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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this capstone paper and the accumulation of my college career to my roommate of four years, Brooke Plein. As the strongest woman I know, she makes me realize that everyday is worth living and to take nothing life has given me for granted. One of the absolute highlights of my experience here was meeting her. I love you Brooke!
Historiography

For the research on this project I utilized a multitude of sources to complete my inquiry on the world of Wisconsin women during the Great Depression, especially from the viewpoint of women in the criminal system. One of the main sources of research I studied were research books regarding the Great Depression. I found Susan Ware’s book, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s*, especially helpful because it covered the majority of my topic and provided crucial background information. The book was a great account of what American women, both rural and urban, experienced and endured during the economic downturn of the 1930s. Another great book I found that was extremely constructive was Jean V. Matthews book, *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women’s Movement in America, 1875-1930*. Matthews’ work really helped me to understand what women, including those in Wisconsin, had just accomplished during the women’s rights movement of the early Twentieth Century and how the idea of the ‘New Woman’ was continuing to change their world. It seems that after looking back, American women had just overcome a huge hurdle of achieving voting rights and were beginning to conquer equality in the work place and education when the Great Depression struck and created yet another hurdle for them to jump.

My primary source I used for learning about a group of Wisconsin women during the 1930s and how the economic downturn was affecting them were the Milwaukee County Women’s Jail Intake Records from the years 1930-1933. These records, which were unbelievably great condition for their age, provided me
information about what Wisconsin women did for a living, crimes they may have committed, their ethnic backgrounds, and their age. It was a unique way to look at the female population of the state at the time and to determine how the Depression may have affected them in regards to committing crimes of a various assortment.
Abstract

The Great Depression was arguably the most devastating event in American history. The economic collapse during the late 1920s, with consequences lasting into the 1940s, forever changed the lives of millions of citizens. So often history tells the story of the man who gets laid off from his factory job or cannot sell his crops in a downtrodden market because of the monetary crisis, but theirs is not the only story to be told. American women struggled just as much, if not more than the men because it was up to them to keep their families in tact. Women in Wisconsin felt this strain as well, from their farmhouses in the rural West or their urban communities of Madison and Milwaukee. The purpose of this paper is to reassemble what the world for Wisconsin women was like for those who lived in it and to tell the story of the Great Depression from their point of view. I will use the Milwaukee County Women’s Jail Intake Records to put a different spin on the research, learning about a segment of the female population during the era who may have committed crimes due to the strains they were feeling from the economic pressure being applied on themselves and their families.
Background on the Great Depression

The years leading up to the collapse of the American stock market possessed a feeling that was almost the polar opposite of that of the Great Depression itself. Many Americans felt unstoppable in the 1920s. Business was booming with America controlling nearly half of all the power resources in the entire world, the society was taking huge leaps and bounds in technology resulting in the improvement of life, and the nation’s total income itself jumping from $74.3 billion to $89 billion.¹ And for the American woman, everyday life was constantly changing. With the emergence of the “New Woman,” the ideas, images, and freedoms concerning females were rapidly evolving, often in their favor. This New Woman could take an active stance in politics, provide economically for herself, and was also exploring the expansion of her being in ways outside of the realms of wife and mother. The domestic lifestyle was becoming a part of the past. American women gained the right to vote in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, and during this same decade they also acquired access to new educational opportunities and more economic independence away from the men in their lives. By the twenties about half of all the American women over the age of eighteen had worked in places outside the home for some period of their lives.² This was a drastic change to the times before that when mothers and wives general stayed strictly with in the home. Women were many things in the 1920’s: they were the New Woman, the flapper of

the night life, the It Girl setting trends, the working girl, and, in general, more independent individuals. But what these women were not was ready for what they would have to face next.

In October of 1929 things rapidly went awry economically in the United States. On “Black Thursday,” October 24th 1929, thirteen million stocks were traded. When the market opened the following Monday, October 28th, General Electric had fallen forty eight points while Westinghouse and AT&T had dropped thirty four points. On Tuesday, October 29th, market chaos ensued. Sixteen and a half million shares were traded and there was an average decline of forty points. The *New York Times* reported the next day that efforts to estimate the losses in dollars were futile. “Everyone wanted to tell his neighbor how much he had lost. Nobody wanted to listen. It was too repetitious a tale.”\(^3\) The United States had just entered the most trying decade in its history as a nation. As far as American women, after their many triumphs and gains of the 1920s, every single female in the country was affected in some way by the economic devastation, which significantly differentiated the 1930s from the previous decades. All women where then faced with the struggles of the economic downfall in helping to provide for themselves and their families.

After the stock market crash of 1929, $40 billion worth of stocks completely vanished.\(^4\) This extreme loss of money and disruption of the entire economic system cause widespread financial issues on a variety of levels, massive unemployment rates, and severe hunger in thousands of citizens. These events were changing the very ways that much of the American population lived their lives. Families were

\(^3\) Brown, 25.
\(^4\) Brown, 25.
forced to become even more inventive than ever before and to stretch those resources even more thinly. And many times the females in any given household were responsible in accomplishing these tasks of stretching resources.

