics board — renamed, for public-relations reasons, the Board of Social Protection — was quietly dissolved, bringing the whole ignoble experiment to an end. And in 2002, Governor John Kitzhaber formally apologized to everyone the state had mutilated under the law.

It was bad. But had it not been for Lora Little, it likely would have been a good deal worse.

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