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WOMAN NEWS

A job once filled by men became a pink profession

By Amy Eagle
Special to the Tribune

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When Julius Caesar was murdered, he is said to have lashed out at his attackers with a stylus. Like many early leaders, the Roman dictator was proficient in writing and carried his writing instrument at all times.

Secretarial skills once were considered important tools of statecraft, and many heads of government and business have depended on expert recordkeepers and assistants. The term "secretary" comes from the same Latin word as "secret," indicating the level of trust inherent in this position. Its significance is reflected in governmental titles such as secretary of state.

In the more recent past, secretarial work became mostly a women's career. On Wednesday, as the nation's offices recognize Administrative Professionals Day (the annual celebration formerly known as Secretaries Day), WomanNews takes a look at the history of this long-lived occupation--and a peek at its future.

From ancient times to the 1880s, secretarial work was a man's job. But by the 1920s, most U.S. secretaries were women.

Why the change? "The one-word answer is the typewriter," said Gerald Ronning, co-coordinator of the Social Science History Association's Labor History Network and assistant professor of history at Albright College, Reading, Pa.

The Remington typewriter, the first to be mass-produced in the U.S., was unveiled in the 1870s.

Other factors combined to fuel the gender change. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution and Civil War, industry and state governments were booming, creating demand for office workers, said Jean H. Baker, professor of history at Goucher College, Baltimore. Male laborers were being drawn into the growing construction, mining and heavy industry fields. And the advent of free public high school meant

there were educated girls who could fill the increasing number of secretarial positions.

"One of the noteworthy statistics is that it's really not until 1920 that more Americans were living in cities than they were on farms," Baker said. "Business was getting bigger and there were more jobs."

The position of clerk (as secretaries were more commonly known then) had been an entry-level professional job. "Clerks often went on to become managers," said Leon Fink, a history professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. As corporations grew and management required more specialized training, office support became "more of a permanent subordinate position," he said.

The question of which came first -- the diminished status of the secretarial job or women's entrance into the field -- is a chicken-or-egg conundrum. "These things were happening more or less at the same time," Fink said.

Perceptions fueled change

Certain perceptions about women helped propel them into the field. For example, the belief that women had small, dexterous fingers that could better operate a typewriter was widespread--"the fact that it's not really true notwithstanding," Ronning said.

Women's perceived domestic skills also were seen as advantageous for secretarial work. "As the social face of the corporation became important, women put a 'happy face,' in some sense, on the corporation," Fink said.

Women's advancement into secretarial jobs led to special vocational training opportunities for girls and women. High schools started segregating parts of their curricula by gender, with girls learning typing and boys learning carpentry. Secretarial schools for women opened, further increasing their numbers in the field.

Although secretarial work provided economic and employment opportunities for many women in the 20th Century, the job's general low pay and prestige during that time caused the centuries-old title of "secretary" to lose some of its luster.

Today office support staff are usually called "administrative professionals." Though women still dominate this line of work -- men represent about 5 percent of the field -- administrative professionals are not, in the once-familiar phrase, "just secretaries."

"I think admins have taken on much more responsibility than they had when I started working" 23 years ago, said Meg Cipar, an executive assistant and Illinois division president of the International Association of Administrative Professionals. "You see many admins taking on more of what had been managerial duties: composing their own correspondence, managing offices, managing meetings, managing projects."

Salaries have not quite kept pace with the additional responsibilities, Cipar said, but they are rising. Association surveys show that 45 percent of its members received more than \$40,000 in base pay last

year, compared with 33 percent in 2002 and 8 percent in 1997.

These jobs often have stricter qualification requirements than in the recent past. A college degree was considered a liability in the field when Cipar started out, she said. But now many administrative professional job postings list a bachelor's or associate's degree as a requirement for employment. Foreign language skills also can be essential for jobs in international businesses.

Certification an option

Administrative professionals also can pursue professional certification. The association offers two types of certification: Certified Professional Secretary and Certified Administrative Professional. Candidates must pass an exam covering various areas of office technology, administration, management, planning and communication. They also must have two to four years' experience in the field, depending on their education level. More than 62,000 administrative professionals have received these designations since they were first offered in 1951, said Rick Stroud, association spokesman.

As the field has evolved, Administrative Professionals Day has focused increasingly on professional development.

"The focus before was on gifts and candy ... that kind of thing," said Cipar, who works at Acordia Inc., an insurance brokerage in Chicago. "But I'd like to hope that as the job has come to be seen more as a profession and as much a career as other positions at a company, companies will start to recognize admins on a more professional basis. Lunch is nice, but a training seminar would be much more helpful and have much more long-lasting effects."

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Secretarial milestones

4th Millennium B.C.: First writing systems developed.

17th Century B.C.: Women worked as scribes in Mesopotamia, in the vicinity of modern-day Iraq.

1625: English philosopher and essayist Francis Bacon writes, "[T]hat which is most of all profitable, is acquaintance with the secretaries and employed men of ambassadors.

1870s: The telephone, typewriter and carbon paper came into popular use.

1880s: Mimeograph and adding machines come into use.

1890s: Dictating and stenographic machines come into use.

1942: National Secretaries Association founded.

1950s: Electronic digital computers made with transistors or vacuum tubes come into use. Early data processing begins.

1951: Most secretaries make \$3,060 a year.

1970s: Developments include microcomputers, optical scanning and recognition equipment, and video display terminals.

1980: Movie "Nine to Five" depicts female secretaries wreaking revenge on their nasty male boss.

1990s: The advent of personal computers, the Internet and e-mail.

2005: Most secretaries make \$35,000-\$39,999 a year.

--A.E.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, International Association of Administrative Professionals, Internet Movie Database.

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