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Who Was Deborah Kallikak?

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Abstract

The Kallikak Family was, along with *The Jukes*, one of the most visible eugenic family narratives published in the early 20th Century. Published in 1912 and authored by psychologist Henry Herbert Goddard, director of the psychological laboratory at the Vineland Training School for Feeble-minded Children in Vineland, New Jersey, *The Kallikak Family* told the tale of a supposedly “degenerate” family from rural New Jersey, beginning with Deborah, one of the inmates at The Training School. Like most books in the genre, this pseudoscientific treatise described generations of illiterate, poor, and purportedly immoral, Kallikak family members who were chronically unemployed, supposedly feeble-minded, criminals, and, in general, perceived as threats to *racial hygiene*. Presented as a “natural experiment” in human heredity, this text served to support eugenic activities through much of the first half of the century. This article reviews the story of Deborah Kallikak, including her true identity, and provides evidence that Goddard’s treatise was incorrect.

“One bright October day, fourteen years ago, there came to the Training School at Vineland, a little eight year-old girl”

([Goddard, 1912](#), p. 1)

So began *The Kallikak Family*, Henry Herbert Goddard’s 1912 best selling addition to the depressingly-large eugenic family studies genre. Starting with the 1877 publication of Richard Dugdale’s study of the Juke family, these pseudoscientific genealogies chronicled the lives of society’s least capable families—often given pejorative names like the Smoky Pilgrims, the Pineys, the Dacks, the Happy Hickories, and the Nams. These eugenic family studies influenced the public’s understanding of what constituted “degeneracy” for nearly half a century.

The Kallikak Family, which Stephen J. Gould called the “primal myth of the eugenics movement” ([Gould, 1981](#), p. 198), was published in 1912 and authored by psychologist Henry Herbert Goddard, director of the psychological laboratory at the Vineland Training School for Feeble-minded Children in

Vineland, New Jersey. *The Kallikak Family* told the tale of a supposedly “degenerate” family from rural New Jersey, beginning with Deborah (see [Figure 1](#)), one of the inmates at The Training School. Like most books in the genre, this pseudoscientific treatise described generations of illiterate, poor, and purportedly immoral, Kallikak family members who were chronically unemployed, supposedly feeble-minded, criminals, and, in general, perceived as threats to *racial hygiene*.

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[Figure 1](#)

“Deborah Kallikak” as pictured in the frontispiece of *The Kallikak Family*. (Photograph in public domain).

Unlike other such tales, however, the Kallikak story had a plot twist. The progenitor of this putatively degenerate line, an American Revolutionary War soldier called Martin Kallikak, Sr., had, purportedly, sired his disreputable ancestral line through a dalliance with an allegedly feeble-minded bar maid. Martin Sr., however, righted his moral ship, married an upstanding Quaker woman, and became the forefather of a second line of descendants that included, as Goddard put it, “respectable citizens, men and women prominent in every phase of life ([Goddard, 1912](#), p. 31).” Goddard derived the pseudonym Kallikak from the Greek words Kallos (beauty) and Kakos (bad); his dramatic way of capturing the essence of the story of the Kallikak family, one branch of which was supposedly good and the other bad (see [Figure 2](#)).

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[Figure 2](#)

The influence of heredity is demonstrated by the “good” and the “bad” Kallikaks. From [Garrett \(1955\)](#) p. 65.

The Story of Deborah

The story of Deborah’s lineage, as told by Goddard, was a national best seller and it is evident from the onset of the narrative that Goddard intended *The Kallikak Family* as a moral tale written for the masses:

“It is true that we have made rather dogmatic statements and have drawn conclusions that do not seem scientifically warranted from the data. We have done this because it seems necessary to make these statements and conclusions for the benefit of the lay reader”

([Goddard, 1912](#), p. xi).

Goddard’s version of Deborah’s story begins in *The Kallikak Family* narrative as such:

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One bright October day, fourteen years ago, there came to the Training School at Vineland, a little eight-year-old girl. She had been born in an almshouse. Her mother had afterwards married, not the father of this child, but the prospective father of another child, and later had divorced him and married another man, who was also the father of some of her children

(Goddard, 1912, p. 1).

