**A Brutal Chapter In North Carolina's Eugenics Past**

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From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Robert Siegel.

North Carolina is trying to make amends for an ugly chapter in its history. At least half of all states once had eugenics laws, but only a handful kept their forced sterilization programs active after World War II. North Carolina was among them. It sterilized more than 7,000 people, many against their will. Within the state, one county sterilized three times more than any other, Mecklenburg.

Reporter Julie Rose of member station WFAE has been in Charlotte, the county seat, working to understand why so many sterilizations happened there.

Four hundred eighty-five, that's how many people in Mecklenburg County lost their ability to reproduce by order of the North Carolina Eugenics Board. We don't know their names, or why the board sent them to the cold steel of a doctor's table. The Eugenics Board's records are closed to the public. Here's what we do know.

The five bureaucrats who were on the board in the '50s - the peak period for eugenics in North Carolina - didn't drive around the state plucking people off the street for sterilization. They had middlemen do the leg work: picking candidates and summarizing their lives into terse paragraphs with just enough unsavory detail to make a case.

One girl sterilized by the board is described in her file as, quote, "often away from home and constantly talks about boyfriends." She was 12.

The middlemen volunteering these girls and women for sterilization were typically social workers. That's what makes North Carolina stand out in the history of eugenics laws. Other states left the referral process to doctors working in prisons and mental hospitals. Only North Carolina gave that power to social workers.

Many have long since passed away, but not all.

(SOUNDBITE OF A CREAKING SCREENDOOR AND KNOCKS)

Hello? Is Mrs. Wall here?

Yes.

I find Merlene Wall tucked in her Charlotte condo. She's 80 and her memory is going, but she's willing to talk.

It was an interesting time. We stayed busy. We really did.

Mecklenburg County was booming. The typical welfare recipient was a single woman with four or five kids. Politicians and public officials worried that these unwed mothers and their children would overwhelm the system.

The North Carolina Eugenics Board offered a solution. Since the 1930s, it had sterilized people in mental hospitals and schools for troubled youth. In the '50s, the focus shifted to women on welfare and social workers like Merlene Wall.

And I keep thinking back about one case and there were retarded daughters. And, my gosh, what a - what a time and what a mess. And how do you protect the children that these two females had?

She brings up this one story over and over. I get the impression it was one of the few sterilization cases she was personally involved with. Through the fog of failing memory it still haunts her.

But I don't drive myself crazy with it anymore, 'cause I drove myself crazy when I was working and...

About it?

About it, yeah. It was a hard thing to do. I don't know what the answer is. What do you do? You do what you can and you do the best that you can. And it's not just protecting the children, you got to protect that mother, too.

A lot of people were wrestling with this question back then. Some powerful elites - including heirs to Procter & Gamble, Hanes Hosiery and RJ Reynolds Tobacco - formed a group called the Human Betterment League. They published glossy brochures like this one read by an actor.

(Reading) The job of parenthood is too much to expect of feebleminded men and women.

Morons, the league called them.

(Reading) North Carolina offers its citizens protection in the form of selective sterilization.

The Human Betterment League made social workers and doctors and public officials feel like humanitarian heroes for sterilizing people. The message spread to many states post World War II, but Mecklenburg County's eugenics effort had something even more.

(Reading) This is a single woman 25 years of age...

Notice the common thread in these dramatized case files from the summer of 1955.

(Reading) Sterilization proceedings instituted by Wallace H. Kuralt.

(Reading) This is a single girl, 16 years of age with two children. Sterilization proceedings instituted by Wallace H. Kuralt.

Wallace H. Kuralt was the head of Mecklenburg County Public Welfare from 1945 until 1972. The name may sound familiar because his son Charles was a famous journalist.

Wallace Kuralt did not believe women should be sterilized against their will. He was a champion for reproductive rights. He wanted to help women keep from getting pregnant when they couldn't afford the children they already had.

But this was the '50s. Abortion was illegal. The birth control pill wasn't available. Existing methods for women were complicated or unreliable. Having your tubes tied, on the other hand, was very reliable.

Kuralt knew his welfare clients couldn't afford to pay a doctor for sterilization, but if he referred them to the Eugenics Board, the government would pay. Consider this case Kuralt initiated.

(Reading) Married female, age 38, two children, currently pregnant. She wandered out into the woods to have her last child. They sleep on corn shucks and cotton piled in the corner. This couple came to the Welfare Department to request sterilization for the woman.

Such requests did happen, though we'll never know if that woman truly wanted sterilization. Some social workers did coerce consent out of women by threatening to withhold welfare benefits. Kuralt claimed that nobody in Mecklenburg County ever got sterilized against their will.

Rutgers researcher Johanna Schoen spoke to Kuralt in the early '90s, a few years before he died.

I don't even know whether Wallace Kuralt read all the petitions. I mean, in the larger scheme of things, of running the department of public welfare in Mecklenburg County, reading the petitions for eugenic sterilizations probably was a relatively small thing.

Though, certainly not small to the hundreds of people forced into sterilization by those petitions. Kuralt may have had noble intentions, but not all of his social workers did and they were the ones in the field. Plus, those Human Betterment League brochures were everywhere.

Then, in 1960, Kuralt didn't need the Eugenics Board anymore. He had The Pill. He opened a family planning clinic and gave out free birth control pills. Sterilization referrals from Mecklenburg County dropped off dramatically.

Finally, in 1974, the Eugenics Board was quietly disbanded. And now, 37 years later, state officials have decided to try to compensate some 3,000 or so Eugenics Board victims thought to still be alive. The question they're struggling with is - how much money could possibly make things right? For NPR News, I'm Julie Rose in Charlotte.

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