

WOMEN'S STUDIES

The Lady with the Alligator Purse

This spring a course and a companion Humanities Project are examining Rochester resident Susan B. Anthony. Her connection with 19th-century reform movements—for abolition, temperance, and women's suffrage—are well known, but less so are details of the physical, material, and cultural worlds that shaped her life and work.

Honey Meconi, the Susan B. Anthony Professor of Gender and Women's Studies, developed the course and project.

How did Susan B. Anthony become the iconic figure of the women's suffrage movement?

People assume it was her brainchild, but she wasn't there at the beginning. Her parents and her sister got involved in the movement for women's suffrage before Anthony did.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the originators of the movement, became more radical as the years went on and became controversial even within the movement. Anthony was more pragmatic. And she was out in public much more. Cady Stanton had seven children to bring up. But Anthony was one of the best-traveled people in the world at the time, male or female. She was considered indefatigable, going from coast to coast, sometimes staying in a different town every night. She traveled around New York state in winter because she knew most entertainers wouldn't—and so people would come out to hear someone talking about almost anything.

You brought Miss Manners to campus to talk about Anthony. What's the connection?

You could argue that it was the social expectations for women that really spurred the whole

thing. Cady Stanton traveled to London with her abolitionist husband in 1840 for the World Anti-Slavery Convention. Lucretia Mott was there, too, and at the convention women weren't permitted to be delegates, to speak, or to sit with the men. And Cady Stanton and Mott decided there should also be a movement to end this quasi slavery for women. Obviously it took them eight years to get around to starting that movement.

Women didn't have a public voice. Women could work behind the scenes, but it was unladylike to speak in public. So was clapping—women waved their handkerchiefs in what was called a "Chautauqua salute."

Did Anthony play a special role in the movement?

Because her family was involved in abolition, she got involved, too. She found that her *métier* was being a professional organizer.

As an unmarried woman, Anthony could make a business contract. A married woman couldn't make a business contract in her name—and almost everyone else in the movement was married. So Anthony was the one who could rent the halls. In a sense she was the business manager.

The project looks at fashion, too. How is it important to the movement?

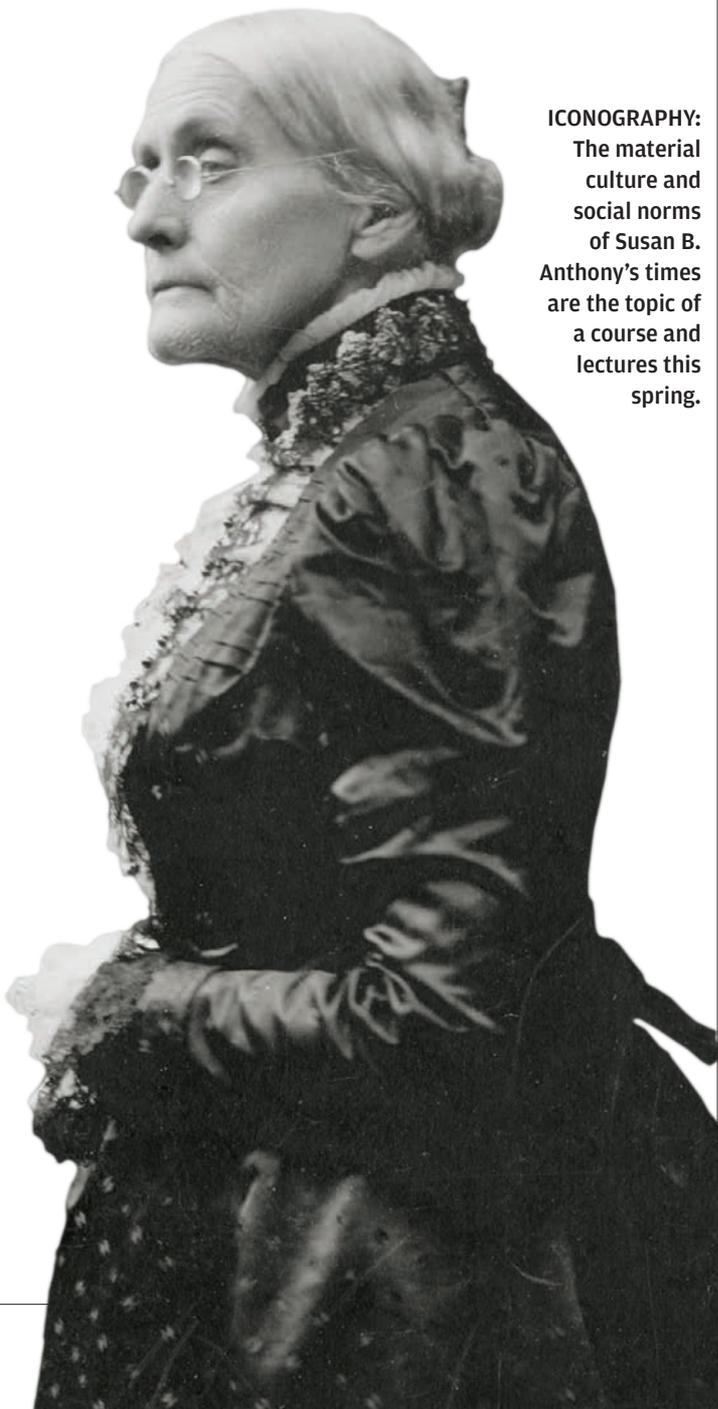
Anthony, like other members of the movement, adopted a style of dress—a shorter skirt, with pantaloons—that gave women freer movement. Crowds of men would jeer and laugh, and the women stopped wearing those clothes because it was detracting from their message. Anthony wore stylish black dresses. When

