

SPECIAL: Florence Robinson, Gerda Lerner, and Women's History at UW-Madison



Gerda Lerner: I have never understood the people who, who don't even bother to understand what's going on. No, I don't understand that. To have no intellectual curiosity, except to repeat the paradigm in the way they were trained. We *shattered* that paradigm.

Barry Teicher: The History Department was hiring you and part of it was to start the women's program.

Gerda Lerner: No, it was—

Barry Teicher: Was it—

Gerda Lerner: The only reason I came was to start the program. Now, I should say, and I will say, that there was— I had great hesitation about coming here for another reason.

Janet Sibley Hyde: I knew—[Laughter]—I'll tell you a funny story about Gerda Lerner.

Tyler A. Lehrer: It seems like just about everybody who interacted with Gerda Lerner has a story about her.

From the University of Wisconsin—Madison, this is *Ask a Historian*. I'm Tyler A. Lehrer, sitting in for Emily Tran. I'm a History PhD candidate here at UW. And this week, Emily has turned over the microphone, so to speak, so that we can bring you a special podcast I've been working on about Gerda and the history of the History Department.

So, unlike other *Ask a Historian* episodes which draw on live interviews, I wanted to pull together some of the amazing material we have in the archives of the UW Oral History Program, and to let Gerda lead the way in narrating the story about how she came to establish our pathbreaking PhD Program in Women's History in the late 1970s.

But before that, we need to begin in the early 1920s with the history of the Robinson-Edwards Chair in American History. It was endowed by the families of two women graduates of our American history program in the '20s to be held by a woman historian, and it would go unfilled until Gerda was hired to forge our PhD Program in Women's History in 1978.

Just why an endowed professorship from the 1920s—holding the stipulation that it could only be held by a woman historian—would go unfilled until 1978, it turns out, is both a fascinating and a contested story.

When Gerda arrived on campus in the late 1970s as the Robinson-Edwards Chair, and with the express purpose of establishing a women's history PhD program. She brought with her strong pedagogical, ethical, and epistemic commitments, which would have a lasting impact on the

Department and on campus. The rigidity of her intellectual standards, as well as the early Program's "feminist" model of student mentorship and shared governance, shaped how the entire Department trained students.

Gerda taught her students that studying ordinary women—like mothers, community organizers, unfree laborers, office workers, nuns and "communists"—enriched the study of history from the inside-out, generating new questions and pushing new intellectual boundaries. She taught her students that important research and good history can start with their own lives, their own backgrounds, and their own experiences.

As Ira Glass would say right about now, *stay with us*.

[Musical interlude]

Tyler A. Lehrer: Lerner was a lightning rod here at Madison as well as in the field. Literally *so much* has been written and said about her. And at the outset, in thinking about how to produce a podcast, I faced the enormous challenge of trying to locate stories about her life and her impact that haven't already been dissected a million times. And so, I started with her oral history interview recorded in the year 2000 with Barry Teicher. Teicher asks,

Barry Teicher: You were hired as the Robinson-Edwards Professor. Could you give some background on what is a most truly amazing story?

Gerda Lerner: Well, it's a very sad story. Florence Robinson was a graduate of the University of Wisconsin in the early 1920s. She got a PhD in American history and was unable to find a job because she was a woman. She had a very good friend named Martha Edwards, who also got a PhD in American history from the University of Wisconsin and was unable to get a job.

Florence Robinson's father was a trustee of Beloit College, and through his influence, she got a job in the Home Economics Department of Beloit College. And that's where she spent the few years that she taught. And apparently, part of her duties was to make tea at faculty meetings and serve cookies.

Tyler A. Lehrer: I mean, it's pretty astonishing—as well as unsurprising, I guess—that in the 1920s, a woman PhD would be given that kind of role. It turns out that while Dr. Robinson was at Beloit, our own Professor Merle Curti—years before he came here—was finishing up his PhD at Harvard, and took a leave one year in the early '20s to teach at Beloit, and it turns out, interacted with Dr. Robinson quite a bit.