The remainder of Chapter 1 relates records from Deborah's years at Vineland. Throughout *The Kallikak Family* narrative, Deborah is depicted using clinical terms emphasizing defect and degeneracy... to paint a verbal picture of the type of "feeble-minded" person Goddard wanted readers to believe she was... "Mouth shut" (p. 3), "Staring expression" (p. 3), "Jerking movement in walking" (p. 3), even

Ultimately, and predictably, Goddard turns to information from the Binet-Simon intelligence test to make his case for Deborah's degeneracy. Goddard introduced the Binet test to an American audience and was the preeminent mental tester for the decade thereafter, until Lewis Terman usurped that role.

By the Binet Scale this girl showed, in April, 1910, the mentality of a nine-year-old child with two points over; January, 1911, 9 years, 1 point; September, 1911, 9 years, 2 points; October, 1911, 9 years, 3 points. (p. 11).

And:

This is a typical illustration of the mentality of a high-grade feeble-minded person, the moron, the delinquent, the kind of girl or woman that fills our reformatories. They are wayward, they get into all sorts of trouble and difficulties, sexually and otherwise (p. 12)

Turning even to Deborah's positive qualities to bolster his thesis, Goddard argued that:

It is also the history of the same type of girl in the public school. Rather good-looking, bright in appearance, with many attractive ways, the teacher clings to the hope, indeed insists, that such a girl will come out all right. Our work with Deborah convinces us that such hopes are delusions (p. 12-13)

And:

Here is a child who has been most carefully guarded. She has been persistently trained since she was eight years old, and yet nothing has been accomplished in the direction of higher intelligence or general education. To-day if this young woman were to leave the Institution, she would at once become a prey to the designs of evil men or evil women and would lead a life that would be vicious, immoral, and criminal (p. 13).

Providing an advance organizer for how to interpret the remainder of the book, Goddard concluded Chapter 1:

We may now repeat the ever insistent question and this time we indeed have good hope of answering it. The question is, "How do we account for this kind of individual?" The answer is in a word "Heredity," --bad stock. We must recognize that the human family shows varying stocks or strains that are as marked and that breed as true as anything in plant or animal life

([Goddard, 1912](#), p. 13).

Switching topics, in Chapter 2, to the means by which data on inmates at the Training School were gathered, Goddard continued:

The Vineland Training School has for two years employed field workers. These are women highly trained, of broad human experience, and interested in social problems. They become acquainted with the condition of the feeble-minded. They study all the grades, note their peculiarities, and acquaint themselves with the methods of testing and recognizing them. They then go out to the homes of the children and there ask that all the facts which are available may be furnished

([Goddard, 1912](#), p. 14).

So out into the slums, the hollows, and the barrens they went; a cadre of women field workers, many well educated but unable to break the barrier of gender to secure professional jobs with decent wages. Among them was Elizabeth S. Kite, who had recently returned to Philadelphia from the University of London and was the field worker who tracked down the Kallikak information. And, not surprisingly, they found—or claimed to find—what they were looking for:

The surprise and horror of it all, was that no matter where we traced them, whether in the prosperous rural district, in the city slums to which some had drifted, or in the more remote mountain regions, or whether it was a question of the second or the sixth generation, an appalling amount of defectiveness was everywhere found

([Goddard, 1912](#), p. 17).

One family, however, stood out even in this sea of so-called degeneracy.

In the course of the work of tracing various members of the family, our field worker [Kite] occasionally found herself in the midst of a good family of the same name, which apparently was in no way related to the girl whose ancestry we were investigating. These cases became so frequent that there gradually grew the conviction that ours must be a degenerate offshoot from an older family of better stock (p. 17).

