

**Barbara Burt Interview**  
**March 26, 2011**

**Song:** *Open the Doors*

With shirtwaist blouses billowing in the March wind, hundreds of union workers, city, state and national officials and school children marked the centennial anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City.

The fire killed 146 workers on March 25, 1911. Those who perished were mostly young immigrant women and girls who had been locked in the factory by their managers.

**Song:** *Open the Doors*

The flames of the tragedy sparked a social justice movement for workers rights. Many laws were enacted several years later in the 1930's by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. His New Deal was a series of economic programs that helped Americans struggling through the Great Depression.

The architect of many of the New Deal programs was Roosevelt's Labor Secretary, Frances Perkins, the first woman appointed to the U.S. Cabinet. Perkins was instrumental in crafting many of the rights American workers have today, including child labor laws, minimum wage requirements and overtime regulations. She also wove a social safety net that continues to stabilize the American middle class in hard times: The Social Security Act, which included many the benefits we now take for granted: unemployment benefits, welfare for the poorest of Americans and the Social Security program.

Frances Perkins witnessed the Triangle Fire. She was having tea with a friend when they heard screams, and they ran out into the chaos. The tragedy made a lifelong impact on Perkins.

**Barbara Burt:** *I think this was really a turning point in her professional life.*

That's Barbara Burt, the Executive Director of the Frances Perkins Center in Newcastle, Maine.

**Burt:** *First of all, she was horrified. And she also was galvanized to really understand that change was going to come about through laws that were enforceable and that affected large numbers of people. And she had already been doing some of that. She was the Executive Secretary of the Consumers Union of New York. This, I think, really brought home the fact that there needed to be government intervention. And she was appointed to the Factory Investigation Commission through the recommendation of Theodore Roosevelt, which is sort of interesting. He already knew of her work and, because of being on that commission, she got to work with Al Smith. And together, when Al Smith became governor, they really began to institute some of the laws that*

*eventually became the New Deal under FDR. So this was a pivotal moment in labor history, but also in her life. It really propelled her into the next phase, the next level where she could be that much more effective and change things for the better for that many millions more people.*

Perkins' passion for the working class grew out of her experience as an undergrad student at Mount Holyoke College. She visited factories and saw the working conditions with History Professor Anna May Seale and had the opportunity to hear social and political reformer -- and the first woman factory inspector -- Florence Kelley -- speak.

**Burt:** *You know, those were things that really rocked her perception, I think, of the world. My guess is that she was brought up in a very, you know, conservative New England family where if you have difficulties, probably it was attributed to the fact that you weren't working hard enough or that you were drinking or whatever. And this took her out of that mindframe and introduced her to the fact that there were many people, though they worked very hard, through no fault of their own fell on severe hardships. So Mount Holyoke really laid the groundwork and started her on the path of whom she was going to become. There's absolutely no question about that.*

Perkins' mission went beyond simply creating safety nets for workers. It involved keeping the American economy on an even keel through the good times and bad and helping people to succeed.

**Burt:** *She had a vision of how the world should be. And that included the government providing a baseline of support so that people could take risks. If you were going to risk becoming bankrupt and being thrown in jail or being sent to the poorhouse or something like that, you wouldn't try to start a new company or take on a job that was less secure. So she knew that for the American economy, it was good to have these safeguards for workers. It also meant that when you got old, you didn't become a burden, not only on your family, but on the state. In fact, if you had Social Security money flowing into your accounts, it then flowed out into your community's accounts as you went to buy your food and the other necessities of life. So she had this sense of the connectedness of people within the economy and government and the role that government should play to help make people to be able to achieve their highest aspirations.*

Perkins kept on her own path to success through hard work, a sense of humor and respect for people -- even her fiercest opponents.

**Burt:** *She had tenacity. But I think in the way she dealt with people, she was very good at making them feel like they were bringing something to the table. Because she could work with people on opposing sides and get them to see the one place where they agreed so that what she was trying to accomplish could go forward. I mean, she was tough in that she stuck to it. And there are stories about her working far into the night reading legislation, reading letters, etc., and, you know, like putting cold water on her eyelids so that she could stay awake. She was very driven, personally motivated to accomplish these things. But obviously she also, in the way she dealt with people, was*

*very sensitive to them, and she had a great sense of humor, very sharp wit. Chris Brieseth, who is on our board and also knew her when he was a student at Cornell. She lived in the Telluride House, which he also was a resident in, you know, said that she held this group of young men who were, you know, in their early 20's. And she was in her 80's. She held them transfixed. They thought she was fabulous. So obviously she had a personality that could really connect with people.*

The Frances Perkins Center is a two-year-old nonprofit that educates the public about Perkins and carries on her commitment to social justice, workplace safety and economic security.

**Song:** *100 Years from Now*

**Burt:** *There's this really deep longing, I think, in a lot of people to recognize the human values that Frances Perkins embodied and that the New Deal helped put forward. We've been working on Social Security for the past year because last year was the 75th Anniversary, and we have put together a book of essays and also stories of what Social Security has meant to them.*

Burt is concerned about moving forward in terms of social justice, which is a huge challenge in this political climate. Social Security is under attack.

**Burt:** *There's a lot of misinformation out there. And that's one way that the Frances Perkins Center can help is by providing historical context, because I think in a lot of cases, people don't know the history of the labor movement. They don't know why these unions were formed originally. They don't understand how the unions changed working conditions for everybody. You know, there's just a real disconnect. And I think if we can help build that connection back up and inform people about why there was legislation that made it possible to organize in a workplace -- those sorts of things -- that's one thing that we can do.*

Burt says that the level of discourse in this country must change if we are ever to make progress for working people and the American economy.

**Burt:** *Some of the governors who've been trying to weaken and injure the unions in the last couple of months here in the United States have said really outrageous things about teachers and about state workers. And I think they need to be called on that. It needs to become unacceptable to speak that way. And the sides need to be able to get together and talk about what the issues are in a reasonable way outside of a baldly political context.*

**Song:** *100 Years from Now*

This is Stevie Converse reporting for the Mount Holyoke College Frances Perkins Alumnae Association. The songs you heard were from the commemoration of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City on March 25, 2011.