
Guns and Skirts: Chicago's Policewomen and the Press

Breanne Pedigo

Breanne Pedigo is a senior History major from Charleston, Illinois. She wrote this paper for Dr. Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz's HIS 3900: American Women's History. Breanne will be graduating from EIU with a History major as well as minors in Anthropology, Business Administration, and Religious Studies.

During the Progressive era, newspapers were filled with headlines and articles meant to reflect and shape public opinion about the present state of America. There was an overall sense that control was slipping away as women marched in the streets demanding the right to vote, immigrants flooded cities, and young men and women explored new independence. Cities scrambled to gain control over ever increasing populations, as great debates took place surrounding the methods by which cities should police their citizens. Men and women alike hotly debated issues in the press. Pessimism about the state of Chicago and other American cities was met with equally fervent Progressive-era positivity that improvement was possible and that women had a role in creating progress. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century police matrons and female officers for the city of Chicago often understood their role as central to the improvement of their city and society as a whole. As an extension of popular culture, the press often flip-flopped on whether or not they supported the appointment of women to policing roles. It was a divisive issue closely tied to debates about women's rights and pay, and so the press was divided over whether to embrace or exploit matrons and officers. The commentary surrounding women's roles, uniforms, and training show that, at times, women's views of their roles were in line with that of the press, and, at times, they were at odds as women increasingly took positions in law enforcement.

The press played a very important role in shaping public views and opinions of women entering police work. The general consensus was that it would be very difficult for a woman to be both an effective police officer and feminine. Either femininity was emphasized or masculinity played up when women were placed in police roles. One camp of thought in support of police matrons rationalized them as women simply filling a nurturing role, similar to nursing. Because police matrons were working with authority over arrested women and girls, there was little for men to oppose. Some men claimed that women should be protected from seeing the uglier side of humanity, but it was difficult to say that a woman caring for the needs of other women was unladylike.

Opposition to police matron appointments also was blunted by the fact that women were not being given authority over men. Police matrons were responsible for the care of arrested women, but they were unable to make arrests. The *Friend's Intelligencer* reported in 1882 that Chicago, in particular, needed police matrons because 1881 had seen "over 5,000 arrests of women or girls."¹ One Chicago police station, a newspaper reported, had brought on a police matron "and after a few months' experience the officials heartily endorse the change which they scarcely believed feasible... This success has caused an effort to have matrons admitted at the other three stations."²

As early as 1880, there were calls for women police officers. Suffragist Mrs. Lillie Devereux Blake told the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that she wanted "policewomen to be employed at the police

¹ "Report of The Committee on Prison Affairs," *Friends' Intelligencer (1853-1910)*, October 21, 1882.

² *Ibid.*

stations in New York ... strong, healthy women of good physique, and paid the same as policemen.”³ In 1910, the National Probation Officers’ Association Convention in St. Louis concluded that “women police officers are the logical solution to the question of handling girls who have “gone wrong... a girl should have sympathetic treatment, such as only women can give. She should not be subjected to the brutalities of a criminal handler.”⁴ This call, however, was not widely accepted by the public, and women who aspired to be police matrons and police officers were often mocked or belittled. “A big part of the problem was that the widespread employment of policewomen across our nation began at nearly the same time that the Suffrage Movement reached its height. ... Many individuals in the United States saw these events as radical changes to a way of life they wanted to maintain, and they were prepared to fight these changes with all of their strength and will,” stated historian Robert Snow.⁵

The rapid inclusion of women into the police force at the turn of the century is often attributed to the suffragist movement. While many women were fighting for equal pay and the right to vote, some women were now being hired, at a generally lower pay rate, to incarcerate them. The hiring of women to accompany male officers and granting authority to women to make arrests themselves was meant to drastically reduce the risk of harm coming to detained women and girls. “It was considered inappropriate for any man, other than a family member, to touch a lady. But then suddenly, because of the Suffrage Movement, upper-class women were being physically hauled away to jail by policemen,” explained Snow.⁶ The general safety and well-being of women was certainly of significant concern as “women held at police stations often suffered sexual abuse.”⁷ Lieutenant Mina Van Winkle of the women’s bureau defined one of the duties of policewomen as addressing “the future social status” of the arrested, rather than simply “the physical wants of the women in her care.”⁸ The most vocal opposition to the appointment of female officers grew out of resistance to giving women roles with arresting authority. Full arresting authority would give women the right to arrest men— this was the most disputed facet of policewomen’s roles— something which went against seemingly every behavior and attitude prescribed to women. Seen as unladylike and outright dangerous for the policewomen, full arresting authority was withheld for a number of years.

Generally, Alice Stebbins Wells of the Los Angeles police department is considered the first



female policewoman. Wells was sworn in in 1910 as a kind of civil service/ police officer.⁹ Yet, clearly women served as part of police forces, including in Chicago, well before Wells arrived on the scene. Mrs. Marie Owens, for instance, attained the rank of Sergeant Detective in the Chicago Police Department several years before Wells’s swearing in. In 1904, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* printed a feature on Owens, the headline claiming she was “the Only Woman Police Sergeant in the World.”

