



WOMAN SUFFRAGE and ETHNICITY in RURAL MINNESOTA

Local Agitation in Pipestone and Lyon Counties

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ON JUNE 26, 1916, Rene Stevens, a field director for the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), sent a long letter to Ethel Briggs, office secretary for the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA), detailing the results of her recent trip to southwestern Minnesota. As an affiliate of NAWSA, MWSA had hired Stevens in January to organize suffrage clubs across the state. The work was slow going, prompting Stevens to concoct a plan to drum up support by hold-

ing a MWSA quarterly conference in southwestern Minnesota. Her letter served as an evaluation of potential sites.

Lincoln County's town of Ivanhoe was unfit, Stevens noted, because it was on a railroad stub and "practically unreachable." Worthington, in Nobles County, seemed an attractive location, but a quick visit confirmed otherwise. The few local suffragists Stevens could find there told her how difficult it had been to organize a district conference earlier that year because the "spirit of inhospitality was revolting as well as deadening to the success of the meet-

ing." While Stevens's interlocutors did not elaborate on what had gone wrong with the previous gathering, the Worthington suffragists also quashed any future plans by declaring that they could not possibly fund the conference. In Rock County, Luverne was promising, but it had only one hotel—and "not a good one"—which meant that "practically everyone with a spare room would have to be interested enough to take a guest." When Stevens approached Luverne's Equal

ABOVE: Scandinavian women in national costume march for suffrage in Minneapolis, 1913.

Suffrage Society—a group she called a “band of old conservatives”—about hosting the conference, they flatly turned her down.¹

Ultimately, Pipestone, a small town on the border of South Dakota and county seat of Pipestone County, emerged as the best location. With Pipestone accessible by rail, Stevens estimated that she could find enough local support among ethnically and religiously diverse women to pull off the conference. Plans that drew in locals whom MWSA assumed were unreservedly opposed to woman suffrage actually revealed the opposite. Before the mid-1910s, the suffrage cause had been unpopular in rural areas in part because grassroots organizing—in general as well as among ethnic groups—had been limited. Stevens’s visit signaled MWSA’s new focus on outreach. As organizers tapped into Pipestone and other rural enclaves, suffragists began to understand how Minnesota’s European ethnic diversity and vibrant social and religious networks shaped local politics.²

Two years later, in July 1918, a young MWSA field-worker named Grace Randall visited Lyon County, also in southwestern Minnesota. Populated primarily by Norwegian,

German, Belgian, and French Canadian immigrants who despised woman suffrage, Lyon County was not a hotbed of activity for the cause. Nonetheless, Randall convinced four local women to lead suffrage efforts there. By August the quartet was working diligently, despite the odds, to collect signatures on a pro-suffrage petition and to secure support from local organizations. Over the next two months, all four women—Laura Lowe, Minnie Matthews, Harriet Sanderson, and Tillie Deen—carried out grueling schedules to complete

it would upend rigid gender notions of women as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters. In addition, many Minnesotans opposed the cause because they associated it with temperance. For decades, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union had been a champion of woman suffrage, and many suffragists belonged to this national organization. Immigrants whose ethnic customs embraced the consumption of alcohol mistrusted suffragists. Anti-temperance sentiment was especially high in Lyon County.

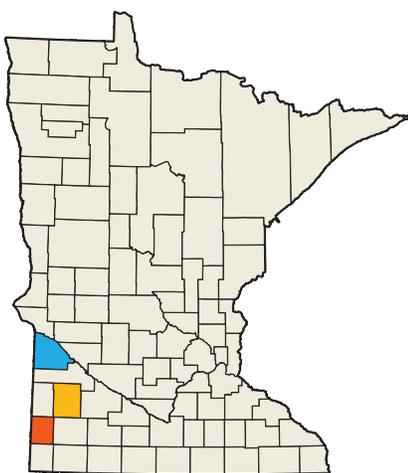
The hardest-fought battles of woman suffrage in Minnesota took place in counties like Pipestone and Lyon, where women combated ignorance or apathy among their neighbors.

the work for MWSA while also continuing their responsibilities to the Red Cross in supporting both an influenza outbreak and US troops fighting in World War I.³

How these four women came to woman suffrage and achieved the success they did in the previously unfertile territory of Lyon County provides important insights into how the woman suffrage quest unfolded in Minnesota and why the state lagged behind its neighbors in pro-suffrage activity until the mid-1910s, when new leadership and young talent flooded MWSA. Though woman suffrage activists continued to face difficulties, MWSA’s evolution, thanks to the organizing and fundraising skills of its newly elected president, Clara Ueland, made possible the cause’s striking transformation from one of Minnesota’s least desirable political causes to one of the most fashionable.

Most Minnesotans at the time viewed suffrage as radical and dangerous. Public attacks, especially in newspapers, revealed that Minnesotans feared women voting because

While Clara Ueland, Rene Stevens, Grace Randall, and their counterparts deserve attention for their important work, local suffrage advocates also deserve credit for their critical role in the overall success of MWSA’s efforts. The hardest-fought battles of woman suffrage in Minnesota took place in counties like Pipestone and Lyon, where women like Lowe, Matthews, Sanderson, and Deen combated ignorance or apathy among their neighbors. Making woman suffrage popular also meant divorcing it from temperance in the minds of Minnesotans. It meant reaching out to ethnic groups with political connections. It meant crafting arguments that deradicalized the cause by promising that women would still maintain their cherished place in the family even with the ballot. Finally, the charged political climate of World War I changed expectations for Minnesota’s immigrants. Local suffrage leaders capitalized on the rising fear of foreign-born residents, championing their mobilization as patriotic in a tactical move to win additional political clout.



