



LOOKING BACK...AND FINDING SURPRISES

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Monday, August 26 marked the ninety-ninth anniversary of the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. It reads: "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 I think about this right that I take for granted, it has not been in place that long.

I am a third-generation woman voter. Although I never knew my grandmother, she worked for suffrage and was one of the first women to vote in her rural county. I grew up hearing about this

legacy.

Suffrage for women had been proposed to Congress a number of times, beginning in 1878. It never gained traction until 1919 when the suffragettes set up protests in front of the White House to urge support from President Woodrow Wilson. The pressure helped the Nineteenth Amendment pass the House on May 21 and the Senate on June 4. It was sent to the states for ratification.

Tennessee was the last state needed to ratify. On August 18, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment passed by one vote. Senator Harry T. Burn changed his mind that morning while carrying in his pocket a letter from his mother urging him to pass suffrage. His yea vote sent the Nineteenth Amendment to U. S. Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby, who certified it as law on August 26, 1920. This is now known as Women's Equality Day.

While ratification was moving forward, suffrage leaders saw the need for one organization that would educate and support new women voters. On February 14, 1920 the League of Women Voters (LWV) was founded with its roots in a movement that dated back seventy-two years. The LWV will celebrate its one hundredth birthday this winter. The organization is political, but non-partisan. The League studies, then formulates and publishes, positions on national, state, and local issues, but does not take positions on candidates. While the LWV started as a

women's organization, it has included men for the last fifty years. Its name has never been changed since it is synonymous with the history of women's right to vote.

The League of Women Voters of the Gunnison Valley (LWVG) has already begun celebrating. You may have seen yellow roses in the Cattlemen's Day parade and at other events throughout the spring. The yellow rose was a symbol of those supporting suffrage, especially when lawmakers wore the rose on their lapels. Suffrage workers, sitting in balconies above legislative bodies, could count the support they had on the floor below.

This year the LWVG will be studying and presenting information about the suffrage movement. The local League plans to hold a community Equality Tea at the time of our one hundredth anniversary in mid-February. In addition, topics to be considered at League meetings this year will include National Popular Vote legislation, Medicare for All proposals, the upcoming census, state legislative reports, and local ballot issues.

LWVG invites anyone interested in current issues to join us. The League meets on the second Tuesday of each month in the conference room at the UGRWCD, 210 W. Spencer Ave. Contact LWVG at lwvgunnison@gmail.com.

In the early 1990s I received a photograph of my grandmother attending the signing of Michigan woman suffrage in 1918, two years before the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified.

Our family did not know this existed. My mother saw it in the Detroit Free Press and recognized her mother. Sixteen women line the office of Governor Albert Sleeper who sits at his desk beside a candlestick type telephone. None of the women pictured were identified, however, before her death, my mother was able to put names to three of the faces. This is so often the case with women in history. They surround us but remain invisible.

Locally, we have a rich, but unseen, history of women involved with all aspects of Gunnison County from ranchers such as Viverelle Esty, early scientists at Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory like Ruth Willey, and our first woman county commissioner Marlene Zanetell.

The anniversary year of woman suffrage is an opportunity for every family, and for us as a community, to think about the women in our history. It's a chance to ask questions and to recognize achievements. The League of Women Voters of the Gunnison Valley invites you to join us in our celebration of the past and our work towards fulfilling our current motto, "Making Democracy Work."

Lyda Mary Hardy retired as librarian in the Gunnison school district, and now serves as program chair in LWVG.