

History of the League Women Voters

"The First Fifty Years, League of Women Voters of Minnesota 1919-1969"

Women's Rights Movement

Dissent is the heritage of the League of Women Voters. The organization grew out of 80 years of protest over women not being allowed to vote. Surely its beginning dates from that day in 1840 when Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton met at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London -- the day Mrs. Mott, a delegate, was denied a seat because she was a woman. Outraged, these two determined to start a woman's rights movement in the United States. Between the determination and the deed eight years passed because it was a bold proposal. The first Woman's Rights Convention was held in 1848. Out of it came the statement "It is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves the sacred right to the elective franchise." No woman could have read it then without a shudder of disbelief or a thrill of elation. It was Elizabeth Stanton's resolution, and the only one on the agenda which caused consternation. Even Lucretia Mott disapproved: "Oh, Lizzie! If thou demands that, thou wilt make us ridiculous! We must go slowly." It was the opinion of the convention that so radical a proposal would jeopardize the movement and prevent other reforms, but Mrs. Stanton insisted that only with the vote would legal changes be achieved and women's status significantly altered.

Struggle for Suffrage

Meetings for the cause proliferated. Members of the Women's Rights organization wrote, lectured, recruited, and importuned. In 1869, just 21 years after the first convention, two woman suffrage associations were formed -- the American and the National. They merged in 1890 to become the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). It had one objective: to secure the vote. Every League member must contemplate with envy the solitary goal which permitted concentration of personnel, time, energy, and funds on winning for women the elective franchise "by appropriate national and state legislation."

The idea that women were individuals with the right to citizenship and authority over their persons, children, and property was revolutionary. Like any other revolution it had its partisans, and sex was not all that divided them. Many women were opposed to voting by women and shocked by public display. The suffragists needed their determination, their stamina, their courage. Not only were they stubbornly opposed; they were threatened and ridiculed. NAWSA had developed into a formidable organization over the years. Following the political conventions Carrie Chapman Catt, president, called the Association into emergency session and proposed that it concentrate on the passage of a federal amendment, giving its national Board authority over the formerly self-directed state associations. Members present immediately pledged \$818,000 toward a million dollar campaign fund. The final thrust had begun.

It was 1917. Financially, the Association was aided by a legacy of nearly a million dollars from the estate of Mrs. Frank Leslie (New York publisher) to be used by Mrs. Catt "as she shall think most advisable to the furtherance of the cause of woman's suffrage." Psychologically, New York's passage of a constitutional referendum granting women the vote increased the national effect of the action by several other states which earlier in the year had granted some form of suffrage -- North Dakota, Indiana, Vermont, Rhode Island, Michigan, Ohio, Nebraska, Arkansas. As women took on jobs left vacant by conscription and contributed as volunteers to the war effort, the old slogans about "woman's place" became obsolete.

Congress Sends 19th Amendment to States

President Wilson called a special session for May 1919, and on June 4 the 19th Amendment was sent to the states. Its wording was the same proposed by Susan B. Anthony in 1875: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."

After this success the goal was clearly visible. But NAWSA was already looking to the future. As early as 1916 a committee within the organization was suggested to represent the equal suffrage states. The Jubilee Convention in St. Louis, held in March 1919 on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the suffrage associations, made its chief business the planning of a new organization -- "a League of Women Voters, one of whose objects shall be to speed the suffrage campaign in our own and other countries." In her convention address Mrs. Catt said, "I propose ... a League of Women Voters to 'finish the fight' and to aid in the reconstruction of the nation."

The convention recognized national needs that required attention simultaneously with the old goal of suffrage. It was willing to change in order to cope with these conditions in the postwar world. It had a vision of what might be done and a plan for doing it.

Mrs. Catt completed her stirring call to action:

"The spirit of this new crusade will travel from state to state, from city to city ... a nationwide campaign against the world's oldest enemy -- ignorance. What should be done, can be done; what can be done, let us do."

