

Minnesota Unraveled

EP103 - Measuring Up: Better Baby Contests at the State Fair

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Chantel Rodríguez:

For 12 days, at the end of every summer, right between Minneapolis and St. Paul, the Minnesota State Fair comes to life. The smell of corn dogs, music playing from the grandstand, flashing lights from the midway, the tens or hundreds of thousands of Minnesotans at their great get-together. Truth be told, it can all get a little bit overwhelming for me, so one year I found myself passing the carousel and the sky ride, trying to scope out a quieter spot. When I made it to West End Market, I happened upon the History and Heritage Center and decided to duck in. The building is modern, sleek metal with lots of windows, but inside, it's all about the history, memorabilia from state fairs, past exhibits, detailing its evolution and placards, highlighting particular moments from the fair's history. It was two of that last category that caught my eye.

One baby blue sign titled Competitions of the Past shows a black and white photo from 1909. A somewhat dour looking nurse is bottle feeding a little boy named Wilbur. According to the caption, Wilbur was "favor to win the 1912 baby competition," at least until a mosquito bit him on the forehead. Baby competition? The placard next to it only raised more questions for me. It talked about a baby show in 1913 where the judges were pediatric authorities and a 1915 show held in a glassed-in show ring. You heard that right. Along with the contest for the best pumpkins and canned pickles, the state fair once held competitions to decide the best babies. Who won? The smartest? The cutest? What exactly were these baby shows and why were they held at the state fair?

Welcome to Minnesota Unraveled. I'm your host, Chantel Rodríguez. This is episode three, Measuring Up: Better Baby Contests at the State Fair.

I figured I wouldn't find the answer in those two placards. So I enlisted some help from two fellow public historians. I sat down with Laura Leppink and Sarah Pawlicki. Laura is a disability historian based out of the University of Minnesota. Her work centers around fostering inclusion and equity in the histories we make and tell. Sarah is a public historian focused on women's history initiatives within the National Historic Landmarks program. I asked Laura how the two of them got interested in the history of the better baby contest.

Laura Leppink:

We created the Repair Disability Heritage Collective and got collectively more interested in learning how to do disability histories.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Here's Sarah.

Sarah Pawlicki:

It originated with a project we were doing focused on gender histories and the home economics movement. And given at that point the Repair Collective's budding interest in disability histories and Laura's long time, I don't know if you would characterize it, Laura, as like a fascination with love for complicated relationship to the Minnesota State Fair and the Minnesota State Fairgrounds, I guess all of the pieces just fell into place to focus on that. Laura had, I think, contributed the place-based aspect of the project and I was really interested in the gender and histories of the differentiation between what was perceived as like "men's roles" and "women's roles" within both better baby contests and the state fair and more generally.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Something I didn't really get from the placards in the History and Heritage Center was just what these contests looked like. How were they set up?

Laura Leppink:

I do have a little quote I would love to pull, and this is actually from the Minnesota Department of Public Welfare had a report in 1915. They did describe it as three sides were of glass, the four side opening into two dressing rooms. Each baby was examined in full view of the public. The physicians and the nurses in their white uniforms were the only ones allowed in the cage, but it was made to be set up and look very formalized with physicians and nurses in their uniforms, but also, it was done in a way to reassure mothers that their children would be very well taken care of. So it was very official. It was done so that it was performative so people could see it, but a little bit a medical setting that they set up just within it, but obviously it was mostly glass and that was because they wanted people to see the babies and how they were going about their assessments.

Sarah Pawlicki:

The better baby competitions were held in what they described as I think a 20 by 20 glass cage because the idea was that the walls would be transparent because it was at least supposedly an educational event. People could watch the examinations being conducted and therefore know what they were supposed to look for when perhaps examining their own babies or the babies of friends and family.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Let's take a moment to imagine what this might have looked like. A 20 by 20 glass box with uniform doctors and nurses behind the glass evaluating each child, all at the state fair. So now I had a handle on just what these competitions look like, but what were babies being judged on?

Laura Leppink:

When you talk about the ways that these babies were assessed, often there were the ways in which they tried to make it more scientific, so it was their weight, their responsiveness. Fred Coleman specifically was in part a child psychologist, and so he did a lot of assessment related to the "mental capacities" of these children alongside what those physical assessments were in those moments.

Chantel Rodríguez:

We don't know the exact details of the contest procedures at the Minnesota State Fair. The rules, the sequence of events, but we do know what they looked like in other states. Indiana is a good example. Before the Indiana contest began, registered infants were divided into groups. Those were based on age, sex, and place of residence. Each mother was instructed to arrive with their infant at a designated time. Once they arrived, nurses would take the overall health history of the child, any past health issues the baby had experienced or anything the doctor should know. Mental tests, different for each age group, were conducted by psychologists. They observed if an infant could speak, stand and walk, how an infant manipulated balls and blocks and how they responded to questions like, who is that baby in the mirror?

