

“City Slave Girls” of Chicago

The Fundamental and Forgotten Exposé of Nell Nelson



Thesis:

The purpose of this capstone is to restore Nell Nelson as an influential female journalist and pioneer of investigative reporting in the late nineteenth century.

The illumination of Nelson's "City Slave Girls" series as a fundamental exposé of the cruel and unsanitary working conditions of industrialization highlight Nelson's ability to overcome the gender restraints she faced as a middle-class woman exposing the most prominent men and successful corporations of Chicago.



Nell Nelson

- Helen Cusack Carvalho
- middle-class woman of the late 1800s
- undercover investigative reporter
- employed by *Chicago Daily Times* and then New York's, *The World*
- no complete biography

“City Slave Girls” Exposé

- front-page series of *The Chicago Daily Times*
- daily coverage (twenty-one part series)
- first report published on July 30th, 1888
- full-page ad preceded series
- in-depth reports of conditions, wages, and working girls (complete exposure)
- published response letters to the editor and interviews with public officials



A Photonegative of “Miss Nell Nelson” taken by an unknown photographer in 1911. This is courtesy of the online database of the Chicago History Museum.

The Chicago Times
VOL. XXIII
TUESDAY MORNING, JULY 30, 1888—TWENTY PAGES
PRICE 8 CENTS

Let Romance Rest.

Give Truth a Hearing.

Life

Among the Slave Girls of Chicago

NO need to draw upon the imagination nor to indulge in fiction. A dreadful, damnable reality is presented to this community. European methods introduced, developing and expanding here, whereby the marrow is ground out of the bones, the virtue out of the souls, and the souls out of the bodies of the miserable, ill-fed, half-starved, underpaid, insulted, roughly-treated, and unprotected Working Girls.

Shocking Revelations

Resulting from an investigation put on foot by

The Chicago Times

Not a batch of sensational stories, in which names are fictitious and addresses are suppressed, but a series of articles which point to the men who are growing rich at the expense of human life and blood. *The Real Names and Addresses* of Chicago manufacturers who have established a slave trade; who have transformed honest labor into a bondage; who are practicing the arts of the Pharaohs upon the weak and defenseless women of the city; who are running

Organized Hells on Earth.

Places where virtue counts for nothing; where girlhood and womanhood are degraded; where moral and physical rottenness abound; where an ulcer is festering that will eat a hole through society. The entire sickening story will be told in this paper without regard to persons or places.

The First Installment Will Appear Tomorrow

And the articles will be published daily until the whole truth is made known to the public.

The Grinding Process
Women, working like slaves for ten a day.
Long hours of toil with nothing but watchfulness to look forward to.
Reason an excellent girl must take short stitches to save themselves.
Cost 30 cents to get a seat in a church, can't afford it, and stays at home.
Who a girl of 13 crawled among the rubbish to search for gold.
Sew and a half cent for making a cotton-bach shirt.
How the factory is made and what it costs a girl to make it.
The grinding process in making a shirt for a man.
Demanding details that are never referred to the girls.
Villainous treatment of unfortunate women in a big factory.
One gets \$13 for the work of over six months.
A concern keeps its employees to grind the lives and souls out of women.
Waiting piles to work and waiting close hours for 50 cents.
One gets a gross for cutting dress-shirts.
Four cents a gross for sewing button on blouses.
Three cents per dozen for buttoning and so for opening blouses.
Sixteen cents a day in a big factory.
A little girl who made all of 12 cents in a day.
Where Dr. De Witt was found some work to do.
A kind and pathetic appeal for the suffering of Christian charity and Christian love.

THE WHOLE STORY
Beginning tomorrow in *The Times* and running every day until finished.

The Grinding Process
Ten cents a week for making that half-fancy New York work for the city.
Working on a shirt two and a half days for fifteen cents.
The grateful girls say "If I didn't live at home I'd starve."
Working from five to ten enough sleep to keep a pair of shoes.
How one prostitute "picks up gold" and takes their little share.
Thirty-five cents for making a shirt.
Paying an exorbitant price for a gross and losing their strength on needles and needles.
Twelve and a half cents a day made at a needle factory.
The girl turned their own (moral and mental) and are subjected to blows.
The great few "when the Rev. Mr. Goss expounds."
Girls use their underclothes for needles.
The Bible and religious scenes around them in the "holy" houses.
Bread and now only made of the overworked and weary.
Seventy-five cents per dozen for making overall pants.
Something about Street order and Street morality.
Twelve cents per gross for the use of a sewing machine.
Hiding, tears, but not a sympathetic glance.
Where the woman's true virtue shows through the veil.

