

## Explore Democratic Values



# Equality

by Professor Graticule

Almost a century ago, Fred Barnard, who sold advertising displayed on streetcars, came up with the sales slogan, “a picture is worth a thousand words.” He was right. Images can carry much meaning that otherwise might need pages and pages of words.

And sometimes what is *not* in a picture tells the tale. In a two-page spread in Shirin Yim Bridges’ *Ruby’s Wish*, artist Sophia Blackall portrays Ruby’s grandfather surrounded by his five wives, his eight sons and their thirteen wives, and a flock of grandchildren numbering, we are told, over a hundred. But none of the old man’s daughters are in the picture. They are all off somewhere else, as wives, in other families, cooking and sewing and keeping house. These are all good things to know how to do, as are hunting and fishing and fighting off fierce beasts. But many people want to be able to do something else, too.

Still, down through history, few women had much life outside the household. The Declaration of Independence told us that “All *men* are created equal” but said nothing about women. Of course, we now interpret *men* to mean *mankind*, which means *humans* or *people* or, well, *everyone*. But it has taken us a couple of centuries to fully understand that meaning, and the process isn’t finished yet.

How far along we’ve come can be seen in the long struggle for women’s voting rights and for equality in education, which Ruby so much wanted, and the kinds of work outside the household it can lead to. The women’s suffrage (voting rights) movement began a century and a half ago, and just after the Civil War, the Wyoming Territory gave women the vote. In the next half century so did fifteen other states. Finally, in 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution gave women political power throughout the nation.

During the same 150 years, free public education became available to boys and girls both, and by 1870 more girls were high school graduates than boys. Likewise, as public colleges and universities sprang up in every part of the country, women began to share in what Ruby was so happy get from her grandfather. In America, only about one in a hundred young people went to college in 1870, but every fifth one of those was a woman. By the time of World War I, five in a hundred went to college, and two of them were female. Today, almost a third of college-age Americans go to college, and well over half of them are women.

Which is why a hundred years ago only one in twenty doctors and one in a hundred lawyers were women. But today, a fourth of doctors and lawyers and almost half the students in medical and law schools are women. Many women today cook and do embroidery, just as Ruby did, when they’re not busy in Congress or running a major corporation or flying an Army helicopter. It’s their choice. ♦