The night before the 1915 New York State suffrage referendum was put to a vote, Sinclair Lewis and his wife Grace Hegger Lewis made their way to the final rally at a movie theater in Hempstead, Long Island. It had been a long, hard campaign. She had bicycled through the poor neighborhoods, jollying working men into supporting the vote for women. He gave speeches from the backseat of a roadster proclaiming, as Grace later wrote, ”If a human being who was a man had the right to vote, a human being who was a women had the same right.”

Sinclair Lewis:
SUFFRAGE

T

Dave Simpkins
Four women contributed to Lewis’s support of women’s suffrage and gave him material for his feminist characters. They were: his stepmother, Isabel Warner Lewis; his friend, Frances Perkins; and his two wives, Gracie Hegger and Dorothy Thompson.

Lewis’s birth mother died of tuberculosis when he was six years old. A year later, his father, Dr. E. J. Lewis, married Isabel Warner, a 40-year-old woman from Chicago. She was delighted to have a family of three sons to nurture and a community to influence. Like a red-haired tornado, Isabel Lewis directed her righteous determination toward personal and community improvement. She took her red-haired stepson under her wing, encouraged his reading and writing, and taught him to dress well and act like a gentleman.

Isabel called meetings of the Women’s Gradatim Society to order in the modest parlor of the home at what

F Sinclair Lewis grew up far from New York in the bustling prairie town of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, the son of a reputable country doctor and the stepson of a high-minded community activist. After obtaining an English degree from Yale University in 1908, he worked as a reporter and writer’s assistant in Waterloo, Iowa, and Carmel, California, before moving to New York City’s Greenwich Village in 1910 at the age of 25. There he lived in a boardinghouse at 69 Charles Street with two writers from Yale, George Soule and William Rose Benet.

Greenwich Village was a hotbed of new ideas in politics, art, sex, and feminism when he arrived. It was there—before marrying and moving to Long Island—that he began campaigning for suffrage. Women were declaring their economic independence and calling for equal rights, equal pay, reproductive freedom, and the vote. Lewis’s subsequent involvement in the suffrage movement put him in contact with many leading feminists. He brought these people and experiences to his writing, making him a powerful voice for women. His works stood out from other novels of his time. He became not only Minnesota’s most successful author but America’s most admired novelist of the 1920s, with a string of best-selling books: Main Street (1920), Babbitt (1922), Arrowsmith (1925), Elmer Gantry (1927), and Dodsworth (1929). In 1930 he became the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Our women contributed to Lewis’s support of women’s suffrage and gave him material for his feminist characters. They were: his stepmother, Isabel Warner Lewis; his friend, Frances Perkins; and his two wives, Gracie Hegger and Dorothy Thompson.

Lewis’s birth mother died of tuberculosis when he was six years old. A year later, his father, Dr. E. J. Lewis, married Isabel Warner, a 40-year-old woman from Chicago. She was delighted to have a family of three sons to nurture and a community to influence. Like a red-haired tornado, Isabel Lewis directed her righteous determination toward personal and community improvement. She took her red-haired stepson under her wing, encouraged his reading and writing, and taught him to dress well and act like a gentleman.

Isabel called meetings of the Women’s Gradatim Society to order in the modest parlor of the home at what
is now 812 Sinclair Lewis Avenue in Sauk Centre. Young
Lewis listened from the bottom of the stairs, with the oak
parlor doors open enough for him to hear the meeting.
The middle-aged ladies sang church hymns, read poetry,
and discussed civic projects such as their anti-fly cam-
paign, the building of a new library, and the in-town “rest
room” that gave farm wives a place to keep warm and chat
while their husbands drank and fraternized in the saloons.
Lewis noted at Isabel’s death in 1921 that her life was a
triumph and an influence for fineness, ranging from her
campaign to ensure that local butchers sold fresh meat
to her part in establishing the Minnesota Federation of
Women’s Clubs.7

The community activism of Lewis’s stepmother comes
alive in his 1920 best-selling book, *Main Street*, which
portrays a St. Paul librarian, Carol Kennicott, a liberal,
free-spirited woman who marries a friendly, respectable
small-town doctor. Carol suffers from having a working
brain and no work. She sets out to reform the sleepy town
of Gopher Prairie into a Paris on the prairie. Beaten by
the town but not defeated, she leads her husband to their
nursery door, points to the fuzzy brown head of their
sleeping daughter and says

