

## Editors' Note

Brian M. Ingrassia and Rosanne Currarino 

As students of history, we all understand the power of narratives to shape understandings. In this issue of *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, we examine the uses of storytelling to shape turn-of-the-century American society.

In her presidential address, “Legislating Morality in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era: Moral Panic and the ‘White Slave’ Case That Changed America,” Nancy Unger draws our attention to the so-called “white slavery” epidemic of the early 1900s, a euphemistic reaction against forced prostitution rings. As Unger skillfully shows, the moral panic regarding white-slave trafficking anticipated moral crusades of our own time, especially anti-gay, anti-abortion, and anti-sex-trafficking movements. All too often, Unger reminds us, narratives of moral depravity take a grain of truth out of proportion for a political purpose and are used less as a way to improve society and more as a wedge for one group to gain control over others.

In the Graduate Student Essay Prize winner, “‘The Indian Side of the Question’: Settling the Story of Potawatomi Removal in the Twentieth-Century Midwest,” Zada Ballew weaves an intricate tale of how settler communities crafted narratives claiming that Indigenous people had vanished from lands east of the Mississippi River by the early 1900s. These white storytellers took a genuine document of Native resistance, Simon Pokagon’s *The Red Man’s Rebuke*, originally presented at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, and then, in a classic case of “firsting and lasting,” appropriated Pokagon’s narrative to argue that white settlers were the first to establish civilization and that the last Indians were now passing into history.

Paige Glotzer, meanwhile, takes a different approach to the institutionalization of settler colonialism in “Realtors Interpret History: The Intellectual Origins of Early National Real Estate Organizing.” Today, most of us are likely aware that the term Realtor designates members of a national professional organization, the National Association of Realtors (NAR). What many of us may not know is that NAR’s origins date to the Progressive Era, to the National Association of Real Estate Boards and, even earlier, to the National Real Estate Association (NREA), which originated in the South and Midwest before the Panic of 1893 undermined it. Glotzer shows how, in the process of banding together to create a national group focused on professionalization, speakers at those early NREA conventions relied on historical narratives of nationalism and imperialism as well as—on a few rare occasions—economic and social justice.

Jamie Marsella’s “‘An Army of Little Mothers’: Progressive Era Eugenic Maternalism and the Medicalization of Motherhood” shows how reformers crafted Little Mothers’ Leagues as a way to teach girls, especially the female children of recent immigrants, to care for younger siblings. Immigration, some social work pioneers observed, had inverted parent-child relationships: Parents, frequently uneducated in the ways of a strange land, relied on offspring to understand and interpret their new home. (Certainly, co-editor Brian Ingrassia’s Sicilian-immigrant grandparents had this sort of relationship with their

six children.) Little Mothers' Leagues, a well-intentioned reform, nevertheless demonstrated a strain of assimilationism and eugenics that permeated Progressive Era America: shaping working-class immigrants to be future citizens of a nation that continued the supposedly superior traditions of northern and western European forebears.

Although Ida Tarbell's muckraking history of Standard Oil may seem like old news to scholars of the Progressive Era, Minseok Jang adds a compelling new dynamic to this narrative in "Kerosene is King: Kerosene Consumers and the Antitrust Movement against Standard Oil, 1859–1911." Tarbell, the daughter and sister of independent oil producers, wrote not just to expose the monopoly's unfair practices but also to provide a revisionist history of independent oilmen. Although John D. Rockefeller's corporation may have reduced nominal prices of oil products, it also squeezed many independent producers out of business. Middle-class Americans who read Tarbell's exposé—both men and women, especially those who used kerosene products on a daily basis to enhance the domestic sphere—in turn helped shape the idea of a consumer class, a public sphere united by purchase and usage of consumer goods.

Early-1900s narratives often engaged issues of purity—how to maintain purity of morals, races, and goods within a nation of rampant commercialism, teeming cities, and massive immigration. For middle-class women swapping kerosene "recipes" to light homes, clean clothes, and kill garden-variety bugs, pure petroleum products were an important facet of home economy. For proponents of Little Mothers' Leagues, training girls to be mothers was a way to purify homes and, also, the nation's racial stock. For a generation of real-estate professionals, creating a national organization was a way to purify practice—and, as it turned out, to enforce perceived spatial purity of racial segregation. For Euro-American settlers, purity of historical practice was a way to craft narratives portraying civilization as something that superseded Native American presence, while some Native Americans who fought back against removal—from both land and history—fought to purify their own society by resisting alcohol. And for opponents of so-called white slavery, all forms of sexual deviance, whether consensual or not, had to be cleansed from the body politic in order to preserve the nation's moral purity.

Please join us for these fascinating narratives of American life in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As usual, we augment these fine articles with a carefully selected group of book reviews highlighting recent additions to the historical literature.