A legend at the front of social revolution

By Marilyn Gardner
Red wrote of the Christian Science Monitor

A s a child growing up in Peoria, Ill., Betty Friedan regularly ended her bedtime prayers with a personal 'wish to God.' Night after night she would pray, "When I grow up, I want to do a work." At the time, most women did not hold paying jobs. So that early wish for a "work to do" came true beyond anything Ms. Friedan could have imagined. In writing "The Feminine Mystique" in 1963, she found a lifetime of work. Her groundbreaking book, arguing that equal opportunity for women, also paved the way for millions of other women to pursue jobs and careers, spawning a social revolution that forever changed the American landscape, domestically and internationally.

Friedan details this remarkable journey of nearly eight decades in "Life So Far," a frank memoir that doubles as a historical overview of the modern women's movement. Socially ostracized at school because she was Jewish and emotionally deprived at home by a demanding mother, Friedan spent a lonely childhood.

"My mother was not only beautiful, she was a perfectionist," she says during an interview in Boston. "She knew how to do everything that women were supposed to do perfectly. Compared to that, I was made to feel a mess."

Yet as fruitful as those experiences were, they played a role in shaping the adult Friedan.

"A certain amount of marginality - for instance, growing up Jewish in Peoria - keeps you a little outside," she says. "That makes you an observer - a sociologist, a social critic, all the things I became."

After graduating from Smith College and winning a fellowship to Smith, Friedan became a reporter for a labor newspaper in New York. But later, married and expecting the birth of her third child, she was fired for being pregnant. It was a survey of her Smith College classmates, 15 years after graduation, that set Friedan on the road to fame.

She identified the "problem that has no name" - dissatisfaction and unarticulated longing for something more - even for her own. The group, which she later called The Women's Project, was transformed into women's liberation.

"The problem that has no name" is a phrase that Friedan uses throughout the book, transforming herself from home-maker and freelance writer to pioneering feminist and international icon.

But within a decade, she found herself marginalized again, squeezed out of a leadership role in the National Organization for Women (NOW), which she had helped found, by more radical factions. Undaunted, the famous author continued writing and lecturing. Yet public images do not always match private realities. While Friedan was inspiring other women to carve out new roles for themselves, she was exhausting herself at home. As she tells it in the book, her husband, Carl, "started beating up on me." In the interview she explains, "It's not hard to understand how he would feel threatened. Most women didn't even have careers then."

In person, she downplays the subject of abuse. "He was not a wife-beater and I was not a passive victim. We had a very stormy marriage. When fighting escalated beyond words, he was bigger than me. I gave as good as I got." The marriage ended in 1969.

"Getting a divorce was the hardest thing I ever did," Friedan says. "I was so afraid. If everything is organized two by two, the idea of going it alone is frightening. I shouldn't have been so afraid. After a certain point, if you stay in an abusive relationship, you're colluding." Years after their divorce, Friedan and her former husband became friends again when grandchildren started arriving. "He's been quite supportive," she says, explaining that they have stood by each other in times of personal need.

"Friendship is now being strained by her charges of abuse, which Ms. Friedan denies. On a Web site giving his version of the couple's domestic problems, he states that although he is "proud of what she did for the world, he is 'insulted' about her, 'breathing allegations' of spousal abuse. Friedan says she began his anger is "only temporary." Friedan the non-totalist refuses to settle for simply reviewing the past. She remains active in the feminist movement, looking for ways to improve the lives of women and men. Friedan, 70, is a three-year study on women, men, work, family, and public policy. Cornell University, funded by a $1 million grant from the Ford Foundation.

"There must be more emphasis on men sharing responsibility and on high-quality child care, probably beginning at six months, because most women don't get any longer leave," she says. "Without child care, it's all just talk."

She also notes that there has been no movement to ban the United States for shorter work hours in 60 years. "If anything, we're going in the opposite direction. People are holding two jobs. There's a lot of workaholism and overtime. We need a 'Get-a-Life' movement, Policies and programs, she explains, 'should be structured for their effect on quality of life, and not just the bottom line.'"

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"If they find something they like and are good at, whatever that is, let them do it," she says. "Boys could be chefs of Steyrers. Girls can be anything. They can take risks. They should be able to make mistakes in ways we couldn't. And I hope they will have families. Families are a great thing.

PHOTO BY ALFRED COHEN - DPPH

ILLUMINATION: Author, activist, and grandmother Betty Friedan discusses her pioneering work detailed in her memoir, "Life So Far," 

Wednesday, May 17, 2000

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The success of those efforts will depend on part on women strengthening their political power. Friedan cites research at Rutger University showing that the addition of just two women into a state legislature "helps to change the agenda, not just on women's rights, but on issues having to do with life."

Friedan also observes a troubling national passivity, saying, "There's no movement in this country now. Everybody has been co-opted and to a degree corrupted by the culture of greed. It's as if there are no values anymore except material success and status."

She recalls more politically active times when people not only worked toward their own career and success, but went part of the movement to make something better. In the 1960s she took her young children to Washington for a civil rights march. And the march for women's equality that she organized in New York on Aug. 26, 1970, remains the high point of her political life.

"To see the enormity of 50,000 people marching on Fifth Avenue," she says, "was truly a thrill.

For all her professional success, it is a more personal subject that Friedan returns. "I believe in marriage, I think intimacy, bonding, and families have value. It is perhaps my main regret that I didn't have a good marriage. When I see people who have been married 50 or 60 years, have grandchildren, and are still together, I congratulate them."

What does Grandmère once, now a 70, former granddaughter of a man in all - on a trip, one by one. Two years ago she and her oldest granddaughter, who also worked in finance, last summer she took another grandchild to Paris, where the two went up in a hot air balloon. "Even Grandmère took the balloon ride," she says proudly.

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