Women's Suffrage: Crash Course US History #31

Crash Course: U.S. History
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=====Introduction=====

Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course U.S. History, and today we're going to talk about women in the Progressive Era.

My God, that is a fantastic hat. Wait, votes for women?!

So between Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson and all those doughboys headed off to war, women in this period have sort of been footnoted. Shockingly.

Mr Green, Mr Green! I'd never make a woman a footnote. She'd be the center of my world, my rays-on de tray (raison d'être), my joy de vee vrah (joie de vivre).

Oh, me-from-the-past, I'm reminded of why you got a C plus in French III.

Let me submit to you, me-from-the-past, that your weird worship of women is a kind of misogyny, because you're imagining women as these beautiful, fragile things that you can possess. It turns out that women are not things; they are people, in precisely the same way that you are a person. And in the Progressive Era, they demanded to be seen as full citizens of the United States.

In short, women don't exist to be your joie de vivre - they get to have their own joie de vivre.

(Intro)

So it's tempting to limit ourselves to discussion of women getting the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment but if we focus too much on the constitutional history, we're going to miss a lot.

=====Economic and Political Opportunities for Women=====

Some historians refer to the thirty years between 1890 and 1920 as the "Women's Era" because it was in that time that women started to have greater economic and political opportunities. Women were also aided by legal changes like getting the right to own property, control their wages and make contracts and wills. By 1900, almost 5 million women worked for wages, mainly in domestic service or light manufacturing like the garment industry. Women in America were always vital contributors to the economy as producers and consumers and they always worked, whether for wages or taking care of children and the home. And as someone who is recently returned from paternity leave, let me tell you - that ain't no joke.

And American women were also active as reformers since, like, America became a thing. And those reform movements brought women into state and national politics before the dawn of the Progressive Era. Unfortunately, their greatest achievement, Prohibition, was also our greatest national shame. Oh, yeah, alright, okay - it's actually not in our top five national shames. But probably women's greatest influence indeed came through their membership and leadership in the Women's Christian Temperance Union. The WCTU was founded in 1874 and by 1890 it had 150 000 members making it the largest female organization in the United States. Under the leadership of Frances Willard, the WCTU embraced a broad reform agenda. Like it included pushing for the right for women to vote. The feeling was that the best way to stop people from drinking was to pass local laws that made it harder to drink. And to do that, it would be very helpful if women could vote because American men were a bunch of alcoholic scoundrels who darn well weren't going to vote to get rid of beer hoses.

In 1895, Willard boldly declared, "A wider freedom is coming to the women of America. Too long has it been held that woman has no right to enter these movements...politics is the place for woman." But the role of women in politics did greatly expand during the Progressive Era. As in prior decades, many reformers were middle and upper class women but the growing economy and the expansion of what might be called the "upper-middle class" meant that there were more educational opportunities and this growing group of college-educated women leaned in and became the leaders of new movements. Sorry, there was no way I was going to get through this without one "lean in" - I love that book.

=====Role as Primary Consumers=====

So as we've talked about before, the 1890s saw the dawning of the American mass consumer society and many of the new products made in the second wave of industrialization were aimed at women, especially labor-saving devices like washing machines. If you've ever had an infant, you might notice that they poop and barf on everything all the time. Like, I recently called a pediatrician and I was like, "My 14-day-old daughter poops fifteen times a day," and he was like, "If anything, that seems low." So the washing machine is a real game changer. And many women realize that being the primary consumers who did the shopping for the home gave them powerful leverage to bring about change.

Chief among these was Florence Kelley, a college-educated woman who, after participating in a number of progressive reform causes, came to head the National Consumers League. The league sponsored boycotts and shaped consumption patterns, encouraging consumers to buy products that were made without child, or what we would now call sweatshop labor. Which, at the time, was often just known as labor.

