The fight for women’s suffrage in Lycoming County

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Susan B. Anthony, another pioneer of the women’s suffrage movement, visited Williamsport in November 1870. Like Stanton, Anthony spoke at the Ulman Opera House. Her lecture was entitled “False Theories,” and the Gazette and Bulletin reported that it was met with applause. Anthony’s “false theory” was the “delusive idea entertained by such large numbers of women that they are simply born to be supported.”

She urged the women in the audience to prepare to work in the various trades and professions and stated that women should advocate for their daughters to do the same.

Another leader of the suffrage movement, Lucretia Coffin Mott, a Philadelphia Quaker, had spoken in Williamsport decades earlier, in 1843, when she was on tour advocating for the abolitionist cause.

Despite their best efforts, the founding mothers saw little progress during the latter part of the nineteenth century in getting the vote for women on either the state or the national level.

Progressive era

According to the National Women’s History Museum, a coalescence of events in the first quarter of the twentieth century helped to revitalize the suffrage movement. The Progressive Era, spanning from 1890 to 1929, gave “new life to all reform efforts. Millions of women from all ethnic, class, and racial backgrounds entered public life to address severe social problems through innovative reforms.” As women’s roles in society expanded, so did the activism that politicized women and brought them into mainstream politics.

The Progressive movement took hold in Williamsport, where women formed more than 30 organizations, including the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the Home for Friendless Women, the Women’s Christian Association, and the Home for Aged Colored Women. The women organized in Pennsylvania was educational and generally peaceful, with women organizing in clubs, leagues, or branches of the Woman Suffrage Party. The Civic Club, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the College Club, the Home and School League, the Business and Professional Women’s Club and the Civic Club Civic Department were all very active in the suffrage movement.

They held open meetings; spoke at schools, churches, the courthouse, and the county courthouse; distributed literature throughout the city; and sponsored and attended state conventions.

Groups elsewhere were much more radical. Alice Paul, influenced by British suffragists, founded the National Women’s Party. She organized a large demonstration in Washington, D.C., at the inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson in 1913.

On the evening of the Alice Paul Institute, the suffragists arrested at that demonstration were sent to Occoquan Workhouse, a prison in Virginia, where they staged hunger strikes.

By all accounts, Paul and her compatriots were treated brutally. She and several other suffragists were force-fed, and prison officials removed Paul to a sanitarium in hopes of having her declared insane.

In 1917, in response to public outcry about the prison abuse of suffragists, President Wilson reversed his position and announced his support for a suffrage amendment. In 1919, Congress passed the 19th amendment, first drafted 41 years earlier. Mrs. B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. A year later, it was ratified by the requisite number of states and became law.

Local activists

Among the many Lycoming County women whose names were frequently associated with the suffrage movement, in addition to Henrietta Baldy Lyon, president of the Williamsport Women’s Suffrage Party, were Mrs. Robert Fleming Allen, Mrs. Newton C. Chatham and Mary Elizabeth Crocker.

Mrs. Robert Fleming Allen, of South Williamsport, born Edith Bennington, chaired the local suffrage movement while she still had young children at home. After the death of Robert Allen, she married Renshaw C. DeWitt. Later, as Mrs. Edith DeWitt, she played an exceptionally active role in local and state politics and in the Democratic Party. She was elected a delegate to the national presidential nominating conventions in 1924 and 1940, and she served as Pennsylvania’s Deputy Secretary for Welfare and Deputy State Treasurer.

In 1930, she ran for the office of Secretary for Internal Affairs, but was defeated.

Mrs. Newton C. Chatham, born Louise Lazelle, was very active in local civic groups, as well as chairing the local suffrage group. In 1911, she was the first female candidate for Williamsport School Committee, a post she did not win. At 48, she began to pursue her life-long dream of studying law, entering Boston Law School (which her son was a student at M.I.T.). After graduating magna cum laude, she was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1925. She was the first woman ever admitted to the bar in Lycoming County.

Mary Elizabeth Crocker, a librarian who graduated from Drexel University in 1906, was another star of the local suffrage movement. After working in the New York Public Library, she returned to her hometown of Williamsport and in 1906 was appointed first assistant to O. R. Howard Thompson, the first director of the brand new James V. Brown Library.

The first presidential election in which women could vote was 1920, in which Warren G. Harding, Republican, defeated the Democratic contender, James M. Cox. On election night, the Williamsport YMCA hosted an open house for the women of Lycoming County, giving them an opportunity to attend a general rally and to listen to the election returns. Local activists celebrated the dream that had come true because of their hard work and steadfastness.

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