Women's Voices on Maxwell Street: The Silent Influence

This project was made possible, in part, by a grant from the Maxwell Street Foundation. It is a compilation of stories surrounding five influential women as they pertain to Chicago's Maxwell Street. These women have each had their stories documented to varying degrees, and some are more well known than others. But it was not until now that their histories were brought together. Through the common thread of the Maxwell Street neighborhood, their stories are told as a way to shed light on these women and their contributions to the history of Maxwell Street. The project opens the door for more research to be done on this topic. It is my sincere hope that my project will be a starting point for others who see the value in this endeavor and that they will take it to the next level.

This project strove for balance in telling the subject's stories, although it may seem disproportionate at first glance. The amount of information contained within is a direct result of the amount of information available. It is also a result of maintaining the focus of the project on the female subjects. In some cases, the seeming lack of information of some individual stories reiterates one of the main points of this project: whose information is preserved and passed on?

Women's Voices on Maxwell Street

The Silent Influence By Corine A. Azem



Historic Maxwell Street

For over 100 years, Chicago's Maxwell Island of the Midwest'. The neighborhood has been attributed with producing famous food items, like the Chicago Style Chicago men: musicians like Benny Goodman, and business owners like Nate Duncan (of Nate's Delicatessen), and engendered groundbreaking businesses like Bernard Abrams' Maxwell Street Nelle, released Little Walter's first record. Gold's Restaurant was the place where the notorious Al Capone and his gang 'hung from the rich and varied story of Maxwell Street is the women who lived, worked, famous men, women like Dr. Beatrice Tucker, Johnnie Mae Dunson, Florence Robinson. Here their stories are brought the role of women's influence on the culture of historic Maxwell Street.



Elizabeth Eunice Smith-Marcy

Teacher, writer, poet, abolitionist, temperance supporter, Elizabeth E. Marcy Center founder

Elizabeth Eunice Smith was born in 1882 in East Hampton, Connecticut. She was the third child of eleven, and was raised as a devout Methodist. Her ancestors came to America on the Mayflower, which Elizabeth documented in her book Facts and Fancies of Family History. She and her siblings were educated both in school and at home. Elizabeth learned French and graduated from Wilbraham Academy in Massachusetts where she would eventually teach school. It was here that she met another teacher, Oliver Marcy. In 1847 the couple was married. Elizabeth and Oliver had four children, two of whom died when they were quite young. In 1862, Oliver was offered a position as professor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. It was here that the family of four made their new home. Tragically, in 1875 their daughter Maud died as a young teenager. A few months later their only surviving child, Anna, married. In 1882 Elizabeth was involved with the work of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. She also became involved in the founding of the Rock River Conference of the Woman's Home Missionary Society through the Methodist Church. She took a position on the need for a mission to help the indigent who lived in what was considered to be the most depraved neighborhood of the day, "The Bohemian District" or the Maxwell Street neighborhood. Her hard work and dedication would lead to a social service center that would serve the Near West Side neighborhood for 130 years.



In 1883 Elizabeth Smith Marcy, along with five other women, rented a small storefront next to a saloon at 300 West Maxwell Street to be used as a "Bohemian" mission. The purpose of the mission was to serve the community through social services to the sick and needy, to perform saloon, which was considered to be "the root of all evil". Initially, Elizabeth and the women of The Woman's Home Their sole purpose was to bring Christianity into the lives of the rough neighborhood youth. The religious work Extension Society that the Women's Home Missionary Society completely take over all mission operations, which also included industrial training. In 1890, the new site at 1335 South Newberry Avenue (on the corner of Newberry Avenue and Maxwell Street) was secured. A two-story on the lot to make room for a new three-story center which was dedicated in 1896. Because of Elizabeth's hard work and service to the mission and the community, the suggested at their monthly meeting that the new building In spite of this, on March 21, 1896, the Elizabeth E. Marcy Home was dedicated. Elizabeth herself wrote a poem for the occasion. Not long after, the word "home" was



