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## Rehabilitating Gender Roles: Girls in Texas' Juvenile Justice System, 1949-1958

Because American society in general viewed female juvenile delinquents as a challenge to established societal norms, the Texas Youth Commission, as well as other juvenile justice agencies in the United States, set forth policies, curriculums, rules, and regulations that attempted to extinguish the threat of subversive behaviors in delinquent youth. Juvenile crime was different, and anything that was unordinary from the American nuclear family was a perceived threat to the morality and national security of the United States. Legislators and other authority figures presented delinquent girls that participated in premarital sexual relationships, prostitution, or other disturbing or questionable behavior as a serious threat to the American family, and therefore to America's political, economic, and social systems. The Texas Youth Commission created programs that reinforced societal norms to those who had strayed in order to teach good values to those whose education had been lacking. Ultimately, the Texas girls' juvenile justice system used its authority to perpetuate race and gender constructs of the time through curricula, rules, and regulations within the Gainesville State School for Girls, Brady School for Negro Girls, and Crockett School for Colored Girls.

Established in 1916, the Gainesville School for Girls, previously named Texas State Training School for Girls, stood on a 160-acre plot of land east of Gainesville, Texas.<sup>1</sup> The school's goal was "to provide a home for delinquent and dependent girls where they [might] be trained in those useful arts and sciences to which women are adapted."<sup>2</sup> Scholars credit Dr. Carrie Weaver Smith, a graduate from the Pennsylvania Women's Medical College in

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<sup>1</sup> The Texas State Training School for Girls changed to the Gainesville State School for Girls in 1948 when the school's population reached 198 inmates. For more see Brian Hart, "Gainesville State School for Girls," Handbook of Texas Online (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jjg01>), accessed July 10, 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

<sup>2</sup> William S. Bush, *Who Gets a Childhood? Race and Juvenile Justice in Twentieth Century Texas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 22.

Philadelphia and self-proclaimed “expert on female delinquency,” for establishing the institution.<sup>3</sup> Since its beginning, Gainesville focused its curriculum on what society considered “women’s work.” Stressing the importance of femininity, Gainesville personnel focused their curriculum on grooming future homemakers. Despite the increase in working women during and after the war, the Texas juvenile justice system still focused their curriculum on the domestic sciences with the intention of reforming delinquent girls into what society called them to be: homemakers. However, the type of domesticated work depended on the girls’ race. The curriculum at Gainesville focused on the upkeep of the American home, while the girls at Brady and Crockett attended classes that stressed the importance of commercial cleaning and services.

The Crockett School for Colored Girls began as the Brady State School for Negro Girls. The Brady school accepted its first students on February 14, 1947; thirty years after the Texas legislature authorized the State Board of Control to establish a school for black female delinquents. The thirty-year delay occurred because the state did not appropriate funding for the school until 1945.<sup>4</sup> The push for an all black female juvenile detention center in Texas began in 1916 by Dr. Carrie Weaver Smith, the superintendent of the Gainesville School. Before its actual establishment, several civil rights groups were concerned about the young black girls that were being committed to adult prisons.

Black girls who committed violent crimes received sentences to adult correctional facilities where they were vulnerable to abuse. Those who committed sex crimes were often times not placed in an institution, but instead rejoined the community. The efforts to establish a juvenile facility for black girls gained momentum at the conclusion of World War II due to the

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3 Ibid., 22-23.

4 “Manual on Preparation of Children for Admission to the State Training Schools 1956,” 13.

