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The Progressive Era, a time period in American History that lasted from 1890 to 1916, was a period that can be characterized by a change in the role of government in the United States. This time period, led by political figures such as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Robert La Follette, brought increased government regulation in areas such as working conditions, working hours for women and children, the meat packing industry, and many more. Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Robert La Follette are all considered to be progressive in their political ideas. These figures were all determined to influence political, social, cultural, economic, and business by addressing what they believe needs to be reformed.

The role of government changed during the Progressive Era. Reforms and regulations led to the presence of government in all aspects of life. These reforms and regulations tended to focus on people who would otherwise get trampled on, including women, children, elderly, and the poor. While most of the regulations and reform movements were beneficial and good, some weren’t.

During the Progressive Era, government regulation increased and became apparent in the everyday lives of all people. One example of increased government regulation can be seen when examining working conditions in factories. After the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York in April of 1911, workers along with government officials became increasingly concerned with the conditions of factories. In June of 1911, the Factory Investigation Commission is created to ensure that all factories operate under acceptable working conditions to ensure the safety of their workers. Factories that do not have acceptable working conditions were fined and their door locked until conditions improved. Working conditions were not the only concern of state and federal governments as far as factories are concerned.

At this time, factory workers worked unimaginable hours and received very little time off. State governments were the first to act. Many states, such as New York, began to pass laws that limited the number of hours women and children could work in one week. In 1912, New York altered their labor laws to include a maximum of 54 hours a week for women and children under the age of 18 years old (NYT, Shorter Factory Hours Reading). According to the reading, the State Labor Department gave factories printed notices of the new law. In Muller v. Oregon (1908), the Supreme Court upheld an Oregon law that limited the number of hours that women can work per day in factories and laundries (Woloch, vii).

The Progressive Era also brought new attitude in regards to children. Before the 19th century, children were seen as small adults that can reason and work like adults. At the end of the 19th century, this attitude changed. The 20th century, according to James Marten, author of *Childhood and Child Welfare in the Progressive Era*, became known as the “century of the child” (Marten, 5). Instead of being seen as small adults, they were seen as small innocent children that must be protected from the evil realities of the world. Reforms began to focus on how children were affected by factory conditions, drinking, and large families. The same New York law listed above stated that children between the ages of 14 and 16 could not work unless they had documents that proved they had received an eight year education. This section of the law also shows that education gained value during this era. Families were also informed of the impact that drinking in the family, especially mothers, can have on children. Mothers were educated on the death of children from preventable diseases, who were blamed for these deaths. This time period is also marked by a decrease in birth rates. The government encouraged families to have fewer children so that each child can receive an adequate amount of love and attention from their parents. This also increased the importance of each child. There was also a push for programs that were specifically designed to meet the needs of children. It is during this time that organizations such as the YMCA and the YWCA begin offering programs for families to provide supervision, activities, and moral guidance for children. The government and organizations also began to educate women, usually during “Baby Weeks” located in poor neighborhoods, about how to properly take care of their babies to ensure their health.

The government also became concerned with the meat packing industry and other food producing companies after the horror of packhouses were exposed in Upton Sinclair’s book, *The Jungle.* The Meat Inspection Act of 1906 addressed the concerns over the sanitation of the meat packing industry. This act also required the elimination of contaminated meat as well as accurate labeling of meat (Marley Blanchard, Politics Timeline). According to this timeline event, this act also led to other legislation that focused on the safety of food. The Pure Food and Drug Act was also enacted that year and it placed restrictions on the operations of food and drug companies. Both of these laws were passed to ensure the safety and health of Americans.

Although most of the reforms and regulations that were enacted during the Progressive Era were positive changes, some cannot be described as so. One particularly awful aspect of the Progressive Era has to do with the “americanization” of Native Americans. Native Americans were sent to boarding schools like Richard Henry Pratt’s Carlisle Indian School. Native Americans were stripped from their homes and forced into the schools to learn how to be American. They were given what were considered to be appropriate names and were forced to abandon their culture. The cultures of Native American tribes were also damaged during this period by the Dawes Allotment Act. This act individually allotted land and outlawed communal ownership, which is what Native Americans were used to. Whatever land was left after allotment was sold off. This drastically reduced the size of reservations and created a checkerboard problem because the reservations had been broken up by other settlers who had bought land from the government.

For the most part, Progressivism and its reforms were only applied and relevant to white Americans. Little was done during the time to meet the needs or address the issues and plights of African Americans. During this time, there was large scale disenfranchisement of African Americans living in the South. However, during this time, this was seen as progressive because many whites living in the south believed that this would undo errors made previously.

The most difficult thing about the Progressive Era is trying to come up with a concrete definition of who is considered to be a progressive. Progressives were members of the middle class who were concerned with how the class below them was being treating. Progressives were also muckrakers who were dedicated to exposing corruption in factories, businesses, and the government. Progressives were presidents, politicians, protestant white men, suffragists, prohibitionists, and everyone else who believed that they were progressive. Progressives, as a group, were very interested in reform. The most prominent figures during this time that can be called progressives are Theodore Roosevelt, Robert La Follette, and Woodrow Wilson. Theodore Roosevelt read Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and responded by working with Congress to create the Meat Inspection Act. He also worked to create the National Parks System which he believed was essential in the conservation of wilderness areas and natural resources. He believed that instead of preserving these areas, we should conserve them so that they can continue to be used and enjoyed, by hunters, fisherman, and other sportsman. Robert La Follette, the Progressive Governor of Wisconsin, led reforms in the process of direct primaries, stronger regulation of the railroads, workmen’s compensation, and joined with Roosevelt to encourage the conservation of natural resources (Tindall and Shi, 946.) Woodrow Wilson showed progressive reform tendencies before he was ever in office. According to Tindall and Shi, Woodrow Wilson, while working at Princeton University, introduced a more modern curriculum, a tutorial system, and raised admissions standards (Tindall and Shi, 968). As Governor of New Jersey, Wilson pushed for a workers’ compensation law, a corrupt-practices law, and took measures to regulate public utilities (Tindall and Shi, 968). In his presidency, a new banking and currency reform took place. Wilson believed that banks should be instruments and not masters of business and individual enterprise and initiative (Tendall and Shi, 974). This reform addressed three of the major problems in regards to banking: bank reserves were pooled to increase security, the nation’s currency supply and bank credit became more elastic and reserves concentration in New York City was decreased (Tindall and Shi, 974).

The Progressive Era was a time where an abundant amount of reform took place in all aspects of life. The role of the government in the United States increased dramatically. The government moved towards intervention in everyday life to regulate and mandate the moral behavior of its citizens and businessmen.

Citations:

Marten, James . *Childhood and child welfare in the Progressive Era: a brief history with documents*. New York, NY: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004.

Tindall, George Brown, and David Emory Shi. *America: A Native History*. 8 ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009.

Woloch, Nancy. *Muller v. Oregon: a brief history with documents*. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996.