

The Progressive Era

Part 1: A Better Life for Americans

The late 1800's and early 1900's were a time when America was making its power felt around the world. At the same time there were many problems causing unhappiness for Americans at home. People began to look for ways to take care of these problems.

Big Business had become even bigger. Large corporations were making a great deal of money, and some owners and managers became very rich. However, most of the people working in business and industry were not getting rich.

Farmers were having trouble. Railroads were charging higher prices to ship their crops to market.

As the farmers tried to produce more crops, they bought new farm machinery and more land. Often the money they got for their crops was barely enough to pay for the machinery and land. They could not make a living.

Many workers were working in unhealthy places for little pay. Young children worked long hours alongside older workers.

Many people lived in overcrowded cities, paying high rent for poor housing.

Many local government officials took money from businessmen and others. In exchange for this money, they would pass laws that often helped only those businessmen. These laws were unfair to other people doing business.

At that time the city governments were often **political machines** run by **bosses**. These bosses were sometimes dishonest and tried to make money from being in office.

Big Business made it a point to be friends with political machine bosses. The federal government did little to control business.

Thomas Nast, a cartoonist for the New York Times in the 1870's, was able to do something about one of these bosses. He drew cartoon after cartoon about the dishonesty of New York's Boss Tweed. Samuel Tilden, a lawyer, was finally able to get Tweed sent to jail.

The Populist Movement

One of the tries at **reforming** (making better) American life came in the late 1800's. Farmers united at that time with city workers in the **Populist Party**.

They hoped to fight Big Business by electing a Populist President. They wanted laws for better working conditions, an eight-hour work day and a fair income tax.

In 1892 there was a Populist candidate for President and Vice-President. In 1896 William Jennings Bryan was the Populist candidate for President. He lost the election. The Populist movement died out after that. The work they began did not die out, however.

About 1900, other people began to speak out about the things that needed changing in America.

Many of the reformers were writers. One of these was **Upton Sinclair**. In 1906 he wrote a book called

The Jungle which told of the very dirty conditions in meat packing plants. He told of rats and insects that were there, and unclean meat.

There were people in the federal government who knew that this was going on. They believed that the meatpackers should have the freedom to do their business as they wanted.

Sinclair's book, however, led to pressure from President Roosevelt and others. The **Meat Inspection Act** was quickly passed.

Other writers also forced changes. **Ida Tarbell** wrote a book showing how the Standard Oil Company controlled the flow of oil and oil products and kept others out of that business.

Frank Norris wrote *The Octopus*. It was about how a few men on Wall Street in New York controlled the flow of money in the entire nation.

Lincoln Steffens wrote *The Shame of the Cities*, showing the way people lived in the overcrowded slums of America's large cities. He also told how big city politicians got rich from taking money for "doing favors" for businessmen and others.

President Roosevelt called these writers **muckrakers**. A muckraker is a person who goes through dirt and **muck** (mud) with a rake trying to find valuables which have been lost. Roosevelt said that the reformers were raking up the muck and not doing any good.

Child Labor

The muckrakers stirred public action with their writing in another area. They wrote of the evils of child labor in mills, factories, and mines.

Many children worked long hours under terrible conditions. For example, nine- and ten-year-old boys were hired in coal mines to pick slag out of coal. They worked in the dirt and grime, often far under ground. They were paid 60 cents for a ten-hour day.

Most often, after a year or so on the job, these **breaker boys** had permanently bent backs and crippled hands from doing their jobs. They were often fired at the age of 11 or 12, and new youngsters took their places in the mines.

Such books as **John Spargo's** *The Cry of the Children* brought these facts home to many Americans.

By 1914 almost every state in the Union had passed laws setting a minimum age for working children and laws to protect them at work.

Roosevelt's Square Deal

When Roosevelt was elected President, he wanted to give working people and farmers a "square deal". To do this, he made up his mind to break up the large business monopolies and trusts.

Before this time, some laws had been passed to control business, such as the Sherman Antitrust Act in 1890. However, these laws had never really been enforced.

Roosevelt **enforced** (made people use) these laws, and got Congress to pass other laws also. His government was able to break up Rockefeller's oil trust, James B. Duke's tobacco trust, and passed laws to control the railroads.

Other reforms were made during this period as well. People other than muckrakers also gave much to the reform movement.

One of these people was **Jane Addams**. She founded a place where poor people in the city of Chicago could go if they needed help. It was called **Hull House**.

She helped form the first court of law for young people in the United States. She helped open the first public parks in Chicago. She fought for children's labor laws, for the rights of women, black people, and working people.

