**Interview with Professor Kathryn Sklar, January 19th, 2014**

**Interviewer:** How would you describe women’s place in American society before the Progressive Era?

**PS:** The first principle that historians, like other social scientists, use when they talk about women is that women are as diverse as men. So there’s many different classes, different races, and there’s probably no such thing as just women. You know you can’t have a single answer, because the group is too diverse. If you mean how would I describe white, middle class women’s place, well, it was very much enhanced by their participation in social movements that began very strongly in the 1830s. So if you begin the Progressive Era in 1880, there’ve been 50 years -or two generations- of women being very active politically. Their place in society was changing very dramatically and was expanding very dramatically. No politics took place without women participating. They didn’t participate on the scale that men did, but they were present in all the male-dominated politics; and then they had their own separate politics. In many ways I think women were more politically active in those years than they are now. Most people wouldn’t expect that. You probably don’t expect that. Would you expect me to say that women were more politically active then than now?

**Interviewer:** No, not really.

**PS:** Probably not. But that’s how very, very active they were. Very active. And I think pretty much if you would ask any historian about American women, they would say that.

**Interviewer:** Oh, ok. Then how did the right to vote impact women if they were more politically active before getting it?

**PS:** Well, historians tend to say that that was what brought them together and made them active and then afterwards they lost interest, because they had achieved their goal, so maybe they should do other things than be politically active -that’s the way the historians look at it. That the achievement of the enactment of the 19th Amendment was a turning point in which some women turned away from political activism. The decade of the 1920s was a very politically conservative decade, and many women’s organizations were dramatically reduced in size. So the thing is that it’s a longer story than that, so you sort of have to look at women coming back into politics in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, but not nearly on a scale that they had been involved in political activism in like the 1880s, 1890s, and the first decade of the 20th century- the 1900s. This may not only be different from what you expected to hear, but it might also be different from what textbooks say. Textbooks often don’t have very much about women, and what they do have often follows what our expectations would be. So they say, oh, women don’t have the vote; so hooray, they got the vote, and that made a big difference in their lives. Well, yes, but the even bigger difference was made in the decades before where women were participating in politics in order to achieve a lot of things, beginning with their communities -shaping their communities, and also including the enactment of an amendment to the Constitution. But let me just do a bit of a digression about the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920 granting women the right to vote, and say that what that was really about was the South. Women had the right to vote everywhere in the United States, you might say beginning with Colorado in 1890. Women in every state outside of the South, except for Pennsylvania, had the right to vote before 1920. We think of this amendment as affecting the entire country; it did not. It affected really only the Southern states and Pennsylvania. Areas where there was no way that the state was going to enact women’s suffrage; those states were against it. It’s where the highest population of African Americans lived. Basically, overwhelmingly, the African-American population in 1920 lived in the South. Do you think that those people had voting rights?

**Interviewer:** No, I think there were the Jim Crow laws.

**PS:** Giving women the vote in the South raises the whole question of African-American women and their rights to vote. And the suffrage movement itself did not support efforts to achieve the of white women only. They might have supported that speaking in code, knowing what they were speaking about did not include black women, but they would never say that directly. So the suffrage movement in the South was very weak. So that’s what the amendment was about. It was about extending the rights of women to vote to states who themselves would never enact it. That’s a big thing to know about. That’s not the way it’s taught and understood at the level of popular understanding. The reality is a really interesting story. And that highlights the first point I made; that women were very politically active in the decades between 1830 and around 1920.

**Interviewer:** I see. What were some of the specific ways women participated in politics during the 1900s? I only heard about how they helped in education, schools, and parks, and all these other types of reforms, but not that much about how they were involved politically?

**PS:** The things you mentioned are all political. They took political form. You don’t have a park without a political body creating it. The book that I would recommend that you look at is is by a historian named Rebecca Edwards, called Angels in the Machinery. Her focus is on women in the political parties mainly -overwhelmingly the Republican Party. It’s actually mostly about the 1880s. If you open to any page of that book, you’ll get examples of women being politically active. There were a lot of issues that were politically women’s issues, but there were lots of issues in which women were active that were not at all women’s issues, like the tariff. The tariff was a huge issue that women were very much involved with. The issue of the tariff was an important issue with a lot of economic reasons that aren’t at play right now, so it seems obscure to us, but the tariff was all about where money came from in the form of taxes. If you tax the stuff that’s imported and get your money that way, that’s different from when people spend to buy stuff. Women were very active in the huge issue of the tariff.

**Interviewer:** Do you think women played an important part in creating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act?

**PS:** That is a really good question. I would have to go to Rebecca Edwards’ book to see. You’re not going to find women speaking in Congress; it’s not like they were important in that way. I am sure that if you look at that book, you will find some activity by women in the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. The way that they would be important is shaping the Republican Party’s policies. They would have attended meetings, they would have ideas organized in the form of arguments, about the tariffs, urging their party, their local politicians, their Senators and Congresspeople to support a particular policy. They wouldn’t necessarily be organized as women. The single most powerful organization of women in that time period, from 1870-1910, is the Women’s Christian Temperance Union -the WCTU. It was extremely powerful, in every town, every city. What the WCTU decided to support was a matter that everybody noticed. That’s a way that women, as a women’s organization, shaped politics. But women were also active in the Republican Party itself.

**Interviewer:** Moving on to modern times, what do you think were the greatest challenges/goals women face in the 21st century? It’s not the right to vote anymore.

**PS:** In the United States, as women, what I see and hear around me is the need for public policies that support wage earning women, even salaried women, to support women’s participation in the labor force. The labor force today is moving towards 50-50; fifty percent of it being women. This huge, historic rise in the percent of the labor force that is women compared to 1920 -I doubt it was 20% and the majority of those women were not married. They might not have been young, but they were not married. So the fact that a huge proportion of the labor force today are women with children, and we have no policy that aids them, is a huge need. We have no publicly funded childcare, for example. School programs, afterschool programs, are very inadequate. That I would say would be number one, and my own perspective on women in reproductive rights, as a historian who studied that question from the 1820s to the present, it’s very important in women’s rights to include whether to bear children or not when they’re pregnant. There’s two things -there’s work and family, and I think community -a third category of community, I think it’s very important that women become politically active in order to improve their communities.

**Interviewer:** I know women had a lot of strikes during the Progressive Era, so do you think they helped them, or do you think the strikes made it harder for them?

**PS:** Oh, definitely helped them, definitely helped them. It was crucially important in helping them. There’s a lot of wonderful examples that one could find about that. If you would go into UC Berkeley where you could go into their library, you could find something that I edit called *Women in Social Movements in the United States.* There’s a database, and we’ve got really fabulous examples of strikes. What we do on that database -it’s an online journal- we edit documents that come from the time period, and some of those historians are interpreting the documents. So that’s always interesting to look.

**Interviewer:** Ok, I’ll take a look at it. It was really nice talking to you, Professor Sklar. I learned a lot today

**PS:** It was nice talking to you, and good luck with your project.