

The Corporation as Family: The Gendering of Corporate Welfare, 1890–1930. *By Nikki Mandell*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 224 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-807-82685-3; paper 0-807-85351-8.

Reviewed by Judith Sealander

Nikki Mandell's *The Corporation as Family* argues, as do many other studies of early-twentieth-century business, that the decades of enormous growth between 1890 and 1930 imposed huge problems, including worsening relations between management and labor. Mandell, however, emphasizes one corporate response, welfare work (the original name for personnel benefits), arguing that it was a far more significant development than scholars have previously recognized. Programs of benefits varied widely. A company that improved workplace comfort and safety by installing drinking fountains on the factory floor engaged in welfare work. So did one that offered classes in English composition or sponsored an employees' baseball team. Firms that paid nurses to make house visits or promoted employee profit-sharing plans were also performing welfare work.

Whatever the specific components of the benefits, Mandell sees welfare work as an effort to “gender” the corporation by superimposing on workplaces the values of the Victorian family—with employers as responsible fathers, welfare workers as caring mothers, employees as loyal children. The effort ultimately failed, because neither the employers nor the employees chose to play their designated roles, though the familial constructions of welfare work briefly opened the door for women to enter management at “unprecedented” levels (p. 155). However, welfare work soon became a subdivision of the new field of personnel management, with men in charge.

This thesis is intriguing. Unfortunately, *The Corporation as Family* does not prove it. An historian at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, Mandell has made extensive use of archival collections and personal papers, particularly those of the National Civic Federation. These documents, however, do not clearly make her case.

Was welfare work really as widespread as Mandell suggests? She notes that records from the National Civic Federation's welfare department identified almost 200 men and women as directly responsible for such benefit programs, but she argues that perhaps thousands of activities at other companies went unrecorded, since managers may have added welfare work to their duties without changing job titles. That might be true, though Mandell provides no evidence beyond this speculation, which in itself misunderstands the role played by the National Civic Federation in early-twentieth-century America. Although the NCF condemned the membership of the National Association of Manufacturers as "anarchists" among businessmen, it was the latter organization's confrontational strikebreaking techniques that won the open allegiance of more businesses than did the Civic Federation's reformist agenda.

Moreover, Mandell's discussions of welfare work focus on activities at large companies, particularly the programs sponsored by the National Cash Register Company and International Harvester. Rightly so: despite Mandell's unsupported guesses, welfare work was, as other scholars have long argued, primarily the creation of a relatively limited number of "progressive" corporations. Moreover, if Mandell is right that welfare work helped meld females into the workplace, why does she examine with greatest care companies where the majority of employees were men? Most NCR women workers, barred from any management positions and offered only low-level jobs, were young "girls" who left soon to marry. Even Mandell agrees that "a dearth of statistics" makes it impossible to verify any relation between percentages of women workers and promotion of noncash benefits (p. 43).

Mandell does not prove that welfare work integrated the undoubtedly increasing numbers of women working for pay in the early twentieth century. Nor does she convincingly elevate the role of women welfare workers to that of intermediaries between management and labor. Both employers and employees correctly identified money in a pay envelope as the real nexus of power. That was never within the control of any welfare worker—not even the redoubtable Gertrude Beek of the NCF's welfare department. Beek is the only woman who emerges from *The Corporation as Family* as a fully realized character. However, Beek, whose NCF position gave her an unusual degree of autonomy, provides little corroboration of Mandell's thesis that welfare

workers sought to transform the American corporation by making it conform to the values of a harmonious family. Of course, that was the rhetoric, but as a historian Mandell should know the difference between rhetorical claims and actual purposes, especially since she shows Beek consistently giving the cold shoulder to less prominent welfare workers who wanted to create an organization independent of NCF's welfare department, which only allowed employers to be members.

Mandell never documents her claim that a significant percentage of welfare managers came from working-class families (p. 35). If true, that would be fascinating. Likely most were from the Gertrude Beek mold: middle class, reasonably well educated, and keenly aware of their subordinate corporate status.

NCR again provides an illustrative example. Mandell notes that NCR hired a former Baptist deaconess, Lena Harvey, to run its welfare activities. She does not mention that Harvey was soon gone, replaced by a male employee whose primary job was to show noontime movies. Employees at NCR and elsewhere accepted welfare benefits—*if* the movie was of interest or the subsidized lunch was tasty—but they never confused them with the benefit they really desired—higher pay.

Moreover, by focusing on blue-collar employees, Mandell misses the people that welfare programs may have indirectly most influenced—managers themselves. NCR's welfare efforts, significantly, soon had the company's all-male sales force competing for china sets and its vice presidents striving to win weekends for two at the Waldorf Astoria. Why? The company brilliantly realized that the *unpaid* wives of white-collar staff needed incentives to accept the absence of husbands who were expected to work unceasingly. Mandell argues that welfare work soon became a subdivision of the emerging corporate specialty of personnel management. In important ways it was personnel management's prototype, not its predecessor.

Mandell might have realized this had she not read quite so literally the NCF materials on which she relies. *The Corporation as Family* began as a Ph.D. dissertation, and it still bears the marks. It is the creation of a hard-working, but relatively inexperienced, historian who has not yet acquired the kind of gimlet eye best suited to reading sources and placing them in context. Witness the fact that Mandell cites the welfare manager at Colorado Fuel and Iron on the importance of attractive table settings

(p. 61). This was in 1913, when workers for the company were living in abominable company towns, where dead rats routinely appeared in the pump water, where overflowing cesspools led to epidemics of typhoid fever, where both miners and owners stockpiled submachine guns! Witness the use of Samuel Crowther's 1923 biography, *John H. Patterson: Pioneer in Industrial Welfare*. Even had Mandell not known about the subvention paid Crowther by the Patterson family, the text alone should have told her that the book was primarily hagiography, not a source upon which to base much of her commentary about NCR welfare activities. If the choice had to be a nonscholarly memoir, she would have been better advised to read Stanley Allyn's much more perceptive 1967 book, *My Half-Century with NCR*. Indeed, *The Corporation as Family* would be a stronger work had it been more firmly grounded within the context of scholarship about Progressive Era reform and early-twentieth-century corporate change. Mandell states that "Andrea Tone's *The Business of Benevolence* stands out as the first study of turn-of-the-century welfare work in a quarter century" (p. 5). Mention requires abandonment of any pretense of modesty, but why wasn't my book, *Grand Plans: Business Progressivism and Social Change in Ohio's Miami Valley*, consulted? Its 1988 publication date makes it less than a quarter-century old. For obviously self-serving reasons my book comes immediately to mind, but so do several others, which view welfare work through larger lenses and base arguments on corporate records themselves.

The Corporation as Family is relatively brief, with fewer than 150 pages of text. Its most interesting chapter is its last—as it seeks to place welfare work within the larger frame of managerial capitalism and the growth of personnel management. Perhaps in a second book Nikki Mandell will devote her obvious energy to that subject.

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