³ “Policewomen,” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, April 2, 1880.

⁴ “About Women,” *Zion's Herald (1868-1910)*, June 8, 1910.

⁵ Robert L. Snow, *Policewomen Who Made History: Breaking Through the Ranks* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸ Allan T. Duffin, *History in Blue: 160 Years of Women Police, Sheriffs, Detectives, and State Troopers* (New York: Kaplan, 2010), 51.

⁹ Kerry Segrave, *Policewomen: A History*, 2nd Ed (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 57.



“THE ONLY WOMAN POLICE SERGEANT IN THE WORLD.” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), Aug 07, 1904.

The article explained how Owens earned her title. After serving as a “special health officer” for women and children for some time, Owens was given the authority to enforce child labor by being put on Chicago’s police payroll in the detective department as “Sergeant No. 97.” The police lieutenant over her considered her another patrolman saying “Mrs. Owens... is a patrolman, gets the salary, has the rank and all. ... So what’s wrong with ‘patrolman’ for Mrs. Owens?” Owens began her role as a special officer in 1901. Interviewed later, she said, “Of course I have full police power, but I find myself more than busy rounding up truants, looking after cruel parents and preventing violations of the child labor law.”¹⁰ In 1906, the *Chicago Tribune* published another article on Owens, this time featuring her work as a detective.¹¹ Echoing the first story, the article highlighted her modesty and femininity

while quoting higher ranking men praising her work. A few years after the piece on Owens, in 1909, *Zion’s Herald* reported that Josephine E. Sullivan, who had “been an employe[e] of a detective agency for 6 years,” had been hired as Chicago’s “first policewoman.”¹² Sullivan’s ‘beat’ was limited to the main shopping street of Chicago, where she was assigned to prevent shoplifting and theft.

Finally, in response to various calls for more female police, in July of 1913, the police department announced that Chicago would be hiring *ten* women as police officers. In August, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* listed the officers as Mrs. Anna Loucks, Miss Clara Olsen, Miss Fannie Willsey, Miss Margaret Wilson, Mrs. Lulu Parks, Mrs. Margaret Butler, Mrs. Alice Clement, Miss. Emma Nukum, Mrs. Nora Lewis, and Mrs. Mary Boyd.¹³ Since the department made the hires a trial basis only, no uniforms were made for the women. The ten female officers were meant to patrol Chicago’s “dance halls, bathing beaches, and small parks and playgrounds” at first. The *Tribune* named Owens again at this point as the “general detective” assigned to the management of the female officers.¹⁴ The female officers found themselves limited to handling cases related to morality for most of their work. It was not until 1914 that female officers were included in more general duties.

One subject which seemed of particular interest to the public was the physical appearance of a policewoman. What would it look like for a woman to be a police officer? Policewomen themselves were divided on the issue. One suggestion was that women should wear a long gray skirt, short enough to run in, a white shirtwaist, a gray sombrero, and boots.¹⁵ Historian Allan Duffin notes that, “a proposed uniform for Chicago’s policewomen featured a long jacket and a skirt with a pistol pocket sewn into the right side in the event that the policewoman carried a sidearm.”¹⁶ Papers often featured such stories for various cities’ policewomen. As women were being given policing positions, several women insisted on remaining in plainclothes. The push for uniforms came mostly from outsiders who hoped to avoid being surprised by a policewoman in plainclothes. Others still

¹⁰ Ibid, 49.

¹¹ “The Only Woman Detective on The Chicago Force,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 28, 1906.

¹² “About Women,” *Zion’s Herald*, June 16, 1909.

¹³ Segrave, *Policewomen: A History*, 81-2.

¹⁴ “Ten Policewomen Chosen by Mayor; On Duty Monday,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 2, 1913.

¹⁵ “Women Police Qualities Given,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 9, 1913.

¹⁶ Allan T. Duffin, *History in Blue*, 48.

argued that uniforms should be given only to men on patrol. As late as 1917, years after female officers in Chicago had been appointed, debate continued over how women officers should be dressed. “Cleveland Health Commissioner, A.L. Bishop, is strongly urging the adoption of trousers for policewomen as a health measure,” reported the *Tribune* in 1917. Chicago’s chief of police quickly shot down Bishop’s suggestion when interviewed, saying, “policewomen are valuable to a department for the reason that they are women, modest women. In this, and this only, lies their ability to accomplish what men detectives fail in.”¹⁷ Contemporary sources implied that wearing pants would instantly make a woman manly and immodest. After all, the difference between men and women was the main cause for there to be women police in the first place, in the minds of many.