“escalating pressure from black civil rights advocates.”<sup>5</sup> The military also pushed for the establishment of a juvenile facility for black girls in Texas. This was primarily because of the increased concern over black female prostitution during World War II and the subsequent spread of venereal disease in the military. V-girls, also known as Khaki-Wackies, “frequented places of public entertainment” where they would seek or gain the sexual attention of military men. Studies from the time reveal how lower-class areas as well as areas with large black populations were considered heavily populated with these “prostitutes.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, in 1947, Article 3259a placed the State Board of Control in charge of establishing what would become Brady State School for Negro Girls. The Texas legislature asked the State Board of Control to place the school “upon the cottage plan for the care, education and training of dependent and delinquent colored girls, provided such location is approved by the Governor.”<sup>7</sup>

The student handbook for Brady began with a welcome letter from the superintendent at the time, Mrs. E. G. Harrell. The superintendent expressed joy over having the girls there because she fully believed that the school could help the young girls, and that it was obvious the girls needed help or they would not be at the school. The letter told the girls entering Brady that their “past life must be forgotten” because at the school they were beginning a new life. What the girls did not know, was that whites would groom their new life in a way that attempted to engrain societal ideas of black inferiority. Immediately after the welcome letter, the handbook stressed to the girls what the rules and regulations were at the institution.

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5 Bush, *Who Gets a Childhood?* ,71; The lack of funding for an all-black female juvenile delinquency center in Texas mimics the funding gap for other African American educational facilities. For more on this see Judith N. McArthur and Harold L. Smith, *Texas Through Women’s Eyes: The Twentieth Century Experience* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

6 Marilyn E Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 67-68.

7 Compiled Notebooks, Brady, 1947, Records, TYCA, 1999/087-5.

The staff and superintendent at Brady took these rules very seriously and asked the students to pledge their loyalty to the institution, therefore relinquishing their individuality and potential. The section of the handbook that discussed “Education and Home Life,” urged the girls to keep up their personal appearances. “Clothes don’t make the woman, but they help a lot,” was not only a motto at Brady, but also the Gainesville School. Whether or not the girls at Brady maintained an acceptable personal appearance determined whether the girls earned placement on the schools Honor Roll.<sup>8</sup>

The Brady School had no tolerance for rule breaking, and followed the rigid practices they believed would best help these “wayward” girls. Bells ruled the girls' daily life, the school expected girls to remain quiet at all times, and follow the “keep-to-the-right rules” in all rooms, hallways, and corridors. This contrasts greatly with the tone of the Gainesville school. *The Austin Statesman* wrote an article about Gainesville and stated, “The giggles that sound through the corridors of the school are no different from those in any high school.”<sup>9</sup> This statement further demonstrates the clear differences between the more lax atmospheres of Gainesville compared to the regimented Brady and Crockett institutions.

In many ways, these juvenile facilities had more in common with finishing schools than detention centers. Brady, Crockett, and Gainesville expected the girls to attend classes that the Council hoped would improve their behavioral and social skills. Gainesville held classes on floristry, English, business education, music, cooking, elementary education, homemaking, institutional sewing, and physical education. These classes, according to *The Austin Statesman*, “are as practical as a saddle on a horse.”<sup>10</sup> In 1950, Gainesville held an open house for the

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8 Brady Student Handbook, 1949, Records, TYCA, 1989/169-1.

9 “Gainesville State School Girls Learn Practical Subjects in Study Courses,” *The Austin Statesman*, 1952, 14.

10 Ibid.

parents and guardians of the girls.<sup>11</sup> The visitors received an informational packet that described each class and the goals the school hoped to accomplish through these classes. These classes, as well as the goals each class tried to achieve, show the obvious gendered nature of the Texas juvenile justice system.

The floristry classes focused primarily on corsage making, fundamental art, and club activities projects. The class had several aims besides learning design, the effective use of floral materials, and table decorating. The class aimed “to awaken the students’ natural love for flowers” and “to open new channels of aesthetic appreciation.” Although it was the newest of the classes in 1950, the school believed the floristry department had “created a love for beautiful things,” “improved mental health,” and taught the girls “to think beautiful thoughts.”<sup>12</sup>

Gainesville also had business classes; however, they taught the office skills that would limit them to secretary work. The girls received instruction on typing, shorthand, filing, business spelling, and business math. The aim of the department was “to give the girls some practical instructions that will enable them to provide at least a part of their livelihood after leaving the school.” The class not only taught them how to perform secretarial tasks common for women at the time, they also emphasized the importance of appropriate clothing for office work that would be “acceptable in the business world.”<sup>13</sup>

