

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Kimberly Hess, author of the 2021 biography, *A Lesser Mortal: The Unexpected Life of Sarah B. Cochran*. So why don't we start with what Sarah is remembered for.

KH: So what she's remembered for depends on where you're from. If you are from southwestern Pennsylvania, you would associate her with the coal and coke industry and with building two structures that are on the National Register of Historic Places. If you are from the Morgantown, West Virginia area, you would associate her with the coal industry, and also as the namesake of the Phi Kappa Psi West Virginia Alpha chapter fraternity house. And if you're from Ohio, the Westerville area, you might have associated her with Cochran Hall, which was a women's dormitory that she donated to Otterbein University. So it really depends on those areas.

AT: Before we get too far, you mentioned coke. And so I'd like to just clarify what we're talking about in this context, because she was definitely not involved, as far as I know, in either soda or drugs.

KH: That's right. Yes, the coke that we're talking about is a byproduct of coal. And a lot of people don't really know what that is unless they're from a coal mining region, because it was used as an input in steelmaking. So people are aware of steel, they're not always aware of what goes into it. But it was a very lucrative byproduct of coal, that coal mining operations could make themselves on-site. So if you were a coal baron at the turn of the century, you would have your mining operation, you would have your coking operation on-site, and you would keep a portion of your coal that you extracted as fuel for your own operation. You would send another portion to market to sell as coal, and then you would transition the other portion into coke and sell that to steel manufacturers.

AT: And Sarah's father-in-law, James Cochran was a pioneer in the use of coke, like he was a self-made coal industry leader.

KH: He was the first to sell Connellsville coke commercially. So he was setting up this business in the 1840s and 1850s, when he was mining coal with two relatives and then used a coke oven locally to make coke. And then, as the story goes, he built his own boat and boated this coke to Cincinnati, and sold it to a man by the name of Miles Greenwood, who understood the value that this had in foundries, and this was the first time that anyone actually paid money for coke from the Connellsville coal region. And it started an industry and that was very profitable. He was the pioneer of that industry. Henry Clay Frick is the name that most people have associated with the industry since then, because he's the name that was really the biggest name and lasted the longest.

AT: Her story was unusual for the time, not least because she started out as a maid who caught the eye of the young man of the house, and they fell in love and got married, which to me sounds like a Downton Abbey subplot. Like this doesn't sound like the kind of thing that does happen in real life.

KH: Right, it does sound almost like Branson and Sybil with a role reversal of genders in a way because it's happening in the Gilded Age. This person is a maid because she needs a job of some kind. Sarah is from a family that is very, very poor financially, and for some reason, she became a maid in the home of Jim Cochrane. And at this point, he would have been a very wealthy man. And she met Philip, who was Jim's oldest son. They were about eight years apart in age and Philip was being groomed to take over the family business and was involved in it. He might have been the most cosmopolitan man Sarah Cochran would have met because he had studied at Bethany College in West Virginia in preparatory courses, and he studied at Otterbein University in Ohio. And the two just fell in love, which, like you said, just doesn't seem like something that would happen. Because if you're a young coal baron, being groomed to take over this business and have

a place in an industry, there's really no incentive to marry the maid unless you're really in love with her. It seems like you could think more about networking and business associates and think of other people that might be good marital candidates from a business standpoint. So we've generally seen Sarah and Phillip as being a love match. And if you look at their life over time, he seems to have been someone who didn't see his wife as strictly ornamental, he seemed to appreciate her brains as well.

AT: Yes, she was very fortunate not only that, I assume as sort of the new-money, self-made person, I assume her father-in-law was a lot more open to this than you might have seen with the old-money crowd. But also, her husband recognized her intelligence; he actively encouraged her to learn about the business.

