

“Dance Halls or Dance Hells:”¹ Turn-of-the-Century La Crosse Adolescents and Social Reformers

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ABSTRACT

Turn-of-the-century La Crosse dance halls became the center of a moral crusade by social reformers, namely the Associated Charities of La Crosse, against adolescents and their leisure. By examining primary sources from *The La Crosse Tribune*, the City of La Crosse, residents, and even the adolescents themselves, the methods and the views of both the social reformers and the adolescents are unveiled. In the tradition of historians like Kathy Peiss and Ruskin Teeter, I find the ways in which the Progressives of early 20th Century America targeted the adolescent group for reform. This paper acts as an exploration of two narratives about the meaning of adolescence and about La Crosse as a place during the turn of the century.

INTRODUCTION

If the La Crosse ministers had been granted the opportunity to peer through the smoke-clouded atmosphere into the dance hall, into the bar-room and the “ladies’ room,” where young girls between the ages of 12 and 20 years and boys of equal ages were staggering and lying drunk in disheveled heaps, where the floor was flooded with beer-wet filth, where those too drunk to stand slept upon empty beer-kegs along the wet and steaming walls, it would have been the subject of a thousand sermons.²

This perilous passage came from a March 6, 1905 article in *The La Crosse Tribune*. It goes into detail about the conditions of Armory Hall when it was closed by the Governor’s Guard after a rambunctious Saturday night that led into Sunday morning. This article, entitled “End Shameful Orgies: Terrible Saturday Night Dances Stop,” starts a significant thread of more than 20 articles in *The Tribune* between 1905-1915 that call for the establishment of surveillance and control of adolescents and their leisure in turn-of-the-century La Crosse. In these articles and the events described, we plunge into a morality battle about the definition of adolescence between the adults guided by the Progressive Movement and the first instances of the adolescent groups that we would eventually call teenagers in La Crosse.

This paper focuses on 1890s to 1910s adolescent leisure in La Crosse. Further, it explores the relentless social reform directed at adolescence and their leisure that took place in the city, and across the country. The turn of the 19th Century into the 20th Century in the United States was a time of change that was driven by four factors: industrialization, urbanization, Progressivism/Progressives, and Victorian gender and purity ideals. The Progressives, who pushed more endless reforms of government, industry, and society. These reforms both worked to clean up the streets of American cities both in the form of sanitation and bringing awareness to homelessness and urban slums. But the Progressives also pushed to regulate American industries and reform Americans and immigrants to their middle-class virtues, including with leisure. Leisure has, over time, been defined in opposition to work and as a way to fill free time.³ Time available for entertainment and leisure expanded due to Progressive reforms of factory work and labor regulations, such as pushing for the 8-hour workday and 40-hour workweek, starting in the 1890s.⁴ For turn-of-the-century Americans, entertainment and leisure took the form of amusement

¹ “Dance Halls or Dance Hells,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, February 28, 1906, 4, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/513512627>.

² “End Shameful Orgies: Terrible Saturday Night Dances Stop,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, March 6, 1905, 1, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/513516933/>.

³ Katherine C. Grier, “Introduction: Are We Having Fun Yet?,” in *Hard at Play: Leisure in America, 1840-1940*, ed. Kathryn Grover (Rochester, New York: The Strong Museum, 1992), 1.

⁴ Gary Cross, *A Social History of Leisure: Since 1600* (State College: Venture Publishing, Inc., 1990), 73.

parks, theatres, dance halls, social groups, and excursions.⁵ In this period, white, middle-class, Christian, and politically active Progressives fought for social reforms to address anxieties about race, sexuality, gender, and vice.⁶ These Progressive beliefs along with the expansion of leisure in America provided the impetus for this paper's argument; that dance halls were used as a decisive moralistic battleground between social reformers and adolescents, that the social reformers defined as immoral and out-of-control, in turn-of-the-century La Crosse.

This comes through in a demonstration of the existence and definition of adolescence nationally and locally, an explanation of the state of adolescent La Crosse leisure from 1890-1919, and an examination of the role of dance halls as a decisive location where La Crosse social reformers enacted their power over adolescents.

This topic looks at the leisure activities of 1890s-1910s La Crosse teenagers⁷ and their rebellion against Victorian morals that were upheld by the social reformers. A historiography for this topic can be split into two parts. First, the emergence of adolescence/teenagehood prior to the 1940s. Second, social reforms crusaded by Progressives during the 1890s to 1910s in the dance halls.

It has been traditionally posited by prior generations of historians that the idea of teenagers and their subculture began after the Second World War as commercial advertisers targeted the defined group for new products. This narrative dominated much of the historiography related to the teenage age group, but some historians have placed the beginning of the teenage or adolescent age group.

Two of these historians are Ruskin Teeter and Jon Savage. In his article, "Coming of Age on the City Streets in 19th-Century America" (1988), Teeter draws from books written by Progressives and other literary works to argue that the definition of adolescence was formed as a response to this fear for the Victorian modesty of young girls and to better define and control juvenile delinquency of the period.⁸ Jon Savage expands on this thread of perceived moral decline, teenage rebellion, and the definition of adolescence in his popular history, *Teenage: The Prehistory of Youth Culture 1875-1945* (2007). In the first section of this book, he argues that the idea of adolescence was created by social reformers like G. Stanley Hall to combat a growing juvenile delinquency concern that was arising in the cities.⁹ But Savage also shows that this concern was not unique to the United States but was also occurring in Great Britain and other parts of Europe.

Kent Baxter and Sarah E. Chinn expand upon the idea of adolescence emerging from the Progressives' social concerns. In *The Modern Age: Turn-Of-the-Century American Culture and the Invention of Adolescence* (2008), Baxter posits that adolescence as an idea came from the combination of industrialization, urbanization, more available education, and a growing middle class.¹⁰ Further, Baxter finds that adolescence as a category of analysis was been created out of the anxieties about the causes of juvenile delinquency and about juvenile delinquency itself, fall in religious attendance, and dissolution of Victorian gender norms.¹¹ What is essential here is the perceived moral decline of American society that was perceived by Progressive social reformers. Chinn adds, in *Inventing Modern Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the-Century America* (2009), that the first teenagers came out of the immigrant-born children that were living in urban centers and that they were able to create an identity by the forces (class, enjoyment of commercial amusements, freedom from adult supervision, and others) that united them. And further that this separation between the adults and children set up inter-generational conflict and a pattern of control and rebellion.¹² Taken together, these four historians construct a basis for the adolescence that is central to the argument in this paper. These historians place adolescence in the center of Progressive attempts to exert control over crime, vice, and sin.

⁵ Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1999), 73.

⁶ Laura S. Abrams, "Guardians of Virtue: The Social Reformers and the 'Girl Problem,' 1890-1920," *Social Service Review* 74, no. 3 (September 2000): 436-437.

⁷ An important semantic note before beginning, often the terms "adolescent" and "teenager" are used interchangeably in modern times, and I will do so as well to add variety and modernity (adolescence feels sterile and antiquated at times). Truly though, "adolescence" came into more common usage in the early 1900s with G. Stanley Hall's book *Adolescence* (more on this later), and the word "teenage" was not used until the 1940s. This concept of adolescence is usually set between the ages of 12-19.

⁸ Ruskin Teeter, "Coming of Age on the City Streets in 19th-Century America," *Adolescence* XXIII, no. 92 (Winter 1988): 909-912.

⁹ Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Prehistory of Youth Culture 1875-1945* (New York: Penguin Group, 2007), x, xviii-xix.

¹⁰ Kent Baxter, *The Modern Age: Turn-Of-the-Century American Culture and the Invention of Adolescence* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 23, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uwlax/reader.action?docID=835674&ppg=38>.

¹¹ Baxter, *The Modern Age*, 20.

¹² Sarah E. Chinn, *Inventing Modern Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the-Century America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 4-5.

The other set of secondary sources examines more closely the ways that Progressives and social reformers attempted to assert control over teenagers and leisure. This topic was referenced and important in most of the other works that have been presented but the works below deal specifically with the social reformers. Many of the historians in this set build upon Kathy Peiss' seminal monograph, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (1986). Peiss examines the social life of working women in New York from 1880 to 1920.¹³ She argues that through leisure, working women spearheaded changes in social interactions and that in return social reformers used strategies to control and contain the young women's leisure and their "sexually expressive culture."¹⁴ Laura S. Abrams, in her article, "Guardians of Virtue: The Social Reformers and the 'Girl Problem,' 1890-1920" (2000), focuses on the motives and methods of the social reformers. She posits that the social reformers in their efforts to control young women, particularly immigrants, were upholding a "Victorian cult of domesticity."¹⁵ This idea stressed maternalism for all women and their place as masters of the home according to the separate spheres ideology. Women and men were seen as inherently different and fit to complete different societal roles--women in the private and men in the public sphere. Social reformers and Progressives sought to force those roles on young women and immigrants. Chani Marchiselli agrees in her article, "Danger in the Dancehall: Gender and Urban Reform in the Early Twentieth Century" (2018). She argues that social reformers, horrified by a perceived breakdown of feminine morality in dance halls, attempted to reform teen girls and their entertainment to create more moral and feminine places of leisure.¹⁶

This historiography shows a significant body of work dedicated to the emergence of adolescence, social reformers, and their efforts to control portions of society. Teeter and Savage are important works in arguing for the existence of adolescence or proto-teenagehood before the end of World War Two. Further, they show how, from the start, social reformers exerted their control over adolescents. Peiss, Marchiselli, and Abrams are key to my discussion of the motives that the social reformers have and the narratives that they create in crusades to purify young people and the dance halls. Together, these historians' works build a foundation for examining how and why adolescence was defined in La Crosse, Wisconsin at this period, as well as what methods La Crosse social reformers used to control the newly defined adolescents.

This paper and its thesis originate from three groupings of primary sources: student publications, oral histories, and city publications and newspapers. All of these sources come from the predominately white, middle-class, Christian background of La Crosse. The student publications were written by 1910-1919 La Crosse Normal School and 1905-1919 La Crosse High School students. They include student newspapers like *The Racquet* and *The Booster* and yearbooks. In these sources, adolescents speak for themselves in turn-of-the-century La Crosse. They were written by students, many of which were male and some of which were female. Included here are illustrations of age groups that accompany different grades in the La Crosse High School yearbook. These documents were mainly written for other students but were also likely read by adults at the school or by parents. This type of audience forces the students to remain proper and uphold a Victorian decorum in their essays, news stories, and illustrations. The power dynamic here illuminates the reason that there are few primary sources from La Crosse adolescents at the time. With the control that the adults exerted on the adolescents, stories and views points were censored or not shared at all. It is possible though, with careful analysis, that the view of adolescents in the 1910s appears between the lines.

