



From Seneca Falls to the Polling Booth

By Mike Peterson

Illustrations by Christopher Baldwin

CHAPTER SIX: The Struggle for the States

Even before Susan B. Anthony and Virginia Minor cast their illegal ballots, suffragists had begun working to change state laws one at a time. It was not an easy process, and it was not often successful.

Although the railroads connected major cities, traveling throughout an entire state was difficult. Wagons and dirt roads were uncomfortable, hotels were often plain and communication was all by postal service. Add the fact that, in many small towns, the newspaper was only published once a week and it was easy to feel very alone while going around a state trying to raise votes for women's rights.

But there were gains and victories, particularly in the West, where states were still being formed and where pioneer life made women more independent.

In some places, women were permitted to vote, but only in school elections. Then, in 1869, Wyoming's territorial legislature approved full women's suffrage, to the delight of suffragists throughout the country.

Later, in 1890, Wyoming was about to become a state, and the federal government told them they would have to come in as a men-only voting state. The Wyoming legislature responded with a telegram: "We will remain out of the Union for 100 years rather than go in without women suffrage."

Other attempts to get the vote for women were not nearly as successful, however. There seemed more hope in the West than elsewhere, but, even so, suffragists disagreed over whether it was worthwhile to seek the vote state by state.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association, convinced that the women would never get the vote until there was a constitutional amendment giving them that right.

The American Woman Suffrage Association, formed by Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, felt the state-by-state method would eventually work, and that they would do better by asking for suffrage rather than demanding it.

The two groups remained separate for 21 years, until 1890 when they united as the National American Woman Suffrage Association. But suffragists were still divided over the question of whether it was better to be polite and use the system to get what they wanted, or to demand to be heard in ways that were not always polite, or even legal.

As the 20th Century dawned, women were becoming impatient.

They had seen some victories, and by 1900, women had gained the right to vote not only in Wyoming but in Utah, Colorado and Idaho, and more states were allowing them to participate in some local elections.

Still, they had lost referenda in several other states.

Now women were becoming more outspoken about fairness, and less patient about being ignored.

In 1894, women in New York State turned in a petition with 600,000 signatures, asking for a referendum on a suffrage amendment, but the legislative committee turned them down.

Jean Brooks Greenleaf, the president of the New York State Women's Suffrage Association, was outraged that the committee members had decided the men of the state "should not be allowed to decide whether their wives, mothers and daughters should be enfranchised or not."

Women were also less patient about newspaper editorials and cartoons that made fun of "the New Woman," less patient with men treating them as if they were little children, less patient with being told that wanting to vote was not "ladylike."

In 1900, just before her 80th birthday, Susan B. Anthony stepped down as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, a role she had taken over from Stanton a few years earlier. In her farewell remarks, she spoke of "the three I's."

When women asked for the vote, she said, they were told it was “indelicate,” then that it was “immodest” and finally that it was “impractical.”

And, indeed, women had been hearing such things at least since 1851, when Sojourner Truth had stood up at one of the first meetings on women’s rights and declared that, having worked as a slave and lived the hard life of a slave, she was not a weak, delicate thing but the equal of any man.

Now, as the new century began, Rose Schneiderman, a labor leader in New York who worked to form unions for women in the clothing industry, joined in the effort to get them the vote.

When a state senator said that letting women participate in politics would cause them to lose their delicacy and charm, Schneiderman was furious that a politician who refused to help women get better pay and fair treatment at work, now felt they were too delicate to vote:

“Of course, you know the reason they are employed in foundries is that they are cheaper and work longer hours than men. Women in the laundries, for instance, stand for 13 or 14 hours in the terrible steam and heat with their hands in hot starch. Surely these women won’t lose any more of their beauty and charm by putting a ballot in a ballot box once a year than they are likely to lose standing in foundries or laundries all year round,” she said.

A new generation of suffragists was stepping forward. Some, like Schneiderman, were tough, experienced and street-smart. Others, like Alice Paul and Inez Milholland, were better-educated than women had ever been before. All were energetic and eager to take their rightful place in the nation.

And they were not patient, nor were they worried about being called unladylike.

*Text Copyright 2015, Mike Peterson
Illustrations copyright 2015 Christopher Baldwin*