

“CEASELESS, UNREMITTING TOIL:”

THE WISCONSIN CAMPAIGN FOR WOMAN SUFFRAGE

*by Ruth Page Jones
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The Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, adopted on August 18, 1920, after ratification by thirty-six states declared:

“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.”

When Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment on June 4, 1919, Wisconsin suffragists sprang into action. Time and time again, their efforts to obtain full woman suffrage had failed. Now, they had one last chance to secure a victory. With the legislature still in session, suffrage leaders Ada James and Theodora Winton Youmans quickly marshaled their forces to persuade state lawmakers “to secure for our state the honor of being the first state to ratify.” State legislators, ambitious to triumph in that competition, complied on June 10. Without delay, James’ father, former state senator David G. James obtained the signed document and hastened to catch the train to Washington, D.C. Thus, Wisconsin delivered the ratification papers before any other state and took its place in the history of woman’s voting rights.

Changes in society triggered the demand for equal voting rights. In the early 1800s, women began entering the workforce and quickly discovered the disadvantages of their status. Existing laws gave women no recourse for low wages, labor abuses, and unfair treatment. In addition, married women could not own property in their own names, sign legal papers, sue or even retain their own earnings or custody of their children in case of divorce. The unjustness of those laws motivated them to act. Starting with few legal rights and lacking public advocacy skills, women faced a daunting task.

The struggle for woman suffrage is a story about women organizing on a massive scale to change public opinion. In order to succeed in the United States, women needed to build awareness among both men and women, to educate the public, and to persuade a majority of

male voters to change voting laws that treated them as inferior citizens.

The issue of women's property rights reached Wisconsin in 1846. In the state's first bid for statehood, the proposed constitution included a measure giving married women some property rights. Alarmed by that concept, voters rejected that constitution. Two years later, they approved a modified constitution that excluded those property rights. Expressing a common sentiment at the time, one man argued that giving property rights to women would be injurious to husbands, as then a wife's "welfare, and feelings, and thoughts" would not "be all wrapped up in his happiness." Changing public opinion posed a formidable challenge.

Wisconsin achieved statehood in 1848, a notable time in the history of women's rights. That same year, a convention was called in Seneca Falls, New York, to "discuss the social, civil, and religious rights of woman." Participants endorsed a number of rights at the meeting, including the right to suffrage. The voting resolution stated, "That it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to elective franchise." Seventy-two years would pass before those women secured that sacred right.

In 1856, before any suffrage organization had yet formed at either the state or national level, woman suffrage proponents in Wisconsin embarked on their first public campaign. After women organized a suffrage petition, a sympathetic legislator introduced a woman suffrage bill for the first time. No action was taken.

Wisconsin passed its first full woman suffrage bill in 1867, but then failed to approve it in the next session of the legislature, a requirement of any bill that amended the constitution. To promote the amendment in 1869, proponents established the first statewide woman suffrage group, the Woman Suffrage Association of the State of Wisconsin. For president, they chose Dr. Laura J. Ross, one of the first woman physicians in the country. Several national speakers also helped campaign for the amendment, sponsored by the national American Equal Rights Association, formed only three years earlier. Although the amendment failed, legislators did approve a bill allowing women to run, but not vote, for school office. However, the school measure contained no enforcement provisions.

During the following decade, as Wisconsin suffragists mostly

organized lecture tours, temperance organizations energized many women to fervently crusade against the abuse of alcohol. Those temperance campaigns helped serve as a training ground for the suffrage struggle, teaching women many of the tactics



OLYMPIA BROWN.

and strategies needed to persuade the public. Voting rights made some progress in 1875, when the legislature improved the school suffrage law, and four women were elected county superintendents of schools.

In the early 1880s, suffragists renamed their organization the Wisconsin Woman's Suffrage Association (WWSA). They also lobbied for a suffrage amendment, which then passed in one session but failed in the next. Leadership included many temperance advocates, plus the previous president, Dr. Laura Ross Wolcott, married and widowed in the intervening decade, and Laura Briggs James of Richland Center. Her husband David James and their daughter Ada James would later play key roles in the state's bid to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment. Another leader, Reverend Olympia Brown of Racine, one of the first female ministers in the country, would maintain a high profile in the suffrage movement throughout. Well-known as a national suffrage speaker, Brown lived to be one of the few "first-generation" suffragists to vote in 1920.

