

Transcript of *What'sHerName* Episode 66: THE MUCKRAKER Ida Tarbell

00:00 - 05:01

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Olivia Meikle: Hi Katie!

Katie Nelson: Hi Olivia!

OM: Today, I am taking you 130 years back in time...

KN: M'kay

OM: To the east coast of the United States.

KN: So like 1890's? Is that where we're at? on the east coast?

OM: 1890's through the early parts of the 20th century.

KN: Cool.

OM: In New York City. But we're starting in Pennsylvania.

KN: Okay.

OM: This is a time period that historian Doris Kerns Goodwin described as the United States *molting*. It was such a significant change that it is almost like it 'took off its skin' and started over.

KN: Huh! That's cool.

OM: So just a short list of a few of the things that have changed at this point in the United States: The frontier is gone. The US is settled from coast to coast. There is extremely entrenched political corruption, and that corruption is starting to spark lots of grassroots protests.

KN: Union Strikes!

OM: Union strikes, serious civil upheaval. Politics is *incredibly* polarized between liberal and conservative views. There's a lot of pushback against the Victorian values that have really run most of the 19th century in the United States. Massive income inequality on a scale that had never been seen before in the United States

KN: Much of this sounds familiar. [laughter]

OM: Oh! [sarcastically:] This is such an *unfamiliar world* that we're thinking about here. [laughter] Serious crises in race relations - you know, the failures of Reconstruction are becoming *really* apparent. Established gender roles are being really strongly questioned.

KN: Yeah.

OM: The nation is completely mesmerized by new communications technologies. These shocking new innovations that are going to change the world, like the telephone and telegraph.

KN: Yeah! Electricity.

OM: Electricity! Lots of concern around immigration, and integration of immigrants into American society.

KN: I think it's actually one of the most interesting time periods in American history. If I had to go back in time and live in any period in American history, that's where I would live. Like, the turn of the 20th century must have been an exciting time to be alive. Just because everything was changing so much, and so many like, truly, new discoveries were being made that it

OM: Yeah! It must've been wild.

KN: Exciting! Yeah. You never know what news you're gonna wake up to, how things are going to be different.

OM: But this is really a time when there is a growing concern among some parts of society, that "traditional values are being abandoned"

KN: Oh, yeah

OM: that America is "losing its moral center." And while a lot of people feel like you, that this is a really exciting time - there's also a lot of people who are *really* unhappy about the things that are changing in this country. [sarcastically:] I mean I know none of us can imagine what that would be like - to live in a country that was doing that kind of thing. [laughter] But let's try *really* hard

KN: Yeah!

OM: to put ourselves in the place of people at this time. [laughter] Because the woman that we're talking about today was right in the thick of all of this. She is born in Pennsylvania while the Civil War is raging. And she will live to see: cars, the telephone, two major World Wars. She will travel the world. She will fly in an airplane. *And* she will single-handedly take down one of the largest and most powerful men in the United States.

KN: Whoa! See? What a time to be alive.

[theme music]

OM: I'm Olivia Meikle

KN: and I'm Katie Nelson

OM: and this is *What'sHerName*

KN: Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[theme music]

05:02 - 10:05

OM: So, today we are going to be talking about Ida Tarbell, who was one of the most influential muckraker journalists of the 20th century. I talked to Stephanie Gorton...

Stephanie Gorton: Hi. My name is Stephanie Gorton. and I recently published my first book titled *Citizen Reporters- S.S. McClure, Ida Tarbell, and the Magazine that Rewrote America*, which is about the rise and fall of McClure's magazine - one of the most influential magazines of the Gilded Age.

OM (to KN): And *Citizen Reporters* is fantastic. It's a great book, and the format of it is really interesting and unusual. I think we're used to biographies of one person, or larger group histories, but I have read very few books that focus on how the relationship between two people really changed the world, in the way this book does - so I highly recommend it.

KN: Cool.

