Sinclair Lewis: SUFFRAGENT

Dave Simpkins

The night before the 1915 New York State suffrage referendum was put to a vote, Sinclair Lewis and his wife Grace Hegger Lewis made their way to the final rally at a movie theater in Hempstead, Long Island. It had been a long, hard campaign. She had bicycled through the poor neighborhoods, jollying working men into supporting the vote for women. He gave speeches from the backseat of a roadster proclaiming, as Grace later wrote, "If a human being who was a man had the right to vote, a human being who was a women had the same right."[1]

Suffragists nationwide expressed their beliefs with slogans printed in large letters on banners declaring, "Votes For Women," "Give Women A Square Deal," and "Mr. President: How Long Must Women Wait For Liberty." Gracie hung suffrage banners in the theater before the rally. The stakes were high as Sinclair, then a tall, red-haired man of 30, made his way to the stage in front of a crowd of 600. Hecklers booed and cursed him, but when he spoke, the passion of his words silenced them. He dubbed himself a suffragent, encouraging the men to join him in supporting the suffragists.[2]

When he finished, the lights went down for the suffrage film to begin, giving the hecklers cover and sending them into action tearing down the banners. The next day, suffrage opponents triumphed as the initiative failed. Yet women's right to vote passed two years later in New York State and became the law of the land in 1920 with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.[3]

Sinclair Lewis grew up far from New York in the bustling prairie town of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, the son of a reputable country doctor and the stepson of a high-minded community activist. After obtaining an English degree from Yale University in 1908, he worked as a reporter and writer's assistant in Waterloo, Iowa, and Carmel, California, before moving to New York City's Greenwich Village in 1910 at the age of 25. There he lived in a boardinghouse at 69 Charles Street with two writers from Yale, George Soule and William Rose Benet.[4]

Greenwich Village was a hotbed of new ideas in politics, art, sex, and feminism when he arrived. It was there—before marrying and moving to Long Island—that he began campaigning for suffrage. Women were declaring their economic independence and calling for equal rights, equal pay, reproductive freedom, and the vote. Lewis's subsequent involvement in the suffrage movement put him in contact with many leading feminists. He brought these people and experiences to his writing, making him a powerful voice for women. His works stood out from other novels of his time. He became not only Minnesota's most successful author but America's most admired novelist of the 1920s, with a string of best-selling books: *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), and *Dodsworth* (1929). In 1930 he became the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.[5]

FACING: *Suffrage rally, New York City, "a parade of brains expressed through marching feet!" in Lewis's words.* INSET: *Sinclair Lewis, about 1915.*

Isabel Lewis, Sinclair's influential stepmother

Four women contributed to Lewis's support of women's suffrage and gave him material for his feminist characters. They were: his stepmother, Isabel Warner Lewis; his friend, Frances Perkins; and his two wives, Gracie Hegger and Dorothy Thompson.

Lewis's birth mother died of tuberculosis when he was six years old. A year later, his father, Dr. E. J. Lewis, married Isabel Warner, a 40-year-old woman from Chicago. She was delighted to have a family of three sons to nurture and a community to influence. Like a red-haired tornado, Isabel Lewis directed her righteous determination toward personal and community improvement. She took her red-haired stepson under her wing, encouraged his reading and writing, and taught him to dress well and act like a gentleman.[6]

Isabel called meetings of the Women's Gradatim Society to order in the modest parlor of the home at what

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is now 812 Sinclair Lewis Avenue in Sauk Centre. Young Lewis listened from the bottom of the stairs, with the oak parlor doors open enough for him to hear the meeting. The middle-aged ladies sang church hymns, read poetry, and discussed civic projects such as their anti-fly campaign, the building of a new library, and the in-town "rest room" that gave farm wives a place to keep warm and chat while their husbands drank and fraternized in the saloons. Lewis noted at Isabel's death in 1921 that her life was a triumph and an influence for fineness, ranging from her campaign to ensure that local butchers sold fresh meat to her part in establishing the Minnesota Federation of Women's Clubs.[7]