huge sleeves were in, she wore black dresses with huge sleeves. And she had pretty lace collars on. She wore a beautiful cameo. She met the norms for a staid lady at the time—in a way that didn't detract from listening to what she said.

She also used to carry around a large alligator bag. There's a children's jump-rope rhyme,

"Miss Lizzie had a baby . . ." Do you know how it ends, in some versions? "Vote, says the lady with the alligator purse." She dressed in a way not to detract from her message but as an icon she was closely identified with these physical things.

—Kathleen McGarvey



ICONOGRAPHY: The material culture and social norms of Susan B. Anthony's times are the topic of a course and lectures this spring.



NEUROLOGY

Fish Food for Thought

Does the “good” outweigh the “bad” when it comes to eating fish? A new study by Medical Center researchers adds to evidence that when expectant mothers eat fish often, they’re giving their future children a boost in brain development in spite of the neurotoxin methyl mercury in fish—a food more than 3 billion people depend on for basic nutrition. Pediatric neurologist **Gary Myers** has been a member of the Seychelles Child Development Study team since it began in 1989.

What problems and benefits can come from eating fish?

If a problem is going to show up, you don’t know what age it’s going to show up in. One of the populations in our study is now 22 years old, and we have yet to find any consistent evidence of adverse effects.

What we’re looking for basically is a needle in the haystack

because these are low-level exposures.

So you’re trying to find out whether the mercury in fish causes nothing at all or something really small. The question is whether these very low levels of exposure that you get from eating fish are bad. Our study in the Seychelles has the highest level of exposure of any study in the world.

What’s become abundantly clear to us is that omega-3 long-chain fatty acids are really important, and fish is the primary source.

What do omega-3 fatty acids do for us?

They’re incorporated into the cell walls of nerve cells and other cells of the nervous system. They’re important in turning genes on and off, and in neurotransmission. They’re also anti-inflammatory. They’re beneficial across the lifespan. They tend to

prevent and decrease the significance of macular degeneration in the elderly. They’re very important to all kinds of things.

What’s the news from the latest study?

We found more beneficial effect from the long-chain fatty acids at five years of age in this second nutrition cohort. We’ve found a correlation between prenatal exposure to omega-3 fatty acids and the children’s neural development for language.

How did you start looking into the issue of mercury and fish consumption?

We’d done an earlier study, in the 1970s, in Iraq, where there was a poisoning epidemic. That study pointed to the possibility that low levels of methyl mercury exposure might have consequences for the developing fetus. Since we already knew that you could get low levels of mercury

exposure from eating fish, the natural question was, could you eat enough fish to cause a problem?

Our group looked for a place in the world where people eat a lot of fish, figuring that was our best shot at finding something wrong, if there was something wrong. And we ended up choosing the Republic of Seychelles in the Indian Ocean for a variety of reasons—they ate fish every day, sometimes twice a day, and they have a fairly high birth rate.

We started a study looking for adverse effects of mercury from eating fish on the developing fetus. And after almost 10 years, we were finding that when the mercury exposure in the women was higher in these low-level exposures, the children were actually doing better. And we knew it wasn’t the mercury, because there is no purpose of mercury in your body.

—Kathleen McGarvey