KH: Right. And I've heard, I can't really find documentation about this. But it's been said locally that he was criticized for bringing her into the business and teaching her about it. Because at that time in history, women really weren't supposed to have careers. If they did do any kind of work outside of the home, then it looked like their husband was a failure of some sort. And business was considered a man's world, and especially mining, where it was actually illegal for women and girls to work in or around Pennsylvania mines starting in the 1890s. And that didn't begin to change until the 1910s. But yeah, he did bring her into the business. He was said to have taught her about it. And there are even some deeds for the sale of two different mining operations that have her signature and her mother-in-law's signatures on them with Jim Cochran and Philip Cochran. And it's very clear that these are mining operations. It's just not clear why the wives are included on those deeds at this time. So yeah, it is pretty interesting. And Philip happened to pass away early, he died at about 49 years old in 1899, and wrote a will a couple of weeks before he died, where he left Sarah in complete charge and control of the estate. He left a third of the estate to her, and he left her in charge of the other two-thirds of the estate until their only child, a son, would turn 21. And he assumed that the son would then take over the business at that point. There is no mention in this will of anyone else. He had a male cousin who was a very esteemed attorney who could have been named in the will as someone to help Sarah look over this estate. But he's not mentioned. He had brothers. He didn't mention the brothers. So it's a very curious will when you start to read into it.

Two years later, just months before their son was about to turn 21, he was studying at the University of Pennsylvania, learning more about business academically to take over this family business. He was a member of the Phi Kappa Phi Fraternity, and playing football, seemed very healthy. He got a cold which turned into pneumonia and he died in March of 1901. So at that point, Sarah was left with this business portfolio in the coal industry that spanned parts of western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Tennessee and Virginia. And she was also grieving the loss of her husband and son at the same time. So, a doctor apparently told her to consider all the churches and schools that she could help philanthropically and that was what brought her into philanthropy as a way of helping her to grieve in this process. So she did begin to take steps as a philanthropist at that point, she also began to take steps as a business leader in this very male-dominated industry. And if we try to find her today, sometimes certain US census records show her occupation as a blank space as the word none, or as the word employer, which could mean a lot of different things. And I looked at what her husband and father-in-law's occupations were shown as when they were alive, and they were coke merchants or coke producers. Henry Clay Frick was just listed as a capitalist, which could mean different things, but at least sounds productive. So it's very bizarre. And I read a book by Robert Lopresti when I was doing my research called *When Women Didn't Count*. And it's about biases that were considered in the US Census when the census was taken at different times. So my assumption is that maybe someone just assumed that a woman wouldn't be working in the coal industry at this point and might have "corrected" information. So yeah, it's difficult to really know why but it doesn't help anyone find Sara, if they're doing research through those records.

AT: At one point, she was called the nation's only coal queen. And under her leadership, like, obviously, as you said, it was a huge business portfolio. But it grew threefold under her watch, and she also expanded to selling coke in England, France, Germany, Mexico. So it's not just that she inherited it and kept it going.

KH: Yeah, she actually had to fight her own male directors to get Philip's cousin, M. N. Cochran, who was this attorney I mentioned earlier, put into the position that her son would have had. And once she did that, I think they seem to work together well. And she was able to grow the business. She's credited as a founder of a particular bank in the area. But it's not really clear to me how much agency she had in any of this. I don't know if certain people took her seriously and others didn't. Or if she had ideas, were they just not implemented, people drag their feet, it's kind of hard to know what the dynamic was, working with this group of people. Women were allowed to be philanthropists at that time, but they weren't really thought of as businesspeople. And even when Sarah died in 1936, there was this very brief obituary in a Pittsburgh newspaper that mentioned that she died, that her husband was Philip Cochran, and he was the businessperson, and she was a philanthropist. And that was the end of it. And you're looking at this thinking, Well, it's nice that they're acknowledging Philip, but he's been dead for 37 years at this point. And he's still known in someone's mind as the businessperson for this portfolio of businesses that she's really been in charge of, even though she's also a philanthropist, but maybe there was a reluctance to label her as a business person.

AT: And of course, philanthropy was a much more acceptable role for women, particularly rich women. It seems like it's the only socially acceptable thing that they were allowed to do that would make change. Anything else, like any other form of activism seems to have been very, de classe, shall we say? And frowned upon, the idea that that's all women were allowed to do was spend what was seen as their husband's money, even if they were the ones earning it, or they were the ones who had brought it into the marriage.

KH: Right.

AT: Bit frustrating.

KH: Yeah, yeah. And it's interesting to see how she used her philanthropy, working with churches and schools, which this doctor had apparently recommended to her, but ultimately becoming involved in the suffrage movement by 1915, where you might think of that as activism or you might think of it as philanthropy or philanthropic activism or activist philanthropy somehow. But it's interesting because by becoming involved in suffrage, she was doing it in a public way. She was letting people know the limits that her gender forced on her that her male peers and even all of the men who worked for her didn't have to deal with. And even her male peers like Frick, or like Carnegie, didn't necessarily have to fight just to get basic citizenship rights since they were men and as a woman, she could be a peer in the industry, but she still had to fight to get and maintain basic citizenship rights.