The community activism of Lewis's stepmother comes alive in his 1920 best-selling book, *Main Street*, which portrays a St. Paul librarian, Carol Kennicott, a liberal, free-spirited woman who marries a friendly, respectable small-town doctor. Carol suffers from having a working brain and no work. She sets out to reform the sleepy town of Gopher Prairie into a Paris on the prairie. Beaten by the town but not defeated, she leads her husband to their nursery door, points to the fuzzy brown head of their sleeping daughter and says

> Do you see that object on the pillow? Do you know what it is? It's a bomb to blow up smugness. If you Tories were wise, you wouldn't arrest anarchists; you'd arrest all these children while they're asleep in their cribs. Think what that baby will see and meddle with before she dies in the year 2000! She may see an industrial union of the whole world, she may see aeroplanes going to Mars.[8]

The book ends with Carol's declaration: "I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe! I do not admit that dishwashing is enough to satisfy all women! I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith."[9]

Frances Perkins was the most influential of Lewis's Greenwich Village friends. Even though she was from an affluent family in Boston, she was an ardent feminist with a passion for poor, working-class people—and she had an encyclopedic memory. She helped poor women at Jane Addams's Hull House in Chicago, and then in 1907 headed to Philadelphia to investigate a sex-slave operation that lured immigrant women into prostitution with the hope of a job. In 1910 she got a master's degree in political science from Columbia University while doing settlement work in New York City.[10]

At that time, Lewis was an awkward, loud, country boy rejected by the Village Bohemians. Perkins, five years older, was more of a mother than a sweetheart. They had fun together mimicking the Bohemians and their smug conversations of rugs and revolution. They took long walks through the slums, rode the ferry to Staten Island for picnics, and found cheap seats at the theater together. She later wrote, "He appealed to one's parental sense," characterizing him as a "half-developed boy, given to great extravagances of expression and thought" but also caught up in social issues. White slavery was one; women's suffrage was another.[11]

Perkins was having tea with friends near Washington Square on March 25, 1911, when a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory on the top floors of the ten-story Asch Building. She joined the crowd of a thousand onlookers, clutching her throat as she watched helpless workers, mostly young Jewish and Italian women, clinging

The community activism of Lewis's stepmother comes alive in his 1920 best-selling book, *Main Street*.

Frances Perkins, head of New York's Committee on Safety, about 1911. Fire escapes were a major part of the workplace-safety campaign.

to the window frames before falling to their death. She stood in silence, screamed, or cried.[12] The owners had locked the doors to the stairwells to discourage unauthorized bathroom breaks.

One hundred and forty-six garment workers died, making the Triangle Shirtwaist fire the largest workplace disaster in New York history. Perkins vowed to dedicate her life to labor, workplace safety, and suffrage. When the Committee on Safety was established to improve workplace safety in New York later in 1911, former President Theodore Roosevelt was asked to lead the effort. Instead, he recommended Perkins for the job.[13]

Lewis campaigned with Perkins for women's suffrage. The two addressed envelopes, distributed flyers, and carried banners. He delivered copies of the suffrage newspaper to young women who would sell it along the Fifth Avenue route of the 1912 women's suffrage parade. He later related, "It was a parade of brains expressed through marching feet!" Lewis continued, "It was a great thought of justice, made visible. It was—oh, let a newsboy friend of mine express it. I heard him say, after the parade, to another boy; 'Say, gee, dat was some parade—all dose women walked like dey was queens!'"[14]

