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Woman in American History

March 9, 2011

Frances Perkins: Invisible Hero of the People

Born Fannie Coralie Perkins, on April 10, 1880 in Boston, Frances Perkins grew up in a strict congregationalist family. Her family history was rich in American history, and even a familial hero who fought against the tyranny of British rule during the revolutionary war. Smart and clever she excelled in academia, and was allowed to attend a prestigious high school for affluent children, mostly boys. Fannie was close to her father who encouraged her in being educated. Her father also became a supporter of woman's suffrage after seeing a lecture by Anna Howard Shaw.

Early on she found herself connected to the poor, despite her own conservative and affluent upbringing, even declaring herself a Democrat as a young girl. She was particularly influenced by the writings of Jacob Riis and his book 'How the Other Half Lives'. Enrolling in a nearby college of Mount Holyoke, Fannie fell in love with college life. She majored in chemistry and physics, but her true interests lay in a class she took on American Economics. Not the best student, she none the less succeeded in other areas. She overcame her childhood shyness and became known for her social skills and leadership. Mount Holyoke is also where she met her lifelong friend Florence Kelly. Kelly was the executive secretary of the National Consumers League and introduced Fannie to new radical ideas such as Marxism.

After college Francis went to find a job in social work in New York. Rebuffed at her first attempt, she returned home to her parents a little disappointed. After a few months she got an offer to teach at an all girls college, Ferry Hall, and picked up and moved to Chicago.

Her first act on moving to Chicago was to change her name to Frances Perkins. It seemed she was tired of being called 'fannie' as in rear end, but the name also gave her the advantage of being androgynous on paper. A new town was a way for a new name and a new way of life unlike her

conservative parents. Frances also changed her faith to Episcopalian, preferring the more ritualized structure there.

As part of the affluent girls college she mingled with the upper crusts of Chicago, but also became involved with the rougher side of town as well. This skill of navigating both worlds would be a part of the rest of her career. Her interest in social work brought her to the Hull House. The Hull House, run by Jane Addams, provided shelter and education to the working class and immigrants. The Hull house offered everything from job training to a savings bank. Frances went from occasional volunteer to a regular attendant and even lived there on occasion, though her job at Ferry Hall prevented it most of the time. The settlement house became her home and family.

Soon Frances left Ferry Hall to pursue her true passion of social work in Philadelphia. Her first job there was to investigate poor immigrant women being pushed into sexual slavery. Working with these women opened her eyes to the more pervasive problem of woman's inequality. Women were paid less, were given the worst jobs and were excluded from union membership. It also made her realize that she needed further education. Now in her late twenties she decided to go into The Wharton School of Finance and Commerce in Pennsylvania.

Though the school was conservative, she learned more from her fellow, now male, students and started to appreciate her own intellect. She fell in love with a man named Jon Cohen, and friends say they would have married, but he never seemed to notice her. So she went off again, this time to New York once more. She moved into the Hull House there and started studies in social work and economics and gained her Master's degree in Political Science in 1910.

Confident and popular she navigated the social scene, gathering important people around her. She became friends with many in the women's suffrage movement and was a supporter of birth control. She soon accepted a position with the National Consumers League. She believed that low wages and overwork were the root cause of societies problems, and worked to improve “poor conditions in cellar bakeries, long hours and poor wages for women, child labor, and workplace fire hazards.” (downey, 29)

Her job also let her work closely with her friend and mentor, Florence Kelly who taught her to research reform before enacting it, and to bring together employers and workers towards the reform once decided. She began to see that unionization was essential, but she also began to realize that the government needed to lay the playing field.

It was the Triangle Shirtwaist fire that really got Frances committed to her cause. After years of fighting for better working conditions for working woman she was a firsthand witness to the tragedy. The images she saw that day stuck with her and she was determined that it should never happen again. As her idealistic dreams faded her convictions hardened and she decided she would use whatever means she could to see change. The power in New York lay in Tammany Hall, an infamous seat of corruption in the political arena. Tammany Hall gave handouts to the poor in return for votes, and put the kickbacks in their own pockets.

Frances had seen the corrupt system work in favor of people she had worked for as a social worker, and many of those who died in the Triangle Shirtwaist fire had been constituents of Tammany Hall. She made it her business to get to know those in power and started to lobby for legislation on the fifty four hour work week. Though the man in power gave the nod to the bill, it hit a small bump with the canneries who wanted an exemption. Frances had to decide to allow the exemption and let the bill pass for the majority. A year later the exemption was struck from the bill. So was her introduction to political process formed with hard won victories and concessions.

