The Progressive Era: Progressive and Populist Movements

The progressive era was the name giving to the time in history between 1880 until 1916. This short amount of time in America saw many changes in the form of reforms, political parties and government. These changes appeared on the local, state and national level. Changes were felt and experienced by all Americans. Women acquired a voice and started using that voice to fight for their rights. African Americans also experienced changes, having known nothing but working for others, now they were free and needing to find purpose, place and acceptance in society. The Progressive and Populist movement are two movements that are unique to this era. Influences from these two movements can be seen in just about every aspect of the progressive era.

The beginning of the progressive area was marked by a growth of population in cities. Life in the country no longer held promise of making a living, causing waves of people to move to the city. A large portion of these people were African Americans and immigrants. African Americans, no longer slaves were free and in need of finding a place in society. Up till this point African Americans had had a place in society as slaves, now suddenly they were free, with little clue what to do or where to go. So many were in need of jobs and lodging, that staying in the location they had lived their entire life was not an option. This resulted in the wave of blacks moving into the cities and urban areas. To the African Americans the large cities offered more opportunities to find jobs, than they would have if they stayed put. This tidal wave of freed blacks was unsettling for most whites. For most Americans there was this great confusion into how to control and regulate the African Americans. For the whites feared the possibility that the freed blacks would take their jobs, fight for equal rights and most of all no longer bow to the authority of whites. Most felt that the possibility of this happening was unacceptable. One way of controlling that the whites came up with was separation rules or laws. The blacks were free, but they were not equal in the eyes of whites. So they were given separate areas in public. Like when two black church leaders Rev. John Frank and Rev. C. H. Parish went to a church function, “They visited the meeting and took seats in the body of the church. At the request of the Association, a policeman was called and escorted these men out because they would not take the seats set apart for colored persons in the back part of the Tabernacle”[[1]](#footnote-1). The blacks may have had freedom, but this freedom came with regulations and rules. These regulations and restrictions prevented the African Americans from truly being free.

African Americans were not the only people moving to the great cities of America. Immigrants from all over arrived in large numbers; most of these were European immigrants. They, like the blacks, came looking for a better way of life, which included jobs and opportunities that they would never have back in their own country. Finding jobs was not easy, most immigrants ended up working in the infamous sweat shops and or factory’s, jobs that most Americans felt beneath them. Some immigrants were lucky and found employment as household servants. Once in America they took over certain areas making it their own, typically sectioning it off. The Irish in one area, Jews in another and so forth. The West Side of Chicago was famous for immigrants and its poor slum like conditions. Though these slum like and unsanitary conditions could be found in most cities. This rush of new people pouring into the cities caused a drastic change in the life of those already there. This made it imperative for the city and government to become involve and help regulate the drastic change taking place.

The progressive movement was full of changes, reforms and political advances. The progressives core belief was that man could better himself and his life, as long as he was shown how and was given the correct tools and opportunities. People, who carried the view or label of progressive, did not always agree with each other. The lines separating people views politically were often hazy or easily intertwined with other views. People often claimed to follow the views of one group but often held ideas in multiple areas. This often caused confusion in who was what.

One large movement that held multiple views was women’s rights. Up till this point it was thought that the women’s place and job was at home taking care of the family, then during this era women started working and experiencing life outside of the house. Getting a job was not just about making money; these women got jobs to make important changes. “Suffragists like Mary Livermore reasoned that women’s entrance into the work would help to introduce desirable feminine qualities into society”[[2]](#footnote-2). One of these feminine qualities was the voice women brought through the creation of Ladies Clubs. There were Women’s clubs before the progressive era, but during this time the idea of Women’s Clubs took on a new meaning. Originally a way for women to better themselves through culture “Jane Adams put it another way: “Lumbering our minds with literature only served to cloud the really vital situation spread before our eyes”[[3]](#footnote-3) , these clubs now had a new purpose. “Clubs, the impetus that in the 19th century had propelled women out their front doors into meetings in their churches and other public places, now were pushing them to confront public problems”[[4]](#footnote-4). An extremely passionate cause that these clubs fought to improve was the education system. Better education was needed for not only children but women as well. Seeing what shape the schools their children went to were in caused uproar among the women. Demand to better them came fast , “they demanded improvements: better heat, light, ventilation, drinking water, drainage, seats, desks, fresh paint, pictures on the walls, and playgrounds”[[5]](#footnote-5).Once the women saw that they could make a change, there was no stopping them. Not only did they fight for the children, they fought for themselves and those who had no voice. “Energized by their successes, undertook to improve public health services, protect the country’s environment, encourage better household economics, ensure the purity of the food supply, reform the civil service, and ameliorate industrial conditions for women and children who labored”[[6]](#footnote-6). One of these women was Jane Adams, who became famous for founding The Hall House located in Chicago, which became one of the most well-known settlement houses of the time. Jane Adams felt strongly that the poor deserved an education and the opportunity to better their living situation. Many worked long hours and had little money to show for it, crushing the chances they had to go from poor to well off. Even with the limitations the poor had, Jane Adams saw that these people had potential to make their situation better. As most progressives, she felt this could only be accomplished through giving them the assistance they need, once they learned they could better there life on their own. The creation of The Hall House did just that, giving those who resided there, revenue to a better life.

