

On Writing Labor History

Now that I've written several books on topics relevant to labor history, I am frequently asked, "Why did you start writing labor history?" The truth is that I didn't start writing labor history. I started writing women's history, fueled by a mission to answer the questions, "Where were the women, and what were they doing?" Historic women, including Frances Perkins, Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, and World War II women war workers, led me to labor history, a new kind of labor history that was more than traditional accounts of a few famous leaders and/or accounts that ignored prejudice and discrimination in the organized labor movement.

About the same time, two of my young adult sons started studying this new kind of labor history in college and graduate school. Back and forth we shared information, insights, and resources. We watched films and videos and listened to audio tapes of labor songs. I got hooked by the history of ordinary workers' oppression, resistance, and resilience, and I had an epiphany—most school children grow up and become workers. They need to know this history, as does everyone if we hope to create a humane and equitable society.

My books include biographies and social histories for ages eight and up. The topics reflect a variety of voices, events, and perspectives. In *A Woman Unafraid: The Achievements of Frances Perkins*, I examined Perkins's motivation, experience, and achievements in state and federal government as an architect of far reaching and important labor reforms and legislation. I focused on one event—Mary Harris "Mother" Jones's 1903, twenty-day, 125 mile protest march against child labor—in *Mother Jones and the March of the Mill Children*. In *Strike!: The Bitter Struggle of American Workers from Colonial Times to the Present*, I highlighted workers' heroic struggles and key strikes. In *Rosie the Riveter: Women Working on the Home Front in World War II*, I wove together four aspects of the story: the collective voices and experiences of women workers; illustrations of life on the home front; information about the industrial mobilization;

and details about the propaganda campaign to recruit women workers.

Regardless of the topic, I approach each book in generally the same way. I search for relevant material in archives, attics, libraries, used bookstores, and museums. I immerse myself in words and visual images, listen to available audio tapes, view videos, and visit historic sites and cemeteries until the material takes over my mind. Recognizing that the material is mediated by many factors, including my experiences and perspectives, I strive to stand back and let the essence emerge—the themes, evidence, connections, and details. Before I actually start writing a book, I spend a lot of time thinking about how to present the material—how to make it irresistible, informative, and even transformative. Inevitably, each book presents a particular set of writing challenges. For example, in conceptualizing *Rosie the Riveter*, I was faced with the need to engage readers' interest in the context, connections, complexity, and chronology of material that, on the surface, seemed to lack the drama of material that focuses on a great person or a startling event. Since I wanted readers, including young readers, to enter into the story and stay engrossed page after page, I knew that I had to find a way to take readers by the hand and say, "Come with me. This book is accessible, amazing, and dramatic."

Since I do most of my writing problem solving in my head, I spent weeks and months preoccupied with this challenge. Then one day, I had coffee with a group of people, including Dot Chastney Emer, a recently retired librarian. At one point, I casually asked Dot if she had memories of World War II.

"Oh, yes," she replied with assurance and enthusiasm. As Dot spoke, my ears tingled, and my head cleared. I asked her more questions and discovered that she had detailed memories and some memorabilia. Later I interviewed her for many hours, and something took over, something larger than a rational process, and I found myself introducing Dot's memories at carefully selected intervals

throughout the book. Dot became a personal, engaging commentator of sorts who moved the chronology and commented on daily life. She recalled how she heard about Pearl Harbor, the Battle of the Bulge, and the dropping of the atomic bomb, as well as having to wait for four years to get a two-wheel bicycle, and how she and her classmates knitted squares to make afghans for the Red Cross to distribute. About the knitting, Dot remembers: “Our teacher set aside a time in the school week—knitting time—and the girls taught the boys to knit. It was really fun because some of the boys couldn’t get the hang of knitting. It gave us a little power over the boys. We could say to them, ‘But your square is so uneven.’ They were good sports about it because everyone felt that we were doing this for the war effort.”