W.E.B. DuBois, a black leader, began the **Niagara Movement** to help black people. This led to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (**NAACP**).

Government Reform

For a long time politicians had given government jobs to people as gifts for helping them get elected to office. No one would ask whether the person could do a good job or not.

In 1883 the **Civil Service Act** was passed. This act allowed many government jobs to go to people who had passed a test or somehow showed that they could do the job. These government workers could not be fired when new officials were elected.

The first **secret ballot** law was passed 1897. Up to this time, people had had to vote in the open, with everyone looking on. This had led to people telling others how to vote. The new laws which were passed allowed people to vote in secret, so that nobody would know how they voted.

In 1913 the **Sixteenth Amendment** was passed. That amendment gave Congress the right to set up an income tax that would be fair to everyone. Such a tax would make the rich pay more taxes than the poor.

Many rich people and big businesses were against the income tax, because they did not want to pay more taxes to the government. This tax was a victory for working people.

Progress In Education

It has always been the hope in America for as many people to go to school as possible. From the end of the Civil War to 1900, many hopes for education came true.

1862 President Lincoln had signed a law to build **land grant** colleges. That is, the government gave states the land on which to build free public colleges. Many of the state universities of today began as land grant colleges. Many of them are in the midwest.

More children began going to public school. Twice as many were in school in 1900 as in 1870. There were twice as many colleges in 1900 as in 1865. Women were allowed to attend all state universities by 1900.

Because of the writers and the reformers who helped to get new laws passed, the lives of most Americans improved between the late 1800's and 1920.

There were still problems. While some people became rich, others lived in poverty in the slums of the cities and the farm shacks of the south.

For most Americans, however, things were looking up. People thought that there soon would come a new age where everyone would have everything they needed.

Part 2: The Progressive Movement

How did a group of reformers try to solve some of America's problems?

The rapid growth of industry after 1865 brought many changes to American life. It gave Americans more goods, more machines, and more comforts. But the new ways of living brought serious problems as well. Many people thought that our form of government, democracy, was in danger. A few wealthy and powerful business leaders were able to influence government officials to pass laws in their favor. They were able to squeeze out owners of smaller businesses. They were able to sell goods of poor quality at high prices. They had no income taxes to pay. In addition, many people thought that the way officials were elected was not democratic enough. In short, there were few laws to correct these problems.

These and other problems facing the people were described by a group of writers called **muckrakers**. In 1906 Upton Sinclair published the most stirring of these writings, *The Jungle*, a story of the meatpacking industry. The public was shocked to learn of the unsanitary methods used to bring meat products to market. For example, meat was often stored in rooms where rats would race about. Poisoned bread would be set out to kill these rats. Then the poisoned bread, dead rats, and meats would all go into the meat grinder together.

Other well-known muckrakers were Frank Norris, Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, and Thomas Lawson. In his books, Frank Norris told how farmers suffered from the railroad and grain trusts. Lincoln Steffens showed how politicians in many cities got rich by giving favors to big business. Ida Tarbell wrote the *History of the Standard Oil Company*, which told how difficult it was for new companies to make a start against the giants of the business world. Thomas Lawson showed how a few men controlled most of the money in this country.

All over the United States, voices called for reform or change. Those voices seemed to say, "Come on Americans. We can do better than this." The call for reform was led by a new group of Americans, called Progressives. The Progressives were mainly middle-class Americans who wanted to correct some of those abuses. They did not like the growing power of big business. They felt that the cities were run poorly. They wanted to end child labor in the factories. The government's role, as they saw it, was to help them bring about reforms. Among the leading Progressives were Senator Robert La Follette of Wisconsin and Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

The Progressives wanted the common people to have greater control over their local governments. In the larger cities, a new type of leader had appeared, the political boss. The bosses were full-time politicians. Sometimes they got themselves elected as mayors. But for the most part, they stayed in the background. They picked their own candidates for office. Then they made sure that the people in their district voted for these candidates. When their candidates were elected, the bosses were able to control them from behind the scenes. Once in power, these bosses often made fortunes for themselves and their families, always at the expense of the people they were supposed to serve.

In order to curb some of the worst abuses by political bosses, many Progressives worked to bring about the following changes.

