

# Preface

Front-page reports of the pitched battle to the north were the talk of Portland on the rainy morning of November 6, 1916. Six men were slain and dozens more wounded in the lumber town of Everett, Washington, during a bloody free-speech skirmish. Once Dr. Marie Equi heard about the five young labor radicals killed and the others stricken, she dropped everything and rushed to provide medical care for the wounded protesters.<sup>1</sup>

Sheriff's deputies had ambushed members of the Industrial Workers of the World—*Wobblies*, as they were called—who had tried to defend the Everett mill workers objecting to a 20 percent pay cut. The Wobblies were caught in a deluge of gunfire. Stunned by their casualties, they retreated to Seattle where they were charged with complicity in murder. Equi stopped first at the jail and then proceeded to the city hospital in the company of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the radical labor leader revered as the “Rebel Girl.” The bedridden men hooted and cheered when they saw Equi. “Good ole Doc, we *knew* you'd come to us,” several told her. Equi tended the wounded and castigated the authorities for failing to provide adequate medical care. At the resulting trial, she testified about the condition of the injured and then went on to rally support for the defendants implicated in what became known as the Everett Massacre.<sup>2</sup>

“We knew you'd come to us.” Equi responded to the Everett conflict as a matter of course. It was how she understood her place in the world. She valued loyalty and risked imprisonment to protest injustice against the disadvantaged, the outsiders, and the outcasts of society. At the same time, Equi tolerated no insult to her working-class background, her choice of female companions, or her political beliefs. She was a strong, determined, freethinking woman, and those who crossed her met with fierce opposition. In her most resolute stance, she asserted her right to free speech when the law of the land claimed she had none.

And yet Equi was neither a strident advocate nor a rigid ideologue. Her politics were personal, fluid, and eclectic. She operated with a straightforward sense of right and wrong, aligning herself with causes and groups when they matched her beliefs and experiences. After first promoting Progressive Era

reform—woman suffrage, eight-hour workdays, and civic improvements—she became radicalized by the blows of police clubs and embraced anarchism as the means to obtain economic and social justice. She championed the goals of the IWW and espoused an overthrow of an economic system with its rampant inequities. She became an early advocate of occupational health, joining women strikers exploited by low pay and sordid working conditions. She marched so often with unemployed men that the media referred to them as her “army.” She refused to abide by restrictions on women’s access to abortion and birth control, and she spent time in jail to defend their rights. During the World War I era, she decried the corporate war profiteering of the global conflict, and federal agents labelled her one of the most dangerous radicals in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Equi lived openly as a lesbian, although she was not known to have publicly proclaimed or affirmed her sexual identity. At a time when so few women risked public exposure of their same-sex preferences, Equi chose to do as she pleased, caring little if she became a social outcast as a result.

Historian Karen Blair noted in 2001 that “all too little” research and writing had been undertaken about Pacific Northwest women engaged in politics, radicalism, and sexual issues. More recently, Kimberly Jensen assessed the same terrain and found encouraging progress in studies of women’s role in politics. Yet, accounts of radical women in the Pacific Northwest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries still comprise a mere handful. Labor radicalism roiled through the region, and the tumult was hardly the domain of men alone.<sup>4</sup>

Biographies of lesbians of the Pacific Northwest during this period are even scarcer, and the situation in Northern California is similar. Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk were hard-pressed in their review of lesbian and gay lives in the San Francisco Bay Area to find more than a few references to lesbians in the region prior to World War I. For these reasons the life story of Equi, along with her intimate companions, is crucial to understanding the role of lesbians in the history of the Pacific Northwest and Northern California.<sup>5</sup>

Few role models existed to guide Equi as she sought an intimate relationship with another woman, and she mustered considerable courage and resolve to live as a transgressive sexual outsider. Through circumstance and scandal, she placed loving lesbian relationships before the public in Oregon and much of the Pacific Northwest for the first time at the end of the nineteenth century and again in the early twentieth century. She was among the first known

lesbians to adopt a child legally in the region and the first woman whose same-sex preferences figured in two cases before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and one before the US Supreme Court. She lived up to the description of a correspondent during her imprisonment, who described her as “unusually out of the ordinary.”<sup>6</sup>