The oral histories come from Howard Fredricks interviews of La Crosse citizens in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Most of them are life-course interviews with small portions that focus on childhood, adolescence, and leisure. Out of the five oral histories listened to, only one interviewee was a woman. Memory is an important factor to consider for oral histories. These interviews are recounting stories that would have happened 70 to 80 years before the recording. The stories that they tell may have slight falsehoods or may be confused. This can be remedied with corroborating evidence from other sources like articles from *The Racquet*, *The Booster*, and *The La Crosse Tribune*. Another essential factor is the purpose of these interviews. The oral histories were created with the expressed purpose to preserve stories and knowledge for future generations. As such, this affects the types of stories told and the thoughts shared in the interview that will become an everlasting representation of the interviewee.

The City of La Crosse and publications from the City of La Crosse and the public. This includes city directories, city ordinances, and *The La Crosse Tribune*. All of these documents were written by, concerned with, and targeted

¹³ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 3.

¹⁴ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 8.

¹⁵ Abrams, "Guardians," 437.

¹⁶ Chani Marchiselli, "Danger in the Dancehall: Gender and Urban Reform in the Early Twentieth Century," *The Journal of American Culture* 41, no. 2 (June 2018): 185-186.

white middle-class adults and their businesses. The city directories were often made by printing companies as a way for cities and their residents to track and find businesses or people. City ordinances bring focus to the laws passed by city officials. They come from the point of view of city officials, who were white middle-class adults. Articles from *The La Crosse Tribune* serve as the best record of the events related to the social reform of dance halls and adolescents. These documents show the adult side of the story and how they viewed the adolescents and dance halls. Generally, the articles uphold the Victorian and Christian ideals of the white middle-class majority of the period. The voices of La Crosse adolescents are not present in any of the documents that target them. As such, this group of sources acts as a counter to illustrations in the first group of sources.

The nature of these primary sources has a distinct effect on the history that this paper recounts. Many of the sources are centered around adults rather than adolescents. They are all written by white middle-class people or are concerned with a white middle-class audience. The voices of People of Color or people experiencing poverty are not present in these sources. Although this is the case, this paper takes a social history approach by using newspaper articles, yearbooks, and oral histories. I seek to place my focus on the adolescents more than the adults but the nature of the sources paints much of the story from the adults' view.

The narrative of La Crosse social reformers and adolescents during the turn-of-the-century period is driven by four major factors: industrialization, urbanization, Progressivism, and Victorian gender and purity ideals. Together, these factors coalesce to create the events covered.

The first two, most basic and influential, factors were industrialization and urbanization. As the United States industrialized, the nation's transportation, manufacturing, technology, and standardization of materials exploded. Accompanying this industrial explosion, came urbanization. The United States resident population grew from 62 million to 106 million people during the 1890-1920 period.¹⁷ Immigration from western, southern, and eastern Europe, Asia, and the Ottoman Empire accounted for a large portion of this population increase. This flow of immigrants was far more racially and ethnically diverse than immigration to the United States before the American Civil War, which stemmed closer to northern and western Europe. These immigrants, and other Americans, were drawn to the cities where industrialization allowed for increased job opportunities, more shipping for goods, and more pressure on cities to accommodate incoming people.¹⁸ All was not positive with industrialization and urbanization though, conditions in factories were dismal and large portions of low-income urban dwellers lived in slums.¹⁹ La Crosse was no exception to these trends. By the 1900s, La Crosse's lumber and logging industry ended due to deforestation and other industries, like brewing and manufacturing, grew to fill the economic hole.²⁰

As the cities grew and industries expanded, social anxieties about poverty, crime, sexuality, gender, religion, and immigration multiplied.²¹ Middle-class white Christian Americans were concerned about the moral fabric of their nation, and they were driven to defend it. This defense took the form of activism and social reform under Progressivism. These social reformers pushed for reforms of factories, governments, corporations, crime, and people.²² Progressive ideals expanded across the nation during the 1890s to 1910s, through lectures, books, magazines, and eventually, policy.²³ Wisconsin quickly became a central state in the Progressive movement.²⁴ One movement led by Wisconsin social reformers was "The Wisconsin Idea" which worked to bring education and knowledge out of the University of Wisconsin system to influence state policy and better Wisconsinites' lives.²⁵ Through the Wisconsin Idea, Progressive ideals were further expanded through lectures at universities and in cities around the state. These academic lectures became an important origin point for the ideas among people outside of the collegiate realm.

¹⁷ "1890 Fast Facts," History, U.S. Census Bureau, accessed April 16, 2021, https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1890_fast_facts.html; "1920 Fast Facts," History, U.S. Census Bureau, accessed April 16, 2021, https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1920_fast_facts.html.

¹⁸ "Life in Industrial America," *The American Yawp*, Stanford University Press, accessed April 16, 2021, <http://www.americanyawp.com/text/18-industrial-america>.

¹⁹ Stanford, "Life in Industrial America."

²⁰ "La Crosse History," *Footsteps of La Crosse: A Journey Through Time and Architecture*, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://footstepsoflacrosse.org/more-la-crosse-history/>.

²¹ Stanford, "Life in Industrial America."

²² Steven J. Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (Hill and Wang: New York, 1998), 220.

²³ "The Progressive Era," *The American Yawp*, Stanford University Press, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://www.americanyawp.com/text/20-the-progressive-era>.

²⁴ Diner, *A Very Different Age*, 211.

²⁵ "The Origins of the Wisconsin Idea," University of Wisconsin-Madison, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.wisc.edu/wisconsin-idea/>.

One of the Progressive social reformers' motives was to uphold traditional Victorian values, such as separate spheres for the genders and the virtuousness of women. The separate sphere ideology held that women were best relegated to household management while the husband controlled the family's public affairs.²⁶ This was the ideal of, as historian Francesca Sawaya puts it, "the professional-managerial class," in other words, the educated middle-class.²⁷ In this way, the idealized middle-class family was one that allowed women to stay in the home as the men worked in the public sphere in the workplace and in governmental spaces. This was not the same experience for many People of Color or people experiencing poverty, as they may not be able to split the male-female marriage in such an idealized way. As the 1800s turned to the 1900s, women, especially middle-class women, experienced changes to status and role in the United States.²⁸ More middle-class women went to college and entered professions that required post-secondary education. At the same time, many working-class women entered the factory, domestic, and service workforce in higher numbers.²⁹

While women entered the middle-class workforce, they also pushed for equality, especially in the political sphere with the suffrage movement. This increase in rights, education, and work for women was not an entirely welcome sight to all Americans. As historians Laura S. Abrams and Laura Curran point out, many people, including medical and psychology experts, believed that traditional middle-class values about family and, apparently, women's health were threatened by increased education and independence among women.³⁰ Some Progressive groups and women's groups, like the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) who fought for women's rights by fighting alcohol abuse, also became concerned about "ruined girls," "wayward girls," or promiscuity, crime, and vice around young men and women. In the eyes of the WCTU, alcohol was the seed of evil for the good of the family and women and by prohibiting it, women and families could return to Victorian and Christian ideals. The fear became that educated and independent, and thus vulnerable and incapable, young women and rambunctious criminal young men would erode the traditional middle-class values and idealized family, as defined in ideologies like the Separate Sphere Doctrine.

From the changing world of an industrializing and urbanizing turn-of-the-century America and the fears that accompanied such change comes the topic covered.

DEFINING "ADOLESCENTS" IN LA CROSSE

The historiography of juveniles, adolescence, and teenagers has been a long and evolving discussion. Traditionally, it has been posited that, after the Second World War, there was an expanding consumer and advertising market broadened to target a burgeoning group of young people called "teenagers." While there is a wealth of concrete historical analysis that links teenagehood to the end of WWII, there may be more to this story of the history of youth as a category of analysis. Earlier historians' arguments, that teenagehood was designated in the later 1940s, negate the existence of any "teenage"-like groups before the Second World War. Primary source research of La Crosse during the period of 1890-1919 demonstrates, however, that there were teenagers in an earlier period.

The preferred word for describing this age group in early articles from *The La Crosse Tribune* was "juvenile." Most articles in *The Tribune* used the word as a catch-all term for young people and youth. It was used to describe books for kids, children's clothing, and also juvenile crime.³¹ There does not seem to be a specific age range attached to this term with some articles using it for children as young as five.³² From this example, perhaps "juvenile" is only a synonym for "child." We need to dig deeper to find evidence for a specific demographic that is

²⁶ Abrams, "Guardians of Virtue," 442.

²⁷ This term originated from Barbara and John Ehrenreich in "The Professional-Managerial Class," *Radical America* 2, no. 2 (March-April 1977): 7-31, cited in Francesca Sawaya, *Modern Women, Modern Work: Domestic Professionalism, and American Writing, 1890-1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1.

²⁸ Laura S. Abrams and Laura Curran, "Wayward Girls and Virtuous Women: Social Workers and Female Juvenile Delinquency in the Progressive Era," *AFFILIA* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 50.

²⁹ Abrams and Curran, "Wayward Girls and Virtuous Women," 50.

³⁰ Abrams and Curran, "Wayward Girls and Virtuous Women," 51.

³¹ "Society Happenings," *The La Crosse Tribune*, January 21, 1905, 3, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/513515427>; The Continental, "Everything New in the Boys' Department," *The La Crosse Tribune*, September 6, 1906, 5, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/513536573>; "Wants Juvenile Court and Equitable Campaign Cost," *The La Crosse Tribune*, January 14, 1907, 2, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/513470071>.

³² "Juvenile Party," *The La Crosse Tribune*, August 25, 1906, 2, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/513535978>.

referenced by the word. The definition of “juvenile” appears to narrow when juvenile delinquency was discussed in the *Tribune* and city documents.

As early as 1907 in *The La Crosse Tribune*, a discussion began about bringing a juvenile court to La Crosse. In one early article, a 14-year-old boy was used as an example of a juvenile that would be charged in a juvenile court.³³ So, from this, we can see that it could be that “juveniles” are people around the age of 14. Unfortunately, most articles that mention juveniles do not specify an age range, but we can ascertain more on the distinctions of age by looking into City Ordinances.

La Crosse City Ordinance 333, a statute enforcing a children’s curfew, was passed on October 12, 1900. This ordinance specified its purpose, “to regulate the loitering of children before a certain age on the street during certain hours,” and to enforce this on, “any person under fifteen years of age.”³⁴ This, and *The Tribune* article above, may give us a sense that the line between a child and a juvenile might be somewhere between the age of 14 or 15. There is some uncertainty here (and perhaps others will resist my interpretation). How exactly did these past La Crosse residents distinguish adolescence from childhood and adulthood during this period? It is all quite obscure and, to be thoroughly transparent, I am uncertain of the distinction between juveniles and adults in La Crosse. But, I believe it does show that a concept of adolescence or proto-teenagehood was, at least, in its infancy for La Crosse parents and adults. We may find some clarity by looking at other historians’ interpretations.

