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FLORENCE LEDYARD CROSS KITCHELT:
A MICRO-EXAMPLE OF THE NEW WOMAN
OF THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

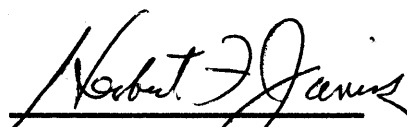
A THESIS

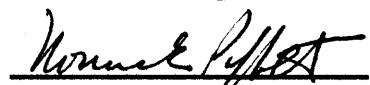
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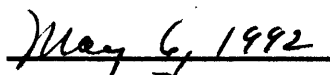
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INTRODUCTION

THE NEW WOMAN OF THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

The Progressive period, from the 1890s through 1920, was a response to the rapid socio-economic changes that occurred in America following Reconstruction. During these years, the rural-centeredness of the nation collapsed and the cities became the driving force. These cities, scattered across the country, had the man-power, industries and transportation facilities to supply the rest of America with most of its needs. This ability gave the cities power over the rest of the nation. Americans felt uncomfortable with the great power wielded by the manufacturing and railroad barons over their rural neighbors. Residents of the nation's small towns in particular believed they had lost control of their lives. They also felt that the rapid influx of immigrants into the cities, all potential voters, created an even greater disparity of power. Finally, the country's middle-class grew in number during this period, and it realized the power held by the rich and the cities' poor was disproportionate to their numbers. In an attempt to reorganize the power structure in the country, a new

reform-minded group arose which historians label "Progressives".¹

The women of the Progressive Era can best be described as a new breed of women. After centuries of filling only a nurturing role within the confines of the family, the new woman rose, phoenix-like, out of the ashes of the Civil War. She created a new place for herself, while attempting to reshape American society. The reform and social work of the Progressive period, appeared ready-made for the new woman. She was able to step out of the confines of her home and into society without requiring too radical a change in her traditional role. She assisted the immigrant poor of the cities, saving them from the excesses of the new industrial order, while at the same time acclimating them to American society, so they would behave in a manner acceptable to the

¹Historians do not completely agree to the definition of Progressivism, but several historians have based their theories on a struggle by the middle-class, inhabitants of small towns, conservatives and professionals to regain power and control of American government, commerce and society. Some of these historians are: Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. (New York: n.p., 1955); Gabriel Kolko, The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History 1900-1916 (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Robert Wiebe, The Search for Order: 1877-1920 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); David Thelen, "Social Tensions and the Origins of Progressivism," Journal of American History 56 (September 1969): 323-341; Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," Reviews in American History 10 (December 1982): 113-132; John D. Buenker, "Sovereign Individuals and Organic Networks: Political Cultures in Conflict During the Progressive Era," American Quarterly 56 (Summer, 1988): 187-199.

middle-class. Her reform activities involved regulating consumer goods, from milk to clothes, in order to protect the nation's children (and her own) from unsafe or unhealthy products. They also included helping create laws which would keep women and children from being neglected or abused by society. All of the new woman's interests simply expanded the traditional role women had in society -- a mothering, nurturing role centered around the well-being of the family -- making these cares broader and extending her concerns beyond her immediate family.

The new woman of the Progressive Era came from a middle-class background, and her economic situation allowed her to remain outside of the workforce. This allowed her time to devote to women's organizations and civic work, not open to women from the working class. The new woman also had an advantage over the women of an earlier generation, because women's colleges matured during the Progressive period, allowing her an opportunity for an advanced education. These women's schools also gave her the chance to live and work with other like-minded women, giving them a sense of community with each other and forming strong ties with other women. She gained her education and then immediately applied it, in social reform. Often, the new woman joined the Settlement House movement, which required her to move into tenements and ghetto areas, despite the danger of crime and disease, and the barrier of cultural

differences between herself and her neighbors. Many needs came to her attention, including criminal-justice reform and improvement in public schooling. Also, as industry began demanding more and more cheap labor, they drew on women, children and immigrants. The new woman then involved herself in the organization of trade unions, as well as labor reforms, in order to protect these workers.

With the change in her social position, the new woman also attempted to change the relationship between men and women. She felt that because she shouldered an equal amount of the burden for society, she deserved equality with men in all other aspects of life. She began by demanding an end to the almost servant-like position she held in marriage and fought for reforms of women's property and legal rights after marriage. She struggled to give women control over their lives, instead of an instant abdication of rights to their husbands, upon the completion of the wedding ceremony. She believed the right to vote belonged to her because of her equality to men, who had the vote. The new woman demanded the vote because she believed equal suffrage would allow women to have more reforms enacted by the government, thus giving her a greater ability to help others. The new woman of the period, not only created a new definition of

her place in the world by expanding her traditional activities, but she also fought to gain new rights as well.²

Born in Rochester, New York on December 7, 1874, Florence Ledyard Cross Kitchelt grew up during the Progressive period and exemplifies the new woman of the period. Raised in a middle-class family, she obtained a college education and entered into social work. Trained in college, for a role in society which did not exist, she set out to create a new public role which extended the nurturing, caring responsibilities previously assigned to women. She worked in Settlement Houses, in the criminal-justice system, and in the labor movement. She also fought for woman suffrage and was committed to equality of the sexes. Her marriage, from its inception, reflected the ideal of an equal partnership.

²Women of the Progressive Era and the new role these women had in society are explored in the following works: Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., New Viewpoints in American History (New York: Macmillan, 1922); Mary Beard, America Through Women's Eyes (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Charles and Mary Beard, America in Midpassage (New York: Macmillan, 1939); Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1959); William O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, [c. 1971]); Sarah Slavin Schramm, Plow Women Rather Than Reapers: An Intellectual History of Feminism in the United States (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1979); Carl Degler, At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Nancy Cott, The Grounding of Modern Feminism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

Florence's life personifies the Progressive Era's new woman. By examining her life during the Progressive time period, this essay will document the activities of the new woman. Focusing on her life after her teenage years to the passage of the Woman Suffrage Amendment will lead to a better understanding about the ideas and behavior of the new woman.

Florence's ideas behind social reform and settlement work, as well as her concepts of women's equality, both in marriage and in politics, were similar to those of more famous of the new women, such as Jane Addams, along with those of many male Progressive reformers. Her ideas reflect the fight to regain control and power, both by the middle-class and by women. Also, the struggle to create a new role in society for herself, while helping others, is a repeating theme in her life. Florence Ledyard Cross Kitchelt is a micro-example of the Progressive new woman. An examination of her life and ideas can lead to a better understanding of the new woman created by this period.