Altering the Fine Edge of Respectability: Business Women in Houston, 1880–1920

by Anne Sloan

From the days of our great-grandmothers, when woman's work was in her home and the exchange of money was in the hands of men, there has long been handed down an idea that the fine edge has been taken off a lady's position when she receives money for her work. In our modern cooperative living this is no longer true.[1]

The decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century witnessed significant changes in the employment of middle-class women outside the home. Middle-class women founded their own businesses and gained more jobs in offices, government agencies, and retail stores. In doing so, they challenged the traditional notion that a woman's virtue was attached to her role at home with her family. The influx of middle-class women into the work force generated heated debates about woman's respectability in the context of new business roles. Houston women actively took part in this debate, and the lives of businesswomen in Houston provide a sample of the ways in which women throughout the U. S. responded to the debate and to economic opportunities during this period.

Fiction and commentary in popular media and more serious treatments at the national and local level focused considerable attention on the movement of middle-class women into the business world. This paper reviews writings discussing woman's place and her relationship to paid work from the 1880s through 1920. Commentary in periodicals in Texas and in Houston contributed to the national debate and indicates that women in Houston participated in the national trend. Two periodicals founded in 1917 by Houston businesswomen demonstrate the optimism women felt about their new opportunities and the enthusiasm they felt toward the success of the women around them.

The Houstonian was devoted to "woman and her interests." The publication appeared in 1917, in conjunction with the founding of the Houston Business Woman's Club. *The Houstonian* provided practical information for working women and featured Houston businesswomen as models for success. In the same year, businesswoman Ferdie Trichelle began publishing *The Neutral*, which mixed social commentary with local business news written from a woman's perspective. In the same decade, the *The Houston Post* ran a daily column written by Hallie Rienzi Flint, who used the pen name Harriott Russell. Entitled "Of Interest to Women," Russell's column discussed working women's proper place, dress, and behavior. In addition to these sources, this paper profiles six Houston businesswomen to illustrate the variety of career paths that characterized businesswomen's lives during this period.

During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, commentators recognized that changing social and economic circumstances demanded new roles and made possible new life choices for women. Thomas Higginson, a Harvard-educated Unitarian minister, outlined his view of women's place in his book *Women and the Alphabet* in 1881. Chapter One, originally an essay written for *The Atlantic Monthly* (1859), carried the facetious title "Ought Women to Learn the Alphabet?" Higginson explained that "the long subjection of a woman" stemmed from the "simple truth that her time had not come." He based his theory on the idea that physical strength had enabled men to rule through the ages and claimed that "women's social inferiority has been in the past, a legitimate thing." He classified past history as an "empire of muscles, enlisting, at best, but the lower powers of the understanding" and applauded the fact that "the genius of a woman," had been reserved for the present day. Modern civilization was to him, the "fullness of time" when women, who had been enslaved to the spinning wheel and needle, were now ready for "higher work." He insisted, "No use releasing her [talents] till man, with his strong arm, had worked out his preliminary share in civilization."[2] In a later chapter on "Study and Work," Higginson propounded the "dignity of self-support that removes the traditional curse from labor, and allows woman the right to claim her share in that dignified position."[3]

The world was changing, and women's lives were changing as well. In her 1911 essay "Woman and Labor," South African writer Olive Schreiner, whose books Estelle Hudson recommended in *The Houstonian*, echoed Higginson's idea. Her essay lamented that women's "spinning wheels" were broken, and that "modern civilization" had robbed women "not merely in part but almost wholly of her ancient domain of productive social labour" without giving her the opportunity for "new and compensatory fields."[4]

Female commentators urged women to dispute their husbands' fear that the world would fall apart if wives did not stay at home. In her book *Woman's Share in Social Culture*, Anna G. Spencer characterized the end of the nineteenth century as a slow realization by women and men that "woman is no stepchild of nature, no Cinderella of fate to be dowered only by fairies and the prince; but that for her...as truly as for man, life has wrought its great experiences."[5] Author Nellie McClung, who titled the first chapter of her 1915 book, "Should Women Think?" described the nineteenth

century as a time when society feared women who learned to read. Because female advancements could interfere with a man's comfort, McClung joked, a husband might come home and "find his wife reading, and the dinner not ready—and nothing could be imagined more horrible than that!"[6]

Edward Bok's scathing condemnation of women in the workplace in 1900 demonstrates the degree of resistance to middle-class women moving into the business world. This influential editor of the *Ladies Home Journal*, wrote a full-page editorial contending that it was time for women to retire from the business world and return to their homes. He charged that "women were never trained for business, and consequently do not and cannot understand its essential requirements." He claimed that their current employers were complaining that "women in business were not the success they had hoped for," and that women's employment had resulted in the "alarming tendency among business girls and women to nervous collapse." Bok advised that his magazine had made a "careful and thorough investigation of the hospitals and sanitariums for women," and that the numbers of patients received had never been as great as the past two years. He argued:

> Women have been in business long enough to demonstrate to employers that they are not physically constituted to stand the strain of the peculiar work which business demands. They work for less, but they have not the endurance of men. They have not the productive value, and therefore their lesser wages are costly rather than economical.