● Lac Qui Parle County ● Lyon County
● Pipestone County

Development of Woman Suffrage in Minnesota

A group of 14 women from around the state had formed the MWSA decades earlier, in 1881, first led by Sarah Burger Stearns. Its early efforts largely targeted enfranchisement by a state amendment. At every legislative session between 1881 and 1898, MWSA submitted bills to secure woman suffrage. Prominent individual suffragists who lived mostly in St. Paul or Minneapolis promoted these efforts, giving speeches or hosting meetings to drum up support, but the work was infrequent and often limited to elite circles. In addition, a few field-workers attempted to organize suffrage clubs, including national organizers Laura Gregg and Helen Kimber in 1899, but agitation was spotty and uneven. These local and county clubs were usually short-lived, lasting less than a year, and mostly ineffective.

Nineteenth-century suffragist Ethel Hurd wryly noted that she and her cohort had “little honor or glory, much less remuneration.” Prior to MWSA’s efforts, in 1875 women had won the right to vote in school elections, making them eligible to serve on school boards. In 1898, the state legislature passed a law that enfranchised women in library elections. While these were victories, they were rather small, and most bills that extended women’s rights died in committees or on the floor of either the house or the senate. Focusing on the state legislature not only led to minimal legislative success but also stymied efforts at the local level.⁴

Moreover, after late 1898 securing a woman suffrage amendment became virtually impossible. That year, voters approved a constitutional amendment that said all future amendments to the state’s constitution had to receive the majority of the

highest vote total cast in the election, not just on the amendment itself. An abstention was now the same as a “no” vote. Lobbying the legislature, the approach favored by MWSA, was no longer a viable option. Suffragists struggled to regroup.⁵

Since its founding, MWSA had also struggled with a shortage of both resources and talent, which helped explain why the organization had stuck with a narrow strategy focused on the state legislature in St. Paul. In addition, navigating ethnic communities in rural Minnesota was complicated. Historian Barbara Stuhler characterizes MWSA’s early attempts at rural advocacy as “less ardent and less successful” than urban efforts. A debate among scholars has emerged about what Stuhler calls a “lack of commitment to suffrage from rural constituencies.” Some historians, like William Watts Folwell and Stuhler, argue that traditional attitudes about gender or suffrage opposition born from anti-prohibition sentiment “restrained” Minnesotans, especially rural people, from supporting the cause. Other historians point out how “practical hurdles of farm chores and distance from town” prevented rural dwellers from engaging in the ways urban suffragists had envisioned. In other words, everyday obstacles, not rigid convictions about gender, obstructed advocacy in rural Minnesota. While rural Minnesotans did largely oppose the cause, especially in the nineteenth century, the sentiment was not permanent.⁶

Scholars like Barbara Handy-Marchello hit squarely on the issue, placing outright blame on urban-dwelling suffragists for refusing to organize rural women. In her assessment of suffragists in North Dakota, she posits that leaders failed to see “their rural counterparts as allies, as intelligent women with strong credentials in community organiza-

tion, as the source of change in rural communities.” In Minnesota, this resource remained untapped until the mid-1910s not because suffragists suddenly recognized the extensive power rural women wielded but because their state leaders finally had the talent and financial support to move beyond Minnesota’s urban centers.⁷

The dearth of local engagement made Minnesota an outlier among other states in the region. Local women throughout Wisconsin, Iowa, and South Dakota had been participating in suffrage efforts for decades. In Wisconsin, women had agitated since the 1860s, largely through temperance reform, and in 1912 voters considered but ultimately rejected a suffrage referendum. Since the 1880s, Iowa had enjoyed a robust history of local activism, which culminated in 1916 when Iowans voted for the first and only time on an (unsuccessful) amendment to the state’s constitution. In fact, when Stevens came to southwestern Minnesota in mid-June 1916, she was returning from a disappointing stint in Dubuque, Iowa, to support the campaign before the June 5 referendum. A stone’s throw to the west from Pipestone, residents of South Dakota were experiencing their sixth of seven amendment campaigns in 1916. Since 1890, suffragists there had staged tenacious campaigns to enfranchise South Dakota women, and the 1916 effort was the third in a series since 1910. Less than a week after the 1916 Pipestone conference, Stevens became a field organizer based out of Aberdeen in northeastern South Dakota.⁸

Despite Aberdeen’s proximity, Stevens’s presence in Minnesota was hit or miss; organizing there often received second billing when contests erupted in neighboring states. That little on-the-ground mobilization for woman suffrage had existed anywhere in rural Minnesota before the

Pipestone conference in southwest Minnesota made the event even more remarkable. Not only would it offer a significant opportunity to advocate for woman suffrage, it was likely the first time that most people living there had ever interacted with a professionally trained suffragist.⁹

This new strategy to engage with rural women in Minnesota was part of a broadened vision for MWSA that took shape after Clara Ueland became its president in 1914. In the legislative arena, MWSA leaders reconfigured their goals, focusing on suffrage just in presidential elections. Presidential suffrage bypassed the state's difficult amending process because it only required the approval of the legislature, not an amendment supported by the majority of all votes cast at an election. It also aligned with NAWSA's "winning plan," which gave states

typically "excluded women from independent public activities." Rural women, however, did take positions as school officers, librarians, county deputies, police officers, and superintendents for charitable causes. This activity, combined with their work in collective organizations such as church groups and federated women's clubs focused on civic engagement and community volunteerism, gave rural women a record of public service and community engagement that resonated with suffragist organizers.¹¹