The state of Wisconsin was no exception to the economic crisis of the Great Depression. The world as each Wisconsin woman knew it differed individually. Some of them lived in the more densely populated areas around the city of Milwaukee, which is the group this paper will focus on, while others lived and worked on farms in the more sparsely populated countryside of the state. Regardless of where they may have lived, they all faced the burden of helping to pull their families through the hard times. As former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt so appropriately wrote in 1933, “The women know that life must go on and that the needs of life must be met and it is their courage and determination which, time and again, have pulled us through worse crises than the present one.”

In 1930, just after the stock market crash, the population of the state was 2,939,006 people. Of this statistic, about half were women who were desperately trying to keep their households together, working the land, or finding employment in one of the urban centers such as Milwaukee, Green Bay, or Madison. In many instances, which were not uncommon in other states as well, the male head of household would lose his job and the woman would have to find employment outside of the home to support the family. Many have suggested that Americans

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during the 1930s turned inward to rely heavily on the matriarch and because of this women’s roles became exceedingly important.6

Many women during this era had to push themselves to think creatively in being able to provide regardless of their problems. Mothers, daughters, sisters and aunts would trade and share ideas for saving money in any ways possible. For example, entire cookbooks were dedicated to recipes that would provide the cheapest but most nutritional meals for the greatest amount of people possible. Women would also try to buy in bulk or share expenses with those in their community around them so that more could be bought for less. Many items were purchased this way, such as flour, fabric, oil and coffee or tea. Families would recycle as many products as they could by using a variety of objects for purposes other than their actual function, such as relining coats with old blankets.7

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7 Ibid, 2.
Because of Wisconsin’s highly agricultural economy during this period, it is also important to note that women during the Great Depression, many of who lived on one of the state’s farms, had triple the workload. Females had to care for the household, tend to children and the enormous task of raising them, in addition to working on the farm. Add to this the immense stress of economic strain and it seems that this lifestyle was not an easy one.

Agriculture in general was also one of the sectors most devastated by the economic downturn. But the prominent agriculture of the state was only one of several parts affected; factories and urban industries were also crushed. According to the Wisconsin Historical Society, “In Wisconsin, people turned from sneaking bootleg beer into jazz halls to devising ways of surviving the worst depression in the nation’s history. Wisconsin suffered severely as factories closed, wages dropped, and unemployment swelled.” And to make matters worse, a severe drought advanced on the land in all of the Midwest during the early 1930s, hitting Wisconsin especially hard.

The urban area around Milwaukee is where women, and families in general, suffered most under the Depression. From 1929 until 1933, the amount of people in the city that actually held paid jobs dropped seventy five percent. Add to that the fact that the number of strikes skyrocketed, increasing sevenfold between 1933 and 1934. Violence was heavily present during these strikes as the population waivered under the weight of economic stress and the inability to make enough money if any at all.8

Wisconsin, along with many other states, suffered from the most devastating bank collapse since its inception into the Union in 1848. Banking in the state would not surpass its pre 1929 vigor until 1942 when industry for the military and World War II would save the country as a whole. For women and their families this meant economic hardship would actually drag on longer than the official Depression itself would last. The slow and painful process of rebuilding personal economics from the ground up would injure Wisconsin women as they tried to do everything they could to provide for their families.

It is no secret that during this era a woman’s role was arguably more important than ever with in her family. For most women in the Midwest who did live an agricultural lifestyle, they had a triple lifestyle that is previously mentioned. But when the Great Depression emerged, many women’s roles took on a fourth burden of providing for their families. Most male head of households in Wisconsin either completely lost their jobs or had suffered heavy pay cuts that helped stabilize employers from also going under. But historian Susan Ware also notes that:

Conditions had always been difficult on farms, especially for women. Rural women’s lives were ruled by low income and poverty, overdependence on cash crops... high fertility, isolation, and the lack of conveniences—all conditions which predated and postdated the 1930s.  

So the Great Depression essentially only added weight to the backs of Wisconsin women by making a tough lifestyle, which they had been living for generations, even tougher.

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9 Ibid
10 Ware, 8-9.
Some other aspects of female life were also changing due to the national crisis. For example, the marriage, divorce and birth rates all dropped off significantly after the stock market crash and did not pick up again until after 1934. This meant a multitude of things for women. First of all, fewer marriages left some young females to fend for themselves if they had become of age at the beginning of just before the downturn. And if these women could not scrape to get by on their own, they may have had to stay with other family members, placing the burden on their mothers, aunts, sisters or grandmothers. According to research, “the proportion of single women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty in 1935 was about thirty percent more than the proportion of single women in the similar cohort five years earlier.”11 Plus it was very expensive to get married. Either way, all women were feeling a pinch from the drop in unions.

