

## **FROM THE TRIANGLE FIRE TO THE NEW DEAL: FRANCES PERKINS IN ACTION**

A Talk by Christopher N. Breiseth in Commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Triangle Fire, the New York State Museum, Albany, New York, March 25, 2011

Frances Perkins was having tea with friends at Margaret Morgan Norrie's home on Washington Square on Saturday afternoon, March 25, 1911, one hundred years ago this very hour. The clang of fire trucks interrupted their conversation and they hurried across the Square to discover the cause. They reached the Asch Building, site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, in time to see young women, many on fire, jumping to their deaths. 146 human beings perished. Perkins's friend, Will Irwin, later remarked that "What Frances Perkins saw that day started her on her career." [Downey, p. 36] The definitive historian of the Triangle Fire, David Von Drehle, concluded that Frances Perkins's "experiences perfectly suited her to help redeem the tragedy of the Triangle fire. That she was there to see this tragedy with her own eyes, to be able to feel it viscerally, is one of history's intriguing strokes of coincidence." [Von Drehle. p. 195] Perkins herself, subsequently FDR's Secretary of Labor, the first female cabinet member and the prime architect of the major social legislation of the 1930's, later observed that the New Deal began on March 25, 1911.

Through her grandmother, Cynthia Otis Perkins, Fanny (later Frances) Perkins was descended from two prominent actors in the era of the American Revolution, James Otis ("Taxation without representation is tyranny") and his sister, Mercy Otis Warren, author in 1805 of the "History of the American Revolution." [Downey, pp. 7-8; Schiff, p. 133] Perkins drew on this revolutionary lineage and her New England roots, including her religion, to help redefine in a career over almost four decades the role of government to meet human needs.

During her student days at Mount Holyoke College, Perkins studied at first hand the unsafe factory conditions in nearby Holyoke, Massachusetts under the supervision of her professor, Annah May Soule. A visiting lecture by the prominent social worker, Florence Kelley, head of the National Consumers League, thrilled Perkins. From her undergraduate experiences Fanny Perkins acquired the skills and passion to study the conditions of the working poor, learning to respect the power of facts when properly assembled to allow clear analysis of problems as the basis for thoughtful solutions.

Between her graduation in 1902 and the time of the Triangle Fire in 1911, a period of almost a decade, Perkins worked with the poor in the settlement house movement with Jane Addams in Chicago, studied the problems of young immigrant women being drawn into prostitution in Philadelphia and became the executive secretary of the New York Consumers League, through this assignment becoming a colleague of her hero, Florence Kelley. In this last role, Frances (her new chosen name) lobbied in Albany to secure passage of a law to limit the working hours of women to 54 hours per week. During this effort she got to know a young assemblyman from New York City's Lower East Side, Alfred E. Smith. Helped by his mentoring, Perkins learned the political ropes of Albany

including how to deal with Tammany Hall, the political organization controlling the Democratic Party in New York. Unlike other reformers, she learned to work with and respect Tammany leaders like Thomas “The” McManus and Big Jim Sullivan who helped her achieve her reform objectives. She learned to be both political and pragmatic and regarded legislation as a powerful means to address social ills.

The election of 1910 in New York produced Democratic control of both houses of the legislature. Tammany boss Charles F. Murphy secured the leadership positions in Albany for two promising young men, Robert Wagner in the Senate and Al Smith in the Assembly. They would soon be known as the Tammany Twins. Both Catholics, they emerged from the immigrant poor in New York City with whom they deeply sympathized. Tammany Hall had not been conspicuously supportive of unions before this election. Indeed, the policemen of New York, under Tammany influence, had led the physical attacks on the female textile workers during their strike in 1909, a long strike that increasingly attracted the sympathies of significant numbers of the general public, including many of Frances Perkins’s wealthy female friends.

