

Frances Perkins, The First Woman In Cabinet, Is Dead

Frances Perkins, the first woman Cabinet member, who served for 12 turbulent years as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, died here yesterday at the age of 83.

Miss Perkins left her post as lecturer at the New York State School of Industrial Relations at Cornell University two weeks ago and was admitted to Midtown Hospital for a routine examination. While there she suffered a stroke. She died yesterday at 7 P.M.

Her term of office as Labor Secretary, from 1933 to 1945, coincided with the greatest period of labor unrest and economic upheaval in American history. Through all the strikes, peaks of unemployment, technological relocation and mobilization for the war, Miss Perkins presided efficiently and with restraint, withstanding repeated private and public attacks.

In recent years time had mellowed the opposition to her and she was no longer considered controversial. She spent the last years of her life generally regarded as an elder stateswoman.

But this had not always been the case for the New Deal official. Her years in office saw the labor movement come into its own, after experiencing turmoil and growing pains. The skirmishes between the American Federation of Labor and

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FRANCES PERKINS OF NEW DEAL DIES

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the Congress of Industrial Organizations added to the headaches of the slight woman from Boston.

It was the period that such New Deal reforms as Social Security and the National Labor Relations Act were introduced, reforms that were achieved over a vocal and militant opposition.

And in those times of change, Miss Perkins, who kept sewing needles and thread in her drawer next to Presidential memorandums, was often the target of much criticism and some abuse.

"How has she remained in office so long?" editorial writers asked. One correspondent described her as a "colorless woman who talked as if she swallowed a press release." In the House of Representatives a petition was submitted to force her dismissal, but it was withdrawn.

Miss Perkins persisted, and she left her post only after Harry S. Truman succeeded President Roosevelt. Even then she stayed on in Washington, working until 1953 as a civil service commissioner.

When President Dwight D. Eisenhower took office, ending 20 years of Democratic rule, Miss Perkins resigned, saying, "It's quite an accomplishment to be the last leaf on a tree."

Spoke to Steelworkers

In the course of her tenure at the Department of Labor, the dark-eyed, dark-haired, spry woman, her perennial tricorne perched on her short, bobbed coiffure, may have seemed a strange figure at, say, a strike-deadened steel town. But there she was, dominating the action.

Once she went to Homestead, Pa., a company town, to explain the President's labor program to steelworkers. The company had grudgingly provided a hall too small for her audience. And so, as company officials protested, Miss Perkins led the workers, those inside as well as outside, to the local post office, where she addressed them and answered their questions.

If the sight of a woman was strange at a meeting of workers, some also thought it was strange at a meeting of Cabinet members.

Miss Perkins once recalled how, at her first Cabinet meeting, she felt that Vice President John Nance Garner was looking at her with what she thought was a condescending expression.

At one point, she related, President Roosevelt turned to her and asked, "Now, what's on your mind?"

"I replied just as briefly and clearly as I could," she said. "When that first Cabinet meeting broke up, Mr. Garner came over to me, slapped me on the back and exclaimed, 'You're all right; you've got something on your mind. You said it and then you stopped.'"

"I guess he feared I would be a vague woman—not quite sure of anything. Really, I don't believe men would long tolerate vague women in public office."

Once, when she was asked the inevitable question whether her sex had ever been a handicap in public life, she replied with Yankee dryness: "Yes, in climbing trees."

Miss Perkins had set views on what constituted public and private life. She seldom gave interviews, and when she did, it was all business. Once she chided a friend who had written a short magazine article describing Miss Perkins's summer home in Maine. She felt the story was an invasion of her privacy.

She had a good deal of the reserve of a proper Bostonian, from whom she was descended. Her father, Frederick W. Perkins, a conservative Republican, traced his ancestry to pre-revolutionary days. From her birth on April 10, 1882, Frances Perkins was trained in the genteel traditions of her class. She attended Mount Holyoke College, majoring in chemistry and biology.

After graduation in 1902, she worked for a time as a social worker for the Episcopal church. Throughout her life, she was deeply religious.

"I don't see how people who don't believe in God can go on in this world as it is today," she said.

For a while she taught in a high school. Then, straining at the restrictive vocational binds imposed on women in those days before the 19th Amendment, she joined Jane Addams at Hull House, the prototype settlement house established among the immigrant slum dwellers of Chicago.

After Hull House, she continued her studies, first at the



Associated Press
Frances Perkins greeting President Roosevelt in 1943

Wharton School of Finance and Commerce at the University of Pennsylvania and then at Columbia University, where she earned a master's degree in social economics.