Historian Gary Cross’s *A Social History of Leisure* examines early concepts about childhood and adolescence. He sees a change in concepts of childhood from pre-Enlightenment to the Enlightenment ideas of philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. These Enlightenment philosophers shifted the concept of children from sinful mini-adults that needed to be trained like an animal to blank-slate objects of innocence that needed to be preserved and protected.³⁵ Cross also points out that, in the 1800s, children not only needed to be protected from the sins of society but also the rough nature of older children, or adolescents.³⁶ Without a proper middle-class Victorian upbringing, older children would return to the sinful nature of pre-Enlightenment children. It seems plausible then, that the Victorian ideals of childhood led to the Progressive development of the idea of adolescence. By viewing the child as something to be protected but also as prone to sin if a proper upbringing was neglected. This appears to be the exact source of the Progressives’ fears about adolescence and their wild side.

There is also a level of Victorian maternalism to this burgeoning adult view of adolescence. For many adults, including social reformers or Progressives, the best path to fulfillment for women was motherhood and marriage.³⁷ In that way, marriage and motherhood was the goal for adult and young women. The social reformers took that maternalistic attitude and applied it to their view of the vulnerable and incapable (i.e., adolescents).³⁸

The terminology for the teenage age group became more varied later in the Progressive Era. One term, “adolescence,” slowly became more commonly used in academic discussions of the age group, particularly when speaking about vice. “Adolescence” and its variations were used in early *The La Crosse Tribune* articles sparingly.³⁹ Often it was used as a one-off adjective for youth, but not as a demographic term until 1912 or 1913. On May 14, 1912, the Wisconsin Idea came to La Crosse through the University Extension Professor W. P. Roseman’s lecture at the La Crosse Normal School about the American education system problematizing the low percentage of students completing high school “during the period of adolescence.”⁴⁰ A better definition of adolescence comes from another University Extension Professor, Prof. J. L. Gillian. In his March 14, 1913 lecture, he described to La Crosse residents that:

³³ “Wants Juvenile Court in City,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, June 29, 1907, 5, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/513466762>.

³⁴ “Ordinance No. 333: AN ORDINANCE to regulate the loitering of children before a certain age on the streets during certain hours,” in *Special Charter and Ordinances Of the City of La Crosse*, comp. John F. Doherty (La Crosse: The Inland Printing Company, 1911), 400-401.

³⁵ Cross, *A Social History of Leisure*, 109.

³⁶ Cross, *A Social History of Leisure*, 110.

³⁷ Abrams, “Guardians of Virtue,” 443.

³⁸ Abrams, “Guardians of Virtue,” 449.

³⁹ “Whither Are We Drifting,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, August 26, 1905, 4, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/513526716>; “Too Many For Him,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, October 10, 1912, 3, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510879312>; Parker Jeweler, “Beauty,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, October 1, 1910, 6, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510867155>.

⁴⁰ “Roseman Talks on Education,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, May 14, 1912, 4, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510889264>.

The theory once was that a human being was either a child or an adult. We now have come to recognize that there is an intermediary stage when [a child] is neither... The fundamental fact in considering the child in this period of its development is that [they are] neither one nor the other. This is a period of change.⁴¹

Professor Gillian brings this idea of “adolescence” as a specific term and distinction for young adults amid the greatest change in their life to the La Crosse adults. These lectures are directly in line with historians Jon Savage’s and Ruskin Teeter’s arguments on the emergence of adolescence out of the Progressive and social reform movements.

Historians, Savage and Teeter both argued that the concept of adolescence emerged as a Progressive, with G. Stanley Hall and his 1904 book *Adolescence* as the first instance, response to juvenile delinquency. In Savage’s *Teenage* and Teeter’s “Coming of Age on the City Streets,” both argue that the Progressives, and G. Stanley Hall with his 1904 book *Adolescence*, created the idea of adolescence as a response to juvenile delinquency. Defining adolescence was then a way to control and reform the youth of large cities, like Chicago and New York City, and eventually smaller cities like La Crosse.⁴² La Crosse adults believed that the same sinfulness that was happening in the urban slums of Chicago and New York City was coming to their city and so they fought to control and reform teenagers and their leisure activity in the dance halls. They saw their city as a part of large national-scale social problems as they grew with industrialization and urbanization that had taken off across the nation.

Defining adolescence was not something uniquely done by La Crosse adults. In fact, it seems that the adolescents of La Crosse were taking part in defining this stage of life for themselves. La Crosse High School’s *The Booster Annual of 1917*, the yearbook for the high school, offers a visual insight into their concept of adolescence as a period of change in seven grades. Each of the illustrations was done by different students and creates a through-line of how many adolescents defined their growth period. It is not clear if the narrative about adolescence was planned by the artists or if it is an organic instance. The majority of the student illustrators were female and were part of the Art Club or Art Department at the La Crosse High School.⁴³ To analyze this, I will follow the same order students went in, starting with Freshmen and ending with Seniors.

The Freshmen illustration (Figure 1) at the top of the grade page shows young children, one, just right of the middle, even has a small enough stature to look like a toddler. A boy rides by on a velocipede (a bicycle with a large front wheel and a small back wheel) and a young girl looks at a squirrel curiously. Their clothing is more akin to a young child than to older adolescents. The girl on the far left is in a typical young girl’s rain outfit, while the boys, in the middle and on the far right, are wearing newsboys-type clothing with their flat caps and loose-fitting jackets. These first-year students are shown as very young and child-like. They are new, curious, and perhaps free to explore and learn at this first experience in high school.

⁴¹ “Gives Solution of Dance Evil,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, March 14, 1913, 14, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510921169>.

⁴² Savage, *Teenage*, 66; Teeter, “Coming of Age on the City Streets,” 909.

⁴³ “Art Club,” in *The Booster Annual of 1917* (La Crosse: Students of La Crosse High School, 1917), 96, housed at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections/Area Research Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin.

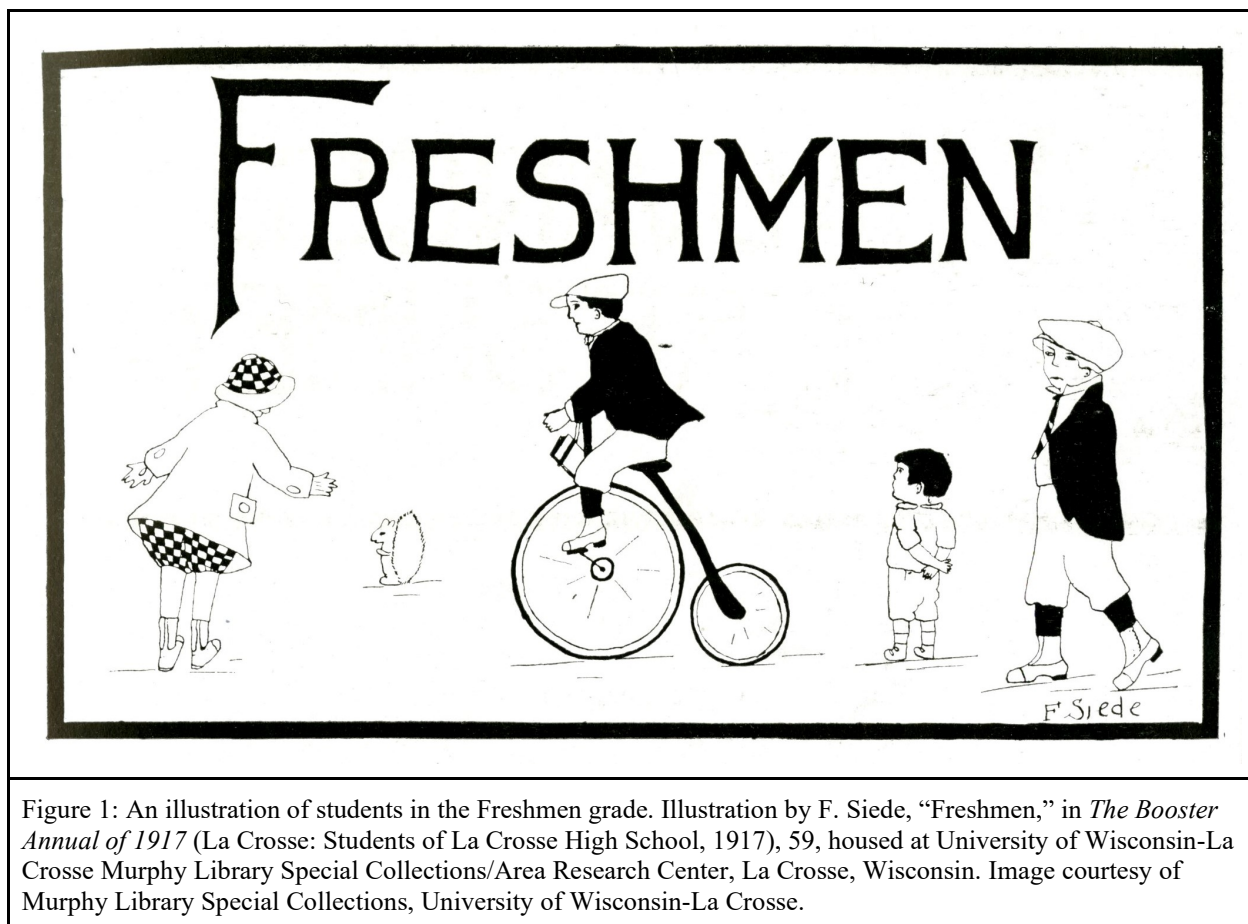


Figure 1: An illustration of students in the Freshmen grade. Illustration by F. Siede, “Freshmen,” in *The Booster Annual of 1917* (La Crosse: Students of La Crosse High School, 1917), 59, housed at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections/Area Research Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin. Image courtesy of Murphy Library Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

Next, we see the Advanced Freshman grade (Figure 2). This image shows a young woman watering a plant in a garden. She is wearing clothes that present youth, with a bonnet and poufy dress, but come closer to adult clothing of the time. Her clothing is an in-between of the clothing seen in the Freshmen illustration and those seen in later illustrations. This illustration could be read as a depiction of nurtured growth. The girl symbolizes the students, the action of watering as education and learning, and the plant as educational and social and emotional maturity. These adolescents are growing during this period physically as well as in their ideas and relationships. The Advanced Freshmen are more mature than their Freshmen counterparts. It is worth noting as well that the “Advanced Freshmen” illustration only depicts a girl while the “Freshman” illustration included boys and girls. These themes continue in the “Sophomore” illustration (Figure 3).