And yet, lower numbers of divorces and births could be seen as a blessing in disguise. If a couple was facing marital issues, they may have put off separation due to the inability of each part to support themselves individually, it would have been much easier to try and work together. The national divorce rate dropped from 1.66 per 1,000 population in 1929 to 1.28 in 1932.12 One must also bear in mind that staying in a strained relationship, while fiscally a good move, could bring about domestic abuse or psychological hardship due to the additional economic tension. But the drop in birthrates is probably the most significant fortune simply because the less mouths to feed and bodies to clothe the smaller amount of money to be spent. Although it is no secret that children bring joy to many couples’ lives, during

11 Ibid, 7.
12 Ware, 7.
the Great Depression one can only imaging the complicated emotions felt by a family who found out they were pregnant. Birth rates dropped so low during this era that they fell below the replacement level for the first time in United States history. In 1930 the average was 21.3 live births per 1,000 population falling to 18.4 by 1933. Most couples put off having children at all costs, and with the rise in a variety of forms of birth control this was more easily done than ever before. But still if a woman found she was pregnant, the event was often treated as a misfortune and an increase in abortions, even though illegal, began to also rise.13

Another major change for Wisconsin women, as part of a more national change as well, was many instances of role reversals between males and females. Because more time than not, the man, who was also previously the head of the household, found himself at home because of unemployment or a mass cut in hours at work. This change in responsibility for men irritated both males and females. Mothers and wives who were now trying to help provide for the family did not enjoy having the man constantly around and getting in their way. And many fathers and husbands despised the fact that they were not providing for their families, feeling like they were detracting from their masculinity and proper roles as a man. Some men were more than happy to help out around the house, doing chores so that they could feel they were contributing something to the family. But other times the man would not want any part of “women’s work,” believing that he was above doing such

13 Ibid, 7.
a thing. And women sometimes did not want his help, believing that their husbands were terrible housekeepers.¹⁴

For those women who had husbands who completely lost their jobs or were single and had to find a way to provide for themselves, joining the work force was the only way to accomplish the means of survival. In Wisconsin, this was especially true for females living in urban areas than females who lived on farms that were struggling or else just not making it. Nationally, the proportion of women in the workforce increased by one percent during the Depression and of married women in the workforce increased by four percent.¹⁵ Statistics also show that forty percent of the wives finding these jobs were of middle class families, which were widely represented in the state. But there were several factors working against women who wanted to become a part of the working world. First of all, the public was still not on board with wives and mothers breaking traditional roles to become employed. In 1936, a Gallup poll showed that 82 percent of Americans thought that wives whose husbands were still employed, even if they had faced dramatic pay cuts, should not have a job.¹⁶ Despite the economic hardships being faced by the entire country, the institution of gender roles still stood strong in the minds of many Americans and could not be swayed by a need to provide for one’s family. Another factor working against women was a restriction on employment opportunities based on a man’s opportunity. Men were often hired before women for a multitude

¹⁴ Ware, 15.
¹⁶ Ibid, 23.
of jobs, keeping gender roles in check with conventional beliefs. And lastly, women who wanted to join the workforce, whether for only a few years or as a career, faced a major decision concerning ‘celibate careerism.’ A woman who had to or else wanted to hold a wage paying job was required to choose that over having or maintaining her marriage, having or raising her children, and having or maintaining a household. Today it is common knowledge that the ideal of the ‘working women’ can and has been accomplished many times but during the Depression years that idea to many was unfathomable.

Considering how the Great Depression altered the very history of the United States, in a general sense it may not have altered the lives of Wisconsin women drastically. As mothers and wives, they were still working hard to provide and care for their families. It is true, however, that the Depression forced them to put in even more effort and become more creative in how they would make the lives of their loved ones as comfortable and pleasant as possible.

Women in the Milwaukee Jail System, 1930-1933
The downfall of the American economy had a most definite affect on many lives in the country, but it did not completely stop the inner workings of society. Life went on. People still fell in love, raised families, and celebrated birthdays, anniversaries, or graduations. And people still broke the law. In Wisconsin, both men and women still committed crime during the 1930s and many, consequently, went to jail.

One of the main women's correctional facilities during the 1930s was located in Milwaukee County itself. The Milwaukee County Women's Jail kept intake records of the women who passed through its doors to either serve time, pay fines, make bail, or serve as state witnesses to a variety of other faults and offenses. Luckily, these records are in excellent condition and when studied, provide a plethora of information regarding each woman's name, age, home address, occupation, crime, and sometimes sentence or ethnic background. After studying these documents thoroughly, I have found a variety of patterns, trends, and learned the stories of these women. It is important to note while studying this era for Wisconsin women that crime still was committed and that just because the country as a whole faced severe economic hardship, it did not mean corruption and the institution of law was any less prevalent in society.

