**Ida Tarbell: Relentless and determined, she beat giant Standard Oil** By Smithsonian.com

Ida Tarbell was 14 years old when she witnessed the Cleveland Massacre, a battle in “the oil war” of 1872. Dozens of small oil producers in Ohio and Western Pennsylvania battled 32-year-old John D. Rockefeller Sr. and his newly incorporated Standard Oil Company. At the time, Frank Tarbell, Ida's father, owned one of the oil companies refining oil for fuel in Cleveland, Ohio. Rockefeller offered Ida's father and the other oil company owners an ultimatum. They could sell their businesses to him or they could try to compete with Standard Oil and undoubtedly fail. Though Tarbell did not understand what was going on at the time, she would never forget the effects of the Cleveland Massacre. Rockefeller and his Standard Oil Company left Cleveland owning 85 percent of the city's oil refineries.

**Relentless Search For Facts** Almost 30 years later, journalist Ida Tarbell would search for the facts and write about "the oil war" in a 19-part series in McClure’s magazine. This masterpiece of journalism exposed the truth and brought down one of history’s greatest tycoons and effectively broke up Standard Oil’s monopoly. Her “steady, painstaking work,” unearthed damaging internal documents, which were supported by interviews with employees, lawyers and the powerful vice president of Standard Oil, Henry H. Rogers. She became one of the most important muckrakers who reported about greed and corruption in big business and the government. “They had never played fair,” Tarbell wrote of Standard Oil, “and that ruined their greatness for me.” She was an important part of the Progressive Era that began around 1890 and ended near the end of The Great War in 1920. Progressives fought for honest and fair rules in business and government and voting rights for all Americans. They also worked to reduce the fear of immigrants coming to America.

**Railroad Scheme Revealed** Ida Minerva Tarbell was born in 1857, in a log cabin in Hatch Hollow, in Western Pennsylvania’s oil region. Her father, Franklin Tarbell, spent his early years building oil storage tanks. He switched to refining oil into fuel and became rich. “There was ease such as we had never known; luxuries we had never heard of,” she later wrote. Her town of Titusville and surrounding areas in the Oil Creek Valley “had been developed into an organized industry which was now believed to have a splendid future. Then suddenly this prosperous town received a blow between the eyes.”That blow came in the form of the South Improvement Company, a corporation established in 1871. Secretly, Rockefeller and the three major railroads that ran through Cleveland—the Pennsylvania, the Erie and the New York Central, made a secret deal. The railroads agreed to raise shipping fees, but would still give Rockefeller and Standard Oil some money back. Word of the South Improvement Company’s scheme leaked to newspapers, which outraged independent oilmen in Ohio and Pennsylvania. There were speeches calling for violence as train cars filled with oil were raided and buyers of oil were turned away. Franklin Tarbell and the other small oil refiners pleaded with state and federal officials to crack down on the business practices that could ruin them.

**"Hate, Suspicion And Fear"** By April of 1872, the Pennsylvania Legislature repealed the South Improvement Company’s charter before a single transaction was made, but the damage had already been done. In just six weeks, Rockefeller was able to buy 22 of the 26 oil companies in Cleveland that competed with Standard Oil. When buying out the competing oil companies, Rockefeller encouraged the other company owners to invest in his company by taking stock instead of money. “Take Standard Oil Stock,” Rockefeller told them, “and your family will never know want.” Most who accepted the buyouts did indeed become rich, but Franklin Tarbell did not. His daughter wrote that she was devastated by the “hate, suspicion and fear that engulfed the community.” Franklin Tarbell’s partner killed himself, and the Tarbell’s were forced to sell the family home back to the bank to pay for his company’s debts.At the time, Rockefeller said there was no secret deal to raise shipping fees and to give him some money back. But years later, he said that the practice was common and those fighting it did not know much about business. He explained that a company that ships 5,000 barrels of oil a day should not have to pay as much for a barrel as a company that only ships 50 barrels a day.   Ron Chernow, Rockefeller's biographer, wrote: “Once he had a monopoly over the Cleveland refineries, he then marched on and did the same thing in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York and the other refining centers. So that was really the major turning point in his career, and it was really one of the most shameful episodes in his career.”

