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WILL A PRIVATE WAR ON POVERTY SUCCEED? THE CASE OF THE ST. LOUIS
PROVIDENT ASSOCIATION

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ABSTRACT

In view of the current emphasis on private approaches to social problem resolution, it is instructive to look at private efforts of the past. The St. Louis Provident Association was a private effort to deal with poverty. It was organized in 1860 to provide relief for the "needy and distressed." Data on the volunteer leaders of the association and on the people who were actually helped show a number of things about the 19th-century effort to deal with poverty. First, the volunteers were upwardly-mobile business and professional men who were concerned about the stability of their society. Second, the policies and practices of the Association reflected the social status and ideology of the volunteer directors. Third, the consequences for the poor were a limited amount of help and disproportionate help to particular groups of the impoverished.

Discussions of the resolution of social problems generally assume a significant role for the federal government. In the case of poverty, for example, various income-maintenance programs have been suggested as an important way to attack the problem (Lauer, 1982:296-97). But there has been increasing pressure in recent years to minimize the role of the federal government in combatting problems, including the problem of poverty. High-ranking officials in the Reagan administration have extolled the virtues of private, as opposed to public, help for the poor (at least one has even declared the war on poverty to be won).

What will happen if the struggle against poverty is transferred from the public to the private sector? Will the effort be more efficient? More effective? Less costly? We believe that we can do more than merely speculate on answers. We can look at some examples from the past when anti-poverty efforts were private enterprises. We are not arguing that current private efforts will necessarily recapitulate all of the errors of the past. But neither are we confident that all of those errors will be avoided. In particular, we have examined the 19th-century war on poverty in St. Louis, as carried on by the St. Louis Provident

Association. It was a private war. How well did it succeed?

To answer the question, we will examine the work of the St. Louis Provident Association from 1860, the date of its establishment, to 1899. First, we will briefly describe the setting in which the organization was established, the situation in St. Louis that demonstrated a need for the Association. Second, we will describe the background and ideology of the 132 volunteer leaders who served the Association over the 40-year period, and the nature of the organization itself. Finally, we will show how the successes and failures reflected the character of the Association's leadership and organization.

THE NEED TO ATTACK POVERTY

The St. Louis Provident Association was organized on December 3, 1860 to provide relief for the "needy and distressed." A sense of urgency hung over the city that year and undoubtedly influenced the founders of the Provident Association. They were responding to a need which resulted, first, from the tremendous growth in the size and complexity of the population of St. Louis. In a city whose population had more than doubled during the past decade and which had experienced the full impact of economic fluctuations along with the rest of the nation, the problem of poverty loomed large. The St. Louis newspapers gloomily chronicled the pervasiveness of poverty as well as the plight of the poor: the hard-working and care-worn mother mistreated by her lazy, good-for-nothing husband; the family, newly arrived in the city, "homeless, shelterless, penniless, and friendless;" and the unfortunate widow unable to pay for the burial of her infant child (Missouri Democrat, Sept. 6, 1860; Oct. 8, 1860; and Sept. 12, 1860).

Moreover, the problem of poverty was aggravated by those who seemed content with their situation and even willing to capitalize on it. "We venture to say," wrote the editor of the Missouri Republican, "that there is scarcely any city in the country which has more blind, lame, maimed, dumb and deaf beggars than can be found here. At the corners of every street you are met by a Lazarus, who, with a squeaking voice and a trembling hand, implores you, not for a morsel of bread or a cup of water, but for the solid cash, a dime, a quarter, or even a dollar would be acceptable to him" (July 30, 1859). The existence of poverty--whether deserving or underserving--was increasingly visible and demanded a response by concerned citizens.

Second, the need was intensified by the political events of 1860. The national struggle over the future of slavery posed a dilemma for St. Louis, a commercial city in a slave state. There was strong sympathy in the city for the southern cause yet also a firm conviction that economic prosperity depended on continued association with the North. The Missouri Democrat predicted, after the election of Lincoln, that secession followed by probable war would mean that commerce would come to a standstill,

manufactures cease, and all other business be arrested. Secession would end credit and confidence, it warned; crops would rot in the field; shipping would be dismantled; the railroads and canals would be idled; and widespread unemployment surely would result (*Missouri Democrat*, Nov. 24, 1860). Unfortunately, this prediction was right on target; the panic of the winter of 1860-61 produced severe dislocations in St. Louis and the problem of poverty worsened.