Describing the Intake Records
To begin, it is necessary to describe the records themselves. I personally examined the files from 1930 through 1933, and these three were combined into two hard covered books, larger than the average notebook, that contained many pages of lined paper. Not all of the pages were used. Each page, on average, was set up as a small chart, starting with the inmates’ name, address, then age and occupation, crime and date. The charts spanned two pages, when the book is opened flat face up, and each was hand written (not typed on a type writer). The books themselves are in very good condition for being nearly eighty years old. Most of the time the information was taken down in pencil but sometimes it was recorded in pen. It seems, from the handwriting, three or four people were mainly doing the documentation, assumedly women. Plus, some of the pages were very well organized with the words nicely spaced and neatly written, while others were looser with words written in the margins or above other words. This may have been because the secretary had to take in many women at once and she had to collect and write the information quickly.

The information that was given was not always consistent. Some parts of the intake record were missing but other individuals had all of their details recorded, which were their name, address, ethnicity, age, occupation, and the crime they committed. Of the individuals who had some of their information missing I could not specifically tally that count, as well as those whose information in which I could not decipher the handwriting. Plus, who ever was recording the information would many times use abbreviations such as “vag.” or “L.L.B” to describe the woman’s
crimes.\textsuperscript{17} I could make educated guesses as to what those markings meant but I could never be completely sure, so I decided to not include them in my study at all.

\textit{The Female Criminals}

\textsuperscript{17} Milwaukee County Sheriff. Women's Jail. Register of Prisoners, Volumes One and Two. 1930-1933.
Just from gathering this somewhat limited amount of information on each individual, collectively much can be learned not only about the women in the jail system but also about women in Wisconsin at the time. I found patterns and gathered a variety of statistics regarding these documents and what women did for work, their ages, many of their ethnic backgrounds, and the range of the crimes.

As was true to traditional gender roles of the era, a majority of the women in the records documented their occupation as either “housework,” “housewife,” or “home maker.” The next most reported job, which was of a significantly less amount, was waitress. I would venture a guess that many women who worked as waitresses were either single or worked it as a source of second income seeing how it was a generally female role during the era. There were a wide variety of other occupations given as positions that these women held at the time of their arrests. Some of them were, in order of their frequency from greatest to least: factory worker, saleslady (with the rise of the department store), telephone operator (probably due to their increasing use), laundry work, secretarial work, cook or baker, bookkeeping, nursing, mail, seamstress work, teaching, cashier, real estate, and hotel maid.\(^{18}\)

These findings seem to hold fairly true to what I have discovered of Wisconsin women at the time. During the first part of the twentieth century most females took on the identity of ‘housewife.’ According to research, by the decade just before the Great Depression over half of the adult women in the American population had been employed in places other than the home at some point or

\(^{18}\) Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volumes One and Two.
another, but most of these experiences were short lived.\textsuperscript{19} So it is not surprising that only a few years later this is still the trend. Some of the women did have jobs outside the home, but none of these except for maybe teaching or nursing were careers that would last long.

About a third of the records made no mention of the ethnic background of the inmates, but the rest did mark what nationalities they were. The most prevalent of these was German, which was unsurprising to me. During the 1930s (insert percent here) of Wisconsin citizens were of German decent and even today a large number of the population still have this in their heritage. But there were many other ethnic backgrounds present in the women’s jail as well, including Polish, Irish, Slovakian, Swedish, French, American, Mexican, Scottish, and English. I did notice, however, that there was no representation of Native Americans in the records. I know that the Native populations in Wisconsin had largely been discriminated against and displaced from their homes at this point, but it is unclear if any criminals were simply dealt with within their own tribes or not placed in the county jail at all.\textsuperscript{20}

Each year of the records had certain patterns and trends as well. Regarding all of the years collectively, there was an arrest and intake, on average, at least once a day. Some days there was more than one, other days there were none. I found that no arrests were made on Christmas day, but other holidays, such as Christmas Eve or New Year’s day did have arrests. In this particular case, the lack of arrests on the

\textsuperscript{19} Matthews, 51
\textsuperscript{20} Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volumes One and Two.
Christmas holiday may be because the majority of Wisconsin’s population was Christian at the time and regard that day as the holiest of the entire year.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{21} Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volumes One and Two.
The intake records from the year 1930 saw many of the same patterns congruent with the other years. In 1930, there were approximately 346 bookings of criminals, witnesses, or releases with in the Milwaukee County Women’s Jail. A majority of the women recorded their occupation as housework or housewife and no one was booked on December 25th, Christmas Day. There were a multitude of crimes recorded for women in this year. Some of the more frequent law breaking activities were disorderly conduct, drunk and disorderly conduct, larceny (or theft), and broken probation, for which the typical sentence was thirty days or paying a hefty fine (most likely dependent upon the frequency of the offence).  

The 1930 records had the least amount of information simply because the first date listed was in April. It is probable that who ever was taking the information simply had to start a new document due to space. 199 individuals gave housewife or housework as their occupation, about fifty eight percent of the whole. The next most common occupation was waitress at 43 instances and just over twelve percent of the total. Given the urban nature of the city of Milwaukee eleven women worked in factories, barely three percent. The remainder of the inmates who did give their occupations worked a variety of careers: teaching, secretarial work, cooking/baking.