To extend MWSA's base into these rural areas, Ueland organized the state by legislative district, emphasizing local outreach among the constituents of legislators whose support seemed attainable. The seven districts in southwestern Minnesota were particularly attractive because they bordered suffrage-rich eastern

cause. Opinions ranged from indifference to opposition. Moreover, for most rural inhabitants ethnic identity profoundly shaped their political viewpoints. After the Civil War, large numbers of European immigrants had arrived in Minnesota, bringing cherished customs that included the consumption of alcohol. Distinct populations flourished in their own relatively isolated rural communities, creating a patchwork quilt of ethnic settlements. At the heart of these communities was the rural church, an institution that sanctified an enclave culture that privileged ethnic values. People spoke their native languages, consumed native foods and alcohol, and celebrated native holidays at church, while their children attended the parochial school taught by members of the congregation and held within church walls. Enclaves and their institutions made it easy for newcomers not only to pass down ethnic values to their children but also to resist pressure to assimilate to American norms.¹²

Late nineteenth-century immigration was highest from countries in northern Europe, including Germany, Norway, and Sweden, but other ethnic groups also founded colonies that made Minnesota ethnically and culturally diverse. For example, Pipestone County's population included Germans and Norwegians, while immigrants in Lyon County to the northeast included Icelanders, Belgians, and French Canadians as well as larger communities of Norwegians and Germans. They came to Lyon County because boosters seeking to develop the local economy lured farmers and laborers to emigrate from Europe.

In one instance, American-born business leaders in Marshall, the county seat, pledged their own money to construct a Catholic church, explaining that they were desperate

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different goals depending on the likelihood of success. While the national plan focused primarily on securing a federal amendment, it also allowed simultaneous state campaigns, either for constitutional amendments or, in states like Minnesota where the odds were not favorable, for presidential suffrage.¹⁰

In addition, MWSA's up-and-coming advocates began embracing tactics to increase their base. As they pursued grassroots organizing among rural women, MWSA field-workers encountered ethnic and religious groups that needed to be won over to advance the cause in Minnesota. Campaign tactics included demonstrations to generate public attention and publicity among an electorate that Folwell described as "restrained" by traditional gender norms that

South Dakota. Still, coordinating a suffrage campaign in any rural Minnesota district was a challenge. Ueland charged field-workers with changing public opinion. En route, they struggled to overcome rugged terrain, underdeveloped communication networks, poor road conditions, and vast distances. Traveling to rural communities was a feat; but convincing locals to support woman suffrage was perhaps the most difficult task.

Ethnic Dynamics in Rural Minnesota

By March 1916, Stevens and Maria McMahon, another NAWSA organizer, were working in Minnesota's southwestern districts, encountering "unenlightened" people with a "crying need" for information about the

WOMEN VOTE IN NORWAY

to attract a large cohort of workers at a time when many Catholics were founding large colonies in Minnesota. Over time, these boosters' efforts paid off, and the number of foreign-born residents rose substantially. While ethnic communities were a minority in Pipestone County, by 1920 in Lyon County only 40 percent of the population was native-born, eclipsed by the Germans, Norwegians, Irish, Polish, Belgians, and French Canadians in their midst. Lyon County represented demographic trends across Minnesota. As Stuhler notes, the 1905 census revealed that more than two-thirds of all Minnesotans had at least one foreign-born parent.¹³

Understanding how ethnicity shaped politics proved essential for suffragists working in rural Minnesota, but MWSA had to navigate the issue carefully. Suffragists recognized that many immigrants opposed the cause because they believed women only wanted the vote to enact prohibition. Immigrants also enjoyed tremendous political power, a power that began even before they became citizens. In Minnesota, male immigrants received the right to vote after they registered their Declaration of Intention, a legal document that proclaimed their desire to become a naturalized citizen after only two years of living in the United States. Stuhler claims that Minnesota's suffragists were "not, as a rule, offended that male immigrants" could vote before becoming citizens, or, if they were, they "held their peace."¹⁴

This attitude no doubt helped MWSA cultivate close relationships with immigrant women, especially those from Scandinavian countries. In 1907, the Scandinavian Woman Suffrage Association (SWSA) formed,

and affiliated with MWSA. The SWSA pursued twin goals of woman suffrage and cultural preservation. By 1915, all Scandinavian countries had granted women the right to vote, a victory SWSA's second president, Nanny Jaeger, was quick to champion. While SWSA proved vital to expanding the cause among Scandinavians by adopting a broad message that Scandinavians were progressive-minded, SWSA remained primarily an elite urban group as nearly all its members lived in the Twin Cities and were the wives of well-to-do Scandinavian men. In addition, only first- and second-generation Scandinavian Americans could join, which further restricted its base.¹⁵

The stakes were particularly high for the SWSA. After 1916, its members did not hesitate to downplay their ethnic immigrant identities in favor of celebrating American assimilationist ones. But in so doing, the SWSA undercut itself and its mission to preserve Scandinavian culture. By 1918, it even considered changing its name to the Woman Citizen Association. In the end, the SWSA kept its name, but the debate reflects the political precarity foreign-born Americans faced during World War I. Most ultimately bowed to pressure to assimilate out of loyalty. For Germans, the most vilified group, nativist hostility was tremendous.¹⁶

Woman suffrage came to rural Minnesota with renewed energy in 1916, when state suffrage leaders began partnering with locals who took up the cause themselves and infused it into their already vibrant ethnic social and political networks. MWSA, and to a lesser extent SWSA, could claim a change in public opinion in favor of suffrage only when