Franchise of Women in Minnesota

On the same day, March 24, 1919, the Minnesota Legislature granted to the women of the state the right to vote for presidential electors.

Action in the nation was accelerated now as states began to ratify the 19th Amendment and as suffrage associations in those states automatically became members of the League of Women Voters, still an auxiliary of NAWSA. Governor J.A.A. Burnquist called a special session of the Minnesota Legislature and on September 8, 1919, it ratified the 19th Amendment: in the House 120 to 6; in the Senate 60 to 5. Thus full franchise came to the women of Minnesota. Those who worked for it began to plan immediately for its use.

League of Women Voters of Minnesota Organized

The Minnesota Suffrage Association dissolved its corporation on the seventh of October and passed a resolution that its effects -- funds, office supplies, equipment -- "become on that date the property of the Minnesota League of Women Voters to be organized October 29, 1919, as a branch of the national League of Women Voters for the purpose of completing full enfranchisement of women and increasing effectiveness of women's votes in furthering better government."

League of Women Voters Minnesota Timeline

March 24, 1919: Carrie Chapman Catt proposed the formation of a "league of women voters to 'finish the fight' and to aid in the reconstruction of the nation." The occasion was the 50th Anniversary Jubilee Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, in St. Louis. In proposing a "fitting commemoration," Catt asked: "What could be more natural than that women who have attained their political independence should desire to give service in token of their gratitude? What could be more appropriate than that such women should do for the coming generation what those of a preceding period did for them? ... Let us then raise up a league of women voters ...; a league that shall be non-partisan and nonsectarian in character ..."

March 24, 1919: The Minnesota Legislature granted to the women of the state the right to vote for presidential electors.

May 21, 1919: The House of Representatives passed the 19th Amendment, 304-89. Opponents blocked action in the Senate for another two weeks, delaying ratification by ensuring that most state legislatures had adjourned for the year.

June 4, 1919: The Senate passed the 19th Amendment, with two votes to spare, 40 years after its first introduction in Congress. From Paris, President Wilson sent a cable of congratulations.

September 8, 1919: The Minnesota Legislature ratified the 19th Amendment (House 120 to 6 / Senate 60 to 5)

October 29, 1919: League of Women Voters Minnesota (LWV Minnesota) was organized. (The Minnesota Suffrage Association dissolved its corporation on October 7, 1919 to become LWV Minnesota.)

February 14, 1920: League of Women Voters was officially founded as "a mighty experiment," at the "Victory Convention" of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in Chicago, Illinois. By then 33 states had ratified the suffrage amendment, but final victory was still three states away.

August 18, 1920: Tennessee became the final state to ratify the 19th Amendment, after the governor yielded to appeals to call a special session of the legislature. A young state legislator cast the deciding vote after being admonished to do so by his mother.

The 19th Amendment: The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate action.

August 26, 1920 (Women's Equality Day): Notice of the final ratification was received by the Secretary of State in Washington at 4:00 a.m., and the Nineteenth Amendment was proclaimed part of the Constitution. Up to that time, no other amendment had taken so long to secure. Minnesota can claim the first women voters in the nation as a stalwart group of women in South St. Paul organized a local referendum in the wee hours of the morning of August 27, 1920.

April 11-18, 1921: League of Women Voters first annual Convention, Cleveland, Ohio



Clara Hampson Ueland 1860-1927

First President of League of Women Voters Minnesota

[Clara Ueland selected as one of 150 people, places and things that changed Minnesota](#)

Clara Hampson Ueland

Clara Ueland was an extraordinary woman whose interests included the establishments of kindergartens, the preservation of immigrant crafts, support of the fine arts, clean water and clean air; prison reform, community charities, the abolishment of billboards, the formation of a juvenile court, and the care and education of a talented family of seven children. In virtually all these and many other activities she played a leadership role, but none consumed her energy so completely as the right of women to vote. She was President of the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association, 1914-19, and then the first President of Minnesota League of Women Voters, 1919-20. Though Clara Ueland resigned the presidency in her first year, she did so because she preferred to direct the League's work at the Legislature.