In 1884, suffragists approved a campaign for full suffrage and appointed Alura Collins to lobby the legislature. Collins, the state's first female lobbyist, wrote two bills, one for full suffrage and one for school suffrage. However, only a revised school suffrage bill passed both houses. Lawmakers then required the measure to be placed on the ballot in 1886. Although voters approved the bill, its vague language gave hostile officials an excuse to deny women at the polls. The issue then went to the Wisconsin Supreme Court. In 1888, the court decision limited women to voting only for school officers on

separate ballots in separate boxes. But, without laws requiring districts to provide separate ballots or boxes, most women still could not vote. Another Supreme Court decision two years later sent the bill back to the legislature for rewording. The legislature, however, took no action.

Meanwhile, Wisconsin women were organizing “women’s clubs” and achieving some “firsts” in the state: first female graduates from the University of Wisconsin, first woman admitted to the bar, first woman given a state political appointment. Women joined a variety of clubs. Some were organized as literary societies, some served as



ADA JAMES.

meeting places to host speakers to discuss current topics, and some clubs worked together on reform issues, such as child labor laws and free public libraries. As members, women built a number of skills that would prove useful in the fight for suffrage. They learned to run meetings, speak in public, research data, and raise funds. Many of the club leaders actively participated in the suffrage movement, although not all members agreed on the need. In 1890, clubwomen from several states established the national General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC), creating an umbrella organization for women’s clubs throughout the country. Seven years later, the Wisconsin Federation of Women’s Club (WFWC) formed.

The next Wisconsin suffrage leader, Theodora Wilton Youmans, would carry the fight through ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. An active clubwoman, suffragist, and reporter on women’s issues, Youmans marshaled the power of the press and her network of clubwomen to educate and advocate for the cause of suffrage. Reporting for the *Waukesha Freeman* before and after her marriage to the editor Henry Mott Youmans, Theodora Youmans shared stories about women in politics and also exposed workforce conditions. In 1901, one year after Youmans took over the role as president

of the WFWC, she led the group’s effort to fix the unresolved wording problems in the 1886 school suffrage law. The new bill passed, and women could now exercise their right to vote in school elections.

By 1910, woman suffrage activity in Wisconsin had lost all momentum. While membership in women’s clubs exceeded seven thousand, the suffrage organization, WWSA, under the leadership of Olympia Brown, claimed only a few dozen members. Hoping to revive the movement, Ada James, a “second-generation” suffragist and officer in the WWSA, founded a new suffrage organization in her hometown of Richland Center. James worked to lead a more active state organization, the Political Equality League (PEL), that did not rely on Brown, often absent from the state. This action and differing strategies would create dissension among state suffrage leaders for many years. In 1911, newly elected state senator David G. James submitted a bill to the Wisconsin legislature for full suffrage, on behalf of his daughter Ada and the PEL. Both houses passed the bill and scheduled a vote on the amendment for the 1912 election.

The ensuing campaign of 1911-1912 engaged more than five out of six clubwomen in a well-planned public relations effort. Youmans publicized the campaign in her column, with Ada James as her major source of suffrage stories. As President of the WFWC, Youmans also helped educate and organize clubwomen, even though the organization itself was nonpolitical and some members opposed suffrage. For many clubwomen, their lack of franchise, especially when their efforts at reform failed, left them feeling powerless. Although most leaders supported suffrage because they believed in the justice of the cause, many other clubwomen engaged for the reason of “expediency,” to obtain the vote as a means to improve conditions for women and children.

Suffragists and clubwomen used a number of tactics to gain attention in 1912. They stood on soapboxes to hold street meetings. Accompanied by reporters, they ran “motor tours,” drawing crowds in every town and speaking from automobiles (still quite rare at that time). A pilot dropped flyers from an airship over the Wisconsin State Fair, and a ship carried speakers up the Wolf River, stopping at every landing. In the infancy of the moving picture industry, women showed a two-reel “photo-play” called “Votes for Women.” Celebrities, such as Buffalo Bill Cody and circus-man Al Ringling,

helped promote the cause. In addition to publicity stunts, women used organizing skills learned from their years of temperance and club-women activities. Their public relations campaign required a vast network of volunteers to find and schedule speakers at numerous public events throughout the state. Suffragists spoke to private groups in churches and libraries, and also attempted to organize African-American women in Milwaukee. When the WFWC officially endorsed the amendment towards the end of the campaign, their cause earned days of headlines and free press.