Finally, the enormity of the problem taxed resources of St. Louis charities and benevolent institutions. With increased demand for aid, the need for a rational system of relief was apparent. The experience of St. Louis was similar to that of many 19th-century American cities: a growing population; a higher incidence of--or at least, more visible--poverty; the inability or unwillingness of the local government to deal with the problem; and the piece-meal attempts by a variety of individuals and organizations to provide some relief. But the latter were unable to meet the growing demand for help, and there was always the possibility that services might be duplicated or rendered to the undeserving. Thus, St. Louis was to follow the example of other cities and establish an agency which would try to concentrate relief activities in a single organization. With the existing problem of poverty and the potential for far worse conditions in the near future, a solution had to be found. The Provident Association, it was hoped, held the answer.

Edward Pessen's (1973) study of the membership of voluntary associations in antebellum America, and various studies of 19th-century poverty associations, all suggest that the rich and elite in American society dominated these organizations (Coll, 1955; Heale, 1971; Rauch, 1976; Watson, 1922:66-67). An examination of the directors of the St. Louis Provident Association in its first two years of existence furnishes some interesting variations. Of the first twelve directors, eleven were businessmen and one was a clergyman. Without a doubt, they were vitally interested in the economic fate of the city; however, they did not represent the wealthiest or the oldest of St. Louis families. Indeed, of the eight whose birthplace we could identify, none were natives of St. Louis (seven had been born elsewhere in the United States and one had been born in Ireland). And their years in St. Louis varied; on the average, they had lived in the city for just a little over eleven years. Their average age was 38.5 years and ranged from 31 to 52 years. Of the five whose educational background we could determine, two had attended college. Finally, ten of the twelve were involved in several civic activities and eight of the twelve served for five years or more on the St. Louis Provident Association Board. We can establish, then, that these first directors, although not native-born St. Louisans, were active in city affairs and concerned with its economic well-being. It is reasonable to suggest that, rather than comprising an established rich and elite who were anxious to conserve social

order and their place in it, they were men on the make, attempting to secure the stability of society in order to further their pursuit of wealth and power.

Over the next four decades businessmen continued to dominate the Board of Directors of the Provident Association. During the 1860s, 86 percent were businessmen; in the 1870s, 79 percent; and in the 1890s, 80 percent. Among the 132 directors, clergymen, educators, and lawyers were notably few. Only one minister, two educators, and three lawyers served on the Board between 1860 and 1899. It is also interesting to note that there was an apparent attempt to democratize the Board during the 1870s when a steel mill roller, a weigher at the Merchant's Exchange, a paver, a cashier, and a collector were added. However, the trend did not continue.

Consistent with the trend established during the first two years, few native-born St. Louis appeared on the Board until the 1890s. And even then, only 19 percent of the directors were natives (table 1). However, by the last two decades the number who had resided in St. Louis for more than 30 years had increased substantially. And subsequent Boards tended to be older than the first one. In fact, during the four decades of our study the Board was dominated by men between the ages of 40 and 54 years, and their preponderance increased during the period (see Kusmer, 1973, for similar results in the Chicago Charity Organization Society from 1886 to 1908).

Table 1
Nativity of the Association's Directors

Birthplace	1860-69 (N=15)	1870-79 (N=14)	1880-89 (N=13)	1890-99 (N=26)
St. Louis	0	8%	8%	19%
Other American	93%	67%	77%	69%
Foreign-born	7%	25%	15%	12%

Although information about the level of education attained, religious affiliation, and political preference is not complete, several interesting trends are suggested by the available data. First, the number of Board members with a college education increased over time (table 2). Furthermore, the proportion of college-educated members was considerably higher than that of the population as a whole.

With respect to political preference, we found information on 37 members: 54% indicated a preference for the Republican party and 35% for the Democratic party. Finally, with respect to religious affiliation, the Protestant denominations were well represented. Eight-nine percent were affiliated with some Protestant group. The remainder were either Unitarians or Jews.

Table 2
Education of the Association's Directors

Education	1860-69 (N=11)	1870-79 (N=20)	1880-89 (N=12)	1890-99 (N=25)
College	27%	20%	25%	52%
Less than college	73%	80%	75%	48%

It is clear that the evangelicals were involved deeply in the benevolent activities of the Provident Association. They saw relief of the poor as part of their Christian responsibility. The missionary emphasis in their work is underscored when it is noted that over the years the majority of relief recipients consisted of the unchurched. Association leaders were typical of those who, as one historian put it, "had come to the Midwest not just to better their worldly condition, but to advance the Kingdom of God" (Kleppner, 1970:89).