Oliver Marcy died in March of 1899. would not accept it as she was an enduring inspiration to the Center. member to be her assistant. In October of of two Honorary Presidents of the Board. Elizabeth retired from the Board of the Marcy Center after the untimely death of 1902 the National Board of The Woman's operations, and the work of The Marcy Center continued without Elizabeth's friends and colleagues maintained that nothing dampened her spirit. The manuscript of Elizabeth's book, Facts and admirers added a memorial section to the back of the book: a selection of her photographs, one of Elizabeth and one of the Elizabeth E. Marcy Center.



1917 brought zoning changes into the Maxwell Street neighborhood that rezoned the area for industry. This was the catalyst to search for a new site for the Marcy Center, as it was now known. In 1923 land was purchased for the new location in the North Lawndale neighborhood. In 1930 the third iteration of the Marcy Center was dedicated at 1539 South Springfield Avenue. The Marcy Center would continue to serve the needs of the changing community. From storefront to mission center, The Elizabeth E. Marcy Center served the Maxwell Street and surrounding neighborhood for 130 years. In June of 2013, the Center was forced to close its doors due to budget constraints, leaving a hole in the community where Elizabeth's spirit and legacy had once been.



Dr. Beatrice Tucker

Obstetrician, Home Birth Advocate, Chicago Maternity Center Director

The name Dr. Beatrice Tucker is not famously synonymous with the legacy of Maxwell Street; however her work with the Chicago Maternity Center affected the in the legendary neighborhood. Dr. Beatrice Tucker worked tirelessly to provide the best possible care for pregnant women and their newborn babies through the Chicago Maternity simultaneously gave the city of Chicago its lowest infant mortality rates in the country during the mid-nineteenth century. Dr. Tucker lived and worked in the same conditions as the poor served. She was an advocate of reproductive choice and fair treatment of human life, and she thrived in the maledominated medical field of the day. Beatrice eschewed marriage due to her parents unstable union, but was one of the first single woman to adopt children in the state of Illinois. She fought for the when the University of Illinois at Chicago decided to expand the boundaries of its neighborhood. The University eventually took over the land, relegating the legacy of the Chicago Maternity Center to the history of Maxwell Street.



Beatrice's desire to become a doctor came from her father's influence. He was a grocery store owner, optometrist, and practiced unlicensed as a medical doctor specializing in cancer. As a child, the family moved constantly to stay ahead of the sheriff and the medical board. In spite of this, Beatrice, "...identified with my father." "[He] ...was a lovable, vital, wicked man." She attributed her success to her mother, who convinced Beatrice to finish medical school and who, "...probably did more for me through discipline and keeping me on a level key than my father did." Beatrice was educated in medicine in a time when the field was almost exclusively male. She completed high school and two years of college at Bradley University (formerly Bradley Polytechnic Institute), and graduated from the University of Chicago with a B.S. in 1918. Beatrice obtained her medical degree from Rush Medical School in 1922, and from 1921-1922 she was an intern at Evanston Hospital. From there, her career path followed the public health field, working with the city of Chicago and the jail system in infant welfare and venereal disease. In 1929, Beatrice became the first woman resident at the University of Chicago Lying-In Hospital where she entered the field of obstetrics. It was there that Beatrice first met Dr. Joseph De Lee, chief of staff. Their relationship was uneasy, due to Dr. De Lee's flagrant misogyny, but Beatrice would impress him to the point that he asked her to be the director of the newly named Chicago Maternity Center in 1932.



