Henrietta Baldy Lyon: Our own suffragist

WilliamSPORT Women

Local women played an important part in winning women the right to vote, and Henrietta Baldy Lyon highlighted that role when she addressed the large celebration held in the Community House in September 1920, after the 19th amendment was ratified. The Gazette and Bulletin reported that she gave an “effective talk in which she spoke on the long struggle and the important part played by the women of Pennsylvania and Lycoming County.”

That amendment to the Constitution guarantees that no state can deny the right to vote on the basis of sex.

Baldy Lyon was a central figure in the movement; she was chair of the Lycoming County Suffrage Party at its convention in September 1915. One of Williamsport’s elite, she lived on Millionaire’s Row.

As Barbara Ertel said in discussing Baldy Lyon’s home at 219 W. Fourth St. in “The West Fourth Street Story” (1975), Baldy Lyon had “courage and tenacity” when she joined the battle for the vote.

Suffrage was not the only cause that Baldy Lyon worked for. When the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, the suffragists, who were by then very well organized in Lycoming County, turned their attention also to supporting the war effort. Baldy Lyon became the Lycoming County chair of the Women’s Liberty Loan Committee. She was an organizer of the Lycoming County Red Cross Society, the Lycoming County Food Committee and the Lycoming County Speakers Bureau.

Adopted daughter

Born on April 14, 1865 in Danville, Pennsylvania, the youngest of the five children of Henry Hurley Baldy, a prominent lawyer, and Henrietta Cooperwoman Montgomery Baldy. Her mother died shortly after she was born, and she was raised in Williamsport by her great-aunt, Caroline, and her husband, Edward Lyon, a lumberman. She took the name Lyon out of respect for her adopted parents.

On both sides of her family, Baldy Lyon could trace her roots back to Colonial times, and she was a member of the Pennsylvania Society of the Colonial Dames of America.

At 16, she went to Elmira College for one year. When she was 31 she attended Bryn Mawr College. In the College catalog, she is listed as a “Hearer in Latin, English, German and French, 1899-1900, 1901.” (A "hearer" was someone who applied for a course but was not enrolled in a degree program). Bryn Mawr records indicate that she had “prepared at Miss Lyon’s School in Philadelphia.” According to her obituary, she also attended Barnard College in New York and Washington University in St. Louis, Mo.

We have one photograph of Henrietta, taken when she must have been in her late 50s and published along with a profile in Col. Thomas H. Lloyd’s History of Lycoming County (1929). There also is a physical description of her at age 24, written when she applied for a passport. She is described as being five feet tall and having brown hair, blue eyes, a fair complexion, a high forehead, a Roman nose, a well-formed chin and a moderately full face.

As an unmarried woman, she had the time and the freedom to dedicate her talent and energy to civic and charitable affairs. The Gazette and Bulletin reported that in April 1906 she held a fundraising bridge party at the Country Club to benefit the Home for the Friendless; she held many such fundraisers. We know that she was one of the very few women in the city who drove an automobile. In 1905, the Gazette and Bulletin reported that she was involved in an automobile accident, she allegedly had been driving at a high rate of speed up West Fourth Street.

Winningsuffrage

In Lycoming County, the suffragists’ goal was to organize every ward and precinct in the city for the cause. While Baldy Lyon was traveling all over the state and bringing state and national leaders to Williamsport, the opposition also was active.

In 1915, the anti-suffragists in Lycoming County elected as chair Mrs. H. D. McCormick. Rebecca Foreman was vice chair; Katherine Reardon, secretary. According to a speaker at a county meeting, the anti-suffragists considered themselves “real progressives, believing that they were more in line with constitutional rules. Reporting an address by an out-of-state speaker, Mrs. O. D. Oliphant, of Trenton, N. J., at one of the first anti-suffrage gatherings in the city, the Sept. 8, 1915, The Williamsport Sun said that many women were fearful of the push for votes for women and that “the majority of her sex does not want to see woman brought down to the level of man.”

In Nov. 1916, the Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association’s 48th annual convention took place in Williamsport. The Lycoming County Historical Society held a copy of the official convention program, and a digitized copy is part of the Lycoming County Women’s History Collection at www.lycoming.edu.org/lcvchc.

At left is the home of Henrietta Baldy Lyon, courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society. Above is a clipping from the Williamsport Gazette and Bulletin on Feb. 2, 1918 from the Lycoming County Women’s History collection.

Read more about the fight for (and against) suffrage in Lycoming County, the 19th-century visits of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the activities of our own local suffragettes in next month’s “Williamsport Women.”

Sieminski is a retired librarian and manager of the Lycoming County Women’s History Collection. Her column is published the second Sunday of each month and can be reached at lifesan gazette.com.