

# PROFILE OF A SUFFRAGIST: MRS. ALICE HANLON OATWAY

by Bonnie Byrd



Who were the suffragists who stood alongside Theodora Winton Youmans, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Olympia Brown, the well-remembered Wisconsin leaders of the women's suffrage movement? Who were the women organizing fairs, baking auction items, attending rallies and marches, and sounding the clarion call for enfranchisement? Mrs. W.H. Oatway is one such woman – but her story for me began with a small note in our artifact collection catalog. “Women’s Suffrage Smock. Worn by Mrs. Oatway in the Last National Suffrage Convention. Donor Mrs. Charles (Oatway) Dornbusch.”

As often occurs, uncovering women in the historic record can require creative investigation and an understanding of likely paths and patterns in a given time and place. Fortunately for this researcher, Mrs. Margaret Oatway Dornbush chose to return home for interment at Prairie Home Cemetery, in a plot next to her parents, Alice H. and William Oatway. What follows is a sketch of Mrs. Alice Hanlon Oatway, from her beginnings in the southeast corner of Milwaukee County to her years of civic leadership in Waukesha.

Mrs. Oatway was born Alice Rose Hanlon. Her early life was remarkable for its familiarity to many other women of her time. Alice was one of twelve children born to Irish immigrant parents George and Alice Ryan Hanlon arriving on August 30, 1870. George Oatway farmed a land claim, several miles south of Carrollville [1], near “South Milwaukee,” more recognizable as Oak Creek today. Details of Alice’s early life are scarce in the historic record. The family appeared in the 1880 Census, with the full household recorded as: George & Alice Ryan, 51 and 39 respectively; children Elizabeth, Lawrence, William, James, Jane, Alice, Catherine, George, John, and Margaret, ages 16-3; Ann Ryan, mother-in-law; and Alice Carpenter, aunt. The youngest of the family, twin boys Thomas and Timothy were born January 3, 1881. Alice Ryan Hanlon died just days after the twin’s birth, on January 10, 1881.

A middle daughter, of an Irish immigrant family in the 1890s, Alice is emblematic of countless other women in the 1890s needing to earn a wage. Accounts of Irish domestic work is well documented. Ladies housekeeping manuals of the time gave advice to hiring and advertising for in-home domestics, often emphasizing Irish girls. While cooking and housekeeping would be an extension of skills likely learned at home, Alice Hanlon had greater aspirations. Throughout the 1890 Milwaukee City directories, Alice appears in the city, usually living with a sibling, and listed not as a domestic,



STANDING (L TO R): MRS. EVAN THOMAS, WAUKESHA; MRS. W. H. OATWAY, WAUKESHA; MRS. H. M. YOUMANS, WAUKESHA. SITTING (L TO R): MRS. E. J. GEORGE, WAUKESHA; MRS. A. J. ROGERS, MILWAUKEE; MRS. HELEN HAIGHT, WAUKESHA. C.1916

but as a nurse.

Nursing had become an acceptable women's pursuit even by Victorian standards. It fell well in line with traditional expectations of women, catering to the nurturing care and domesticity ascribed to women's sphere of influence. While several nursing programs had begun in Milwaukee hospitals and schools, a nurse's role as assistant and subordinate to predominately male physicians were well defined. Nonetheless, nursing gave Alice a profession and provided a common field with her future husband - Dr. William H. Oatway.

Dr. William Oatway emigrated from Canada in 1891 and spent the decade of the 1890's throughout the upper mid-west. He considered several medical schools including Valparaiso Medical School in Indiana and Northwestern University in Illinois, before finally entering the Milwaukee Medical College (later merged with Marquette) graduating in 1897. [2] His specialty was Eye, Ear, Nose, and Throat, but seems to have expanded into general practice throughout his career.

