

RURAL VOICES ON THE PATH TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS

PRO-SUFFRAGE SENTIMENT

A GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE
BY THE PEOPLE FOR THE PEOPLE



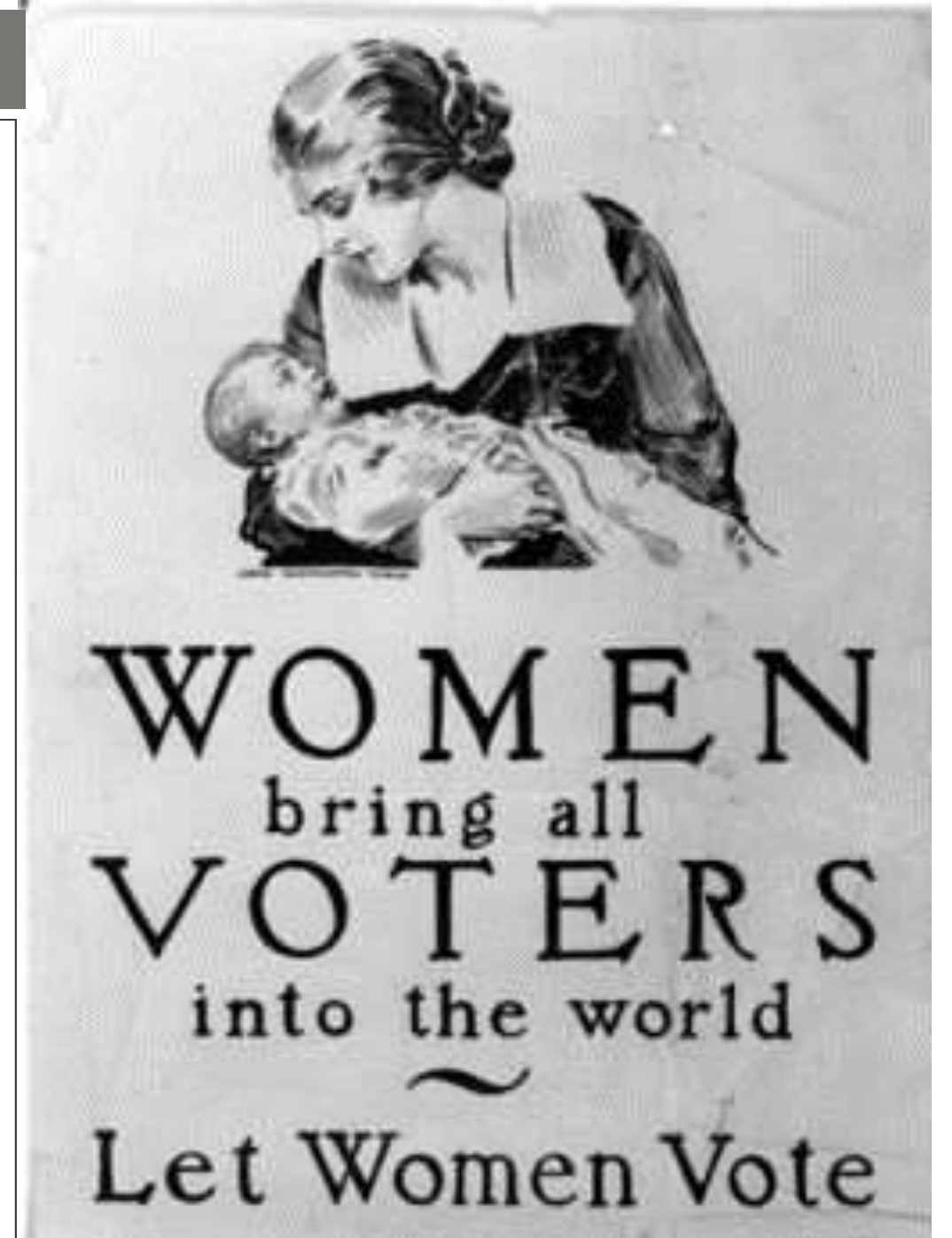
ARE NOT THE WOMEN HALF THE NATION?

SENECA FALLS CONVENTION OF 1848

At the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, N.Y. on July 19, 1848, a woman's rights convention—the first ever held in the United States—convened with almost 200 women in attendance. Elizabeth Cady Stanton read the “Declaration of Sentiments and Grievances,” a treatise that she had drafted over the previous few days. Stanton's declaration was modeled closely on the Declaration of Independence, and its preamble featured the proclamation,

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights...

