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Seattle's Forgotten Heroine of Unionization: Alice Lord

In elementary school, I remember kneeling in front of a certain section of shelves in the library. I remember always having known exactly where it was. As soon as those automatic doors opened and the wave of air-conditioned breeze passed over me, I made a beeline for the small alcove at the very front of the children's fiction section. There it was, rows upon rows of History Mysteries, Royal Diaries, and Dear America books. The historical fiction was my section; anyone else standing there was in my way. I cowed many a smaller girl away with the combination of my deft, expert hands searching the shelves, and my steely gaze scanning the titles. I measured how good a 'haul' of books I had got that day by the length of my checkout receipt. If it was longer than I was tall, then it had been a good day. As the years went by, I developed a deep passion for history and the way it is portrayed in literature.

In high school, I realized that most of the history we learned about in school was dominated by male protagonists. I decided to start writing a series of short stories based on courageous women role models throughout history, called "Her Story in History." Already, I have discovered Agnodice, "Athens' secret physician" and Noor Inayat Khan, "WWII's most unbreakable spy." I am eager to find more and share these inspiring examples with other young women to encourage them to pursue their ambitions.

Alice Lord fits right in with these women. Lord was never mentioned once in my years of Washington State history classes; however, as a unionist, suffragist, and community leader of the twentieth century, she left a legacy that has shaped the present laws and cultural attitudes in Washington State to an ineffaceable extent. At great personal risk to her livelihood and societal

standing, Lord advocated for and brought about tangible changes in the conditions of working women.

Lord was born in New York in 1887 but moved to Seattle when she was twenty-three years old and started working as a waitress. The Gold Rush was in full swing and Seattle had become a boomtown with a rising need for support industries like launderers and eateries (Andrews). With little government control or labor organization, the standards for menial labor were appalling and unequal. Women were usually only employed by third-tier diners, the upscale eateries preferring to hire men (McConaghy). Waitresses at these establishments worked twelve hours a day for seven days a week and made five or six dollars a day, nearly half as much as male laborers (Andrews). Working women were not rare, but they were generally ignored and dismissed by working men and lawmakers alike. Most assumed that these women would give up work once they were married and therefore would not benefit from or be capable of unionization.

Compounding this oppression was the general public's attitude towards working women. Middle class society viewed waitresses with suspicion since they worked all hours of the night and returned home alone at odd hours. The implication was clear; they associated these women with prostitutes. Often waitresses walking home after the night shift were stopped and questioned by police or their local "Purity Squad," who would insist on accompanying them back to their place of work to verify their employment, or to their home to verify their character with the landlord (Andrews). This had the effect of not only humiliating women who worked long and hard hours to make a living, but also discouraged them and other women from continuing work.

Fed up with these conditions, Lord founded one of the first women's labor unions to be chartered by the American Federation of Labor, Waitresses Local 240, with 65 fellow members

on March 27, 1900 (Andrews). Their aims were to improve the status of working women and the working class as a whole and to win respect and suffrage for women. Lord started her work right away and gained a reputation as a militant and effective leader. One account describes Lord marching into a non-union restaurant, recruiting five waitresses on the spot, and returning the next day during the lunch rush to demand all of them walk out. With these tactics, Lord and her union were able to close ninety five percent of the restaurants in Seattle, while the union negotiated (McConaghy). Lord proved from the very beginning that she was a pragmatic leader who did not shy away from hard work in pursuit of her goal to better the lot of working women.

Lord also advocated for respectful treatment of working women by police officers, seeking to ease the social stigma surrounding working women. When a waitress who was intimidated and harassed by police officers while returning home from work testified before the City Council, Lord defended her case ardently and appealed for the police to be sensitive to the position of working women (McConaghy). Lord never hesitated to stand up for women's rights on a small or large scale, even when she risked censure from society.

Lord also understood the importance of teamwork not only within her union, but also with other organizations. She forged alliances with people and organizations from all walks of life to improve conditions for working women. Middle class women from the National Women's Trade Union League supported Waitresses' Union sponsored protective legislation and helped working women to reclaim their lives by engaging them in enrichment activities like music, reading, and dancing. Lord also aided women of other industries, like garment workers, to form their own unions (Andrews). By doing so, Lord may have helped prevent incidents like the infamous New York Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911 from happening on the West coast, saving countless lives. Many men's unions refused to associate with other unions who they

considered to be “beneath” them, but Lord had no such reservations. She advocated for the working class as a whole and did not hesitate to reach across professional lines.