Equi’s commitment to medicine and her patients for nearly thirty years represents one of her greatest achievements. To her patients, friends, and comrades alike, she was simply “Doc.” She earned her medical degree at a time when working-class women, if they felt they must pursue a professional career, were expected to become nurses. In 1903, she became one of the first sixty women physicians in Oregon.<sup>7</sup> Her ease with working-class patients and among laborers who worked the farms, factories, and forests made her distinctive among other doctors in the Pacific Northwest. Her willingness to help women with birth control and abortion when both were illegal set her further apart from many of her colleagues. But Equi’s commitment to medical care combined with her generosity appeared to mitigate the criticism and disapproval directed her way. Although government officials uniformly castigated her as a dangerous and degenerate radical, more dispassionate observers recognized her overriding good will and humanity.

One of the initial challenges of this project has been documenting and understanding Equi’s life given the loss of her journals, many of her personal papers, and memorabilia, most of which were apparently discarded after her death in 1952. No formal oral histories of her exist, and no recordings of her many talks have been located. Historians often encounter this difficulty in researching women’s lives at a time when their experiences and contributions were less valued. But Equi appeared less committed than several of her contemporaries—Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, for example—to leaving recollections and writings for her legacy. As it turned out, discovery of other primary sources helped document Equi’s life and revealed further her considerable historical footprint.

Extensive oral histories conducted in the 1980s by Portland historians—until recently held mostly in private collections—with Equi’s daughter, nurse, attorney, medical colleagues, and political allies provide a richer, more detailed view of Equi’s relationships and political involvements than previously reported. Additional documents in a dozen archives—located in university libraries, court records, probate files, historic newspapers, registers of deeds, the National Library of Ireland, and sacramental records stored at the Equi family church in New Bedford, Massachusetts—contributed to a more

complete and nuanced understanding of her life and times. In one particularly helpful repository—the National Archives and Records Administration located in San Bruno, California—the court records of a trial involving her longtime companion Harriet Speckart include Equi's testimony about her early medical career, her budding lesbian relationship, and the sex-and-money scandal that appeared on the front pages of the *Sunday Oregonian* newspaper.<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, the federal agency that sought to silence Equi became the largest repository of materials that give voice to her political thinking, radical acts, and personal relationships. Through an extensive surveillance operation, US Department of Justice agents reported on Equi's day-to-day movements in the period prior to her sedition trial and during her imprisonment. More than eight hundred pages were preserved and archived. While any document filed by an undercover agent is problematic given the potential for bias, inaccuracies, and outright misrepresentation, Equi's files often present information in her voice that can be confirmed with other sources.<sup>9</sup>

Equi also generated a considerable amount of local, regional, and occasionally national newspaper coverage—more than three hundred articles over a forty-year span beginning with her arrival in Oregon in 1892. These reports of her civic reform work, political protests, legal battles, love affairs, and social appearances—along with several interviews—yielded a more complete account of political motivations and activities. Similar to reports filed by federal agents, newspaper articles must be judged for accuracy. In several instances, the newspaper's bias reveals how Equi was presented to the public and presents the political and cultural environment of her time.<sup>10</sup>

In the final tally, what Equi chose to do with her life revealed much of what she valued, perhaps as well as lost journals might have indicated. Her direct involvement with the political turmoil and social transformation in America a century ago reflects how one woman lived her life on the edge of public opprobrium. She risked being one of the most feared and hated women in the Pacific Northwest—almost an outcast for her radicalism and lesbianism—to remain true to her belief in social and economic justice. She earned her reputation as a remarkable woman during exceptional times. How she engaged the struggles of her day with courage and compassion makes Equi's life story important to anyone interested in the issues then and concerned about similar injustice today.