Seven years later; returning from the Capitol and a day of lobbying on behalf of a bill for working women, she was run down by a truck as she stepped off a street corner near her home. A banner headline across the top of the front page of the next day's Minneapolis Journal on March 2, 1927, proclaimed: "Mrs. Andreas Ueland killed." A memorial service at the State Capitol was the first ever bestowed on a private citizen of Minnesota, as was the broadcast of that service over WCCO radio.

Tributes took many forms. The photograph of the bronze plaque featured in this exhibit is on permanent display in the rotunda of the Capitol building. The Clara Ueland Fellowship was established at the University of Minnesota and is awarded annually for the purpose of aiding a woman graduate "in a year's graduate study of problems of government and citizenship." There was an outpouring of sentiment for this remarkable woman.

Her friends and associates said of her:

"She believed absolutely in liberty of opinion."

"The most courageous and the only truly great woman I have ever known."

"A woman of vision, courage and judgment, she labored long and arduously for the betterment of life."

"No timid doubt, no hesitation, no personal excuses hindered her from doing a need at the moment it should be done. That kind of moral courage is rare and characterizes the great - the makers of history."

Clara Ueland was a maker of history. Under her energetic leadership, the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association finally prevailed in its arguments on behalf of voting for "female persons," and the Legislature in special session became the 15th state to ratify the 19th amendment on September 22, 1919. In 1920, seventy-two years after women had gathered in Seneca Falls, New York, to proclaim their independence and equality, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed.

When she became President of the Suffrage Association, she remarked: "Of all the honors which have been offered me ... none appeals to me as does this one. If I can be, in any small way instrumental in gaining the franchise for the women of Minnesota, I shall feel that I have been allowed to be of real use." She recognized also that "What is a good deal of a burden to a few women can be done with comparative ease by a good many." Her organizational talents helped to turn the tide. Realizing that the achievement of suffrage was not the end but the beginning of a larger mission, Clara Ueland prepared a "call to organize the Minnesota League of Women Voters."

She declared, "Great actual and potential power is now in the women of the State. We must confer in order first - that we may become enlightened voters and, second-to consider plans by which this great power may be directed for the good of the state."

Our Minnesota Suffrage Association will soon cease to exist. Let us build in its place a mightier organization, which shall include all women and organizations having for their purpose the raising of our standards of living and the safeguarding of our cherished institutions.

Together the women of the state must make wise and farseeing plans to the end that our dreams of a democracy, in which men and women shall have an equal voice must come true." - October 1919

Clara Ueland's living heritage is League of Women Voters Minnesota. Marguerite Wells, her successor as Minnesota president and later president of the national League, said of her: "I believe Mrs. Ueland to have been the ideal citizen. She was a good citizen because she cared." (From the "Clara Ueland Wall," League of Women Voters Minnesota office, St. Paul.)

LWV USA History

The League of Women Voters was founded by Carrie Chapman Catt in 1920 during the convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. The convention was held just six months before the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, giving women the right to vote after a 72-year struggle.

The League began as a "mighty political experiment" designed to help 20 million women carry out their new responsibilities as voters. It encouraged them to use their new power to participate in shaping public policy. From the beginning, the League has been an activist, grassroots organization whose leaders believed that citizens should play a critical role in advocacy. It was then, and is now, a nonpartisan organization. League founders believed that maintaining a nonpartisan stance would protect the fledgling organization from becoming mired in the party politics of the day.

However, League members were encouraged to be political themselves, by educating citizens about, and lobbying for, government and social reform legislation.

This holds true today. The League is proud to be nonpartisan, neither supporting nor opposing candidates or political parties at any level of government, but always working on vital issues of concern to members and the public. The League has a long, rich history, that continues with each passing year.

For additional historical information about the League, please visit the [Issues](#) section of this web site.