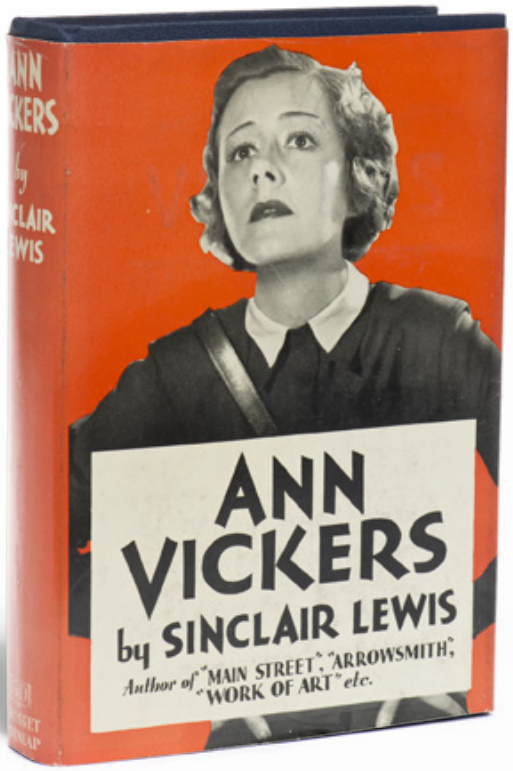
Young Sinclair Lewis fell in love with Perkins. One hot summer night, he drunkenly proposed marriage, standing on the street below her apartment window for all the neighborhood to hear. That incident ended the one-sided romance, but they remained lifelong friends.[15]

President Franklin D. Roosevelt named Perkins secretary of labor in 1933, making her the first woman in U.S. history to serve as a cabinet member. She held that job for 20 years, writing and administering most of the New Deal. Also in 1933, Lewis published *Ann Vickers*, a novel whose title character was modeled on Perkins—along with Susan B. Anthony, Sarah Bernhardt, Nancy Astor, Catherine the Great, and Lewis's second wife Dorothy Thompson. *Ann Vickers* tells the story of a young, liberated woman who is thrown in jail after a suffrage rally and goes on to become an ambitious prison reformer. In that, Vickers also resembles Fannie French Morse, the prison reformer who planned and supervised the Minnesota Home School for Girls, founded in Lewis's hometown of Sauk Centre in 1911 with a philosophy of rehabilitation over retribution.[16]

Lewis gives us a whimsical look inside the suffrage movement when he has Vickers join three fervent volunteers living in an old mansion donated by the wealthy Mrs. Ethelinda St. Vincent, "a large determined lady with purple hats and a bosom like a sack of wheat." The group leader was Miss Mamie Bogardus, otherwise known as "The Battleaxe" or "The Carrie Nation of Suffrage." Lewis portrays Bogardus as a caricature of the suffrage warhorse: a tall, scraggly spinster with ferocious eyes and a loud, shrill voice, yet also "the bravest, the most honest, the kindliest, and the most wistful woman alive."[17]

The book's references to adultery, abortion, and lesbianism—along with its portrayal of a successful woman—made it a shocker *and* a best-seller during the depression era, when books were not selling. It was also made into a 1933 movie starring Irene Dunne and Walter Huston.[18]

During his early years in New York, Lewis's love life greatly improved on September 12, 1911, when he met Gracie Livingston Hegger, a bright, slim, five-foot-seven copy editor and columnist for *Vogue* magazine with a slight English accent inherited from her immigrant



Ann Vickers tells the story of a young, liberated woman who is thrown in jail after a suffrage rally and goes on to become an ambitious prison reformer.

parents. She did not acknowledge him getting on the rickety freight elevator after hours. (He worked for publisher Frederick A. Stokes, located in the same building as *Vogue*.) When the elevator wheezed to a halt, Lewis stepped back to let her exit first, awkwardly knocking her bag from under her arm. As he stooped to pick up the bag, his derby hat fell from his hand and rolled away. Distraught, he dropped the bag, started after the hat, and bumped into an empty pail, which overturned with a clatter.[19] Lewis and Hegger were married three years later.

