

Frances Perkins: Champion of the New Deal

In February, 1933, President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt was forming his first cabinet. Rumors were going about the nation that he would appoint the first woman to his cabinet and that first woman would be, Frances Perkins.

Perkins always believe in being prepared, so just in case the rumors were true, she had jotted on a piece of paper what she wanted to do if she were appointed Secretary of Labor. On the February evening she met with President Roosevelt; he did indeed ask her to be Secretary of Labor.

She took the piece of paper out of her purse and said, "I want to work on the following: minimum wages, maximum hours, unemployment insurance, and retirement insurance. She said to the President, "if you don't want these done, I'd be an embarrassment to you as Secretary of Labor."

FDR, who had known her socially and professionally for 20 years, knew she meant what she said. He told her "You'll have to work on these on your own because I have other things to do. But I'll back you" With those assurances she accepted the position. Within four years she had accomplished these goals.

What career path brought this remarkable individual to become the first woman in a President's cabinet? Her beginnings were not remarkable. She grew up in Worcester, MA, in an Old New England family with limited financial resources. She was raised a Congregationalist, but as an adult became an Episcopalian. She attended Mt. Holyoke College and was not an exceptional student. She was well liked enough to be elected senior class president, but little else marked her as outstanding.

One teacher, Annah May Soule, professor of economic history had a profound affect on her social beliefs. Professor Soule sent her students to visit neighboring factory towns and write reports on the working conditions there. The students found the factories unsanitary, poorly lighted, and dangerous. Workers had to operate machines without safety guards, and many lost fingers, toes, and even hands and feet or were blinded. Frances Perkins, after these visits to factories, became a passionate advocate of workers rights. Her parents had taught her that workers were poor because they drank alcohol, or were lazy, or had no ambition. She had learned better.

After graduation, Miss Perkins realized social work was her true calling. Edward Devine, the director of the Charity Organization of New York, advised her she needed to read and gain more life experience before becoming a social worker. He advised her to read Jacob's Riis' How the Other Half Lives. She did and took teaching position at a girls school.

In her spare time she started a girls club on the premises of the Worcester settlement house for factory girls. The club offered factory girls and women a place to exercise and learn two nights a week. Settlement houses had become quite popular after the first one was established in London in 1884 by Samuel August Barnett. Barnett's idea was that social workers would "settle in" with factory workers and teach them in the evenings.

Mary Hogan was a candy factory worker who lost her hand in a candy dipper. Francis Perkins was horrified to find the factory sent Mary Hogan without professional medical attention. Miss Perkins, first arranged for a medical doctor to see her. Then outraged that manufacturer would do nothing financially for the injured worker, she and a clergyman, eventually got the company to pay Mary Hogan \$100 for the loss of her hand.

These experiences made her decide her life's work would be to seek social justice for all people regardless of class.

She then took a teaching position in Chicago and became a worker at the most famous Settlement house of its day, Hull House. Hull House had been founded by Jane Addams, a Unitarian, who worked her entire life to provide shelter, education, and child care for working women. She soon learned that factory owners would often cheat these women of their wages. She, as their social worker, often had to use her wits to persuade factory owners to pay them.

Because the individual workers could do little in dealing with powerful owners, Frances Perkins said, "I began to see that there was a reason for trade union organization. There was a strong group that could collect money. The union could see that the wages were paid on time and paid when they were earned."

Although she was not a union member herself, from her experiences at Hull House she became an advocate for trade unions.

From Chicago she moved to Philadelphia to become executive secretary of the Philadelphia Research and Protective Association, an organization to study and aid immigrant women, many of whom had been forced into prostitution.

While working in Philadelphia, she also went back to school to do graduate study in economics and sociology. Her economics professor, Simon Patten, arranged for her to receive a graduate fellowship at Columbia in New York. There she soon became involved in the social issues of the day, especially the women's suffrage movement. One New York political boss told her, "I'm opposed to giving women the right to vote, but even so, I know you'd make a good Democrat." During this time, she met the leading Democrats of the day, including Al Smith, later governor of New York, Robert Wagner, later Senator from New York, and young, wealthy politician, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

On Saturday afternoon, March 25, 1911, she had gone to a small tea party at the home of Mrs. Gordon Norrie on Washington Square in New York City. During the party, the women noticed a fire in a factory nearby. She and the other women walked toward the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and became witnesses to the worst factory accident in American history. 146 workers died. Many jumped from the roof of the eight floor building because the elevators failed and the only stairway was locked. The tragedy shocked all of America.