1. **Civil Service Reform.** For a long time, government jobs were handed out to people who had helped elect a high official. They were given to people who had worked for the successful political party or had given money to it. They were not given out based on a person's ability. This practice is called the spoils system. In 1883 the Civil Service Act was passed. Under this law, a large number of government jobs were given only to people who passed an examination that proved their ability. This law made government workers feel safer in their jobs. Now they could not be removed if a political party other than their own won the next election.
2. **The Secret Ballot.** Although more people were voting than ever before, voting still took place in the open and each political party provided its own ballots. Each party had its own colored paper for its ballot. As a result, party workers could easily see who was voting for their party. Party workers could get a group of people together, show them how to vote, and make sure they voted as the party wished. Under the leadership of the Progressives, laws were passed requiring that voting be done in secret (in a polling booth). Furthermore, they required ballots to be all one color and supplied by the government.
3. **The Direct Primary.** For a long time most candidates for political office were chosen at private meetings of the party leaders. The Progressives wanted the people to have a greater voice in the selection of candidates. They urged that people use the direct primary. Under this method, an earlier election, called a primary, would be held. Voters of each party would choose the candidates they wished to represent them in the final election. Voters could also have the name of any candidates listed on the ballot if enough members of the party signed a petition for those candidates.

The Progressives also wanted to check the growing power of big business. Some earlier efforts to do so, such as the Granger laws in the 1870s, Interstate Commerce Act of 1887, and Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, had failed. A number of states began to pass laws to protect the worker. These laws reduced the number of hours that men, women, and children could work in factories. In some states, children under 16 years of age were forbidden by law from working in factories and mines. However, the courts did not allow some of these laws to stand. The Supreme Court said that a state could not pass laws that would interfere with a business that was carrying on trade in more than one state.

The Progressives worked even harder to get Congress to pass national laws that cared for the needs of the people. In 1906 Congress passed the **Pure Food and Drug Law**. This law protected the people from unsafe foods and medicines. Shortly thereafter, Congress passed a law giving the government the power to inspect meats and other foods. In 1913 Congress passed the **Federal Reserve Act**, setting up the banking system that still exists today. In 1914 it passed the **Clayton Antitrust Act**. This act made it easier to break up the big trusts into smaller companies. It clearly stated what big businesses could and could not do. It also made it easier for workers to join labor unions and strike.

One of the greatest achievements of the Progressives was the passage of the **16th Amendment** in 1913. This amendment gave Congress the power to place a tax on the money people earned. This is called an **income tax**. Only 18 years before, the Supreme Court had said that such a tax was unconstitutional because it was an attack upon the rich.

The new income tax was graduated, which means that people paid according to their income. Those who made a lot of money were required to pay higher taxes than those who did not make much money.

In 1913 the Progressives were also successful in having the **17th Amendment** added to the Constitution. Up until that time, United States senators were chosen by the legislatures of the states. As a result, senators were often elected by small groups of people in each state and did not represent the choice of the majority of voters. Under the 17th Amendment, United States senators were to be elected directly by the people of the states.

Demands grew for the right of women to vote. In 1869 the Wyoming Territory gave women in that region full voting rights. Many reformers joined the National Woman Suffrage Association. As its president, Susan B. Anthony continued her work for women's rights. But by 1898 women could vote in all elections only in Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho.

In the early 20th century, supporters of the vote for women organized marches, petitions, and hunger strikes. More and more states, mostly in the West, passed laws giving women the right to vote. In 1912 the Progressive party came out officially in favor of women's suffrage (the right to vote). Carrie Chapman Catt became an important leader. She and other supporters worked hard to convince Congress to pass a constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote. Their work was finally successful. Congress passed the **19th Amendment**. It became part of the Constitution in 1920.

At the same times these reforms were being made, there was a movement to save our natural resources. When the first settlers came to America, they found a land rich in soil, forests, and water. As the westward movement continued, the great resources of our land were used carelessly. There seemed to be so much natural wealth that people gave little thought to protecting nature's gift. Instead, they cut down whole forests. Miners dug only the richest veins of ore. Cattle and sheep were allowed to strip the grassy plains, turning them into "dust bowls." Beginning with President Theodore Roosevelt, the government took an active part in seeing that our natural resources were not wasted. Lands were set aside by the national government as parks. These lands were not to be settled. Rather they were to be used by all the people. This program of saving our natural resources is called **conservation**.

The Progressives had changed the attitude of the government toward business. For a long time, it had been felt that government should not interfere with business. However, the struggles of farmers and workers to improve their lot changed this idea. New laws brought the government closer to the people. The people were given greater power in choosing public officials. There were laws that protected farmers and workers as well as those who used their goods. With the beginning of the 20th century, the government became more concerned with the welfare of all the people of the nation.