The next step, all the babies were put into flannel togas. Then physicians would weigh each baby and check their eyes, ears, nose and throat. They looked for "physical defects" like scaly skin, unevenness of the head, delayed teething and enlarged glands to name a few. The better baby contest really did appear to be a rigorous medical examination and made me wonder about Baby Wilbur from the beginning of the episode. Was he part of a better baby contest or something different?

Laura Leppink:

I think there's also the other contingency of baby contests that were something called a pretty baby contest or ones that are a lot more focused on aesthetics of what the babies were, but the ones that we're talking about here are a little bit more related to the, I guess, baby health contests. And they look to make it more into a very scientifically relevant or at least performatively rigorous assessment of these babies and their capacity both physically and cognitively for that time, but it was very impacted by what the university was thinking about and the people there as well as the state institutions that often were very connected with this type of assessment.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The pretty baby contests sound more like what Baby Wilbur might've been part of in 1909. This is fascinating. Baby pageants had been around in the United States well before the 1900s, but in the 19-teens there were these new types of competitions, better baby contests arriving on the scene. Why start a new type of contest focused on health?

Laura Leppink:

The better babies movement in part originally came out of this movement to help infant health and because of the high mortality rate for young children and babies. And so out of this and out of things like the domestic science movement, mothers and other leaders became more interested in how to decrease infant mortality rates and also childhood illnesses.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Alarm over high infant mortality rates began in the mid 1800. Then, it was as high as 20%. The cause of that high rate was a subject of much debate, but there were a few factors that many could agree were contributing, things like rapid industrialization and urbanization, the unclean water, the filthy streets, and the crowded living conditions were likely causes of poor health. When germs, those invisible microbes, were discovered to be the cause of disease in the 1880s, attention was turned to infant nutrition, namely the milk they consumed. Scientists showed that animal milk could carry dangerous microbes like salmonella, listeria, and E. coli. Public health officials pushed for pasteurization, the process of heating the milk, to keep those microbes from causing severe illness or even death in children. But in spite of all these efforts, the infant mortality rates still hovered above 10% from the 19-teens.

It was at this time that scientific progressivism was underway. The movement promoted initiatives to improve life by applying the insights of the new sciences, like with pasteurization where new germ science was used to make drinking milk safer. Progressives and advocates for infant health charted a new course to save children,

educating mothers through scientific management of the home. This came to be known as domestic science.

Laura Leppink:

Bertha Dahl Laws was a domestic science educator at one of the normal schools in Minnesota, but also was very heavily involved within Minnesota Agricultural Society. So her and other women were the people really pushing for more women's participation, but also a greater focus on the health and well-being of people in Minnesota, especially women and children. And so it was through her work and the work of other women at the fair that pushed for a women's building, which eventually became the host site for better baby contests.

I will also say, like a lot of other states, Minnesota had a lot of different coverage of the Women's Home Companion Better Baby contests, and so it was very popularized on a national level as well, and there were contingents of people who were going to national conventions and other things, and so there was a place for this ideas and better baby contests had found a home at the fair.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Domestic scientists like Bertha D. Laws promoted efficiency in household tasks like washing dishes and doing laundry, but they also encouraged women to think of themselves as professionals, skilled in home management to embrace scientific motherhood.

Sarah Pawlicki:

There was debate about whether the better babies contest within the women's building should be more sequestered than it was. Bertha Dahl Laws was annoyed that people on their way to the better babies contest would have to be seeing all these exhibits about how to produce jellies and do different kinds of embroidery, and she thought that that diminished the significance of the better baby contest, that it was being put in conjunction with that more mundane elements of women's domestic life.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Despite Bertha's concerns, Minnesotans attended the contests in droves and there was no shortage of mothers who wished to register their child. According to the placard that kicked this whole thing off, up to 300 babies entered in 1913. The contests were popularized not only by local organizers, but by one of the most widely

read magazines in the nation, the *Woman's Home Companion*. It did an entire campaign singing the praises of the better baby contests. Mothers were greatly concerned for the health and well-being of their children. Of course they didn't want their child to become part of the infant mortality statistic.

At the better baby contest, mothers could learn the most up-to-date medical knowledge about child health. They could learn how to better care for infants to improve their well-being. This was especially important because at the time, regular doctor visits and preventative care weren't yet standard, but all of this was beginning to change in the 19-teens.