In his inimitable fashion, Bok stated that the thing for businesswomen to do was to go back to where they came from, "into the home as domestic helpers." He called this women's natural sphere, as opposed to business, which placed her on "foreign soil."[7]

Despite Bok's prominent position, his critique seems anachronistic when compared to many of his contemporaries. By 1909, even President William H. Taft could recognize that women might make other choices in life than dedication to matrimony and household chores. He emphasized the importance of education for women when he addressed female students at the State Institute and College in Columbus, Mississippi on "Woman's Education."

> I wish that every woman in the world was so situated that she did not think it was necessary for her to marry... I am the last one to take a position against that old doctrine that there ought to be nothing to interfere with matrimony. But I would have the matter so arranged that the women.... are put in a situation where that which they choose is not a life which they select because it is better than some they expect, but a life that they look forward to with unmixed happiness... The best legacy that can be left to a young man is a good education and a good character... The same thing is true with respect to the young women who are given a fair chance in life to earn and carve out their own futures. The great trouble has been.... we have not given the women a fair show. We have not opened all the avenues to livelihood which they are quite as well able to fill, and in certain respects better able to fill, than we are.[8]

President Taft expressed his regret about the limited opportunities open to women. He acknowledged women's abilities and urged them to enter the workforce.

Popular fiction also reflected the trend toward women's entrance into the business world. Edna Ferber's tremendously successful novel, *Roast Beef Medium, The Business Adventures of Emma McChesney*, began as a short story in *Cosmopolitan* in 1911. Emma McChesney, a traveling saleslady for the T. A. Buck Featherloom Petticoat Company, described herself as a divorcee who earned a "man's salary" and battled "against men in a man's game."[9] Emma did not succeed as a businesswoman by behaving like a man, but because she was well groomed, polite, and charming, a winning combination.[10] Emma was a character whom female readers applauded for consistently outplaying her male competitors. To them she seemed to embody the new freedom to move about outside of the home and the ability to utilize traditional female traits to achieve her goals. Emma was a "new woman" who controlled her money and her life. Regardless of the brief longing she expressed for a home of her own, she quickly dismissed the idea in favor of the challenges of her successful career.[11] Emma McChesney and her creator, novelist Edna Ferber, each earned their living in professions dominated by males, and Ferber's novel described the strategies women counted on to achieve success.

Over the two decades subsequent to Bok's critique, the *Ladies' Home Journal* came to grudgingly accept this seemingly inexorable movement. Thirteen years after Bok's tirade, a different editor's essay in the same magazine expressed the changing tide of public opinion. Edward S. Martin offered bittersweet recognition, stating "there is no great scarcity of women nowadays who are hard driven by professional or business cares and labors," and he slyly suggested that these women needed wives. The proposition against women in the workplace was replaced by Martin's questioning of how they would support their families and still have children. He concluded by asserting, "You can't make a mother out of a man."[12] This problem would be left to another day and age to address in greater depth.

By 1919, influenced by the strain on the work force caused by WWI, *Ladies Home Journal* editors appeared to have come to terms with the issue of women in the workplace. The January issue contained a two-page spread called "The American Woman's New Work." The first essay, "Must I Go to Work? Are Women's Services Really Needed Now, and for What?" referred to the debate in Washington war offices over women entering the workforce to satisfy their patriotic duty. The author, Dudley Harmon, suggested that the time had come for a totally different response:

> Although we are accustomed to the idea of women working we have only begun even to think of woman power in the aggregate. We must now not only think of it, but must learn to translate woman power into what we have hitherto regarded as man power alone.[13]

Dudley not only acknowledged the reality of women's entrance into the workforce, but he recognized it as an important social force.

