

University of Chicago Library

Guide to the Chicago Commons Collection 1927-1968



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Descriptive Summary

Identifier ICU.SPCL.CHICAGOCOMMONS

Title Chicago Commons. Collection

Date 1927-1968

Size .25 linear feet (1 box)

Repository Special Collections Research Center
University of Chicago Library
1100 East 57th Street
Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.

Abstract The Chicago Commons settlement was founded in 1894 by Graham Taylor, a Dutch reform minister and pioneer of social work in Chicago. Located on Chicago's Northwest side, the settlement was home to a large number of Chicago's growing immigrant population. Taylor's daughter Lea Demarest Taylor took over as Head Resident in 1921 upon her father's retirement, and oversaw the administration of the Commons during the Great Depression. This collection contains seven annual reports of the Chicago Commons, documenting the changing ethnic profile of the neighborhood and efforts to improve the lives of residents. The collection also includes a transcription of an oral history by Lea Demarest Taylor, dictated to the Training Center of the National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers.

Information on Use

Access

The collection is open for research.

Citation

When quoting material from this collection, the preferred citation is: Chicago Commons. Collection, [Box #, Folder #], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

Historical Note

The Chicago Commons settlement was founded in 1894 by Graham Taylor, a Dutch reform minister who also founded the School of Social Economics which later became the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration. The settlement was initially home to Italian, Irish and Scandinavian immigrants on the Northwest side of Chicago; as well as Taylor, his four children, and several of his students. The Commons sought to reduce urban poverty and provide a sense of community through social welfare services such as free kindergarten, healthcare, and job training programs.

After graduating from Vassar, Taylor's oldest daughter, Lea Demarest Taylor, returned to Chicago Commons to work as her father's secretary and assistant. In 1917, she became the Assistant Head Resident and in 1921 became the Head Resident upon her father's retirement. In 1924, she became the President of the Chicago Federation of Settlements. During the 1920s and 1930s, the low-income residents of the Commons were hit hard by the Great Depression and its resulting unemployment. Lea Demarest Taylor began a study of unemployment among the young families living in the Commons and lobbied the federal government for relief funds for the city's vast number of unemployed workers. She sat on several Chicago committees of the Works Progress Administration, the largest New Deal agency created by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which employed millions to carry out public works projects in an effort to overcome the recession. In the 1940s, the ethnic profile of the neighborhood changed again as more African American families moved into the area. In 1947, the city of Chicago announced plans to build a freeway through the neighborhood, after which the neighborhood merged with another settlement, Emerson House, in 1948 to become the Chicago Commons Association.

Scope Note

The collection contains seven annual reports of the Chicago Commons settlement's administration. The reports 1927-1932 cover the Commons' activities in the realm of unemployment assistance and job training, efforts to eradicate gambling and bootlegging, healthcare initiatives, and social events for its members. The reports also document changes in the neighborhood and housing stock; in particular, the shifting ethnic profile of the neighborhood as new Polish and Italian residents began to move into the settlement at the end of the 1920s. With the onset of the Great Depression, the reports highlight the devastating effects of unemployment. The annual report of 1945-1946 draws attention to the increasing number of African American families now living in the Commons. It stresses efforts to integrate these families into the existing community through their participation in inter-racial settlement events and clubs.

The collection also contains a transcript of a personal biographical account dictated by Lea Demarest Taylor to the Training Center of the National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers, which produced it with a grant from the New World Foundation. The introduction to the transcript contains a handwritten note from Lea Demarest Taylor to John Ballard. In it, Taylor discusses her family heritage, her father's work and legacy, her work on behalf of the Chicago Commons, and other settlement organizations and social causes.

Related Resources

The following related resources are located in the Department of Special Collections:

<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/select.html>

National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers. Records

University of Chicago Service League. Records

Subject Headings

- Taylor, Graham, 1851-1938
- Taylor, Lea Demarest
- Chicago Commons Association
- Social settlements
- Chicago (Ill.)--Emigration and immigration
- Social workers -- Biography

INVENTORY

Box 1

Folder 1

Report of the Work of Chicago Commons for the Year ending September 30, 1927

Box 1

Folder 2

Report of the Work of Chicago Commons for the Year ending September 30, 1928

Box 1

Folder 3

Chicago Commons, Report of the Head Resident for the Year 1928-1929; Thirty-fifth Year

Box 1

Folder 4

Chicago Commons, Report of the Head Resident for the Year ending September 30, 1930

Box 1

Folder 5

Chicago Commons, Report of the Head Resident, 1930-1931

Box 1

Folder 6

Chicago Commons, Report of the Head Resident, 1931-1932

Box 1

Folder 7

Chicago Commons Association, Annual Report, 1945-1946

Box 1

Folder 8

Transcript, "Lea Demarest Taylor: Her Life and Work between 1883 and 1968"