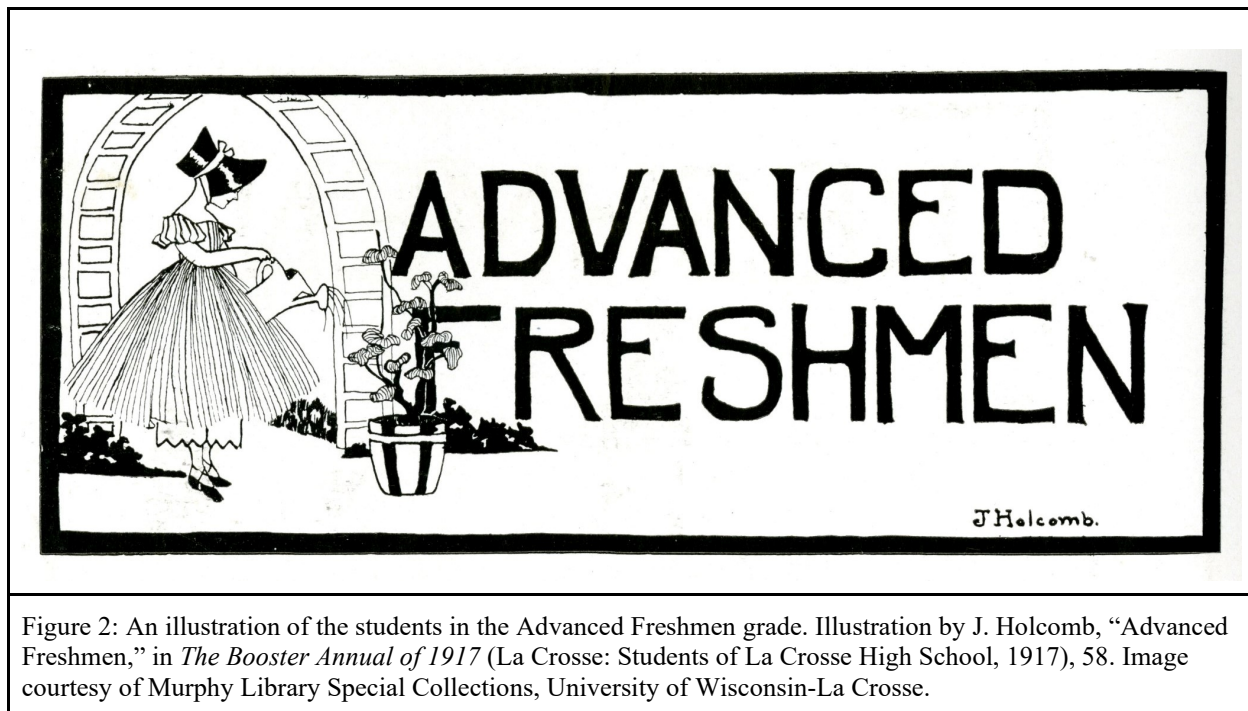


Figure 2: An illustration of the students in the Advanced Freshmen grade. Illustration by J. Holcomb, "Advanced Freshmen," in *The Booster Annual of 1917* (La Crosse: Students of La Crosse High School, 1917), 58. Image courtesy of Murphy Library Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

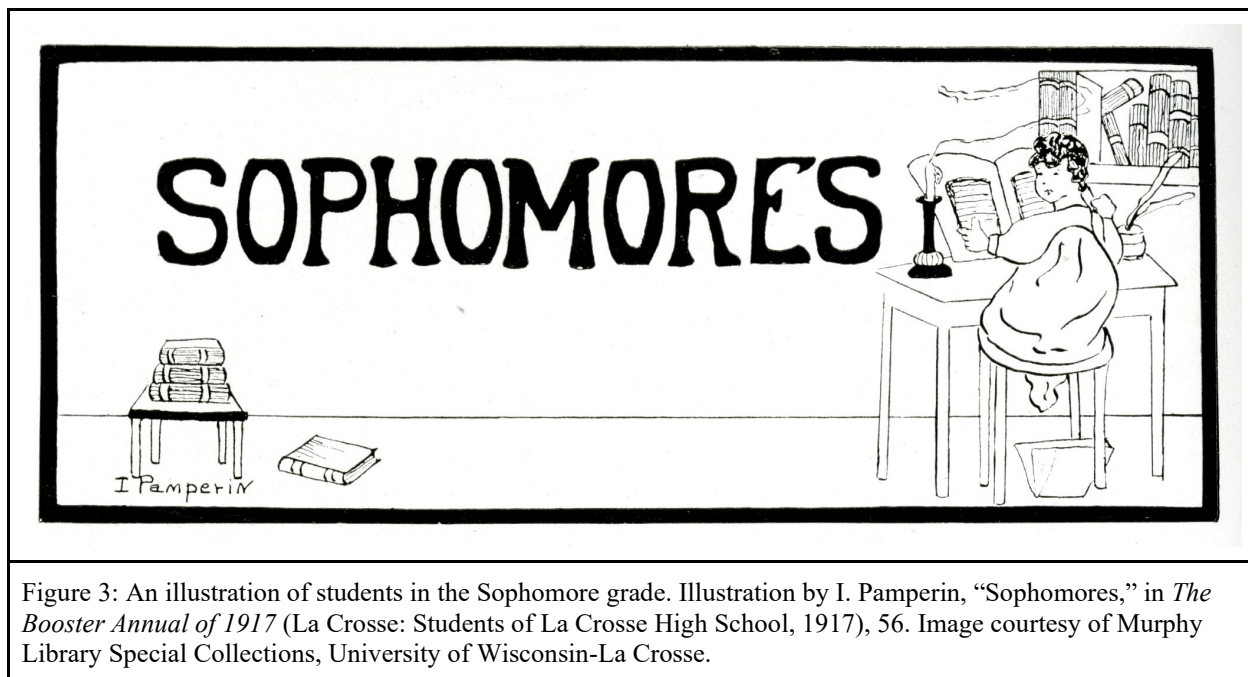


Figure 3: An illustration of students in the Sophomore grade. Illustration by I. Pamperin, "Sophomores," in *The Booster Annual of 1917* (La Crosse: Students of La Crosse High School, 1917), 56. Image courtesy of Murphy Library Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

This illustration shows a young girl studying by candlelight at her desk while she is surrounded by books. Oddly, this girl looks younger than the one in the Advanced Freshmen illustration. This may signify the continued immaturity among the Sophomore students. There is more emphasis put on education here. While the last illustration showed nourishment, maybe at a slow pace, this illustration shows the student studying late at night in her nightwear by candlelight. The studying for these students is more rigorous than before as she is surrounded by books and writing with a fountain pen. The students need to focus more on their work at this time as they grow older.

In the “Advanced Sophomores” illustration, we see another change (Figure 4). This one shows a boy in the middle with two girls on either side. Three of the girls look toward the boy as the fourth girl and the boy meet the reader’s gaze. A heterosexual romantic interest is implied, especially of the girls interested in the boy. It is not a serious romantic interest though. The two girls on the right are looking directly toward the boy with downturned mouths and eyes. Perhaps they are not entirely pleased with their option but feel pushed toward it. Agnes Osborne attests to an uncommitted form of dating in her 1971 oral history interviews, where she describes boy-girl

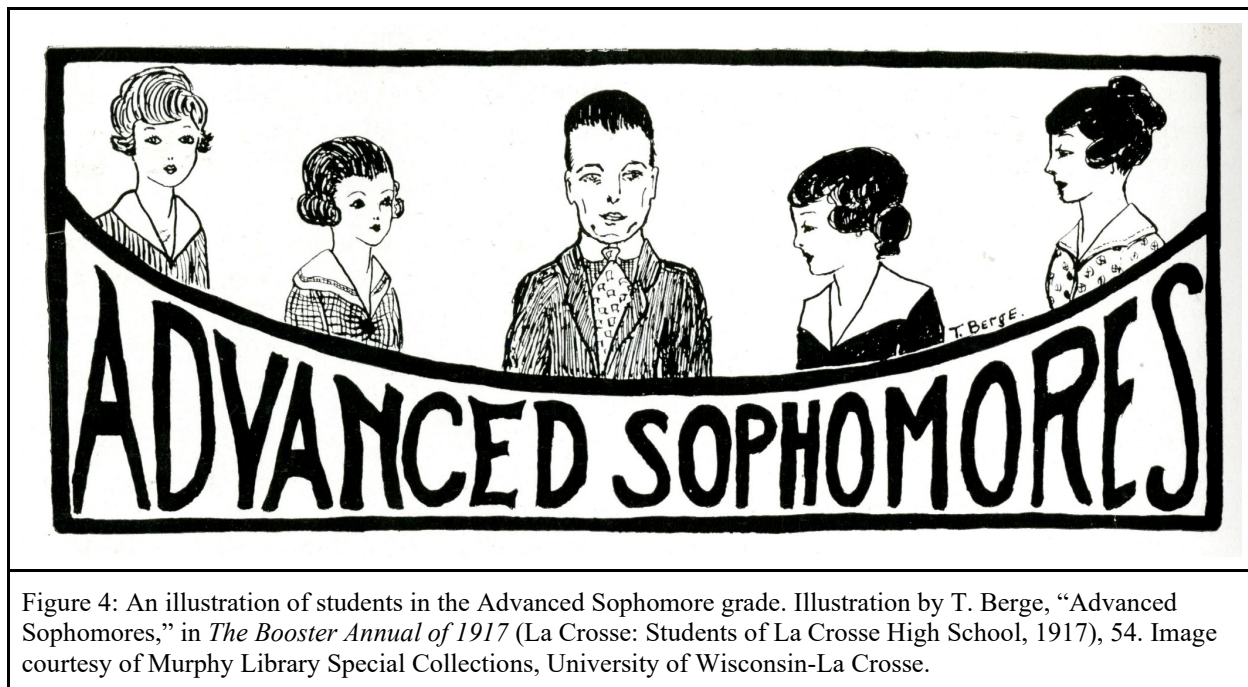


Figure 4: An illustration of students in the Advanced Sophomore grade. Illustration by T. Berge, “Advanced Sophomores,” in *The Booster Annual of 1917* (La Crosse: Students of La Crosse High School, 1917), 54. Image courtesy of Murphy Library Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

relationships in her early teens:

Oh well, they didn’t go steady then the way they do now. We’d all go together and then, you know, they’d pair off each time, y’know, somebody’d ask you. But you didn’t go with them steady the way they do. I think we had a lot more fun. [chuckles]⁴⁴

With the illustration and the oral history excerpt together, it seems that dating was not a serious pursuit but rather just seen as something to do. Osborne provides that because the opportunity for light dating was present they took part, and the illustration seems to signify that as well. It also becomes apparent that the far-left girl’s and the boy’s gaze forward may show their dedication to their future and education. The idea of uncommitted dating changes a bit in the “Junior” illustration (Figure 5).

