

The Bellwomen: The Story of the Landmark AT&T Sex Discrimination Case. By Marjorie A. Stockford. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004. xv + 247 pp. Index, notes. Cloth, \$25.95. ISBN: 0-813-53428-3.

Reviewed by Dorothy Sue Cobble

At a certain point in the early 1970s, what once seemed natural to the majority of people—the division of the work world into “men’s jobs” and “women’s jobs”—came to appear unnatural and objectionable. It was a remarkable sea change, and one that took many by surprise, even those advocating such changes. Marjorie Stockford offers some help in fathoming this historical disjuncture in her blow-by-blow account of how an underfunded and relatively toothless government agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), dismantled the gender status quo in the workplace at American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T), the country’s largest employer of women.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 included a prohibition against employment discrimination on the basis of sex, but few took it seriously. Indeed, proposed at the last minute by a southern segregationist congressman, the sex amendment passed with the delighted backing of many who thought it would help sink the bill. The ploy failed, and working women took immediate advantage of their new rights, unleashing a barrage of complaints alleging sex discrimination. Yet it was not until the 1970s, in the wake of the rising clamor of a mass women’s movement, that the EEOC became an aggressive advocate for ending sex discrimination. The AT&T case was pivotal. On November 18, 1970, Stockford reports, “white liberal twenty-nine-year-old” Harvard-trained EEOC lawyer David Copus came up with “a brilliant brainstorm”: he would attack AT&T’s discriminatory employment practices before the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC), relying on the agency’s new regulations prohibiting employment discrimination at the companies it monitored (pp. 9, 15). Bill Brown, the EEOC’s chair, had been involved earlier in a similar assault launched by the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Urban League against the Potomac Electric Power Company. Yet Copus and the EEOC initially conceived the case as being about race discrimination, and it wasn’t until almost a year later, when his former EEOC colleague Susan Ross convinced him to

reverse gender roles with her for a week at their daily lunch, that, according to Copus, “a bright light went on,” and he understood the sexist dimensions of the case (p. 65).

Bellwomen draws its information largely from legal documents generated by the AT&T case itself and from extensive interviews with those most directly involved—the group Stockford calls the “cast of key characters”: the government officials who pursued the charges, the AT&T personnel who defended the company, and those who testified before the FCC, including AT&T employees, expert witnesses, and advocates from the National Organization for Women and other groups (pp. xi–xiv). Stockford keeps her narrative within a relatively short time frame as well, zeroing in on the progress of the case from November 1970 to January 1973, when it was finally resolved.

Her scope is narrow, both thematically and chronologically, and it is an approach that yields mixed results. On the positive side, we are treated to some tantalizing and entertaining tales, enlivened by Stockford’s vivid portraits of her protagonists and her decision to let the characters narrate much of the story themselves. We learn, for example, not only how the EEOC staff changed their ideas of discrimination in midstream, but also how many within AT&T’s management were surprised by what they found once they began gathering the data. Many sincerely believed AT&T to be a progressive and just employer, despite the highly segregated nature of the workplace. Stockford also adroitly recreates the circus atmosphere of the FCC’s public hearings in New York and elsewhere, including the unpredictable antics of EEOC’s unwelcome allies from the Center for United Labor Action, a radical labor organization granted status as a party to the case by the FCC.

The political twists and turns of the lawsuit are expertly etched as well. The case might have languished, despite AT&T’s vulnerability before the FCC, had not the EEOC chair, a black Republican appointee, decided to forge ahead, risking the opprobrium of his colleagues and superiors in the Nixon administration. Similarly, according to Stockford’s telling, the final settlement was reached only after the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance opened up a separate channel of negotiation with AT&T, and Dan Davis, director of AT&T’s EEO office, found a solution to the deadlock over “quotas”: a novel mechanism he called “the affirmative action over-ride” (p. 185). The override allowed the company to bypass seniority and rely

increasingly on company-instituted tests in determining the “best-qualified” individuals for promotion and transfer. The approach helped the company integrate jobs by race and gender, but it also proved highly unpopular with the unions at AT&T and, as other scholars have noted, encouraged invidious distinctions among workers based on age and other differences.

Unfortunately, the narrow focus of the book proves frustrating as well as illuminating. Many questions remain unasked and unanswered. What general patterns, if any, did Stockford see emerging from her welter of particularity? How did the AT&T case compare with the other celebrated sex-discrimination suits of this period? How does she distinguish her account from those penned in Phyllis A. Wallace’s edited collection, *Equal Employment Opportunity and the AT&T Case* (1975), or from Lois Kathryn Herr’s recent *Women, Power and AT&T: Winning Rights in the Workplace* (2002)? And what light does her study shed on broader debates among historians, legal scholars, sociologists, and others concerning the relation between law and social change, for example, or the effect of the rise of gender politics on class and race inequalities? Stockford gives us a rich and evocative story, but readers will have to draw their own conclusions about what it all means—for scholarship and for workplace justice.

Dorothy Sue Cobble is professor of labor studies, history, and women’s and gender studies at Rutgers University. She is author of the award-winning book Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century (1991), and, most recently, of The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America (2004). She is currently editing a collection of essays entitled “The Sex of Work: Women and America’s New Labor Movements,” whose theme is postindustrial unionism, and she is also conducting a study of Esther Peterson and trans-Atlantic feminism in the post-World War II era.