

Montclair Equal Suffrage League: Grassroots Suffragists

PART 2

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IN THE LAST ISSUE of *Montclair Neighbors*, we shared part of a first-person narrative from a Montclair suffragist. Her article, "Recollections of the Montclair Equal Suffrage League by an Old Timer," is in the Montclair History Center's archives. Written by a woman who referred to herself only as "an old timer," this 1950 article details the work of the women who founded the league in 1910. In Part 1, she talked about the impetus for founding the league, their first meeting, and the formation of an anti-suffrage group that also formed in Montclair. The women were ready to become more visible activists for social change.

"Word came that there was to be a suffrage parade in New York, and we were urged to take part," she writes. "It is hard to realize nowadays, when publicity is sought after on all sides, what an almost shocking proposal this was. Parading in the streets! No Lady - but we felt we must do it for the Cause, and our problem was whether to tell our husbands before we marched or after. Aside from our palpitating emotions, it was a pretty dull parade, no bands, no costumes, no color - just a long stream of earnest women two abreast."

"Our next parade was in Newark, where Mrs. Henry Lang stoutly marching over the cobblestones of Broad Street was almost run down by a mounted policeman, eager to keep the peace. I doubt if we made much impression on Newark, but we were learning about parades, and our next one in New York was a real parade."

"We dressed in in white, with yellow sashes from shoulder to hip, and we had a banner eight feet long with the name Montclair Equal Suffrage League carried by two of our prettiest

members. There were several bands, and throngs of marchers from all over the country gathered in the side streets around Washington Square waiting for the signal to start. Best of all this time the men joined us. They marched in a delegation behind the women and probably we received the applause while they got the catcalls. It was a perfect day and we seemed to float from Washington Square to 59th Street, our feet barely touching the ground. We were not all young either. Mrs. Powell Macy, well over seventy, walked the whole distance with us."

"When I came home I brought two small yellow banners with the words 'Votes for Women.' We had carried them in the parade, and I thought our young daughters would like them. They did, to the extent of forming a sidewalk parade outside our house. The next day we observed that our neighbor across the street

repeatedly called her little girl into the house. She was not to play with 'those children' anymore. As a result our younger daughter came to me in tears, 'Please Mummy, don't be a Boats for Women lady anymore.' She was learning at an early age what happens to non-conformists."

The Montclair Equal Suffrage League then decided to go door-to-door canvassing for new members. Our anonymous writer recalls, "I could never harden myself to that moment when the door opened, and the defender of the fortress looked at the outsider, 'What,' she seemed to say, 'are you selling?' It's no easier to sell suffrage than books or brushes, and we were not always turned away politely."

Members of the group took public speaking lessons with Beatrice Forbes Robertson, whose lecture in Newark had kicked off the Montclair Equal Suffrage League. They also attended a one-week School for Suffrage Workers in New York City run by Carrie Chapman Catt, a well-known suffrag-

ist and founder of the National League of Women Voters (1920). She recalls, "We left home in the early morning, returning in the late afternoon, and before the days of frozen foods, pressure cookers and babysitters that required a bit of planning. But Carrie Chapman Catt was a great leader, and we always came home in a mood of exaltation. Now we knew how to answer those arguments -- Woman Suffrage will merely double the vote. Women will vote as their husbands do. Polling places are unfit for women. They will lose their femininity. Woman Suffrage will only increase the cost of government. Woman's place is in the HOME."

As the nineteen-teens advanced, the League continued to bring noted suffragist speakers to Montclair. "In those days," our narrator recalls, "before the radio showered its wealth upon us,



Montclair's own suffragette, Lucy Stone

PHOTO COURTESY MONTCLAIR HISTORY CENTER

a public meeting on almost any subject was a matter of stimulation and interest. There were no apathetic audiences. We held our breath to get a first look at the speaker and did not miss a syllable."

Although several states and territories had begun to allow women to vote prior to the 19th Amendment, New Jersey was not one of them. In 1919, Congress voted in favor of women's suffrage. Thirty-six states needed to ratify it before it would become the law of the land.

Our historian tells the rest of the story: "We did not have the satisfaction of seeing New Jersey ratify the Amendment, but in 1920, Tennessee, the thirty-sixth state went over the top and the vote was won."

"Mrs. Catt in her wisdom did not allow this great reservoir of patriotic enthusiasm to dissolve. She summed all suffrage leagues in the country to meet and reform as an educational organization. Thus began the glorious history of the League of Women Voters."

"Following Mrs. Catt's orders, we held a victory luncheon with one hundred women present in May 1920, at Unity Church, the same spot where ten years before we had begun our work. In our groping, amateurish, and sometimes over-zealous attempts to make friends and influence people we had not dreamed that one day an organization would spring from us dedicated to the effective use of what we had won, an organization with worldwide prestige, enlightened, scholarly and authoritative, one of the great forces of democracy."

Today, nearly 100 years later, the League of Women Voters of the Montclair Area continues to live out the vision of those early grassroots suffragists as an educational organization that serves as a force of democracy. ■

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