The Scandinavian Woman Suffrage Association expanded the cause among Scandinavians by adopting a broad message that Scandinavians were progressive-minded. This white ribbon sash was worn by a member of the St. Paul Political Equality Club.

community leaders endorsed it, defusing its radical charge (steeped, as it was, in both prohibition and women's rights) in the process. In addition, agitation increased among rural Minnesotans when the Congressional Union (later renamed the National Woman's Party), led by Alice Paul, established a state chapter in Minnesota in 1915. MWSA appreciated the union's recruitment of younger suffragists who championed direct action tactics that included parades and street meetings in rural communities. Scholars often overlook the vibrant spectacles orchestrated by Congressional Union suffragists in Minnesota, but Ueland welcomed them, noting that the union sent organizers into "places where there has never been a suffrage meeting. (Minnesota is an untouched field comparatively.) . . . and their work has certainly reinforced our own." Finally, after 1917, World War I virtually silenced immigrant opposition born of anti-prohibition concerns. Instead, ethnic communities, especially non-German ones, mostly endorsed the cause in public ways.¹⁷

Pipestone Suffrage Conference

The woman suffrage conference planned in Pipestone in 1916 served as the first inkling of just how powerful local coalitions of women could become if given the opportunity. Stevens had selected Pipestone as

part of an effort to advocate for the cause in both southwestern Minnesota and southeastern South Dakota. In late June 1916, at a meeting with Mamie Pyle, president of the South Dakota Universal Franchise League, Stevens explained that MWSA sought to bolster the ongoing campaign there by holding the conference in a county along South Dakota's border. Pyle asked—"wistfully" according to Stevens—"if it wouldn't help Minn. about as much if we worked the border counties on the Dakota side." Stevens's response was telling. In as "tasteful language as possible," she indicated that Minnesota lagged far behind South Dakota in support for woman suffrage. She judged the South Dakota league's efforts more beneficial among South Dakotans, who demonstrated more knowledge of and enthusiasm for the cause. As she put it, Minnesota resembled "the Lord in a willingness to help those who help themselves" but at the same time had a "desire to be shown" the way. Her few months in Minnesota earlier that year had revealed that some locals wanted to help organize the conference but needed a guide to "advise, stimulate, push, etc."¹⁸

Stevens arrived in Pipestone in early July 1916, and she set to work immediately by contacting local politicians, business leaders, and prominent women from immigrant and non-immigrant groups to gain their endorsements for a conference. In particular, she drummed up support among churchgoing women, including Presbyterians and Methodists, who were mostly non-immigrants, and Catholics, who were mostly immigrants. For Stevens,

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locals with "social position" were key to a successful conference, and she reportedly "bulldozed" those reticent advocates into providing entertainment, housing, and funding. But it is unclear just how recalcitrant locals were toward the cause. Stevens had low expectations, stating, "I [just] want to make a dent in the attitude of the townspeople," but she also named scores of Pipestone residents who took on the myriad tasks she gave them.¹⁹

Their willingness seemed insignificant when compared to Stevens, who was a whirlwind of energy and demanded as much from her coworkers, so much so that Clara Ueland responded to one of Stevens's letters by advising her to take it easy. "Do not kill yourself trying to get a conference," she advised. Simply organizing and agitating in rural Minnesota was enough, according to Ueland, but Stevens was undeterred, responding to state headquarters that she had set the

date for August 3 and 4 and had publicized the conference in neighboring counties, including Lyon County.²⁰

Newspaper reports about the Pipestone conference were spotty at best, not because Stevens failed to notify newspaper editors but because they could not always print her press releases as quickly as she wanted. With face-to-face contact difficult to maintain among rural populations, newspapers were crucial for organizing. On July 20, Stevens visited Marshall, the county seat of Lyon County, meeting with the editors of both the *Marshall News Messenger* and the *Lyon County Reporter*. Staff at both newspapers admitted that their previous coverage of woman suffrage had been irregular, and they promised to advertise more among their subscribers. Yet their assurances were somewhat hollow. The *Lyon County Reporter* merely published a single, three-paragraph missive about the upcoming conference, while the *Marshall News Messenger* failed entirely, printing a brief that appeared a day after the conference had begun. The lack of coverage, however, did



West Main Street, Pipestone, about 1904.

not keep an unnamed “Marshall delegation” from attending the conference, and they reported it “a great success.”²¹

Despite the less-than-sterling work of some local newspapers, MWSA proclaimed the Pipestone conference a victory. Five days before it began, Stevens had hung Votes for Women posters in the windows of nearly every business in Pipestone. While she admitted that “it seemed early to do this stunt,” she did it so that country dwellers, including Germans and Norwegians, who came to Pipestone only on Saturdays—“the big country day in town”—could see them. The main events were a street meeting during which suffragists walked from corner to corner, repeating their speeches as they went, and a massive banquet hosted by members of two local churches, one Catholic—most likely German—and the other Presbyterian. Stevens had printed almost 1,300 programs, and although she did not tally the total attendance, her letters after the conference were full of positive reports.²²

The conference’s success stemmed in part from what Ueland called a

“triumphant tour” of southern and western rural Minnesota that promoted enthusiasm for the conference leading up to the big event. Traveling in an automobile caravan totaling 50 cars, MWSA officers held open-air street meetings at small towns, including Lakefield, Slayton, and Woodstock, along the route from the Twin Cities to Pipestone. They also crossed the border into South Dakota, holding open-air street meetings in nearby Flandreau. These spectacles were invaluable for bringing rural Minnesotans in direct contact with woman suffrage, something that the subdued campaigns of the past had not been able to do. The conference proved to Stevens and others in MWSA that rural populations, including members of ethnic and religious communities, were not categorically opposed to the cause and would step forward when state leaders gave them the chance.²³