The debate in Houston and Texas closely followed the one on the national scene. Prominent women had entered the discussion in earnest with the Ladies Reading Club program in 1895. They

preserved their perspective as mothers while acknowledging significant changes in the lives of their daughters. This literary group of "ladies" initiated the club's tenth year with a debate entitled "That the education of our daughters for an independent career will unfit them for the duties of wife and mother." The club members defeated the proposal that would have limited women to a life of domesticity.[14] Prominent Houston clubwoman and essayist, Elizabeth Strong Tracy, took up the question in her article, "The Higher Education of Women" in 1904 in *The Houstonian* (an earlier periodical that had no connection to the magazine founded in 1917 by Estelle Hudson). She argued that, just as surely as the slaves, southern women had been emancipated by the Civil War. Tracy pointed out that, prior to the war, the limitations on women's avocations were "hedged about with the traditions of past ages," which fostered "mental microbes" women had to overcome "before they could succeed in business or the professions." She condemned the defective training of the past, which, she insisted, must be replaced with a higher education demanded by the new "spirit of the age."[15] Tracy's ideas echoed the earlier sentiments of Higginson and others.

A debate between a male doctor from Flatonia, Texas, and a female doctor from Marlin in a small Galveston magazine, *Texas Talks*, reflected the issue of women in the workforce as a function of the relationship between husband and wife. Entitled "An Even Exchange," Dr. J. W. Torbett's topic was the "New Woman" and Dr. Dixie Tucker's topic the "New Man." The male debater cavalierly apologized to the "New Woman" for her having long been the butt of jokes about "dyspeptic husbands who married for money and failed to get it." He renounced the "unjust charges" that the "New Woman" has "usurped man's authority" and "has even shifted the responsibility of the home and nursery upon his shoulders."[16]

The words of the female physician reveal how professional women sustained the idea of separate spheres for women and men. She began her speech by thanking her husband for appreciating that a "woman can successfully fill more places than home and not neglect the duties of a wife and mother while she crowns herself with glory in a profession adapted to her." Dr. Tucker sharply distinguished between women's personal achievements and their political power in the conclusion of her essay that praised women's achievements but denied the need for them to have the ballot:

> The women of the United States are accomplishing the grandest work the progressive world has ever known . . . They have no voice in the legislative halls, nor do they desire it. Their wishes are carried out by the new man. . . . that [condition] has lifted the burden from the woman's shoulders, and wherever you see him, you see happy homes, progress and prosperity.[17]

To accept Dr. Tucker's assessment of what constitutes women's happiness, one assumes that women who want to vote and fulfill their own wishes have burdensome lives, occupy unhappy homes, and lack prosperity. Dr. Tucker had the perfect husband who allowed her complete freedom to pursue her profession, and she reduced the "new woman's" problems to a matrimonial fix; just find yourself a "new man."

As the debate over woman's place continued, Houston journalist John Regan noted the inevitable changes in the business life of his city. In 1913 he wrote an article in the *Houston Chronicle* that documented the strength of Houston's female work force. Entitled "How 3500 Houston Women & Girls Earn Daily Bread," Regan's article discussed women wage earners and called his figure of 3500 a conservative estimate. While Regan devoted some space to Houston shop girls and factory workers, the bulk of his article profiled middle class working women. He noted that Houston women were successful as real estate agents, journalists, insurance agents, and auditors, and identified Houston's booming economy as the attraction that drew many women to work as stenographers, bookkeepers, office assistants, and comptometers. High pay and a plethora of job openings added women to the Houston work force during this decade. Regan concluded his detailed survey by voicing his enthusiastic appraisal of females in the work place:

> One must bow to the new woman. She is quite sure of her bearings, nor is she as aerial as the fashion plate of old. But she's deep, presenting the same old enigma—the eternal woman who quietly meets all adjustments and shames men for their impatience. To her old intuition, she has added business acumen.

He acknowledged that women seem like intruders whom society would prefer to find "behind a rose bush than a pile of shirt waists—cleaning the parlor furniture and not the silverware in a shop," but pointed to the industrialization of the country that had made it necessary for women to help fill the increased number of jobs. Regan's conclusion was "the female employee in Houston is here, and she is here to stay."[18]

Local Houston leaders agreed and began to publicly acknowledge women's contributions to the city's workplace. When Mayor Pastoriza spoke at the Houston Business Woman's banquet in 1917, he acknowledged the importance of women's wage earning to the maintenance of the family: "The average man cannot earn sufficient salary to support, in comfort, a family. Women in the business world is now almost a necessity." R.W. Wier, president of the Houston Chamber of Commerce and head of a large lumber company, noted on the same occasion, "Women have a greater share in the world's destiny and a greater responsibility than ever before."[19] The presence of these two prominent men at a businesswoman's event demonstrated the degree to which women had won acceptance into Houston's business community. The men's words underlined the value placed on women's participation. Public opinion was changing, both nationally and locally, from the practice of inculcating women's helplessness, uselessness, and incompetence to an inclusion of women in the destiny of the world.