Her time with Tammany Hall changed her in other ways as well. She began to realize she could use her gender as an advantage, and some of the men saw her as non threatening and motherly. In that vein she began to dress a little more matronly, and wearing a string of pearls around her neck. She started to be called Mother Perkins by the press.

In 1912 Frances was given the post of executive secretary of the safety committee that wanted to eradicate industrial fires. A post endorsed by Teddy Roosevelt, whom she had correspondence. Under her leadership they created a commission for fire prevention and the New York State Factory

Investigation Commission. Frances became somewhat of an expert in fire safety and changed laws.

In 1913 Frances Married Paul C. Wilson, but did not change her name as she was somewhat known in certain circles and she feared she would lose her place. Also since Paul worked in the political arena as well, they feared her connections with Tammany Hall could hurt his career.

Frances ducked out of the world for a couple years and had her only child Susanna just as she had been getting restless with married life. Still the child was a joy for her, something she had always wanted and had pursued despite a miscarriage the year previous. Frances only returned to work after her husband suffered what they called a breakdown, but which was most likely bi-polar disorder.

After helping him win election Frances was appointed to the coveted position on the Industrial Commission by former Tammany Hall man, now Governor, Al Smith. Frances seemed an unlikely choice considering she was a woman and she had openly criticized the commission on numerous occasions for their 'murders' of factory workers for not improving safety for them. It was rough going at first, with the other commissioners outright hostile to her being there, but it wasn't long before she started to affect change around her. She began rotating inspectors so they wouldn't become buddy buddy with the employers they were meant to be regulating, change the way meetings were held and generally cleaned up the place. One of her triumphs was in diffusing a strike where the workers had hidden dynamite and were threatening to use it if they didn't get their demands met. Frances traveled to the mine and diffused the situation by discounting one of the worst bosses of the mines freeing up negotiations. All in all she helped reduce the work week to 48 hours for women, expanded investigations into factories improved unemployment insurance laws and championed a minimum wage.

Her friend Al Smith decided to run for President and named his successor as Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Perkins didn't like him at first, he was arrogant and handsome and didn't seem interested in her ideas about wage and labor hours. But that had been before he had contracted polio and became paralyzed from the waist down. Smith lost the election and FDR gained his and Frances started to

work under him instead.

Roosevelt ran for President and won taking Frances with him, naming her Secretary of Labor. It was a shocking move, but Frances had proven herself time and again. Even so Frances had been hesitant to take the position. She had a teenage daughter and a mentally ill husband to take care of. She was also poor and needed an income and this would be a chance to get her causes put into laws. She took a list with her to the meeting about the position and refused to take the job unless FDR agreed with her demands which included "a forty hour workweek, a minimum wage, worker's compensation, unemployment insurance, a federal law banning child labor, direct federal aid for unemployment relief, Social Security, a revitalized public employment service, and health insurance." (Downey, 1) FDR agreed to most everything except Social Security, though he allowed her to research it further and come up with a better solution than had been done in Europe.

With that one meeting Frances sealed her fate as the first female Secretary of Labor and the longest to ever hold the seat at 12 years. Frances worked closely with FDR, it seemed he did most anything she proposed, he trusted her judgment and she respected his. Her first days as Secretary of Labor were a blur of activity as she started to navigate the micro politics of Washington Life. Her first act was to revamp the Labor Department, firing those who were corrupt or ineffectual. She put her contacts into positions of support and power and started to make things happen.

The presidency started out in the early part of depression. Unemployment was at an all time high and the spirits of the people were downer. Frances believed that the government needed to step to improve unemployment rates and to stop the downward spiral of food prices.

Frances was integral in the New Deal reforms and wrote or pushed for many of them. She worked long hours and never stopped pushing for what she believed in. She helped in the formation of the Wagner Act which allowed workers to form unions and the right to collective bargaining.

In fighting for workers rights she famously held a makeshift meeting in a post office since she had been denied the right to council the steel workers in the park. She also prevented the President

from calling in federal troops to the San Francisco General Strike of 1934.

Her old cause of minimum wage and shorter workweeks she manifested in the Fair Labor Standards Act. Her crowning achievement was the formation of Social Security, a long awaited triumph for her belief that a country needed to care for the elderly.

Frances Resigned in 1945 from her post as Secretary of Labor. Later in life she started guest lecturing at Cornell University helping to motivate the new generation of social reformers. She died on May 14, 1965 at the age of 85.