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22 Milwaukee County Sheriff, Intake Records Women’s Jail, 1930-1933, Register of Prisoners, Vol. 1 & 2, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
laundry work, phone operating, bookkeeping, seamstress work, retail, and nursing.\textsuperscript{23} (See Graph One)

During this year, along with a wide variety of work, the women committed a wide variety of crime. The most frequently committed crime was larceny, or common law theft, at 21 occasions. Six percent of all the women recorded committed this offense. Sixteen of the 346 females in the records were simply witnesses attending court of meeting with governmental officials. Seventeen women committed adultery (approximately five percent), fourteen were booked on disorderly conduct (approximately four percent), another fourteen on forgery charges (approximately four percent), and nine women broke their previous probations (approximately three percent). The remainder of the crimes, all occurring six or less times, were abandonment, drunk, murder, assault and battery, shoplifting, defrauding, vagrancy, fornication, bigamy, burglary, federal narcotics, drunk driving, aiding riot, and contempt of court.\textsuperscript{24} (See Graph Two)

There were a few transgressions that were of particular interest. The first was a few cases of fornication, or consensual sex between two unmarried people. Women in the 1930s were still idealized as pure and were to act proper, so it is not completely shocking that a woman could be arrested for this act. But one must wonder, was the man also arrested? I would venture to guess probably not. By today’s standards it seems that many people in our society could be arrested for this “crime,” but luckily it is no longer considered an offense. Another one of interest were the arrest made for adultery. It is no secret that unfaithful marriages have

\textsuperscript{23} Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volume One.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
always existed in one form or another, but the question during the Great Depression is did these particular cases result from unhappy marriages, which had to stay together because of rough financial situations? It may be impossible to know for sure the answer to that question unless one was able to ask that particular offender, but I am willing to bet that several of these cases were the result of the financial downturn.

Another crime of interest was noted as “abandonment.” I am not sure if this referred to child abandonment, but I would assume that in some cases it did. There were only a handful of crimes marked as this, so based on that I would think that these acts were not a direct result of the depression. But one cannot be sure. Seeing how abortion and birth control, although growing in availability, were still not prominent in society, what was a woman to do at the time with a child that she absolutely could not afford? It is an extremely terrible thing to think about, but the lack of income and resources may have led to drastic measures on a woman’s part.

Of the other crimes committed shoplifting is probably one of the easiest to connect to the hardships of the 1930s: when a woman simply could not afford something, she may have just stolen it. I can imagine that some people were desperate for necessities if they could not afford them at a certain time, such as milk, flour, bread or eggs. As was mentioned previously, during the Depression many families turned inward to rely on the female figures to hold the unit together, and under this kind of pressure to provide, especially when a husband could not, it is
quite possible that a wife or mother would go to the extreme to supply goods for her family. 25

25 Ware, 8.
The next year of records, 1931, had many similarities to the previous year but also some unique differences. During this year 478 intakes were recorded. Once again a majority of the women performs housekeeping duties as their day jobs. This year also took in many more inmates on charges of disorderly conduct and violation of probation. Those women who did violate probations seemed to be waitresses as their chosen profession, which was interesting. I cannot say that there would be a certain reason that a waitress would commit a crime, but it did also seem that those females tended to be single, so maybe the lack of family stability in an era of economic uncertainty led to the opportunity of committing more crimes. In addition, once again no one was booked on Christmas Day.26

Of the 478 women passing through the Milwaukee County jail, 312 of them listed housekeeping as their chosen profession, sixty five percent of the whole. The next most popular choice of employment, the same as the previous year, was waiting tables with 68 women in this industry, or fourteen percent. More women were recorded as waitresses in this year than the last. Other frequently noted occupations were factory work at thirteen instances (barely three percent), eleven factory workers and eleven seamstresses (approximately two percent), nine involved in nursing (1.8 percent), seven cooks and seven laundry workers (both 1.4 percent), and seven also worked in beauty shops or beauty parlors. I found this last occupation very intriguing. It had not been mentioned in the previous year and it is

26 Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volume One.
strange that this job suddenly appeared, especially during the economic
downtrodden when it is doubtful that many women had spare cash to be spending
in a salon. The rest of the occupations mention were the same as those in 1930, but
in 1931, along with work in beauty parlors, some of the other new jobs were
restaurant workers and entertainers (singers and actresses). The only job that was
mentioned in 1930 that was not present the next year was teaching.27 (See Graph
Three)

Of the female charges in 1931 the most regular crime was once again larceny
with 54 instances and eleven percent of the total. The next most frequent
transgression was adultery with 24 records or five percent, a dramatic increase
from 1930. Disorderly conduct had twelve occurrences, or 2.5 percent, and eleven
women were drunk (approximately 2.3 percent). Ten inmates broke their
probations, another ten committed forgery (approximately two percent each), eight
were caught shoplifting (approximately 1.6 percent), and six were arrested on
assault and battery charges (approximately 1.3 percent). Once again, the same
occupations mentioned in 1930 were represented but some new crimes were
documented, including the first instance of prostitution and attempt to murder or
kill. Yet there was no evidence of any woman committing crimes of burglary or
aiding a riot.28 (See Graph Four)

In the records, there are instances of assault with the intent to kill, two
instances of outright murder and one instance of murder with a weapon, and an
instance of kidnapping. Why the sudden intensity in crimes during this year?

