

Crusading Women: Santa Cruz was a Hotbed of Suffrage Fight

By Ross Eric Gibson

Women were granted the right to vote 75 years ago under the 19th amendment, but the fight for that right began much earlier. In California, the battle for women's suffrage started 99 years ago.

The fight for California women's suffrage came during the presidential campaign year of 1896. The campaign brought the top celebrities of the movement to Santa Cruz, including town-founder Elihu Anthony's relative, Susan B. Anthony. The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* was strongly in favor of suffrage, while the *Surf* was opposed.

In May, a suffrage convention was held at the Methodist Church, which was decorated with yellow flowers, the color of the suffrage movement. Bows of yellow ribbons were worn as symbols of support. The Civil War Women's Reserve Corps represented the local veterans' hall. But supporters were urged to give up their seats for any opponents who came.

Men were seated in a block in the central pews, with women on the side aisles. The Yellow Ribbon Choir opened with suffrage songs. Then author Elizabeth Yates approached a podium draped with an American flag showing only three yellow stars. They stood for Colorado, Wyoming and Utah, the only states where women had the right to vote for president. She told the convention that denying women the vote put them in the same class as Chinese, Indians, idiots and criminals.

The following day, the featured speaker was a national celebrity, the Rev. Anna Shaw, who in 1880 was ordained the first female Methodist minister and was a leader in the nationwide movement to win the right to vote. Her companion of 30 years was Lucy Anthony, niece of Susan B. Anthony. Shaw's popularity required meeting at the larger YMCA Hall on Pacific Avenue. She described the evolution of American voting rights, at first restricted to male church members, then male property owners, then all white men, then including black men.

She said women built the country as much as men did, and they should not be denied the right to vote. She gave a point-by-point response to locally voiced objections, and concluded that only the dead and the foolish never change their minds, and aren't worth convincing. The *Surf* newspaper reported that her speech was much better than one she gave in Santa Cruz a year earlier, and refrained from calling men "the tyrant sex," since only men would decide the fate of women's suffrage.

In July, the State Suffrage Association met at Native Sons Hall. Oakland's Unitarian pastor, Eliza Wilkes, delivered her church's endorsement. She said some feared that voting would make women aggressive and less feminine. "Three years ago, the Presbyterians wondered if women should be permitted to pray in church," she said. Others, like the Christian Church, "have gone so far as to ordain female ministers" as a show of support.

Two weeks later, a convention at Garfield Park tabernacle provided the largest hall yet for the overflow crowds who came to hear Susan B. Anthony. "The moment a woman marries, she loses custody of her rights and property" to her husband, Anthony said. In spite of "my 30 years of teaching, an uneducated man would earn \$30 a month, and I only \$1.50 a week."

How can a woman be a real American, she asked, "if she is subject to taxation without representation? . . . Some insist that the majority of women don't want to vote. And I reply, neither do the majority of men, but just try taking their option to vote away." Numerous outbursts of applause were concluded with a church resolution of support.

A reception was held for Anthony at the St. George Hotel dining room, which had been leased as suffrage headquarters. Suffrage gained endorsements from the state Republican, Populist, and Prohibition parties, and a one-third vote from the Democrats.

But state suffrage was defeated that November. Florence Matheson, a Felton woman who worked for the San Francisco Examiner, said the movement suffered internal dissent because seven Easterners, and no Californians, led the state campaign. They made arguments suited to more oppressive conditions back East than in California, she said. This didn't mesh with California voters, who had a defensive kind of state boosterism and were trying to overcome an image as the Wild West. Matheson said they must have seen the suffragettes as Effete Easterners talking down to the "uncivilized" West.

Sources

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