Under the pseudonym Harriott Russell, Hallie Rienzi Flint wrote a daily column "Of Interest to Women" that appeared in *The Houston Post* and addressed the day-to-day issues of dress and conduct that affected women in the male-oriented workplace. In one column she contrasted "the proper appreciation of plain togs" for businesswomen with the "frilly, frou-frou gowns" all right for "chicken-salad and bridge existence." She insisted that if you ask men what they think of "a well-put up shirtwaist sort of a girl whose clothes are pretty, rather plain, and scrupulously clean," they will always answer that this is a woman who "commands respect."[20]

Another column advised young girls entering a downtown office, "watch your conduct." Russell maintained that while "stiffness" is not necessary or attractive, "there is a certain amount of dignity and reserve that are most essential if a girl wishes to command the absolute respect of those with whom she is thrown in contact in her work."[21] Russell acknowledged that the business world was a new environment for women, lamenting, "The world WASN'T made for working women — it was made principally for WORKING MEN[sic]." She stated that the establishment of restrooms for working women, to her, would be a sign that "women . . . stand on equal terms with men in the matter of salary and consideration."[22] Russell's columns indicate the inherent struggle in changing social manners as women increasingly entered the business workplace.

Other commentators noted the mindset that women adopted as business professionals. The following vignette taken from *The Tangent* (1911), Houston's streetcar magazine, illustrates a popular attitude toward women in business:

> A woman who conducts a business of her own...was crossing the ferry to Staten Island one day after work. She was carrying packages and arranged them beside her on the seat. Shortly after, she saw a very dirty and very tired looking workingman standing, and she took her packages in her lap to make room for him. As he dropped into the place she had made, the workingman said gratefully, "I'll just bet you're a business woman!" "Why?" she asked. "Oh, no lady would give me a seat," he said with conviction.[23]

This story speaks volumes about the contemporary perception of businesswomen versus the "ladies." Hortense Ward identified the values of the businesswoman as a new behavior for women. In her editorial "Fair Play," which appeared in *The Houstonian* in 1917, she contrasted the attitude of the businesswomen with their economically dependent counterparts. Ward argued that "a wholesome respect for the rights of others" was a principle women had not been taught, and "sincerity and directness . . .have never been lauded as fascinating qualifications for the weaker sex." She concluded, "the economic independence of women has done much towards raising women above the necessity of insincerity, but there is still a long ways to go."[24] The values women brought as businesswomen differed from those of domestic women. This difference is what set them apart.

In 1917 *The Houstonian*, a new local publication, reflected the growing admiration for businesswomen and recognized businesswomen's problems and successes. Its editor Estelle Hudson headlined the first issue, "Houston Has Many Representative Women In the Business World." In this essay, Hudson applauded Houston businesswomen, who not only had "business ability and qualifications," but also the "charm of feminism." She cited their modesty and quiet work as they conducted operations that required trust and responsibility. She attributed the success of these women to their meticulous attention to detail and praised their preparation and willingness to accept a "required and prescribed course of training." In the fifth issue, Hudson reiterated her praise by placing a boxed-in editorial on page one entitled, "Honor to the Business Woman, Let the world rise up and call her blessed."

Citing examples of businesswomen's importance in ancient history, Hudson lamented that the contemporary world had not yet conceded her value. Hudson was certain that if working women withdrew from business, they would be "seriously missed."[25]

The tone of Hudson's periodical was always one of astute political correctness. Dedicated to dispelling the adage that a woman's name appeared in print only twice in her life, on her marriage and death, Hudson asserted "modern progress has...wrought changes in woman's life." Hudson hastened to assure readers that the business woman "has lost nothing of her God-given nature, but has broadened and developed mentally, retaining all the while...the beautiful and lovable traits and qualities that make her man's companion and the mother of humanity." Hudson's businesswoman was definitely a "new woman," but she retained enough characteristics of the "old woman" to satisfy faultfinders. Choosing her words carefully, Hudson managed to depict the Houston businesswoman as one who could balance the more traditional values of home and family with those of the modern age. She declared that there were few professions not represented by Houston women and maintained that these women were "accorded the same recognition as the man, not because of any courtesy bestowed upon them by reason of sex, but because they merit it."[26]