David Cronon, who was Dean of the College of Letters and Science at UW from 1974 to '88 and was a close friend of the Curti family puts it this way, in his 2004 oral history interview.

E. David Cronon: When he needed some money to help with his graduate work at Harvard, he took a job one year on leave from his graduate study at Beloit as a fill-in. And he was asked to fill in for their absent American historian, but they wanted him also to teach a variety of courses. So, he had this full load of four courses, and then the middle of the year

the political science faculty member got sick and couldn't teach. So, the President called Merle in and said, "Now, I'd just like you to take over Professor So-and-So's courses too."

And so, here's Merle with his own set of American history courses. He has, I guess, all European and American history courses, and he's now having to take over these American— or these American government courses. And Merle says, "Well, I haven't had any work on political science."

And he says, "Oh, you can fake it." He says, "That's alright, you just take it all."

So, he's carrying eight courses, you know, getting through this year. And meanwhile, there's this woman faculty member there, who has a PhD in American history from Wisconsin, the first woman PhD in American history.

Tyler A. Lehrer: Okay, I got to stop the tape for just a second and clarify something. Since this is about the history of the Department, it's absolutely true that the first woman to receive a PhD in History did so here UW, but it wasn't Robinson in 1921. In fact, it was Kate Everest, later known as Kate Everest Levi, who wrote a dissertation on German immigration to Wisconsin in 1893, not 1921. Super proud of that fact! Okay, back to Cronon.

E. David Cronon: Merle says to the President, "Well, why don't you have Professor So-and-So handle this, this extra work so we could— she could share some of my courses."

He said, "Well, she doesn't teach regular courses." She was teaching home economics to the girls, and the closest she ever was allowed to get to the—her name was Robinson—and the closest Professor Robinson ever was allowed to get to a faculty meeting was to pour tea for the faculty members who were in attendance.

Tyler A. Lehrer: Absurd, right? But what about Merle Curti? What did he think? Well, in his 1982 oral history interview, he says of Dr. Robinson that:

Merle Curti: There is a lady here on the faculty who has a PhD in American history from Wisconsin. She asked me if I was interested in reading her dissertation. I read it. Happened to be a subject I was much interested in myself—the reform movements of the 1840s. It was a very good dissertation. She wasn't able to get a job teaching American history because women weren't wanted in American history. And she had to [inaudible] herself in domestic science and she was their professor of domestic science.

And I said, "She's much better equipped to do the American history that I'm doing." And she could at least be, be there.

"Well," he said, "Professor Richardson and Professor Blay [*phonetic*] and would die in their beds at the hospital if they knew that Professor Robinson was teaching any other courses."

[Laughter]

And they spurned the idea of a professor of domestic science anyway and as for her Wisconsin degree, they'd never recognized it. So, there was this lady who wanted to teach American history and was prohibited even to fill-in in an emergency.

[Laughter]

Tyler A. Lehrer: Alright, so one of the things I really admire about Florence Robinson is what she chose to do next. Although higher education in the state of Wisconsin didn't make spaces available in those days for women to shine, she nevertheless didn't give up hope that someday it might be different.

Lerner narrates how she laid the groundwork for an endowed professorship in American history at UW which could only be held by a woman.

Gerda Lerner: In 1927, she made a will, giving \$50,000 to the University of Wisconsin—this was at a time when a full professor salary was \$6,000—which would earn \$6,000, which soon would earn \$6,000, and she said in that will that this— As soon as \$6,000 a year is earned, this professor shall be hired and shall be a woman, and she shall be in any field of American history. And part of her assignment is that she shall not be in Outreach. And she shall not be required to do any duties that her male colleagues do not.

The University had to wait a couple— she died in '29, I believe.

Barry Teicher: Yes, 1929.

Gerda Lerner: The university had to wait a couple of years for the money to accumulate to give \$6,000 a year, at which point the heirs sued. The presumptive heirs—some cousins or something—sued that she was out of her mind when she made that donation. And that was thrown out by the court in '32, '30, and '31, I believe.