[music]

OM: Ida Tarbell is best known as the journalist who took on Standard Oil and John D. Rockefeller

KN: Oh!

OM: and whose work led to the break-up of Standard Oil

KN: Oh wow!

OM: and was really incredibly influential in the way that Americans thought about monopolies, about these sort of *robber-barons of industry*, these mega-titans who controlled the world - or at least the country.

KN: Mmm! I'm excited to hear the story because when I teach about the Robber Barons slash 'great men who built America' in my American history class, for half of the class, we talk about the great things they did and, you know, their incredible contributions, Andrew Carnegie building all the libraries, things like that. And then for the second half, we talk about the 'robber baron' perspective. And then we take a vote: what do you think? Are they more thumbs-up or are they more thumbs-down? What do you think of these characters? So we do a vote at the beginning and it's usually like, oh, 75% 'great men.' And, at the end, it's usually about 75% 'Robber Barons.'

OM: Well, Ida Tarbell would be firmly on the side of 'Robber Barons.' And after reading her work, I'm not sure many people could come out any other way. [laughs]

SG: Well, a huge part of her legacy is that her journalism, and especially her extremely in-depth expose on John D. Rockefeller/Standard Oil, led to a big anti-monopoly crusade and the breakup of Standard Oil itself.

OM (to KN): And that would be enough. I mean that was a huge, *huge* contribution to American history and the way that we look at the world. But she did so much more than that, and she's responsible for some really fundamental shifts in journalism - and in what we think journalism is *for* and how it should work - that it's astonishing she is not a household name.

KN: Yeah. When you think about trust-busting in American history, it's always Teddy Roosevelt. 'Teddy Roosevelt decided monopolies were bad and broke them up.'

OM: And he was *able* to do that because Ida Tarbell convinced the country that that was true.

KN: Cool.

OM: But before she did all that...

[music]

SG: She was born in 1857 and died in 1944. And her family lore is that she was born in a log house - they were always very specific that it was a *house* and not a cabin - near Titusville, Pennsylvania. And that was soon to become the commercial center of the American oil region. The first oil well in America was tapped right near Titusville. Her father made a living building oil tanks. Her mother was an abolitionist and a feminist, and really raised the family as readers. Ida

was the firstborn and she was a voracious reader with plenty of access to books and magazines. Interestingly, she doesn't have this stereotypically 'literary reader's background' or childhood. She was fixated on her microscope, and she loved biology, science.

OM (to KN): There's a story that she once took her baby brother and threw him in the creek, because she wanted to see if he would float or sink. [laughter] Now, as a mother I've seen kids do things you know would make your skin crawl and think 'they're a sociopath!' - and it's just because they don't understand. But I think it's a really good sort of marker for what this little girl's personality is going to grow up into.

10:06 - 15:01

OM: She is *passionately* curious. She will stop at nothing to get to the truth, and the facts about the world around her. And she - although she did learn how to do that in less-destructive ways as she got older - that passion for investigation never leaves her.

SG: When she was fourteen she actually vowed she would never marry, because freedom was more appealing to her than family life. She... I imagine that she saw her mother's position, somebody who's very intellectually engaged with the world around her, but was really hemmed in to domestic concerns. But when Ida Bell was fifteen, her family was hit by a humiliating disaster that stayed with her for the rest of her life. John. D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil made a sweetheart deal with three railroad companies that increased the price of oil freight for everybody, with an exemption for refineries controlled by Standard Oil.

OM (to KN): And this completely destroyed the small oil industry in which Ida Tarbell's father was working. He lost his job, they lost everything and it - it just really completely destroyed their family and the entire community.

SG: Many years later, when she was already a revered reporter, Tarbell heard Rockefeller's son comparing Standard Oil to "a prize rose" in a speech he gave at Brown University. He said "in order to produce the perfect flower, fifty or more small buds must be lopped off" - justifying the flourishing of great American business: these smaller competitors needed to be lopped off.