The dangerous factory conditions faced by such workers became the focus of Perkins in her role as head of the New York Consumers League. Following a fire on November 26, 1910 at the Wolf Muslim Undergarment Company in Newark, New Jersey, where 26 workers died, most after jumping from the fourth floor to escape the fire, Perkins became an expert on fire safety in factories and began formulating legislation to protect workers. In the aftermath of the Triangle fire four months later, a guilty and angry public demanded fire safety reforms. They were challenged by a petite, young labor leader, Rose Schneiderman, at a packed gathering of New York citizens at the Metropolitan Opera House on April 2<sup>nd</sup>. “I would be a traitor to these poor burned bodies if I came here to talk good fellowship,” Rose declared. “We have tried you good people of the public and found you wanting. The old Inquisition had its rack and its thumbscrews and its instruments of torture with iron teeth. We know what these things are today: the iron teeth are our necessities, the thumbscrews the high-powered and swift machinery close to which we must work; and the rack is here in the firetrap structures that will destroy us the minute they catch fire.” Perkins, who was on the stage as a representative of the New York Consumers League, recalled this as the most inspired speech she had ever heard. [Schiff, pp. 141-2]

An immediate response to the tragedy was the creation of the Committee on Safety with thirty-one year-old Frances Perkins as its executive secretary, a post for which she was recommended by Theodore Roosevelt. [Downey, p. 48] In his Assembly leadership role, Al Smith believed that such a committee of “the best people” would have insufficient clout to make a difference. He therefore worked with Robert Wagner to create the Factory Investigating Committee, a legally constituted organ of the Legislature, with the power of subpoena and the charge to recommend laws to the Legislature. Wagner became chair with Smith as vice chair. Including representatives of unions, factory owners and public interest groups appointed by the governor, as well as other legislators, the Factory Investigating Committee became over the next four years a powerful force for reform. Frances Perkins, loaned by the Consumers League to the Committee on Safety, which in

turn was represented by her on the FIC, became its chief investigator, working closely with Smith and Wagner.

Frances organized investigations of factories all over the state, sometimes arriving with an FIC delegation in the early morning as the night shift gave way to the day shift. Their investigations went beyond fire safety to, in Perkins's words, "report [on] all kinds of human conditions that were unfavorable to the employees, including long hours, including low wages, including the labor of children, including the overwork of women, including homework put out by the factories to be taken home by the women. It included almost everything you could think of that had been in agitation for years. We were authorized to investigate and report and recommend action on all these subjects. I may say we did." [Schiff, pp. 143-4] Her investigation strategy included making it "our business to take Al Smith, the East Side boy who later became New York's governor and a presidential candidate, to see the women, thousands of them, coming off the ten-hour night shift on the rope walks in Auburn. We made sure that [State Senator] Wagner personally crawled through the tiny hole in the wall that gave egress to a steep iron ladder covered with ice and ending twelve feet from the ground, which was euphemistically labeled 'Fire Escape' in many factories." Smith would later call the experience "the greatest education he'd ever had." [Schiff, pp. 144-5]

From 1912 to 1915, most of the FIC's recommendations became law. In the area of fire safety, the laws established requirements for fire drills, sprinkler systems in tall buildings, guards for gas jets, enclosed fire stairways, new principles for building construction, relating the number of unlocked exits to the number of persons who would need to use them and be able safely to exit the building within three minutes, even frequent emptying of trash containers with flammable material—all requirements that, had they been in force in the Asch Building, would have obviated the high loss of life in the Triangle fire. Beyond such fire codes, which were soon copied by other states and municipalities around the country, even eventually around the world, the FIC recommended laws covering other working conditions including wages, hours, and prohibition of child labor. Along the way, Perkins secured passage of her 54 hour bill in 1912—six years before she as a woman had the right to vote in New York State. In her book, "The Roosevelt I Knew," which she wrote after FDR's death, she recalled that Al Smith and Robert Wagner through their work on the FIC "got a firsthand look at industrial and labor conditions, and from that look they never recovered. They became firm and unshakable sponsors of political and legislative measures designed to overcome conditions unfavorable to human life." [Perkins, p. 17.]

One of the new laws reorganized the state's Department of Labor which had proved to be a toothless enforcer of the safety requirements previously on the books. A new Industrial Commission within the Department of Labor was created with real powers of enforcement. When Al Smith was elected governor in 1918, he appointed Frances Perkins as one of the five commissioners. This recognition of Perkins, a woman, for a major government position, was greeted by Florence Kelley. "Glory be to God," said Kelley, bursting into tears. "You don't mean it. I never thought I would live to see the day when someone that we had trained and who knew industrial conditions, cared about

women, cared to have things right, would have the chance to be an administrative officer!.” [Downey, p. 77] Smith made Perkins the chair of the Industrial Commission in 1926.