In politics, Lord worked with and supported suffrage organizations. She was a prominent speaker at the 1906 Washington Equal Suffrage Association (McConaghy) and supported important suffragists such as May Arkwright Hutton and Emma Smith DeVoe who reciprocated by supporting Lord’s eight-hour workday initiative (“The Eight-hour Day”).

The “Waitress Bill” that would cap women’s working hours at eight per day was one of Lord’s biggest accomplishments. Lord and her union tirelessly lobbied the state legislature, and she was even reported to have made the trek from Seattle to Olympia on foot daily to save her union the cost of a carfare (McConaghy). Lord’s Waitresses’ Union led the coalition of women’s groups from all classes and professions bound together by the Washington’s Federation of Women’s Clubs to endorse the bill (Andrews). In 1911, Washington became the first state to ensure women an eight-hour day (Riddle). Through teamwork, courage, and sheer effort, Lord and the members of the Waitresses’ Union were able to set a precedent that inspired countless other laborers nationwide and foreshadowed a standard of working conditions that we now take for granted.

Lord risked great societal backlash through her work. When the union was founded in 1900, many people in Seattle, including men’s unions, regarded it as a joke and doubted women’s ability to effectively organize. One year later, the *Seattle Union Record* stated, “... [The waitresses] have shown that women can maintain a union as successfully as men.” when Lord courageously addressed a crowd of two hundred and fifty men at the Washington State Federation of Labor Conference, a newspaper reporter commented that she had “lost all sense of

appreciation of modesty and propriety” (McConaghy). However, Lord persisted and never let her critics inhibit her determination.

Lord not only bettered the lot of working women for herself and her peers, but also for future generations of girls in Seattle. She and other influential Seattle women founded the Seattle Industrial Union and Trade School for Girls, which taught underprivileged girls useful skills in fields from dressmaking to millinery. (McConaghy). By doing so, Lord gave these girls the gift of self-sufficiency that was invaluable in shaping future generations of women to become independent and empowered.

When Alice Lord passed away in 1940, she was nearing her 80s and was still president of the Waitresses’ Union. Lord and her compatriots had achieved goals beyond their wildest dreams during her years of advocating for progressive reforms. The Central Labor Council put it concisely when they remarked shortly after her death that, “Working hours have been reduced more than 50 percent while wages have increased more than 300 percent” (*Seattle Union Record*). Lord’s civic courage in improving the lives of working Seattleites embodies and inspires a fight that is continued to this day.

Wages have stagnated over the past decades while inflation has risen at an unprecedented rate. To illustrate, in 1940, a standard candy bar was 5 cents, about 5% of the minimum wage of about 1 dollar an hour for that time period. As of 2015, the minimum wage was \$9.47 and the price of a candy bar was \$1.30 (“Candy Prices Over The Years”). Thus, a candy bar now costs about 13% of a worker’s hourly paycheck. This disparity between the cost of living and the minimum wage contributes to the development of a social class known as the “working poor.” These men and women live paycheck to paycheck, with no way to save money. A simple illness or death of a breadwinner can easily push such people into homelessness and poverty.

The “Fight for \$15” initiative to standardize a fifteen-dollar minimum wage in Seattle echoes many of Lord’s struggles in the early 1900s. Unions such as the International Brotherhood of Electrical Worker’s Seattle Local 46 banded together to fund and endorse the campaign in 2014 (“Related Articles”). They cultivated public support and held demonstrations, channeling Lord’s spirit of determination and courage. Now that the Minimum Wage Ordinance has passed, all workers in Seattle can expect a \$15 minimum wage by 2020 (“\$15 Minimum Wage”)

Merriam-Webster defines courage as the, “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.” Alice Lord doubtlessly went above and beyond the requirements of this definition in her long career dedicated to serving the needs of working women. History repeats itself, and Lord’s story of civic courage is a timeless one. Studying the tales of Alice Lord and other courageous leaders from the past who have fought tremendous injustices made me more conscious of what I can do to shape the future of our community, our nation, and the world. There are still more battles to be fought in the name of fairness and equality in the workplace. I hope that by spreading these stories, we can learn from them and inspire each other to demonstrate civic courage in our daily lives.



Alice Lord working away at the typewriter in the Waitresses Union headquarters in Seattle.

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