27 Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volume One.
28 Ibid.
Multiple sources point to 1932 being the worst year of the Great Depression, so it would be wrong to put the blame of this upswing of crime on the period of the crisis itself. It is hard to say the exact cause of these events but it is still extremely interesting that they occurred when the year before had absolutely no presence of murder or kidnapping.

Another trend of the 1931 records was the variation in age of the offenders. While taking down information, I divided the women into seven main age groups: age 16 to 20, age 21 to 25, age 26 to 30, age 31 to 36, age 37 to 42, age 43 to 50, and age 51 and older. I came to find that the most frequent age group of offenders was the 21 to 25 range, coming in at 128. The youngest female to be booked was sixteen-year-old Sarah Bauer, who was also the only African American I could find in the year (although she was marked as ‘colored’). The oldest woman was an incredible 94 years old, but I could not make out from the handwriting what she was taken in for.29

From my own research, I was not surprised that the group of young twentysomethings were the most documented group. Beginning in the 1920s, women were expanding their horizons and finding work outside the home after they graduated high school and before they got married, usually between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. According to author Jean V. Matthews:

This new pattern in women’s lives thus meant a much sharper break than ever before between the world of young womanhood, much of which was now extra familial, and the world of domesticity, and the world of domesticity they entered on marriage. 30

29 Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volume One.
30 Matthews, 51.
By using this idea, it would make sense that a proportion of younger, single women could have been caught without the support of a spouse or family during the Great Depression, perhaps spurring them to turn crime in a way in order to support themselves. It is also true that the Depression had its largest impact on urban women, which is most likely where many of these single women would have to live to work such jobs during their transition years, cities in Wisconsin such as Milwaukee.31

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31 Ware, 13.
The year of 1932 had a wide variety of crimes, but the nice thing about the records for this year is that they all consistently marked the ethnic background of the female criminals. Four hundred and thirty four bookings were noted in this year. The previous years did so off and on and in no particular pattern, especially the 1930 documents, but 1932 was well organized in this sense and provided even more information about the women. There were many ethnicities listed in this section that were similar to those in 1930, including German, French, Polish, English, Swedish, French Slovakian, and a handful of Mexicans. But what was different was that several others were listed. For example, the marking “Col.,” which I took to mean Colored or African American was extremely prevalent. In 1930 the state of Wisconsin was home to 10,739 African Americans according to that year’s census. I counted around sixty-four of these women, which was the third highest group that year behind one hundred and fifteen Americans and eighty-five Germans. I cannot explain why they would start marking African American women all of the sudden at their intake when previously few, if any, had been recorded. It is possible that there were no one of that race arrested in previous years, but I find that highly unlikely given the large amount of them that had suddenly appeared.

Occasions of the women in this set of records were, unsurprisingly, dominated by housekeeping. 287 of the total 434 women claimed this profession, coming in at sixty six percent of the total figure and the highest percentage of all four years. 74 women, or seventeen percent, were waitresses in this year and ten women worked retail (or just over two percent). Some of the other top jobs were

32 Gibson, Table 64.
33 Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volume One.
factory work at nine (or two percent), secretary at seven (or 1.6 percent), and
seamstress, nurse, and restaurant work all coming in at six each (1.4 percent). This
year there was one criminal teacher, unlike 1931, but no phone operators were
arrested. Comparatively, all of the other occupations were represented on at least
six or less occasions.\textsuperscript{34} (See Graph Five)

Once again the most recurrent crime in this year was larceny with 38
incidents, or 8.8 percent of the total. The frequency of adultery continued to rise as
well from the previous years. 1932 recorded 36 charges of the crime, at 8.3 percent,
barely less than adultery. The third most popular crime of Milwaukee’s female
citizens was simply being drunk, which one can assume involved some sort of public
drunkenness or drunk and disorderly charge. 22 of those incarcerated faced this
accusation, at 5.1 percent of the charges. Other crimes that occurred in substantial
amounts were breaking probation coming in at 14 counts (or 3.2 percent),
disorderly conduct with 11 counts (or 2.5 percent), nine counts of forgery (or 2.1
percent), and seven counts of fornication and shoplifting (or 1.6 percent). All of the
other previously mentioned crimes, except for two, were also represented in 1932
plus perjury, reckless driving, the intention to do bodily harm, and keeping kids
from school. This last offense is intriguing, making me wonder if a mother kept her
children from school to do some sort of work, probably not completely legal, to
make the family extra money in order to survive. But it was the only case of this
crime being committed in the whole four years I studied. The two crimes not
present this year were murder and attempt to kill/murder. It seems the Wisconsin

