Historical Journal Publishes Native Peorian’s Take on Betty Friedan

An article by Gwen Jordan entitled “How The Feminine Mystique Played in Peoria: Who Is Betty Friedan?” appears in the most recent issue of History of Women in the Americas, a scholarly journal published in Great Britain. It is based on interviews conducted over the last couple of years with several Peoria women, including some members of the Betty Friedan Tribute Committee.

Jordan’s article explores why Friedan’s “groundbreaking work ... was not celebrated in her hometown of Peoria, Illinois until its fiftieth anniversary,” referring to the event the Tribute Committee organized in February of 2013 at the Peoria Riverfront Museum. It further explores why many of Friedan’s “Peoria contemporaries – white, educated, married, middle- and upper-middle-class women, like the women featured in her book – rejected her thesis that their lives as women without careers ... were dissatisfying.” The reason, says Jordan, is that they “found fulfillment and satisfaction as professional volunteers.” She argues that these women were mischaracterized in The Feminine Mystique and “their contributions to producing a civil society have been undervalued.” While their roles now as workforce members may be personally fulfilling, their absence from volunteer work poses problems for organizations and communities that need citizen leadership.

Jordan was born and raised in Peoria, herself the daughter of active volunteers, Ed and Judy Hoerr. She is Associate Professor of Legal Studies and Chair of the Legal Studies Department at the University of Illinois at Springfield. She specializes in women’s legal history and feminist-critical race studies. She is also a staff attorney with the Illinois Innocence Project. She says she wrote the article because, having grown up in Peoria in the 1960s and 1970s, she wanted “to understand the relationship between the women Betty Friedan wrote about in The Feminine Mystique and the women I knew in Friedan’s (and my) hometown.” She mentions such stellar volunteers as Sally Page, Harriet Vance Parkhurst and Esther Cohen. Jordan first presented the paper at a conference marking fifty years of The Feminine Mystique held at the Royal Holloway University of London in November of 2013.

Jordan’s article follows, along with links to five other articles from Volume Three of History of Women in the Americas, a journal that publishes “cutting-edge scholarship on women’s and gender history in all parts of the Americas.” Volume 3 of the journal is entirely devoted to articles related to The Feminine Mystique. The volume is entitled Women as Wives & Workers: Marking Fifty Years of The Feminine Mystique. All of the articles may be found at http://journals.sas.ac.uk/hwa/issue.