Minnesota’s suffragists maintained connections with an international network of activists working for the common cause of women’s equality. As the international speaking tour became a regular phenomenon in the 1910s, a series of overseas lecturers came to the state, including Rosika Schwimmer, a Hungarian feminist and peace activist, and Ethel Snowden, a British socialist and human rights activist. But no one drew more attention than Emmeline Pankhurst, leader of Britain’s militant suffrage organization the Women’s Social and Political Union, who twice visited Minnesota. Her visits generated intense press coverage and stirred up discussions about the meaning of the vote and what strategies were necessary to achieve it.¹

Pankhurst was the leader of the “suffragettes”—British activists who adopted militant tactics such as huge parades, open-air meetings, direct confrontation of political leaders, as well as window breaking, arson, and acts of vandalism. Their calculated invasion of public space was unprecedented and shocking at a time when women were expected to be subservient and demure. At the height of the British militant campaign, between 1910 and 1914, suffragettes gained celebrity status in the United States through extensive press coverage of their dramatic protests. Minnesota’s press covered the British suffragettes closely, sometimes with greater detail than the American movement. From the Bemidji Daily Pioneer to the German-language New Ulm Post, Minnesota’s newspapers elevated Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, Christabel and Sylvia, into household names. When given the chance to see a suffragette in person, Minnesotans turned out in droves. While many Minnesotans were critical of militant tactics, they were also eager to see these “law-breaking” women speak. Local activists proved remarkably supportive of the Pankhurs, even while they agreed that militancy was not the right strategy in Minnesota.²

On separate trips, Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Sylvia came to Minnesota in 1911, a crucial year in the US suffrage movement. Following the horrific Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City that April, suffragists were redoubling their efforts to broaden the base of supporters and frame the vote as a tool for achieving Progressive reforms. Similar efforts had begun in Minnesota, where a handful of small suffrage organizations were attempting to recruit wider memberships. In 1913, when Emmeline returned to the Twin Cities, she helped provide momentum to reinvigorate the local movement. In total, Emmeline made six trips to the United States—in 1909, 1911, and 1913 to campaign for suffrage, and in 1916, 1918, and 1919.

FACING: Emmeline Pankhurst being carried by a policeman, as two other men stride along beside, during her arrest at Buckingham Palace, 1914.

Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst, 1912.

Sylvia Pankhurst, date unknown.

Jacqueline R. deVries

"Those Who Came from Curiosity Remained from Interest"
to raise awareness about World War I and its aftermath. Her affinity for American audiences had been nurtured through correspondence with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as well as through a personal friendship with Stanton’s daughter, suffragist and labor activist Harriot Stanton Blatch. The Pankhursts used these tours to build alliances, raise money, and explain the necessity of the Women’s Social and Political Union’s militant approach, and in so doing they stirred up a great deal of local interest in the suffrage cause.\(^3\)

Sylvia was the first Pankhurst to visit Minnesota, on a short but much publicized stay in January 1911. She kept a lower profile than her mother, preferring labor meetings to society luncheons and drawing crowds in the hundreds rather than thousands. But the press still followed her movements closely. During Sylvia’s visit to the Twin Cities the Minneapolis Sunday Tribune gave her a full-page cameo, together with the famed actress Ellen Terry. Twenty-eight years old and petite, Sylvia was often infantilized by the press. The Sunday Tribune reporter gossiped that she had a cold and was “tucked up in bed like an ordinary little girl,” but then conceded she was “no ordinary girl.” In actuality, Sylvia was a witty speaker who connected to younger audiences. Her visit was sponsored by the Political Equality Club, the longest-running suffrage organization in Minneapolis, as well as the newly formed Workers’ Equal Suffrage League and the 1915 Suffrage Club, both of which attracted younger, wage-earning and “business” women. In the Sunday Tribune interview, Sylvia was forthright—“women are human beings with brains and should be treated as such”—but she was careful not to tell local women what they needed. Contrasting the social evils in the “old” country with the possibilities of the “new” United States, she observed, “In England we need the ballot far more than you do in this country,” although she was quick to add, “I am sure you could improve conditions if you were to be enfranchised.”\(^4\)