⁴⁴ Agnes Osborne, interview by Howard Fredricks, 1971, audio recording, 34:50-35:09, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Oral History Program, housed at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections/Area Research Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin.

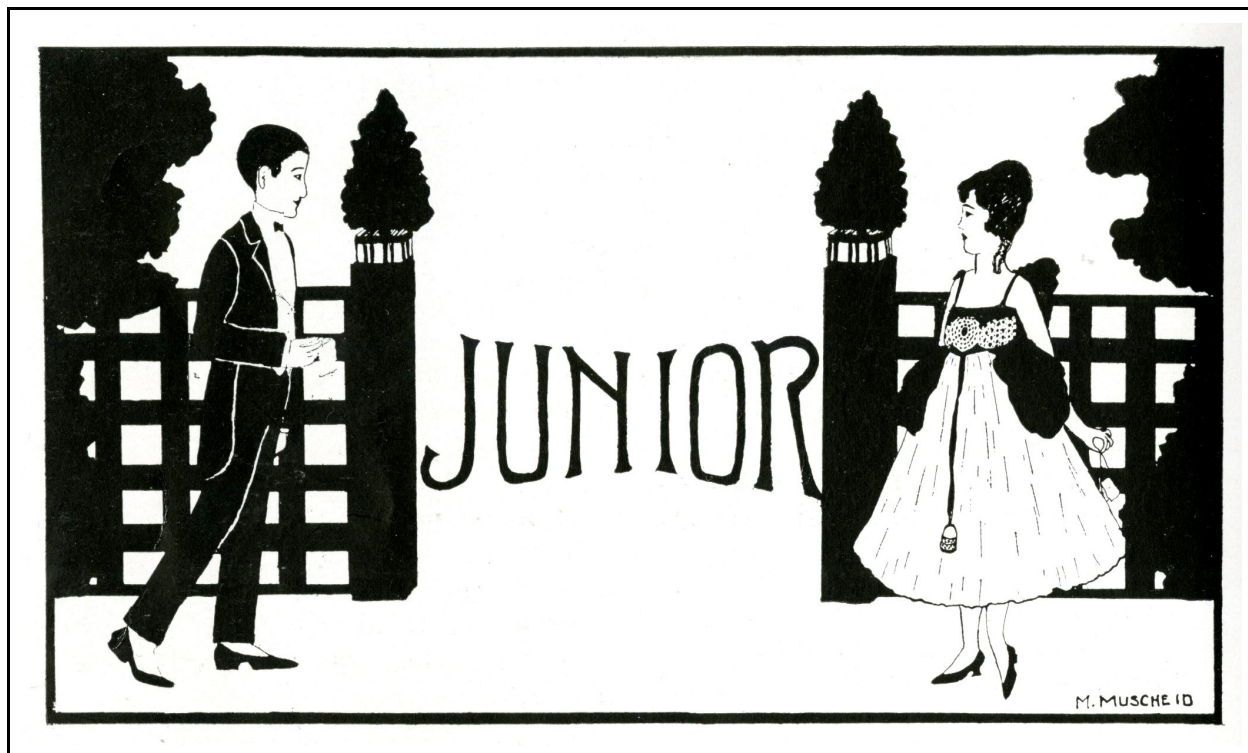


Figure 5: An illustration of students in the Junior grade. Illustration by M. Muscheid, “Junior,” in *The Booster Annual of 1917* (La Crosse: Students of La Crosse High School, 1917), 52. Image courtesy of Murphy Library Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

Here, we can see a young man and young woman facing each other outside of a fence. The young man is walking toward the young woman. The figures are visibly more mature in their clothing and stature. He is wearing a three-piece suit while she is wearing a cocktail dress with exposed shoulders. They are also taller and look more like teenagers than children. Their more mature romantic appearance may refer to the High School’s Junior Prom. It is also important to note that this illustration only includes a couple instead of the group dating that was described in the oral history. This shows the narrative of adolescent-defined adolescence leaning into the idea of serious dating and future marriage. This differs from the early illustrations, as well as the upcoming Senior illustration.

The “Advanced Juniors” illustration shows another depiction of serious dating (Figure 6). In this illustration, the students are again shown in formal attire outside of a car. The young man’s suit and the young women’s dress look adult and the two are standing much closer than in the couple in the Junior illustration.

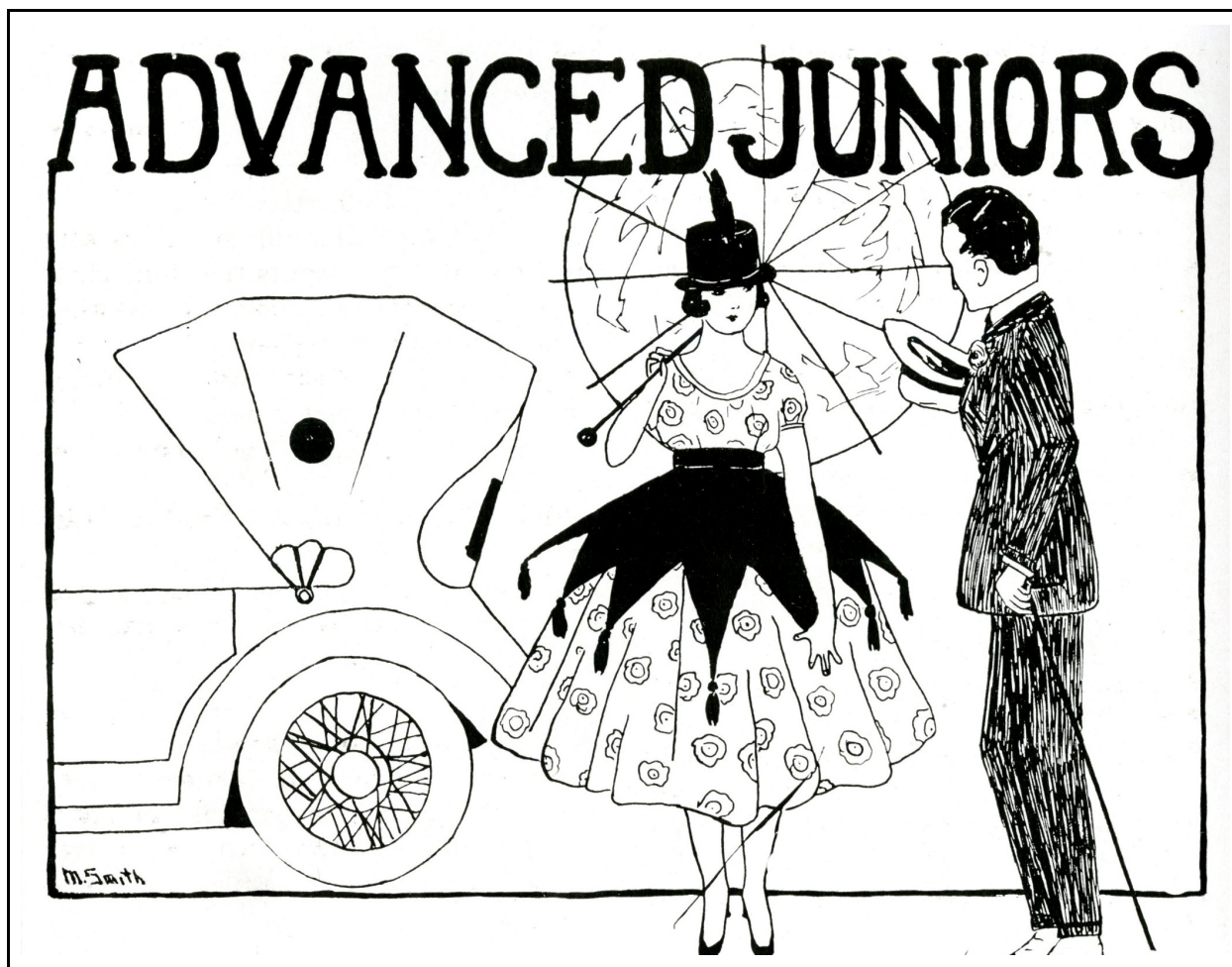


Figure 6: An illustration of students in the Advanced Junior grade. Illustration by M. Smith, "Advanced Juniors," in *The Booster Annual of 1917* (La Crosse: Students of La Crosse High School, 1917), 50. Image courtesy of Murphy Library Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

This assumes a higher level of maturity among these students and a further heterosexual romantic interest between the two. The act of the young man tipping his hat and the inclusion of the car in the background and their demeanor also implies a more serious dating culture during later adolescence. This depiction of serious dating culture, particularly without adult supervision, signifies what the social reformers feared most about the adolescents: premarital sex. Their growth into adults is beginning to truly show here and even more in the next illustration of the Seniors.

The final illustration shows a depiction of the Senior grade (Figure 7).

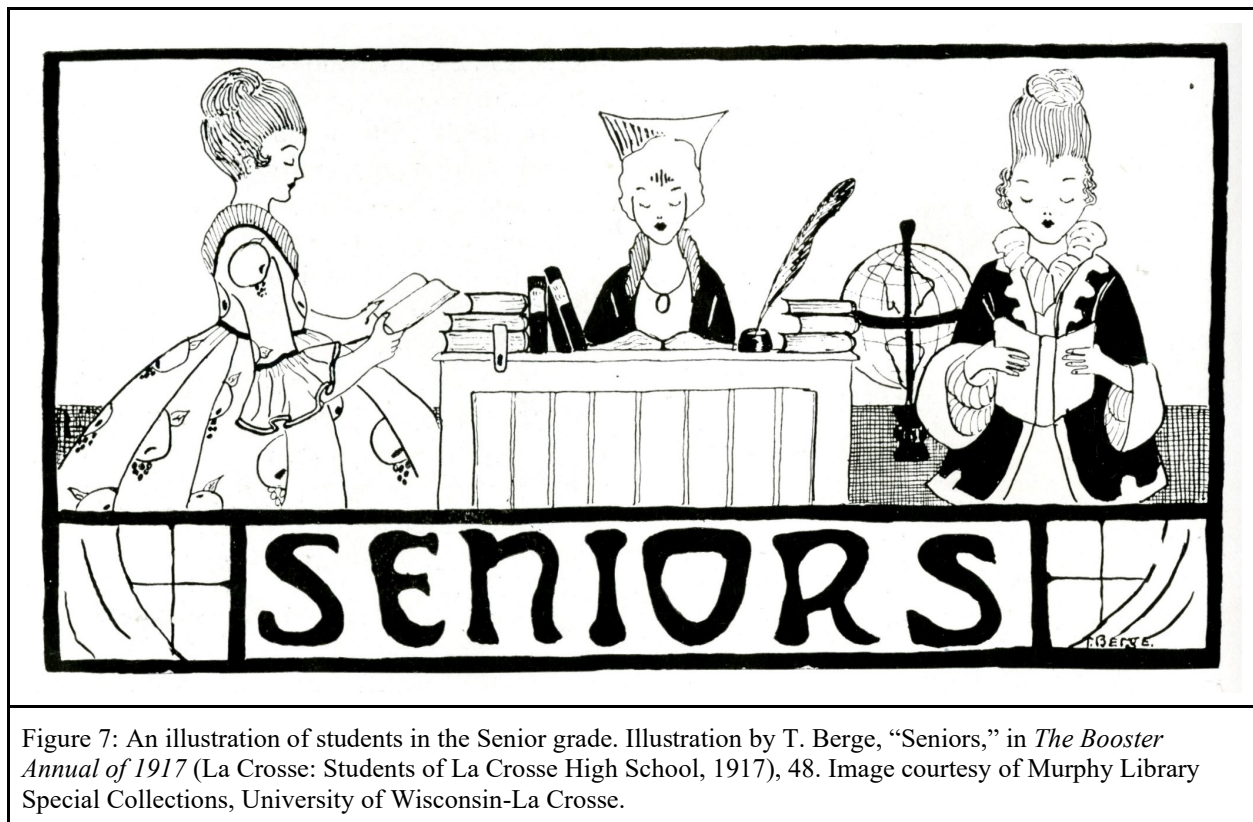


Figure 7: An illustration of students in the Senior grade. Illustration by T. Berge, "Seniors," in *The Booster Annual of 1917* (La Crosse: Students of La Crosse High School, 1917), 48. Image courtesy of Murphy Library Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