THE WHOLE STORY
Beginning tomorrow in *The Times* and running every day until finished.

Historiography

Women in Journalism and Investigative Reporting of the Late Nineteenth Century

❖ Alice Fahs

- *Out on Assignment: Newspaper Women and the Making of Modern Public Space*

❖ Jean Marie Lutes

- *Front Page Girls: Women Journalists in America Culture and Fiction, 1880-1930*

❖ Maurine H. Beasley and Sheila J. Gibbons

- *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism*

❖ David Paul Nord

- *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers*

Industrialization, Labor Reform, and Working Women

❖ Eric W. Liguori

- “Nell Nelson and The Chicago Times ‘City Slave Girls’ Series: Beginning a National Crusade for Labor Reform in the late 1800s.”

❖ Lara Vapnek

- *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, 1865-1920*

❖ Ruth Milkman

- *Women, Work & Protest: A Century of U.S. Women’s Labor History*

❖ Meredith Tax

- *The Rising of the Women*



Evidence:

Nell Nelson. “City Slave Girls.” *Chicago Daily Times* (Chicago, IL), July 30-August 19, 1888 and August 26-27, 1888. Accessed via the NYU digital library.

Nell Nelson [pseud.]. *The White Slave Girls of Chicago*. (Chicago, IL: Berkley Publishing Co., 1888). Also available on microfilm at *History of Women: No. 3519*. (New Haven, CT: Research Publications Inc., 1976).

John T. McEnnis. *The White Slaves of Free America*. (Chicago, IL: R.S. Peale & Company, 1888). Also available online courtesy of Harvard University’s digital library.



Methodology:

❖ **NYU Digital Library**

- “City Slave Girls” newspaper articles as they appeared in the *Chicago Daily Times*
- Included all twenty-one articles as well as published letters received by the editor in response to the series
- Commentary of unnamed, digital library guide author provided basics regarding the publication and Nell Nelson

❖ ***The White Slave Girls of Chicago***

- Included majority of the series (excluded published series’ responses)
- Written out in plain text
- Truncated company titles and abbreviated names
- Articles and subtitles were abridged

❖ ***The White Slaves of Free America***

- Included abridged portions of Nelson’s series
- Written out in plain text
- McEnnis incorporated the “City Slave Girls” series in his broadened exposé of the labor conditions across America’s largest nineteenth-century cities.
- Excluded company names/addresses and abbreviated names

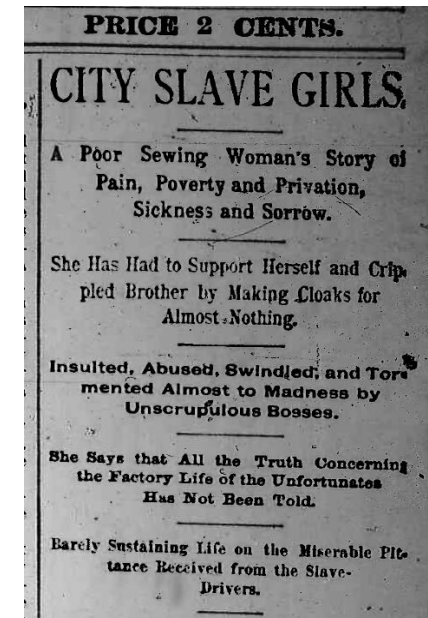
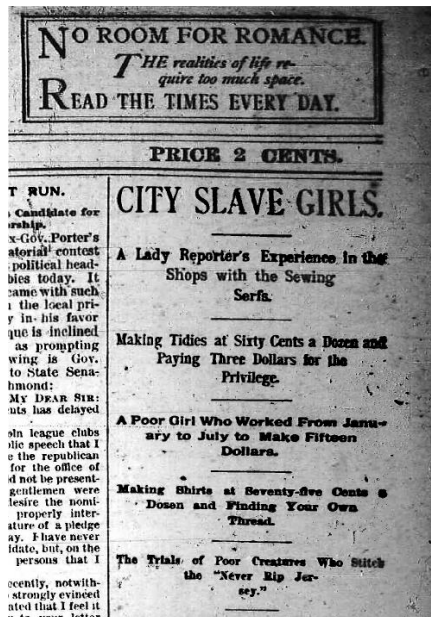


Conclusions:

There is a lack of substantial information regarding Nell Nelson and the impact of her “City Slave Girls” series.

The restoration of Nell Nelson’s “City Slave Girls” series would prove valuable to the following three fields of history:

- 1) women’s history
- 2) labor history (regarding industrialization and labor reform)
- 3) the history of undercover journalism / investigative reporting



Snapshots of
Headlines
courtesy of the
NYU Digital
Library.

