

I was widowed at 35, had never earned a penny in my life and I had five small children to feed.

My parents were Irish immigrants, famine immigrants they called them, but my younger brother Brendan and I were born in Byton, Canada. They call it Ottawa now but when we lived there it was Byton. I was an early Christmas present, born December 21, 1853. I married Thomas Owens, a local gas fitter, in 1879, soon after we moved to America. Chicago. Ten years later Thomas contracted typhoid and died.

That same year, the city of Chicago passed an ordinance prohibiting the employment of children under 14 years old, unless there were extraordinary circumstances requiring them to work. Despite my lack of prior employment of any kind, I was hired as one of five special female health inspectors. Our job was to oversee the sanitary conditions of the many women and children working in Chicago's large stores and factories. Widows and mothers, we were chosen over men because managing other women and children was deemed to be within our natural predisposition. We visited the stores and factories, reported to the Commissioner of Health and were paid a salary of \$50 a month.

I found small children, frail little things in many cases under seven, working for 75 cents or \$1 a week. Despite my knowledge that this modest pittance may have bought food for a sick mother, or milk for a colicky infant at home, I couldn't condone it. Not at the cost of the working children's health and education. So under my strict, yet compassionate supervision, countless illegally employed children were removed from the workforce. I did my best to assist their parents in finding other means to support their destitute families and often contributed from my own salary to help. I had a particular talent for tracking down wife-deserters. I think you call them 'dead-beat dads' now. I saw first-hand how small children were forced to seek employment to keep their family from starving after the father abandoned them. Bringing these scoundrels to justice became my passion and my life's calling. I ferreted out and brought so many of these derelict men to the authorities that the

newly appointed Chief of Police decided to employ me in the detective bureau. I was detailed to the Board of Education as an enforcer of child labor, truancy, and compulsory education laws. My mission was the same except now I was now Sergeant No. 97, with the rank, salary, badge, and the arrest powers of any detective - although I rarely made use of the latter.

At first a woman wearing a police sergeant's star was perceived as a novelty. Some manufacturers were reluctant to cooperate. But fortified by the strong arm of the law and my will to do good, I was able to enforce the laws and gain the manufacturers' trust and compliance. Working children were gradually thinned out, and employers became accustomed to asking for affidavits required by law before any work was given to children.

There were those concerned about the danger of my position setting a precedent of masculinizing womanhood, but an article in the 1906 'Chicago Tribune' assured its readers that this lady police sergeant had lost none of her womanly attributes, and other male detectives in the central office still lifted their hats when they greeted me. I took no notice: my concerns were with the welfare of the children, not the gossip of the time. I like to do police work. It gives me a chance to help women and children who need help. I know little about the kind of work the men do. I never go out looking for robbers or highwaymen. That is left for the men. My work is just woman's work. But I assure you, in my sixteen years of experience, I have come across more suffering than is ever seen by any man detective. Not to mention, in that same article my superior officer, Captain O'Brien was quoted as saying, "Give me men like she is woman and we will have the model detective bureau of the whole world."

Marie Owens, first female US police officer

David Rhodes