This illustration shows the students at their most mature. With their ornate dresses and updo hairstyle, the three women appear stately, elegant, and adult. The many books around them, the quill and ink, and the globe indicate that they are well-educated and well-read. They are focused on their studies with downturned eyes. From the absence of any men in the illustration, it seems that they even left romantic relationships behind them for a life of education or an elite life. The absence of males is making a statement about the changing values of young women, not for the worst--like the adults perceived--but for the better. In many ways, this particular illustration acts as a strong adolescent reply to the adult narrative of adolescent vice and immorality described above and further described later.

When the seven illustrations are combined, a narrative appears. The Freshmen are at their most childlike, while the Seniors are at their most mature. In between, romantic relationships and studying are important pursuits for these teenagers. It is also apparent how they viewed their high-school experience and adolescence as a period of growth and maturity. They connected over the shared experience of changing mindsets, relationships, and growth. Through these illustrations, they created a narrative about their own adolescence opposed to the adult narrative of adolescent vice and sin. This type of depiction of age was not unique to the 1917 edition of *The Booster Annual*; similar illustrations can be found in other La Crosse High School yearbooks.⁴⁵

Another piece of the adolescent narrative comes from an essay written by a La Crosse High School Advanced Junior Rena Call, who was jokingly described in a "Rogue's Gallery" to be going to Vassar College for two years "for agitating 'Woman's Rights'."⁴⁶ She wrote an essay titled "Should High School Students Give Any Time to Social Entertainments" in the 1906 La Crosse High School Junior Annual.⁴⁷ In this essay, Call argues against the stance, "that a high school girl should have nothing to do with social entertainments of any kind whatever, that two

⁴⁵ See *The Booster Annual of 1918* (La Crosse: Students of La Crosse High School, 1918), housed at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections/Area Research Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin.

⁴⁶ "Rogue's Gallery," in *Junior Annual*, 1906, 37, housed at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections/Area Research Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin.

⁴⁷ Rena Call, "Should High School Students Give Any Time to Social Entertainments," in *Junior Annual*, 1906, 19-20, housed at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections/Area Research Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin.

words spell her duty, home and school.”⁴⁸ To Call, this not only meant excluding herself from commercial leisure like dances and theaters, but also picnics, church meetings, and other beneficial activities. By the end of the essay, she concludes:

that social entertainments, moderately indulged in, will confer upon high-school students the [worldly] experience and knowledge of human nature that can be gained from no other source, besides furnishing a healthy diversion from study.⁴⁹

In speaking against the restriction of adolescence and their leisure, Call made the best possible argument for herself. Moderation of studying and leisure was key to her becoming a healthy and successful adult. This article adds to the adolescent’s narrative from the illustrations by emphasizing their dedication to being balanced and healthy adults.

The adult/academic definition of adolescence, as well as the teenagers’ definition, show the beginning of the teenage or adolescent demographic before it was traditionally thought to begin by prior generations of historians (post-Second World War). In the newspapers and city ordinances, adults attempted to define a burgeoning age group that is seemingly causing trouble in the cities. Social reformers, such as Professor J. L. Gillian, brought a “scientific” concept of adolescence to La Crosse in the 1910s. Defining teenagehood was not unique to La Crosse adults, teenagers themselves took part in defining themselves through their yearbook illustrations and school work to create a distinct narrative opposed to the adults’ narrative. There, we can see that they defined their adolescence as a process of growth and change. They also made strong efforts to stress their dedication to education and a successful and healthy adulthood. Clearly, there was some concept of adolescence in turn-of-the-century La Crosse. We have seen the adolescents’ narrative about their growth period and the beginnings of the adult narrative about adolescence thus far. Next, we will take a short look at leisure in La Crosse to see how adolescents entertained themselves and venture deeper into Progressives’ and reformers’ struggle for control.

LEISURE IN LA CROSSE

I think it is important now that we understand clearly who is being discussed in this leisure section. The sources that I have drawn from for this section are primarily made by or about college or high school students in an overwhelmingly white city. Experiences were likely very different for Adolescents of Color or adolescents experiencing poverty. For these people, many of the leisure opportunities would not have been available, either because of social barriers, lack of free time, or lack of opportunity.

Outside of commercial leisure, La Crosse residents, and particularly adolescents, took part in several other activities. Some activities included: riverboat excursions and picnics in the summer, while in the winter, they had sleigh ride parties and ice skating.⁵⁰ Swimming, usually in the local rivers, was also a popular activity, especially among teenage boys.⁵¹ They also attended themed parties in their free time, such as Halloween parties.⁵² A personal favorite was the “‘Bessie’ Picnic” among La Crosse Normal students in 1917, where only girls named Bessie were invited to join the picnic and the club.⁵³ It was dances, though, that dominated the entertainment and leisure activities for young La Crosse residents.

⁴⁸ Call, “Should High School Students,” 19.

⁴⁹ Call, “Should High School Students,” 20.

⁵⁰ Osborne, interview, 1971, audio recording, 32:58-34:50, 42:25-42:45; Carl Scheel, interview by Howard Fredricks, 1978, audio recording, tape 2 of 3, 53:36-53:53, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Oral History Program, housed at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections/Area Research Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin; “Sophomore Notes,” *The Racquet*, January 29, 1912, 21, accessed on Murphy Library Digital Collections, https://digitalcollections.uwlax.edu/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=414a6a10-234a-416b-887f-5b08361e9452/wlacu000/00000004/00000009&pg_seq=23&search_doc=.

⁵¹ Scheel, interview, 1978, audio recording, tape 2 of 3, 00:26-01:41; William Koch, interview by Howard Fredricks, 1971-1972, audio recording, tape 6 of 17, 46:03-46:30, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Oral History Program, housed at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections/Area Research Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin.

⁵² “The Junior Hallowe’en Party,” *The Racquet*, December 16, 1910, 28, accessed on Murphy Library Digital Collections, https://digitalcollections.uwlax.edu/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=414a6a10-234a-416b-887f-5b08361e9452/wlacu000/00000004/00000001&pg_seq=32&search_doc=.

⁵³ “‘Bessie’ Picnic,” *The Racquet*, June 14, 1917, 3, accessed on Murphy Library Digital Collections, https://digitalcollections.uwlax.edu/jsp/RcWebImageViewer.jsp?doc_id=414a6a10-234a-416b-887f-5b08361e9452/wlacu000/00000004/00000062&pg_seq=3&search_doc=.

At the turn-of-the-century in La Crosse, leisure was only beginning to be commercialized. This commercialization of leisure is most clearly seen with amusement parks, movie theatres, dance halls, and other commodified and paid leisure activities. While looking through 1890-1919 La Crosse City Directories, I focused on three leisure institutions: halls, bowling alleys, and theatres. Halls (specifically those that hosted dances) provided the most consistent number of leisure spaces over the 30 year period. In 1890, there were approximately 15 dance halls; in 1900, about 23 dance halls; in 1910, approximately 20 dance halls; and finally in 1919, there were about 18 dance halls.⁵⁴ La Crosse bowling alleys, on the other hand, follow a bell curve pattern. In 1890, there were 3 bowling alleys; in 1903, 5 bowling alleys; in 1910, 1 bowling alley; and finally in 1919, there were 2 bowling alleys.⁵⁵ Lastly, the La Crosse theatre industry expanded quickly during the 1903-1915 period. In 1890, there was 1 theatre; in 1900, still only 1 theatre; in 1910, there were 4 theatres; and finally in 1919, there were 7 theatres.⁵⁶

“Every Saturday night, we’d go to dances...” said Carl Scheel in his 1978 oral history interview.⁵⁷ Dances served as popular places of leisure for adolescents and adults in turn-of-the-century La Crosse. It was a place for people to stay out late, sometimes until 3 or 4 am, and have a good time.⁵⁸ Dances in La Crosse happened weekly, if not multiple times a week, and were a key part of leisure for adolescents at La Crosse High School and La Crosse Normal School. Dances took place after club meetings, as social events hosted by the school, and as private parties at homes or dance halls. Often these dances were organized by the adolescents themselves. Oral history interviewee Scheel clarifies how dance halls were rented by teenagers:

Fredricks: These halls would be privately owned and would charge you admission to come?

Scheel: Well, you had to individually engage it and then rent it from them. Then you brought your own group in.⁵⁹

This ability to hire dance halls and set up their own events allowed La Crosse adolescents a degree of freedom that may have seemed dangerous to some adults. With nearly 20 dance halls in the city throughout the 1890-1919 period and dances every week, the venues were booming and some La Crosse residents took issue with the halls and the freedom it gave adolescents.

THE BATTLE IN THE DANCE HALLS: SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS REFORM OF LEISURE AND ADOLESCENCE

The article that introduced this paper was also the first article in *The La Crosse Tribune* that reported on vice and sin in the dance hall. The March 6, 1905 article titled, “End Shameful Orgies: Terrible Saturday Night Dances Stop” chronicled the closure of Armory Hall by the Governors’ Guard after a rowdy dance.⁶⁰ The article paints a picture of a hellish and sinful night full of hedonism and debauchery. One section of the article reads:

⁵⁴ Ascertaining the number of dance halls in La Crosse is difficult as the category of “dance halls” was not used in the city directories. My estimations are based on the halls that were listed in the city directory that year and were noted as the meeting place for multiple groups or were named elsewhere as the meeting place for a dance. There could be more or fewer dance venues in the city during those years. *La Crosse City Directory, 1890*, (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Spicer & Buschman, 1890), 19-34; *La Crosse City Directory, 1900*, (La Crosse, Wisconsin: L.P. Philippi Co., 1900), 100-113; *La Crosse City Directory, 1911*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Wright Directory Co., 1910), 39-51; *La Crosse City Directory, 1919*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Wright Directory Co., 1919), 55-56.