Gracie Lewis, with her work experiences, became the solid, capable, hardworking Una Golden in *The Job*. Published in 1917, *The Job* was the first full-length novel in American fiction about an office girl. Golden, a feminine Horatio Alger character, rises from an eight-dollar-a-week typing job to manage a hotel chain, creating for herself the kind of life she wants to live.[20] Optimistically she wonders, "Maybe, the business women will bring about a new kind of marriage in which men will have to keep up respect and courtesy. . . . I wonder—I wonder how many millions of women in what are supposed to be happy homes are sick over being chambermaids and mistresses till they get dulled and used to it." Once married to gangly, acne-faced Walter Babson, a Lewis look-alike, she vows to balance career and home: "I will keep my job—if I've had this world

Grace Hegger Lewis—Gracie—about 1915

Dorothy Thompson, the talented, strong-willed, ambitious career woman

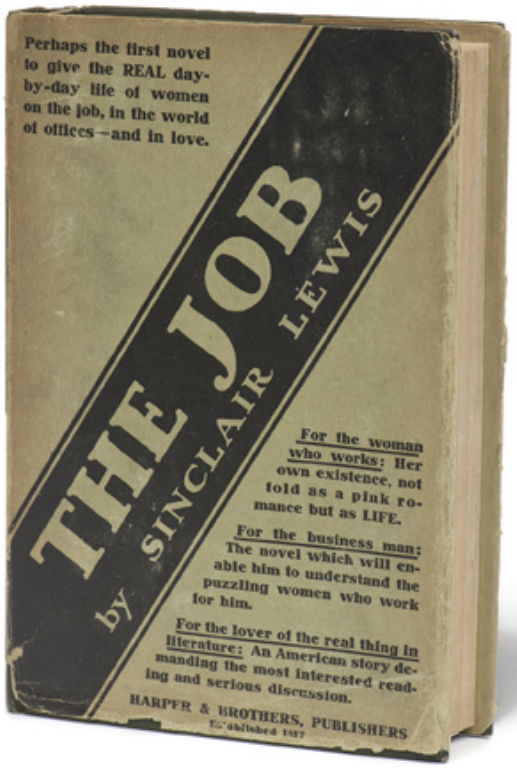
of offices wished on to me, at least I'll conquer it, and give my clerks a decent time. But just the same—oh, I am a woman, and I do need love. I want Walter, and I want his child, my own baby and his."[21]

The year 1917 was an exciting one for Lewis and Gracie. *The Job* was successful, Gracie gave birth to their son, Wells, and Lewis began working on *Main Street*. But a decade later, in 1928, the couple divorced.[22] Within weeks, Lewis married his second wife, Dorothy Thompson, the chief European correspondent for the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and the *New York Evening Post*. Thompson was the daughter of an upstate New York Methodist minister. She had graduated from Syracuse University in 1914 and took a job with the Buffalo headquarters of the New York State Woman Suffrage Party, becoming one of its best speakers. In 1920 she went to Europe as a newspaper correspondent, and by 1928 she was the most popular newswoman on the continent, perfectly at ease with men—particularly men of power—who were no more than her equals. She enjoyed their company.[23]

In 1931 she was the first western journalist to interview Adolf Hitler and, later, the first western journalist to be expelled from Nazi Germany. Also a columnist and radio commentator, she became known as the "First Lady of American Journalism." She and Eleanor Roosevelt were considered the most influential women in America, according to Thompson's biographer.[24]

The tall, rosy-cheeked woman was full of intelligent energy and tenacity. She once borrowed money from Sigmund Freud for train fare from Vienna to Warsaw to cover a coup d'état. With her bob haircut and short skirts, she embodied the modern flapper and successful career woman. Like Lewis, she had lost her mother at a young age but, unlike him, did not bond with her stepmother. Her success, like his, was attended by chain smoking, and she could down drinks with the hardiest reporters.[25]

Thompson was not only one of the models for Ann Vickers, the character, but also a sounding board for *Ann Vickers,* the novel. Like Thompson, Vickers was a strong-



Published in 1917, *The Job* was the first full-length novel in American fiction about an office girl.

willed, articulate woman driven by ambition to establish a career. Also like Dorothy, she tried to have it all: career, love, and family. Lewis ends the book detailing Vickers as "the Captive Woman, the Free Woman, the Great Woman, the Feminist Woman, the Domestic Woman, the Passionate Woman, the Cosmopolitan Woman, the Village Woman—the Woman."[26]