New scientific technologies meant that more and more people look to doctors as figures of authority. Pediatricians and university-trained specialists became trusted authorities on infant health as experts in child psychology, biology and physiology. This happened in large part through the better baby contests, but this language of "better" really caught my attention as a historian. The idea of betterment is written all over the contest. Domestic scientists use this language when they promoted the betterment of home and society. Physicians similarly supported physical improvement and race betterment. These contests were taking place in a historical moment when eugenic ideas were spreading in Minnesota and the United States more broadly. It made me wonder whether the two, eugenic ideology and the better babies contest, could be connected back to Laura and Sarah.

Laura Leppink:

Charles Dight listed as a Minnesota Eugenics Society president and he wrote a letter to the editor and he wrote, "In the livestock exhibit at the Minnesota State Fair, a scrub cow is placed besides two fine Holstein cattle per contrast, and to show that by wise selection in breeding, a superior stock can certainly be produced that will yield more and better milk and increase farmer's income. A question which I asked several exhibitors of stock and which always caused a smile was this: where in the fairgrounds is the building in which is exhibited a fine type and superior strain of human beings purebred men and women human thoroughbreds?"

Sarah Pawlicki:

One of Dight's favorite catchphrases is that the fitter family and better baby contests were designed to create "human thoroughbreds."

Laura Leppink:

One that we often cited was in one of the annual reports, but also used for their marketing. If you don't like the cattle reference, there's always their slogan, which was, "Are you interested in babies? Will you help us improve the most important crop raised in the state of Minnesota? Help save the lives of Minnesota babies. Enter your

baby or help your neighbor's baby, or enter your neighbor's baby in the health contest at the Minnesota State Fair." And so there was this pretty big comparison both between crops and also the livestock at the fair. And for people like Bertha Dahl Laws was you have all of these contests related to this other agriculture, and yet we haven't yet talked about the people in our state. And so that was her motivation to push for more of these exhibits and things like the better baby contest. And for Dight, he saw it as a direct connection for this better breeding and better genetics.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The connecting thread here appears to be that scientific way of thinking that was gaining popularity in the 19-teens. A wide variety of groups pushed the idea that there was a scientific way to improve crops and livestock. So it only seemed natural to domestic scientists and eugenicists to apply the language of breeding better animals to breeding better humans. But the question here is that when you're trying to breed better humans, who gets to decide what better means? For the eugenicists involved in the better baby contest, that answer was somewhat clear. Better, in many cases, meant whiter. It also meant babies who were both physically and mentally sound because it wasn't just the ideas of domestic science that the organizers wanted to make more accessible.

Sarah Pawlicki:

The idea for the better baby competition specifically gained ground primarily through letters to the editor written by Charles Dight, then the president of the Minnesota Eugenics Society. He proposed having a better baby contest, specifically at the Minnesota State Fair, both on the basis of eugenic ideology, but also because he saw the better baby contest as a way to communicate eugenic principles outside of the academy, which he felt was key to seeing the broader movement grow. He and his collaborators recognized that the principles couldn't stay within academia, and in many cases, governmental institutions, medical institutions, it needed to reach "domestic space," and the most, in his mind, effective way to do that was through a popular public venue like the state fair, and specifically in what was at that point called the Woman's Building of the Minnesota State Fair.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This points to a much darker side of the better baby contests, the side that cared not only about baby's health but their genes as well.

Laura Leppink:

When we talk about better baby contests, they're connected to eugenics. There are two different types of eugenics. The most common ones are positive eugenics and negative eugenics. Here often the focus was on positive eugenics, and what that had to do with was who are the two best people for each other to procreate to create the best baby possible or the best new generation? I think one headline that comes to mind from Minnesota during that period of time was Babies Seek Infant Supremacy. And this coincided with other contests such as the fitter family contests that took more into consideration of the whole family and the kind of genetics that were going on there. And so it wasn't always just about a single baby, but the entire family in and of itself.

The other side of this that people often think of is negative eugenics, and negative eugenics is specifically intended to keep particular people and I guess different people from procreating and having kids. And this is often what we think about in things like the sterilization laws and other conditions that had a pretty horrible impact on different minorities and marginalized communities and identities.

And so we talk about eugenics. It was because at a certain point in time, these concepts about genetics and compatibility and everything like that paired well with this idea of who's your mother? Who's your father? How are you having your kids do this? And so Eugenics became a little bit synonymous with these over time, even if it wasn't always the fundamental basis for the better baby contest originally.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Sterilization laws are likely the part of Eugenic philosophy that you've heard about. The premise of these laws was to stop people that authorities deemed unfit from having children. If Eugenics was hand in hand with the better baby contest, how did mothers feel about it? Did they buy into whatever the eugenicists were saying about the better babies contest, which was that this is about science and medicine and it's about the infant health movement? Is that how eugenicists wanted to sell it? Did they assume that there were other threads involved, or did some of the public recognize it for maybe the negative aspects that could've been part of the better baby contest? I'm curious to know more about what you may have found out there about that.