⁵⁵ *La Crosse City Directory, 1890*, (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Spicer & Buschman, 1890), 288; *La Crosse City Directory, 1903-1904*, (La Crosse, Wisconsin: L.P. Philippi Co., 1903), 484; *La Crosse City Directory, 1911*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Wright Directory Co., 1910), 387; *La Crosse City Directory, 1919*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Wright Directory Co., 1919), 627.

⁵⁶ *La Crosse City Directory, 1890*, (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Spicer & Buschman, 1890), 112; *La Crosse City Directory, 1900*, (La Crosse, Wisconsin: L.P. Philippi Co., 1900), 570; *La Crosse City Directory, 1911*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Wright Directory Co., 1910), 699; *La Crosse City Directory, 1919*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Wright Directory Co., 1919), 661.

⁵⁷ Scheel, interview, 1978, audio recording, tape 2 of 3, 52:07.

⁵⁸ Edwin Dohlby, interview by Howard Fredricks, 1978, audio recording, tape 1 of 3, 31:40, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Oral History Program, housed at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections/Area Research Center, La Crosse, Wisconsin; Osborne, interview, 1971, audio recording, 34:20-34:35.

⁵⁹ Scheel, interview, 1978, audio recording, tape 2 of 3, 57:27-57:38.

⁶⁰ “End Shameful Orgies,” 1.

Disheveled, ruined girls have been seen at these orgies, to drink until they fell from their chairs. Young men, blear-eyed, flushed and unkempt, cursing oaths that would make a pirate blush, drink, quarrel, and roll about the beer-flooded floors in drunken disorder.⁶¹

Four days later, on March 10, 1905, *The La Crosse Tribune* reported on an account of dance halls by the Milwaukee Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).⁶² This article commented in much the same way upon dance halls as the earlier article. The WCTU reported that they saw teen girls, 15 or 16 years old, dancing and drinking in short dresses and teen boys partaking in drink and dance as well.⁶³ From these two first articles, there is a distinct focus on the young women that appeared in this account. A pattern of adult concern and a narrative about adolescents, vice, and dance halls began to form in La Crosse.

One of the most sensational articles to discuss vice in the dance halls was published on February 28, 1906 and lends its title to that of this paper: "Dance Halls or Dance Hells."⁶⁴ This piece began by describing sinfulness and vice by adolescents in the dance halls, only to slowly reveal itself to be from *The Chicago Tribune*. The author then went on to compare the wretchedness of Chicago dance halls with those in La Crosse. Finally, they concluded with "If Chicago, wicked Chicago, rises up to crush out evils of this sort, how much more incumbent on decent little La Crosse to have a social wash-day and subject its immoral linen to the suds."⁶⁵

What was happening in La Crosse for such bombastic articles to appear? Was the city falling from grace as an American Sodom and Gomorrah? It certainly seems that way from these articles. Or was this sensational by the newspapers to drive up readership? Either way, discussion of sinful dance halls quieted for the next eight years until it returned with the Associated Charities of La Crosse.

By 1913, the discussion of "dance evil" returned with an article in *The La Crosse Tribune*.⁶⁶ Think back to my earlier discussion of University Extension professor J. L. Gillin and his definition of adolescence in a March 14, 1913 article. During the lecture that the article described, he also addressed a question from Rev. George R. Longbrake, a pastor for St. Paul's Universalist Church and member of the Associated Charities of La Crosse, a Progressive organization, Board of Directors, concerning immorality in La Crosse dance halls.⁶⁷ The Associated Charities was concerned with "the prevention of cruelty to animals, to children, and in distribution of clothing to the needing."⁶⁸ Gillin responded that the solution to the immorality "is either municipal dance halls or dances under the direction of the churches."⁶⁹ It seems that this comment put the Associated Charities on the path to regulate La Crosse dance halls. Over the next year or so, the group continued to pressure city officials to implement a city ordinance on the dance halls, along with employing other strategies to control or "protect" the city's adolescents.⁷⁰ Two months later, on May 3, 1913, *The Tribune* reported that Rev. Ambrose Murphy, a Catholic priest of St. James Church and a board member of the Associated Charities, made the bold statement about the dance halls, that "if vice must be in a certain district... it should be south of State street and east of Sixth where the respectable people of the town will be able to watch it and see just how it acts in degrading youth."⁷¹ City officials worked quickly to please the Associated Charities, and presumably other La Crosse adults and parents. By April 24, 1914, City Ordinance 550, an ordinance to regulate dance halls, was passed. One particular section is important for my discussion. Section 6 read:

It shall be unlawful after 11 o'clock p. m. to permit any person to attend or take part in any public dance who has not reached the age of eighteen (18) years, unless such person be in company with

⁶¹ "End Shameful Orgies," 1.

⁶² "Milwaukee Women Take In Saturday Night Dance Sights In Crowd," *The La Crosse Tribune*, March 10, 1905, 4, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/513517086/>.

⁶³ "Milwaukee Women," 4.

⁶⁴ "Dance Halls or Dance Hells," 4.

⁶⁵ "Dance Halls or Dance Hells," 4; Chicago, the closest large city to La Crosse, was the epitome of a growing industrial city. Chicago's fast growth outpaced La Crosse and never quite left the eye of La Crosse residents as an economic and cultural competitor.

⁶⁶ "Gives Solution of Dance Evil," 14.

⁶⁷ Social Service Society, "1909-1939," *Manual*, MSS 011, Box 1, Folder 1, La Crosse Public Library Archives, La Crosse, WI.

⁶⁸ Social Service Society, "1909-1939."

⁶⁹ "Gives Solution of Dance Evil," 14.

⁷⁰ "Ask Council to Protect Youth," *The La Crosse Tribune*, May 3, 1913, 1, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510916633/>.

⁷¹ "Rev. Ambrose Murphy Dies; Pastor Here For 51 Years," *The La Crosse Tribune*, April 6, 1939, 1, 6, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/511272453/>; "Ask Council to Protect Youth," 1.

a parent or natural guardian. It shall be unlawful for any person to represent himself or herself to have reached the age of eighteen years in order to obtain admission to a public dance hall, or to be permitted to remain therein, when such person in fact is under eighteen years of age, and it shall also be unlawful for any person to represent himself or herself to be a parent or natural guardian of any person, in order that such person may obtain admission to a public dance hall, or shall be permitted to remain therein, when the party making the representation is not in fact either a parent or natural guardian of the other person.⁷²

This ordinance gives a clear indication of what aspects of adolescent leisure in the dance halls that La Crosse adults were afraid of. The first sentence shows that they were fearful of the adolescents being independent and without adult supervision. It was permissible for the adolescents to attend the dances as long as they were accompanied by “a parent or natural guardian.” This concern is a natural extension of the “ruined girls” idea that was presented in 1905 in *The La Crosse Tribune*. Explicitly, social reformers were afraid that if the adolescents were not under adult supervision, sex would be rampant and morals disintegrated. Historian Chani Marchiselli’s analysis of social reformers’ dance hall concerns shows similar strategies among other Progressives to regulate and close the dance halls and to use education to push middle-class virtues on adolescents and other patrons of dance halls.⁷³ With the passage of this ordinance, the Associated Charities had seemingly succeeded. The adolescents were controlled in the dance halls and sin was eradicated from the venues, as the ordinance. But that was not the last word from the Associated Charities.

At the same time as the dance hall reforms, the Associated Charities also tried other strategies to control La Crosse teenagers. One of these was a push for a juvenile court in the city. Discussion of a juvenile court began as early as 1907 before the Associated Charities came into play.⁷⁴ The question of such a court continued into 1908 with La Crosse Judges Fruit and Brindley, but the Associated Charities did not become involved until 1913 with their hosted public meeting in the La Crosse City Hall on “Juvenile Welfare” which included lectures from Judge Brindley and Rev. Murphy.⁷⁵ But this strategy ultimately failed in 1914, when the same Judge Brindley that had pushed for a juvenile court concluded that the number of juvenile crime cases was not high enough to warrant the establishment of a juvenile court.⁷⁶ Such a desire for a criminal court system in La Crosse is indicative of the nationwide struggle by social reformers to control and reform juvenile delinquency with juvenile courts that Savage and Teeter describe in their analyses related to the social reformers, such as G. Stanley Hall and his 1905 book *Adolescence*, and the creation of adolescence.

The Associated Charities’ other strategy to reform La Crosse teenagers was the creation of more playgrounds. In 1913, La Crosse adults and the Associated Charities started to push for the city to build more playgrounds to control and better raise the children and adolescents in La Crosse. A July 24, 1913 article about playgrounds and juveniles read:

Whatever may be said in derogation of the new conditions that make it necessary to teach children - especially city children - to play, the existence of that need will not be questioned by observers of child life of the times. The value of play in character building is recognized, and civilization cannot permit the evolution of generations of children who do not play.⁷⁷

⁷² “Ordinance No. 550: AN ORDINANCE defining dance halls, and providing for the licensing thereof, and provisions upon which the same may be operated,” in *Supplement to Ordinances of the City of La Crosse: From Ordinance No. 520, Published Oct. 18, 1911 to Ordinance No. 721, Published July 26, 1923*, comp. O. J. Swennes (La Crosse: G. A. Keller, 1923), 23-25.

⁷³ Marchiselli, “Danger in the Dancehall,” 185-186.

⁷⁴ “Wants Juvenile Court in City,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, June 29, 1907, 5, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/513466762>.

⁷⁵ “Municipal and Juvenile Courts Demanded as a Relief in The City,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, February 14, 1908, 1, 6, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/513684359>; “Juvenile Welfare Will Be Discussed,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, April 30, 1913, 6, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510916404/>.

⁷⁶ “Juvenile Court Not Needed Here,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, March 12, 1914, 1, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510924447/>.

⁷⁷ “Play Builds Character in Our Juveniles,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, July 24, 1913, 3, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510915399>.