Lewis's career waned after winning the Nobel Prize in 1930, while Thompson's flourished. The two were rarely in the same country, let alone the same bed. She did not want to be just Mrs. Sinclair Lewis, and he feared becoming Mr. Dorothy Thompson. Unfortunately, the couple did not find a way to maintain a marriage that balanced two high-powered careers. Their union ended in 1942.[27]

Ironically, the Lewis-Thompson marriage became the model for a romantic comedy starring Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, released in that same year. Sinclair Lewis had been a friend of the Hepburn family for 20 years. The actress's mother, also Katharine, was a national suffrage leader who, with Margaret Sanger, cofounded what became Planned Parenthood. After the success of Hepburn's 1940 *Philadelphia Story*, the actress and her writers looked for a similar script idea. Meanwhile, over dinner, Thompson had shared humorous stories of her marriage to Lewis with one of Hepburn's writers, Garson Kanin. This gave him the backdrop for a movie, *Woman of the Year*, in which Hepburn played a high-energy, globe-trotting journalist "tamed" by a sports reporter. The 1942 movie won an Oscar for best screenplay and brought Hepburn a best-actress nomination. Asked what she thought of the film, Thompson called it "a sickening travesty and thoroughly unconvincing."[28]

Katharine Hepburn's freewheeling, freethinking, liberated characters resembled Lewis's heroines Una Golden, Carol Kennicott, and Ann Vickers. Lewis's experiences at home in Sauk Centre and in Greenwich Village produced a literary fulfillment of the New Woman of the Twentieth Century—an ideal the suffragists and suffragents could only imagine in 1915. ⊡

Notes

1. Grace Hegger Lewis, *With Love From Gracie* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 68.
2. On suffrage, see Linda J. Lumsden, *Rampant Women: Suffragists and the Right of Assembly* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 135–38; on the Lewises' participation, Richard Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street* (New York: Random House, 2002), 73.
3. Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 73; Lumsden, *Rampant Women*, 13.
4. Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 29–31, 39. The Historic Landmarks Preservation Center in New York awarded the building a Cultural Medallion in May 2014.
5. Bill Bryson, *One Summer: America 1927* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 389; Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 351–53.
6. Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 8–10.
7. Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 170.
8. Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street: The Story of Carol Kennicott* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1920), 450.
9. Lewis, *Main Street*, 451.
10. Kristin Downey, *The Woman Behind The New Deal: The Life of Frances Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor and His Moral Conscience* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 24.
11. Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 40–41.
12. Downey, *Woman Behind the New Deal*, 35.
13. Downey, *Woman Behind The New Deal*, 48.
14. Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 180–81.
15. Downey, *Woman Behind the New Deal*, 27.
16. Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 374. On Morse, see Terry Jaakkola and Julia Lambert Frericks, *Shadows Illuminated: Women in a Rural Culture* (St. Cloud, MN: Stearns County Historical Society, 1996), 90.
17. Sinclair Lewis, *Ann Vickers* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1932), 105–07.
18. On the themes and the film, see Ann Vickers on *www.imdb.com*.
19. G. Lewis, *With Love From Gracie*, 3.
20. Michael Millgate, *American Social Fictions: James to Cozzens* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1964), 98; D. J. Dooley, *The Art of Sinclair Lewis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 79.
21. Sinclair Lewis, *The Job: An American Novel* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917), 327.
22. Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 104, 326.
23. Peter Kurth, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson* (Lexington, MA: Plunkett Lake Press, 2012), 53; Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 487.
24. Marion K. Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson: A Legend in Her Time* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 223–25.
25. Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 312.
26. S. Lewis, *Ann Vickers*, 562.
27. Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 381, 460.
28. Garson Kanin, *Tracy & Hepburn: An Intimate Memoir* (New York: T.F.T Corporation & Viking Press, 1971), 80; Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 299.

The parade photo on p. 330 is from the New-York Historical Society; p. 331 is courtesy the Sinclair Lewis Foundation/Sinclair Lewis Boyhood Home; p. 333, Frances Perkins Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; and p. 335 (top), Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries. All others are in MNHS collections; book photos by Jason Onerheim.