The Chicago Maternity Center

Dr. Joseph B. De Lee founded the Center on February 14, 1895. It was originally called The Maxwell Street Dispensary and was located at 1336 South Newberry Street at the corner of Maxwell and Newberry Streets. The Chicago Maternity Center served the neighborhood for 37 years before Dr. Beatrice Tucker became director in 1932. After several years in the public health realm, Dr. Tucker, who was the first woman resident at the University of Chicago Lying-In Hospital, accepted Dr. De Lee's offer to direct the Center. It was the goal and mission of the Center and Dr. Tucker to give the best possible care to the inhabitants of the Maxwell Street neighborhood while simultaneously teaching resident doctors for modern obstetric care.



Birth at Home

This image shows the doctors and Clinic as they prepare for a home birth. Notice the newspapers on the floor near the 'bed' that is the kitchen table. Newspapers are also placed on the ironing board under the medical instruments. This tactic was known as "the island of safety." It essentially created a barrier against germs that were brought into the home by outsiders. Dr. Tucker, her associates, and her students were diligent in this practice. Hand washing was also part of their process. These two habits were instrumental to the success the Center became known for. Prior to the home birth, mothers would medical history, and receive regular check-ups. These methods informed the medical profession to the degree that they are still used (some in retired in 1974 when the Center closed due to lack of funding and the impending expansion of the Campus.



Johnnie Mae Dunson

Blues singer/songwriter/drummer

Raymond, Alabama in 1921. When she was just two years old, she contracted rheumatic fever. Doctors predicted age of fourteen. But Johnnie Mae gradually became stronger. She was once quoted as saying, "...I believe at that time God gifted me with the music I have because He knew I wouldn't be able to do any other kind of work." Growing up, she sang of whom influenced Johnnie Mae's blues style. Migrating from Alabama to Chicago in 1943, Johnnie Mae had many jobs, hairdresser and restaurant manager among them. By 1944 she began singing and playing the drums on Maxwell Street. Soon, she was writing Blues songs without credit and sometimes without pay. At the blues trio The Globe Trotters, who played clubs on West Madison



By 1973, Johnnie Mae stopped Robinson who convinced Johnnie James Fraher, a filmmaker and photographer who was documenting of 1998, Johnnie Mae sang at Maxwell neighborhood from the University of Illinois campus expansion, but to no avail. She also performed at the York's Apollo Theater during the last never recorded her own songs until 2000. Her debut album was called 'Big Boss Lady', and contains songs such as the same-titled, 'Big Boss Woman'. Johnnie Mae once grandmother of the blues." and there are many who would agree with her declamation. Johnnie Mae died in



Florence Scala Community Activist, Business Owner, Life-long Near West Side Resident

The name Florence Scala is tightly integrated into the history of the Maxwell Street neighborhood's struggle to survive. She would wage battle against the City of Chicago, Mayor Richard J. Daley and the Illinois Supreme Court over the destruction of the neighborhood to make way for the University of Illinois' Chicago campus.



Florence Giovangelo was born in her family's home on Taylor Street. Her parents were Italian immigrants from the Abrruzi region of central Italy. She spoke only Italian until she entered Kindergarten. There, she learned English through immersion. Growing up, she went shopping with her mother on Maxwell Street. As a young girl, Florence and her girlfriend sold shopping bags for a nickel a piece to the many Maxwell Street shoppers. In her teenage years, Florence would go to Maxwell Street for "...very nice clothes...every Saturday...we bought our hot dogs there. We went there for jazz records, too. You just knew where to go for things."



Florence eventually found her way to Hull-House where she made many life-long friends. She joined a dance class and a theater group. Florence credited Hull-House and her dance teacher, Edith de Nancrede, as being responsible for her further exposure to the arts. Florence's father played opera music at home, but her Hull-House experience she described this way, "...Hull-House extended us, at least it did me. Music was important and music is still very enriching." She was present at Hull-House in November of 1937 when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited. Florence was among several girls chosen to visit Mrs. Roosevelt in Washington D.C. The exposure to Hull-House and its social justice mission would impact Florence for the rest of her life.