Hudson proudly quoted *The Austin American* (March 4, 1917), which praised *The Houstonian's* refusal to rely upon the topic of women's fashions and applauded its ability to enlist advertising

NOTICE
Please do not write in this book or turn down the pages

THE HOUSTONIAN

VOLUME ONE — HOUSTON, TEXAS, FEBRUARY 24, 1917 — NUMBER ONE

HOUSTON HAS MANY REPRESENTATIVE WOMEN
IN THE BUSINESS WORLD

HOUSTON can claim the distinction of having some of the most successful business women in the South. Another noteworthy fact in this connection is that Houston is a typical Southern city, holding to all the old tenets and social codes that tend to keep woman in a sphere all her own. This condition exists even in the business world here where women occupy a prominent place. It can well be said that Houston business women are representative women. They have, in addition to their business ability and qualifications, the charm of real feminism. They occupy their positions of trust and responsibility and manage enterprises of their own in so modest and quiet a way as to suggest that they shun all publicity.

A census made some years ago, it is said, gave the number of women in the business world of Houston as eight thousand. The population of the city has grown rapidly since this census was taken, and this number cannot now be accepted as in any measure authentic.

The time was when a woman's name only appeared in print twice in her life, on the occasion of her marriage and at the time of her death.

Modern progress has, however, wrought changes in woman's life. The woman herself has lost nothing of her God-given nature, but she has broadened and developed mentally, retaining the while all the beautiful and lovable traits and qualities that make her man's companion, and the mother of humanity. There are very few professions not represented by Houston women. In these various professions they are accorded the same recognition as the man, not because of any courtesy bestowed upon them by reason of sex, but because they merit it. They have prepared themselves by the required and prescribed course of training in whatever line of business they engage, and by close application and attention to business in detail, they succeed.

Miss Willie Owens One of Houston's Successful Business Women

Miss Willie Owens, one of Houston's prominent and popular young business women, holds rather a unique position in the local realm of business affairs, in that her business is different from the professions usually chosen by women. Miss Owens owns and conducts a business known as "multigraph letters," with offices in the Union National Bank Building. She engaged in this business four years ago, beginning in one small room. Now she has three commodious offices, handsomely furnished, and uses five typewriters, five multigraph electrical folding machines, and all other necessary equipment to carry on the immense business which she has built up for herself. The total investment is given at something over six thousand dollars.

In speaking of her work and success, Miss Owens mentioned, when talking to a representative of The Houstonian, that her efforts had always been exerted to the point that all work done by her would be absolutely correct. She says that she does not want those whom she serves to ever overlook any shortcomings on her part because she is a woman.

The work of multigraph letters requires special training, and this training is given the young women employed by Miss Owens. She also does the repair work herself on her machines. She has conducted several large advertising campaigns, which were highly successful. She says that she has been watching Houston grow, and has great confidence in the future of the city. In her years of business training and experience Miss Owens has gained a valuable fund of information. She is a student of life and its problems, and can offer many valuable thoughts and suggestions along the line of political and home economics. This information, or better expressed, inspiration, she has gained by the experience that actual work and contact with real life brings. Her work, she says, has been both mental and manual, and this charming young business woman acknowledges to being proud that she has worked long and hard. She is somewhat averse to having pictures made of herself, but no visitor to her office will ever forget the expressive gray eyes, with their betrayal of intellect behind, neither will they forget to admire the dimple in the cheek which gives one the feeling that there's lots of laughter and sunshine in the old world.

Two Official Stenographers Hold Positions in Houston.

There are only four offi[illegible]

GREETING!

How do you do? I, myself, am well and happy.

I HAVE just entered Houston, and that is sufficient to make me happy; and, moreover, I have already some friends, and that goes far toward my well-being. ¶ I am here, good readers and patrons, to serve you. In serving you it will be my purpose to boost. I will stand for Houston's interest first, last, and at all times.

Primarily, my pages are to be social, with woman and her interest paramount; but with the poet I am going to agree, quoting:—

> *"As unto the bow the cord is,*
> *So unto the man is woman;*
> *Though she bends him, she obeys him—*
> *Though she draws him, yet she follows,*
> *Useless each without the other."*

The editor of "The Houstonian" will, therefore, adhere to the open-door policy and not exclude the great Houston Hiawathas who are calling for more than the bark of the birch tree to build from.