**Writing Put Her On A Path** Still a teenager when all this happened, Ida Tarbell never forgot what Rockefeller had done. “There was born in me a hatred of privilege, privilege of any sort,” she later wrote. “It was all pretty hazy, to be sure, but it still was well, at 15, to have one definite plan based on things seen and heard." These feelings would drive her to write about fairness and justice in the future.  At age 19, she went to Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, and after studying biology, Tarbell came to realize that she preferred writing. She took an editing job for a teaching publication. Eventually, she worked her way up to managing editor before moving to Paris in 1890 to write. It was there that she met Samuel McClure, who offered her a position at McClure’s magazine.

**Following The Paper Trail Of Documents** In 1900, nearly three decades after the Cleveland Massacre, Tarbell began a 19-part series that would become a book, “The History of the Standard Oil Company,”  that, in her words, "fed the antitrust frenzy by verifying what many had suspected for years: the pattern of deceit, secrecy and unregulated concentration of power."  Ironically, Tarbell began her research by interviewing Henry H. Rogers, who knew her father and had a similar business in Pennsylvania. After the Cleveland Massacre, Rogers spent 25 years working alongside Rockefeller, building Standard Oil into one of the first and largest multinational corporations in the world. Rogers, it seems, might have been under the impression, after the McClure’s series on Lincoln, that Tarbell was writing a flattering piece on him; he reached out to her through his good friend Mark Twain. Meeting her in his home, Rogers gave her papers that explained how Standard Oil got some of its refunded money from the railroads.Franklin Tarbell warned Ida that Rockefeller and Standard Oil were capable of crushing her, just as they had crushed her hometown of Titusville, but his daughter was relentless. As the articles began to appear in McClure’s in 1902, Rogers continued to speak with Tarbell, much to her surprise. He went on the record defending Standard Oil's business practices, but “his face went white with rage” to find that Tarbell had uncovered documents that showed the company was still secretly working with the railroads to hurt the business of other oil companies.

**Simple Yet Dramatic** In "The History of the Standard Oil Company," she combined a thorough understanding of the inner workings of Rockefeller’s oil businesses with simple, dramatic writing:It takes time to crush men who are pursuing legitimate trade. But one of Mr. Rockefeller’s most impressive characteristics is patience. There never was a more patient man... Everything must be ready before he acted, but while you wait, you must prepare, must think, and work. “You must put in, if you would take out.” His instinct for the money opportunity in things was amazing... And nothing was too small: the corner grocery in Brownstown, the humble refining still on Oil Creek, the shortest private pipe line. Nothing, for little things grow.Ida Tarbell described Rockefeller as a “living mummy,” adding, “our national life is on every side distinctly poorer, uglier, meaner, for the kind of influence he exercises.” In 1911, the public anger that followed led to the breakup of Standard Oil after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the company was violating the Sherman Antitrust Act. Small companies were being hurt by larger companies and this led to higher prices for things that people bought. Ultimately, Standard Oil was broken into “baby Standards,” which today includes ExxonMobil and Chevron. Rockefeller was deeply stung by Tarbell’s investigation. He referred to her as “that poisonous woman.” Almost 40 years after the Cleveland Massacre, Ida Tarbell, in her own way, defeated Rockefeller and Standard Oil. . New York University placed her book, "The History of the Standard Oil Company," at number 5 on a list of the top 100 works of 20th-century American journalism.

**DO NOW:**

1. Read the paragraph from the section "Hate, Suspicion and Fear." Why does the author include this paragraph in the article?
   1. to highlight the breadth of Standard Oil's effects on Cleveland
   2. to summarize the differences in Cleveland's oil companies before and after the entrance of Standard Oil
   3. to compare Standard Oil's practices with those of other large oil companies
   4. to describe the ways that Standard Oil took over control of Cleveland's oil companies
2. Which of the following answer choices would BEST describe Tarbell's reaction regarding Standard Oil's takeover of Cleveland oil companies?
   1. dismay at the change in her family's status
   2. frustration about her inability to do anything to help her community
   3. disgust at the underhanded tactics used in the takeover
   4. fear about what would happen to her family in the future
3. Read the section "Simple Yet Dramatic." How does the article develop the idea that Tarbell's writing had far-reaching effects?
   1. by highlighting changes to Rockefeller's business practices
   2. by describing the long-term effects of her work
   3. by comparing different perspectives on her work
   4. by showing the ways that her work introduced new laws
4. WRITE: Is muckraking an effective tool to reform the U.S.? Find three pieces of convincing evidence from this article or your readings from the textbook. (Need at least five sentences)