Whereupon the university went to court to ask the court to allow it to appoint a male professor on the grounds that there weren't any female professors qualified to take this job. And the court, after many years of wrangling, decided that in the Dartmouth case—I believe in 1820—it was established that if you accept money with a certain provision, you are obliged to fulfill that provision.

Florence Robinson had expected no better and had put a clause in that, if within five years of the execution of this will, the university had not acted to appoint a professor, the money should go to the University of Chicago. And it was at that point that the university went to, sort of, court, to fight for—

Barry Teicher: Couldn't get it. Right.

Gerda Lerner: This took them around, into the 1940s, after which they were told by the court that they had to appoint a woman professor. Well, they managed to be unable to find a qualified woman between 1940 and 1978.

Tyler A. Lehrer: Okay, I mean, this is technically true, but surely what hinges on "managed to be unable" is a little more complicated, right?

Well, one of the super cool things about having a large oral history archive like the one here at UW is that we have three different interview sessions with Curti, each of them about a decade apart. So, the tape I played earlier was from 1982. Now I want to play Merle again, this time in 1973, about five years before Lerner came to Madison.

Merle Curti: Whenever a new appointment was to be made in America history, Mr. [inaudible] and I were very eager to see if we couldn't find a competent woman. In general, I must confess, that in terms of their research records, the women we were able to turn up were not at the same point that the men, the available candidates, were. And so, and so, no one was appointed.

We did find one, one woman, teaching at Teachers' College, I believe, in Missouri, who had a very good publication record. But we'd been told that she—by her colleagues, some of her colleagues—that she was very difficult. And so, no effort was made to bring her here. Though heavens knows, there are enough of us in the Department, on the male side, who I'm sure would have been considered by many women as quite difficult men.

Tyler A. Lehrer

I get that this was the early '70s, but this bit of tape is really remarkable and, frankly, a little disturbing. Curti admits that they didn't move to hire a qualified woman candidate because of her reputation for being difficult to work with. Amazing, right? He also notes—and I realize the audio quality from this early interview was a little rough—that no doubt many women would have found him and his fellow male colleagues equally difficult.

Let's assume—and I very much doubt this was the case—but let's assume anyways that there were no viable or quote unquote collegial women historians. What about the UW administration, or those managing the endowment? What's the story there? Here's Cronon again.

E. David Cronon: The Robinson-Edwards Professorship was to be filled by a woman in History who was not to be permitted to have any extension work duties and not to be asked to teach anything that other History faculty members were asked to teach.

Unidentified speaker: Not to pour tea.

E. David Cronon: And not to pour tea.

And so, there was a dispute about the will. She died, I think, sometime not long after Merle had been at Beloit in the early '20s, and there was a dispute with one of the other heirs over the will. And it was in litigation for some time before it came to the university. There was a proviso on it that, if the university ever violated any of these provisions, the estate was to go to the University of Chicago, if they would honor the, the bequest.

And so, she'd also stipulated that the salary of the Robinson-Edwards Professor had to be \$6,000 a year which, at the time she wrote the will, was a high faculty salary. So, she was determined that they weren't going to cheat this woman professor because it had to be filled

by a woman. And these days we wouldn't accept a bequest like that, it was that specific. But by the time we were able to implement it, while I was dean, \$6,000 was just a fraction of what we would be paying somebody for a named professorship.

So, I called the system lawyer Chuck [inaudible] and I said, "Chuck, would you take a look at the bequest and see if there's any way we can use that as a research fund? Because we can pay the salary on 101 funds, regular funds. But it'd be nice if we had a research allowance for the Robinson-Edwards Professor."

And he looked it up and he said, "No, it's very specific. This has to be a salary."

So then, in the end, when Gerda Lerner was in the chair I decided to use L&S money, 101, for money, \$6,000 worth, for her research allowance so she would have a research fund, and that would, you know, meet what we really needed to do in connection with the Robinson-Edwards Professorship.

