



Frances Kellor.

Kellor, Frances Alice (1873-1952)

by John Press

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2012 glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Frances Kellor was a progressive activist and intellectual who is today best known for having led the Americanization movement that greeted the Ellis Island generation of immigrants from 1906 to 1921. But she did much more. Her work also promoted women's athletics, changed the way we view criminality, led to the founding of civil rights organizations, presented alternative forms of government, helped insert suffrage into national party politics, and contributed to the founding of the field of international arbitration.

Born Alice Kellor on October 20, 1873, she was reared by a single mother in the small town of Coldwater, Michigan. She never met her father. She also never finished high school. Poverty caused her to quit school in order to do domestic work with her mother.

Soon thereafter, however, two sisters, Mary and Frances Eddy, took her into their home. Along with a minister, the Eddy sisters trained Kellor in social work activism and prepared her for college. In their efforts to mold her into a progressive reformer, they succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

Kellor enrolled at Cornell University in 1895 to study law. Upon receiving her Bachelor of Laws degree in 1897, she became the third woman to earn a law degree at Cornell.

Although Kellor never sought admission to the bar and therefore never practiced law, she did put her legal training to great use during her long career, which often required her to supervise legal branches of organizations and to propose laws.

At Cornell, in a move towards gender ambiguity, Kellor changed her name from Alice to Frances. She also worked to establish a women's rowing team. Since some people thought that athletic competition might "unsex" women, a women's rowing team was controversial, and when she left Cornell, the team still had not gained official recognition.

In 1898, Kellor undertook graduate work in criminal sociology at the University of Chicago. While there she successfully challenged the world's leading criminal sociologist, Cesare Lombroso, who asserted that criminals were genetically defective. Lombroso "proved" his theory by measuring faces and resistance to pain. He believed that women with certain shaped jaws were often lesbians and prostitutes.

Kellor worked to refute Lombroso by replicating his studies on different populations (northern white women in prison, northern white women in university, and African-American women in southern penitentiaries). Three years of data collection resulted in her 1901 book, *Experimental Sociology*, which vindicated the modern idea that the environment, not defective genes, fosters criminal tendencies.

Kellor left the University of Chicago in 1902 without finishing her Ph.D. She probably realized that there were too few positions available for female academics to justify completing the degree. Her upcoming

torrent of activism might also indicate that she left university because she wanted to engage in more direct activism.

In 1902 Kellor moved to New York City to investigate the condition of domestic workers. In undertaking this investigation, she must have been motivated to some extent by the memory of her mother's work as a domestic.

Although she began engaging in more hands-on activism in New York, she nevertheless published a book of thoughtful sociology, based on her research into domestic workers' lives, *Out of Work* (1904). The book presented both findings and solutions.

Out of Work addressed the plight of both European immigrant women and African-American women who had moved North to work as domestics. Thus, she began shifting her focus from protecting African-American women to doing the same for immigrants.

Upon moving to New York to help domestic workers, Kellor began a relationship with Mary Dreier (1875-1963) that would last for 47 years. She soon moved in with Mary and her sister Margaret Dreier Robins (1868-1945), the daughters of German immigrants.

In 1904, not long after they met, Kellor wrote Mary, "The colors and sunlight make me hungry for you." A year later she wrote Mary that with her, "love burns thru beautiful nights you dear sweetheart."

These letters hint strongly at sexuality in their relationship, which might be described as a romantic friendship or "Boston marriage."

Photos show that Kellor literally wore the pants in the relationship. She had always been androgynous. In her hometown, some people shunned her because she "wore her hair shingled and walked and talked like a boy." In most of Kellor's photos, she is dressed in men's clothes.

In one photo, in which Kellor and Dreier greet Eleanor Roosevelt, Kellor has her arm around Dreier's shoulder in a masculine gesture of protection. Kellor often called Mary, "my dear little girl."

Indeed, a paternalistic attitude is apparent in many of the letters Kellor wrote Dreier. In one, she reassures Mary, "I don't expect love to make a sociologist or any other ologist out of you."

But Mary and her sister Margaret were important activists in their own right. For example, both served as presidents of the Women's Trade Union League. Margaret and her husband, Raymond Robins (1873-1954), were powerful members of the Progressive Party. Collectively, they constituted a veritable first-family of progressivism.

Mary was often described as reserved. Yet people also commented on how much she had "come out" under Kellor's tutelage. Mary even once was arrested for trying to stop a scab from crossing picket lines. A newspaper expressed shock that authorities would "lock up a woman like Miss Dreier . . . LIKE A COMMON CRIMINAL!"

It was after moving to New York, writing *Out of Work*, and establishing a household with Mary, that Kellor began her long affiliation with Americanization.

