The Lady from Newcastle Maine and Social Security

BY DONNA HALVORSEN

If Frances Perkins were alive today, she'd be crisscrossing the country defending Social Security. She would be the scourge of certain talk show hosts, who would call her a radical, a socialist, or worse.

If she sought peace at her family's 174-year-old homestead in Newcastle, Maine, peace might have eluded her at a time when her greatest legacy is under siege. Just a few years ago some government officials sought to privatize what is arguably the most successful—and surely the most popular—government program in U.S. history. Now the effort has begun anew, and Perkins would have had to set the record straight. Social Security is not a giveaway, she would insist, but a promise to workers who, in return for paying into the system while they are working, would not be allowed to sink into poverty when they retire.

Perkins wouldn't have called herself the architect of Social Security, though she was. She wouldn't think of herself as "the most important progressive in U.S. history," as former Washington Post reporter Kirstin Downey calls Perkins in her 2009 biography, The Woman Behind the New Deal.

She didn't consider herself a saint, though she was named one by the Episcopal Church in 2009.

She might not even have called herself a daughter of Maine, though she was, with ancestral roots dating to the 1700s. Perkins grew up in Massachusetts, but considered Maine her home, Downey told me. "She was a Maine Yankee through and through."

But she is a mere footnote in U.S. history as the first woman in the U.S. Cabinet. Few people know that Social Security was her idea, not President Franklin D. Roosevelt's. He simply told her to go ahead, that he wouldn't stand in her way.

Nor do they know that Perkins, as Secretary of Labor under Roosevelt for all 12 years of his presidency, was
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and saw the promise of his precocious daughter. He taught her Greek and sent her to an elite high school, then to an elite women's college. At Mount Holyoke she graduated with a degree in physics and chemistry, but she knew even then that she wanted to be a social worker, according to Kirstin Downey. While teaching in Chicago, Perkins worked weekends at Hull House, the well-known settlement house that saw to the needs of the poor. It was a catalyst for Perkins' many social reforms, which included providing infant and maternal care to poor women in New York City.
But an even bigger catalyst was the 1911 fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Co. in New York that killed 146 people, mostly young women. Perkins, who was visiting a friend nearby, saw some of the victims leap to their deaths. This year, events will be held around the country to mark the 100th anniversary of one of the worst workplace disasters in U.S. history.

Factory safety became Perkins' first cause, to be followed by other workplace issues that she initially pursued in New York under Govs. Al Smith and Roosevelt. To become better informed, she obtained a master's degree in social economics from Columbia University.

"She was the most important progressive in U.S. history, male or female, if you consider not just her work as Secretary of Labor, but also in drafting fire-safety and workplace regulations in New York, rules which spread globally, and in bringing thousands of Jews and others to safety during World War II, when she served as chief of the immigration bureau," Downey told me. "Her other accomplishments include the ban
on child labor, the 40-hour work week, unemployment compensation, workers compensation, overtime pay and the minimum wage."

In a 1962 speech at Social Security headquarters, Perkins described the shoestring beginnings of Social Security. When Roosevelt asked her to be labor secretary, she said she told him he might not want her in that job because she would insist on pushing her agenda, which included unemployment insurance, old-age insurance and health insurance. "I remember he looked so startled, and he said, 'Well, do you think it can be done?'

"I said, 'I don't know.' He said, 'Well, there are constitutional problems, aren't there?' 'Yes, very severe constitutional problems,' I said. 'But what have we been elected for except to solve the constitutional problems?"

The president's response, as she recalled it, was "All right. I will authorize you to try, and if you succeed, that's fine." He told her to "borrow" money and staff from other federal departments, because they all had "thousands of employees" and "don't really need all of them." Perkins did just that. The Lions Club and other groups put up money to hire actuaries.

As the work progressed, a legal problem loomed large: states had always provided for their own people. Perkins said she raised the issue with Supreme Court Justice Harlan Stone one afternoon when she was having tea with his wife. "He looked around to see if anyone was listening (and) he said, 'The taxing power, my dear, the taxing power. You can do anything under the taxing power.'"

