

“Carrie Chapman Catt, Founder of the League of Women Voters”

By Margaret Drake

The League of Women Voters was founded by Carrie Chapman Catt in 1920 during the convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. The convention was held just six months before the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, giving women the right to vote after a 72-year struggle.

Carrie Chapman Catt was a women's suffrage leader who campaigned for the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution which gave U.S. women the right to vote in 1920. She served as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and was the founder of the League of Women Voters and the International Alliance of Women.

She was born January 9, 1859, Carrie Clinton Lane in Ripon, Wisconsin. Carrie spent her childhood in Charles City, Iowa and attended elementary education in a one-room schoolhouse in Charles City.

When Carrie was 13 years old, she asked her mother why she was not getting dressed up to go to town to vote like her father and his hired man. Her sincere question was met with laughter and the reason that voting was too important a civic duty to leave to women. That day was to be a turning point in her life.

In 1877, she graduated from Charles City High School. She wanted to go to college, but her father refused to provide the money for more education so Carrie taught school for a year, earning enough income to enter Iowa State Agricultural College. During her two years there, she supported herself working in the state library and the college kitchen. She graduated in 1880 – the only woman among 18 graduates. She aspired to become a lawyer so she began reading law in an attorney's offices in Charles City

The next year, she began teaching high school in nearby Mason City, Iowa, with the intent of earning enough money to study law at the university. However, she found she enjoyed teaching so much that she gave up the idea of becoming a lawyer. Less than two years later in 1885, she was appointed both principal and superintendent of the Mason City schools.

On February 12, 1885, Carrie married Leo Chapman, editor of the *Mason City Republican* and she resigned from teaching (as married women were not allowed to teach). She became his business partner, writing a “Woman's World” column – but not about food or fashion, rather about women's political and labor issues, and reminding

women that if they wanted the vote, they needed to organize. After Leo harshly criticized a local Republican candidate in the paper, he was sued for libel and had to sell the newspaper. In May 1886, he went to San Francisco to find work. However, he caught typhoid fever. Carrie received a telegram about him and left immediately by train, but Leo died before she arrived. She was only 27 years old. Eventually she landed on her feet but only after some harrowing experiences in the male working world. In 1890, she married George Catt, a wealthy engineer. Their marriage allowed her to spend a good part of each year on the road campaigning for women's suffrage in the late 1890s. Catt also joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Prohibition of Alcohol and Women's Suffrage had many links during that era as in the case of Carrie Chapman Catt.

She became a close colleague of Susan B. Anthony, who chose Carrie to succeed her as head of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). She was elected president of NAWSA twice; her first term was from 1900 to 1904 and her second term was from 1915 to 1920. Her second term coincided with the climax of the women's suffrage movement in the U.S., and culminated in the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920. NAWSA was by far the largest organization working for women's suffrage in the U.S. Carrie supervised dozens of campaigns, mobilized numerous volunteers (1 million by the end), and made hundreds of speeches. After the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, Carrie retired from NAWSA.

She founded the League of Women Voters in 1920. She proposed the League "to finish the fight". In the same year, she ran as the Presidential candidate for the Commonwealth Land Party.

Catt was also a leader of the international women's suffrage movement. She helped to found the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in 1902, and served as its president from 1904 until 1923. The IWSA remains in existence, now as the International Alliance of Women.

Carrie was active in anti-war causes during the 1920s and 1930s. She settled in New Rochelle, New York in 1928. During this period she was frequently recognized as one of the most prominent female leaders of her time.

The League began according to Carrie, as a "mighty political experiment" designed to help 20 million women carry out their new responsibilities as voters. It encouraged them to use their new power to participate in shaping public policy. From the beginning, the League was an activist, grassroots organization whose leaders believed that citizens

should play a critical role in advocacy. It was then, and is now, a nonpartisan organization. League founders believed that maintaining a nonpartisan stance would protect the fledgling organization from becoming mired in the party politics of the day. However, League members were encouraged to be political themselves, by educating citizens about, and lobbying for, government and social reform legislation.

She campaigned for American participation in the League of Nations (and later the United Nations), and lectured at every possible opportunity for peace. In 1925, she helped establish the Committee on the Cause and Cure of War (CCCW), serving as chair until 1932. With many members coming from major women's organizations, this new one quickly had over five million members. By 1930, over eight million women had joined the CCCW. During the "Red Scare" following Russia's revolution, Carrie's pacifism and promotion of improved international relations made her a target of 'super-patriotic' groups, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, who accused her of being a Communist sympathizer. She was in good company as Eleanor Roosevelt and social worker Jane Addams were similarly accused.

In 1933, with Hitler's rise and the Nazi Party persecutions, Carrie helped establish the Protest Committee of Non-Jewish Women Against the Persecution of Jews in Germany. They obtained thousands of signatures to a letter protesting the crimes against the Jews. She also lobbied Congress to amend the U.S. immigration laws to help Jews and other refugees escape. That same year, honoring her work, Carrie received the American Hebrew Medal – the first woman to do so.

She was 80 years old when World War II broke out. Her age and health prevented her from publicly campaigning any more, but she continued corresponding with influential people about helping war refugees and maintaining peace after the war. During her 40 years of continuous office-holding in all the varying organizations, she had never received a salary from any source at any time. On March 9, 1947, at the age of 88, Carrie Chapman Catt died of a heart attack in her home in New Rochelle, New York. By that time, women in most developed countries around the world had equal voting rights.

Thanks to the League Website and Wikipedia.

[presentation by Margaret Drake, LWV Hawaii County, Nov. 13, 2010]

From the diary of Margaret Drake's mother, Elvira Lena Collins at age 16.

Feb. 16, 1913 - I was put on the program for Literary (*Society at Vermilion Grove Quaker Academy, Illinois*) for the following:

“Why I Believe in Woman Suffrage”.

Women are on equality with men in every thing in this country excepting politics and why not in politics? I believe that if women were given the ballot it would do more toward prohibiting Alcoholic beverages than has ever been done in this country before.

When man gets in such a condition that he cannot control himself he needs assistance and if women could have their say I believe it would be put out of his way.

There are so many women whose lives have been made unhappy and miserable by this curse that I believe that they would vote against the thing that is ruining their lives and their country.

If women could vote, there would be a decided change in the way men conduct themselves at the polls. In Colorado for instance the women vote and there is not so much profanity, smoking and other disrespectful things that go on at the polls. We notice that men are more respectful when in the presence of ladies.

I suppose everyone is aware of the fact that all men vote. It does not make one wite of difference if they are idiots just so they can get to the polls. I rather think women have as much good common horse sense as idiots at any rate. Socially, intellectually and spiritually women are on an equality with men.

In conclusion I should say

“He is a slave who dares not be

In the right with two or three.”