In terms of the lasting effect this had on her and her values, she also wrote, "There was born in me a hatred of privilege - privilege of any sort." Elements of a crusading journalist, or 'witness to history,' I think, were in her from a very young age because of the family experience.

OM (to KN): But luckily, Ida Tarbell is growing up when women are allowed to go to college. Only a few colleges, and only in very specific fields, and only with very specific restrictions - but she can go to college. And so she gets a degree from Allegheny College. She realizes quite quickly, science *is not* open to her. She will not be able to be successful in science as a woman. And so she didn't know what else she wanted to do. This had been the consuming passion of her life. What else should she do? She teaches high school, and she starts writing for local magazines, editing... But this is really - she really sees this as like, a stopgap to whatever the thing is that she's going to be doing later. And then when Ida Tarbell is 33 years old...

KN: Whoa! That's the key age for *all* of the Robber Barons in America.

OM: Is it?

KN: It is!. All of them. Carnegie...

OM: Wow!

KN: Rockefeller, Morgan. Like 33 is **it**.

OM: Really?

KN: Yeah. And I remember when I first noticed that, I thought "Ooh when I'm 33... nothing's going to happen, and I'll be such a failure compared..." [laughter]

OM: Well, 33 was the key year for Ida Tarbell as well.

KN: Cool.

OM: She was sitting in church, and a Scottish pastor who was visiting was giving a guest sermon. He was really fiery, you know, very 'fiery Scottish minister.' And at the end of the sermon, he pounded the pulpit and yelled, "Yer **dyin'** of respectability!"

KN: Whooooo.

SG: And she was shaken by it. She talks about that as a pivotal moment where she thought, 'I am! I am dying of respectability right now!' And it's not how she wanted her life to go.

OM (to KN): And so... she moved to Paris!

KN: Whoa!

OM: On her own. At 33 years old.

KN: I love that.

SG: You know, friends actually told her, when she decided to move to Paris and start writing, "Remember you're past 30. Women don't make new places for themselves after 30."

KN (to OM): Yeah, you settle into old maidhood and like

OM: Yeah, your life is *over* at 33. And she was not having it. She was no longer gonna die of respectability.

KN: Ah! I love it.

OM: And, so, she picked up and went.

15:04 - 20:02

OM: She arrives in Paris and she starts writing for American magazines, from Paris. And she published an article on the street sweepers of Paris. And a man named Samuel McClure

SG: ...who is an up-and-coming, charismatic, really visionary magazine editor. He was on the verge of launching his magazine, and thought she had a mundane topic so entertaining and so informative, and it was exactly the kind of form that he wanted to publish in his magazine.

OM (to KN): He went off to Paris and knocked on her door

KN: Really?

OM: and badgered her to write for his magazine.

KN: Whoa! He wasn't in Paris?

OM: No.

KN: Wow.

OM: He left New York, sailed to Paris, knocked on her door [laughter] and begged her to write.

KN: That's every writer's dream! [laughs]

OM: *Except hers!* Because she likes Paris! She doesn't want to move to New York. She has chosen where she wants to be

KN: Yeah.

OM: but he won't leave her alone. So she finally, begrudgingly, says, 'Fine. I will write you some stuff from here, but I'm *not* moving. I'm not leaving Paris.'

SG: But a year later there was such a deep recession, she completely ran out of cash.

OM (to KN): And McClure is offering a very nice salary, and an office and a desk, and the brand-new-that-he-has-just-invented-for-her position of Staff Writer for a magazine. This is not a thing that existed. Magazine editors just hire freelancers

KN: Yeah

OM: and McClure essentially invents this new idea and says, 'I would like you to be **the** writer - **our** writer - for this magazine.'

KN: Huh!

OM: She says, 'Fine. Fine, I'll come to New York *until I can afford to move back to Paris.*'

SG: She was in or near New York City for just about the rest of her life. In her work at the magazine initially, she was taking assignments from McClure. She wrote a series on Napoleon, a series on Lincoln - both were very trendy topics at that time, that other magazines were publishing on as well. She always expected or hoped that she would return to Paris someday.