\textsuperscript{34} Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volume One.
women were feeling a little less mortally violent than previous years. And lastly, there were only six witnesses who came to the institution in this year.\textsuperscript{35} (See Graph Six)
And 1933, the final year of the records that I studied, proved to be noteworthy as well. Milwaukee women committed the highest amount of crime with 534 intakes recorded in all over the span of the year. Housekeeping was still the main occupation for these women, although there were some minority careers that seemed to become more frequent during this year. There were almost three times as many arrests for prostitution, although it was obviously not listed as the woman’s occupation, it was still some sort of a source of income for them. It is possible that this occurred from each of these particular women really feeling the pinch financially by 1933, but there is no way to be sure that any of them would enter such a life of crime to pay the bills. It would be nice if the records, in this case, told of their marital status because I feel that single women would have been more inclined to turn to prostitution than those who were married.36

As with all of the other three years, housework still ruled the occupations of Wisconsin women’s lives. Of the total, 336, or sixty three percent, claimed this as their occupation. But there were some surprising changes with the numbers of the other occupations. 55 women were waitresses (or ten percent) and 18 (3.4 percent) worked as a maid or in the hotels of Milwaukee, a huge increase from the almost nonexistent occupation in the previous years. Another surprise was that secretarial workers were also committing more crimes with 17 of them being charged in this year (3.2 percent). The number of entertainers arrested multiplied as well. In 1932 there were four but in this year it was one of the most reported jobs with 16 arrested at just under three percent of the total. I cannot say if these increases in

36 Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volume Two.
certain occupations were due to the increase of crime in general but the patterns in 1933 are quite interesting and different from the other records.37

Concerning the other jobs listed, 12 worked in factories (or 2.2 percent), nine worked retail as salesladies (or 1.7 percent), eight worked as seamstresses (or 1.5 percent), and seven as nurses (or 1.3). The only group not represented in this year was teachers, which in previous years were never a significant population anyways. The beauty parlor made a comeback in this year as well with six of those booked giving it as their source of employment.38 (See Graph Seven)

Seeing how 1933 saw the most female arrests of any of the four years, it would only make sense that it also had the widest range of crimes that more frequent occurred than before. The most common crime committed was, as was typical, larceny with 45 instances, making up 8.4 percent. Women were also being more drunk, disorderly and committing adultery in higher numbers than any of the other records, at 29 intakes for each representing 5.4 percent of the total. Ten women broke their probations in some way, accounting for 1.9 percent of the total crimes. Nine women were charged with assault and battery (or 1.7 percent). This year saw no murders by women or any attempted murders, but it also saw no bigamy, perjury, reckless driving, burglary, federal narcotics, keeping kids from school, or aiding riots. Along with these it seems that the usually more frequently represented crime of forgery dropped significantly to only three occurrences from

37 Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volume Two.
38 Ibid.
the previous year’s nine (1932), ten (1931), and fourteen (1930). And lastly, there were ten witnesses.\(^{39}\) (See Graph Eight)

Another unique quality concerning the documents for this year was the expanding variety of crimes committed. All of the common offenses were still included here, such as larceny, adultery, drunk and disorderly, and violating probations, as previously stated. But several new law breaking acts were added, such as destroying property, suspicion of adultery, abortions, petty larceny, “common drunk,” selling beer with out a license, resisting an officer, manslaughter, operating a gaming device, immigration, and abstaining money.\(^{40}\) It is important to take note of the abortion offense. During the 1930s, as the birth rate fell, expectations about having and raising children was also evolving, along with the wider availability of birth control in eliminating unwanted fertility. Pregnancy was too often treated as a misfortune throughout the decade and in some cases the acceptance of abortion, though still illegal, became prominent.\(^{41}\) If a woman could not get any forms of birth control, which at the time was not extremely widespread, combined with the economic strain, it is not surprising that during these years arrests were made for this crime.

I also found that in this year there were more and more charges of illegal activities that would some how make the perpetrator money, including selling beer with out a license, operating a gaming device, and prostitution. 1933 saw the highest number of arrest for prostitution that the other three years, and not just slightly

\(^{39}\) Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volume Two.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) Ware, 7.
higher. In 1930 there were zero counts, 1931 had one and 1932 had two, but 1933 the frequency suddenly jumped up. Could this be the stressors of the depression continuing to add pressure on these Wisconsin women? And was the woman who was charged with selling beer possibly bootlegging and selling for cheaper in order to make a bigger profit? It very well could be that because of the economic pulls of the 1930s men and women alike, as we saw with the number of arrests for being drunk, would turn to alcohol and looking to buy it for cheap. There very well could have been good money to be made there.