Goddard then described this putatively degenerate ancestry:

The great-great-grandfather of Deborah was Martin Kallikak. We had also traced the good family back to an ancestor belonging to an older generation than this Martin Kallikak, but bearing the same name. Many months later, a granddaughter of Martin revealed in a burst of confidence the situation. When Martin Sr., of the good family, was a boy of fifteen, his father died, leaving him without parental care or oversight. Just before attaining his majority, the young man joined one of the numerous military companies that were formed to protect the country at the beginning of the

Revolution. At one of the taverns frequented by the militia he met a feeble-minded girl by whom he became the father of a feeble-minded son. This child was given, by its mother, the name of the father in full, and thus has been handed down to posterity the father's name and the mother's mental capacity. This illegitimate boy was Martin Kallikak Jr., the great-great-grandfather of our Deborah, and from him have come four hundred and eighty descendants. One hundred and forty-three of these, we have conclusive proof, were or are feeble-minded, while only forty-six have been found normal. The rest are unknown or doubtful

([Goddard, 1912](#), p. 18).

After describing the seemingly endless ways in which this family was worth singling out among the “appalling amount of defectiveness [that] was everywhere found” (p. 17), Goddard stated:

This is the ghastly story of the descendants of Martin Kallikak Sr., from the nameless feeble-minded girl. Although Martin Sr. himself paid no further attention to the girl nor her child, society has had to pay the heavy price of all the evil he engendered

([Goddard, 1912](#), p. 30).

Deborah's story concludes in *The Kallikak Family* narrative:

Martin Sr., on leaving the Revolutionary Army, straightened up and married a respectable girl of good family, and through that union has come another line of descendants of radically different character. All of the legitimate children of Martin Sr. married into the best families in their state, the descendants of colonial governors, signers of the Declaration of Independence, soldiers and even the founders of a great university. There are doctors, lawyers, judges, educators, traders, landholders, in short, respectable citizens, men and women prominent in every phase of social life. There have been no feeble-minded among them; no illegitimate children; no immoral women. There has been no epilepsy, no criminals, no keepers of houses of prostitution (pp. 30–31).

Good seed. Bad seed. Kallos. Kakos.

Impact

The impact of *The Kallikak Family* was significant. The book was received with acclaim by the public and by much of the scientific community and was reissued through 12 printings, including a reprinting as late as 1939. It is difficult to locate a biology or psychology text in the years immediately following the publication of the Kallikak book that does not cite the study as conclusive evidence of the hereditary nature of feeble-mindedness and, by extension, human intelligence. Eugenicists cited Goddard's study to justify their hereditarian stance as early as 1911, a year before the book even appeared in print. The biology text used to teach evolution to students at Rhea County Central High School in Dayton, Tennessee by John Thomas Scopes, the nominal defendant in the 1925 Scopes trial starring attorneys Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryant, was *A Civic Biology Presented in Problems* by George William Hunter, published in 1914. Hunter's text included a presentation of eugenic thought as scientific fact and an overview of the Kallikak story. It is interesting to note that the same text included an argument for the racial inferiority of all people other than those of European origins. No mention of this was made during the trial.

In 1927, *The Callicac Family* [sic] was entered into the record as evidence in *Buck v. Bell*, the case that resulted in the Supreme Court decision establishing that involuntary sterilization of “mentally defective” people was constitutional. *The Kallikak Family* was reprinted in German in 1933, the same year Nazi Germany passed the “Law for Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Defects Act.” That Act was based on the model sterilization law drawn up by American eugenicist Harry H. Laughlin, a star witness in *Buck v. Bell*, and legalized involuntary sterilization of Germans with disabilities. From 1934 to 1939, Hitler’s Nazi regime involuntarily sterilized somewhere near 150,000 Germans with disabilities, and beginning in the winter of 1939, implemented a program of extermination that, by its end 20 months later, had resulted in the murder of 80,000 disabled Germans.

Deborah Kallikak became the poster child for societal fears, the flames of which were fanned by a select group of well educated, upper class, white Americans joined by an aspiring professional middle class and marching under the banner of the new sciences of genetics and heredity. The name Kallikak would become part of the vernacular; a synonym for backward, inbreeding hillbillies and slum dwellers. Deborah was only one of many young women whose primary ‘sin’ had been to be destitute, poorly educated, and attractive at a time when society viewed this combination as a deadly cocktail leading to, as then President Theodore Roosevelt, proclaimed, the threat of “race suicide.”