=====Women in the Workplace=====

And there was also a subtle shift in gender roles as more and more women worked outside the home. African-American women continued to work primarily as domestic servants or in agriculture and immigrant women mostly did low-paying factory labor. But for native-born white women, there were new opportunities, especially in office work. And this points to how technology created opportunities for women. Like, almost all the telephone operators in the U.S. were women. By 1920, office workers and telephone operators made up 25% of the female workforce while domestic servants were only 15%. A union leader named Abraham Bisno remarked that working gave immigrant women a sense of independence - "They acquired the right to personality, something alien to the highly patriarchal family structures of the old country." Of course, this also meant that young women were often in conflict with their parents as a job brought more freedom, money and, perhaps, if they were lucky, a room of one's own.

=====The Mystery Document=====

Oh, it's time for the mystery document? Please let it be Virginia Woolf, please let it be Virginia Woolf! The rules here are simple. I guess the author of the mystery document, I'm either right or I get shocked. Alright, let's see what we got.

The spirit of personal independence in the women of today

> is sure proof that a change has come...the radical change in the economic position of women is advancing upon us...the growing individualization of democratic life brings inevitable changes to our daughters as well as to our sons...one of its most noticeable features is the demand in women not only for their own money, but for their own work for the sake of personal expression. Few girls today fail to manifest some signs of the desire for individual expression...

Ah, that's not Virginia Woolf. Stan, I'm going to be honest, I do not know the answer to this one. However, it has been Woodrow Wilson for the last two weeks... you wouldn't do that again to me, or would you? I'm going to guess Woodrow Wilson - final answer...Dang it!

Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the book *Women and Economics*, what? Ahh... [shouts].

The idea that having a job is valuable just for the independence that it brings and as a form of individual expression was pretty radical as most women, and especially most men, were not comfortable with the idea that being a housewife was similar to being a servant to one's husband and children. But of course that changes when staying at home becomes one of many choices rather than your only available option. And then came birth control! Huzzah!

=====Female Sexuality and the Introduction of Birth Control=====

Women who needed to work wanted a way to limit the number of pregnancies. Being pregnant and having a baby can make it difficult to hold down a job and also, babies are diaper-using stuff-breaking consumption machines. They basically eat money and we love them. But birth control advocates like Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman also argued that women should be able to enjoy sex without having children. To which men said, "Women can enjoy sex?" Believe it or not, that was seen as a pretty radical idea and it led to changes in sexual behavior including more overall skoodilypooping.

Goldman was arrested more than 40 times for sharing these dangerous ideas about female sexuality and birth control and she was eventually deported. Sanger, who worked to educate working class women about birth control, was sentenced to prison in 1916 for opening a clinic in Brooklyn that distributed contraceptive devices to poor immigrant women.

The fight over birth control is important for at least three reasons: first, it put women into the forefront of debates about free speech in America. I mean, some of the most ardent advocates of birth control were also associated with the IWW and the Socialist Party. Secondly, birth control is also a public health issue and many women during the Progressive Era entered public life to bring about changes related to public health, leading the crusade against tuberculosis, the so-called "White Plague", and other diseases. Thirdly, it cut across class lines. Having or not having children is an issue for all women regardless of whether they went to college and the birth control movement brought upper, middle and lower class women together in ways that other social movements never did.

=====The Settlement House Movement=====

Another group of progressive women took up the role of addressing the problems of the poor and spearheaded the settlement house movement. The key figure here was Jane Addams. My God, there are still Addams' in American history? Oh, she spells it "Addams family" Addams, not like founding fathers Adams. Anyway, she started the Hull House in Chicago in 1889. Settlement houses became the incubators of the new field of social work, a field in which women played a huge part. And Addams became one of America's most important spokespeople for progressive ideas.