Kellor led every phase of the Americanization movement. This movement attempted to acculturate the Ellis Island generation of immigrants. Although some historians deride the movement as coercive, xenophobic, and culturally conformist, such generalizations overlook the fact that in leading the movement Kellor

developed an accepting social justice-based, multicultural version of American citizenship.

Indeed, many of the movement's activities, such as English classes for adults and lecture series on American history, were initiated by immigrants who desperately wanted to become "real Americans." Moreover, as someone who had herself escaped poverty, Kellor intimately understood the aspirations of the newcomers.

Kellor's early Americanization work aped that of existing immigrant groups. For example, she went to the docks to welcome immigrants and steer them clear of predators and con men.

As Kellor took on immigration activism full-time, however, her work shifted into the traditionally male domains of labor camps and politics. As such, her previous exclusive attention to women ended.

In 1909 Kellor co-authored *Athletic Games in the Education of Women* with the long-time head of the University of Chicago women's sports program, Gertrude Dudley. Kellor's vision for women's sports had widened during the ten years of basketball coaching she undertook after her early rowing team advocacy at Cornell. In the book the authors contended that women were too domestic and concerned with gossip. They argued that playing basketball could make women public activists and concerned with important issues outside the confines of their homes.

In 1910 the National League for the Protection of Colored Women, which she had founded while studying domestic workers, merged with two other groups to form the National Urban League, one of the oldest and most successful community-based civil rights organizations in the country. But in making her organization larger, it lost its sole focus on women in a way similar to her shift in focus from women immigrants to immigrants in general.

Still Kellor's very success helped women lift the glass ceiling. In 1910 Kellor became the first female head of a New York state agency, the Bureau of Industries and Immigrants. Working with private immigrant advocacy organizations, Kellor turned this bureau into a powerful protector of immigrant labor rights.

Eventually, Kellor led military and federal Americanization departments during World War I and afterwards.

Americanization Day was the Americanization movement's most public event. Held on the Fourth of July, Kellor's celebrations featured long-term Americans welcoming newly arrived Americans. In the first year, 1915, celebrations took place in over 150 cities and hundreds of thousands participated. In each of these events, immigrants marched in their traditional costumes. The festivities peaked with the end of the War in 1918. Americanization Day created a proto-multicultural definition of American citizenship.

In 1916, the Committee for Immigrants in America (CIA), which Kellor led, wrote the New York State Americanization curriculum. Following the lead of John Dewey, the curriculum urged activist community service learning rather than memorizing historical facts or imparting Protestant culture. The curriculum asked teachers to identify problems facing the particular immigrant community they taught and to help the immigrants organize to solve these problems.

During the years Kellor led the Americanization movement she also undertook other endeavors. She held the highest position of any woman in the 1912 Progressive Party presidential campaign of Theodore Roosevelt. This was the first campaign in which a major political party included women's suffrage in its national platform.

Roosevelt said he had, "always favored woman's suffrage, but only tepidly, until my association with women like Jane Addams and Frances Kellor, . . . changed me into a zealous instead of a lukewarm adherent of the cause."

The *New York Times* considered it nearly unbelievable that a woman held so prominent a position in a political campaign. Kellor's work for Roosevelt broke ground for women.

After Roosevelt's defeat, the Progressive Party bifurcated. The political wing continued fighting for votes while Kellor's half, called the Progressive Service, attempted to channel social activism into national politics.

The Service's sociological department studied social problems. The legal branch wrote bills to fix the problems. And the educational branch, via local and state chapters, fomented support for the legal solutions. Kellor viewed this scheme wherein sociologists proposed legislation that passed via popular backing as a new form of government. For Kellor, participatory activism and social justice moved us towards American ideals.

In 1915, Kellor published another version of *Out of Work*. While the title remained the same, the book nearly doubled in size. It examined all unemployment, not just that of domestic workers or women. This version of *Out of Work* was the first book that viewed unemployment as a structural problem for which the Federal government should assume responsibility.

Kellor's work in labor relations promoted the new idea that the provision of benefits and clean and happy workplaces would forestall strikes and reduce worker turnover. Kellor made important contributions to our national understanding of unemployment and employment.

Kellor also took a leading role in the 1916 Republican Presidential campaign of Charles Evans Hughes. She headed the Women's Committee of the National Hughes Alliance. In this capacity, she took many women activists on a speaking tour across America via train. She undertook this endeavor in order to show that women could compete effectively in the male arena of politics. She lectured her women about the "masculine" manner of speaking.

Because it became controversial, Kellor's embattled train tour may have actually cost Hughes the 1916 election. But, as the last national Presidential campaign to publicly advocate suffrage (i.e., the last one to need to), it met with long-term success.