But once she started writing investigative stories, that were less focused on history and more focused on the world around her, she really found herself too compelled to leave. She said "The magazine itself had become a citizen in its own right. It had tasted blood, and it could no longer be content with being merely attractive." I think that's what really kept her there, was that she initially felt she was contributing to a form of popular entertainment, and that was *fine*. A very respectable way to make a living and to help support her family, especially after the [Great Recession in 1893](#). But after the magazine's angle changed, and became much more engaged with the society around it, she felt she had a stake in it as somebody who is a voice. And there she stayed.

OM (to KN): She stumbles into the line of writing that is going to become her legacy, and transform American journalism.

SG: It was not her idea. It was a colleague of hers who said, 'You know, the magazine really ought to be covering Trusts. These big industrial monopolies are very much in the news. We should write about a Trust. Should we write about steel? Should we write about sugar? Let's write about oil.' So it was [Ray Stannard Baker](#) who said, 'Oh, this oil well has just been tapped in California, looks like it's going to be big - maybe Miss Tarbell can write about it.' S.S. McClure and his business partner John Phillips had Tarbell write up a proposal. She does, and it's for a three-part series.

Once she gets going, the information that comes to light starts creating momentum and giving her such a strong opinion, that it ends up coming through very strongly, with an almost emotional impact. by the end of the series - especially if you read it all in one go.

20:03 - 25:07

OM (to KN): What was supposed to be a three-part series will become a nineteen-part series

KN: Whoa

OM: this becomes deep-dive investigative journalism to find out what's actually happening behind the scenes of this industry. *What is Standard Oil and John D. Rockefeller doing to America?*

Now - before we talk about what she found, we sort of have to talk about... What *is* Standard Oil? What *was* the oil industry? What *was* John D. Rockefeller doing to the United States?
[laughter]

So if you are teaching this class on "Great Men Who Made America," do you have sort of a snappy wrap-up of 'Standard Oil and John D. Rockefeller' that you can share...

KN: [laughs] In a nutshell?

OM: ...to explain what are we talking about here?

KN: For sure. Like all the Robber Barons in this time period, Rockefeller came from nothing, and through his genius and his ambition, he built himself an empire. He saw that oil was the future (because previously people had used kerosene) - oil is cheaper, safer, it's less polluting when you burn it in lamps, and so he decided: oil's the future. He bought his first oil company, and then over the course of his life, he bought *every other* oil company in America. And he was known for being really ruthless. He would buy out all of his competition. If anybody dared to *not* sell to him, then he just stomps them into the ground, and they go out of business, and they're bankrupt forever. And so, eventually, he owns *everything* - every oil business everywhere, controls it all, calls it Standard Oil. And he's got the ultimate monopoly.

OM: Perfect. This brand-new industry, in ten years went from 'kooky-weird-hilarious' to the major commodity in the United States.

SG: The first oil well in America - you could still visit it today - it's just south of Titusville, Pennsylvania. It's in western Pennsylvania. Petroleum would occasionally seep up in certain creeks in that region of Pennsylvania and be gathered up and it was used, sometimes as a source of fuel, but also as a quasi-medication. The Native Americans in the regions used it to rub on muscle aches as an ointment. The first producer of oil sent out this man Edwin Drake, to go and speculate and see if he could turn this into a business. The local people called him crazy and he was probably pretty close to the end of his rope when he actually - his drill reached oil. And he had this kind of ramshackle derrick built over it, but he was able to gather upwards of forty barrels of oil, very, very rapidly.

Once people figured out how to refine it, refining turned into a business that really any speculator could come out and have a try. You built yourself an elementary still and started refining oil and it turned into a source of fuel that you could sell very rapidly. There were no oil wells in Texas yet, there was nothing in the Middle East, there's nothing in Russia - though those were kind of burgeoning... Northwestern Pennsylvania, this strip of land in the Allegheny Valley, was really where it was at. Today it's completely vanished.