To counteract the business education, Gainesville offered a myriad of classes, all pertaining to the girls’ assumed duties as wives and mothers. Heavily weighted in the curriculum at Gainesville were classes on cooking, sewing, and homemaking. Besides teaching “good every-

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11 “Gainesville Sate School Open House, 1950,” Records, TYCA, 1999/087-3.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

day manners,” the homemaking courses attempted to teach the “responsibilities of homemaking, marketing, and meal planning.” According to Gainesville the girls who “completed this course, besides being better trained homemakers, are better waitresses and domestic helpers where monetary jobs are necessary to their livelihood.” A 1949 *Austin Statesman* article discussed the benefits of these homemaking courses. Maxine Burlingame, Superintendent of the Gainesville school, stressed how it was necessary for these girls to learn how to create well-balanced meals. According to the article however, “the stress is put on meals for hard working people.” Superintendent Burlingame explained “that most [of the] girls will marry laborers who want fried potatoes with their breakfast.”<sup>14</sup>

The curriculum at the Brady and Crockett schools was noticeably different from the Gainesville School. In 1956, the Crockett School offered considerably fewer courses to their students than other juvenile facilities. They justified offering fewer classes to the girls at Crockett because of the “low mentalities and very poor educational backgrounds” of black girls. The Youth Commission considered it at times “difficult, if not impossible, to teach many of them any sort of trade.” The Council also blamed the disproportionate amount of classes between Crockett and Gainesville on lack of funding.<sup>15</sup>

They did teach the girls at Crockett homemaking skills, however, much of their focus was on maid, janitorial, and commercial laundry services. The classes that focused on maid and janitorial services were “designed to help girls secure and hold jobs in hotels and private homes.” Commercial laundry equipment was available for classes as “an honest attempt...to teach all of the girls how to handle laundry as is found in laundries...and private homes.”<sup>16</sup> The comparison

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14 “Gainesville State School Girls Learn Practical Subjects in Study Courses,” *The Austin Statesman*, October 11, 1949, 14.

15 “Manual on Preparation of Children for Admission to the State Training Schools, 1956,” 23.

16 *Ibid.*

of curriculums between Gainesville and Brady/Crockett exposes the social constructs of both gender and race. The white girls at Gainesville found themselves in a curriculum that encouraged and “trained” them to fulfill their expected duties as a submissive homemaker. The black girls at Brady and Crockett experienced a curriculum that recognized the possibility of them being homemakers, but the majority of the classes aimed at teaching trades like domestic service or other jobs United States society associated with their race instead of their capabilities.

The Texas Youth Commission saved their encouragement to become homemakers for the white girls at Gainesville. The black girls that attended Brady and Crockett received a much different message. The Texas Youth Commission modeled rules, regulations, dress expectations, and curriculum in such a way as to further engrain African American’s unequal place in United States society. The girls at Brady and Crockett found their daily life ruled by bells and supervision. The constant supervision ensured that they were in no way a threat to their considered place at the institution. The Texas Youth Commission stripped these girls’ individuality, creativity, and agency in order to run a regimented program that would ensure the girls’ subordination.

The study of the Texas juvenile justice system shows how this threat was a concern to almost every institution in the country. In order to extinguish this threat, American youth needed grooming into what society considered an upstanding citizen. For white girls, this meant that they needed to perform, without challenge, their natural homemaking duties. For black girls however, they still needed to strive for the same feminine qualities espoused by white women, but they also needed to accept their second-class citizenship status. Ultimately, the Texas Youth

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Commission's purpose was "to teach the girls how to live a normal, useful, happy life, and to take their place as respected members of an organized society."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "Gainesville State School Girls Learn Practical Subjects in Study Courses," *The Austin Statesman*, 14.