Society’s punishments for such transgressions were severe. For Deborah, it was life without parole in an institution. For others like her, it was worse. Before Goddard’s “menace of the feeble-minded” era ended, somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 Americans labeled as feeble-minded had been involuntarily sterilized.

Emma’s Story

The Kallikak Family narrative begins with the chapter titled “Deborah’s Story” and it was “Deborah’s” story ... to the extent that Deborah was an invention of Goddard, one he needed to tell his story. The story of Emma Wolverton, whom the world has known as Deborah Kallikak, is much richer and more complex, starting with her arrival in the world and at the Vineland Training school.

Emma’s entry into the world had been as ignoble and anonymous as her arrival at the Vineland Training School that October day in 1897. She was born, in 1889, into the wretchedly poor environs of a late 19th Century almshouse to a single mother who had lost her job as a domestic servant due to her illegitimate pregnancy ([Kellicott, 1911](#), p. 162). Emma’s father, identified as normal but as morally bereft as he was financially bankrupt, abandoned the newborn Emma and her mother to the penury of the almshouse. The possibilities in life for Emma, her mother, and her three older siblings improved when they were brought to live in the home of a benefactor. Eventually, though, Emma suffered from the consequences of poor decisions made by her mother, who circumvented efforts by the host family to prevent further dissolute sexual behavior and entered into a relationship with another man that resulted in pregnancy. Unnerved by Emma’s mother’s promiscuity, the benefactor insisted upon and arranged for a marriage between Emma’s mother and this man. Soon thereafter, Emma’s mother and the rest of her family moved out of the benefactor’s home and in with her latest paramour, and after bearing him two children, moved to a farmhouse, where, eventually, Emma’s stepfather disappeared and her mother lived openly with the farmer/landlord. Seemingly cut off at every turn, the benefactor arranged for a divorce between Emma’s stepfather and mother, and for a marriage between Emma’s mother and the farmer. The farmer consented, with the caveat that the children who were not his would be sent away, including Emma.

Thus, Emma was brought to the gates of the Training School with the highly suspect explanation that because she didn't get along with other children at school, she might, possibly, be feeble-minded. When she entered Vineland, according to school records, she was of average size and weight with no particularly notable physical anomalies. She could wash and dress herself. She was identified as a good listener and imitator and as active and excitable, though not particularly affectionate. She was not literate and could not count—hardly surprising since it is unlikely she attended school regularly—but was handy and could use a needle, carry wood, and fill a kettle.

In 1911, the year before *The Kallikak Family* was published, 22-year old Emma Wolverton was described in institutional records as a skillful and hard worker who lacked confidence in herself. She continued to excel in woodworking and dressmaking. Academic subjects were still a problem, but the records indicate that across the years of her confinement at the Training School, she made considerable progress in multiple areas of her life, particularly in nonacademic learning and in social skills. She furthered her needlework skills and became a handy carpenter (see [Figures 3 & 4](#)). She learned to play the cornet and performed in the Vineland Training School band. Emma was an avid participant in outings and in the life of the institution (see [Figure 5](#)).

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[Figure 3](#)

Deborah at the sewing machine (from *The Kallikak Family*, p. 4).

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[Figure 4](#)

Deborah as a waitress (from *The Kallikak Family*, p. 4).

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[Figure 5](#)

Deborah (lower left) on an outing at the Training School. (from author's personal collection).

But, increasingly as she got older, Emma became subject to the laws of such institutions, in which more capable inmates were required to perform compulsory labor to meet the demands of these increasingly under-funded and overcrowded warehouses ([Trent, 1994](#)). Emma performed a wide array of tasks during her years at Vineland, including serving as a teacher's aide for the kindergarten class.

She also worked in the school dining-room and was a helper in the wood-carving class. In fact, Deborah's capacities earned her the *privilege* of working for the family of Edward R. Johnstone, the institution's superintendent ([Doll, 1988](#)).