"I went back to my committee and I never told them how I got my great information," Perkins said in her speech. "As far as they knew, I went out into the wilderness and had a vision."

The bill passed handily: 371 to 33 in the House, and 77 to 6 in the Senate (in both chambers some members were absent or voted "present"). The bill that Roosevelt signed in 1935 established unemployment insurance as well as Social Security. Health insurance was dropped, Perkins said, because the experts didn't get their work done soon enough to be included.

Perkins did her ground-breaking work while she was married and had a child — an unusual circumstance for a working woman of the time, unless she was poor. Her circumstances were even more unusual because both her husband, Paul Wilson, an economist, and her daughter, Susanna, were mentally ill. Her grandson says Perkins' government jobs made it possible to pay for their care. "Yes, it took a strong person to be Frances Perkins, but maybe it also took an absent man," Coggeshall says. Wilson was frequently hospitalized.

Perkins considered herself a feminist and worked for
woman suffrage. Even when she took a high-paying government job in New York state, she didn’t have the right to vote. When she was appointed to the cabinet, both business and labor opposed her, seeing her as a radical and perhaps the wrong gender, but women’s groups cheered. In office, Perkins tried to mute the criticism by wearing nondescript clothing and, at official functions, sitting in the chair set aside for the labor secretary’s wife. But she was criticized for failing to keep up with her social duties in Washington and for not taking her husband’s name.

“She was realistic about sexism and found she could be more successful in promoting her policies by not making an issue out of it,” Downey told me.

Photos of Perkins rarely show her smiling, though Downey says she had “a wicked funny sense of humor and a large circle of friends who adored her.”

Downey suggests that the failure to give Perkins her due may also be gender-related. “There is a strange misconception that there can only be one great woman at a time, and that slot was filled in people’s minds by Eleanor Roosevelt,” she says. “Also, a generation of male scholars in the 1950s and 1960s, the Barbie doll/Mad Men (TV show) era, found it inconceivable that a woman could do so much, so they simply wrote her out of the story.”

Her grandson says that when he walks around the Perkins property, where for a century his family had a successful brick-making operation along the river, “I certainly feel the ancestral tendrils engaging.”

It’s uncertain what the Frances Perkins Center will become. Now more a virtual center with a web presence, it could become a retreat, a small conference center or a policy center, but the first priority will be defending Social Security, says Coggshall, an IT consultant. “We need to stand ready to make the case that it is insurance, it’s not an entitlement,” he says. “People have paid into it. It’s not part of the national budget. Hands off!”
To those who are trying to dismantle or limit Social Security, Perkins would have been a formidable opponent. Three years before she died, she declared: "One thing I know: Social Security is so firmly embedded in the American psychology today that no politician, no political party, no political group could possibly destroy this Act and still maintain our democratic system. It is safe. It is safe forever, and for the everlasting benefit of the people of the United States."

Donna Halvorsen, who lives in South Portland, has been a reporter for more than 30 years in Maine, Minnesota and New York. She covered courts for the Portland Press Herald in the 1980s and retired in 2007 from the Minneapolis Star Tribune, where she spent 17 years covering legal and consumer issues, health care and the Minnesota Legislature.

All About Social Security

In 2010 nearly 53 million Americans received $703 billion in Social Security benefits. Not all recipients are retirees.

- 34 million retired workers received $40 billion in benefits (with an average monthly benefit of $1,170)
- 2.9 million dependants of retired workers received $1.7 billion in benefits.
- 8 million disabled workers received $8.5 billion in benefits (with an average monthly benefit of $1,065)
- 1.9 million dependants of disabled workers received $0.6 billion in benefits.
- 2.9 million dependants of retired workers received $1.7 billion in benefits.
- Survivors of Social Security beneficiaries received $6.4 million in benefits (with an