Research Strategies and Application of Library Resources

As a freshman in HIST 395: The American South in Spring 2013, I wrote a final research paper called “How Society Changed in 1913: The Role of Fashion, Marriage, and the Women’s Suffrage Movement in Demonstrating Female Rights.” The year 1913 was chosen by Professor John Boles, because he wanted us to examine events that occurred a century ago. I was interested in women’s rights and I was intrigued by the idea of examining this issue from a historical viewpoint. I knew that the Nineteenth Amendment extended voting rights to women in 1920, so I wanted to observe the tension between men and women as women began pushing for equal rights in 1913.

I began my research by reading about the events of 1913 online and from books in Fondren’s general stacks. Through this, I learned that Woodrow Wilson was inaugurated as President after William Howard Taft’s term ended, the National Women’s Party was formed, and Inez Milholland led the Women’s Suffrage Parade in Washington, D.C. Several important events occurred for women in January 1913, including the formation of the National Women’s Party and the Suffrage Parade mentioned above. Because of this background research, I decided to focus on women’s rights in January 1913.

I wanted to observe the struggle between men and women in 1913 as society began to shift, rapidly in some ways, but slowly in others. I thought that looking at old newspapers would be a fascinating way to do this, as newspapers show so many different sectors of society and would be able to give me a general perception of the role of women in 1913 in addition to more specific events. I decided to use The Atlanta Constitution because it had been so involved in the Civil War only fifty years before, and I thought that this might affect women’s rights in some ways.

After reading about events in the year 1913, the context of women’s rights in 1913, and Atlanta, Georgia in 1913, I began analyzing the newspapers themselves. In order to read these newspapers, I used the microform machines in Fondren Library’s basement extensively. I engaged in an in-depth analysis of
the articles, advertisements, obituaries, and “help wanted” pages, using the microform rolls and machines in the Kelley Center for Government Information.

I read through thirty full newspapers and garnered a clearer understanding of women’s roles in Atlanta, Georgia in 1913, and how those roles were beginning to change. Articles revealed that women were starting to force their way into areas of society where they had previously been barred, engaging in strikes, protests, and the women’s suffrage movement. They started redefining their role in society, taking on different positions in the workforce. Some even served as politicians. At the same time, the newspapers clearly showed how much they were having to fight against. While newspapers praised men for their intelligence, advertisements and wedding descriptions focused on women’s beauty. While there were articles from groups that opposed suffrage, there were subtler differences as well. The section about jobs, for example, made a distinction between “wanted: male help” and “Situation Female,” which I saw as a genuine request for male help but a condescending offer to hire women out of their own generosity. Men’s obituaries talked about their jobs and intellectual contributions to society, while obituaries for women talked about their husband and listed all of their children.

I came out of this project with a deeper understanding of women’s rights in 1913. Women were neither pure suffragists nor 2-D women who stayed in the home. They were complex beings who accepted or fought against the society they lived in. In analyzing these newspapers, I also saw some similarities in women’s societal roles then and now. The way in which the newspapers and advertisements objectified women and praised them for their physical beauty is not unlike television advertisements today.

I learned a lot through this research project, and I realize it would not have been possible without the resources that Fondren library provided. I used various books in Fondren’s general stacks to read about society, Atlanta, Georgia, and women’s rights in 1913. This valuable context allowed me to write my report from a knowledgeable standpoint.
At the very beginning of this project, I did not know how to use the microform machines. The staff at the Kelley Center for Government Information taught me how to use the microform machines, and nicely assisted me when a microform got stuck and had to be rewound. Without the microform machines and the reels of the *Atlanta Constitution*, this project would not have been possible.

Fondren’s resources helped me in another significant way as well. My laptop computer actually crashed two weeks before final exams, shortly before my final paper was due. I used the computers and printers at Fondren to check the historical context of my research, as well as to type and print my report.

The microform machines, staff assistance, books, computers and even printers in Fondren Library allowed me to research women’s rights in 1913 from a unique angle and I came to appreciate the complexities of Atlanta’s society. Analyzing the issues of *The Atlanta Constitution* enabled me to understand the challenges women faced in obtaining equal rights in 1913, and the similarities between how society treats women in 1913 and 2013 opened my eyes to the roadblocks facing gender equality today. I would like to thank Friends of Fondren for the resources that allowed me to complete this project and for the opportunity of recognition through an Undergraduate Research award.