Tyler A. Lehrer: In most circumstances, it works like this. Someone endows a chair with X number of dollars and a search won't go out until the interest on that initial endowment accrues to the point that it alone can support a faculty salary for at least a couple of years.

It sounds like between the years of litigation and the fact that the salary itself was only set at \$6,000—which by the way was \$1,000 more than what Paul Knaplund or Michael Rostovtzeff were making in 1921, although \$6,000 was pretty absurd by the 1970s—it sounds like the professorship was really just in name.

And, listening through the oral history archive a little more broadly, other perspectives on this also cropped up. For instance, in his 2007 interview, English professor Richard Knowles recalls a moment when the History Department told him and his wife that they weren't interested in hiring a woman historian because Margaret Bogue was already fulfilling the role.

Richard Knowles: When my wife came here, she came with everything but a doctoral degree in American history. And she went to the History Department, hoping that she would be given some kind of adjunct teaching here. And the History Department at that time had a grant from a former graduate of the University, a woman, who had given them a great endowment to hire a woman professor to teach in History. Edwards-Robinson. And the, the History Department simply chose not to use that money for something like 35 years.

And I suspect it was— Well, Jean went in was interviewed by them, and they said, "Oh, we have a woman already." Margaret Bogue something, who has written histories of the shores of Wisconsin or something like that. And Margaret was there. And, "Don't we already, Margaret?" "Yes, we do," she said, "and that's all we need." [Laughter]

And finally, the cura— curators of the endowment said, either use it or lose it. And so, they hired Gerda Lerner, who was a master at organizing power in her area of the History Department. They built a very strong women's history department.

Tyler A. Lehrer: Alright, so we know that Lerner came to fill the Robinson-Edwards chair, but how, and why? Here's Gerda.

Gerda Lerner: I let it be known in the profession. I told all the people I knew that I'm looking for a job in any history department that will allow me to do a program in women's history to give the PhD inside the history department, not in Women's Studies. That was another strategy that I've figured out: it has to be inside History, because if it was in Women's Studies, they were marginalized. And I wanted it to be, I want to transform the history profession. So I made it inside History.

Well, at the time I was negotiating with three places. The offer came from Wisconsin, and I was negotiating with the University of Arizona in Tucson, and I was negotiating with Lewis & Clark College and the University of Oregon in Portland, and they offered me a joint appointment. I was just—I would work half the time of the University of Oregon and give a PhD program for graduate students, and half the time at Lewis & Clark. And Arizona, they offered me just what I wanted. And I should say that, at that time, already I was a passionate hiker and backpacker, and I was very very attracted to Arizona.

Barry Teicher: Oh, that's a beautiful area, yes indeed.

Gerda Lerner: And I was very attracted to Oregon for that.

Barry Teicher: Yes, indeed. [Laughter]

Gerda Lerner: I was not the least bit attracted to Wisconsin.

Barry Teicher: Yes, indeed. [Laughter]

Gerda Lerner: And Arizona made me a better offer than Wisconsin, financially, but I analyzed the state of the history department in the different schools, and since I wanted—what I wanted to do was to—in a relatively short time, 15 years, 10 years—to create a graduate program that would be a model for the rest of the nation. I figured I better go to the best history department, and that was Wisconsin. And that is the reason I came to Wisconsin.

And I came to Wisconsin knowing not one single person in the entire state. It's one of the few places where I had no friends at all. I mean I have former students and contacts all over the nation, but not in Wisconsin. So, it was very deliberate on my part.

Tyler A. Lehrer: So, Gerda was at Sarah Lawrence, heading a women's history master's degree program there, and she went to the American Historical Association, what we call the AHA, and, well, basically to hear her tell it, courted the top PhD programs in the field to help her realize the ambition of spearheading a women's history doctoral program.