The New York legislature appointed the State Factory Investigating Commission, and Frances Perkins became their chief investigator. Her investigations revealed filthy working conditions, fire hazards of all kinds, lack of sanitation, dangerous machinery that maimed workers, and women and children working in the garment industry for 12-18 hours a day. She took many leading politicians with her to these factories, including Al Smith and Robert Wagner. They both stated they learned to have a social conscience from Frances Perkins.

At the same time, she met and married Paul Wilson, a brilliant economist. She shocked every one by keeping her maiden name for professional purposes. Throughout her life, her mother insisted on introducing her as Mrs. Wilson. She never objected, and told people, "I'm more of a conformist than you realize when it comes to social occasions." Unfortunately, Paul Wilson suffered from mental illness and was in and out of hospitals for most of their marriage.

She continued her work and in 1912, achieved a major triumph of having the New York legislature enact a 54 hour work week for factory workers. She had to compromise with the politicians, and canning workers were not included in this legislation. It was during these debates that she learned more about Franklin Roosevelt, who was a state senator. She was disappointed that this patrician senator had little interest in the problems of factory workers. So she set out to educate him about social justice.

When her daughter was born in 1916, she had decided to retire from public life. However, her husband's illness necessitated her finding a job. In 1918, Al Smith was elected governor of New York and asked her to become a member of the Industrial Commission. She accepted the position and became the highest paid woman in America with a salary of \$8,000 a year, the equivalent of \$90,000 a year in today's dollars.

Most members of the Industrial Commission were political hacks or lackeys of industry. By using her investigative and political skills she forced the Commission to become active in defending workers rights. She coordinated the work of the Commission with the Workmen's Compensation Division, so the Commission could correct factory conditions that caused accidents.

She took pride in using new scientific discoveries to investigate factory accidents. No one understood why an explosion had occurred at an aluminum factory until she appointed a team of scientists to study the problem. They discovered that the accumulated dust in the air caused the explosion.

She offered a prize for the best way to prevent silicosis in jackhammer operators. She had the winning device installed on the jackhammers at the construction site for the Rockefeller Center. She had the workers tested for silicosis before they went to work there and after, proving the device worked and proving that dust and rock particles endangered workers lungs.

She described her job with the Commission as the perfect job. It caused her to use all her talents, and

as she said, enabled her to make “constant progress toward social justice.”

Al Smith suggested to his successor as governor of New York, Franklin Roosevelt, that he extend Miss Perkins position with the Industrial Commission. FDR told Smith he intended to make her head of the Commission. Smith said that would never work. Men wouldn't take orders from a woman. Roosevelt admired her earlier work so much, that he ignored Smith's advice and made her head of the Commission.

Governor Roosevelt told her to pursue her entire legislative agenda with the New York Assembly, and he as governor, would support her. The assembly passed all her agenda including child labor laws, reducing the number of hours women could work, and making it illegal for women to work at night. She said of this brilliant legislative achievement, “If it can be done in New York, it can be done anywhere.”

In 1932, FDR was elected President. Business owners wanted one of their own appointed Secretary of Labor. Union leaders wanted a union man appointed. FDR had the perfect choice in Frances Perkins because he knew she wouldn't satisfy either side but she would work for social justice.

The nation was in the Great Depression with no end in sight. The new Secretary of Labor advocated immediate relief through welfare checks. FDR was opposed to such direct relief payments, but supported her plans for WPA and CCC to put people back to work. The CCC is particularly important because it took young men off the street, trained them to work in battalions under officers, gave them a “can do” attitude, and in real sense prepared them to serve in the war that was on the horizon.

In her first two years in office, she wrote the Social Security Act, saw it through Congress, and in August, 1935, FDR signed it into law. Also during this time, she was an advocate for the National Recovery Act, which was found to be unconstitutional. From that she learned that social programs could be enacted to bring the country out of the Depression on a piecemeal basis, rather in an omnibus bill like the NRA.

With her old friend, Senator Robert Wagner of New York she worked on the National Labor Relations Bill to give workers throughout the country the right to organize.

But also during that time, she almost became the first woman impeached by Congress. Harry Bridges, the head of the Longshoreman's Union, had called a strike on the West Coast. FDR was aboard ship in the Pacific on vacation, and Secretary of State Cornell Hull was acting president. He thought the strike would develop into a general strike and was on the verge of sending the army to end the strike.

Miss Perkins felt this would cause general rioting and do irreparable damage. She argued it was a strike of single trade union and would soon end. Hull would not listen to her. She went over Hull's head and cabled FDR through Navy channels her understanding of the situation. He agreed with her and cabled Hull not to send in the army. She was right. The strike soon ended and the crises was over.