Trust that the use of the personal pronoun "I" will be pardoned in connection with this greeting; it does not seem exactly meet and proper to lay claim as yet to the hallowed "we" of ye editors, on coming to you with this, the first issue of "The Houstonian." There is going to be a whole lot of news in every little space of this magazine, and there is going to be a great big boost for every little enterprise in Houston.

KEEP IN TOUCH.

Estelle Hudson enthusiastically began publication of The Houstonian *in 1917 to support and celebrate Houston businesswomen.* Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

support from the business community. The Austin newspaper called Hudson's publication "a woman paper, a real woman's paper," with no society news; "not even a personal, not a reference to style or a description of a costume and not an extravagant adjective."[27] The Austin newspaper noted the Houston Chamber of Commerce's full-page advertisement on the back cover, indicating their surprise that a business concern was advertising in a woman's paper.

Included in the magazine's format was a ten-part syndicated series written for *The Houstonian* by Thomas A. Ripley, a young Georgia writer. His series profiled occupations currently practiced by women and provided pros and cons about available opportunities. Ripley's articles reveal how much a businesswoman's success depended on her ability to conform to society's notions of appropriately feminine physical characteristics and social behavior. Fifth in the series was an article describing "The Telephone Operator." Six years earlier the Houston Home Telephone Company had prematurely bragged that the automatic phone system would be in operation by April 1911, and that central-girls who "butt in, get saucy, and listen on the line" would no longer be needed.[28] Despite the prediction of the demise of this occupation, Southwestern Telephone Company continued to employ large number of females. By 1917, it generously offered a classroom for training purposes, a library, a café, a hospital for employees, and a roof area where operators could go to find respite from the heat of the switchboard rooms.[29] These were attractive benefits, and working as a telephone operator became a sought-after job. Employers' requirements regarding morality, character, and physical abilities demonstrate the distinctions made for female applicants. Ripley's list included the following: references, including one from her minister "who must know her well," an arm reach of 62 inches from the tip of the right forefinger to that of the left, a sitting measurement of at least 26 inches, and a physical examination by a trained nurse, who would also investigate the candidate's home environment.[30]

Ripley's essay on "Woman as Traveling Representatives," echoed the experiences of Edna Ferber's fictional character Emma McChesney. It described the hardships of a "little woman" who goes to "Hopeville" to sell shoes.[31] Ripley wrote of this traveling saleslady braving the elements, and standing up to the remarks made by the feed store's male customers who are shocked to learn that a woman has ridden on a train to come to their store and peddle her wares. Propriety merged with opportunity in Ripley's recommendation of clerical work as a woman's occupation, revealing the rationale that made this category the fastest growing segment of women's work during this era. Ripley described clerical work as the "opportunity right before your door," a job which brought "excellent pay," an association with "reputable companions," and gave young women a chance to become "something other than a milkmaid."[32] During the sequence of his weekly columns, Ripley described professions as varied as "The Saleslady," the "Woman at Law," and "Women Can be Undertakers," providing tips on how to enter the various professions, in what regions of the country the professions could best be practiced, and what salary the profession would probably pay. The articles emphasized that a woman's sex was no obstacle, but focused on woman's intuition as her greatest asset.

In her effort to inform and assist Houston women, Estelle Hudson recommended library books of interest including *The Business of Being a Woman*, by Ida Tarbell; *Woman and Labor*, by Olive Schreiner; *The Ambitious Woman in Business*, by Rosenblatt, to name a few.[33] She was not recommending popular novels or romances, but rather nonfiction treatments of subjects that were of interest to her readers.

The formation of the Houston Business Women's Club in February 1917 coincided with the founding of Estelle Hudson's pro-business women's publication, and the membership, goals, and activities of the Club all indicate local businesswomen's career-minded dedication. The remarkable diversity of the Club's officers and board of directors indicates the breadth and depth of the women's intentions. Dr. Elva Wright, well-known physician and president of the Houston Anti-Tuberculosis League, was elected president; Minnie Bolton, assistant to Jesse H. Jones, was elected vice-president; and Mrs. C. C. Knapp, official stenographer of the 80th District Court, secretary-treasurer. The board of directors included Florence Sterling, secretary-treasurer of Humble Oil; Dr. Martha Wood, member of the Harris County Medical Association; Willie Owens, multigrapher (operator of a rotary typesetting and printing machine used for making multiple copies of written matter); Mollie Westheimer, longtime employee and stockholder of Levy Brother's Dry Goods; Mrs. J. C. Love, probation officer; Retta Johnson, registrar in the local nurses association; and Anne Cabiness, an employee of Gulf Pipe Line.[34] Six were single women and four were married. Despite their dissimilar backgrounds, differing levels of education, and professional status, these women joined together to discuss their common concerns and offer each other encouragement. The Club began with 50 members and grew to a membership of 100 in less than six months.