Gerda Lerner: I made clear from the beginning that I was only interested if the department really wanted to make a commitment to women's history, and they, they thought—they convinced me that they were very sincere about it, and that of course there was no unanimity about it and that this was a new thing.

Barry Teicher: Mmhmm, right.

Gerda Lerner: And I pointed out to them that the fact that they are the place where they had the outstanding American history program—in the 60s were Professor Bogue, for example, was a pioneer in, in the study not just the frontier but of statistics in history, cliometrics—

Tyler A. Lehrer: This is the same Margaret Bogue that Knowles dismissed earlier as, quote unquote, studying the shores of Wisconsin.

Gerda Lerner: —where William Appleman Williams had revolutionized and changed foreign policy studies were well Curti had started intellectual history. I said, "Seems to—" And where you had the finest labor history collection in the nation next—

Barry Teicher: Mmhhh, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Gerda Lerner: Yeah. That this— And you had a fine woman historian who was a labor historian Barbara Melosh, that this was the place to do it. That's, that was my argument.

And I also— So, they, they objected that, well how did we know that we could take students in good conscience? Would they be able to get a job?

Barry Teicher: Interesting. In light of what happened, that's very interesting.

Gerda Lerner: Yeah. And I said, "Well, first of all what they're getting is a PhD in American history at the University of Wisconsin, and their specialty is women's history. So, yes, they will get a job. And secondly," I said, "this will be, this is a trend that's not a fad. It's going to change the profession. We will be pioneers we will be making a national impact; I have no question about that."

So, apparently, I convinced them. Then I, when I came here to be interviewed, I made— And in the interim I talked to the chair, and that was, by the way, Stanley Payne. I said, because of my long history of struggling to set up the master's program and Sarah Lawrence, I was not interested in coming then at Wisconsin, unless the Department enacted formally, and by vote, and approved by the dean, the establishment of the women's history program, PhD program. And he agreed that that was the right way to go.

And he and I worked together on designing that program and Professor Lindstrom and Professor Melosh and Judy Levitt, from the beginning. And I made a— I set a blueprint of it, and I made clear to them that I wanted to program to be entirely under the aegis, it would be part of the American history program. That means that every rule and regulation that applies to the American history program, we would follow.

But that in certain areas, there would be separate standards, and I made clear what they would be. And number one: I wanted every— At the time, the Department did not require a master's essay. You could do it, but you didn't have to do it. In order to enter a PhD program, you could take an MA by taking extra courses. I said I would not want that, I wanted a master's essay, because I wanted to be able to screen out the students that could not do the PhD before they went into the whole study.

Barry Teicher: Right.

Gerda Lerner: There was one condition.

The second was that I will let the admissions committee, which changes every year for the American history program, they would screen the candidates that applied to my program. And if they wanted to exclude anyone, they could do so, but I would have a veto over the people they approved, only to the extent that I could say, "Student A can be in the American history program but I don't want them in women's history." So, I narrowed my jurisdiction very greatly then on purpose because I wanted the Department to feel comfortable with the students I was admitting.

And in practice, it worked out quite differently, much better than I had hoped for. They were concerned, of course, the people who opposed the program or who had misgivings about it, were concerned about, you know, they have this idea that women's history was this feminist tag, and we were sitting around holding hands with each other and autobiography. You know they had in their mind that the place would be filled with incompetent touchy-feely students, you know.

Barry Teicher: [Laughter]

Gerda Lerner: Well, they learned in the first year that I was a much tougher professor than most of the ones the [inaudible] in the Department, as far as standards is concerned. And I, I established that reputation very quickly. And, you know, this was not, this was not a yo-yo program.

Barry Teicher: Right, right.

Tyler A. Lehrer: In those first couple of years, Lerner had to prove to both the Department and the University that women's history was viable both intellectually as well as pragmatically. But what about the rest of the field? Well, she tells this hilarious story about meeting with the President of Princeton University. In her interview Teicher asks,

Barry Teicher: How did it feel you started this program all but yourself, and you go to the AHA and the OHA and all of a sudden you start meeting these heads of all these other women's history programs?