Emmeline’s visit to Minnesota in November 1911 also generated a flurry of press coverage. On this, her second trip to North America, she traveled the length and breadth of the United States and Canada, covering an exhausting 10,000 miles. She visited Minneapolis and Duluth in mid-November, undeterred by an early winter blizzard and cold snap. The statewide press had drummed up interest for days prior to her arrival. Calling her “the famous English suffragist who . . . is perhaps one of the most talked of women in the world,” the Duluth Herald declared: “Equal rights for women is the live question of the day and a great deal of interest is being shown by both men and women in her coming to this city.” Pankhurst found enthusiastic audiences.\(^5\)

Duluth, a town of stark social contrasts between immigrant laborers and an upper crust of Yankee industrialists and socialites, offered a wide potential audience. Emmeline Pankhurst was at home among many different social classes. After her husband’s death in 1897, Emmeline had worked as a local registrar of births and deaths, which helped her develop an affinity with the laboring women of Manchester, England, whom she later worked to recruit to the movement. She also had the confidence to navigate the highest social echelons. When making public appearances, Emmeline carefully dressed in a refined style to conform to the most discerning femininity and counteract criticism that suffragettes were masculine “amazons.” As the Duluth Herald noted:

Perhaps many people have formed a set idea of the typical suffragette. If this idea pictures the type as a bold woman, aggressive and free of the womanly charm, Mrs. Pankhurst is far from the type. She is a little woman with large gray eyes and a charm of voice that wins confidence. Her chief charm seems to lie in her gentleness of character.”\(^6\)

Audiences were surprised to discover that Emmeline Pankhurst was petite, feminine, and soft-spoken. A large
contingent from Superior, Wisconsin, joined more than a hundred from Duluth to hear her talk, which the Duluth Herald described as “eloquent” and “sweeping.” Emmeline urged the crowd to consider woman suffrage as “the great movement of modern times,” a phrase often repeated by Minnesota’s suffragists. Her public presentation was followed by an elegant reception at the Spalding Hotel, where she networked among Duluth’s society women, gently pressing them for donations.7

Emmeline Pankhurst demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt her message to local American audiences. She capitalized on deeply held skepticism of the British political system and filled her speeches with clever references to the colonists’ rebellion against British tyranny. When questioned whether suffragette violence was degrading, she asked if they believed violence was necessary in the American Revolution. Alongside references to the Boston Tea Party, she would strategically quote Patrick Henry’s eloquent defense of the American Revolution: “We have petitioned, we have remonstrated, we have supplicated, we have prostrated ourselves at the foot of the throne, and it has all been in vain. We must fight—I repeat it, sir, we must fight.”8

During her November 1911 visit, Pankhurst spoke to a large crowd at the Minneapolis Auditorium, the city’s imposing civic structure on Eleventh Street and Nicollet Avenue, with box seats and space for several thousand. Ushers wore yellow streamers printed with “Votes for Women,” and the stage was decorated with a huge bouquet of yellow chrysanthemums, symbolizing woman suffrage. Front-page headlines trumpeted her demands for women’s representation on the city council and claim that women’s votes could stem the tide of “racial degeneration,” a common term that tapped into fears of declining fitness especially among white men of military age. Raising some eyebrows, she spoke on Sunday at the First Congregationalist Church, hosted by the church’s Men’s Club. Her talk won over many skeptics of militant tactics, including Clara Ueland, the soon-to-be leader of Minneapolis’s Equal Suffrage Association and later the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA). Ueland was critical of Pankhurst’s long, rambling lecture but was moved enough by her rhetoric to agree that militant tactics might be “as justifiable as the Battle of Lexington.”9

While their stays in Minnesota were brief, both Pankhursts left a deep impression. Over the coming months and years, Minnesotans would continue to follow their protests and imprisonments, at times stepping in to defend their actions. When British suffragette militancy reached a fevered pitch in 1912, Minnesota suffragists rose to their defense. Kate Finkle, one of the 1915 Suffrage Club hosts of Sylvia’s visit, argued, “The Pankhurst women have made suffrage a serious issue all the world over and have taken it out of the silly column.” Her colleague, Dr. Mabel Ulrich, president of the 1915 Suffrage Club, observed that suffrage riots may have been justified in England because of the “pig-headed” English men, but she assured readers that they were unnecessary in the local movement.10

