A PRIZE-WINNING BABY OF 1931

BY RICHARD M. CAPLAN

At age 15 months and 2 days, Fredda Ellen Sideman faced her competition—155 other “city girls,” ages 12 to 24 months.

Ellen (as Fredda was known) was a contestant in the Iowa State Fair’s Baby Health Contest in 1931. The categories were age, sex, and section (city, town, or rural). She placed second in her category, and she still has the medal (above) and her photo from the Des Moines Register to prove it.

Common at county and state fairs, baby health contests were actually intended to reduce infant and maternal mortality, educate mothers on child nutrition, build doctor/parent relationships for preventive medicine, provide practical and scientific information on early childhood, and determine whether the healthiest babies lived in rural communities, small towns, or large cities. Iowa’s first contest, in 1911, was perhaps the first in the nation.

In Iowa’s 1931 contest, a grand total of 521 babies entered (though today we would call them toddlers). The judging lasted from August 28 until September 3. In three-minute intervals, each baby was examined briefly by one or more nurses and a physician. Points were assigned in these categories: mental and nervous; eye, ear, nose and throat; oral and dental; physical; measurements; and consultation.

Points were subtracted from a starting total of 100 for developmental milestones missed; nutritional defects; physical abnormalities; lack of vaccination for smallpox or diphtheria; and other suboptimal details noted by the examiner.

Ellen was thought to have “slight conjunctivitis” on the day she was judged, which cost her 0.1 point and contributed to her reduced total of 98.20, as her score cards reveal here. The score attained by the girl who cost her a gold medal remains unknown, as do the ranges and means of all participants’ scores.

Historically, the score cards tell us some of the concerns of child-health reformers back then: whether babies were breast- or bottle-fed, what solids they ate, and whether they had a “daily sunning” and napped with a window open. Free hearing and vision tests were offered to older children.

An interesting contest innovation allowed babies to be re-examined the following year under the same criteria, permitting them the opportunity to receive an “improvement score” and an associated prize. Regrettably in 1932 Ellen lost fractions of points for knock knees, flat feet, precocity (!), over-aggressiveness, an unspecified eruption, some detail involving measurement, and a final, sad loss of 0.2 points for a few swollen lymph nodes. Thus, her score declined from 98.20 points in the previous year to a still-not-too-worrisome 96.25.

Ellen’s reduced score may have been a harbinger of a downward trend, since she developed ragweed hay fever at age 8, asthma at age 74, and a few other episodes of minor, transient illness.

On the plus side, though, her fine beginning presaged the bearing of four healthy sons, graduating from the University of Iowa with a bachelor’s degree (including Phi Beta Kappa, perhaps to make up for
the earlier loss of a half-point for precocity) and a master’s degree, and working with pleasure as a
high-school librarian while raising children and maintaining a happy marriage, to me, now in its
60th year.  
Of course, her sterling (silver) attainment in the competition cannot by itself attest to the
predictive value of the contest, but since there is no research suggesting otherwise, I'm delight­
fully to have made my successful choice of a life partner without even knowing that she
was a prizewinner in Iowa’s 1931 Baby Health Contest.

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