



Photo by Lona on Unsplash

Women Make History: Stories We Should Have Learned in School

***“There weren't any headlines...
That's not the way it worked.
You achieved something, and
were glad for that.”***

**Loney Clinton Gordon
Interview 1998**



Loney Clinton Gordon, Courtesy Michigan Women Forward (MIWF.org)



Loney Clinton Gordon, Courtesy WOODTV.com

Loney Clinton Gordon: Crusader for Health

In 1943, working as a lab tech alongside two women scientists, Loney Clinton Gordon made a significant contribution to the discovery of an effective vaccine against [pertussis](#), a deadly disease, commonly known as whooping cough. While the two scientists had already created a vaccine, they wanted something far more powerful to save lives. It was Gordon who succeeded in supplying the missing element.

Thwarted Aspirations [Born](#) Loney Clinton in Arkansas in 1915, she moved with her family to Michigan as a young girl. She [graduated](#) from South High School in Grand Rapids, where the future president Gerald R. Ford was also a student. Both appear in the school's 1931 yearbook. With aspirations of becoming a dietitian to work in restaurants and institutional settings, Gordon earned her bachelor's degree in chemistry and home economics from Michigan State College in 1939. However, her dreams were thwarted when she discovered that white male chefs generally refused to take instructions from an African American woman.

In the only known recorded [interview](#) of Gordon, she [stated](#) to historian Carolyn Shapiro-Shapin in 1998, "I couldn't take that prejudice...They could say no to me, or I could say no to them...so I left."

A New Path In 1943, four years after college, Gordon embarked on a new career when she was hired as a lab tech by bacteriologists [Dr. Pearl Kendrick and Dr. Grace Eldering](#). The two had been working for nearly a decade to develop a vaccine for whooping cough. Today, people may not think of it as a deadly disease, but records from the Centers for Disease Control confirm more than 100,000 cases per year in the 1920s and 1930s, killing an average of 6,000 children annually. Michigan, where the three women lived, had the highest fatality rates in the country.

Although Kendrick and Eldering had produced a vaccine, it wasn't very effective. They were committed to producing one that would render the disease virtually harmless. To achieve that goal, they knew they needed to grow a much stronger strain of the bacteria in their lab. That's when they hired Gordon.

"I knew what my mission was to be," Gordon told Shapiro-Shapin, "to help find the culture with sufficient virulence to make the vaccine."

It was a difficult task. The biggest [challenge](#) was finding the right formula to grow the most virulent strains of pertussis. Working eight to twelve hours a day, Gordon rigorously grew and assessed thousands of cough plates (plates on which patients had coughed). Later, Gordon remarked, "I don't know why I have eyes. I must have looked at a billion plates." But it was her rigor and precision that led her to use sheep's blood as the medium to incubate the culture.

"...This one day," Gordon told Shapiro-Shapin, "I went in, and I said 'Okay God, this has to be the day...It just talked to me. Here I am,'" Gordon said. "And bingo, there it was." According to Shapiro-Shapin, for Gordon, it was like "a religious experience...she tells it very much in the way Alexander Fleming spoke about his discovery of penicillin."

Professional Success [According to](#) the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, Gordon's success in isolating a "virulent strain of pertussis" led to the effective vaccine Kendrick and Eldering sought. Soon after, in 1944, the [American Medical Association](#) added it to the list of recommended immunizations. Within the decade, cases of pertussis in the U.S. were cut by more than half, and the mortality rate decreased from 7,518 in 1934 to ten by the early 1970s.



Loney Clinton Gordon, 1951, Grand Rapids Public Library

The discovery catapulted the two doctors into the ranks of world-renowned experts, although neither Kendrick nor Eldering sought recognition. When asked by a reporter in 1985 why the vaccine didn't bear their names, Eldering [replied](#): "...Medical breakthroughs are a result of the work of many persons. We disapproved of that notion...there were just too many people involved, and we didn't want the sole credit. You'd have to put a whole string of names on the vaccine."

The duo later combined the diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus vaccines into a single shot, eliminating the need for separate injections.

But after the AMA's approval, Gordon's work on the vaccine was done. She married in 1956, moved to Lansing, and accepted a supervisory position in microbiology at the Michigan Department of Health. She was probably the first African American scientist at the lab.

A Legacy Late to be Recognized

[According](#) to a family friend, Gordon faced discrimination, but needed to keep her job. "She, like the rest of African Americans, had to walk kind of a tightrope."

During her life, Gordon received a brief measure of fame when she was invited by the [National Council on Christians and Jews](#) to travel to Europe and the Middle East to discuss the vaccine. She also delivered some 50 speeches in the U.S. When she retired in 1978, however, Gordon's accomplishments were largely unknown.



Statue of Pearl Kendrick, center, Grace Eldering, left, Loney Clinton Gordon, right. By Lisa Spindler.

That began to change in 1997, when the Michigan House of Representatives [recognized](#) her contributions with a proclamation. Shortly after Gordon's 1998 interview with Shapiro-Shapin, the historian began to publish scholarly articles that included Gordon's work.

Gordon passed away in 1999 at age eighty-three. In 2000, she was [inducted](#) into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame. A statue commemorating the accomplishments of Kendrick, Eldering, and Gordon was [unveiled](#) in 2019 by the Grand Rapids Community Legends Project at the Michigan State University Research Center.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask yourself: Am I quick to acknowledge others' contributions?

Ask a friend: How do you respond when you're excluded from receiving recognition for work you've significantly contributed to?



Join me in Ohio, New Hampshire, Maine, and California...Thank you, Pam Bingham, Nancy Botkin,

Ann Acheson, Jill Hall, Helen Frink, Wendy Pomeroy, Joan Cox, and Sharon Roe for making these possible!

Springfield, Ohio: Thursday, July 30, Pennsylvania House, 5 - 6:30 p.m., then Splash Zone, 7 - 9 p.m.

Keene, NH: Wednesday, Aug. 5, Book Talk, 4 - 5:30 p.m.

Alstead, NH: Friday, Aug. 7, Empower Hour Women's History Bingo, Chase's Mill 7 - 9 p.m.

Acworth, NH: Sunday, Aug. 16, 4 - 5:30 p.m. Acworth Historical Society at the Acworth Town Hall

Kittery, ME, Wednesday, Aug. 19, Rice Public Library, 6-7:30 p.m.

Sausalito, CA, Thursday, September 17, Books by the Bay, 6 - 7:30 p.m.

Corte Madera, CA, Sunday, September 20, 1 - 2:30 p.m., Book Passage

Check the [Events Page](#) of my website for details and more upcoming gatherings in September and October.

"Remember the Ladies!" to quote Abigail Adams. Help keep alive the stories of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and my book, [Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience](#). Available at Indie Bookstores, [Barnes & Noble](#), [Amazon](#), [Kindle](#), [BookShop](#), and on my website.



I'm passionate about all things Mary Ware Dennett, a pivotal leader of the women's suffrage and reproductive rights movements. A grant from the Schlesinger Library forwarded my research on Dennett. My articles about her have been published in [Ms.](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), and more. My new book, [Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience](#), highlights the stories of remarkable women who, like Dennett, achieved great things only to be swept aside by history or have their achievements wrongly attributed to men.

If you'd like a speaker, [reach out!](#) I'd love to speak to your business, school, women's group, book club, or civic organization in person or via Zoom.

Join the Women Make History Community!

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and encourage others to subscribe:

www.SharonSpaulding.com



Sharon Spaulding | 40 Wanderwood Way | Sandy, UT 84092 US

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)



Try email marketing for free today!