OM (to KN): But as John D. Rockefeller takes over all of it, putting Ida Tarbell's entire family out of work and a home, the country starts to grow a *little* uneasy.

SG: Cartoons featured Standard Oil in the newspapers - often portrayed it as a giant octopus or as a snake wrapped around the US Capitol building, to represent its stranglehold on a major American business.

OM (to KN): So Ida Tarbell takes this assignment and says, 'You know what? I'm gonna tell the real story of what's actually happening here.' And in an era of '[yellow journalism](#),' where it's all about the headline s- everyone who's seen [Newsies](#) knows that, you know, "any headline with the word 'nude' in it is going to sell more," or... [laughter]

KN: Just like today! Clickbait.

OM: Yeah. And newspapers are just sensationalizing, or *blatantly making-up* news, to try to win these circulation wars. The idea that a journalist should check to *make sure that what their source told them is true* is not a thing - even in the major US newspapers. And Ida Tarbell is really the first person who says, '*I think* when we report something, it should be true.' [laughter]

SG: And that's something that was pretty unique to the Tarbell method. There was really no expectation that a reporter would verify something an interviewee had told them - something she did as a matter of course. She also was *extremely* strict about not accepting any kind of gift or any kind of exchange with her sources. When she was interviewing Rockefeller's chief PR guy, she wouldn't accept a cup of milk when he would offer it to her, when she was visibly thirsty in the course of their interviews.

25:08 - 30:05

SG: Her steadiness and her strictness, these value-driven rules she set for herself, were completely original to her. That was not something that was 'in the air' at that time. We marvel today at someone like [Robert Caro](#) or like [John McPhee](#), who synthesizes a staggering amount of raw material into doing justice to a topic. And, to me, she was really a pioneer in that form.

OM (to KN): So this really unusual, and unusually supportive, partnership between McClure and Ida Tarbell allows her to do that. He is encouraging her to do these long, really strange investigations into things that might not be published for months and months and months. Because he recognizes the value of what she's doing.

SG: That Tarbell-McClure partnership was so rich and close - and also *fraught* at various periods. Their level of inspiration that they gave each other, and also a kind of unhealthy exploitative dynamic that developed, McClure's reliance on her. They were such an odd couple, but they really complimented each other. And I think that comes through in her memoirs so clearly, that she'd never really met somebody like this before, and their creative collaboration ended up being extremely fulfilling to her. And kind of giving her a sense of belonging where no

other opportunity had done before. I think we still see those relationships around us today, especially when people are doing work that's supposed to be driven by passion, whether it's writing or activism. I think there's this myth that when everybody is doing what they do out of love or out of a sense of vocation, then a certain level of dysfunction is accepted.

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29:07-30:05

OM: The number one question that comes up about this work that Ida Tarbell did is: Was this investigation driven by a personal vendetta against John. D. Rockefeller for destroying her father and her family?

SG: She wasn't the first journalist to take on Standard Oil. But she did go into the greatest depths and she found sources set nobody else had, whether it was a teenage clerk who had helped dispose of some questionable papers or Rockefeller's brother, Frank, who is kind of bitter guy, to even discover Rockefeller's father, who was this kind of quack living under an assumed name... The level of investigation was really stunning.

OM (to KN): The series that eventually comes out of this becomes a landmark piece of US journalism, that spurs this entire movement of muckraking that we think about of

KN: Investigative journalism.

OM: Yeah! of journalists who understand that their job is to go *find* the story, not just wait until the story is *presented to them*. And to go and *figure out what's going on*, sometimes by literally inserting themselves into the workplace, right?

KN: Yeah.

OM: You know, go work in the sausage factory and write about what it's like

KN: Yeah.

OM: Check yourself into a mental institution and then...