By 1945 Florence had married a neighborhood man by the name of Charles 'Chick' Scala. After World War II, Chick worked nights as a bartender. The couple had opposite schedules and no children. Florence found herself with an abundance of free time. She became acquainted with Jane Addams' nephew, Eri Hulbert. After conversations with the Hull-House board about the poor condition of the neighborhood, the Near West Side Planning Board was formed. Florence was inspired by Eri's passion for change and started taking pictures of abandoned buildings, garbage-strewn alleyways, and examples of awkward zoning where commercial buildings were next to residential homes. The Board showed the photographs to local businesses and banks to raise money for their cause. This was the beginning of the rise of community planning in which neighborhood residents would find their voice to stand up for what they wanted in their community. The united community voice would stay in the Maxwell Street neighborhood through today's current gentrification and historic preservation issues.



The Maxwell Street neighborhood, some original buildings, and the legendary market survived the city's planned urban renewal projects in the 1950s, specifically, the construction of the Dan Ryan Expressway through the area. In the 1960s, The University of Illinois would obtain more of the neighborhood for its 'Circle Campus'. This would be Florence's biggest fight. She would become the face of the Near West Side Planning Board and its unofficial leader to battle Mayor Richard J. Daley, Chicago City Council, The Hull-House Board of Trustees, and The Illinois Supreme Court. Chick lost his job over Florence's involvement in city politics. Florence, Chick and her parents survived two bombings at their home. The second bomb destroyed the back steps of the building to the point that Florence and Chick moved into Hull-House for six months. Unflappable, Florence continued her fight. She ran for First Ward alderman and lost. The winning candidate eventually had to withdraw from office due to residency issues. She, along with Hull-House resident Jessie Binford, sued to keep the City from tearing down what was left of the Maxwell Street neighborhood, including Hull-House. This 1963 video shows Florence at Hull-House discussing the State appeal which went before the United States Supreme Court.



The United States Supreme Court would rule against Florence's case, and on March concession, The University of Illinois opted Hull-House Settlement: the original house and the Resident's Dining Hall. In 1980 Florence, along with her brother Mario, where they grew up. Florence would later 2005 Chicago journalist Carol Marin wrote an editorial proposing that the library on Taylor Street be named in honor of that, "Libraries should be named for lives. I do not agree with proposing my S." Two years later Florence succumbed to colon cancer. On September 5, 2007, Mayor Richard M. Daley and the City Council, Scala by a document of resolution



Carrie Robinson

Gospel Singer

Maxwell Street has a long and varied musical history. From swing to the became famous, music was a staple on Maxwell Street. The neighborhood is recognized as producing and engendering the careers of many now famous musicians, with the exception of Carrie Robinson Very little is known about Carrie Robinson, and research has revealed no information on her background. Yet she was photographed and filmed and even mentioned in documentaries and books concerning the history of Maxwell Street music. It has been surmised that Carrie lived and are images of her in both street perhaps she only sang publicly when the mood struck her. She sang with Jim Brewer, and even that documented fact does not lead to any further information on Carrie. There is one brief interview with Carrie in the short documentary 'Maxwell Street Blues' in which she talks about how she came to be a gospel singer.



An interesting aspect of Carrie's story is that, while she has been photographed many times in regards to musicians on Maxwell Street, she is not identified in her photographs. It is her distinct features that help verify her presence in the photos. In group shots she is usually off to the side. This image is an illustration of this fact. The lack of information regarding Carrie's background and personal life speaks to the untold story aspect as the theme of this endeavor. One could suppose that she had no desire for fame, that her singing and resultant dancing was truly in the spirit of the moment. Interestingly, music historians refer to Carrie quite often, as did Blues author and musician Bonni McKeown, who attributes Mick Jagger's brand of dancing on stage to Carrie's "holy dance" on the street in the Maxwell Street neighborhood.