It is not surprising that businessmen dominated the Providence Association or that they were concerned with the plight of the poor. Membership on the Board was not only an outlet for humanitarian and Christian concern, it also was good business. These interests were intimately intertwined. The relief of the suffering and the securing of the social order increased the attractiveness of St. Louis as a place to live and do business.

Provident Association leaders had definite ideas about the causes and dangers of poverty as well as their responsibility to deal with it. These ideas were expressed in the First Annual Report of the Association and subsequent reports consistently reiterated them. They agreed that poverty was inevitable and resulted from a variety of causes: old age, sickness, death in the family, improvidence, intemperance, or sin. To be sure, some poverty was the result of personal failure more than others; but in every case recovery was ultimately up to the individual. Help was needed from time to time because prolonged poverty might lead to sin and immorality. However it was important even for the deserving poor that relief be temporary, administered judiciously, and coupled with moral and spiritual guidance. Prolonged relief led to demoralization and moral deterioration and, therefore, it was extremely easy for the deserving poor to slip into the ranks of the undeserving. The latter were those who preferred their condition and even tried to take advantage of it. Such people were to be avoided.

The Annual Reports also reveal an attitude of moral superiority on the part of the Board members. They were successful individuals who believed their success was a badge of their moral stature. Therefore, they understood the plight of the poor, could determine the causes of poverty, and evaluate the worth-

ness of potential recipients of aid. The Third Annual Report (p. 6) states: "But in the execution of the trust we have received from you, we regard as paramount to any other consideration the best interest of the poor; hence, after a careful personal examination has been made as to the worthiness of the applicant and what their interests demand, we supply them, whether it be food, fuel, clothing, or medicines." Their ideas both about themselves and about the poor shaped the organization which they established.

Early in their history, the Directors of the Provident Association set forth the principles that would govern their operation. These principles were printed on the covers of the annual reports:

1. To give relief only after personal investigation of each case and inquiry upon the spot.
2. To give necessary articles and only what is immediately necessary.
3. To give what is least susceptible of abuse.
4. To give only in small quantities in proportion to immediate need; and less than might be procured by labor, except in cases of sickness.
5. To give assistance at the right moment; not to prolong it beyond duration of the necessity which calls for it; but to extend, restrict and modify relief as may be found necessary.
6. To require of each beneficiary abstinence from intoxicating liquors as a beverage. . . .
7. To give no aid to persons who, from infirmity, imbecility, old age or any other cause, are likely to continue unable to earn their own support and consequently to be permanently dependent. . . .
8. To discontinue relieving all who manifest a purpose to depend on alms rather than their own exertions for support and whose further maintenance would be incompatible with their good and the objectives of the Association.
9. To check the evils of overlapping relief by promoting. . . cooperation between municipal authorities, the public and private charities, the churches and benevolent individuals . . . and serve as a center of intercommunication between them.

Thus, the association wanted to give limited, temporary, and controlled aid to those it deemed deserving, and those goals were the foundation of the organization.

At the heart of the Association were the visitors, who were male volunteer workers. Each visitor was assigned to a district in the city and had the responsibility of investigating all cases referred to him. He had to determine the extent of need, worthiness of the claimant, appropriate assistance required, and then provide that assistance from the resources of the Association. He was to be extremely wary of undeserving persons who might

fraudulently take aid away from those who really deserved it. Moreover, the visitor was not only responsible for meeting the physical needs of those in his care, he also was charged with providing them moral and spiritual guidance. In the Second Annual Report (p. 6) important accomplishments in this regard were noted: "In many of the homes warmed and cheered by the fuel and the food which our visitors have furnished, they have, by conversation and prayer, pointed them to the 'Rock,' and urged a preparation for that land where 'they hunger no more.'"

The type of assistance furnished by the visitors was also prescribed by the Association. They could not give money to deserving applicants, only food, fuel, clothing, or other necessary supplies. At the monthly meeting of the Board of Directors, the visitors provided a complete report of their visits--both to those who received aid and to those who were refused--and an account of the assistance extended.

The organizational structure of the Association remained loose and informal throughout its early years, largely dependent upon voluntary contributions and volunteer personnel. In 1862, the city was divided into two districts, and a depot for storing and dispensing provisions was set up in each district. At the same time two men were hired to serve as Superintendents of the Depots. These were the first paid employees of the Provident Association. They continued, however, to depend upon volunteer assistance to carry out their primary function--the relief of the poor through temporary relief and moral improvement.

In 1892, with the hiring of the first General Manager and establishment of a Central Office, the organization became more complex and its functions more diverse. A number of new departments were created to direct new areas of service, including lodges for men and women, a laundry, a Sewing room, a Day Nursery and Kindergarten, stores for various goods, a restaurant, an employment bureau, a Penny Savings Bank, and a summer health camp for women and children.