Under the Industrial Commission, rules and regulations governing each industry were created, anticipating the industry “codes” that would become part of the New Deal through the National Recovery Administration in 1933. During the course of Governor Smith’s four administrations (he lost in the Republican sweep in 1920), from 1919 to 1929, Frances Perkins would be a key ally in helping Smith become the most progressive governor in the nation on social and labor legislation in the 1920’s. By and large, his initiatives carried out the full program of action proposed by the FIC—the direct results of the Triangle Fire. George Martin, in his book “Madame Secretary: Frances Perkins,” sought to capture the pivotal relationship for progressive reform between Smith and Perkins:

“Later, in the midst of the Republican ‘return to normalcy’ after World War I, Smith was almost the only governor of the forty-eight to press constantly for more social legislation. An old Tammany politician accounted for Smith’s interest in it by saying, ‘He read a book’—an astonishing judgment, for Smith learned almost nothing by reading books and almost everything by talking to others and observing for himself. Asked to explain, the Tammany man said, ‘He knew Frances Perkins and she was a book.’” [Martin, p. 120]

Frances Perkins’ method to promote reform, first fully developed with the FIC, but then employed throughout the rest of her career, was to assemble a group of intelligent people, including key public officials and others with technical expertise for the problem being addressed, then carrying out research to establish the facts of the situation before reaching conclusions and shaping the group’s recommendations. As Perkins’ biographer Kirstin Downey explains, Perkins “said just fifty people could make a difference. She would act on this theory again and again, each time planting herself in the middle of the circle of fifty.” [Downey, p. 53]

When Franklin Roosevelt succeeded Al Smith as Governor of New York, FDR basically continued Smith’s progressive policies which by late 1929 were particularly needed to cope with the emerging Great Depression in the nation’s largest state, the Empire State. Frances was the bridge between the two administrations, continuing the social and labor reforms of the Smith administration. Perkins recalled later that FDR when president acknowledged that “Practically all the things we’ve done in the Federal Government are like things Al Smith did as Governor of New York. They’re things he would have done if he had been President of the United States.” [Schiff, p. 149]

A key example of Perkins’ strategy for developing policy recommendations that also bridged Roosevelt’s governorship and his presidency was her initiative in January of 1930 as Governor Roosevelt’s Commissioner of Labor to challenge President Herbert Hoover’s overly optimistic assessment of the unemployment situation in the nation. Taking New York State’s unemployment numbers—the development of sophisticated

statistical data was one of the hallmarks of Frances Perkins's contributions to effective government—she called a press conference, without consulting Roosevelt, and showed that unemployment in New York State was not getting better, indeed it was getting worse and this appeared to be the case nationally. She called FDR to alert him to the possible political implications of this direct challenge to Hoover.

“I have done something that you may think is very wrong,” she said. “I’d like to tell you about it. Are you feeling amiable?”

Yes, he was. Frances told him she had sent out a statement disputing Hoover’s comments that would soon appear in numerous newspapers.

“The hell you have!” Roosevelt burst out.

“Are you going to kill me, or fire me?” she asked.

Roosevelt burst out laughing. “It’s bully!”

Still roaring with merriment, Roosevelt said he thought it was wonderful—though if consulted first, he probably would have told her not to do it. He would do nothing to reprimand her but told her she was out there on her own.” [Downey, p. 111]

The response was overwhelmingly favorable to Roosevelt and Perkins came to be regarded as a national specialist on unemployment.

To build upon what became a signature of Roosevelt’s potential national leadership, Perkins advised him to create a commission on unemployment in New York State. The proposal had Eleanor Roosevelt’s strong support. Under Perkins’ leadership, the commission’s recommendations foreshadowed the New Deal’s approach to unemployment and concluded by noting that “the public conscience is not comfortable when good men anxious to work are unable to find employment to support themselves and their families.” [Schiff, p. 162.] FDR followed up, also on Perkins’ advice, to convene a multi - state conference on unemployment thereby strengthening Roosevelt’s national leadership on this crucial issue as the presidential campaign of 1932 approached.

