

Why Women's History

by Dr. Sue Armitage

As you think about the history of Washington State, make a list of women who have been important in shaping that history. Who can you name? Your list is likely to be very short. There are not many women in the history books. Indeed, aside from historical exceptions like England's Queen Elizabeth I and recent political leaders like Golda Meir of Israel and Indira Ghandi of India, history books tell us that men made history and that women have no history of their own. This is not true, as a generation of women's historians have devoted their lives to proving: The list of books about women's history in the Pacific Northwest, in the United States, and in the world is long and growing.

How did we come to believe that women had no history? The largest share of the blame rests with history itself, which was understood to be the story of wars and politics. Historians wrote about the men who had been generals, kings, politicians and statesmen. They didn't write about ordinary people, and they didn't write about private life. Indeed, fifty years ago it was quite common to read biographies of famous men in which their female relatives — mother, wives, daughters — were never mentioned.

Beginning in the 1970s, U.S. women's historians led the way in exploring the private, nonpublic lives of ordinary people. Since, as the Chinese say, "women hold up half the sky," the new histories are as much about woman as about men. They tell us, for the first time, about the daily lives of women in the long historical time when all over the world women were excluded from politics, denied equal education, assigned subordinate roles in religion, restricted economically, denied the right to choose their own marriage partners or to control their own children. Within these lives which seem so restricted to us today, historians have discovered rich subjects like childbirth and childrearing, the economic and social importance of women's household work, changing family roles, the history of sexuality, and many other topics previously considered only private matters. The common discovery, in all the historical studies of women in many countries and many historical eras, is that women, no matter how constrained, were active participants in shaping the conditions of their lives.

One of the most important discoveries in U.S. women's history has been that the entire division between "public" and "private" is false. While it is true that most women had primary responsibility for their homes and families, they never led solely private lives. The first organized women's charity groups date from the time of the American Revolution. Since that time, women have never stayed "hidden in the household" but have actively reached out to other women to build and improve their communities. Long before women had the ballot (in Washington State, in 1910; in most other states, 1920), they had become skilled lobbyists on behalf of social legislation. Indeed, women's activities were so pervasive that historians have realized that we need to revise our definition of politics to extend far beyond voting, and far beyond any notion that politics was for men alone. Of course women as well as men have always cared about their

communities, and of course they found a way to act on their concerns.

What this all means is that we need to rethink and rewrite the history of Washington State. Not that what the male politicians and officials did in the past isn't important. It's just not the whole story. We need to learn what women have done and add that new story to our existing history. The WHC, enacted by the Washington State Legislature in 2005, is devoted to that goal. To reach it, we need your help.