The Declaration of Sentiments and Grievances then detailed the injustices inflicted upon women in the United States and called upon U.S. women to organize and petition for their rights. On the second day of the convention, men were invited to attend—and some 40 did, including the famous African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass. That day, the Declaration of Sentiments and Grievances was adopted and signed by the assembly. For proclaiming a women's right to vote, the Seneca Falls Convention was subjected to public ridicule, and some backers of women's rights withdrew their support. However, the resolution marked the beginning of the women's suffrage movement in America. Thereafter, national woman's rights conventions were held annually, providing an important focus for the growing women's suffrage movement.



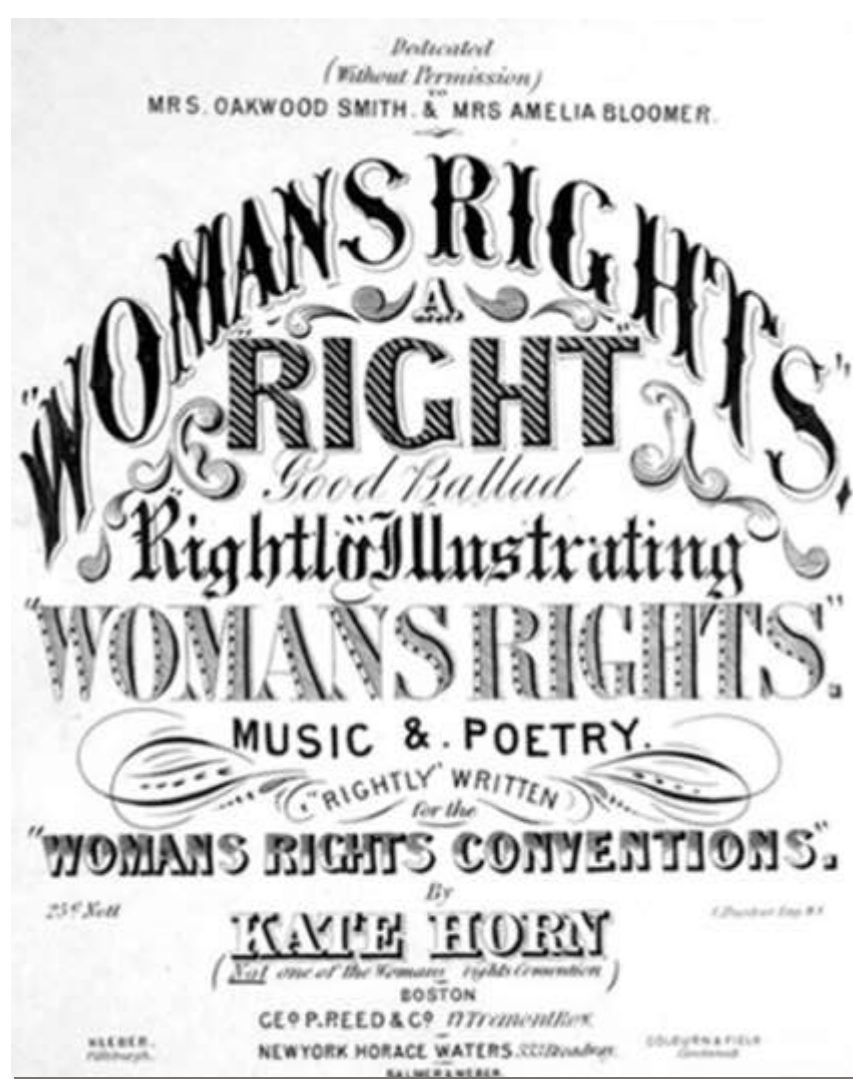
IN THE PRESS

Many supported women's efforts to gain the vote and to have educational and career opportunities. Much of the news of the day, as reported in the local papers, concerned local gossip, church news and social visits, however, The Dryden Herald and The Ithaca were notable in their coverage on the progress of suffrage efforts locally, nationally and globally.

The Dryden Herald (3/7/1894) headlined in their Woman's World Column:

“Mrs. Russell Sage Takes a Stand as Woman Suffragist”. Margaret Olivia Sage, a highly regarded millionaire and philanthropist was born in Syracuse and worked as a teacher struggling to make a living before her marriage to Russell Sage, one of the greatest Wall Street investors of the 19th century. She was active in supporting women's rights and causes in her later years. She stated, “I am not a pronounced woman's rights woman, but since such women as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Julia Ward Howe are leading a movement with this purpose in view, I shall not withhold my name and my purse for its support. I am in favor of such a movement, as is also Mr. Sage. I thoroughly believe in women having a voice in the government, especially when they are taxed.