While Maxwell Street is known to be the birthplace of iconic food, music, men, and places, it also engendered some of the most influential women in the history of Chicago. Elizabeth Smith Marcy, Dr. Beatrice Tucker, Johnnie Mae Dunson, Florence Scala, and Carrie Robinson each contributed to creating the fabric that is the tale of Maxwell Street. demonstrate that the history of Maxwell Street is not strictly male, that these women and their perspective roles added significantly Street encompassed the best and creating the cohesive, vibrant

Fin

Acknowledgements

The following people and institutions, in no particular order, were instrumental to the success of this capstone and I am deeply grateful to all who helped make this project a reality:

University of Illinois at Chicago Special Collections librarians and staff, especially Gretchen Neidhart;
Northwestern University Archivist, Janet Olson; Chicago History Museum Research Library, and the Rights and Reproductions Department, including Angela Hoover and Sarah Yarrito; Demecina Beehn, Programs and Engagement Manager of Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois at Chicago; Maxwell Street Foundation President, Lori Grove; Lisa Junkin Lopez, Executive Director at Juiliette Gordon Low Birthplace; Claudine Ise, University of Illinois at Chicago, Visiting Clinical Assistant Professor; Photographers: Michael Mauney, Tom Smith, James Fraher, Enid Farber, Tim Hunter, MD, David R. Phillips, Jerome Joseph, and Randy Belice; Michael Weber, Communications Director/ Editor, Northwestern Medicine Magazine; Bob Simpson, Bonni McKeown, Jazz Foundation; Ramsey, Andrea, Caroline, and Katharine Azem; Jennifer Bones, Joan Moss, and Kelli Mason.

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 - Box 58, Folder 748
- University of Illinois at Chicago University Library, Department of Special Collections, Florence Scala Collection:
 - Box 1, Folder 7
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Images

- Slide 3) Merchants and shoppers gathering along Maxwell Street, Chicago, Il, 1917. Photographer-Chicago Daily News. Used with permission from the Chicago History Museum.
- Slide 4) Oliver and Elizabeth Marcy, Northwestern University Archives
- Slide 5) Elizabeth Eunice Smith Marcy, Facts and Fancies of Family History, Evanston, Ill.: Bowman Pub., 1911.
- Slide 6) Marcy Center, 1335 South Newberry Avenue, Facts and Fancies of Family History, Marcy, Elizabeth E. Smith, University of Illinois at Chicago, Marcy-Newberry Center Records, Box 58, Folder 742, University of Illinois at Chicago, University Library, Department of Special Collections.
- Slide 7) Image: The Marcy Newberry Center at 1539 S. Springfield in the North Lawndale neighborhood. Source: Marcy-Newberry Center Records, Box 58, Folder 748, University of Illinois at Chicago, University Library, Department of Special Collections.
- Slide 8) Image: Portrait of Dr. Beatrice Tucker, c 1936/37, 8x10, b-w, from the CHM **Chicago Maternity Center photography collection**, **G** 1989.532.2
- Slide 9) Image: "Dr. Beatrice Tucker with infant" Photograph by Michael Mauney.
- Slide 10) Image: "Chicago Maternity Center on Newberry Street" January 14, 1968 Photo courtesy of Tim Hunter, MD, alumnus of Northwestern University Medical School.
- Slide 11) Image: Intern & nurses from Chicago Maternity Center; Photo by Michael Mauney.
- Slide 12) Image: Johnnie Mae Dunson, Chicago, 2000. Photo by James Fraher.
- Slide 13) Image: Johnnie Mae Dunson at Jazz Foundation of America "A Great Night in Harlem" gala at the Apollo Theater, October 28, 2004, photo credit; Enid Farber; photo courtesy of Jazz Foundation.
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Images

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- Slide 20) Image: Carrie Robinson, Jerome Joseph Chicago Historical Society (ICHi-36102).
- Slide 21) Image: Carrie Robinson dancing. Tom Smith Photography.
- Slide 22) Image: Maxwell Street; 14 April, 2015. Corine Azem photographer.

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