AT: Okay, so tell me about Linden Hall.

KH: So Linden Hall was a mansion that Sara built from 1911 to 1913. It's actually on about 600 acres of land that the Cochrans had put together over time. So she and Philip had a house on that land when he was alive. After he died, she had a series of houses but decided to build this Tudor-style crescent-shaped mansion on the property, and that would basically become her primary home. So she was still living in the region of her work and her family and had this very spectacular house with over 30 rooms and had its own train station so that she could take her private train car wherever she wanted to go. And she had actually had a very large-scale Tiffany window made for this house and it was designed by Agnes Northrup. The original design is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, so that can be viewed online on their website, but it's almost a 200-square-foot window. And it's of the garden at Linden Hall in full bloom. And I got to see it when I was really young, just on a docent-led tour of the mansion, it was in a great staircase that went from the second floor down to the Great Hall of the mansion. And it was just spectacular to see all of these flowers and the scale of this window. And it's considered one of the stunning Tiffany floral windows that's out there. It's not in the

mansion anymore, but it was very spectacular. But the house has been put on to the National Register of Historic Places for architecture, back in the 1980s. And it was Sarah's primary home, she built this probably expecting she wasn't going to remarry and have more children, because she would have been in her 50s at the time, and there's never been any discussion of any other companion or interests beyond Philip. So she built this very large, impressive home for herself. She was able to entertain people there for business. She actually allowed all of the Methodist bishops of the world to meet there for one of their meetings in 1916. And she opened it up to host a suffrage rally in 1915, with 500 or 600 people coming to the site for a speech and other entertainment. So it's interesting because it was a place where she engaged with the world at a time when she could have just stayed holed up in this house by herself. And it was also a place where she kind of, knowing it or not, blurred that line between the home that's the woman's realm of the late 19th century and the business world and the political world that are the man's world of the 19th century and early 20th century.

AT: You mentioned it was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1998. But that's not the only building that she's responsible for that's on the register. There's also the Philip G. Cochran Memorial United Methodist Church.

KH: Right, that church is in Dawson, so just a few miles away from the mansion, and both of these are in Fayette County in southwestern Pennsylvania. The church that is on the National Register is one that she built in 1927, in the Gothic style, as a memorial to her husband and son. And it replaced a brick church that she built in 1900 on roughly the same site as a memorial to her husband. So she was very busy building a lot of churches. She had also built one in memorializing her parents in the brethren faith as well. But the Gothic church in Dawson is probably the most spectacular one that she built. It has a Tiffany window that came from the 1900 structure. It also has a full-size painting by L. Storm, who was an artist from Dresden, who made a copy of Raphael's Sistine Madonna. One was for Jane Stanford. And then there was this other copy that Sarah bought in 1905, and gave to her congregation and it's kind of followed through these church structures as they got built.

AT: And so on the philanthropy side, she was also very supportive of education. So I believe you mentioned the fraternity house that I believe was connected to her son, and also the women's dormitory, but she also gave her time as well as her money.

KH: Right. She was the first female trustee of Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, and she was also a trustee of Beaver College and American University. She endowed two department chairs in her name and her mother-in-law's name at Beaver, and at Bethany college. So she was very busy, again, in the educational space, and I'm not sure if this is because education was something that she grew up valuing. There's a story about how she and her sister had to share one dress and one would wear it one day and the other would wear it the next day and go to school because their family had so little money that they couldn't afford enough clothes for both of them to attend school on the same days. So it's been interesting to me in doing the research to see that Sarah had very little education. And education was probably the one thing that her money couldn't really buy her. Yet she was so generous with her money and time in making sure that other people could go to college and making sure that there were dormitories for women at Otterbein and for men at Allegheny. And one of the other things that she did was to just pay for other people's educations, wherever they went to college. And my great-grandmother was one of those people. So my great-grandmother went to the Pennsylvania State Normal School at Indiana, Pennsylvania in 1917, because of funding from Sarah, and by doing that she created this legacy of education in this area where people might not have had access to it. And education creates such a ripple effect through the generations that I feel like I've even benefited from that philanthropic gesture over 100 years ago. But she was very, very involved with education throughout her life. She was even considered the mom of the West Virginia Alpha chapter of Phi Kappa Psi at West Virginia University, and she bought a house for that particular chapter, and furnishings for it. And then after she died, the chapter eventually

moved to another house, but they named that new house for her. So she actually has a fraternity house named for her in Morgantown, West Virginia, which I think is really interesting and really cool.