With so many people having moved to the cities, live there had become unhealthy, unsafe and to large parts dangerous. People populated the cities in such large numbers that keeping up with housing space and sanitation was nearly impossible. Cramp homes with families living on top of families. With so many people, the streets soon became engulfed in trash and body waste. These situations were at their worst in the poorest parts of cities. “Urban problems were addressed by professional social workers who operated settlement houses as a means to protect and improve the prospects of the poor”[[7]](#footnote-7). These settlement houses were created in hopes that the poor would use them to make a better life for themselves. Housing was not the only thing that the settlement houses offered; teachings in how to cook, clean, take care of children and keep a respectable house are just a few examples. The settlement houses were most often located in the poorer parts of cities or towns. Due to it was felt that those living there would benefit the most from the help that the settlement houses offered. “The hope for better things sustained both the settlement house residents and the population of their neighborhoods. This hope was justified partly because the settlement house concentrated their attention on the most likely candidates for upward mobility, the working poor, rather than the despairing unemployed”[[8]](#footnote-8). Those who took up residents at the settlement houses had full time jobs, but when not working at their jobs they were expected to help with maintaining the house. The settlement houses are an example of the progressive belief that the people can better themselves if just given the correct tools and opportunities.

Towards the end of the progressive era, a transformation of America was taking place. Americans and politicians alike were taking notice that land was becoming scarce, land untouched by man and all natural was hard to come by. The solution to fix this problem came in the form of National Parks. One of the most well-known advocates for the creation of National Parks was President Theodore (teddy) Roosevelt. It was known by all that President Theodore Roosevelt was an avid hunter. Becoming President did not keep him from hunting; he was often photographed while hunting. Seeing that the forests of America were disappearing caused distress for Teddy Roosevelt. He knew that without forests there would be no game to hunt. To insure there would always be game and forests, Teddy pushed for a National Parks to be created that would allow game to flourish while at the same time remain untouched by man. While President Roosevelt was in office an Act was passed that would do just what Teddy Roosevelt wanted. In 1906 congressed passed the Integrate Act. This Act insured the protection and preservation of scientific and historical location or objects. A few of the places saved or created by this act are devils Tower, The Grand Canyon, The Petrified Forest and Zion national Forest.

The Progressive era is characterized by many things. The role of the women changed drastically, it went from staying home full time, taking care of her family to getting out into the world, getting jobs and fighting for the correction of public issues. African Americans had just been given freedom, though restrictions and regulations kept them from truly being free. There was great fear that African Americans would cause problems and upset the way of life that whites were accustomed to. Immigrants from all over came to America and took over parts of city’s which lead to the creation of settlement houses. With the American population growing so fast, forests and wide open land was disappearing. So to insure that America would always have forests, and the untouched canvases of nature, National Parks were created. Though the progressive era was from 1880 till 1916, influences can still be seen today.

1. History is a Weapon, "The Convict Lease System by Frederick Douglass." Last modified 2009. Accessed October 30, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dorothy Schneider, and Carl Schneider, American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dorothy Schneider, and Carl Schneider, American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dorothy Schneider, and Carl Schneider, American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dorothy Schneider, and Carl Schneider, American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dorothy Schneider, and Carl Schneider, American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. United States History, "The Progressive Movement." Accessed November 22, 2012. http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1061.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dorothy Schneider, and Carl Schneider, American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)