

Kirmser Award - Essay

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As an unabashed fan of the “underdog”, selecting my topic was an easy thing to do. Far more than any films or novels, history is filled with many “underdog” hero stories. Popular history seems to enjoy glorifying the spirited suffragettes of the Women’s Rights Movement, and rightly so. However, in focusing so intently on these women, they leave out a group of particularly important characters who were truly engines of the cause. I chose to discuss the “happy housewives”—women who received their name by believing that their place was and always should be to remain happily within the domestic sphere—and their profound impact on the movement because I am enamored with their hero story. These women worked tirelessly with little to no recognition, and yet, history so often portrays them as weak and ineffectual to the women’s rights cause though they were anything but. The story of the “happy housewives” is a classic rags-to-riches story. As I journeyed through writing this paper, I could relate to them. I was self-doubting in my abilities but soon learned what I was capable of.

In a previous college course, I was given the privilege of reading a biography on Jane Addams. Addams, a great advocate for women’s permanent role in the domestic sphere, did amazing things with her charity organization, Hull House, at the time of the Women’s Rights Movement. Addams bettered people’s lives by believing that women could extend their nurturing influence beyond the four walls of the home and into the world around them, and many women were recruited to help her with these pursuits. It was learning of Addams’s story that inspired me to research more women who believed that to extend rather than to abolish the influence of their domestic sphere was the best way to make a change in their world.

In order to prepare for the vast amount of research this paper required, I delved right into Hale’s research databases and found numerous journal articles on women in the United States during the 19th

century. Through WorldCat and JSTOR, I was able to find sources whose bibliographies and footnotes led me to specific and unique primary sources which helped me to formulate my thesis. I continued to use WorldCat and JSTOR frequently as I investigated in more detail the lives of the “happy housewives”, but the moment I knew I’d chosen the right topic came when I opened a strange book from Oklahoma. I wanted to get a specific, regional opinion on my topic and so, for the first time in my college career, I decided to utilize the inter-library loan feature at Hale. I requested Suzanne Schrems’s *Who’s Rocking the Cradle?: Women Pioneers of Oklahoma Politics from Socialism to the KKK, 1900-1930* from a public library in Oklahoma, and though the title seemed admittedly bizarre, the book ended up being essential to my paper.

In Schrems’s work, there is a section specifically about Oklahoman women in the domestic sphere and the impact they had on their society. It was a work so particular to the location it came from that there was almost no way I could have obtained this evidence from anywhere else. This arrival through inter-library loan really kick-started the fire in the belly of my paper. These ordinary women in the chiefly rural Midwest were having the same kind of societal impact that Jane Addams was in urban Chicago and that the Ladies Health Protective Association was in New York, and it really struck me. Wanting to ensure the source was sound, I searched JSTOR for reviews of the book which praised Schrems for her astounding evidence. I am forever indebted to the unique feature at Hale, and I have big plans to use it often during my remaining time at Kansas State.

Writing this paper was an adventure, and with adventures also come obstacles that have to be overcome. Searching through online databases was a struggle for me for a while. It bored and frustrated me because I did not know how to use the resources I had, and I realized I needed to consult the experts. I sought frequent help from librarians with finding the locations of worthwhile books in the stacks at Hale, and I learned how to use advanced database searching thanks to research guide Dr. Sara Kearns. She helped me to realize that accessing and evaluating primary sources was neither impossible

nor a chore but rather an exciting quest for answers. She coached me in looking specifically at scholarly articles published in journals of notoriety as well as letters written directly by the people discussed in my paper. Dr. Kearns's instruction helped me to fine-tune my skills in analyzing the credibility of sources and to use more detailed and precise search terms in my investigations. As I learned how to better utilize the resources readily available to students at K-State, I was able to craft a technique to my research. Instead of the haphazard system I had before, I began to take a more organized approach. I sought out sources that I knew and understood already—such as the Jane Addams biography—and branched out from each source by looking at its bibliography for applicable primary sources. This is how I ended up finding many of the letters, speeches, books, and sermons used in my paper.

Hopping from bibliography to bibliography, source to source under the constant guidance of the library felt something akin to following a map to buried treasure. I felt like the “underdog” hero of my own story as I pieced together different components of my beloved “happy housewives” lives. I began this semester inexperienced, unknowledgeable, and unconfident, but soon learned that library resources, which aided me in many forms, served as the map to my glittering treasure; they were always there to guide me when I was uncertain about where to turn next and gave me the support I needed to make something out of nothing and emerge victorious.