The movement from moral care to general police work might be regarded as a step toward equality today, but at the time, both men and women protested the shift. In 1914, the Women’s Athletic Club of Chicago decried the decision to put women on patrol. Mrs. Joseph T. Bowen’s statements in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* made clear that many of the women in the club believed that “the head of the police does not care for policewomen. So he has taken them from the morals section of the department and put them out to do patrol. I contend that the work of a policewoman is not to regulate traffic but to serve as chaperones at the dancehalls and other places where the city’s unprotected daughters gather.”¹⁸



As far as general reporting on Chicago’s policewomen, it seemed that the press was just as confused as the public. 1914 proved an especially rocky media year for Chicago’s policewomen. The press depiction and public opinion of female officers flip-flopped drastically over the course of the year. During the waitress labor boycotts in 1914, violence sparked between crowd members and male and female police officers alike. The *New York Times* reported these incidents in an unflattering light for all involved. In response to concerns female officers looked physically weak and woefully unprepared for conflict, female officers were taught jujitsu and armed with pistols.¹⁹ When the *Chicago Daily Tribune* announced this training and the transfer of women into different departments at police stations, the article was largely a puff piece meant to show the public that the Chicago police department was dedicated to having the best of the best officers. The article bragged that “The policewomen are better marksmen than the men.”²⁰ However, the very next month, an article poked fun at one of the

female officers, calling her “afraid to go home in the dark” for asking a male officer to escort her home.²¹ In fact the female officer, trained to identify threats to her safety, perhaps was acting with prudence in asking for a male escort. Instead, the press made light of the situation and teased the

¹⁷ “Police Women Wear Trousers? Nix, Says Chief,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 21, 1917.

¹⁸ “Club Women Protest Transfer of Feminine Cops,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 4, 1914.

¹⁹ “Policewomen Apt Pupils with Pistols and Jiu Jitsu,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 10, 1914.

²⁰ “Policewomen Go to Stations,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 8, 1914.

²¹ “She’s Afraid to Go Home in the Dark,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 25, 1914.

officer for trying to secure her safety. One short article in *The Youth's Companion* also mocked policewomen by saying that the husband of one applicant for the Chicago police force sabotaged his wife when she was trying to lose weight to meet the physical requirements of the job. After losing 5 pounds, “her husband, who disapproved of her ambition and her efforts, inveigled her into a restaurant, and had a porterhouse steak put before her.”²²

Despite erratic press coverage, women applied for police positions in droves. One article from 1914 reported that three-hundred women applied for the seven “temporary appointments” in Chicago.²³ By 1916, Chicago had the most female officers out of the nation’s cities at twenty-one officers, according to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*.²⁴ When America entered World War I in April of 1917, things took a difficult turn for women police once more. By 1917, Chicago city officials and judges began to publicly question the hiring and retention of policewomen. In response, Chief of Police Herman F. Schuettler put forward statistics in the *Chicago Tribune* that backed his assertion that policewomen were “invaluable” and “efficient in a marked degree . . . deserving of praise from

both him and the citizens of Chicago instead of censure.”²⁵

The press and the public only served to heighten the expectations placed on women. Early female officers seemed to be forced by American culture at large into the cookie-cutter form of the feminine-yet-“husky,” soft-yet-sharp, compassionate-yet-forceful.²⁶ Every policewoman was a walking dichotomy. Marie Owens was a mother of five, successful policewoman, and role model for those who next took their place on the force. Other officers were expected to be modest, compassionate, and strong but submissive. Alice Clement, who had been hired back in 1913, became Chicago’s next famous police detective, breaking molds by embracing her role as the ever-clever, outspoken, feminine detective, yet mother of three.²⁷ History forgot these active policewomen for the better part of a century as women’s roles as officers were continuously restricted in different ways across the country. The history of police was told about men and told, for the most part, by men.

The matter of unequal pay and unequal work remained an issue well into the twentieth century. Between its circulation wars and deadline pressures, the press rarely took a consistent line. The impulse which would have journalists report objectively was drowned out by the need to print stories which sell, time and time again. Political and economic power drive the media. The removal of women from police roles during the Great Depression and later the emerging women’s movement certainly had an enormous impact on the roles women police played for the greater part of the twentieth century. Issues over equal employment and pay for female officers still remain today, over a century after the first policewomen were sworn in. “Before 1968, no major city in the United States had given the idea of policewomen on street patrol any really serious consideration,”



"Woman Members of Chicago Police on First Day of Duty." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), Aug 06, 1913.

²² "Fact and Comment," *The Youth's Companion* 88, no. 33 (Aug 13, 1914): 416.

²³ "Thirteen Women In 300 Pass Police Examination," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 19, 1914.

²⁴ "Fair Cops," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 1, 1916.

²⁵ "Chief Declares His 29 Copettes Are Invaluable," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 4, 1917.

²⁶ "Women Police Qualities Given," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 9, 1913.

²⁷ "Alice Clement, Policewoman, Is Taken by Death," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 27, 1926.

according to Robert Snow. Female officers were still given roles very similar to those of the very first policewomen. “Policewomen were stuck either in the juvenile aid office or secretarial spots, with their chances for promotion seriously hampered. Their future in the department was dramatically denied.”²⁸ Perhaps by reclaiming the history of Chicago’s policewomen, America’s policewomen and policewomen around the world, this generation and the next will push against the next wave of anti-policewoman and anti-woman rhetoric. Recognizing women’s historic role in policing is a good beginning.

²⁸ Snow, *Policewomen Who Made History*, 5.