

A THETA TRAILBLAZER

Did you know that a Theta's pioneering work in the field of journalism has been honored by the issue of a commemorative United States postage stamp? Ida Tarbell helped transform journalism by introducing what is called today investigative reporting. Through her achievements, she not only helped to expand the role of the newspaper in modern society and stimulate the Progressive reform movement, but she also became a role model for women wishing to become professional journalists.

Born on the oil frontier of western Pennsylvania in 1857, Tarbell was among the first women to graduate from Allegheny College. As a student, she was a founding member of the local sorority that became the Mu Chapter of Kappa Alpha Theta in 1876.

Upon graduation, she tried her hand at the more traditional women's job of teaching, but she soon began writing and editing a magazine for the Methodist Church. After studying in France for a few years, she joined the staff of *McClure's*, a new reform-minded magazine. Her initial work for *McClure's* included two popular biographical series—one on Napoleon and one on Abraham Lincoln.

Then, in 1902, she embarked on her ground-breaking study of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company, or what was called the Standard Oil Trust. Her detailed series of articles, titled "History of the Standard Oil Company," was published between 1902 and 1904. It is considered a landmark work of exposé journalism. Her exhaustive investigation revealed Rockefeller's unfair business methods, which outraged the public and led the US government to prosecute the company for violations of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. As a result, after years of precedent-setting litigation, the Supreme Court upheld the break-up of Standard Oil.

In 1999, New York University's journalism department ranked Tarbell's "History of the Standard Oil Company" fifth on its list of the top one hundred works of 20th-century

Ida M. Tarbell's 1880 graduation portrait.



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Ida M. Tarbell was featured in the USPS *Women in Journalism* 2002 postage stamp collection.

American journalism. Dr. Robert Kochersberger, an English professor at North Carolina State University, has noted, "It was an incredibly researched and written series. Tarbell placed ultimate reliability on facts, information and details, and she just dug in and did the kind of research that would do today's investigative journalists proud."

In the early years of the twentieth century, reform-minded journalists like Tarbell were regarded with scorn by those whose corrupt practices in business and government they sought to expose. Those in power referred to the journalists as "muckrakers," a term that was intended to be pejorative but that has been embraced by both journalists and historians. Ida Tarbell was



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE IDA M. TARBELL COLLECTION, PELLETIER LIBRARY, ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

the only female muckraker, and many say she was the best of the bunch, according to Kochersberger.

As the most famous woman journalist of her time, Tarbell founded the *American Magazine* in 1906. She authored biographies of several important businessmen and wrote a series of articles about an extremely controversial issue of her day, the tariff imposed on goods imported to the US from foreign countries. Of this series President Woodrow Wilson commented, "She has written more good sense, good plain common sense, about the tariff than any man I know of."

During World War I, she joined the efforts to improve the plight of working women. Later in her career, Tarbell traveled as a lecturer and wrote freelance articles, including a report on the Paris Peace conference in 1919 and an interview with Benito Mussolini in the mid-1920s.

The work of journalists like Ida Tarbell inspired Americans of the early twentieth century to seek reform in government, economic structures, and urban areas. Along with other muckrakers like Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, and Upton Sinclair, Tarbell ushered in reform journalism. Ever since, newspapers have played a leading role as the watchdogs and consciences of our political, economic, and social lives.

Tarbell was not herself an advocate of women's issues or women's rights. But as the most prominent woman active in the muckraking movement and one of the most respected business historians of her generation, she succeeded in a "male" world—the world of journalism, business analysis, and world affairs—thus helping to open the door to other women seeking careers in journalism and, later, in broadcasting.

Her achievements were recognized during her lifetime, and her work has also stood the test of time. In 1922, *The New York Times* named Ida Tarbell one of the "Twelve Greatest American Women." On October 7, 2000, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Editor's note: some information for this article was provided by the National Women's Hall of Fame. ♦