All of these people are following the legacy of Ida Tarbell, who was the first one to say “Hey, wait, maybe we should go look.” I can’t imagine a bigger impact on the country than this shift, right - the idea that a journalist’s job is to be accountable *to the people* for the *truth*, instead of accountable to their boss for sales. And again, a lot of those lines have gotten a lot messier

KN: Right

OM: and we're seeing a lot of lines blurring between opinion and news, and fact and, uh, alternative fact...

30:05 - 35:08

KN: Yeah. Maybe they’re - those lines are never clear. Maybe they never have been. Maybe we operate under the delusion sometimes that the difference is clear. But you know, even Ida Tarbell, she would have had her own biases, so

OM: Yes, exactly! and I think that's one of the most important takeaways of this story, too - is we have this idea that journalism’s job is to be ‘objective.’ And we have this idea that that is *possible* - that it is possible for a person to be objective.

KN: Right, to report *the facts*

OM: and then we have assigned the ‘position of neutrality’ to very specific demographics, right? There are people who are presumed to be neutral. “If you're discussing matters of race, white people are *neutral* and people of color are *biased* in that discussion.” And we fall into those patterns often, of: ‘Things that don't affect you, you can be neutral about’ - which is *nonsense!* The idea that anybody can be neutral is nonsense, right? We're all standing on our point of the Rubik's cube, thinking we see the whole thing.

KN: Yeah. So, nobody can be neutral, then.

OM: There *is no neutral*. There *are* facts, right? There are things that are just factually true, and it's important that those be touchstones. But the way different people are looking at any given situation is *always* going to be framed from their experience, from the way they have walked through the world.

KN: Yeah.

OM: And pretending to a neutrality that doesn't exist can be just as dangerous as being openly biased, right? If you think you don't have a bias, you're going to be dangerous to the people who are 'not visible' from your point of view.

And so that's why I find it really fascinating that so much of the focus on criticism of Ida Tarbell lands in two things: it lands in the fact that she's a *woman*. Obviously, right? Women aren't supposed to be doing journalism. They might write a cute little column or

KN: A *story*.

OM: ...you know, they do the Fashion column. But women aren't supposed to be interrogating the ethics of Standard Oil in print. She's *way* out of her lane here, and it is a problem for her entire career. This, you know... the ideas of *who is and is not* allowed to do this work, and Samuel McClure enabling her to do this work, right? She has a salary and she has an outlet to write for. She doesn't have to write the stories that people will buy from her.

KN: Yeah.

OM: He's also benefiting wildly, because McClure's magazine is becoming one of the best-selling magazines in the country *because of her work*. So yeah - you know, 'she's a woman, she shouldn't be doing this work.' But the other criticism that's constantly raised is 'This is a personal vendetta. She *only* did this because of what he did to her family.'

KN: Oh. And so, therefore none of it...

OM: None of it matters.

KN: Yeah.

OM: Or it was *biased*, or it was *unfair*.

KN: Yeah.

SG: Her notes for this article in the series are *wild*. Just has this animus against him, and you can see how her editor guided her and restrained some of that. And then it becomes this uniquely powerful work in American investigative journalism. And it just galvanized a movement, and it fueled this wave of distrust of monopolies like Standard Oil.

OM (to KN): So, while her personal perspective on it was clearly very strongly influenced by her own family's experience - the facts that she shared, the stories that she wrote, the things that she discovered, *are factually true*. They *are* what happened. And just because she was probably happy that she found these things and could make him look bad [laughter] - it doesn't make those stories any less true. This *is* what he was doing. This *is* the impact that he was having on the nation.

Just as an example, here's one of my favorite quotes from Ida Tarbell's profile of John D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil:

There is no gaming table in the world where loaded dice are tolerated, no athletic field where men must not start fair. Yet Mister Rockefeller has systematically played with loaded dice, and it is doubtful if there has ever been a time since 1872 when he has run a race with a competitor and started fair.

KN: Wow. [laughs]

35:08 - 40:11

KN: But can anyone write a profile of someone they hate, that is positive?