Sarah Pawlicki:

Charles Dight, he talked about how to, and using his words here, retail eugenic ideas to the public. He saw the better baby contest as a way to sell these ideas to primarily mothers as a consumer. I don't know that there's a lot of evidence that women felt

that way. He talks about the struggles he has to communicate eugenic principles to particularly young women, and it's that other factors other than what he considers logic and rational decision making is more important. So you can tell a young woman that perhaps her baby is not the best better baby, but that does not necessarily matter to her because I think the vast majority of people, their own baby is the best baby and that is the way it's going to be. And he found it difficult sometimes to break through what he perceived as that wall of sentimentality. So I don't know that he would've seen the outcome of the better baby contest is necessarily as much of a "success" as he would've wanted. The symbolic meaning for the mothers was different than he intended perhaps.

Chantel Rodríguez:

But how did mothers experience a contest itself? What did they think about how the babies were being judged? Because infants can't do much of anything for themselves, so in a better baby contest who's really under the microscope?

Laura Leppink:

Often babies were seen as this extension of mothers, and so their assessment was often, it was an assessment of them too. There was this movement of connecting better babies and women's rights, and so they were used in different ways, but this idea of motherhood and babies and children and the connectedness to mothers was one that was used inside and outside better baby contest settings, but also just generally that motherhood was this association there. Maybe these women weren't quite as connecting with these other topics within eugenics, but what they were connected to was the idea of motherhood and creating the environment for children. And mothers at this time were seen as in charge and responsible for curating this next generation, and that even if you had the greatest genetics, it was then the transition became, but if you're not a good parent, if you're not a good mother, you could ruin that genetic greatness. And so it was connecting it also into this control over how motherhood should be and how they should be acting and what they should be teaching their children and the people around them.

I think the other part of this that we haven't maybe delved in quite as much is that with eugenics, it has kind of an inherited connectedness to racism, to anti-indigeneity, and that's something we've found very reflected in materials from the agricultural society that were very discriminatory towards indigenous people and others. And in our work, we haven't really found the participation of non-white people in this contest for Minnesota. So there is this concept of constructing who is this great citizen? And so it is developing part of that. And Minnesota has a fairly contentious history, and I think better baby contests are this interesting intersection of these different issues over time.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The better baby contests were just that: contests. There was a winner, a best baby. So what about all the other babies? What happened to them?

Laura Leppink:

There's at least one contest in Minnesota that had to do with the babies who are not the fittest, the babies that were showing the, I guess more issues or things that would lose them points in this type of contest. What happened is they assessed this, but they also sent healthcare practitioners around to assess the babies and to also, it wasn't just how bad they were, it was about how much they had improved. So it was still focused on their improvement of their health. And so there were specific instances of that happening. And often with the contests, if a baby had low scores in a particular ways, the healthcare professionals would give them advice about how to improve that, even if it was a normal better baby contest.

There is also this focus that often it was reported like the babies are all so great, there's just one that was just a little bit more exceptional. And so a lot of it was about education in a lot of ways. There was this, I think, type of pride that families had in having the best baby, but I think a lot of the people who did it were just trying to educate the public through the contest and not necessarily just trying to assess who's the worst and who's the best. At least that's the way it was described in some of the literature.

Chantel Rodríguez:

These interventions came out of something called euthenics. It's a bit different from eugenics. Here's Sarah again.

Sarah Pawlicki:

Ellen Swallow Richards was a home economist. She coined the term euthenics as a companion to eugenics to describe what she perceived as women's role in the movement, and she defined it in this way in 1912, "Eugenics deals with race improvement through heredity. Euthenics deals with race improvement through environment. Eugenics is hygiene for the future generations. Euthenics is hygiene for the present generation. Eugenics must await careful investigation. Euthenics has immediate opportunity. Euthenics perceives eugenics developing better men now and thus inevitably creating a better race of men in the future." So that gets at how the better babies contests were designed to make interventions not just in the future in terms of eugenic marriages and shaping choices families would make looking forward, but also to make interventions in the present moment in terms of what Richards would call social hygiene.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The thinking around eugenics is where that domestic science piece comes back in. These contests were partially geared toward giving mothers the scientific tools they needed to raise healthier households.