Voices like Dot’s and those of the women war workers in *Rosie the Riveter* are an integral part of all of my books. In selecting voices, I look for quotations that make something happen—spark insights, evoke feelings, amplify ideas, inspire action, illuminate personalities, illustrate facts, and/or provide role models. A good example of the role model function of quotes are the words of Dolores Huerta in *Strike!*, “One thing I’ve learned as an organizer and activist is that having tremendous fears and anxieties is normal. It doesn’t mean you

should not do whatever is causing the anxiety; you should do it” (*Strike!*, 70). A quote from Mother Jones illuminates her personality: “I am not afraid of the pen, the sword or scaffold. I will tell the truth wherever I please” (*Mother Jones*, 15). Edna “Shorty” Hopkins, a welder during World War II, illustrates a fact: “We were doing the same kind of welding that the men were. But they didn’t call ours certified. We only got \$1.20. I asked, ‘Am I doing certified welding?’ ‘No, Shorty, you’re not.’ But I was, and I knew it, but there was

nothing I could do’ (*Rosie the Riveter*, 88-9). As for words that inspire action, Joe Hill’s last words to Bill Haywood provide a powerful example: “Don’t waste any time in mourning. Organize” (*Strike!*, 46).

In addition to the text, the visual images and captions are an important element in my books, which is why I do my own photo research and write the captions. In some cases, I do my own photography. I look for vivid, interesting, and unusual images. In

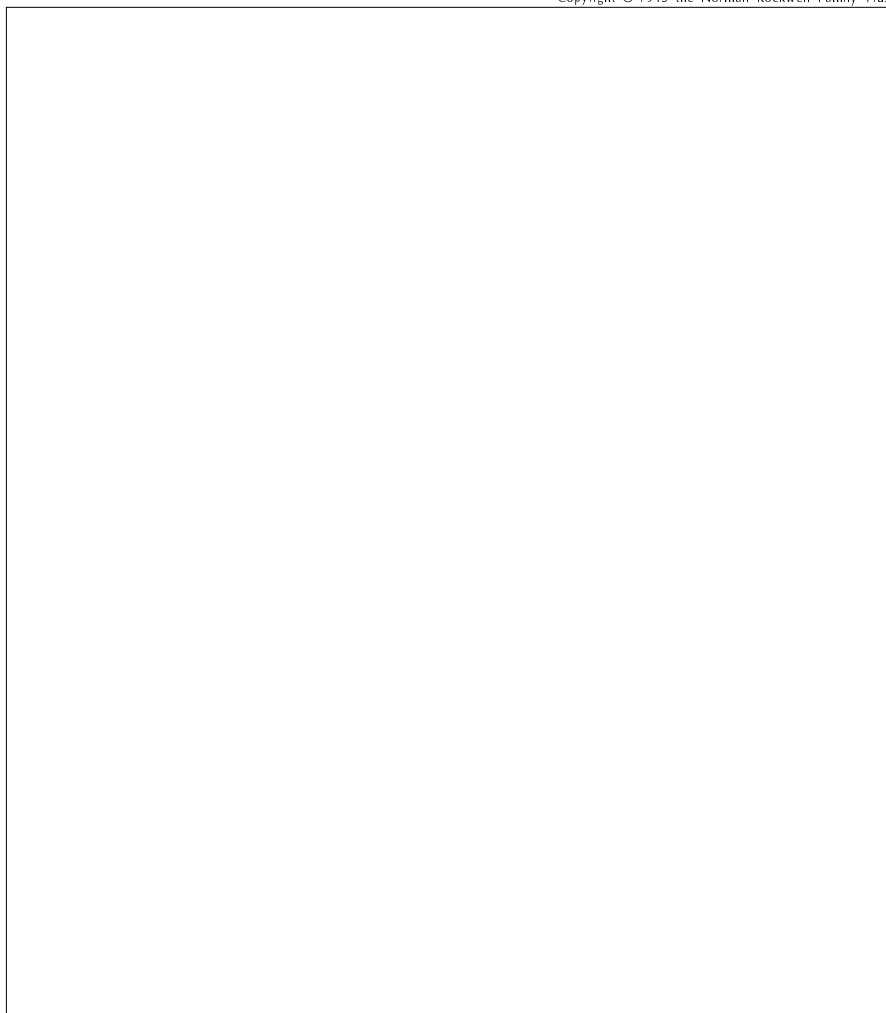
Mother Jones and the March of the Mill Children, I photographed and reproduced images of actual newspaper accounts of the march. I also photographed and reproduced images of newspaper accounts and company newsletter articles in *Rosie the Riveter*. In *A Woman Unafraid*, the photographs span Perkins’s life from when she was four years old to eighty-three years old. The last image is of her headstone.