OM: No, I think probably not. I guess what I think is - because I think neutrality is made up. There's no neutral. And I've seen the damage that comes when we think, like 'A balanced portrayal means you have to land in the middle' - No! A balanced portrayal means *you have to tell the truth*. [laughter] Right? Like, find the closest point to the truth. And maybe the truth is 'This is a despicable human.' The middle is *not* the truth most of the time.

KN: Yeah.

OM: Sometimes it is, and there's always gray. But pretending that you have to present both sides of the argument when 900 people saw *this* and 1 person saw *that*. That's... don't present both sides of that argument, right? [laughter]

KN: Yeah.

OM: So I'm less concerned with objectivity in this series. It doesn't matter to me if she was telling the story of what he did to families because he did it to *her* family. He *still did it to families*, and that story matters.

That's part of the shift that Women's Studies is really trying to critique in sciences, social sciences - that the goal of 'objectivity' is wonderful and noble. But when you pretend that you have achieved it, you are ignoring *really important facts* - and an outside observer is *not* always the best judge. That people on the inside have as many valuable insights to offer about anything

KN: Yeah

OM: as people on the outside. The fact that she's 'inside the story' isn't a disqualification, in my opinion - it's a *qualification* for being able to speak honestly about *what was* the impact on families like hers, on businesses like her dad's.

KN: So, when anyone is telling a story, I mean... in a podcast [laughs] or in an expose. You have, like, a bag of facts. You have to choose which ones you hang your narrative on.

OM: Right.

KN: And so she's choosing particular, horrendous facts, hangs her narrative on that. Somebody could pick out things that are also *all* true, but then suddenly he becomes a great hero. Like there's all the families he destroyed with Standard Oil - but then there's the maternity hospitals that he built for women who had nothing and were totally screwed over by society.

OM: Right!

KN: So you could pick out those facts and suddenly like, "Wow, this guy - greatest guy ever!"

OM: Yeah! And they did, right? That *was* the narrative that was being told. That's why to me like - she was *one* person *finally* telling the other side of this story. It doesn't matter to me what her motivation was to do that, as long as the actual reporting was ethical. And it absolutely is. I mean, she would not engage in these kinds of spurious allegations, these weren't 'salacious tales of the evil John Rockefeller.' They were factual narratives of the harm that his company was causing. A lot of that is, right - she had great editors at McClure that were like "Whoa whoa whoa" and pulling her back.

And so again, this partnership of Samuel McClure and Ida Tarbell - her doing this just *relentless* investigation, and finding all of these horrible things that nobody understood was happening, and him helping her winnow out what goes in the article.

KN: Interesting.

OM: It's remarkable. I really urge everybody to go and [read this series](#) that she wrote. It's really astounding journalism and

KN: Did you hate John Rockefeller by the time you read it?

OM: I already hated John Rockefeller [laughter] but now I hate him more. [laughter]

You know, even from hindsight knowing a lot about this time period, and having rabbit-holed this subject myself a lot earlier in my life, I didn't understand how intentional so much of his destruction of *everything that stood in his way* was.

KN: Oh yeah. So many, like, dirty business... He's not noble.

OM: Yeah it wasn't - he's a bad person. [laughter]

SG: You know, I think Rockefeller's reactions really tell you whether this got under his skin, in a way that he recognized the truth of it. He refused to publicly react to the series, or to Tarbell. He even once claimed that he never read the series - though his wife's traveling companion completely blew his cover in her memoirs, where she talked about how he had her read it aloud to him. [laughs]

OM: His lack of public response tells us a lot about how much this got under his skin. But the other really strong evidence of Rockefeller understanding how effective this series was, was the *really* sudden upswing in the Rockefeller Foundation's charitable work.[laughter]

40:12 - 45:08

OM: That a lot of those *wonderful things* that you said, schools-

KN: the maternity hospitals - actually so much for women, like he focused in on health care for women - so that's amazing.