Do you see that object on the pillow? Do you know what
it is? It’s a bomb to blow up smugness. If you Tories were
wise, you wouldn’t arrest anarchists; you’d arrest all
these children while they’re asleep in their cribs. Think
what that baby will see and meddle with before she dies
in the year 2000! She may see an industrial union of the
whole world, she may see aeroplanes going to Mars.8

The book ends with Carol’s declaration: “I do not admit
that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not
admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous
than Europe! I do not admit that dishwashing is enough
to satisfy all women! I may not have fought the good fight,
but I have kept the faith.”9

Frances Perkins was the most influential of Lewis’s
Greenwich Village friends. Even though she was from an
affluent family in Boston, she was an ardent feminist with
a passion for poor, working-class people—and she had an
encyclopedic memory. She helped poor women at Jane
Addams’s Hull House in Chicago, and then in 1907 headed
to Philadelphia to investigate a sex-slave operation that
lured immigrant women into prostitution with the hope of
a job. In 1910 she got a master’s degree in political science
from Columbia University while doing settlement work in
New York City.10

At that time, Lewis was an awkward, loud, country
boy rejected by the Village Bohemians. Perkins, five years
older, was more of a mother than a sweetheart. They had
fun together mimicking the Bohemians and their smug
conversations of rugs and revolution. They took long
walks through the slums, rode the ferry to Staten Island
for picnics, and found cheap seats at the theater together.
She later wrote, “He appealed to one’s parental sense,”
characterizing him as a “half-developed boy, given to great
extravagances of expression and thought” but also caught
up in social issues. White slavery was one; women’s suf-
frage was another.11

Perkins was having tea with friends near Washington
Square on March 25, 1911, when a fire broke out in the
Triangle Shirtwaist Factory on the top floors of the ten-
story Asch Building. She joined the crowd of a thousand
onlookers, clutching her throat as she watched helpless
workers, mostly young Jewish and Italian women, clinging

The community activism of Lewis’s stepmother comes alive in his
to the window frames before falling to their death. She stood in silence, screamed, or cried.12 The owners had locked the doors to the stairwells to discourage unauthorized bathroom breaks.

One hundred and forty-six garment workers died, making the Triangle Shirtwaist fire the largest workplace disaster in New York history. Perkins vowed to dedicate her life to labor, workplace safety, and suffrage. When the Committee on Safety was established to improve workplace safety in New York later in 1911, former President Theodore Roosevelt was asked to lead the effort. Instead, he recommended Perkins for the job.13

President Franklin D. Roosevelt named Perkins secretary of labor in 1933, making her the first woman in U.S. history to serve as a cabinet member. She held that job for 20 years, writing and administering most of the New Deal. Also in 1933, Lewis published Ann Vickers, a novel whose title character was modeled on Perkins—along with Susan B. Anthony, Sarah Bernhardt, Nancy Astor, Catherine the Great, and Lewis’s second wife Dorothy Thompson. Ann Vickers tells the story of a young, liberated woman who is thrown in jail after a suffrage rally and goes on to become an ambitious prison reformer. In that, Vickers also resembles Fannie French Morse, the prison reformer who planned and supervised the Minnesota Home School for Girls, founded in Lewis’s hometown of Sauk Centre in 1911 with a philosophy of rehabilitation over retribution.16

Lewis gives us a whimsical look inside the suffrage movement when he has Vickers join three fervent volunteers living in an old mansion donated by the wealthy Mrs. Ethelinda St. Vincent, “a large determined lady with purple hats and a bosom like a sack of wheat.” The group leader was Miss Mamie Bogardus, otherwise known as “The Battleaxe” or “The Carrie Nation of Suffrage.” Lewis portrays Bogardus as a caricature of the suffrage warhorse: a tall, scraggly spinster with ferocious eyes and a loud, shrill voice, yet also “the bravest, the most honest, the kindliest, and the most wistful woman alive.”17

The book’s references to adultery, abortion, and lesbianism—along with its portrayal of a successful woman—made it a shocker and a best-seller during the depression era, when books were not selling. It was also made into a 1933 movie starring Irene Dunne and Walter Huston.18

During his early years in New York, Lewis’s love life greatly improved on September 12, 1911, when he met Gracie Livingston Hegger, a bright, slim, five-foot-seven copy editor and columnist for Vogue magazine with a slight English accent inherited from her immigrant
parents. She did not acknowledge him getting on the rickety freight elevator after hours. (He worked for publisher Frederick A. Stokes, located in the same building as Vogue.) When the elevator wheezed to a halt, Lewis stepped back to let her exit first, awkwardly knocking her bag from under her arm. As he stooped to pick up the bag, his derby hat fell from his hand and rolled away. Distraught, he dropped the bag, started after the hat, and bumped into an empty pail, which overturned with a clatter.19 Lewis and Hegger were married three years later.