Taxation without representation will no more be imposed on women today than it was years ago upon our ancestors when under the English yoke.” When asked if she thought women would vote if they had the opportunity, she responded, “The best women would vote the best way. Of course there might be the bad element, but I feel assured that less fraud would be practiced and the polls made more respectable by women voting. On the whole, I believe women would elevate politics as they have everything else they have gone into. Women are voting in Colorado, and if suffrage gets a footing in New York other states will follow.” (DH 10/23/1889)



NEW YORK STATE WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE CONVENTION IN ITHACA

In Ithaca, women were gathering in support of the right of women to vote. The New York State Women's Suffrage Convention was held in Ithaca on November 12-15, 1894 bringing well-known advocates, including Susan B. Anthony, to town. It was reported as the most successful gathering in the history of the Association. The purpose was to urge the legislation of 1895 to adopt a resolution to change the constitution to strike 'male' from the Constitution. Susan B. Anthony spoke and it was said:

It is to be regretted that the address made on this occasion could not have reached the ears of all New York. Never did the great suffrage leader speak more grandly. Never did she make the cause more clear. In listening to her, even her own followers felt the enthusiasm of first conversion. Toward the close she asked for questions and several were put, relating to the objections which have special force among the anti-suffragists. With a very few exceptions her audience was apparently with her. It shook with laughter when she sought to amuse, and was sympathetically serious when she made her earnest plea. So completely did the power of her eloquence clear the atmosphere of the mists and fogs of prejudice that for the time being success seemed near. A vote of thanks was passed before adjournment.

According to the minutes of the Constitutional Amendment campaign in March 1894, the sentiment of the women in the country was favorable towards equal suffrage. The convention brought over 4000 signature obtained. The most opposition was actually from within the city of Ithaca where leading social women did not want to identify with women of lower or working classes. Most women reacted positively to the campaign and one woman reported that for 100 women approached only 1 did not sign her petition. The amendment did not pass but seeds were sown for future change.

THE ROAD TO VICTORY

The next step for women's suffrage came in 1913, when complaints against taxation without representation were answered with a state law that permitted women to vote on town and village tax propositions. Women in incorporated cities were not included in this legislation, but the rural women of Tompkins County had gained their first vote in the political sphere. In 1915 the issue came before voters again. It was reported that the vote in the county was close, the majority in favor being only 115. The city of Ithaca favored the question by 196 but the vote in the towns was much closer. Five of the nine towns gave majorities in favor of suffrage and four went against it. Ulysses voted yes by one, 280 against and 281 for. In Dryden, four districts voted favorably and two against. The question was lost by the total vote of the six districts, 381 against to 347 favorable. The paper further reported that:

Tompkins county suffragists, like their sisters throughout the state, are undaunted by their defeat of November 2nd and are already preparing for a new campaign.

After the triumphant vote on November 6, 1917, the paper reported that *“The vote on the suffrage questions ran about even in Dryden. Leaders of both sides claim the victory in the state.”*

The 1917 result followed 50 years of marching, fund-raising and rallies. That victory was achieved despite the fears of antisuffragists that when a woman received the right to vote, “political gossip would cause her to neglect the home, forget to mend our clothes and burn the biscuits.” The measure carried by more than 100,000 votes statewide and it was thought that when New York women won the right to vote in 1917, they created a landslide effect that would usher in the final effort for the constitutional amendment in 1920.

While much has been written about some of the national leaders in the movement, less can be discovered about these local leaders and some of the men who worked alongside them. There was a strong local support base in Ithaca and on Cornell University, but we have only an imperfect idea of its impact on life for rural women. These women did not march down their Main Streets demanding suffrage and many in fact, were hesitant to bring suffrage to the forefront of discussion in their local social or charity groups. While they may have been reluctant to embrace the activism of the national suffragist movement, they had discourse on the issue. Political Study Groups, W.C.T.U. and Grange meetings hosted speakers on the issue of women's suffrage in Etna, Groton, Newfield and Lansing.

According to the close vote seen in 1915, many women wanted the vote, not as a symbol, but because they wanted to be able to affect public policy and social reform. Although many women did not seek the vote, they saw it as a civic duty once it was given. One woman, writing in the Dryden Herald in 1880 after New York granted women the vote in school board elections, urged the “vast sisterhood” who had not sought the vote take up their ballots for the sake of a moral, respectable government. *“With this new privilege there come new obligations which we cannot escape and duties we must not overlook”* she cautioned. To neglect to vote because one did not wish to do so was to neglect the whole future of the Republic. Once the vote had become a reality, local women were quick to embrace it. In 1920, 34% of the total voters enrolled in Tompkins County were female.

