

MONDAY, APRIL 03, 2006

LIGHTING THE WAY

Gore daughter's book enlightens

Profiles of unsung heroines of U.S. history are rich and fascinating

By CAROL M. SWAIN

Karena Gore Schiff, daughter of former Vice President Al Gore, reveals much about herself and her family values in the choice of women she profiles in *Lighting the Way*, her first published book.

Schiff, who holds degrees from Harvard and Columbia universities, has produced a labor of love by meticulously researching the lives of nine lesser-known women who have made significant contributions to political and social movements in the United States.

Profiled are two black women from Tennessee, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Septima Poinsette Clark. Other women include Mother Jones, Alice Hamilton, Frances Perkins, Virginia Durr, Dolores Huerta, Helen Rodriguez-Trias, and Gretchen Buchenholz. Most are unsung heroines who have not received proper recognition for their patriotism and humanitarian efforts.

A gifted and insightful writer, Schiff skillfully uses her pen to fight the good fight for the underdog.

Schiff describes the book as personal rather than academic. "At first it felt like organizing a dinner party," she explains, "I considered how colorful and interesting each individual was, [and] how well they fit together. . . ." All but one of the women worked as teachers at some point in their careers.

The book was written with high expectations. Her hope is that these women's stories will "illustrate how valuable the right to dissent is, how often the unpopular view is prescient,

and how reactionaries use the same arguments over and over to block progress.

"Missing from the volume, however, is the profile of her grandmother, Pauline LaFon Gore, a graduate of Vanderbilt Law School. She practiced law in the 1930s and was actively involved in shaping her husband's congressional career and her family's political legacy. Perhaps Schiff is displaying modesty and proper decorum by her choice to avoid family.

But some Tennesseans will no doubt interpret the absence as a missed opportunity to profile a woman at least as deserving as those included in the volume.

Schiff begins the series of case studies with the story of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a former slave who achieved distinction as a writer and an activist in exposing the horrors of lynching movement.

We learn that many decades before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, Wells-Barnett had fought unsuccessfully for the right to retain her first-class ticket in a whites-only train traveling through Tennessee. Not giving in without a fight, she was dragged kicking and screaming from the train.

We next encounter Mother Jones, an immigrant from Ireland who after losing her family to yellow fever became a labor organizer for miners and factory workers and an advocate for child labor laws. Schiff introduces us to Alice Hamilton, a physician who mentored Eleanor Roosevelt before running a well-baby clinic for Jane Addam's Hull House. Hamilton became the first woman asked to join the faculty at Harvard University. She accepted on her own terms.

Perhaps a bit better known was Frances Perkins, the first woman to serve in a presidential Cabinet. She helped shape New Deal legislation, including unemployment relief and Social Security. Schiff recognizes Virginia Durr, a converted racist from Alabama, because of her transformation from a believer in the inherent inferiority of African-Americans into a tireless advocate for civil rights.

Next, Schiff profiles Septima Poinsette Clark, a black educator from Memphis. Her father had been a slave on the plantation of the botanist Joel Poinsette, from whom we get our traditional Christmas plants.

Clark began her classes at an integrated retreat center in Tennessee called the Highlander Folk School, but later joined forces with Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Council, where she taught Rosa Parks.

We meet Delores Huerta, who worked with Cesar Chavez to organize the first union of agricultural workers and a 1968 boycott of grape workers; Helen Rodriguez-Trias, who established the first neonatal clinic in Puerto Rico and was a pioneer in public health; and Gretchen Buchenholz, a leading child advocate who is working hard on behalf of needy and marginalized Americans. She has been instrumental in the mainstreaming of handicapped children, working toward the improvement of families in welfare hotels and the quality of life of "boarder babies" left behind in hospitals and orphanages.

Schiff's careful documentation makes this work an important contribution to the literature on women's studies and on American history more broadly.

Although hers is not written to be an academic book, I highly recommend it to readers interested in American social and political history. I plan to use the volume as a reference book.

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