World War I and Lyon County

World War I dramatically transformed woman suffrage campaigning in rural Minnesota, changing what

were piecemeal and somewhat limited incursions by individual activists into sustained and meaningful efforts organized around a central message. When President Woodrow Wilson convinced Congress to declare war against Germany in April 1917, Minnesotans were initially reluctant. Some groups, particularly Scandinavian immigrants, endorsed neutrality while others, especially Germans, supported intervention on the side of Germany. In short order, however, suspicions of disloyalty fostered broad patriotic support for US involvement, and in turn, antiwar positions faced increasing public scrutiny. As nativism gripped Minnesota, immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia, including the Scandinavian Woman Suffrage Association, faced criticism.

According to historian Anna Peterson, the result was a “violent

Suffrage parade in Madison, in Lac qui Parle County, about 1916. Spectacles such as this were invaluable for bringing rural Minnesotans in direct contact with woman suffrage, something that the subdued campaigns of the past had not been able to do.



backlash” that mainly targeted Germans and German Americans but that also caused many immigrants, including Scandinavians, to “renounce their ethnic heritage.” No longer could they defend alcohol consumption as an expression of cultural values. Vocal opposition to woman suffrage out of concerns it would lead to prohibition decreased markedly. Most immigrants ultimately bowed to pressure to assimilate out of loyalty. This was a boon for state suffragists, and neither MWSA nor SWSA spoke out against the anti-German frenzy as it grew. Instead, they loyally mobilized, infusing patriotic pro-war efforts, like selling Liberty Bonds, sewing items for the American Red Cross, and conserving foods, into their suffrage work, and ethnic communities, especially non-German ones, mostly endorsed the cause publicly.²⁴

Pro-war advocacy spurred the creation of groups like the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, an agency that pursued both patriotic demonstrations and persecution of any group deemed “un-American.” MWSA aligned with these efforts at boosting loyalty, reporting themselves and “the mass of Minnesota’s women” as unquestionably loyal, with “their record for Red Cross work, for food conservation . . . [and] for Americanization” as their “entire validation.” Americanization was especially powerful, for it situated immigrant suffragists as responsible citizens who understood American values. War mobilization further politicized suffragists and the activist networks they had cultivated, especially in rural areas and among ethnic groups for which demonstrating their fervent patriotism could mitigate nativist attacks. Infusing woman suffrage with war work brought sustained and compelling campaigns for the cause to rural Minnesota.²⁵



News and Art Club of Minneota, one of the groups from the Lyon County town that sent a resolution to the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association supporting a federal suffrage amendment.

Examining Lyon County reveals how World War I reshaped woman suffrage in rural Minnesota as it, like many rural counties, had a fractured experience with the cause before the war. Snippets in the MWSA archives

willingly joined MWSA as it mobilized for both suffrage and war. After 1917, MWSA pursued two main lines of work: circulating petitions and securing resolutions from prominent groups. The goal was to secure both a

Despite the lack of sustained engagement among locals in Lyon County before World War I, a number of local women willingly joined MWSA as it mobilized for both suffrage and war.

indicate that field-workers twice organized a suffrage club in Lyon County, first in 1899 and again in 1912. Both efforts were brief, and little evidence exists about the clubs’ membership or activities. One report about the 1912 group suggests that it was probably the Current News Club, a local federated women’s club in Marshall. Meeting minute records, scrapbooks, and other documents left by the Current News Club, however, never mention any sort of affiliation with or work for MWSA.²⁶

Despite the lack of sustained engagement with the cause among locals in Lyon County before World War I, a number of local women

federal amendment for women’s full suffrage access and women’s limited presidential suffrage by bombarding members of Congress and state legislators with overwhelming evidence that constituents in their district wanted women to vote. MWSA managed these efforts by sending field organizers to coordinate directly with local residents, as in July 1918, when suffragist Grace Randall visited the county. Although she met with a number of locals, including state legislators, other political candidates, and supportive women, she reported little about her time there. Randall’s brief remarks obscure how meaningful her visit was for pro-suffrage

activists in Lyon County, for shortly after she left, women in Marshall and Minneota, a small town of Norwegian and Icelandic immigrants located northwest of Marshall, began the county's first intensive woman suffrage campaign.²⁷

By August 1918, two pairs of women—Laura Lowe and Minnie Matthews in Marshall and Tillie Deen and Harriet Sanderson in Minneota—were engaging in a countywide canvass and petition drive. All four were established leaders in their communities. Lowe and Matthews were members of the Current News Club and the Ladies' Aid Society of the Congregational Church in Marshall. Matthews's home also served as the headquarters of the local American Red Cross chapter. These networks anchored local suffrage agitation, and Lowe and Matthews used them to circulate MWSA's pro-suffrage petitions. State leaders set signature quotas for each town based on the number of voters at the last election. Marshall's goal was 313 apiece for men and

women; Minneota's was 124 apiece. MWSA requested separate petitions for each gender, which likely allowed officials to demonstrate widespread support among both men and women while also providing an opportunity for women to sign even if their male counterparts did not.²⁸

