

Coline Jenkins Interview

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Interview with Coline Jenkins-Sahlin via telephone

Great-great granddaughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, great granddaughter of Harriot Stanton Blatch, granddaughter of Nora Barney, and daughter of Rhoda Jenkins.

Elected official to the Greenwich, Connecticut legislative body, the Representative Town Meeting descendent

- 1. Can you give a broad overview of the immediate and longer-term effects of the Seneca Falls Convention for both women and men?**

The immediate effect was that a church full of people, which was a meeting place, agreed to the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments*, which is equivalent to the “Women’s Declaration of Independence” and it is essentially a blueprint that is still valid today. Not all of the blueprint has been completed, not all of the house has been built yet. At the time, Stanton insisting on the votes for women was extremely controversial. It was so controversial that Lucretia Mott thought that the demand for the vote might jeopardize some of the other more reasonable demands, but Stanton and Frederick Douglass stood by the need for women to have the vote. Those are some of the immediate effects; and then eventually these documents begin getting passed and other women right’s conventions begin getting organized. That planted the seed in 1848. And then there was this gigantic movement. There was a social revolution, but it was different from the American Revolution which was a blood bath for four years and then it was over. These were females that were fighting, no guns, just their words. Basically it took until 1920 to accomplish the vote. But other things happened before that, like access to higher education. Once they had this they had access to other professions. This still happens today. A blueprint that has evolved and the house is being constructed.

2. In your opinion, what may have motivated your grandmother to have fought so hard for the equalization of rights for women?

She was my great-great-grandmother. Really she grew up in an environment in which the law was all around her. That influenced her as a child. I talked to the president of the American Association of Historians and she told me Elizabeth Cady Stanton was connecting women to the law. It came out of her childhood. There are stories about how people would knock at the door of their home because her father's law practice was attached to the side of the house and Stanton's father would let them in and counsel them. Elizabeth Cady Stanton understood the law, the concepts and effects of the law, and Stanton's father counseled her that cutting up the law books would not change the law; to change anything you had to go to the legislative body and lobby them.

And then there is the story of the law clerk that lived in the house and he said to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "that necklace that you have on, when you get married your husband will own it." Well, Stanton felt the sense of injustice. Imagine your mother gave you a necklace when you are 15 but when you get married the necklace and anything else you own, including your children, becomes the property of your husband. So at a young age Elizabeth Cady Stanton was exposed to ideas and the law and I think that she developed an emotional and intellectual reaction, so it is not surprising that someone in this atmosphere developed as she did. She did not just promote a general concept of women's equality, she actually worked on very logical processes in order to accomplish it. *The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* is a clear declaration that parallels the *Declaration of Independence*. She lobbied legislatures, she was a very powerful speech writer. Elizabeth Cady Stanton had different strategies and used everything she could. She was quite savvy.

3. Can you articulate how she “TOOK A STAND” and help me understand the context of how revolutionary her thinking was at the time?

The best example you can give is the debate over elective franchise for women. And I just mentioned that, I think it is very illustrative, that if women did not have the vote they would be outside the system and they could only appeal to those that had the vote. And to be a full citizen you have to have the ability to vote. But at the time it was considered promiscuous for women to speak in a public forum. Now promiscuity is associated with sexuality, well, back then, just to speak in a public forum was inappropriate. Here is Stanton speaking in a public forum, so not only speaking in a public forum but also trying to gain the ultimate power, which was to be able to vote. Then determine their own destiny by voting on legislation, voting on their representatives that would hold public office. These were all very radical things at the time, a woman speaking in public, a woman demanding votes for women, that was ridiculous. It was so far-fetched that they were concerned that more reasonable things like a woman's ability for higher education might be jeopardized. They feared if they asked for too much they would not achieve anything. But Stanton stood fast and would not change her demands. Now we all take it for granted. Can you imagine not being able to vote? She was always ahead of her time. The other thing is Stanton remained radical through her life. In the late 1800s there was a religious fervor going on in the nation and what she felt was a lot of the institutionalized religions were actually a hindrance to women's advancement; so what she felt was - have you read *The Women's Bible*? The whole point of that was they convened a group of women in order to go back to the original Bible and analyze texts about women. Well, only about 15% of the Bible has anything to do with women. And then they tried to go back to God's word. Information that was not through organized religion or a hindrance to women's advancement, but go back and do their own theological analysis. Well, that was hugely radical and that is in Stanton's old age. She was only 34 when she did the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments*, but in her old age she was still radical. It was so radical that it got her sort of drummed

out of the women's groups. So those are examples of her taking a stand. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was always ahead of her time.

Can you do this? Do you know what is really funny? She had such a great wit about her. She would have people shoot an arrow at her and she would grab the arrow and send it right back at the person. For example, look at the back of your edition of *The Women's Bible* and see if there is a minister that criticizes Stanton's group and says, "*The Women's Bible is the work of the devil.*" And so Elizabeth Cady Stanton had a reply to it, "the theological committee consisted of women, there were no men!" Because everyone thought the devil was a man, it caught the minister off guard. He would have had to say the devil was a woman but nowhere in the Bible did it say that the devil was a woman. So she had the ability to turn around things.

4. What were the hardest times and biggest obstacles for your great-great grandmother? How did she respond when her fellow women were some of her biggest opponents?