Gerda Lerner: I'm not very impressed by status.

Barry Teicher: [Laughter] That's a remarkable accomplishment.

Gerda Lerner: No, I'm not. I do— I'm very pleased with what happened in Princeton, because it was the last place on earth that I would have expected that to happen.

When I was called there, ostensibly I was giving a lecture. You know, I was invited, and then they invited me— And the President gave a luncheon where all the chairs of the L&S had

come, and we had a really major discussion on shouldn't Princeton establish Women's Studies?

And I used an argument there that I've used since with other places where— He said, "Well, why should we, you know, we have been through so many things. Ever since the '60s demands from the law, political issues. And how do we know this is not a passing fad?"

Barry Teicher: Right, so on.

Gerda Lerner: This— So, I, I said the—

Barry Teicher: You said to him, "It's 1947 . . ."

Gerda Lerner: "And you are Princeton, and you don't teach nuclear physics, and you're trying to call in a consultant to tell you what to do about nuclear physics. And I can only tell you that if you're Princeton, and you want to be competitive on nuclear physics, you set up the best department in nuclear physics that you can. And that will require you to spend some money."

At which point, the President interrupted me and said, "Well, unfortunately, while our endowment is great, blah blah blah, we're in this terrible situation this year."

I said, "Well, my advice to you is do nothing." [Laughter]

And he said, "You're not serious."

I said, "Certainly. You don't want to set up a nuclear physics department that's like fifth-rate, do you?"

He said, "Why don't you go off?" [Laughter]

And then I said, "This means that you're going to have to spend some money and you're going to have to take it seriously. And you're going to have to build. You're not starting— This is not something that you do for one year or two years. You have to do this because this is a major thing that's happened, that is not going backwards, it's going forwards. And you'll have to have at least two senior tenured professors in charge of it. And you'll have to have four people on a tenure line, FTE, to start it."

And I went on during the structure and everything else, we had this discussion. And they did it. It's just what they did.

Barry Teicher: Did they build a good program?

Gerda Lerner: Very good now.

Barry Teicher: It's amazing.

Gerda Lerner: Yeah. I'm sure they had other people's advice but I'm saying, I did— My position always was—and I would say that to whoever I speak to whether it's undergraduate or college President or Board of Trustees—that women's history is here to stay. That it's the most important intellectual revolution of the 20th century. That if you don't understand that if half the world's population is rediscovering its history and redefining its past, that you have to be in there and train people to do it responsibly and with good scholarship. That's always been my position. And it's carried a lot of weight.

Barry Teicher: Right.

Gerda Lerner: Because nobody else puts it quite that, you know, extremely, because I believe that. I really believe that. I've believed that from the day one when there was nothing. I've always believed that. And I think that's my contribution. I was right about it. And that's why I think a lot of people listen to me, because I talk to them, you know, sort of, bottom line.

You're not doing this to please unruly students that are clamoring for female presence. I said, "That's no reason to do it." Women have been studying for 100 years at universities from men, they can learn from men. They shouldn't, it's a crime, but they shouldn't be excluded. But the fact is that that's not the reason to do it. You've got to do it because this is intellectual. The most important thing that has happened in the field of Liberal Arts. That's all. And it's really redefining. See, the fact that it is redefining the content of history.

Tyler A. Lehrer: Like I noted earlier, learner came to UW after several years of teaching and mentoring students at Brooklyn College at Columbia—where she got her PhD at the age of around 46—and at Sarah Lawrence. She had strong ideas about feminist mentorship and shared governance.

Barry Teicher: Was, was the word "community," was that was that something that you had a strong sense of?

Gerda Lerner: Very strong sense. I believe in that. I believe that we do not separate our brain from our activity. I don't believe that I can teach you or anybody, just by teaching you intellectually.

Barry Teicher: You have to affect the feelings as well as the intellect.