For over two months, Lowe and Matthews disseminated petitions and faced an onslaught of obstacles. War work, especially for the American Red Cross, consumed nearly every available minute, they reported. In addition, bad weather that fall turned roads into sloppy rut-filled messes. An influenza outbreak and subsequent quarantine made contacting all voters on their list impossible. To top it all off, MWSA staff had failed twice to respond to requests from Lowe and Matthews for "literature on the suffrage question" to distribute in the community, prompting office administrator Clara Heckrich to apologize for the oversight. Lowe also noted that while "soliciting the men [they] encountered considerable

opposition." Despite all these difficulties, Lowe and Matthews pulled off a tremendous feat. Although they secured only 130 signatures on the men's petition (not even half of the MWSA quota), they had collected 311 signatures from local women, falling only two names short of their quota. Lowe also submitted a resolution endorsed by the Ladies' Aid Society of Marshall's Congregational Church that supported a federal woman suffrage amendment.²⁹

While residents in Marshall engaged impressively with woman suffrage, their rural counterparts contributed even more remarkably. Of the nine resolutions submitted to MWSA from groups in Lyon County, seven came from an extraordinary

Members of the Scandinavian Woman Suffrage Association pose in front of headquarters of the National Woman's Party in Washington, DC, 1917. Minnesota NWP chair Jane Potter is at center. The women brandished the banners as part of "Minnesota Day" on the picket line at the gates of the White House, February 1917.



canvass by Sanderson and Deen, the well-connected rural advocates from Minnesota. Four federated women's clubs (the Minnesota News and Art Club, the Fortnightly Club, the Get-To-Gether Club, and the Friday Exchange Club); one chapter of the Royal Neighbors of America (the Alpha Camp Chapter); and two Red Cross chapters (the Nordland and the Eidsvold Auxiliaries of the American Red Cross) all submitted resolutions in support of a federal amendment. The sheer number of resolutions was astounding and their ethnic composition was noteworthy. Minnesota had a large population of Icelandic Lutherans, while Eidsvold and Nordland Townships were Norwegian Lutheran communities. In other words, a major source of support from Lyon County came from ethnic enclaves with vibrant social networks that had mobilized for patriotic work in response to World War I.³⁰

During this period, MWSA also sought to secure presidential suffrage through the state legislature, and they relied extensively on local advocates to lead grassroots efforts—the central component of this strategy. The most compelling battles for woman suffrage took place in counties like Pipestone and Lyon, where women like Stevens, Lowe, Matthews, Sanderson, and Deen personally combated seemingly insurmountable obstacles, from influenza to indifference. But these advocates also benefited from the nativism that had mobilized ethnic communities to prove their loyalty during wartime. MWSA profited from this loyalty even after World War I ended. In January 1919, two months after armistice, state legislators enthusiastically passed a resolution that endorsed a federal woman suffrage amendment. In March 1919, the state legislature approved presidential suffrage by large margins in both

the house and the senate. Grassroots organizing—those “deft strategies of the MWSA” to partner with locals to assemble numerous petitions and resolutions at the district level—had generated irrefutable proof that Minnesotans wanted women to have the right to vote. With the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment the following year, Minnesota women achieved their ultimate goal of access to full suffrage.³¹ □

Notes

1. Rene Stevens to Ethel Briggs, June 26, 1916, 1:800–802, and Stevens to Briggs, June 30, 1916, 1:815–18—both Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association Collection, Minnesota History Society [hereafter, MWSA, MNHS].
2. Stevens to Briggs, June 26, 1916, 1:800–802, MWSA, MNHS.
3. Clara Heckrich to Grace Randall, July 11, 1918, 3:568; Randall to Heckrich, July 12, 1918, 3:569; Randall to Heckrich, July 20, 1918, 3:572; Laura Lowe to Clara Ueland, Oct. 14, 1918, 3:808; Heckrich to Lowe, Oct. 15, 1918, 3:818; Lowe to Heckrich, Nov. 12, 1918, 4:131—all MWSA, MNHS.
4. Ethel Hurd, *Woman Suffrage in Minnesota: A Record of Activities in Its Behalf since 1847* (Minneapolis: Inland, 1916), 5.
5. William Anderson and Albert James Lobb, *A History of the Constitution of Minnesota: With the First Verified Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1921), 145–47. According to Anderson and Lobb, the proposition that changed the amending process did not even pass its own standards. Laws of Minnesota for 1897, Chapter 185, 345–46, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/1897/0/General+Laws/Chapter/185/pdf/>. Susan B. Anthony and Ida Hustad Harper, eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage, 1883–1900* (Indianapolis, IN: Hollenbeck, 1902), 4:772–73, 778–79.
6. Barbara Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors: Clara Ueland and the Minnesota Struggle for Woman Suffrage* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1995), 20–22, 107–10; William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1930), 4:335; William D. Green, *The Children of Lincoln: White Paternalism and the Limits of Black Opportunity in Minnesota, 1860–1876* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 255–318.
7. Barbara Handy-Marchello, *Women of the Northern Plains: Gender and Settlement on the Homestead Frontier, 1870–1930* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Press, 2005), 97. See also Joan Jensen, “The Perils of Rural Women’s History: A Note to Storytellers Who Study the West’s Unsettled Past,” in *One Step Over the Line: Toward*

*a History of Women in the North American West*s, eds. Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008), 173–83; Sara Egge, “Ethnicity and Woman Suffrage on the South Dakota Plains,” in *Equality at the Ballot Box: Votes for Women on the Northern Great Plains*, eds. Lori Ann Lahlum and Molly P. Rozum (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2019), 218–39.