Interestingly, the pair may not have met in Milwaukee. They both appeared in the 1900 Census living in Lake Mills, in Jefferson County. Alice was employed as a nurse in the Frank Brown Fargo home; while Dr. William Oatway lived in town on Main Street. A bit more research into the



WAUKESHA RED CROSS 1918

FRONT ROW - LEFT TO RIGHT: MRS. H. M. HORNING, MRS. GEORGE PALMER, MRS. J. SYLVESTER, MRS. F. E. TICHENOR, MISS G. BEAN, MRS. C. GOFF, MRS. R. DAILEY. BACK ROW - RIGHT TO LEFT: MRS. H. M. STENSLOFF, MRS. E.W. FENLON, MISS COLLINS, MRS. W. H. OATWAY, MRS. H. E. BLAIR, MRS. J. N. WIGGINTON.

Fargo family revealed that Dr. Oatway served as the family physician. Whether they crossed paths in the Fargo home or in town, the pair married in November of 1900. Their two children were born in the early years of their marriage – William H. Jr. in 1902 and Margaret Alice in 1905.

On August 7, 1913, the *Waukesha Freeman* reprinted an article from the *Lake Mills Leader*, announcing that Dr. Oatway and his family would be relocating to Waukesha. By October of that year, Dr. Oatway's business card could be found in the *Freeman* advertising his specialties and office hours.

Mrs. Alice Oatway was not an idle housewife in Waukesha. It is after their move that her work for suffrage is well documented in the public record. One of the great advantages for the Wisconsin movement, and Waukesha in particular, was Theodora Winton Youmans, Assistant Editor of the *Waukesha Freeman*. Her annual column "Votes for Women" provides an incredible record for the work of the Wisconsin Women's Suffrage Association (WWSA). Her column from August 13, 1914, announced the preparations for a fair the following day. The article outlines each table and booth, with Mrs. W. H. Oatway presiding over the candy booth, and Miss Margaret Oatway attending the literature table. Margaret would have been nine, standing alongside not only her mother, but in a room full of leaders in her community, witnessing their work and dedication to a cause devoted in part to her future. Local fairs made the suffrage movement accessible to

communities, sharing their message through familiar faces in approachable events.. The WWSA also understood it must make a political case for federal legislative action – an amendment to the U. S. Constitution became the primary aim.

On a rainy Monday on June 7, 1916, the Republican National Convention in Chicago felt the force of the midwestern suffrage movement. The groundwork for the national parties to adopt a suffrage platform plank was building, but party resistance was strong. To help bolster Wisconsin's presence, the WWSA arranged for Espenhain in Milwaukee to offer at \$3.10 "expense of round-trip ticket, Milwaukee-Chicago, including tunic and hat," from May 31 through June 6. Mrs. Oatway marched the wet, rainy course, the banner-woman at the head of the contingent. It was reported that Wisconsin women were only outnumbered by their Illinois sisters in the Chicago parade.

During the Great War, many of the women involved with the suffrage movement turned their attentions to the war efforts. The Salvation Army, YWCA, and Red Cross all gave women opportunities to provide direct support and service. Mrs. Oatway drew upon her nursing credentials, heading the Hospital Supply Division of the Waukesha Red Cross. Her involvement with the Red Cross continued until "her efforts exhausted her," but it did not end her civic engagement.

After the 19th Amendment was ratified nationally in 1920, Mrs. Oatway continued her work for the betterment of the county. She was a charter member of the Waukesha County Council of Women (WCCW) in 1922 with a mission to "Promote better health and welfare for children." Entirely volunteer based, the founding members all had experience in community organizing and had the professional knowledge to tackle the challenge. Early works included seemingly lighter causes such as supervising dance halls and lobbying for milk in school lunches. This was a veritable tip of the iceberg. The WCCW established health centers and implemented the first tuberculous testing and x-ray for school personnel; founded a well-baby clinic in 1933; and lobbied for a county nurse, and prohibition officer. These projects echoed many of the platform planks the League of Women Voters, and other women's lobbying groups had drafted following ratification.

Mrs. Alice Rose Hanlon Oatway's tunic is now on display in our Suffrage exhibit. Her story is remarkable yet familiar to women across the country whose humble beginnings led to tenacity and passion to affect remarkable change in their communities. □

#### Footnotes

1. Alice Oatway Obituary, Dr. William H. Oatway. *Physicians & Surgeons Book*.
2. Waukesha County Historical Society & Museum. Biography & Character Sketch, Dr. William H. Oatway. *Physicians & Surgeons Book*.