Organization, petition drives, press relations, and fundraising all helped to spread the message. College Equal Suffrage League chapters brought the message to college campuses. Petition drives helped counter the argument that women did not want the vote. Every week, the press campaign sent Youmans' *Freeman* suffrage column, the "Press Bulletin," to all newspapers in the state and to some papers in nearby states. The PEL also translated those releases for foreign-language newspapers. The suffragists raised so much money that the state attorney general ruled that the corrupt practices law limited their spending to \$10,000. Just as opponents funded front groups to run anti-suffrage publicity campaigns, the suffragists hid their excess money in their own front group, the Wisconsin Men's League for Woman Suffrage. The league's membership included leading citizens, such as Senator Robert La Follette and Chief Justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court John B. Winslow.

Suffragists faced a formidable foe. Although the temperance movement in Wisconsin had subsided, liquor interests equated suffrage with prohibition and fought suffrage with all the power at their disposal. Those interests played a significant role in the states' economy, representing farmers, brewers, and consumers of the product, especially those of German-heritage. The German-American Alliance, a powerful association with more than six hundred thousand members, publicly opposed the amendment. For their counteroffensive, the brewers secretly funded female anti-suffrage speakers to argue that women did not want to vote.

Corrupt officials did their part to sabotage the election. For example, the attorney general required a separate ballot for the suffrage vote, although other amendment votes remained on the regular ballot. To ensure "nay" voters knew how to vote, he also required a pink bal-

lot. The brewers then printed and distributed samples with the no vote clearly marked. Some anti-suffrage officials engaged in political chicanery to suppress and confuse voters in pro-suffrage voting locations by supplying too few ballots or by printing them on white paper.

On election day, women provided transportation, worked at the polls, and exhorted voters on street corners. In the high turnout election, only 14 of 71 counties voted for woman suffrage, and the measure lost, 227,024 to 135,545. As much as women wanted it, as hard as they worked, as good as they were at publicity, none of them could vote, and the men of their state had not been persuaded.

After the election, suffrage proponents tried to heal the rift between the two suffrage organizations by re-organizing and changing leadership. When Theodora Winton Youmans agreed to become president in 1913, the movement gained a strong leader, well-versed in politics, the press, and organizing on a massive scale, with access to a vast network of clubwomen and good connections to male political leaders. That same year, Ada James lobbied for another suffrage bill, ignoring Youmans' warning that it was too soon. After passing both houses, the governor, unfriendly to their cause, vetoed the measure.

Discouraged, but dedicated, the suffrage movement pursued a new strategy: education beyond awareness. As the organization rebuilt, leaders ran suffrage schools to train more workers and speakers. Youmans moved the headquarters office from Madison to Waukesha, thus leading the final phase of Wisconsin suffrage from that city, as both president of WWSA and a *Freeman* reporter. In 1915, again against Youmans' advice, suffragists submitted three bills to the legislature: for municipal suffrage, for full suffrage, and for presidential suffrage (the right to vote in presidential elections). Not only did they



CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT.

lose in all three attempts, punitive state lawmakers stunned them by changing county boards of education to appointive commissions, thereby eliminating women's only voting right.

By that time, Youmans had concluded women could not win the vote in Wisconsin. In 1916, she entered into a secret agreement with Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association ((NAWSA), and after 1920, renamed the League of Women Voters). Youmans agreed to end the quest for a state amendment. Instead,



THEODORA YOUMANS.

Wisconsin would stay organized in readiness to push for ratification when Congress passed the national amendment. NAWSA would then support those states most likely to obtain either full suffrage or presidential suffrage. Suffrage leaders calculated that a majority of pro-suffrage states in the electoral college would create sufficient political pressure on Congress to pass a voting amendment.

Their strategy worked. In February of 1919, with little fanfare, lawmakers approved woman presidential suffrage in Wisconsin. By May of that year, fifteen million women had obtained full or presidential suffrage in 32 states, with those states representing 339 of 531 electoral college votes. One month later, Congress approved the woman suffrage amendment. Rushing to claim a positive place in suffrage history for their state, Wisconsin suffragists successfully lobbied Wisconsin to become the first state to ratify the amendment.

In 1920, after decades of raising awareness, lobbying legislators, and educating the public, Wisconsin women voted as equals at the polls. In her histories, Youmans speculated that future generations would think woman suffrage "just happened." History should teach, she wrote, it was women's "ceaseless, unremitting toil" that changed public opinion and made woman suffrage possible. □

Note: This article is based on the book *"On Wisconsin Women, Working for their Rights for Settlement to Suffrage"* by Genevieve G McBride.