8. Genevieve McBride, *On Wisconsin Women: Working for Their Rights from Settlement to Suffrage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993); Stevens to Briggs, Aug. 21, 1916, 2:190–93, 196–97, and Clara Ueland to Stevens, Aug. 26, 1916, 2:200—both MWSA, MNHS. The amendment in Iowa failed by just over 10,000 votes: see chapter 4 in Sara Egge, *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).

9. Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 20–22; Hurd, *Woman Suffrage in Minnesota*, 31; Stuhler, “Organizing for the Vote: Leaders of Minnesota’s Woman Suffrage Movement,” in *The North Star State: A Minnesota History Reader*, ed. Anne J. Aby (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2002), 226–30; Nineteenth Amendment Celebration Committee, “Minnesota Woman Suffrage Chronology,” folder 7, box 7, Barbara Stuhler Papers, Manuscripts Collection, MNHS; Green, *Children of Lincoln*, 255–318.

10. Jacqueline Van Voris, *Carrie Chapman Catt: A Public Life* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1996), 132–35; Corrine McConaughy, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10–14, 52–54; National American Woman Suffrage Association, *Headquarters News Letter* 2, no. 8 (Aug. 15, 1916), NAWSA Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Carrie Chapman Catt, celebrated for her organizational abilities, was the architect of NAWSA’s “winning plan.” She served as NAWSA’s president from 1900 to 1904 and again from 1915 to 1920. Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 111–18.

11. Linda Lumsden, *Rampant Women: Suffragists and the Right of Assembly* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), xiii–xxv, 33–42; Jessica Ellen Sewell, *Women and the Everyday City: Public Space in San Francisco, 1890–1915* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 95–168; Katherine Adams and Michael Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 76–116; Holly J. McCammon, “‘Out of the Parlors and into the Streets’: The Changing Tactical Repertoire of the U.S. Women’s Suffrage Movements,” *Social Forces* 81 (Mar. 2003): 787–818; Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 4:335; Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 20–22. Wanda Hendricks examines civic engagement among African American women in Illinois: see Wanda Hendricks, *Gender, Race and Politics in the Midwest: Black Club Women in Illinois* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 51–74. For a broad discussion of the formulation of anti-suffragism, see Sarah

Hunter Graham, *Woman Suffrage and the New Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 11–30.

12. Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 111–18; Clara Ueland to “Suffragist,” Aug. 5, 1915, 1:291–92; Clara Ueland to “Suffragist,” Nov. 23, 1915, 1:371–72; Stevens to Briggs, Mar. 25, 1916, 1:483–85; “Plan for Work for Suffrage District Association,” [1916], 10:3; “President’s Address, 1916,” 8:95–100—all MWSA, MNHS; Robert Swierenga, “The Settlement of the Old Northwest: Ethnic Pluralism in a Featureless Plain,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 9 (Spring 1989): 76–79; Frederick Luebke, “Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 8 (Oct. 1977): 412, 417, 427–28; Andrew Cayton and Susan E. Gray, “The Story of the Midwest,” in *The Identity of the American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 15; Andrew Cayton and Peter Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 27; John Hudson, “Migration to an American Frontier,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 66 (June 1976): 258; Robert Swierenga, “The Little White Church: Religion in Rural America,” *Agricultural History* 71 (Autumn 1997): 415–17.

13. Arthur Rose, *An Illustrated History of the Counties of Rock and Pipestone, Minnesota* (Luverne, MN: Northern History Publishing Co., 1911), 331–46; John Radzilowski, *Prairie Town: A History of Marshall, Minnesota* (Marshall, MN: Lyon County Historical Society, 1997), 93; Annette Atkins, *Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), 72–81; Cayton and Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation*, 114–16; Luebke, “Ethnic Group Settlement,” 412; Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 106.

14. Jamin Raskin, “Legal Aliens, Local Citizens: The Historical, Constitutional and Theoretical Meanings of Alien Suffrage,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 141 (Apr. 1993): 1391–470; Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 106; Irene Bloemraad, “Citizenship Lessons from the Past: The Contours of Immigrant Naturalization in the Early 20th Century,” *Social Science Quarterly* 87 (Dec. 2006): 936–42.

For more on the vital link between temperance and suffrage in Minnesota, see Sabine Meyer, *We Are What We Drink: The Temperance Battle in Minnesota* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015). Suffrage activism in Fort Wayne, Indiana, also required careful consideration of ethnic identities, temperance, and “deep cultural resistance to social change”: see Peggy Seigel, “Winning the Vote in Fort Wayne, Indiana: The Long, Cautious Journey in a German American City,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 102 (Sept. 2006): 220–57.

While most suffragists might not have explicitly aired their grievances, they understood enfranchisement in imperialist terms, which produced friction. Global expansion reinforced a racial framework that placed governing, and the

vote, in the hands of civilized, white Americans both abroad and at home. In addition to immigrants considered undesirable, suffragists also viewed African American and Indigenous voters with similar disdain. See Wayne Gannaway, “The Perils of Peace: Frederick Douglass, Winona, and Civil Rights in Minnesota after the Civil War,” *Minnesota History* 66 (Summer 2018): 74–84; Allison Sneider, *Suffragists in an Imperial Age: U.S. Expansion and the Woman Question, 1870–1929* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850–1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Molly P. Rozum, “Citizenship: Civilization, and Property: The 1890 South Dakota Vote on Woman Suffrage and Indian Suffrage,” in *Equality at the Ballot Box: Votes for Women on the Northern Great Plains*, eds. Lahlum and Rozum, 240–63.

