

COMING IN JULY: OUR ANNUAL SURVEILLANCE ISSUE

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BUSTED

BY **DANIEL J. DEMERS**

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Private detectives hired by Sears, Roebuck & Company and Marshall Field & Co. didn't fare well in 1913. They became the scapegoats of a public outcry over abuse of women and the low wages paid to female store clerks in Chicago. In an attempt to quell a growing public outrage over the paltry salaries, the "Merchant Princes" of Chicago had hired the detectives to get the goods on wage hike proponents and state investigators.

Things started coming to a head in January when a sensational story appeared in the *Chicago Day Book* about a couple of young women who were frisked by a male detective. One girl, a sales clerk, was employed by Marshall Field, the other was her roommate. The detective reached into the clerk's stocking and extracted \$305 and confiscated \$15 from the roommate's purse. The clerk claimed the money in her stocking was her savings. The detective then went to the girl's apartment forcing a third roommate who was elderly and sick out of bed. He removed all the clerk's and her roommate's apparel.

The girls were arrested on theft charges. When they appeared in court, the detective produced documents he alleged the girls signed admitting they stole from Marshall Field and permitting him to ransack their apartment. The surprised girls in unison "chored together that they had never signed such documents." The girls' attorney mysteriously resigned midway through the trial and the case was continued. Feeling they weren't going to get a fair trial the two girls left town.

Two months later, Marshall Field and Sears & Roebuck "millionaires" were summoned before the newly created Illinois Senate "White Slave Committee." The committee headed by Lieutenant Governor Barratt O'Hara was investigating "the millionaires who were paying starvation wages [to young girl employees] and driving some [of them] to the streets," asserted the *Chicago Day Book*. O'Hara thundered that these men "are in the same class with the professional white slavers [and] the pimps."

Julius Rosenwald of Sears related the average women's wage paid was \$9.20 a week [\$238 in current values] and that many received between \$5 [\$130] and \$5.50 [\$142] a week. Ed Mandel of Mandel Brothers Department Store asserted a clerk could live on \$7.25 [\$187] a week which he broke down as follows: \$1 clothing, 25¢ laundry, 25¢ room rent, bus fare 60¢, lunches 70¢, doctors and dentists 60¢ and church donations 10¢. William Thorne of Montgomery Ward disagreed, stating a girl could adequately live on \$8 a week (not including the 10¢ for church donation) and also told the committee he didn't believe "the yarn" about girls being forced to the streets. The executives objected to the term "starvation wages" to which O'Hara responded "Wages on which a girl cannot live, wages that force her to go on the streets or to a 'gentleman friend' for help, are starvation wages." A page in the Marshall Field employee handbook read that the girls should "work for love of the work" raised eyebrows.

Many of the girls lived at home, the committee was told. An incredulous O'Hara asked "[Are you telling me you] take all the girls time and skill and [then] expect their parents to help pay their wages?"

As the hearings wound down, Sears executive Julius Rosenwald was asked if he "had hired detectives to trail the committee members?" The *Chicago*



Day Book reported "Rosenwald's fat body lurched suddenly...[his] derisive grin faded rapidly...wiped his forehead and answered "no." When asked if some other executive might have, the *Day Book* reporter wrote: "The sweat stood out greasily on Rosenwald's forehead and trickled down his cheek." This time he shouted "anyone who says that is guilty of a falsehood."

In June of 1913 Rosenwald was exposed as paying "huge sums to private detectives...to spy upon and break up every meeting of store clerks [who were unionizing within the AFL]." One woman who gave her name as "Miss Stewart" at an organizational meeting "was forced to admit that she was the agent of a private detective outfit," reported a Chicago newspaper. She had lied, telling the girls she had come from San Francisco where she had been a member of the Retail Clerk's Association. She was asked to leave the meeting. It was later discovered she was paid \$25 for every meeting she attended. A June edition of the *Chicago Day Book* reported "the department store millionaires are ready to spend" whatever it takes to keep their employees powerless in their grip.

Ultimately the female clerks unionized and got their pay raises **PI**

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