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'Women's Rights' Fight Prominent in Early 1900s

In the 11th Century, Lady Godiva protesting her husband's unfair taxation of the people "demonstrated" against the injustice by staging her famous ride through the town of Coventry.

"Crusades and Causes" led by women fill the pages of history, and American women stand out among the best of them.

By the turn of the century, the

women's suffrage movement in the United States was well on its way, the road being paved by such notables as Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, Antoinette Brown, Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

The modern woman of Birmingham owes a great deal to the women of a century ago who scheduled Historical Society meetings on Monday as open defiance to the wash-day tradition of the time.

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MUCH TO the bewilderment of the men, the ladies just would not stay put any longer. The "feminist" movement was blamed on the bicycle craze which encouraged simple clothing and the automobile with the demure Gibson girl and the steering wheel.

But woman's hardest battle was on the political front.

Fewer than 50 years it was an uphill battle. By 1908, after 480 organized campaigns, only four states granted the voting franchise to women.

LEAVING THE home and entering the voting booth would cause women to lose their femininity was the theory upheld by the opposition.

The dramatic militancy of the English Suffragettes perpetuated this theory among the foes of women's rights, but was a booster shot to the drooping American movement. These English women capable of violence to achieve their ends were not masculine in appearance nor coarse in manner, but well-bred, graceful, patriotic women.

Suddenly, possibly because of the influence of the English movement, prominent women with social status joined "the cause."

Suffrage not only became respectable but fashionable as well. Socialites Inez Mulholland and Portia Willis added a glamorous touch so badly needed by the movement. And all doubt about the femininity of the movement vanished the day Lillian Russell joined up!

The moment of truth came on May 21, 1910 in New York City—a parade down Fifth Avenue.

Walking down the middle of the street caused even the most dedicated suffragette to shudder at the daring of their demonstration. Only a few hundred women were in the parade and the rainy weather wilted their already soggy spirits.

The sparse crowd jeered, and the women suffered the greatest humiliation of all—they were completely ignored!

ONE YEAR LATER, another parade was scheduled but was hardly termed a success. More women participated, crowds were larger and jeered louder, and the parade was late getting started.

Of course, everyone knew that women were never on time; just one more reason why they shouldn't vote!

Nineteen hundred and twelve and woman's suffrage was at the crossroads.

California had been won by a narrow margin and new campaigns were launched in six western states, Michigan among them.

The third and decisive parade was a turning point. A band broke out with "Everybody's Doing It," cheers replaced jeers, and hecklers were hauled off to jail. An open carriage covered with lilacs carried 87-year-old Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the last of the 1848 suffrage pioneers.

The mood of the people had changed in one year and the realization of the strength of the movement was evident by the number of women participating. The time had passed for putting the issue in terms of masculinity.

OPTIMISM WAS running high in Michigan as a result of the successful demonstration, and veteran campaigners were convinced of a victory for the women in 1912. Early returns indicated an easy majority, then without explanation they lost the election by 763 popular votes.

The Suffrage Amendment was submitted to the voters again on November 5, 1918 and Michigan became the seventh state to grant women the right to vote.

The "out-of-the-kitchen" movement did not mean that women jumped into politics.

Suffrage had its roots in the Birmingham area in the development of cultural, historical and charitable organizations.

EARLY IN the area's history, women demonstrated a responsibility in community affairs. Not all women were interested in political reform, but women wielded the leadership for the civic work done on the local scene.

One example is the Baldwin Public Library whose existence is the result of the vision and dedication of Martha Baldwin.

Birmingham women were among the campaigners for the Michigan Suffrage Amendment as well as the Federal Constitutional Amendment.

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