Gerda Lerner: Feelings and behavior and action. And if I can't do that, whatever I teach you intellectually will not last. And I have believed that, you know, forever. I believe that. And I have practiced that in all my teaching, whether it was institutionally manifest or not. That's how I teach.

Barry Teicher: Is that what these students from outside of women's studies who wanted to get into this were telling you? That they wanted a sense of community, they wanted to join this sense of *being* a community, not the community.

Gerda Lerner: Yes, and they were very jealous of our mentoring. This is why the Department had to respond to it. And they were, they were feeling, "Well, why don't we

have part of the governance like they do?" and so on. So now they do. They have a student sit on every committee. We have student representatives on hiring committees.

Barry Teicher: What about men, male students?

Gerda Lerner: Men, yeah.

Barry Teicher: How, how involved, have they become over the years?

Gerda Lerner: Well, some have. I mean, I have, I have had about six students who took minors, male students who took minors in women's history, and all of them teach it now.

Barry Teicher: Interesting.

Gerda Lerner: See, for men, it's a great asset to have a minor in women's history.

Tyler A. Lehrer: This is so true. As someone who identifies as a man and with a minor in what we now call gender and women's history, it's been crazy beneficial in my own research, thinking, and teaching. So, did this model of teaching, mentorship, and governance work?

Gerda Lerner: If you measure the accomplishment of any graduate program, the accomplishment of the graduate program I set up lies in the fact that while our History Department no longer is among the top ten—at the moment I think it's 11. It was eighth or ninth ranking when I came here. I'm not sure of the latest ranking, but I know it's gone down, because we had so many retirements and people left."

Tyler A. Lehrer: Okay, pause. This interview was recorded, as I mentioned, in 2000. And according to the most recent 2017 *U.S. News and World Review* history program rankings, at the moment, we're tied for ninth with UCLA.

Gerda Lerner: The majority of my students not only got tenure-leading jobs with tenure-leading jobs in the top-ranking institutions. That is how you measure success. Okay. Now, this is built, just like, just like the shirt that you're wearing and the blouse I'm wearing from China, that we're buying cheaply because people are working at below subsistence-level wages. That is what has happened in the academy, and nobody has—up to now—paid much attention. Now it's all over. This year, this year's *Perspective* has a big article on it and ten organizations are working on it and all that. But it's been going on. And it's a disgraceful situation.

And to me, I certainly have benefited from my privileged position as being—I'm saying this now not immodestly. I mean, I'm considered a star here. I've been treated like a star. I've had wonderful support as I told you, but I have not forgotten. I have not forgotten what's—the people that don't have.

Once you introduce women's history into the study of history at all levels, you'll not only open up the study of history, but you raise new questions that were never asked before, and that shift the emphasis in history. So, there is a kind of a dynamic in this, which has occurred, which many people deplore. In the so-called "culture wars" of the last few years,

the traditionalists all can give you a long list of the shifts and changes that have occurred, which they all consider trivial, which I consider to be the beginnings of the way history and culture will be taught in the future. And we're just the beginning of it.

Just like the introduction of Black history into American history, which took 50 years of struggle to accomplish. Didn't just, wasn't just added to. At a certain level when you want to begin to really integrate Black history into American history, you have to change American history. You'll have to change the questions you ask the materials you select, the scope of your inquiry, everything.

Now, traditionalists think the world has come to an end and the barbarians have entered the gates. And that's why they really hate us, so many of them. We have several leaders of this movement in our Department. I think it's wonderful. I think it is exactly what Darwinian science did in the nineteenth century. That is, once you have Darwinian science established, science is not the same anymore. It's the same thing here. You can't tell the history of half the world the same way that you tell the history of the whole world. And we have done that. Some people don't recognize it yet. Some people just see the disturbing parts. Some people see the negative aspects that have happened, the excesses, all those things.

But in effect, it's irreversible. It's like—I made the comparison to nuclear science. I mean, the nucleus has been split. The atom has been split. There's no way that you can redo this—undo this. And I think this is wonderful. It's very exciting.

