



Buck vs. Bell

Eugenics is the study of the methods that can improve the inherited qualities of a species. The dream of eugenicists was to cleanse the human gene pool of defects. Eugenics is an idea that we often associate with Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany, but in the early part of the 20th century, eugenics was viewed by many in *this* country as a progressive idea and necessary practice.

The hallmark case of Buck v. Bell concerned 17-year-old Carrie Buck, the first person to be sterilized under Virginia's sterilization laws. To eugenics proponents, she appeared to be a prime example of why sterilization was necessary. Buck was the allegedly retarded daughter of a "feeble-minded" woman. At the time, many believed that feeble-mindedness was genetically passed from one generation to the next.

The plaintiff of the case, Carrie Buck, and her mother Emma, had been committed to the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble Minded. Both were considered "feeble-minded" and "promiscuous" because they had children out of wedlock. Carrie's child, Vivian, was judged to be "feeble-minded" and "backward" at only seven months of age. Dr. Albert Priddy, the Superintendent of the Virginia Colony, testified that members of the Buck family "belong to the shiftless, ignorant, and worthless class of anti-social whites of the South." Hence, the Buck family, these three generations of "imbeciles," became the perfect test case for state officials to use in favor of the eugenic sterilization law.

In court, Carrie Buck did not have strong representation, and the charges against the young woman were supported by some of the nation's leading eugenicists. Buck lost the case and the forced sexual sterilization of "the feeble-minded" became legal in Virginia.

On May 2, 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Virginia law giving the state permission to sterilize citizens considered "unfit." Writing for the Supreme Court, Oliver Wendell Holmes concluded "that Carrie Buck is the probable potential parent of socially inadequate offspring, likewise afflicted, that she may be sexually sterilized without detriment to her general health and that her welfare and that of society will be promoted by her sterilization....It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing

their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes. Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

This decision reflected a new and growing interest in sterilization not only for controlling "the defectives," but also for institutional population control. The decision also inspired other states to use involuntary sterilization and over the next fifty years approximately 65,000 Americans across the country were subjected to the surgery without their permission. It is also believed that Hitler and the Nazis were inspired by the Virginia law and may have used it as a model for conducting mass sterilizations in Germany and then ultimately for their own efforts to create a master race.

We know now, of course, that the case of Buck vs. Bell was built on many flawed ideas and assumptions. "Feeble-mindedness" was a catch-all term that had virtually no medical or useful meaning. Gould (1981) reports that Carrie Buck, in fact, would not be considered "mentally deficient" by today's standards. It is also known that her pregnancy was *not* a result of promiscuity. Ms. Buck had, in fact, been raped by the nephew of her foster parents. Like many unwed mothers of her time, Carrie was most likely "put away" to hide her pregnancy and prevent a family scandal. It is also known that Vivian, Carrie's daughter, was not an "imbecile" as Holmes had indicated; she actually performed satisfactorily in school, earned As and Bs in "deportment," and made the honor role at the age of seven. Sadly, the child died of an intestinal illness in her childhood.

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