Gracie Lewis, with her work experiences, became the solid, capable, hardworking Una Golden in The Job. Published in 1917, The Job was the first full-length novel in American fiction about an office girl. Golden, a feminine Horatio Alger character, rises from an eight-dollar-a-week typing job to manage a hotel chain, creating for herself the kind of life she wants to live.20 Optimistically she wonders, “Maybe, the business women will bring about a new kind of marriage in which men will have to keep up respect and courtesy. . . . I wonder—I wonder how many millions of women in what are supposed to be happy homes are sick over being chambermaids and mistresses till they get dulled and used to it.” Once married to gangly, acne-faced Walter Babson, a Lewis look-alike, she vows to balance career and home: “I will keep my job—if I’ve had this world

Ann Vickers tells the story of a young, liberated woman who is thrown in jail after a suffrage rally and goes on to become an ambitious prison reformer.
Published in 1917, *The Job* was the first full-length novel in American fiction about an office girl.
willed, articulate woman driven by ambition to establish a career. Also like Dorothy, she tried to have it all: career, love, and family. Lewis ends the book detailing Vickers as “the Captive Woman, the Free Woman, the Great Woman, the Feminist Woman, the Domestic Woman, the Passionate Woman, the Cosmopolitan Woman, the Village Woman—the Woman.”

Lewis’s career waned after winning the Nobel Prize in 1930, while Thompson’s flourished. The two were rarely in the same country, let alone the same bed. She did not want to be just Mrs. Sinclair Lewis, and he feared becoming Mr. Dorothy Thompson. Unfortunately, the couple did not find a way to maintain a marriage that balanced two high-powered careers. Their union ended in 1942.

Ironically, the Lewis-Thompson marriage became the model for a romantic comedy starring Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, released in that same year. Sinclair Lewis had been a friend of the Hepburn family for 20 years. The actress’s mother, also Katharine, was a national suffrage leader who, with Margaret Sanger, cofounded what became Planned Parenthood. After the success of Hepburn’s 1940 *Philadelphia Story*, the actress and her writers looked for a similar script idea. Meanwhile, over dinner, Thompson had shared humorous stories of her marriage to Lewis with one of Hepburn’s writers, Garson Kanin. This gave him the backdrop for a movie, *Woman of the Year*, in which Hepburn played a high-energy, globe-trotting journalist “tamed” by a sports reporter. The 1942 movie won an Oscar for best screenplay and brought Hepburn a best-actress nomination. Asked what she thought of the film, Thompson called it “a sickening travesty and thoroughly unconvincing.”

Katharine Hepburn’s freewheeling, freethinking, liberated characters resembled Lewis’s heroines Una Golden, Carol Kennicott, and Ann Vickers. Lewis’s experiences at home in Sauk Centre and in Greenwich Village produced a literary fulfillment of the New Woman of the Twentieth Century—an ideal the suffragists and suffragents could only imagine in 1915.

### Notes

3. Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis, 73; Lumsden, Rampant Women, 13*.
9. Lewis, *Main Street, 451*.
15. Downey, *Woman Behind the New Deal, 27*.
19. *G. Lewis, With Love From Gracie, 3.*
27. Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis, 381, 460.*

The parade photo on p. 330 is from the New-York Historical Society; p. 331 is courtesy the Sinclair Lewis Foundation/Sinclair Lewis Boyhood Home; p. 333, Frances Perkins Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; and p. 335 (top), Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries. All others are in MNHS collections; book photos by Jason Onerheim.
Copyright of *Minnesota History* is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder’s express written permission: [contact us](#).

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#). Include the author’s name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

**Students and researchers**
- You do not need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: [http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html](http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html)
- You should, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

**Teachers**
- You do not need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You do need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

**About Illustrations**
- *Minnesota History* credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. *Minnesota History* itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](#).