At the Club's spring banquet, R.W. Wier, President of the Houston Chamber of Commerce, announced that no other southern city had a club like this. Dallas would not form a similar club until the following year.[35] The Houston Business Women's Club proudly charged higher dues than any other women's club and required the dues to be paid in advance, saying their members were earning good salaries and had no financial difficulties. Florence Sterling urged members "to know one another and to be helpful and sharing in their abilities and capabilities for doing things."[36] Houston women were obviously practicing networking 80 years ago.

In *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1910, Margaret Deland's essay "The Change in the Feminine Ideal," had described the "new woman" as one who knows how to say "I want" and "I will," instead of "I ought." According to Deland:

> There have always been occasional women who did so-called unwomanly things, that is unusual things, things generally left to men; there have always been stray women, who have distinguished themselves in art, or politics, or religion, or science; but they were conspicuous because they were strays. Achieving women are not very conspicuous now, simply because there are more of them.

the important role Florence Sterling, a Director of Houston Business Woman's Club and secretary-treasurer of Humble Oil, played in Houston's business community as well as in the struggle for women's suffrage. Trichelle's inclusion of this acrostic in her magazine demonstrates one of the ways businesswomen cultivated sisterhood and acknowledged each other's accomplishments.

While continuing to run *The Railroad Echo* and *The Neutral*, Trichelle acted on her social agenda by founding an orphanage for Houston newsboys. She named it after her mother, the Emma R. Newsboys' Home. Newsboys, who roamed the city streets at all hours, were a community problem in Houston and in other cities throughout the U.S. during this era. Trichelle's contemporary Sister Agatha described the benefactress's attempts to provide these orphan boys with food, necessities, and a home. Calling Trichelle a "plain spoken, remarkable quiet little woman," she said, "her soft voice went a long way in winning help for her boys."

Ferdie Trichelle and Alice Finfrock pose near an oil rig. From Elaine Finfrock Roberts Papers, Junior League Component. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

The orphanage was in existence under her supervision from 1910 to 1919, and Trichelle enlisted prominent Houston businessmen to underwrite the costs. A Houston newspaper recognized the founding of this home as "the ambition of one young woman to be of real help to humanity." Trichelle opened the "Club Home" in August 1910, for 25 to 30 boys.[48] After Sunday School, she reportedly spent her day at the Newsboys' Club, and her close contact endeared her to the orphans. Because she was able to earn the respect of what was described as Houston streets' "worst little barbarians," Police Chief Noble appointed her to be Houston Police Department's Juvenile Probation Officer, a job for which she was paid a salary by the city.[49] In 1920 Trichelle is listed in the *Houston City Directory* as operating a grocery in Houston Heights with her mother. She formed a new business, Tri-Fin Operators, an independent oil operation, and she and her partner Alice Finfrock brought in their first gusher in 1922.[50]

Ethel B. Teeple's career demonstrates the degree of success women could achieve through clerical work in one of the new corporations. Teeple successfully supported herself in the corporate world for thirty years. Her career began in 1910 when she entered the business world as a twenty-two-year-old widow with a daughter to support. She had no experience or preparation for working outside the home. In an interview by *The Houstonian* in 1917, Teeple said that she had entered the workplace "without a business asset." After seven years of employment, she was described as a woman who "holds [a] responsible position with [a] handsome salary."

Through diligent work, Teeple rose to be head stenographer in the sales department of the Gulf Refining Company. As a supervisor she directed the work of twenty-one women. Teeple claimed pride in the importance of her work and the dignity and thoroughness she required of each stenographer under her supervision. When questioned about her achievements, Teeple attributed her success to a "determination to win." She advised young women to "take advantage of every opportunity"; when asked, "Can you do...?" always answer, "I can." She mentioned that she had disappointments, but insisted these should be "incentives to strive harder," and pointed out that success without a struggle does not give as much pleasure as that which is hard earned.[51] Teeple never remarried. She lived much of her working life at the Bender Hotel, although her successful career enabled her to purchase a home at 3913 University Boulevard.[52]

