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WOMEN AT WORK IN THE '90'S

The progress of a movement in any given period is best measured by answering two questions.

1) What does the period do with its inheritance? Does it waste it? Or does it select, develop and preserve its best?

2) What fresh creative forces, if any, does it loosen? What new implements does it devise?

Apply these questions to the working life of women in the last decade of the 19th Century and each will return exciting answers.

Begin with the number of women at work. At the opening of the decade there were some four million women in the ranks of what the census calls, "gainful occupation." At the end of the decade there were five million three hundred thousand. The significant feature of this increase was not the larger count, it was the push of women upward into management and ownership. In domestic and personal service classes the number of women holding positions as owners and managers of hotel and boarding houses rose by nearly a third in this decade, restaurant keepers doubled. That is, in the great

and important class of food service women were assuming direction of establishments which in many cases they owned.

The same significant trend took place in trade and finance. Here the number employed was considerably more than doubled. This numerical increase was due largely to the coming into general use of various new aids to business efficiency and celerity. The typewriter, the fountain pen, the addressograph, the filing case, the card catalogue, had sold themselves to business by the early '90's. Women were called on in increasing numbers to operate the new devices. They proved so expert, grasped so quickly the needs of office technique and often so improved upon it by their own ingenuity that they were taken on in larger and larger numbers. Soon their usefulness was recognized by enlarged responsibility. The confidential secretary appeared. Before 1900 we had in Wall Street the phenomenon of a private secretary drawing a salary of \$10,000 a year.

It was but a step from the confidential position where a woman had made herself essential into the ranks of the directorate. While in 1890 there were but two hundred and seventeen women officers in banks and companies, ten years later there were twelve hundred and seventeen. And it is doubtful if the census enumerators caught them all. The advance was logical enough. The woman had made herself

so useful by her peculiar self-developed technique that in increasing numbers of cases she was given larger and larger responsibility. She had proved she had something to contribute to business and reaped the natural reward of her contribution.

It was in the professions and the arts that the greatest proportional change in numbers came in this period. Here there was an increase of twenty five percent. In certain categories the percent was still larger. In journalism, for instance, there were two and a half times as many women at the end of the period as at the opening - four times as many lawyers - twice as many women in government service.

The largest professional group was educational, teachers, professors. Here the outstanding change was in the increased responsibility. The woman was proving herself a good educational administrator. She was being called upon in larger and larger numbers to direct and superintend in schools of all grades. Before the end of the '90's there were over two hundred women serving as county school superintendents, twelve as city superintendents. In two states - Colorado and Wyoming - women filled the position of state superintendent.

This increase in the number of women fitted for administrative positions reflected the enlarged educational

opportunities with which the period opened, as well as the strength of the popular opinion that she should have all the training she was willing to take. Before the '90's all but three or four of the state colleges were co-educational, that is, what the state offered a man it offered a woman. The number of high grade women's colleges had increased. If Harvard and Columbia refused to open their doors to women both arranged for annexes where the women heard lectures from members of the faculty. By 1898 eighty percent of the colleges, universities and professional schools admitted women.

The insistence of women on the fullest opportunity for academic and professional training, as well as for the chance to prove their capacity for administration and responsibility, received strong backing from the national organizations of women which were one of the gifts to the '90's from its predecessor, the '80's. Chief among these organizations were the young Federation of Women's Clubs - the National Counsel of Women.

These organizations did no little to enlarge and foster the important co-operative movement brought over from the preceding decade. It sought to relieve the housekeeper of her heaviest tasks, urged her to buy her bread, to send out her laundry. Co-operative bakeries and laundries multiplied, sometimes financed by women, their direction entrusted to women.

Housekeeping like clothing was becoming "ready made", rejoiced the growing groups of reformers of the traditions and practices of the home.

The greatest number of gainfully occupied women was found in industry. Here was an increase of something like three hundred thousand in the period. You found them in every manufacturing and mechanical pursuit; the largest number in the manufacturing of women's wear - dressmakers, milliners, seamstresses. The trend to responsible administrative positions came out interestingly in this group, a woman frequently becoming the foreman of a shop, rising to the head of an establishment. Perhaps as important as any advance in her relation to this class was the way she began to take on designing, even to go abroad to study the fashions women in the United States imitated. Designing, indeed, began to be recognized as a new field for women.

The same trends can be traced in various other manufacturing trades - the woman who stayed by often becoming a foreman or an inspector, an occasional one offering designs for wall paper - oil cloth.

This woman in industry, her wages, hours, conditions, opportunity for advancement, was the particular interest of her sister. The leader in this movement was Jane Addams who at the beginning of the decade established in

Chicago the first social settlement, known as Hull House. It proved the greatest creative force loosened by women in the '90's.

From the time of its establishment Hull House proved a driving force for social betterment. Its significant led to a quick multiplication of settlements in the cities from one end of the country to the other. By 1895 over fifty had been formed. At the close of the decade there were probably a hundred between the Atlantic and the Pacific, their work largely carried on by young women.

The problems these women faced aroused them to the necessity of a better understanding of the economic and social life of the country, as well as of the conflicting philosophies, sharply dividing thoughtful people.

They saw the inadequacy of existing formulae and institutions to meet the needs of the day - a hard day for the country. The long depression of the 1890's had created unemployment and unrest parallel to that which has disturbed the 1930's. Women in the colleges clamored for a new training in economics, something related to life as the masses lived it. They were done with laissez faire. They wanted training for scientific investigation, for more effective legislation, for larger methods of meeting the needs of the poor.

Not a few of the women at the head of the social work of the present day received their academic training in this decade. Among them Mary Simkhovitch, head of that important institution Greenwich House in New York City; Mary Kingsbury/^{who}for so many years has headed social economics at Bryn Mawr; Edith and Grace Abbott; Sophia Breckenridge.

The activities of women in these various fields, coming as they did from various ranks of society, did much to break down the class feeling dividing women. Rich and poor were thrown together in the national organizations of women, in the work of the settlements, in educational institutions. Common interests and common efforts broke down prejudices and minimized castes giving an immense impetus to a more democratic outlook on the life of women.

That is, when you measure the decade by what it did with what it received, estimate the value of the new creative force, with which/^{it}tackled the difficult social and economic life of the times, you find women making a vigorous fresh contribution to society - carrying on and starting something. They received much but they gave more, enlarged all that was worthy in what they received and passed on the seed of a great movement towards the democratization and the socialization of the country's life.