The expansion of organization and services was justified on the grounds of the city's continued population growth and by the example of charity agencies in other cities who had already enlarged their scope of activity. But an examination of the Thirty-third Annual Report of 1893 reveals that the Provident Association continued to operate on the basis of its original principles of thorough investigation and temporary, limited help. Investigation remained as the bedrock of relief activities. "Mendicancy is organized as well as charity," the report pointed out (p. 20). "Hypocrisy is shrewd as well as inquisition; and deceit has many obstructions to the glare of the search-light." Duplication of services was to be avoided because the "duplication of alms is pursued with cunning and attended most invariably with deceit and falsehood" (p. 22). And relief was still to be temporary and limited because "alms easily obtained and profusely dispensed gives birth to reliance upon it. . . There is a just

distinction between honest poverty and pauperism, but the dividing line is narrow and easily crossed" (p. 23). An additional point was stressed, however: "Employment as the basis of relief is a cardinal maxim of organized charity. . . helping the poor to help themselves" (p. 24). Employment not only provided relief from immediate want, it also gave the poor a sense of independence and promoted social harmony. The latter were goals which were consistently held throughout the first forty years of the Association's history.

THE ASSOCIATION'S WAR ON POVERTY

How successful was the Provident Association during these years in providing relief for "the needy and distressed" of St. Louis? There were those, of course, for whom they assumed no responsibility--the unworthy and permanently disabled. And while they were committed to furnishing limited and temporary relief to the deserving, the records of the Association provide some interesting findings and indicate mixed results. The results were determined in part by setting up regression equations for a number of variables in order to compare secular trends over the 40-year period. The equations are (t = time in years):

$$\begin{aligned}y_1 &= 166,167 + 9698.4t \quad (y_1 = \text{total population}) \\y_2 &= 3,565 + 167.2t \quad (y_2 = \text{total people aided}) \\y_3 &= 91,616 + 632.8t \quad (y_3 = \text{total foreign population}) \\y_4 &= 1,180 - 6.79t \quad (y_4 = \text{total foreign-born aided})\end{aligned}$$

Thus, over the 40-year period, we can see that although both population and number of people aided increased, the population grew 58 times faster than the number receiving aid. The problem was not becoming less serious, however. There were many economic problems and crises during the period (Primm, 1981). Moreover, the newspapers continued to point out the extent of the problem. In 1880, for instance, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch carried a series of articles about such aspects of poverty as the city's "begging girls," the "starving families of a great metropolis," and the efforts of the police to provide some food and shelter. This might suggest that the Provident Association was unresponsive and insensitive to the needs of those it was dedicated to helping. However, the Association took pride in the declining ratio of aid to population. In the Annual Report for 1888 (p. 11), it was noted that while "the population of our city has increased rapidly, the proportionate number of poor who apply for aid has decreased in such a manner as to astonish those not conversant with the causes." And they took full credit for the decline; it resulted from their investigative techniques, educational programs, and the kind of assistance offered.

Second, the equations show that the number of foreign-born receiving aid tended to decrease over time even though their number kept increasing. In the 1890s there was a dramatic

decline in aid to the foreign-born. Between 1890 and 1899, the proportion of families aided that were foreign-born declined from 54 percent to 29 percent. The total number of foreign-born who were helped declined from 3,862 in 1880 to 757 in 1899. The reasons for this trend are not altogether clear. Certainly, the cause was not a change in the economic status of the foreign-born. The plight of the immigrants tended to be far worse than that of other citizens even in prospering times. Newly arrived immigrants were prone to exploitation by natives and even by their fellow immigrants who had preceded them (Crawford, 1916:16).

Whatever the cause of declining aid to the immigrants, the records of the Association do not make note of it. Perhaps the answer is to be found in the limited representation of the foreign-born on the Board of Directors. The decline might also reflect the growing national antipathy to foreign immigration. The Annual Report of 1889 (p. 13) suggests that this was the cause. It complained that "our beneficiaries were of nineteen different nationalities, a circumstance which complicates our work very much. All these have to be handled according to their previous habits and customs, so as not to antagonize them with the main object of their relief, which is the elevation of their moral and physical condition." The foreign population, thus, was viewed as a complication which had to be "handled" and "elevated."