=====Thought Bubble: Women's Suffrage Movement=====
And yet, in many places, while all of this was happening, women could not technically vote. But their increasing involvement in social movements at the turn of the twentieth century led them to electoral politics. It's true that women were voting before the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 - voting is a state issue, and in many western states, women were granted the right to vote in the late nineteenth century. States could also grant women the right to run for office, which explains how the first congresswoman, Jeanette Rankin, could vote against America's entry into World War I in 1917. That said, the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment is a big deal in American history. It's also a recent deal. Like, when my grandmothers were born, women could not vote in much of the United States. The amendment says that states cannot deny people the right to vote because they are women, which isn't as interesting as the political organization and activity that led to its passage. Alright, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The suffrage movement was extremely fragmented. There was a first wave of suffrage, exemplified by the women at Seneca Falls, and this metamorphosed into the National American Women's Suffrage Association, or NAWSA. Most of the leadership of NAWSA was made up of middle to upper class women, often involved in other progressive causes, who unfortunately sometimes represented the darker side of the suffrage movement because these upper class progressives frequently used nativist arguments to make their claims for the right to vote. They argued that if the vote could be granted to ignorant immigrants, some of whom could barely speak English, then it should also be granted to native-born women. This isn't to say that the elitist arguments won the day but they should be acknowledged.

By the early twentieth century, a new generation of college-educated activists had arrived on the scene and many of these women were more radical than early suffrage supporters. They organized the National Women's Party and, under the leadership of Alice Paul, pushed for the vote using aggressive tactics that many of the early generation of women's right advocates found unseemly. Paul had been studying in Britain between 1907 and 1910 where she saw the more militant women's rights activists at work. She adopted their tactics that included protests, leading to imprisonment and loud denunciations of the patriarchy that would make Tumblr proud. And during World War I, she compared Wilson to the Kaiser and Paul and her followers chained themselves to the White House fence. The activists then started a hunger strike during their 7 month prison sentence and had to be force-fed.

Woodrow Wilson had half-heartedly endorsed women's suffrage in 1916 but the war split the movement further. Most suffrage organizations believed that wartime service would help women earn respect and equal rights but other activists, like many progressives, opposed the war and regarded it as a potential threat to social reform. But in the end the war did sort of end up helping the cause. Patriotic support of the war by women, especially their service working in wartime industries, convinced many that it was just wrong to deny them the right to vote. And the mistreatment of Alice Paul and other women in prison for their cause created outrage that further pushed the Wilson administration to support enfranchising women. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

=====The 19th Amendment=====

So women's long fight to gain the right to vote ended with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920 but in some ways the final granting of the franchise was a bit anti-climactic. For one thing, it was overshadowed by the 18th Amendment, Prohibition, which affected both women and men in large numbers (also Gatsbys). You can say a lot of bad things about Prohibition, and I have, but the crusade against alcohol did galvanize and politicize many women, and organizations such as the WCTU and the Anti-Saloon League introduced yet more to political activism.

But while the passage of the 19th Amendment was a huge victory, Alice Paul and the National Women's Party were unable to muster the same support for an equal rights amendment. Paul believed that women needed equal access to education and employment opportunities. And here they came into contact with other women's groups, especially the League of Women Voters and the Women's Trade Union League, which opposed the ERA fearing that equal rights would mean an unravelling of hard-won benefits like mother's pensions and laws limiting women's hours of labor. So the ERA failed and then another proposed amendment that would have given Congress the power to limit child labor won ratification in only 6 states. You go America!

(Libertage)

=====Conclusion=====

So in many ways, the period between 1890 and 1920, which roughly corresponds to the Progressive Era, was the high tide of women's rights and political activism. It culminated in the ratification of the 19th Amendment but the right to vote didn't lead to significant legislation that actually improved the lives of women - at least, not for a while. Nor were there immediate changes in the roles that were women were expected to play in the social order as wives and mothers. Still, women were able to increase their autonomy and freedom in the burgeoning consumer marketplace. But it's important to note that like other oppressed populations in American history, women weren't given these rights, they had to fight for the rights that were said to be inalienable. And we are all better off for their fight and for their victory. Women's liberation is, to be sure, a complicated phrase and it will take a new turn in the Roaring '20s, which we'll talk about next week. I'll see you then.

=====Credits=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Meredith Danko, the associate producer is Danica Johnson and the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer, Rosianna Rojas and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Café. Every week there's a new caption to the Libertage, you can suggest captions in comments where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching Crash Course and, as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome. I'm gonna go this way Stan - just kidding!