OM: That's probably because Tarbell's work especially is activating *women* who are furious about the kinds of harm that Rockefeller is doing to the world. So maybe that's his damage control, right?

KN: Maybe, yeah.

OM: We have to pacify the mothers. [laughter]

So the breakup of Standard Oil is *Ida Tarbell's accomplishment*. We can say that explicitly, like - *she did this*. And that alone is enough to make her worthy of remembering. But I think this shift in journalism - this idea of what journalism is *for*, of what reporters *should do* - she really shifted a whole industry. But the astonishing volume of her work, not just on Standard Oil - her investigative journalism was responsible for so much important 'uncovering of things about the United States' at this time of massive upheaval, and where there's so much changing.

It's alarming when these things align, sometimes. I think you and I have experienced that in his podcast, that we choose subjects months and months in advance, and then things seem to kind of just *align* suddenly with things in the news. But I think especially this story - there are so many parallels, right, to what the United States is going through right now. And you and I have talked about this that, you know, the people who *don't* learn from history are doomed to repeat it. But the people who *do* learn from history are doomed to stand on the side screaming, "What are you doing?! Why are you doing this again?! No, *we already did this!*" [laughter]

OM: And I always find myself wishing that I could use all those parallels to identify exactly what we should do, what will work, *here's the path*. And the unfortunate fact is that it doesn't usually work that way. Mostly what we have are really good examples of what *not to do*. [laughter]
Don't do *that*, and don't do *that*. When we have all these parallels - the best we can sometimes do is to try to *fail a different way* this time. [laughs]

OM: But I think there are so many lessons from Ida Tarbell's work, about the importance of journalism that really aims to tell the truth.

KN: But then also, be open about the inherent bias that has to be there. You can be a truth seeker, but then also say, 'I'm looking for my square on the Rubik's cube. Here's what I see.' Here we are in a world where *anybody* can step up to the platform and say their piece. But whether we listen or not depends on whether we *want to hear* what they have to say.

OM: Yeah! One of the assignments I give my students is to do a conscious evaluation of 'What media are you consuming, and how many of the people making that media *look like you*?' I make myself do it again every year, and I'm always startled at - even when I am consciously trying, it's so easy to slide back into just seeing the one side of the cube, you know? You have to *consciously* keep redesigning. Looking at 'What am I reading? What am I listening to? Who's missing?' And then go find those things. It's hard!

KN: And there it is: Everybody, you have to choose. Which stories you're choosing, which facts are going to go into your narrative.

OM: You and I have both have that pain, of our text messages flying back and forth: 'I've got my rough cut of the episode -it is two and a half hours long.' [laughter] Choosing what stays in is *hard*, and the more aware you become of it, the more honest you can be with yourself about how you're 'curating' your world.

KN: Yeah. It's better to choose consciously than unconsciously - to not even be aware that you're choosing.

SG: She gave a commencement speech at Allegheny College, at her alma mater, in 1913 where she really encouraged the people listening to take visionary leaps of faith, really, as she had. She said:

The greatest service of the imagination to the average girl is saving her from an imitative life. Imagination is the only key to the future. Without it none exists - with it all things are possible.

[music]

Credits: Huge thanks to [Stephanie Gorton](#). On our website at what'shernamepodcast.com you can find links to the book, as well as photographs, resources and more. And if you're interested in work that's carrying on the legacy of Ida Tarbell, I want to recommend the podcast *Drilled* from Amy Westervelt and *Critical Frequency*. It's very much a modern continuation of the vital work that Tarbell was doing, and an important and mind-blowing piece of journalism.

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[Music](#) featured in this episode was provided by Andy Reiner and John Souza, Esther Abrami, E's Jammy Jams, Dana Boule, and Jeff Cuno. Our theme song was composed and performed by Daniel Foster Smith. *What'sHerName* is produced by Olivia Meikle and Katie Nelson, and this episode was edited by Olivia Meikle.