That support for the Women’s Social and Political Union militancy would be tested as it further intensified in 1913. In January of that year, Britain’s prime minister declined to sponsor a suffrage bill, propelling suffragettes to cut telegraph lines, break windows, and place bombs in politicians’ homes and churches. Emmeline was imprisoned again for incitement to violence and commenced a hunger and thirst strike. Minnesota newspapers avidly followed her arrest, release for ill health, and re-arrest, sometimes with grim humor. Noting that none of the suffragette-planted bombs had yet exploded, the Duluth Herald quipped, “Can it be that the British suffragette is displaying a sense of humor which the British temperament and femininity . . . are supposed to lack?”
In June 1913, Minnesotans read headlines reporting of the death of British suffragette Emily Wilding Davison, who was trampled by the king’s horse when she stepped onto the racetrack at Epsom Downs carrying a “Votes for Women” banner. Davison’s funeral cortege in London, which drew more than 5,000 marchers and 50,000 observers, was widely reported in Minnesota’s press.11

To escape the frenzy of the militant campaign in Britain, in autumn 1913 Emmeline Pankhurst announced another trip to the United States. This time, it caused a serious dilemma for American suffragists: should they risk being affiliated with a lawbreaker? As suffrage militancy grew increasingly violent, leaders of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) were cautious. Carrie Chapman Catt likened Emmeline to radical abolitionist John Brown and could not decide whether she was “a liberator of her sex or a serious troublemaker. Time will tell which.” Minnesota’s suffragists were also in a quandary. The Appeal, an African American newspaper in St. Paul, articulated it well:

Most of the suffragette leaders say they honor Mrs. Pankhurst as a woman, but that they don’t approve of her methods. Her visit is going to put them in an awkward position. If they don’t pay any attention to her they will be accused of a slight to a woman who has spent her life working for ‘the cause.’ If they do show her attention their action may be interpreted as an approval of militant methods.12

Despite these concerns, Minnesotans continued to provide support. When the 1913 tour began with Emmeline’s detainment at Ellis Island and order of deportation due to “moral turpitude,” Minnesota’s US senator Moses E. Clapp intervened, sending a telegraph to immigration officers demanding Pankhurst’s release from detention at Ellis Island, 1913. Along with other midwestern suffragists, the board of the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association voted to send a letter of protest. Two days later, President Woodrow Wilson personally reversed the decision and allowed Pankhurst to commence her tour.13

By the time she reached Minneapolis, Emmeline Pankhurst’s 1913 speaking tour had drawn both controversy and enormous crowds. At Madison Square Garden in New York City, NAWSA president Dr. Anna Howard Shaw boycotted Pankhurst’s speech, in protest of the high ticket prices and blatant appeals for donations, which Shaw felt drained potential funds from the US movement. Debates flared when Pankhurst spoke openly about white slavery (i.e., prostitution) and the problem of venereal disease. But her bold rhetoric only heightened interest in her appearances, and despite messages from NAWSA leaders to boycott her speeches, thousands turned out to see her. Minnesota’s suffragists ral-
lied to her support, raising $500 to sponsor her upcoming visit to the state and donating more than $1,000 through collections at her various appearances—numbers that the Minneapolis Tribune bragged “put all others in the shade.”

On her three-day visit to the Twin Cities in early November 1913, a group of “enthusiastic local suffragists” met Emmeline Pankhurst at the train; among them was Grace Boutelle, a Minneapolis musician who had been imprisoned several times in London for demonstrating with the suffragettes. Pankhurst’s stay in the Twin Cities was filled with a whirlwind of events, large and small. Escorted by a Mrs. Kimball, the editor of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Employees’ Magazine, a publication for railroad workers, she spoke to the press about women’s right to well-paid employment. She also dined at the University Club, where Minneapolis society women strained for a chance to meet her, and at the St. Paul Hotel with 50 select guests. Her public address at the Minneapolis Auditorium brought in record crowds, with thousands more attending her St. Paul talk the following day.

