

On the first day of class we were asked what we thought best describes American History, and I answered diversity, because I believe that what makes the United States so great is the patch work quilt of cultures and beliefs that we are surrounded by everyday. It is now the end of the semester, and I feel the same way, but I now know the blood, sweat, and tears that were put in by activists to bring equality between our diverse groups. We are a country founded on different races and religious groups fleeing their homelands for opportunity and equality, and yet it took us decades to reach an understanding that all people are equal. Diversity is the essence of American history because many have fought, died, and won to have equality for their race or gender. This can be seen in the fight against slavery, the civil rights movement, and the women's rights movement. The leaders of these groups not only stood up for their people, but opened doors to equality in ways our forefathers never thought possible.

As seen throughout history, people are not accepting to what they don't understand. When you turn that ignorance into a lucrative business, the monster will grow. This is proven with slavery of African Americans. The south was the heart of this business. Their entire economy was based off of 1% of the wealthy plantation owners. Prior to the civil war, things started to change quickly. The North was urbanizing, and with it came the free labor ideology, that every man should have the right to work hard to be successful. Along with this ideology, another group started to arise in the North, the abolitionists. This small group, led by radicals such as William Garrison, Elijah Lovejoy, and Fredrick Douglas, fought to abolish slavery in the south. Because of the abolitionists, the south misinterpreted President Lincoln's stance on slavery, and refused

to compromise on the issue. The south, in return, lost everything in the civil war.

Slavery was over! Or was it? Though the slaves were free, they were left with no homes, no education, and no jobs. A rise of another group began. The radical Republicans led by Thaddeus Steven, Charles Sumner, and George Julian wanted not only freedom for the African Americans, but equality. They were considered extreme radicals of their time, but their ideas were simple; the government should be active in establishing redistribution of the freed slaves, giving them education, and rights... even if it meant excluding the south from the Union to do so. The Freedman's Bureau was following through with the Radical Republican's goals. They helped freed slaves get on their feet by giving them jobs and education. These groups helped fight for the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendment during the reconstruction, which stated that slavery was illegal, if you were born in the U.S or naturalized you were a citizen regardless if you were once a slave, and African Americans had the right to vote. This was a huge leap for freed slaves, but nothing comes easy. When racist Andrew Johnson became president, the reconstruction came to a slow end. Though he was later impeached, he used his power to back peddle what progress was made against slavery. He established the Black Codes, which were laws that freed slaves had to work on their previous master's land and get paid what they were charged in rent, making it impossible for them to leave. More to the detriment of the blacks, it made the idea of white supremacy more dominant, which caused more violence and fear. When the compromise of 1877 was passed, taking the federal troops out of the south, the reconstruction was over. The North and won the war, and the south had won the reconstruction. What the south didn't know was that the reconstruction had laid the fundamental base for the civil rights movement to come.

In 1950's, times were rapidly changing. The TV was becoming more a part of the American home, and people were actually seeing the treatment of blacks in the south. Segregation was very prominent in the south, and along with it came hate, racism, and anger. Though people had heard what was happening in the south, few had seen the terrible acts that were being done until it was streaming through their living rooms. This was an advantage for groups such as the NAACP, who were fighting for civil rights for blacks, and the abolishment of segregation. In 1955, a 14 year old black boy named Emmett Till went to the south to visit. While down there, he whistled at a white woman, and it cost him his life. He was beaten brutally, eyes torn out, and dumped into a river. His mother, distraught with anger and sadness, decided to show the world what the white monsters of the south did to her little boy by having an open casket funeral. This sparked the civil rights movement.

Shortly after, the secretary of the NAACP, Rosa Parks, stood up for herself by not giving up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, causing the Montgomery bus boycott. Martin Luther King Jr., traveled the country speaking of peace and equality for all. His speeches caused many to join the civil rights movement, including people such as Billy Graham, whose popularity was extremely influential among the religious community. Also, students joined the cause, by helping raise awareness, supporting activist speakers, and set up for rallies. They also participated in "Freedom Rides" which were bus rides where the black and white students would sit together on the buses in the south, and sit in at restaurants that refused to serve their black peers. The NAACP also knew that in order to abolish segregation, that they must overthrow the law. Plessey vs. Ferguson was just that. Instead of facing the law head on

with arguments of violence and ignorance, they fought small, and worked their way up. They went to small courts in the North, fighting for more grad schools to be open to blacks. When they felt the time was right, they used their best lawyer, Thurgood Marshall to fight against Plessey vs. Ferguson, and won. The civil rights movement was making a difference.

Not only were blacks making head way, but so were women. Women had become the majority of the work place in WWII, but with the return of the soldiers, women were back at home. Though some women were still a vital part of the work place, they were only making about 60% of what men were making (United, 1). In 1963, Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, writing that women have no other identity than to find a husband and have children. She challenged women to think about whether they were satisfied with their role in society, and encouraged them to find other outlets of self-worth. The book began a movement of women who felt anxious and unsatisfied with their role in society as the stay-at-home mother. Betty Friedan and others started groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and fought to pass legislation for women's rights to equality. In the first year alone, NOW grew to an outstanding 15,000 members (United,1). Feminists also fought for women's right to choose to what happens with their bodies. In the 1970's, feminists such as Gloria Steinman published the magazine *Ms.* and the following year, they published the informational handbook "Our Bodies, Our selves" which sold 850,000 copies (United, 1). In 1973, the supreme court case *Roe vs. Wade* made abortion legal in the first few weeks of pregnancy. Women were now considered equal in society, and had the right to choose what happened to their bodies. The women's rights movement had come leaps and bounds.

Our great nation is far from perfect. It took us centuries to abolish the slavery of African Americans. White supremacy and ignorance took away from the opportunity to grow as a nation, not only economically, but spiritually. A prime example of this is the Harlem Renaissance, where the black community wowed the world with art, music, literature, and poetry like we had never seen before. This is because the black community had never had the opportunity to show what amazing talent and personality they had as a culture. People like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and Emmett Till who gave their lives so that this dynamic community could be seen as equal changed the world as we know it. They are the reason we have a black president today. Women such as Betty Friedan and Dorothy Height, who made a stance against what was the “politically correct” role of the woman are the reason we have the amazing female doctors, lawyers, CEO’s, and why we can choose if we want to be a professional or a stay at home mother. We have an opportunity like no other nation to learn and grow from each other’s differences. If we keep an open mind, an eagerness to learn other’s cultures, and a patience for the views different from our own, we can truly grow as individuals. We can find out who we really are by knowing different view points and making the decision on our own, rather than what our society or family tells us to believe. This will directly reflect on a more peaceful and educated United States. Diversity is the life of our country, and the struggle to understand each other and fight for equality, is the essence of our history.

Works Cited

United States History - The Women's Movement." *Country Studies*. U.S. Department of State, 11 May 2010. Web. 12 May 2010. <<http://countrystudies.us/united-states/history-131.htm>>.