And then, in July of 1914, at the age of 25 and after having lived at the Vineland Training School for 17 of those years, Emma was transferred to the women's institution across the street, which provided a custodial situation in which feeble-minded women could be placed to keep them from "propagating their kind" ([Doll, 1988](#), p. 4). It was to be Emma's home for most of her life.

In 1985, the lead author of this article published a book titled *Minds Made Feeble: The Myth and the Legacy of the Kallikaks*. Goddard's thesis of the hereditary nature of feeble-mindedness rested, in large measure, on the presumption that Emma's Wolverton's¹ ancestors, or a large proportion of them, were feeble-minded, although the only family member ever tested using an IQ test was Emma herself. The bulk of *The Kallikak Family* narrative itself involves descriptions of these ancestors: from Emma's purported great-great-grandfather, Martin Kallikak Jr., the offspring of the ill-advised dalliance with the feeble-minded bar maid, on down to Emma herself. Of course, these family members were christened with stigmatizing names by Goddard and Kite; Martin Jr. was referred to, for example, as the "Old Horror." The pictures in the text show Kallikak family members posed in front of what can best be described as hovels, thereby juxtaposing purportedly degenerate people with their degenerate homes ([Figure 6](#)).

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[Figure 6](#)

Great-grandchildren of "Old Sal" (from *The Kallikak Family*, p. 88).

Minds Made Feeble debunked the assertion in Goddard's narrative that these Wolverton ancestors were degenerate, more or less feeble-minded. The present context does not allow for a detailed accounting, but a few examples will suffice to make this point.

It is, of course, Martin Kallikak, Jr., the great-great-grandfather of 'Deborah,' who is the fulcrum in *The Kallikak Family* narrative. Goddard's description of Martin, Jr. is laden with those traits he felt characterized people he described as "morons". In the text, Goddard narrates a conversation with an elderly woman who is, supposedly, part of the "good side of the Kallikak family" (p. 80), who was reported to remember Martin Jr. as:

... always unwashed and drunk. At election time, he never failed to appear in somebody's cast-off clothing, ready to vote, for the price of a drink" (p. 80)

According to census data for Hunterdon County, Martin, Jr., whose real name was John Wolverton², was born in 1776 and was married in 1804, a union that lasted 22 years, until his wife's death. Unlike Goddard's description of Martin, Jr., John Wolverton appears to have been fairly successful. He owned land throughout most of his adult life. County records indicated that he purchased two lots of land in 1809 for cash. Deed books for the county contain records of his transferring his property to his children

and grandchildren later in his life. The 1850 census record shows that he was living with one of his daughters and several of his grandchildren at that time. That record also lists all of the adults in the household as being able to read. The 1860 census record lists his occupation as “laborer” and his property as valued at \$100 (not a meager amount for the average person at that time). John Wolverton died in 1861 ([Smith, 1985](#), p. 93).

Or, consider Martin Jr.’s fourth child, “Old Sal” whom Goddard described as feeble-minded and as marrying a feeble-minded man and as having two feeble-minded children, who, likewise married feeble-minded wives and had large families of defective children, some of whom are pictured in *The Kallikak Family*.

“Old Sal” was, in fact, Catherine Ann Wolverton, born in December, 1811. She was married in January, 1834 and died in 1897 at the age of 85 ([Macdonald & McAdams, 2001](#), p. 218). Goddard’s nickname of ‘Old Sal’ probably came from Goddard and Kite mistaking Catherine for her sister-in-law, Sarah ([Macdonald & McAdams, 2001](#), p. 811). There is not much known about Catherine herself from the records, but a family history relayed by some of Catherine’s descendants reveals many contradictions to Goddard’s portrayal of her offspring. Two of her grandchildren were still living in 1985 when *Minds Made Feeble* was published. A brother and sister, they were retired school teachers living in Trenton, New Jersey. One grandson moved from New Jersey to Iowa, became treasurer of a bank, owned a lumber yard, and operated a creamery. Another grandson moved to Wisconsin. His son served as a pilot in the Army Air Corps in World War II. A great, great grandson of Catherine was a teacher in Chicago. A great grandson was a policeman in another city in Illinois. A 1930 newspaper article reported that all of Catherine’s sons had been soldiers in the Civil War.

