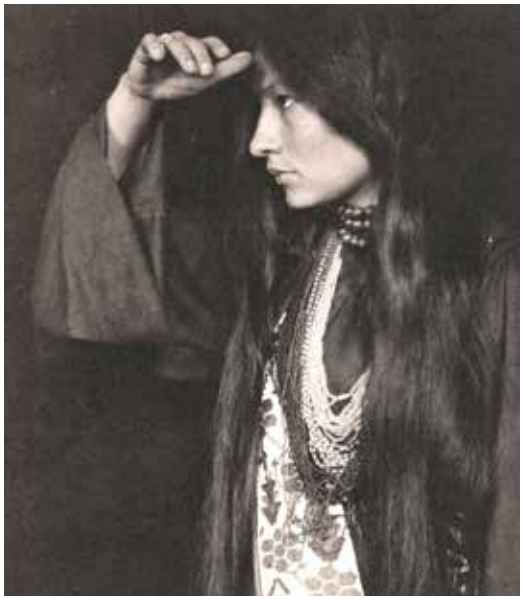
Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

**“I was not wholly conscious of myself, but was more keenly alive to the fire within.
It was as if I were the activity, and my hands and feet were only experiments for my spirit to work upon.”**

Zitkála-Šá
Photo by Gertrude Käsebier



An Unstoppable Fire

In the late 19th century, when the U.S. government was attempting to erase Native Americans and their cultures, Zitkála-Šá rose up to become the voice and energy of the opposition. A fierce activist for Native American civil rights, Zitkála-Šá (aka Gertrude Simmons Bonnin) wove music, writing, and political activism into her fight for full equality of Indigenous people and the celebration of Native cultures.

Zitkála-Šá was born on a Sioux reservation in South Dakota in 1876, the same year her tribe defeated General George Armstrong Custer. At the age of eight, she was sent to a Quaker school in Indiana. A quick learner, Zitkála-Šá was especially gifted in music, but her education came at a devastating price. Being forced to pray as a Quaker, speak

English, and cut her long hair, ignited a life-long personal struggle between the rich culture into which she was born and the white culture in which she was educated. Her internal struggle eventually became the key reason she began to speak out on behalf of others like her.

Scholarships enabled Zitkála-Šá to attend college, and later, graduate studies at the New England Conservatory of Music. In 1902, she married a man who, like herself, was part Sioux and part white. In 1910, while working in Utah with the Ute tribe, Zitkála-Šá met the composer William Hanson. They collaborated on *The Sun Dance*, the first opera about Native American life. She wrote the libretto and songs, basing them on sacred rituals that had been banned by the U.S. government. The first opera co-authored by a Native American, the Sun Dance premiered in Utah in 1913. When it was staged in New York in 1938, only Hanson was credited.

Zitkála-Šá also gathered, translated, and published several collections of Native children's stories. Her investigative journalism focused on the harsh realities facing Native Americans and appeared in national magazines, including Harper's and The Atlantic. One article uncovered evidence that American companies gained access to oil by robbing and murdering Native people, particularly those from the Osage nation. The article influenced Congress to pass the Indian Reorganization Act which returned a portion of the stolen lands to the tribes, along with self-governance. The conspiracy she uncovered is at the root of the best-selling book, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, by David Grann, scheduled to begin filming this year.

In 1916, Zitkála-Šá moved to Washington, D.C., to devote herself to political activism. She helped to ensure the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 which granted U.S. citizenship to Native Americans. However, the act denied people on reservations the right to vote in local and state elections. Unwilling to settle for a partial victory, Zitkála-Šá co-founded the National Council of American Indians to repeal these laws. She served as its president until her death in 1938. The laws weren't struck down until the 1960s.

Hear how to pronounce: Zitkála-Šá.

“If society will not admit of woman’s free development, then society must be remodelled.”

Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell
First Woman M.D.

A Woman of Many Firsts

In 1849, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to earn an M.D. from an American medical school. Born in England in 1821, Elizabeth’s family emigrated to the U.S. in 1832. At the deathbed of a close friend, Elizabeth vowed to become a physician after her friend remarked that she would have fared better had she been treated by women doctors instead of men.

Elizabeth’s numerous applications to medical schools were rejected. Undaunted, she wrote: “The idea of winning a doctor’s degree gradually assumed the aspect of a great moral struggle, and the moral fight possessed immense attraction for me.”

In 1847, Elizabeth was accepted to the Geneva Medical College in New York. However, administrators never intended for her to join the incoming class. To avoid the appearance of rejecting a female candidate, school faculty asked the all-male student body to vote on Elizabeth’s admission. Planning to prank her, students voted yes. Elizabeth seized the opportunity and quickly accepted. She suffered from continual harassment at the college, but nonetheless, earned her M.D. in 1849.

In 1857 Elizabeth and two female colleagues founded the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. The institution enabled her to offer internships to female physicians so they could advance their training. Convinced of the critical need for women doctors, Elizabeth launched a multi-year campaign to raise public and professional support to include a medical school for women at the hospital. It opened in 1868.

In 1859, Elizabeth became the first woman registered with the British General Medical Council. She moved back to England in 1869. Two years later, she launched the National Health Society to educate people about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. Her motto, ‘Prevention is better than Cure,’ was ahead of its time. As she had done in the U.S.,

Elizabeth and two female physicians founded the London School of Medicine for Women, in 1874, the first college to train women as doctors in England.

Even after Elizabeth stopped practicing medicine, she continued writing and publishing articles on health and medicine. She was a leader in preventative medicine, sanitation, family planning, sex education, women's suffrage, and the abolition of prostitution and white slavery. She died in Hastings, England, on May 31, 1910.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Zitkála-Šá: Throughout her life, Zitkála-Šá drew on her struggle against the erasure of cultural identity and used her experience as a catalyst for change.

Ask Yourself: Would you be willing to share your innermost turmoil to bring about change?

Dr. Blackwell was dedicated not only to improving women's healthcare, but also to helping other women break into the medical profession through both education and by creating job opportunities.

Ask A Friend: Who are contemporary examples of women who assist and uplift other women? How many can you name?

Sharon Spaulding discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex-ed and reproductive rights activist, after she married Dennett's greatgrandson. Last year, Time magazine included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history.

Sharon has spent ten years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her journalism has appeared in BOLD and Utah Stories. She lives near Salt Lake City with her family and dog, Gus.

Sharon is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements in the early 20th century. Contact her at: Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. **www.SharonSpaulding.com**