I guess how long it took. The obstacle was time. It just went on and on. One of her biggest disappointments was in 1848 when she was working with Frederick Douglass and then this whole thing with the Women's Movement supporting the Civil War, taking a back seat, but when it is all over only black males get the vote. It was a political and personal disappointment, when your colleague tells you to step aside. The point is, she never really gave up. And we have a letter she wrote to President Roosevelt in October of the same month she died, an eight page letter, and basically she is appealing to President Roosevelt, saying there is no greater monopoly than that of all men writing the laws controlling the rights of all women. Because that was a big period of monopolies and robber barons. So right up to her death she never stopped trying. And what is really interesting, in addition to that letter, we have a letter to Mrs. Roosevelt, from Stanton. So she is not only writing to the President, she is also writing to the President's wife to try to use her leverage to try and get the President to act. She just kept on trying and

trying. Of course there were some early successes, such as the Marital Property Act, so I mean all along the way there were successes but obviously she died without seeing the vote.

5. Near the end of her life, what do think Elizabeth Cady Stanton thought of her accomplishments? Because of her life of solitude.

You mean her speech about solitude that she made near the end of her life? I don't think she experienced solitude in the way you think. Her speech about solitude was about the universal quality of a human being, and there are certain points in every person's life that they will experience solitude. I know when she went to live in New York City on 94th Street on the west side, my grandmother lived with her while she was studying at Horace Mann. And obviously she had seven kids and their families and she was still in touch with her French and English relatives and she was traveling abroad and she was visited by many people. She was not a lonely person in that sense of solitude. But I think the point of *Solitude of Self* is that there will be certain times in a person's life where, as she describes a certain type of storm, and at that time there is solitude, and it is important to be prepared. To be able to navigate through that as an individual, that is how I interpret that. Not that she had a lonely existence. I do not think she died a lonely person. I know one thing that she and Anthony and Gage worked on was getting this massive history down on the history of women's suffrage.

6. How has being the great-great granddaughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a woman, affected you and your family?

Do you understand how I am related to her? Elizabeth Cady Stanton had a daughter named Harriot Blatch and she was a New York state organizer but she also lived in England and was in contact with the British Suffrage Movement

which was more militant than the American Suffrage Movement. So she brought back ideas for the mass parades in Manhattan on 5th Avenue. So she was really important for the New York state Suffrage Movement. Back then New York state was more important than it is today. Because it was a younger nation and the way New York state would go, would indicate how the rest of the nation would probably go and you know they got the vote back in 1917, but of course you have Wyoming in 1869 and the West was more progressive. She had two daughters, one died, and the other was Nora Stanton Blatch who had Forest Blarney, and she was the first female civil engineer to graduate from Cornell University in 1905. So early on she is one of the first in the nation. And I knew her, she was important in my life. She had three children, one of whom was Rhoda Barney Jenkins and that is my mother. My mother is an architect. It is interesting that when I grew up, my father died when I was three, my grandfathers were dead, they had died before I was born, so I really had my mother and grandmother as role models. So I learned from them, I didn't know the formal history of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Harriot Stanton Blatch, so there is clearly a set of values and behaviors that are passed down woman to woman to woman to woman. It is a matrilineal descent. So that is really important. There are some stories, for instance, like my grandmother was working in southern Manhattan as a civil engineer and she got hungry. So she went to a really nice restaurant, Del Monaco's, which is still there, and she went to the maitre-de to get seated and he said, "I'm sorry I can not seat you because you do not have a gentleman with you." Here is this woman who is hungry and wants a good meal. So what do you do? Well you could get angry, go away in a huff, and find another place. What she did was go out to the vestibule and called Western Union. Those were telegrams that were delivered by these men that were dressed up in uniforms that would deliver things. So she had a Western Union person come over to the restaurant and then she took him up to the maitre-de and said, "now you can seat us, I have my gentleman." The point is, once again, beat them at their own game. For example, with the reverend when he said it was the work of the devil. Well, Elizabeth Cady Stanton turned it around and he got stuck. This is an idea that I have that somehow; no matter what it is, you get around it, through it, beyond it,

over it, whatever it is. Of course there are more obvious things a woman should have like a good education, good professions, own property, know about managing their financial affairs. For example, I used to do all of my mother's checks. She would have all of her bills; I was like seven years old, and I would take out the bill, write the check, and my mother would sign it and make a whole pile. That is not so typical. My grandmother had bought a big 65-foot-boat yacht and would go out on it. They would be having cocktails and here I was at the helm of 65-foot-yacht as a young kid. And it would get dark and basically and somehow you did things and rose to the occasion.

7. If Elizabeth Cady Stanton was living today, what specific women's issues do you think she would focus upon/get involved with?

This is really a hot topic. For instance, one of things that happened in Seneca Falls at the 150th anniversary was there was a gigantic billboard with Stanton's photo and it was a pro-life group stating that Elizabeth Cady Stanton was against abortion. And I think that she would be very distressed about the issues of a woman's right to her own body and controlling her own body. You know there is an Elizabeth Cady Stanton amendment right now? It is basically trying to get money to give to women who are pregnant, in order for them to keep the baby and take care of their pregnancy. I think Elizabeth Cady Stanton would support that, but I think taking away the option for an abortion for a woman, I think she would object to that. She would also probably be doing something that the majority would be doing in 50 years from now. Maybe she would be looking at unions and the homosexual aspect of what rights do people have as couples. Also working with economic disparity, which is still, like women spending time child rearing, even if they do take or do not take time off from their jobs, they are at a disadvantage for accruing pensions and social security. Also the financial side of being a woman, she would also be interested in children. She was a very, very broad thinker and she was very eloquent. So where Susan B. Anthony was more the Napoleon, the one that gave the marching orders and a specific goal of having

the right to vote, Stanton was the broad thinker. So Stanton would have opinions on all other sorts of things and would let it be known.