Conclusions

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42 Milwaukee County Sheriff, Volume One.
After completing this research, it is clear to me that women in the Great Depression endured many things. Their world was one of change, springing from the triumphs of the 1920s and their accomplishments of gaining suffrage and further equality in education and the workplace. But one is no to be distracted by the grandeur of America in the 1920s, from the leaps and bounds the country would come crashing into an economic hardship with no brakes to soften its collision. The Great Depression created mass hardship for a majority of the American public whether in great amounts or less extreme proportions. Jobs were lost, homes foreclosed, and dreams were shattered for many families. And while the mostly male job work force either suffered wide spread layoffs or pay cuts, women in every state had to pick up the slack to hold their families together.

The women in Wisconsin seemed to be feeling these same pressures and dealing with the same difficulties as women elsewhere. But what I have learned in doing my research is that life went on and the female population of the state accepted the Depression for what it was. These women, whether living on hard working farms or in one of the state’s hustling urban centers, saw a change in their world. Fewer marriages, divorces, and a lower birth rate kept Wisconsin families from growing or shrinking during the decade. The women who lived on the farms, which was quite a bit of the female population in the state at the time, accepted an even heavy workload to keep their families surviving. The women who lived in one of the industrial centers, such as Milwaukee, suffered more severely from factory line lay offs and low pay, either for themselves or for their husbands. Role reversal
was common during this era because of these affects, forcing women to be ever evolving and more creative in picking up the slack of husbands who could no longer be the sole provider. Mothers and wives in Wisconsin took on this challenge with vigor and worked as hard as ever for their families.

With economic strain at an all time high, it is no wonder that some women, despite what may have started as best intentions in the beginning of the economic downturn, continued to turn to crime in certain ways as they had done in years before. Some of these crimes had clearer connections to financial strife, such as theft, shoplifting, and abortion. Other offences seemed to be a continuation normal life on the part of society with crime being apart of that; there always had been and always will be crime. There were several accounts of drunk or disorderly conduct, and I am sure there will be more of these in the future. Plus, some women, then and now are engrossed in a life of crime, and no Great Depression was going to change that lifestyle.

All in all, it was nice to find that, even in the face of hard times, the women of Wisconsin were pushing forward. Their world may have been a chaotic and tumultuous one, but it seems many were able to avoid law breaking and immoral behavior to come out on top in the face of adversity. And as for the women who may have committed one crime or another during this period, it was most interesting to see how their actions may have connected to the greater complexities occurring in society at the time.

**Annotative Bibliography**

This source analyzed the rapidly changing, and in many cases progressing, lives of women just before, during, and immediately following the Women's Movement in the United States. It really helped me to understand the societal, political, and educational changes that women were facing at the time and how this was affecting the greater experience of the Great Depression. The book covered a wide spectrum of issues and the author was thorough in the writing. It was a highly applicable source to use in my paper.

This source provided a deep and descriptive summary of the American female experience in the 1920s, just before the stock market crash. By reading this book I was able to comprehend what life was like for a majority of women at the time. Understanding where they had come from really made what they did in the 1930s clearer.

This document was very helpful because it summarized and charted all of the information of the United States Census from 1970. But the authors went beyond simply listing the whole numbers, they created tables that were extremely easy to use so the reader could decipher populations based on race in certain areas and states of the country.

This book is similar to *The Changing Lives of American Women* but it focuses specifically on the accomplishments of the women's movement and the mounting need for continual change. It also gave details on the idea of the "new woman," the evolving female after the Women's Movement who was increasingly independent, educated, and social. In regards to the Great Depression, many of these new woman figures were moving into cities such as Milwaukee and once the economic crisis hit they became stranded both literally and financially, single and poor in the city. I felt that several of these women were representative of those from the intake records who were more likely to have to commit certain crimes to get by.
Milwaukee County Sheriff, Intake Records Women’s Jail, 1930-1933, Register of Prisoners, Vol. 1 & 2, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

These documents were the actual records that I used to conduct my research. The were contained in two volumes, hand written, and were composed of the personal information of all the women who entered the Women’s Jail in Milwaukee between the years of 1930 and 1935. I used the facts and data to produce analysis of the correlation between the Great Depression and Female crime in Wisconsin from 1930 until 1933.


This book was probably the most useful for my own research because it focused on the female experience during the Great Depression and years following. The book was well organized into a variety of chapters concerning the separate sections of women’s lives, such as topics concerning, work, family, and the media. Susan Ware did an excellent job depicting the everyday life of American women and their families.


The Wisconsin Historical Society's website is rich with information concerning the state’s past. I found the section on the Great Depression surprisingly informative, detailing the that’s governmental policies and efforts during the economic crisis and the experience of the Wisconsin populace. Each state had a very unique encounter with the Depression and the Wisconsin Historical Society does a great job summarizing this state’s.
Appendix: Graphs

Please note that I did not include housework in any of the graphs concerning occupations simply because it was clearly an overwhelming majority. I also did not include any of the crimes that occurred less than five times in a given year to keep the graphs manageable.
Graph Seven

Crimes of 1932

Graph Eight

Occupation 1933
1933 Crimes

- Larceny
- Prostitution
- Drunk
- Disorderly
- Adultery
- Assault/Battery
- Breaking Probation
- Witness