



From Seneca Falls to the Polling Booth

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CHAPTER FIVE: More Women Join The Struggle

Emancipation of the slaves was only one change the Civil War had brought about. Though they still did not have the vote nationwide, women had gained a great deal from the efforts they had made during the war.

A lot of women had taken on new tasks and responsibilities when their husbands went off to war. In addition to doing more tasks at home that men had done, many had to find ways to earn more money than the army paid their husbands, working either in stores and factories or in their homes.

Some also became volunteers, supporting the war effort in their own communities or going off to serve as nurses or in other ways.

A few women, like Clara Barton and Dorothea Dix, became well-known, made powerful friends through their service in the war, and came away with new knowledge of how to serve the public good. And many, many other women who never became famous were still more confident in themselves because of what they had done during the war.

Their experiences at home, in Washington or at the battlefields, would become a spark for several important social movements.

One of these was the Temperance Movement. There had long been small church groups that were opposed to alcohol, and some of them were able to get laws passed in their communities, controlling alcohol or even making it illegal.

But in 1873, the Women's Christian Temperance Union was founded, a national group dedicated to the goal of ending drunkenness and alcoholism in American society.

Alcohol abuse was not just a religious matter. It was also a serious issue for women.

Though the laws about marriage had improved, a woman married to an abusive alcoholic, or to someone who simply wasted the family's money on drink, had little chance of a decent life for her family. Since she was not permitted in most places to have her own bank account, he could spend every penny the family had.

And while there were some laws to protect women against physical abuse, they were not very strong and they were often ignored.

It was also very hard to get a divorce. If a husband was violent when he drank, or wasted all their money, there was little a woman could do to protect herself and their children.

The WCTU worked not only to ban alcohol, but on other women's issues like poverty, unfair pay and bad working conditions.

And very early in the group's existence, a woman stepped up to lead the WCTU who believed that, to make real progress, women must be able to vote.

Frances Willard took over the presidency of the WCTU and made suffrage a major part of the group's effort. Suddenly, the suffragists had a large, powerful and dedicated group to help as they went from state to state, trying to win referenda that would give women the vote.

But if the WCTU brought energy and volunteers to the struggle, it also brought some powerful enemies: Companies that made beer and liquor realized that, if women were allowed to vote, new laws could put their business at risk.

The subject of women's suffrage was touchy enough that state legislatures were often unwilling to vote on it themselves, but suffragists in those states could work to get a referendum on the ballot, so that voters could decide the issue.

Of course, the voters were all men.

There were quite a few men who felt women should have the right to vote. But there were many others who did not.

Some felt it wasn't ladylike to become involved in politics, or that women weren't smart enough to make good choices. They often made fun of women who wanted to vote.

Others did not disrespect women, but felt that, since wives would probably agree with their husbands, letting women vote was like giving married men two votes while single men only got one.

It was a challenge to win a women's suffrage referendum when only men were allowed to vote on it.

But the support of the temperance movement brought another problem: When a referendum was planned, the liquor companies would spend a lot of money to help persuade men to vote "no," and would tell bar owners and other beer and liquor dealers that they should help defeat the referendum.

It would be a long time before any of the referenda would be successful.

Meanwhile, however, the changes the war had caused brought other allies to the suffrage movement.

Women had begun working to improve the lives of the poor and to help working women get fair treatment, and they, too, understood the importance of giving women a voice in political decisions.

There were women who worked full-time for suffrage, but there were many strong, energetic women whose main work was in other areas but who considered themselves suffragists and could be counted on for support when they were needed.

Besides Clara Barton and Dorothea Dix, there were anti-poverty workers like Jane Addams, labor leaders like Kate Mullaney and Leonora Barry and others, like Josephine Shaw Lowell, who had started a consumer movement encouraging people to shop only in stores that were fair to the women who worked there.

Nellie Bly, one of the most famous reporters of the time, supported suffrage herself, and interviewed Anthony, writing "She is ideal and if we will have in women who vote what we have in her, let us all help to promote the cause of woman suffrage."

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