Before my books go into production, fact checkers and expert readers review the manuscript. After I respond to all the questions, comments, and suggestions, the book goes into production, and, although authors do not have much if any say about the design of their books, I have been thrilled that my books have been beautifully designed. The art director who designed two of my books told me that

she was “deeply moved by the text” to create books “that would attract readers.”

I write labor history with the intent to increase interest, stimulate thinking, and show contemporary relevance. In the Afterword for *A Woman Unafraid*, I wrote, “Sadly, Frances Perkins was right that the door might not be open to other women for a ‘long, long time’ . . . Perkins was also right in knowing that the fight to maintain labor standards would be ongoing. . . . Nor would she be surprised to know

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The cover of one of Penny Colman’s many books, *Rosie the Riveter*. The original was painted by Norman Rockwell during World War II.

that unemployment and health care are still problems. Perkins knew that her work was not done. But she trusted that there would be another generation of people who believed in social justice and who would fight to make life better for all Americans" (*Woman Unafraid*, 112-3). In *Strike!*, my last sentence reads: "The struggle continues as each generation of workers strives to build a better life for themselves and their families" (*Strike!*, 74).

The United States was built by the sweat and sacrifices of workers, but most Americans do not know about their struggles and contributions. Yet, when people are exposed to my books amazing things happen. Members of an audience sang "Solidarity Forever" with me during a book signing at a Borders Bookstore. Recently I received a telephone call from a person at the United States Department of Labor about working with middle-school students in Washington, D.C., to turn *A Woman Unafraid* into a play. In 1995, an off-off Broadway play, "Rosie the Riveter," was based on my book about women war workers.

During the 1996 American Library Association Convention in New York City, I was introduced to a librarian from Colorado. "Strike!" was the first word the woman said to me.

"How do you know my book?" I asked her.

"I used it with the participants in the Incarcerated Youth Program," she replied and explained that the program provides educational opportunities for juvenile offenders who are in prisons in Boulder County, Colorado. "And, they loved reading *Strike!*

because it's about underdogs, about fighting against the system, about overcoming injustice. They really relate to those themes."

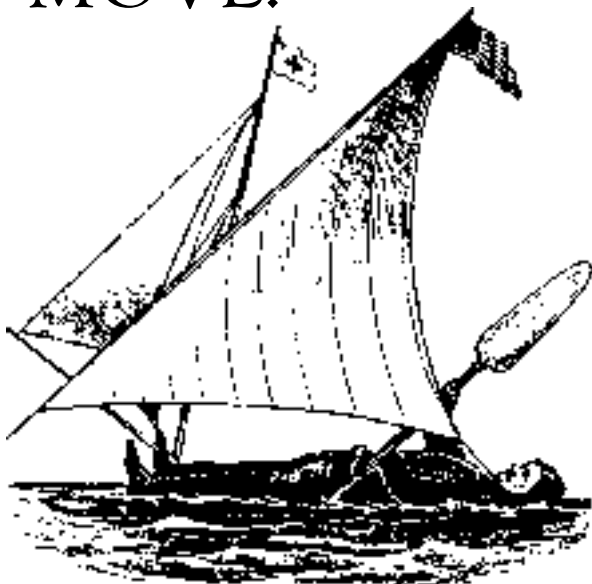
When the students at Nontraditional Employment for Women, a training program in New York City that prepares women for hard-hat jobs, heard me talk about *Rosie the Riveter*, several of them said, "So, women have done these jobs before, right?"

"Right," I replied.

"Then why do we keep having to prove ourselves?" one woman asked. "We don't," replied another woman. "It's here in this book." Unfortunately, there aren't a lot of books about labor history for non-academic readers, especially young ones. But there are more than when I went to school in the 1950s or when my children went to school in the 1970s and 1980s. If teachers, librarians, and parents demand labor history books, publishers will respond. Those of us who are passionate about labor history need to increase our activities, and there is so much that we can do: celebrate labor history milestones and honor historic sites; develop curriculum; make videos; teach units; perform plays; give speeches; and write books. If our spirits sag or our energy ebbs, we should remember Frances Perkins's words, "Doing means digging your nails in and working like a truck horse." □

Penny Colman is a widely published, award-winning author of books, essays, and articles. She writes for all ages and covers a wide range of subjects, including women's history, labor history, biography, education, parenting, and sports.

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