Eva Bacher's occupation as a detective makes her one of the most unusual Houston businesswomen of this era. She came to Houston from Chicago where she had already been trained as a department store detective. In 1913, she began her career in Houston by working for several local stores as a "house detective." Bacher, widowed, with one son still living at home, was a practical, no nonsense woman who had her own special formula for success in her chosen field. She developed what she called her "tried and true method," which was to "make friends with suspected crooks, talk nice to them, and then ease them out." She assured a *Houston Chronicle* interviewer, "They're on their way to jail before they know it." Bacher's tactic for apprehension involved grabbing the suspect with her right thumb and not letting the person loose. She stated that she broke her thumb "a dozen times, but I wouldn't let them loose."[53]

By 1917, Eva Bacher had left the retail workplace to accept a job with the Houston Police Department (HPD) where she worked as a vice-squad detective until 1929.[54] She was possibly the first detective hired by HPD and noted that the department was then called "The Purity Squad." During the *Chronicle* interview she claimed that she never carried a gun. However, *The Houstonian* stated differently, "Mrs. E.J. Bacher, the woman detective and police woman of Houston, carries all the equipment of gun and badge, club and key to police telephone box. She is on her job even into the wee small hours of the night [presumably alone]."[55]

In 1925 Eva Bacher supported Hortense Ward's legislative bill to establish a court of domestic relations in Harris County. In a *Houston Chronicle* article, she discussed similar courts she had worked with in Chicago and New York, and implored Harris County to recognize the importance of this court in making decisions in the best interests of the children.[56] After she left HPD, Bacher returned to Foley's where she worked as a house detective until her retirement in 1945 at age seventy.

The profiles of these early Houston businesswomen show that

they lived multi-dimensional lives. They participated in civic affairs and social reform as they built their careers and lent each other mutual support. Eva Bacher's support for Hortense Ward's campaign for a Harris County court of domestic relations is one example of the cooperation among these women for the good of their community. Ferdie Trichelle and other members of the Business Woman's Club participated in the first Texas Woman's Fair in Houston in 1915, sharing a clubwoman-sponsored event that demonstrated their ongoing sisterhood with women who were not part of the business world.[57] During World War I, businesswomen shared the women's war effort in the city. Houston journalist Belle Costello described women stenographers and Business Woman's Club members who, "after a long day of office work, began going to Red Cross Headquarters" to give time to the "cause of mercy."[58]

By 1920, women had won the right to vote and they had made their mark in the workplace. Both achievements were aided by America's urbanization, women's ideals and ambitions, and the country's increased need for female labor that resulted from WWI. Women of the time felt that the argument for women working outside the home was largely moot by the end of the second decade. In a 1920 issue of *La Revue, Houston's Illustrated Weekly*, the editor noted that the current attitude toward women in the work place had been brought about by the "new girl, who has tasted work and is no longer content to stay at home and attend to flowers."[59] When Edith Abbott published her 1918 overview of women in industrial employment she could draw on numerous writings by women about women workers. Abbott argued that "women must work," asserting that work brought to the "self-respecting woman" the only possible access "to that flow of wealth which is at once the product of the labor and the source of satisfaction essential to full human life."[60]

This 1917 suffrage poster illustrates the optimism that women felt in this era. Courtesy Anne Sloan.

Eleanor Gilbert, in *The Ambitious Woman in Business*, estimated that only six percent of executive positions in the nation were held by women and concluded that "women are the serving class in business."[61] In spite of this assessment, women felt optimistic and self-confident. The winning poster exhibited by the Houston Woman's Suffrage Association at the Texas Woman's Fair in 1917 symbolized their expectations. Entitled "The Woman's Hour Has Struck," the bold black, white, and gold 30" x 40" poster pictures a tall female figure ringing what seems to be the Liberty Bell. The figure represented the winning of the vote, but the fact that Houston women felt they were assuming control of other aspects of their lives was unquestionably present. Author C. Casquoine Hartley in 1914 echoed the view expressed by many women across America when she declared, "The twentieth century is the age of Woman; some day...it will be looked upon as the...dawn of feminine civilisation[sic]."[62]

Journalists repeatedly praised the intuition, the graciousness, honesty, and courtesy that women brought to the business world. They were not battling for equality in the workplace, and therefore their advances may seem insignificant to modern day feminists. However, these earlier women who had so few legal rights, who battled public opinion, and who struggled to succeed in a world created for men, made their efforts count. From 1895–1920 Houston's population doubled, and the per capita bank deposits rose more than 400 percent.[63] Businesswomen played their part in this economic success. Most achieved their goals through their quiet determination, their refusal to give up, and their professional associations. These were the means by which they altered the view of working women's respectability.

ENDNOTES

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