The belief was that more playgrounds and more dedicated playtime for children and adolescents would prevent them from becoming immoral or dangerous. Discussion about the effectiveness of playgrounds on juvenile delinquency continued into 1914 and 1915. Two articles from 1914 and 1915 reported that juvenile crime cases were cut in half as a result of the construction of playgrounds.⁷⁸ The articles give no clear indication of how the playgrounds lowered crime other than that it was a place for the adolescents to go and burn up energy. Archaeologists Suzanne Spencer-Wood and Renée Blackburn analyzed the ways in which Progressives used playgrounds to reform vice and delinquency among adolescents in Boston and Detroit.⁷⁹

The final discussion of immorality and vice in the La Crosse dance halls came on April 22, 1915. With the melodramatic title, “New Juvenile League Starts Crusade Here to Check Dance Halls: Investigation to Determine Effect on Young Planned,” the article outlined the juvenile welfare committee of the Associated Charities’ new plan to regulate and control the dance halls and the adolescents that patronized them.⁸⁰ They continued to push for a juvenile court, more playgrounds, better enforcement of regulatory laws against the sale of alcohol or tobacco to minors, and further investigation of the dance halls. About a month later, on May 19, 1915, *The La Crosse Tribune* reported that the Associated Charities had succeeded and would be pushing forward to create a “committee of citizens” to “censor all amusements of young.”⁸¹ Further, the recommendations of the Associated Charities at a presentation were as such:

The presentation to the public in a more emphatic manner of preventatives of evils arising from contagious diseases of children, and the work being done towards more sanitary condition by city nurses and officers of the Associated Charities.

To urge the regular attendance at churches and Sunday schools at which children are members.

To recommend at least two more play grounds for La Crosse.

A complete investigation into recreations of children who have reached the age of adolescence - including the dance hall, the use of saloons by minors, the free use of automobiles in suburban trips by the youths of both sexes without adult chaperones, and similar trips by train to ball games, etc.

The investigation of the sale of liquor to minors.

The surveillance of factories where child labor may be employed.⁸²

This, again, clearly shows the social reformers’ concerns were low attendance in church and hence low morals, underage drinking, and lack of supervision while young men and young women were together.

That article was the last word found about the Associated Charities and their crusade on adolescent immorality and leisure. The next discussion involving dance halls, more than four years later, on December 3, 1919, reported that parties must be canceled, and businesses closed early to conserve fuel for the winter until a coal strike concluded.⁸³ Further discussion of the dance hall and adolescence reform and control were forgotten with the advent of World War One and the wartime worries and social tensions that came with it. Focus was pulled from problems defined by Progressives to concerns related to the war and enemies abroad and at home. There is little evidence of further discussion of dance halls, even during the Roaring Twenties. The effort to reform the morals of dance halls ended not with a bang or success but with a whimpering suggestion of what more could be done.

The Associated Charities’ and the greater social reformers’ concerns about vice and crime in the dance hall were not entirely unfounded. Fights were common in the dances. Edwin Dohlby describes in his 1978 oral history

⁷⁸ “Delinquency on Decrease Result of Playgrounds,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, September 29, 1914, 6, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510928570>; “City Playgrounds Cut in Half the Delinquency List,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, October 18, 1915, 1, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510921884>.

⁷⁹ Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood and Renée M. Blackburn, “The Creation of the American Playground Movement by Reform Women, 1885-1930: A Feminist Analysis of Materialized Ideological Transformations in Gender Identities and Power Dynamics,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 21, no. 4 (2017): 942.

⁸⁰ “New Juvenile League Starts Crusade Here to Check Dance Halls: Investigation to Determine Effect on Young Planned,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, April 22, 1915, 1, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510922183/>.

⁸¹ “Naughty Joy Rides Now to be Barred by Charities Work,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, May 19, 1915, 6, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510923164/>.

⁸² “Naughty Joy Rides,” 6.

⁸³ “City Closed After 4 P.M. to Conserve Coal,” *The La Crosse Tribune*, December 3, 1919, 1, accessed on newspapers.com, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/510984416>.

that Northside and Southside La Crosse adolescents would often fight at dance halls and mention Centennial Hall as “a bastard of a place for fighting.”⁸⁴ Bill Koch tells similar stories in his early 1970s oral history. He chronicles stories about lumberjacks coming to La Crosse and blowing off steam in the city’s taverns and dance halls.⁸⁵ He tells one particular story when his father, the floor manager for the Concordia Hall at the time, attempted to kick out lumberjacks from the hall and a large brawl broke out. Eventually, the National Guard was called to break up the fight. In another part of his oral history, Koch tells of the many fights at dance halls between adolescent gangs and between other, often adult, dance attendees.⁸⁶ Juvenile crime was also present in La Crosse. In an October 18, 1915 article in *The La Crosse Tribune*, the La Crosse police chief provided numerical details about juvenile delinquency in the city.⁸⁷ Consistently in this article, boys appear in higher numbers than girls as they go through the criminal system with fines, parole, or reform schools. This is in opposition to the intense emphasis on adolescent girls in the dance hall articles. There is also little focus on drunkenness and fighting among adults in the articles. The concern was not that there were fights or extreme drinking in the dance halls or even that adolescents were in the dance halls in general, rather the concern was that young women were there unsupervised and would become “ruined.”

Now that we know what the Associated Charities’ role was, we must ask ourselves who they were? And what did this movement to reform adolescence and leisure mean in the larger historical context? The Associated Charities of La Crosse was part of a larger organization called the Social Service Society that had merged with the Wisconsin Humane Society in 1912. Their work included the advocacy of a dance hall ordinance, as well as “closing of saloons,” and they had an interest in “the tone of motion pictures” and “establishment of Boy Scouts in the city.”⁸⁸ With an obvious focus on the vices and ills of society, the group is an almost stereotypical image of social reformers or Progressives. Their goal to reform the morals and conditions of La Crosse and better the city for all is common among similar groups like the WCTU. The first Board of Directors of the Associated Charities, which participated in the dance hall reform, was made up of 17 prominent white men, including four reverends and two doctors, and eight white women.⁸⁹ Fitting with the social makeup of La Crosse and the Progressive movement as a whole, the members of the first Board of Directors were likely Christian and middle-class. The four reverends included Rev. Murphy and Rev. Longbrake, who were prominent in the battle for the dance halls. This link to religion also highlights the social gospel aspect of their crusade.

A movement to reform vice in leisure and among adolescents is not unique to 1890-1919 La Crosse. The Progressive movement, a widespread movement throughout the U.S. at the time, arose out of concerns about sanitary conditions in cities and factories but also social concerns such as alcoholism, fears about mass immigration, juvenile delinquency, and rampant sexuality.

Religion was connected to the Associated Charities’ reform strategies, as well, with prominent religious community members. From the fire and brimstone sermon-like articles in *The La Crosse Tribune*, there is a clear connection to the social gospel. The social gospel can be best described as a movement that mixed Progressive ideals, like social reforms and social idealism, with the teachings of the Bible and used the pulpit to spread those ideals.⁹⁰ Rev. Ambrose Murphy was one of the most prominent figures in the Associated Charities’ struggle to reform La Crosse’s dance halls and teenagers. His blending of religion with social reform comes out clearly in this sermon quoted from a May 9, 1913 article where he urges the law enforcement of the city to crack down on the dance halls and saloons, he said, “we can’t stop an old devil from going to hell in the majority of cases, but we can so regulate affairs of the city that vice will not flaunt itself publicly to lure and trap the young. We must concentrate on the up-bringing of the young generation.”⁹¹ In the pulpit, Rev. Murphy called for strong social action to protect against vice and sin in La Crosse. The mixing of terms like “regulate” and the “old devil from going to hell” is another indication that the tenets of the social gospel were part of Rev. Ambrose Murphy’s strategies to reform the teenagers of La Crosse.

The use of evangelical Christianity to control and reform American society adds another layer to this story. Furthermore, it underscores the institutions and systems that had their hand in the crusade. Churches, city

⁸⁴ Dohlby, interview, 1978, audio recording, tape 2 of 3, 25:54-26:15.

⁸⁵ Koch, interview, 1971-1972, audio recording, tape 5 of 17, 30:33-34:03.

⁸⁶ Koch, interview, 1971-1972, audio recording, tape 6 of 17, 53:19-59:22.

⁸⁷ “City Playgrounds Cut in Half,” 1.

⁸⁸ Social Service Society, *A Brief History of Family Service Association*, 1, MSS 011, Box 1, Folder 1, La Crosse Public Library Archives, La Crosse, WI.

⁸⁹ Social Service Society, “1909-1939.”

⁹⁰ Christopher Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 2-3; Ronald C. White, Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), xi-xix.

⁹¹ “Ask Council to Protect Youth,” 1.

government, the judicial systems, universities, and parents all contributed and collaborated in this battle for control of the dance halls and thus, adolescents. It becomes clear as well, what little of a voice the adolescents had in these events. The social reformers, the Associated Charities, and those before them, fought this battle in the dance hall. They fought to create a narrative about sinful and sexually impure adolescents, especially young women, and to reform the adolescents through regulating the dance halls “for the children.” Their reform efforts show the ways that Progressivism and the social gospel came to turn-of-the-century La Crosse and how an early idea of teenagers was formed before the post-World War Two consumer market.

When searching for how the adolescents responded, I was able to find only one document written by a teenager that discusses the restriction of leisure in any form, the Rena Call essay that I shared earlier. The lack of primary sources from turn-of-the-century La Crosse adolescents shows whose story is really being told. The Associated Charities of La Crosse, social reformers, and other adults dominated this narrative. There is a heart-wrenching silence on the part of La Crosse teenagers in this event because of the power dynamic between adults and adolescents at the time. The adults, as they do now, hold a degree of power over the teenagers and their abilities to share and express ideas. The platforms for the social reformers were numerous and popular, while the students had few options. Any documents not directly preserved by the schools were not created or saved to the same degree as for the adults, and so their perspectives on this event remain unknown.

CONCLUSION

This paper tells the story of a moral battle between social reformers and adolescents around the use of turn-of-the-century La Crosse dance halls. I argue that in this battle in the dance halls the social reformers pushed a narrative of adolescent immorality and vice, while the adolescents pushed back with their own narrative about adolescence as an important period of educational, emotional, and social growth. It was a battle about what the adolescent period of life means and how they are expected to behave. I argued this thesis in three parts. First, I proved the existence and definition of adolescence or proto-teenagehood in La Crosse prior to the Second World War through articles from *The La Crosse Tribune*, illustrations from the 1917 La Crosse High School *Booster Annual*, and an essay from the 1906 La Crosse High School *Junior Annual*. Second, I set up the types of leisure that La Crosse adolescents enjoyed during the 1890-1919 period. Third, I demonstrated how La Crosse social reformers created a narrative of adolescent sin in the dance hall as a way to supervise and control teenagers in La Crosse until about 1915. This argument built upon the prior scholarship of adolescence before World War Two and of social reformers and their efforts to control vice and leisure. It places La Crosse, as a city, and its social reformer and adolescent residents in a larger context of nationwide Progressive actions against adolescents. The primary sources also illuminated a small bit of the teenage view of their adolescence. In this way, my paper both builds on other historians and constructs new ground for the scholarship of adolescence and social reform, specifically in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

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