15. Anna Marie Peterson, “Adding ‘A Little Suffrage Spice to the Melting Pot’: Minnesota’s Scandinavian Woman Suffrage Association,” *Minnesota History* (Winter 2011–12): 288–90; Anna Peterson, “Making Women’s Suffrage Support an Ethnic Duty: Norwegian American Identity Constructions and the Women’s Suffrage Movement, 1880–1925,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 30 (Summer 2011): 14–17; Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 106–8, 131–38.

16. Peterson, “Adding ‘A Little Suffrage Spice to the Melting Pot,’” 295–96; Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 106–9; Frederick Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974).

17. Quoted in Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 136.

18. Stevens to Ueland, June 30, 1916, 1:815–18, MWSA, MNHS.

19. Stevens to Briggs, July 3, 1916, 2:3–7; Stevens to Briggs, July 6, 2:9–10; Stevens to Ueland, July 12, 1916, 2:25–30; Stevens to “People,” July 15, 1916, 43–46; Stevens to Briggs, July 20, 1916, 2:79–81; Stevens to Ueland, July 25, 1916, 2:116–17; Stevens to Briggs, July 29, 1916, 2:150–52; Stevens to Briggs, July 30, 1916, 2:148–49—all MWSA, MNHS.

20. Ueland to Stevens, July 5, 1916, 2:8, and Stevens to Briggs, July 6, 1916, 2:9–10—both MWSA, MNHS.

21. Carmen Heider, “Farm Women, Solidarity, and ‘The Suffrage Messenger’: Nebraska Suffrage Activism on the Plains, 1915–1917,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 32 (Spring 2012): 113–30; Stevens to Briggs, July 20, 1916, 2:79–81; “On to Pipestone,” 8:154; and “President’s Address, 1916,” 8:95–100—all MWSA, MNHS; “Suffragets Will Meet on Next Thurs. and Fri.,” *Lyon County Reporter*, July 26, 1916; “Suffrage at Pipestone,” *Marshall News Messenger*, Aug. 4, 1916.

22. Stevens to Briggs, July 29, 1916, 2:150–52; Stevens to Briggs, Aug. 8, 1916, 2:179–81; Stevens to Briggs, July 30, 1916, 2:148–49; Stevens to Briggs, Aug. 6, 1916, 2:171–74—all MWSA, MNHS.

23. Briggs to Stevens, Aug. 1, 1916, 2:170–71, and Stevens to Briggs, Aug. 6, 1916, 171–74—both MWSA, MNHS; Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 131–38.

24. Peterson, “Adding ‘A Little Suffrage Spice to the Melting Pot,’” 295.

25. Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 149; “State Convention,” Nov. 16–17, 1917, 3:56–59, MWSA, MNHS; Gayle Gullett, “Women Progressives and the Politics of Americanization in California, 1915–1920,” *Pacific Historical Review* 64 (Feb. 1995): 73–76; Martha Gardner, *The Qualities of a Citizen: Women, Immigration, and Citizenship, 1870–1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3–5, 24, 50–62, 89.

26. Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 67, 77–79; Sophie Kenyon to Anna Howard Shaw, Mar. 10, 1913, 1:164–67; “List of Clubs Paid,” [1912], 9:423; “Suffrage Clubs,” 1912, 9:426; “Clubs Paid Before June 30, 1912,” 9:438; “Appointment Charts, Dec. 31, 1916,” 10:29–30—all MWSA, MNHS. The Southwest Minnesota History Center in Marshall has the minute books and scrapbooks of the Current News Club: see Current News Club Collection, Southwest Minnesota History Center, Southwest Minnesota State University, Marshall, MN.

27. Ueland to Winifred Bartlett, Oct. 11, 1917, 2:786; “Yellow Medicine and Lyon Co. Senators,” 1918, 9:139; Heckrich to Randall, July 11, 1918, 3:568, Randall to Heckrich, July 12, 1918, 3:569; Randall to Heckrich, July 20, 1918, 3:572—all MWSA, MNHS; Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 151–60.

28. Lowe to Ueland, Oct. 14, 1918, 3:808, and Heckrich to Lowe, Oct. 15, 1918, 3:818—both MWSA, MNHS.

29. Lowe to Ueland, Oct. 14, 1918, 3:808; Heckrich to Lowe, Oct. 15, 1918, 3:818; Lowe to Heckrich, Nov. 12, 1918, 4:131; “Presented to Congregational Ladies’ Aid by Laura W. Lowe, Chairman,” July 24, 1918, 9:319—all MWSA, MNHS.

30. “List (Incomplete) of Resolutions, 1919,” 9:353–54; Harriet Sanderson to Randall, Jan. 21, 1919, 5:235–36; Stevens to Sanderson, Feb. 7, 1919, 5:515—all MWSA, MNHS; “Red Cross Committees,” *Minnesota Mascot*, Nov. 15, 1918; Tillie Deen, “News and Art Club History, 1901–1925,” unpublished manuscript, News and Art Club Collection, in possession of Sandy Josephson, Minneota, MN; Torgny Anderson, *The Centennial History of Lyon County* (Marshall, MN: Henle Publishing Co., 1970), 45–47; Charles Vandersluis, *Ninety Years at St. Paul’s* (Marshall, MN: Ousman Printing, Inc., 1977), 10.

31. Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, 168–70; Session Laws of Minnesota for 1919, Chapter 80, HF no. 222, 89, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/1919/0/Session+Law/Chapter/89/pdf/>; Ueland to Carrie Chapman Catt, Jan. 23, 1919, 5:282–83, and Nettie Shuler to Ueland, Mar. 4, 1919, 5:641—both MWSA, MNHS.

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