Despite her fragile health— one paper observed she “shows the effect of her four hunger strikes, [and] of worry over members of her own family”—she held the crowd’s attention for several hours at each event. In the absence of personal accounts, it is hard to reconstruct precisely how most Minnesotans responded to her visits. Press coverage was voluminous but superficial and prone to editorial bias. After Emmeline Pankhurst’s 1913 talks, the conservative New Ulm Review concluded, “She charmed, amused and persuaded them, but when the last word is said they listened to her with a sort of amused tolerance, as if they did not take her quite seriously.” Yet other evidence suggests that Emmeline and her daughter galvanized supporters and convinced at least some doubters. One of them was the (anonymous) author of the Minneapolis Morning Tribune’s popular Sunday column “Tribune Girl,” who penned a long and sympathetic portrait of Emmeline Pankhurst and the suffragettes’ “revolutionary war.” The columnist admitted to at first being “a bit prejudiced against the leader of the militant suffragets [sic]. It is so easy to judge. . . . [But] when the suffrage movement in England is explained by Mrs. Pankhurst, it takes on a different meaning.”

Through their international speaking tours, Emmeline and Sylvia Pankhurst not only generated sympathy for militant tactics but also provided examples of fortitude and persistence. Their celebrity appeal drew thousands who might not otherwise have been engaged. In the years following their visits, Minnesota suffragists would turn what had been a rather staid local movement into something much more effective and exciting, adopting more deliberate organizational strategies and recruiting much greater numbers of participants. Perhaps the Duluth Herald put it best: “Those who came from curiosity remained from interest.”

Notes

2. Nearly every Minnesota newspaper carried coverage of the Pankhursts and the militant suffragettes, including the German, Swedish, and Norwegian press. In addition to the major Minneapolis and St. Paul newspapers, short articles appeared in the Caledonia Argus, Duluth Herald, Elizendale Eagle, International Falls Press, Little Falls Herald, Montorville Express, New Ulm Review, Pine Island Record, Past and Record, Republican Press, Spring Grove Herald, St. Charles Union, St. Paul Tidende, Stillwater Messenger, Tower Weekly News, and Winonan Reporter, to name an inexhaustive list.

The term suffragette was coined in 1906, when the British newspaper the Daily Mail used the word in a derogatory manner to distinguish between British suffragists who were militant and those who were not. British activists embraced the term and claimed it as one denoting radical action; however, American activists preferred the more serious and respected term suffragist. Both contemporaries and historians have debated whether suffragette attacks on property constituted terrorism. For one heated exchange on this topic, see C. J. Beerman’s rather provocative article “Confronting the Suffragette Mythology,” BBC History (Feb. 2007): 14–18, with a response from June Purvis, “Radical Fighters in a Just Cause,” BBC History (Feb. 2007): 20–21.


An incomplete list of Minnesota’s suffrage organizations in 1911 includes the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association, a statewide umbrella organization; the Political Equality Club; the College Equal Suffrage Club; the Workers’ Equal Suffrage Club; the 1915 Suffrage Club; and the Minnesota Scandinavian Woman Suffrage Association. All had small, localized memberships. New clubs formed in 1912 and 1913 include the Equal Suffrage Association of Minneapolis; see Barbara Stuhler, Gentle Warriors: Clara Ueland and the Minnesota Struggle for Women Suffrage (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1995), 76–77.


Founded in 1910 by Minneapolis women, the 1915 Suffrage Club aimed to achieve equal suffrage by 1915. My thanks to Sophie Hunt for sharing her research on this group. For more, see the Minneapolis Sunday Tribune, Nov. 17, 1912, 30. On the Political Equality Club and Worker’s Equal Suffrage League, see Stuhler, Gentle Warriors, 65ff, 81; Kristin Mapel Bloomberg and Erin Parrish, “She Will Marvel that It Should Have Been Possible,” The Political Equality Club of Minnesota,” Minnesota History 60, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 113–22.