Others of the so-called bad Kallikak family members were land owners, farmers, and, while poor, were generally self-sufficient rural people. Though many of them had lived with limited resources and against considerable environmental odds, the records suggest that they were a cohesive family. With Emma’s grandfather’s generation, though, the tides turned for the family. Called Justin in Goddard’s narrative, Emma’s grandfather (also named John Wolverton) was born in 1834 and, like his ancestors, lived in Rural Hunterdon, New Jersey working primarily in agriculture. Like many of his generation, though, John and his family were swept up in the turmoil of the industrial age and by 1880, the family had moved to Trenton New Jersey and John worked as a laborer. Times were difficult, the cohesiveness of the family eroded, and Emma’s mother’s family scraped to get by in those tough economic times.

Malinda Woolverton was the actual name of Emma’s mother. She was born in April of 1868, when the family lived in Hunterdon, but by 1885, at the age of 17, she had already moved out of the family home, living with and serving as a domestic and child care helper in the home of a neighbor. Emma was born to Malinda in February of 1889. Though Goddard indicates that Emma’s mother had three illegitimate children who didn’t live past infancy before Emma was born in the almshouse, McDonald and McAdams’ (2001) genealogy of the Wolverton family noted that records suggest that Emma was Malinda’s only illegitimate child.

The real story of the disfavored Kallikaks, the ‘other Wolvertons,’ is not free of troubles and human frailties. The family had its share of skeletons in the closet, but so did many families of that era, particularly those who were faced with poverty, lack of education and scarce resources for dealing with tumultuous social change. But the family also had its strengths and successes. The tragedy of the disfavored Kallikaks is that their story was distorted so as to be interpreted according to a powerful myth, and then used to further bolster that myth. The myth was that of eugenics.

According to Goddard, ‘(t)his is the ghastly story of the descendants of Martin Kallikak, Sr. from the nameless feeble-minded girl’ ([Goddard, 1912](#), p. 29). But, of course, it wasn’t. It wasn’t because it was Goddard’s story, constructed by Goddard and Kite to fulfill the need for a eugenic-narrative to fit their world-view and to bolster the eugenic myth. It was, perhaps, ‘Deborah Kallikak’s’ story, but it wasn’t Emma Wolverton’s story. Her story was the story of many American families; people living simply in a rural setting who, for whatever reason, were swept at the end of the 19th Century and start of the 20th Century into urban America and into a life that, like many immigrants, was beset by hardships and for which they weren’t adequately prepared.

There is one more reason, however, that this was not Emma’s story. Wolverton genealogist David MacDonald wrote in 1997 that “I am certain that Dr. Goddard plugged the [Kakos] line into the wrong part of the Wolverton family. He obviously wanted for the [Kallos] branch a set of people as good and prominent as possible, and I think that he was not very scrupulous about how he found it.” (personal communication). In 2001, MacDonald and Nancy McAdams completed their 860 page magnum opus on the Wolverton Family. All of the Kallikaks are to be found there, clearly and carefully documented. In an appendix devoted to the Kallikak study David MacDonald and Nancy McAdams wrote:

There should be no doubt that John Wolverton (note: referring to the man whom Goddard referred to as Martin Kallikak, Jr.) was a son of Gabriel Wolverton and Catherine Murray. John’s parentage would not merit further comment if he had not been described in The Kallikak Family, a book published in 1912 as an illegitimate son of John Woolverton and an unnamed feeble-minded tavern girl, when in fact 6.4.1 John (Martin, Jr.) and 1.1.1 John (Martin, Sr.) were second cousins and both perfectly legitimate sons of their married parents

([Macdonald & McAdams, 2001](#), p. 807).