When Roosevelt decisively defeated Hoover in 1932, with unemployment nearing 25%, he turned to Frances Perkins to be his Secretary of Labor. For personal reasons, linked to her husband’s serious bi-polar mental illness, Perkins had serious reservations about leaving New York for Washington. When at last the meeting took place between Frances and the President-Elect in February of 1933, as she had done when he asked her to be Commissioner of Labor in New York in 1928, Frances Perkins had her list of legislative objectives which she needed him to pledge to support if she were to accept his offer. “She ticked off the items: a forty-hour workweek, a minimum wage, worker’s compensation, unemployment compensation, a federal law banning child labor, direct federal aid for unemployment relief, Social Security, a revitalized public employment service and health insurance.” [Downy, p. 1] He assured her of his support. In their time together over the next eventful twelve years, they achieved all of these objectives—except health insurance. In addition, she became the focal point for strengthening unions and securing, with the leadership of Senator Robert Wagner, the right to collective bargaining.

One accomplishment is of singular interest at the present moment: establishing Social Security. Since I had the opportunity to invite Frances Perkins to live with us at our student residence at Cornell University, where she had come to teach in 1955 in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, I know from her personal response to me that she regarded Social Security as her greatest contribution. Her method of securing this singular accomplishment, even now under attack with some of the same arguments used by Alf Landon against FDR in the 1936 election, included recommending to Roosevelt that he appoint a Committee on Economic Security, made up of key cabinet members, along with specialists on old age insurance and unemployment insurance. She recommended the members and chaired the committee. The CES made its report by Christmas of 1934 and Roosevelt presented it to the Congress in early 1935. After much heated but purposeful debate, the Social Security Act, with amendments, was adopted in time for the president's signature on August 14, 1935, just 75 years ago.

It was the signature accomplishment of the New Deal.

A final personal reflection. Miss Perkins, as she liked to be called, had an interpretation of the Roosevelt administration which insisted that there had been no New Deal blueprint prior to FDR's taking office. Rather, he and his colleagues dealt with one problem after another, often in great haste because the problems were so urgently in need of action.[See Adam Cohen, "Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days That Created Modern America"] On one occasion at Cornell in the spring of 1963, the Teamsters' Union chief, Jimmy Hoffa, came to lecture. After the lecture, we held a reception for him at Telluride House. Because at that time he and the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, were virtually at war, Miss Perkins did not want to be photographed with him. She had recently met with President Kennedy as part of a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Department of Labor, and did not want to embarrass the President by being seen in public with Hoffa. When he came to Telluride House after his lecture, Hoffa kept requesting that he be allowed to meet her. Over our old intercom phone system, Miss Perkins kept refusing. Finally one of my housemates went to her room, knocked on the door and explained that Mr. Hoffa was insistent. "Who told him I lived here?," she exploded. Then recovering, she said, "Let it never be said that a former Secretary of Labor refused to see a major national labor leader." She had already gone to bed and thus had to dress and put on her tricorne hat before coming down to the living room where almost two hundred people crowded around Hoffa who was answering questions while seated on a sofa. The crowd separated to make a path for Miss Perkins to approach Hoffa. He jumped up, grabbed her hand and declared, "Madame Perkins, I always wanted to meet you and tell you how good you done in ending unemployment." "Come now, Mr. Hoffa," she responded, "you know that World War II, not the New Deal, ended unemployment." With this she turned and exited, passing Sidney Zagrieb, whom she recognized as the Teamsters' lawyer. "Tell me, Mr. Zagrieb, are the Teamsters still highjacking trucks in New Jersey to organize?" With this, the eighty-three year old former Secretary of Labor went back to bed having paid her respects to the Teamsters.

This story should not be read to demonstrate that the New Deal was without any

architecture. Indeed Frances Perkins' list of requirements in 1933, if she were to accept President-Elect Roosevelt's request that she become his Secretary of Labor, was itself a plan, a plan that he and she, with the efforts of many others, including Senator Wagner, helped implement to the great benefit of the American people. And, as she herself observed, implicitly recognizing the central role she played, the New Deal began on March 25, 1911.

## **Bibliography**

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