In 1916 Kellor also released her most searing work concerning Americanization, *Straight America: A Call to National Service*. The subtitle uses the name of her Progressive Party organization, and makes clear that what is needed is not passivity, but more activism.

It bears noting that immigrants were not the intended readers of *Straight America*. Rather, the book directs its message to long-term Americans and industrialists. It argues that exploitation causes unhappiness and, thus, runs counter to the goals of Americanization. What divides America, she contends, is not immigrants, but prejudice against immigrants. For Kellor, true Americanism was rooted in social justice and inclusion.

As 1920 approached, the country regarded immigrants with increasing suspicion. Kellor had some success in countering this cynicism. In 1919, an association of 400 industrialists, led by Coleman du Pont, the head of the powerful DuPont Company, bought her the American Association of Foreign Language Newspapers (AAFLN). This agency placed the majority of English language advertising in the foreign language newspapers in America. Thus, as the President of the AAFLN, Kellor gained control of the majority of advertising in America's foreign language media.

As the president of the AAFLN, Kellor denounced the Red Scare deportations and greatly contributed to the defeat of Congressional efforts to ban foreign language media. But her efforts to promote an open border and increased immigration fell on deaf ears. In 1921, Congress adopted very tight restrictions on immigration.

With a drastically reduced number of immigrants, the need for the Americanization movement was also drastically reduced.

Many features of modern America reflect Kellor's efforts. Kellor has been noticed as a forerunner of Title IX, which supports women's athletic programs. Other programs, such as Head Start, reflect the belief that poor environments can increase criminality, which Kellor championed.

Kellor's leadership in the 1912 and 1916 presidential elections not only helped achieve women's suffrage, it also helped demonstrate that women were fully capable as politicians

Additionally, Kellor's books and articles also moved us towards seeing unemployment as a national problem that needed to be addressed by the federal government.

In 1921, Kellor launched the field of international arbitration. In 1924, she co-authored a two-volume analysis of the League of Nations entitled, *Security against War*. The book demonstrated the negative effects of the League of Nations' weak legal branch.

According to Florence Allen, the first female to sit on a state Supreme Court bench, Kellor's analysis of the League of Nations led to the prominence of the World Court in the United Nations charter.

In 1926 Kellor co-founded the American Arbitration Association (AAA). As with earlier organizations she founded, such as the National Urban League, she formed it by merging her organization with others. And, as with several other organizations, she served as the AAA's Vice-President under the titular leadership of a male President.

Kellor served as the Vice President of the AAA for the rest of her life. The AAA currently has thirty-four offices and arbitrates more than 200,000 disputes a year.

In her final writing on immigrants, Kellor denounced Americanization for its prejudice and launched the idea of the "International Human Being." Dovetailing with her arbitration work, she argued for international treaties to protect migratory workers.

The multicultural and international view of society Kellor promoted aimed at a world in which all persons, regardless of cultural backgrounds and beliefs, would be welcome and have financial and political access. Kellor's promoting political participation and social justice as cornerstones of American identity may be her most profound contribution.

Kellor died on January 4, 1952. Upon Kellor's death, she was eulogized by many luminaries including Thomas J. Watson of IBM.

More personally, Mary Dreier, who survived Kellor by nine years, received many letters expressing condolences and admiration for the two women's special friendship of 47 years.

Bibliography

Dudley, Gertrude, and Frances Kellor. *Athletic Games in the Education of Women*. New York: Henry Holt, 1909.

Kellor, Frances. *Experimental Sociology: Descriptive and Analytic*. New York: MacMillan, 1901.

_____. *The Federal Administration and the Alien: A Supplement to Immigration and the Future*. New York: George H. Doran, 1921.

_____. *Immigration and the Future...* New York: George H. Doran, 1920.

_____. *Out of Work: A Study of Unemployment*. New York: G.P. Putnam's and Sons / The Knickerbocker Press, 1915.

_____. *Out of Work: A Study of Employment Agencies: Their Treatment of the Unemployed, and Their Influence Upon Homes and Business*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904.

_____, and Antonia Hatvany. *Security against War*. 2 vols. New York: MacMillan. 1924.

_____. *Straight America: A Call to National Service*. New York: MacMillan, 1916.

Faderman, Lillian. *To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America--A History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

Fitzpatrick, Ellen. *Endless Crusade: Women Social Scientists and Progressive Reform*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Hartmann, Edward. *The Movement to Americanize the Immigrant*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1948.

Lombroso, Cesare. *The Female Offender*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895.

Press, John. *Founding Mother: Frances Kellor and the Creation of Modern America*. New York City: Social Books, 2012.

About the Author

John Press taught high school for eight years prior to receiving his doctorate in the History of Education. He is the author of *Founding Mother: Frances Kellor and the Creation of Modern America*.