Martin Kallikak, Jr. was not the illegitimate son of Martin Kallikak, Sr. Whether the dalliance with a feeble-minded barmaid was fiction or fact, Goddard’s natural experiment never occurred. There were no Kallos, no Kakos ... and no Kallikaks. There was no good blood, no bad blood. Some Wolverton family members had access to resources... money, education, health care. Other Wolverton family members had none of those and were swept, with millions of rural Americans and immigrants, into the bowels of America’s urban areas, into lives that were often barely livable.

Emma Wolverton moved to the New Jersey State Institute for Feeble-minded Women in July of 1914. “[Emma], at this time,” described a social worker who worked with her, “was a handsome young woman, twenty-five years old, with many accomplishments” ([Reeves, 1938](#), p. 195). As she had done at the Training School, Emma assumed childcare responsibilities for the assistant superintendent of the women’s facility. For a number of years, Emma worked as a nurse’s aide at the institution’s on-grounds hospital. “In the early nineteen-twenties,” recounted Reeves, “a mild epidemic broke out in the building for low grade patients. Isolation was arranged and the hospital being short-handed at the time, Deborah was glad to assist the special nurse. She immediately mastered the details of routine treatment and was devoted to her charges” ([Reeves, 1938](#), p. 196).

As was the case with the descriptions of Emma Wolverton’s childhood and adolescence in *The Kallikak Family*, hers is not a story without problems by any means. Emma was not an angel. She is described time and again as willful, overbearing, and possessing what could become a vicious temper. On the other hand, those are often exactly the behaviors necessary to survive in an institutional setting.

Inconsistent with Goddard's depiction of her, Emma was literate and well-read. She was a passionate and committed letter writer as well. She wrote letters and sent photographs of herself to her friends up to the very end of her life. In her final years, Emma was offered the alternative of leaving the institution. By then, she was in intense pain because of severe arthritis and used a wheelchair most of the time. It is, of course, a cruel irony that the offer of greater freedom in her life came when it was impossible for her to embrace it. Emma declined the opportunity; she knew she needed constant medical attention.

"I guess after all I'm where I belong," Emma had told her support person, Helen Reeves, once in 1938. "I don't like this feeble-minded part but anyhow I'm not like some of the poor things you see around here"

([Reeves, 1938](#), p. 199).

Emma was hospitalized for the last year of her life, but "bore the frequent intense pain most bravely and without a great deal of complaint." ([Doll, 1988](#), p. 32). She died in 1978 at the age of 89 years. She had lived in an institution 81 of those years.

The now highly-offensive term "idiot," was the primary term used to refer to people with intellectual disability up until the mid-1800s. It was derived, etymologically, from the Greek words "idatas" and "idios," both which refer to a private person, someone who is set apart, peculiar ([Oxford University Press, 2011](#)); someone who is different. When we segregate people, we tell them and others that they are peculiar; different from us. It allows us to then talk about "them" in anonymity, as if they didn't really matter. We can refer to them as morons, degenerates, trainables, retards and a million other labels as if they were not really like us. We can lock them away for the rest of their lives or sterilize them without their knowledge.

Her name was Emma, not Deborah. We cannot undue the injustices done to her or others, but we at least owe her the respect of calling her by her name.

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[Figure 7](#)

Emma Wolverton at age 73.

Footnotes

¹In 1985, the lead author chose not to reveal "Deborah's" real name, in large part out of respect to family members who were still living at the time. In 1994, Straney published a paper focused on the genealogy of the "Kallikak" family, and in a footnote in that paper, revealed Deborah's true name. In 2001, Macdonald and McAdams published the full Wolverton genealogy, including an appendix discussing the Kallikak/Wolverton link. Given the passage of

time and the fact that Emma's identity can be located if one searches diligently, we felt this was an opportune time, with the centenary of The Kallikak Family in 2012, to make that information known to professionals and others in the intellectual and developmental disability field.

²The spelling of Woolverton alternates from generation to generation, sometimes Woolverton, other times Wolverton. The spelling "John Woolverton" will refer to Martin Sr., the spelling John Wolverton refers to Martin Jr.

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