Third, the records reveal that there were also significant shifts in the social conditions of those receiving help. Down until the 1890s, listings of the occupations of family heads receiving aid showed that the majority of support went to families headed by washerwomen and needlewomen. Beginning in 1892, these categories experienced marked decline, and there was an equally dramatic increase in the aid given to families headed by mechanics. A shift, therefore, occurred which extended relief to families headed by men rather than by women. Some women were employed in the Provident's laundry, dress shop, and restaurant, but the number was small and would not account for the shift. The shift might be explained by conditions within the community, however. The middle years of the 1890s were characterized by economic difficulty. In fact, the Annual Report of 1897 (p. 15) pointed out that "the destitution and distress prevailing this year have been unprecedented in the entire history of the Provident Association." And it is possible that the jobs held by men were affected more during the hardships of these years.

But a more probable explanation is that the shift resulted, in large part, from conditions within the Provident Association. During the 1890s the services of the Association were expanded and featured a works program along with a strong emphasis upon self-help and full employment. Unemployed men were the focus of this program, and it is not unlikely that the changing statistics reflected these organizational developments rather than changes in

the social conditions of the recipients.

Another significant development also took place in the 1890s--the religious affiliation of recipients changed. Until this time, a high proportion of aid went to the unchurched: in 1885, 82% and in 1895, 60% of those receiving help belonged to no religious denomination. But in 1896, 27% were classified as unchurched, and by 1899 the proportion dropped to 17%. This development can best be accounted for, we believe, by changes which were occurring within the Association rather than in the society as a whole. During these years the organization and functions of the Provident Association were enlarged. This was accompanied by a greater emphasis upon efficient management and a de-emphasis of the Association's religious role. An examination of the Annual Reports suggests that the Association had become increasingly secular. As the years passed they no longer employed scriptural passages, religious rhetoric, or spiritual justifications for their work. It is reasonable to suppose that with the decline of missionary zeal, the unchurched poor were no longer seen as the most worthy recipients of aid. Rather, church membership indicated a serious, upright person with a stake in society who was deserving of help.

Fourth, the amount of aid given to families did not vary significantly from year to year, not even during periods of severe economic difficulty. Indeed, minimal aid was lauded time and again as the hallmark of Association success. It taught economy and thrift--virtues which the Board, with its business orientation, found praiseworthy.

Finally, the records indicate that the Association held firmly to its policy of investigation through the years. The Annual Reports consistently stressed its importance and maintained that this policy had been responsible for reducing the numbers of those requesting aid. Further, the percentage of families investigated who were granted help changed little, even in times of crisis. Trattner (1974:83) has written that, throughout the nation during the hardships of the 1870s, "little attention was paid to investigation of need, to tests of destitution, to safeguards against duplicity, or to the provision of counsel." But this was not the case in St. Louis. During the most difficult times investigation continued to play a vital role. For example, during the "unprecedented destitution" of the mid-1890s investigation was a "cardinal rule" because "imposture" was a major problem. The Annual Report for 1897 (pp. 15-16) noted that, although there was a "large and deplorable number of imposters, there has been a reduction [in the number of recipients] caused, no doubt, by the wide known knowledge of our method of discrimination and the consequent fear of exposure and by the dread of work."

There was criticism of the Association's policy of investigation and practice of turning down so many requests for aid. These criticisms were addressed in a speech by the Rev. W. W.

Boyd to the Association on November 18, 1897. "It is sometimes urged against the Provident, as against every efficient organized charity," he noted, "that it is cold and unsympathetic in methods. I have been at considerable pains to run down this criticism, and I find its chief source in unworthy homes, where aid has been denied for good reasons" (Annual Report for 1897, p. 52). The criticism was dismissed, therefore, as coming from the undeserving; that such criticism even existed was a testimony that the Provident Association was doing its job and doing it well, according to the minister.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the St. Louis data show a number of things about the 19th-century effort to deal with poverty in the city. First, those who volunteered their services were upwardly-mobile business and professional men who were concerned with the stability of their society. They were not the established old elites that engaged in charitable work in Eastern cities, but they had essentially the same ideology about poverty and the poor as those elites. Second, the policies and practices of the Provident Association mirror the social status and ideology of the volunteer directors. And third, the consequence of all this for the poor was a limited amount of help which was likely to go disproportionately to certain segments of those who were impoverished. The Directors imposed their own ideology on the poor, an ideology which is still in vogue (Lauer, 1982:273-75). They were not even concerned to eliminate poverty. Rather, they believed that poverty is inevitable and that a few of the poor, the "deserving" poor, could be helped on a temporary basis until they could work themselves out of their poverty. Thus, the Association fell far short of a resolution of the problem; it did not even attempt to help all of the needy and distressed. The 19th-century private war in St. Louis turned out to be more of an avoiding of catastrophe than a successful pursuit of victory.

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