Laura Leppink:

The part of this we talk about a lot and the roots of this being very women-based, is that there was the domestic science movement that was very, very critical, and it was a way in part for women to make their way into scientific areas, but in a way that's related to what was stereotypically women's work, so the domestic sphere.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Hundreds of Minnesota babies took part in these better baby contests. Do we know what happened to any of them?

Laura Leppink:

I haven't really. So newspapers every so often will be like, "10 years later, these are where the better babies are." So I think there could be some tracking there. Sometimes it's like, "Oh, wow, look at how well they're doing. And I'm guessing they don't report on the kids who might not be doing so well."

Chantel Rodríguez:

Better baby contests became less common throughout the 1920s. This was because the contests were in part a popular campaign effort to spread eugenic ideas. Public acceptance of those ideas was at an all-time high in the 1920s. So for eugenicists, better baby contests had done their job. They helped popularize eugenics in the minds of Americans. Another reason for the decline of the contests is that it became more common for parents to seek preventative care for their children in doctor's offices.

Laura Leppink:

When World War II rolled around, eugenics ideology in general was losing popularity. And so in the '30s to '40s until the end of World War II, it lost popularity. That said, other forms of eugenics, including negative eugenics, did remain pervasive and influential in state institutions and other places. And also, eugenic ideology maybe found its way into other areas, and people maybe weren't quite so interested in those better baby contests anymore.

Chantel Rodríguez:

But the term eugenics itself did not remain popular for long. The horrors committed by Nazi Germany during World War II led Americans to rethink how they thought about eugenics.

The better baby contests have so many overlapping layers and are a complicated part of Minnesota history. That's precisely why it's such an important story to tell.

Laura Leppink:

So I was mulling this over the other day, and I was thinking about how originally these better baby contests were used as a way to educate folks about these ideas, including eugenics ideas and euthenics ideas. At the same time, babies are always a great way to pull people in. And so I think maybe these types of contests and the way this performance was done also could be an opportunity to start a conversation about these more difficult topics, but in a way that I think is a little bit more approachable than immediately talking about some of the more horrific things that have happened in Minnesota related to different sterilization legislation and negative eugenics.

Sarah Pawlicki:

I think part of why learning about the better baby movement can be so illuminating is that it touches on so many issues and that what was considered critical was having a "able citizenry," and that is put in opposition to what Dight and other members of the Minnesota Eugenics Society refer to as "defective citizens." And when you see how the lens of what was considered "defective," how incredibly broad that is, you can see so clearly how different forms of oppression intersect with each other in the case of the eugenics movement, and also how, as Laura was saying, this really dangerous and pernicious ideology can be made palatable through this kind of rhetoric where it's like, well, we can all agree on this "surface level issue," but when you scratch the veneer a little bit, there is this really complex and hateful ideology just lurking beneath.

Laura Leppink:

Because even still today, we think about, I have started thinking about how the Minnesota State Fair is set up now, and what does it tell us about what we value in the state, because I think it still does in its own type of away.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This story is one that is multifaceted. To get the whole thing, you have to look at it from many different angles. You can hear these two historians even grappling with the answer to what could be seen as a simple question, what did the mothers think about the contest? We can't squarely say the better baby contest only caused harm or only brought about good. These contests promoted eugenic ideas and suggested that some children were more fit than others, but at the same time, they also provided an opportunity for mothers to learn the most up-to-date medical opinions of child specialists.

Children themselves were receiving preventative care, albeit through eugenic medical ideas, that likely helped them survive childhood, but we also can't say that all of the mothers who participated thought about this contest in the same way. We have to hold multiple perspectives and contexts all at the same time. This is when using a historian's perspective can be especially useful. This all started with a trip to the state fair and an unexpected encounter. After only a little more investigation, we learned that the placards I saw didn't show the whole picture, and that this story in particular can't be taken at face value. That is how you start to reveal and pull back the messy layers of history. It starts with your own curiosity and asking questions about the world around you no matter where you are.

You've been listening to Minnesota Unraveled, pulling on the threads of Minnesota history. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources, and MNopedia articles at our website, mnhs.org/unraveled. Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Pod People. Special thanks to our production team, Rebecca Chaisson, Angela Yih, Buffy Gorilla y Brett Baldwin. And sound design and editing by Carter Woghan. Lead research by me, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez, with additional support from Jamie Kherbaoui. Our theme music is Careless Wanderer by Arthur Benson. Funding for Minnesota Unraveled is provided by the state of Minnesota, the Legacy Amendment through the vote of Minnesotans on November 4th, 2008, and our generous donors and members.

Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious. And remember, the tapestries of history are all around you, just waiting to be unraveled.