AT: I wouldn't imagine that there are a lot of fraternity houses named for women. But that could be just my assumption.

KH: Yeah, I kind of made the same assumption, I don't know how many are actually named for women. I was able to find information about the value of her philanthropy, when she died. In 1936, a newspaper estimated it at several hundred thousand for this kind of quiet philanthropy, where she's just putting people through college and doing things on a one-off basis. And I think several hundred thousand, maybe it was \$2 million, at the time for building dormitories and doing things that were much more public and had a paper trail. But if you figure out the value today, it would be upwards of \$43 million. So, she's not on the same level as Carnegie. But she's very important in this region. And she was even looked at as being as important as Carnegie by the president of Allegheny college at the time, because she was giving a little bit more at one point and remained a very important donor to the college.

AT: It is also my impression that a lot of Carnegie's philanthropy was tied around, because he was also a self-made man who was largely rejected by the old money. And so my impression is also that his was largely showing off or trying to build a reputation, because he had something to prove. That's sort of the vibe that I get. Not that what he did wasn't very beneficial to a lot of people. But things like, she's just quietly funding someone's education to help someone without expecting anything in return and not expecting glory for it. I like that better.

KH: I know, in western Pennsylvania, she's been very well-liked because of that, because it seems very genuine, to give money without expectations of the public relations that could go along with it. And I think she's often remembered for that. I think she and her father-in-law, were very well-liked, because they stayed local. And they lived in the community, and they invested in the community. And some people, if you're being cynical, could look at Frick moving to New York City, and having a house there and in Pittsburgh and saying, Well, he left and he's spending money there and not here. And they see the Cochran's as doing the opposite of that by staying

AT: Improve the place that you're in rather than abandoning it.

KH: Right.

AT: So you've mentioned your great-grandmother benefited from her generosity, and that you got to see Linden Hall when you were a kid. So is this just someone that you've always sort of known about in the periphery and decided to dig a little deeper?

KH: Yeah, I've known about her because my family was from southwestern Pennsylvania. And Sarah is a cousin to my great-great-grandmother. So we knew on one side of the family that we were related and how we were related. We knew about her putting my great-grandmother through college and I just grew up with that. I grew up visiting the church that she built in Dawson, because that was my family's church there. So we have a five-generation connection to that. So that was how I knew about her and I took my husband to western Pennsylvania, about a year after we were married. And I was showing him these places. And he said, you know, you should write a Wikipedia entry for her because I Googled her and I can't find any information online about her. And I thought, well, that's great, because then local people can add to it and you know, I don't feel like I know everything there is to know about her. And I started the Wikipedia entry, and I started doing research and I started finding out more than I originally knew, because I had only known her connection to

Fayette County and Allegheny College. And then I started finding out that there was the fraternity house named for her and she had connections to Otterbein and American and all of these different things. And it got to a point where I could write some guest blog posts about her or give a presentation. And then I had enough information and enough questions that writing a biography was the next logical step, even though I wasn't really looking to write a book, because that's a daunting process. I mean, my dad was a professor, and I saw him write books, and nobody should romanticize the book-writing process at all. So I was kind of trying to avoid that. But I just thought, I'm at home with my daughter right now, I have some time that I can work on an unusual project because my schedule is fairly flexible at certain times of the day before she's up or when she's napping. This is a time when I can really run with this. And I used the experience I had from business and from studying economics and from being on the board of the Alice Paul Institute and various hobbies and genealogy that helped me with historical research, and just put them together in a way that was unique to me, and assumed well, at some point, hopefully, someone else will write a book about her because we can certainly have more than one book about one woman. We certainly have that for men. So you know, it's the first biography and I just see it as a starting place and hope that other people take an interest in doing research on her and that we can find out more.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history