Tyler A. Lehrer: Of the many really quotable insights I've extracted out of Gerda's oral history interview. This one especially—and perennially—feels relevant in today's political and social climate: that to tell new stories and to listen to previously ignored voices is a willful act, and one that really ought to uncover new questions about the epistemic foundations of history itself. And that this, in turn, should have implications, not only for women's histories, but also Black histories and those of other indigenous and marginalized communities of color in the U.S.

And nowhere are the stakes of this insight more important, Gerda argued, than in the history classroom itself.

Gerda Lerner: One of the methods that I used in teaching, always, is— See, women have each individually carried a big burden with them, not only of structural discrimination, but of having internalized ideas about women's position that are false. So, a girl that's been raised to think that girls are not as smart in science as boys believes that. That's a self-fulfilling prophecy. And when she comes into a classroom— I mean, very often we've observed that there might be 15 people in the seminar and two boys. If the teacher asks the question the two boys will answer. And the girls will not even raise their hand until the two boys have spoken.

Well, if you're teaching feminist teaching methods, this is no good. So, you have to do something to change that. And one of the things that I have to work with in every class, but especially freshmen, is women speak in a manner without authority. They mumble, mumble in their chest, speak very softly, they can barely be heard, you don't make eye contact. And those are not accidental things, those are deeply internalized. This is body language.

And I, I will say to them, "I can't hear you; the person sitting next to me can't hear you. Can you please speak up?" And they hate it. Then I explain why I'm doing this. Inside of three weeks I've got everybody speaking, okay? You've got to do that.

So, self-confidence for women in the classroom, it's not something that comes with the women. You have to build it. And so, one of the things that I found very useful, especially if you teach women's history, is to make them aware of the fact that their own life experience matters and is valid and it's something that they should use in thinking about the past. Just like I told you that the fact that I was acquainted with how organizations work in a community helped me to direct my research in women's history, because I knew what women do in life.

Well, if you are trained to think that what you experience as a woman is totally unimportant—because women have, as you well know, have never contributed to culture, they haven't written the nine symphonies, they didn't build [inaudible] Cathedral and so on, so forth. [inaudible] Okay. If you believe that— When you are faced with a book that you read, a text, you're not going to ask yourself, "In light of what I know in the world, how does the text read to me?" You're going to say, "Oh, boy. I really don't know much, you know, really, that guy is so smart, I don't know what to do."

Now this you have to fight. If you're going to teach women's studies and women's history.

Tyler A. Lehrer: It occurs to me as I record these voiceovers in late October 2020 in Madison, Wisconsin, and Ithaca, New York, that by the time this episode airs, it may be the case that we've selected a new president, and oh my gosh, I hope that comes to be true. And even if we don't, the enterprise of American history is going to continue to churn along regardless.

So, I really want to close this podcast today with one final observation from a voice we haven't yet heard from, that of the venerable George Mosse. In his 1982 interview, George Mosse remarked about the state of American history in general, and about the unique character of the UW-Madison History Department in particular.

George Mosse: American history is a field that has its ups and downs. As far as I can see, there wasn't for a while a great deal of what I would call highly original work going on in the field. Now, so that is why it's so excellent that we again are having a revival.

For example, I'm always asked, "Why do you support you know women's history?" Well, first of all, why not? I mean, you know, some of it is quite good, some of it is merely polemic. But anyway, gives us again a profile. Something new, yes? Something experimental.

And this Department has been built up on the fact of being a screwball department. And until that, I think, if I may say so, only I myself kept that flag flying, you see? And I really don't know who else through the seventies. Al Bogue, with his social science history, to a certain extent, yes. Gerda Lerner now of course. But see, so we are, we are collecting again yes? We are getting up again. Now, don't forget that was what was what Wisconsin's reputation was based on.

[Musical interlude]

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The music you hear in today's episode comes from the German musician Lobo Loco on the FreeMusicArchive.com.

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