Mary Logan Rothschild’s first career choice was medicine. As a child, she dreamed of becoming a doctor and specializing as a public health pediatrician. As she got older, politics became a consideration.

She wanted to be the first woman senator from the state of Washington.

Deciding what to do with one’s life often is a quandary.

When she first entered college, Rothschild intended to be a brilliant scientist.

But early in her sophomore year at the University of Washington, she decided botany was not for her. She switched to history and never looked back.
A professor of history, Mary Rothschild currently directs the Women’s Studies program at Arizona State University. It is her third term in the post since the program was started in 1977. But her involvement with women’s studies goes beyond helping to found Asu’s program. She is among the first generation of scholars who worked to create and develop women’s studies as an independent discipline at universities across the United States.

“When I completed my bachelor’s degree at the University of Washington, I had to choose between a social work grant and a history fellowship,” she recalls. Social work’s loss was history’s gain. But it was not until 1970 that Rothschild’s interest in women’s history was ignited.

“I was deeply depressed about my future in history because few jobs were available. I actually wrote a letter of resignation from the history department and planned to enroll in law school,” she says. “A call from a friend changed everything. She suggested that I read Eleanor Flexner’s *Century of Struggle*, which is a history of feminism in the United States. It changed my life.”

**Birth Of A Discipline**  
Women’s studies refocused Rothschild’s academic life in terms of research and teaching methods. As a specific academic discipline, the Asu professor thinks that the field of study offers a critical insight on human society through the eyes of gender. It also adds a new dimension to the discourse of human events.

“It is more than adding women to the mix,” she says. “Women’s studies has transformed a whole knowledge base. We really are changing the way people look at the world.”

The seeds of change were planted more than 20 years ago.

Back at Washington, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences invited Rothschild to serve as the graduate student representative on a committee. That committee would investigate the feasibility of launching a women’s studies curriculum. Later, in 1971, she was asked to teach a course on women’s rights and feminism in the United States.

“That assignment was incredibly difficult because so little was written about women in history,” Rothschild says. “Much less then when compared to what is available today. I spent hours and hours in the library. I’d get a paragraph here and a chapter there by investing about 14 hours for every hour of classroom lecture.”

“Many of us thought that women’s history was the history of the women’s movement,” she adds. “Today, that topic is merely a small specialty of women’s history.”

Because the area of study was so new in the 1970s, few mentors were available for Rothschild’s generation of scholars.

“We have become the mentors,” she says. “My real encouragement came from Ann Firor Scott of Duke University. She was the only female history professor I knew. And interestingly, during my entire student career, I had classes from only one woman professor; and she was a sociologist.”

Rothschild says two other feminists influenced her career: Florence Howe, who founded the Feminist Press, and Gerda Lerner, now professor emeritus of women’s history at the University of Wisconsin.

“Florence was very helpful to me. I hired her once to teach a summer class while I was still a graduate student. She took great delight in calling me ‘boss,’” Rothschild says. “Gerda is a very powerful person in this field. She’s always been supportive.”

The study of women’s history has come a long way since those early days. Rothschild considers herself fortunate to have been there at the beginning.

“It was an extraordinary, exciting time,” she says. “Today, the field is large and complicated. The work being done is very good, much more solid than it was two decades ago. But the passion we shared and the excitement surrounding that brand new enterprise was breathtaking.”

Rothschild sees the women’s studies discipline at a crossroads, not only at Asu, but throughout the country.

“The field is at a point that demands analysis,” she says. “There is nothing wrong with what’s been done to date, but the time has come for some serious self-critical evaluation. As academics, we need to decide where we want to go next and put together a strategy for that journey.”
There is much more to the Girl Scout movement than the mastery of selling cookies on a massive scale. Mary Rothschild believes a comprehensive history of Girl Scouting might provide a window on girlhood in modern America. The Asu professor of history has more than 17 years invested in the project to create that window.

Rothschild currently is completing work on her history of the Girl Scouts. “There are shifting visions of what girls and women in America should be,” she says. “On one hand, this work is a straight narrative history of Girl Scouting. But it also is an inquiry into a changing world of visions for girlhood and women in the 20th century United States.”

Rothschild started looking at the subject in 1974 when she needed a research project. She began by trying to find the records of groups such as the YWCA, Campfire Girls, Girl Scouts, and other institutions dedicated to girlhood. “I found nothing,” she says. “Everybody knows about Girl Scouts, yet this organization of 28 million members had never been studied by a historian.”

Work on the history has taken Rothschild across the country and to London. She has compiled notes from more than 100 interviews. She also has done extensive research on the founder of Girl Scouting, Juliet Low, whose birthplace in Savannah, Ga., is a national historical site.

“Still, a level of tension has always existed between the two organizations, especially in earlier times when James West headed the Boy Scouts of America. West resented Girl Scouts and felt they should be Campfire Girls. The coldness did not begin to thaw until West retired in 1943.”

The Girl Scout organization is funded by several sources, including membership dues, the United Way, and of course, the sale of millions of boxes of cookies.

“The organization is a big business. And the American influence on the world organization is very strong,” she says. “I didn’t realize just how strong until I began my London research. The world group actually sprang from the American movement, not from England as I first believed.”

Rothschild admits that involvement in such a massive project has its drawbacks. “People will look at my results and say the findings do not reflect their own Girl Scout experience,” she says. “However, I’m really looking at the history of a national program. What someone experienced as the member of, say, a Madison, Wisconsin Girl Scout troop 20 years ago may bear no relationship to what I am writing about.”—John Matthews

A Woman’s Place  The Asu professor can visualize herself back in China. She spent a year at the Nanjing University-Johns Hopkins University Center for Chinese and American Studies between 1991 and 1992. She served as a visiting professor of American history and culture. She also showed off her prowess as a master cookie baker.

“Yes, I baked cookies in China, and they went over big,” she laughs. “However, logistics did pose a slight problem. Butter and eggs came from Shanghai and Hong Kong. Chocolate was sent from home in Tempe.”

Rothschild describes the distance between Tempe and Nanjing as being 8,000 miles in distance and 100 years in time. The city is located about 575 miles west of Beijing. “The city has the atmosphere of a small village despite its population of more than 2 million people,” she says.

“In Tempe, I drive my Dodge Caravan to Albertsons, stop at Nello’s Pizza, and catch a Sunday movie matinee,” she says. “In China, my vehicle was a two-wheeler. The grocery store was an open-air street market where strips of bloody beef dangled above vendors’ heads and chickens were weighed and sold on hand-held scales. I shopped for cabbage and live eels and hoarded Wesson Oil like liquid gold.”

As a scholar of women’s history, Rothschild found China interesting and invigorating. “I was able to put down roots in a community and learn to know the people,” she says. “I started a bi-weekly Women’s Studies and Chocolate Society for Chinese and American women. We discussed topics that Chinese women rarely, if ever, talked about. It was a moving, profound experience.”

If she gets a chance to return to China, Rothschild says she would go to Beijing, the site of the first Chinese Women’s Institute.

“I’d like to study the role of feminism in post-war China,” she explains. “I want to compare ways in which the definitions of feminism differ in China, India, and the United States. I’d also like to study how the feminist movements in each country have advanced despite political struggle. Feminists play a key role in the political mix of all three countries.”

Mary Rothschild’s research is supported by the Arizona Humanities Council, which named her “Scholar of the Year” in 1991. She currently is completing a history of the Girl Scout movement. For more information about specific projects, call Mary L. Rothschild, Ph.D., Women’s Studies, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 602.965.2358