5. Emmeline Pankhurst, My Own Story (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1914), 160–61; Bartley, Emmeline Pankhurst, 160–80; Duluth Herald, Oct. 30, 1911, 11. Extensive coverage of Pankhurst’s trip can be found in British suffrage newspapers, Votes for Women and The Suffragette, as well as in US newspapers. Despite widespread interest, Pankhurst was not without vocal local critics. See the scathing letter to the editor, “Mrs. Pankhurst and Gentle Brick Throwing,” Duluth Herald, Nov. 9, 1911.

6. Richard Hudelson and Carl Ross, By the Ore Docks: A Working People’s History of Duluth (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Duluth Herald, Nov. 13, 1911, 3.


9. “Woman’s Suffrage Urged as a Remedy for Race Decline,” Minneapolis Morning Tribune, Nov. 12, 1911, 1; “Suffragette Defends Sunday Talk on the Vote,” Minneapolis Morning Tribune, Nov. 13, 1911, 1; Stuhler, Gentle Warriors, 70. Yellow was the traditional color of US suffragists, who adopted yellow sunflowers, roses, daffodils, or chrysanthemums as symbols. Red was the color of anti-suffragists.

10. “Suffragists Here Defend Riots of English Women,” Minneapolis Morning Tribune, July 28, 1912. Single and in her thirties, Kate Finkle worked as a probation officer in Henne-pin Juvenile Court and was an active volunteer for the Minneapolis Women’s Rotary Club as well as for suffrage organizations. Dr. Mabel Ulrich was a frequent speaker around the state on sex education and public health; later, she was director of women’s work for US Public Health Services and served on the Minneapolis Board of Public Welfare.


13. “Sympathy Expressed for Mrs. Pankhurst” and “Militant Is Defended by American Women: Middle West Suffragettes [sic] Are Against Deportation of Mrs. Pankhurst,” Minneapolis Morning Tribune, Oct. 19, 1913, 1; “Local Suffragists Plan Protest to the President,” Minneapolis Morning Tribune, Oct. 20, 1913, 2. Moses E. Clapp, a Republican, served as Minnesota attorney general (1887–93) and US senator (1901–17). According to the British Daily Telegraph, protest meetings were called in Chicago, Detroit, Denver, Cincinnati, and other cities. News of this drama was widely reported in Minnesota’s press. See, for example, “Mrs Pankhurst Is Held Undesirable,” Windom Reporter, Oct. 24, 1913, 2.

14. “Mrs. Pankhurst Heckled at Garden,” New York Times, Oct. 22, 1913, 3; “American Suffragists and Mrs. Pankhurst,” The (UK) Scotsman, Oct. 11, 1913, 7; “Mrs. Pankhurst in America,” Votes for Women, Oct. 24, 1913, 32; “Close of Her Campaign in America: A Disgusted Public,” Western Gazette, Nov. 28, 1913, 12; “Pankhurst Tour Chilly,” Hawaiian Gazette, Nov. 18, 1913, 5; “Mrs. Pankhurst to Get $5000 from the State,” Minneapolis Morning Tribune, Nov. 5, 1913, 9; “Mrs. Pankhurst in St. Paul,” Minneapolis Morning Tribune, Nov. 8, 1913, 1. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw served as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association from 1904 to 1915. The funds raised by Minnesota suffragists were relatively modest. In total, Pankhurst raised £4 500 on her 1913 tour, worth approximately $219,000 at the time.

15. “Mrs. Pankhurst to Reach City Today,” Minneapolis Morning Tribune, Nov. 6, 1913, 11; New Ulm Review, Nov. 12, 1913. Grace Boutelle was active in the Minneapolis arts community, singing, acting, and directing operettas. Many Minnesota newspapers printed short summaries of Pankhurst’s visit, including the Willmar Tribune and the Swedish-language (Minneapolis) Svenska Folkets Tidning.

16. New Ulm Review, Nov. 12, 1913; “One Ain’t Wot It Used to Be,” Minneapolis Morning Tribune, Nov. 9, 1913, section 3, 2. Tribune Girl was a regular Sunday feature with witty discussions of events and people around town.

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