In 1910, Miss Perkins was elected executive secretary of the Consumers League of New York. She directed studies of working conditions in sweatshops, with emphasis on the ways in which women and children employes were being treated.

The following year, after 145 working girls were killed in the Triangle shirtwaist fire on March 25, 1911, Miss Perkins, working for the league, successfully pushed for the introduction of legal standards of safety for factories in the state.

Years later, when Miss Perkins was heading the Labor Department, there were some who said that the entire New Deal relief program was nothing more than an expanded version of the Consumers' League platform.

It was as the leader of this group that Miss Perkins went to Albany, where she came to know the three powerful Democratic leaders who were to be her mentors and allies, Alfred E. Smith, Mr. Roosevelt and Robert F. Wagner.

She led the lobbying drive that ultimately resulted in the passage of a law that limited a work day to nine hours and a work week to 54. It took her two years to marshal the votes needed for passage, and even so the bill did not pass without a last-minute filibuster by State Senator Roosevelt, who stalled the balloting while Miss Perkins rustled sympathetic but absent legislators into the hall.

At about this time, in 1913, Miss Perkins was married to Paul Caldwell Wilson, a financial statistician, who later became adviser to New York's Mayor John Purroy Mitchel. Mr. Wilson died in 1952. Miss Perkins used her maiden name throughout her professional life. In the Cabinet she expressed a preference for being addressed as Madame Secretary.

Miss Perkins got her first government job in 1919, when Governor Smith appointed her to head the State Industrial Commission. When Mr. Smith turned over his office to Franklin Roosevelt, he advised his successor to keep Miss Perkins. "She is an able and conscientious woman," he said. "You had better not let her get away from you."

Governor Roosevelt abided by this advice and in 1929 appointed Miss Perkins as State Industrial Commissioner. In that position she gained a national reputation as an authority on industrial and labor legislation. The country was riding high on a crest of prosperity, and her department, with its staff of 1,800, did business with more than 3 million persons. Then, a year later, the boom dipped and the Depression began.

Miss Perkins began at once to make plans for the future, plans that later, under President Roosevelt, contributed to the large and intricate body of social-insurance legislation promulgated under the New Deal.

She emphatically advocated two major reforms—a system of unemployment insurance and stabilization of industry through higher wages and a consequently increasing purchasing power.

She also preached increased cooperation of industrial management, labor, economists and



United Press International
Frances Perkins

engineers, with government to keep a steady hand to the end that a sound public policy might be developed aiming at regulation of economic forces in such a way as would control or at least temper the incidence of economic dislocation.

In Washington, Miss Perkins had not only contributed materially to the shaping of legislation dealing with unemployment, alleviation of industrial strife, adoption of the Social Security Act and other New Deal reforms, but helped also in standardizing state industrial legislation.

The social service and research agencies of the Department of Labor, particularly, were greatly extended under her guidance, as was the Division of Labor Standards, which cooperates with the various states on labor legislation. The Bureau of Labor Statistics was further developed.

Two important New Deal agencies that came under the immediate supervision of Miss Perkins were the Wage and Hour Division, administering the Federal Fair Labor Standards Act, and the Division of Contracts, having to do with the administration of the Walsh-Healey Act.

During the first two Administrations of President Roosevelt, Miss Perkins was frequently in the center of labor conflicts that had stirred the nation, such as the automobile sit-down strikes of 1937 and the Little Steel strike.

Despite the criticism leveled against her from certain labor quarters, as well as from industry, she emerged from her work as a Cabinet officer with her name written large in the history of the social progress of the nation.

Miss Perkins wrote about the man she had served in New York and Washington in a book called "The Roosevelt I Knew." It was published in 1946. At her death she had nearly completed a volume to be entitled "The Al Smith I Knew," which was scheduled for publication this fall.

Last night tributes to Miss Perkins were being made by those who knew her and worked with her.

Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz said in Washington that "every man and woman in America who works at a living wage, under safe conditions, for reasonable hours, or who is protected by unemployment insurance or social security is her debtor."

George Meany, who as head of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., presides over the merged labor federations, characterized her as "a great lady."

Miss Perkins is survived by a daughter, Mrs. Calvert Coggeshall, and a grandchild.

A funeral service will be held on Monday at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection, 115 East 74th Street. Her body will be on view at the church on Sunday from 3 P.M. to 6 P.M.

Burial will be private.