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Women in History

Grace Abbott: A Leader in Social Reform

Shari Cole Hoffman

One of the earlier 20th century American women leaders in Progressivism was Grace Abbott who led the way so others might be the voices for those unheard. Abbott's heritage influenced her lifetime commitment to social improvement. She was born on November 17, 1878 in Grand Island, Nebraska into a family of activists. Her Quaker mother, Elizabeth Griffin Abbott, came from an abolitionist family and participated in the Underground Railroad. Elizabeth was also actively involved in the women's suffrage movement and often hosted suffrage meetings and events in her home. Susan B. Anthony frequently stayed with the Abbotts when visiting Grand Island. Her father, Othman Ali Abbott, a Canadian abolitionist, served in the Union Army during the Civil War. He read law in Illinois and in 1867 moved to Nebraska and established his law practice. A leader in state politics, he became a state senator and eventually the lieutenant governor, where he was pivotal in the creation of Nebraska laws protecting female workers.

The Abbott's values and interests in social justice had a prevailing influence on all four of their children, but especially on Grace and her older sister, Edith, who also became a well-known social reformer. Their parent's ardent convictions in equal rights for women seemed to set a personal and professional course that Grace Abbott followed until her death in 1939.

After graduating from the Grand Island Baptist College in 1898, Grace taught high school in Broken Bow, Nebraska and then in her hometown until 1906. During summer vacations, she enrolled in graduate studies at the University of Nebraska in 1902 and at the University of Chicago in 1904. In 1907, she moved to Chicago and enrolled full-time at the University, where she studied political science and constitutional history. She earned a Master of Philosophy in Political Science in 1909.

While in Chicago, Grace took up a nine-year residency at Hull-House, a settlement home for disadvantaged families. Co-founded by Jane Addams, another early social reformer who later earned the 1931 Nobel Peace prize

About the Author

Shari Cole Hoffman is a graduate assistant and doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her specialization is Educational Leadership. She has held faculty and administrative leadership roles in the K-12 system for 20 years. At the community-college level, she has extensive experience in institutional planning, quality improvement, and accreditation.

for her work in social justice for the underprivileged, Hull-House initially provided welfare assistance and housing to the poor, then expanded its services to include rooms for working women, a community kitchen, academic classes, and a meeting place for trade unions. Hull-House became a center for progressive reform in Chicago and a training ground for leaders in labor rights and women's suffrage. Closely associated with Jane Addams and Hull-House endeavors, Abbott developed an interest in social work and a passionate commitment to those in need. Also during this time, she gained national recognition as an advocate for immigrants.

While on the faculty of the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, which later became the University of Chicago's Graduate School of Social Service Administration, Abbott, along with Sophonisba Breckinridge and others, organized the Immigrants' Protective League (IPL). IPL helped protect immigrants from mistreatment and assisted them in adjusting to the United States. As the director of IPL, a position Abbott held until 1917, she created a way station for immigrants near Chicago's main railroad terminal, where a number of immigrants arrived looking for work. She was also responsible for securing protective legislation in Illinois to regulate the exploitation of immigrant employment and to prevent immigrant savings loss by privately formed banking companies. Abbott developed Illinois' state plan for the enforcement of compulsory school attendance of immigrant children. She successfully secured the Chicago Bar Association's support for protecting immigrants in the court system. Testifying before a 1912 congressional hearing, she spoke against a mandatory immigrant literacy test and later persuaded President Taft to veto an act of Congress to implement this test. Despite her initial success in 1912, Congress eventually instituted the literacy requirement in 1917.

Throughout Abbott's life, she was an activist for child welfare. In 1917 because of her recognized dedication to improving the lives of immigrants, she was appointed director of the Industrial Division of the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor. In that position, she developed

enforcement plans for the first child labor laws Congress had enacted in 1916.

In 1921, President Warren G. Harding selected Abbott to succeed Julia Lathrop as head of the U.S. Children's Bureau, which was established in 1912 as the first national agency in the world to focus on the needs of children. Through Abbott's leadership, the Bureau administered America's original child labor laws, established standards for state juvenile courts, and designed the children's section in the 1935 Social Security Act pertaining to Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Title V (federal grants to states for maternal and child welfare), and Title VII (the establishment of the Social Security administration office). Abbott also pioneered the process of incorporating sociological data and statistics into lawmaking processes. Under her direction, the agency was the earliest to utilize scientific investigations on children, which highlighted the issues for the neglected and the poor, in designing policy.

In 1934, after resigning from the Children's Bureau, Abbott was appointed a professor of public welfare at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration where her sister, Edith, was the first graduate school woman dean in the United States. Abbott held this professorship, edited the *Social Service Review*, continued to chair international labor conferences and state committees addressing child labor, and stayed actively involved in the peace movement and women's rights until her death in 1939, at 61 years old.

The lifetime achievements of Grace Abbott entailed numerous firsts. She administered the first federal child labor laws that kept many children under 16 out of oppressive working conditions. These child labor laws were often referred to as "the acid test of progressivism." She oversaw the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act of 1921, the first federally funded social welfare measure in the United States. The Act distributed federal matching grants to the states for prenatal and child health clinics, nutrition and hygiene information, midwife training, and nursing visits for pregnant women and new mothers. In 1922, Abbott was the first American appointed to a League of Nations committee.

At one time, Grace Abbott was the highest-ranking most powerful woman in the United States government, yet she stayed the course in what she believed. Through her leadership example of forging a path for other women to follow, individuals learned to work together to make a collective difference in the lives of those in need. As a leader and throughout her lifetime, Abbott embodied what was best about Progressivism. She not only

provided a voice for those too poor or too young to protect themselves, but she took actions to help those who could not help themselves.

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