Her enemies in Congress saw this as an impeachable offense and held hearings on it. They felt she should deport Harry Bridges because he was an alien from Australia, had associated with communists, and was causing labor unrest in the US. She knew deporting Bridges would cause even more labor unrest and refused to do so.

She told FDR she “didn't like the idea being impeached.” He laughingly responded, “I wouldn't worry about that, Frances.” He had counted the votes in Congress and knew that nothing would come of the impeachment hearings.

Enemies attacked her another bizarre way. They accused her of being Jewish. This was a time of anti-Semitism, not only in Europe, but in the United States. Many country clubs, housing areas, and hotels had secret rules against admitting Jews. Her response to this was, “I'm not of Jewish descent, but if I were I'd proudly announce it.”

When America entered World War II in 1941, she negotiated an agreement between factory owners and unions that for the duration there would be no strikes. Arbitration would be used to solve labor disputes through the War Labor Board.

Several times during her tenure as Secretary of Labor, she tried to resign. Several times she thought FDR had accepted her resignation. But always at the last moment, the President told her, “You can't resign. I need you.” Apparently, he could talk openly and frankly without worrying about her leaking information. He always felt she him her honest opinion without worrying whether he disagreed or not.

Still she was loyal to the president. She always told him beforehand when she was going to New York to see Al Smith. Smith and FDR had been allies until FDR won the Democratic nomination in 1932.

Smith had wanted the nomination and thought FDR had undermined his chances and never forgave him for it. FDR, in turn felt, Smith should have given him more support once he had won the nomination. Nevertheless, whenever Miss Perkins told FDR she was going to New York and would see Al Smith, he said, "Give him my best regards." Upon her return to Washington, FDR would always ask about Smith and say he wished their friendship could be mended. It never was.

She credited Smith with developing the ideas for the New Deal as governor of New York, while she herself merely put these ideas into action on a national level. She was quite modest about this. No other cabinet official affected individual lives as much as she did.

When President Roosevelt died in 1944, she and Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, were the only two cabinet members who had served throughout the Roosevelt administration. As is customary, when a President dies, the cabinet members offer their resignations to the new President. Frances Perkins was relieved when President Truman accepted her resignation. She wanted to return to New York and be a grandmother. Truman wrote of her, "She was a grand lady, but not politician."

On June 27, 1944, a testimonial dinner was held for her at the Mayflower Hotel in New York City. William Green, the President of AFL, was a major speaker that night. 12 ½ years earlier he had opposed her appointment as Secretary of Labor. That night he called her the greatest Secretary of Labor in history. She laughingly responded that now she was leaving office, organized labor had come to appreciate her.

At 65, she returned to New York, and immediately, she was offered a contract to write her book, The Roosevelt I Knew.

She needed the money. As Secretary of Labor, she had made \$8,000 a year, spent \$6,000 of that each year on her husband's medical expenses, and tithed 10 per cent to the Episcopal Church.

She found writing difficult but finished the book after some delay. It was the first book written by cabinet member of FDR's presidency.

In 1946, President Truman appointed her to the Civil Service Commission because he recognized her as a brilliant administrator. On one social occasion in Washington, President Truman came into the room, walked across the room directly over to Miss Perkins and kissed her on the cheek. Everyone was shocked because as Senator and President, Truman had never been seen greeting a woman with a kiss. But as one of his aides said, "Mr. Truman only greets two women with a kiss, his wife and Frances Perkins."

She served on the Civil Service Commission during one of the most difficult times in its history. The House Un-American Activities Committee was causing the Red Scare and claiming to find the government infiltrated by communists. Her reaction on the Civil Service Commission did not represent her finest hour. She said, "a man has a constitutional right to belong to be communist, but has no constitutional right to work for the government." She also supported the loyalty oath.

She did remain steadfast in her beliefs about privacy and personal freedom. She argued in one case that a woman who cared for her fiancé in her apartment when he was ill, was not ineligible for federal employment on moral grounds. Previously any suggestion of an unmarried man and woman living together automatically made them immoral and ineligible for employment.

In 1952, she resigned from the Civil Service Commission when Dwight Eisenhower became president. She returned to New York and was invited to become the first woman faculty member of the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations. After her death in 1965, Cornell named a professorship in her honor, and Congress named the Department of Labor Building the Frances Perkins Building.

William Wirtz, Secretary of Labor at the time of her death, said, "Every man and woman who works for a living wage, under safe conditions, for reasonable hours, or is protected by unemployment compensation of Social Security, is her debtor."

I would add that no other government official has had an impact on the daily lives of so many Americans as Frances Perkins.