





100
YEARS
OF THE

19th Amendment

As America celebrates the centennial of women's suffrage, Kansas looks back on pioneers, miners, adventurers and others who relied on themselves, not the whim of men's votes, to advance women's freedom

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Photography by Justin Lister and
courtesy Kansas Historical Society

The year 2020 marks 100 years since the formal adoption of the 19th Amendment, the legal addition to the United States Constitution that clarifies that “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”

Kansans were part of the political and cultural struggle leading up to this monumental change in American life. But for Kansas women, the 19th Amendment was not a magical moment that transformed decades of complete disenfranchisement to a future of absolute equality. Rather, this legal mandate came as a milestone along a continuum of struggles, setbacks and successes that began even before the state entered the union and continue to this day.

So, here’s to the centennial of the 19th Amendment. But more importantly, here’s to the women of Kansas who claimed and defined their own freedoms regardless of the timetables and whims of their male counterparts.

Kansas women led the path to their own suffrage

It has always been about hope.

When abolitionists and free-staters first came to Kansas, it was out of hope—hope that they could change things, make order out of chaos, create a new land where the residents could live freely.

Decades later, when prohibitionists spoke up, it was again about hope.

Staunch defenders of Prohibition—such as Carry A. Nation, who fought fiercely for God, family and home—had experienced the pain and abuse of an alcoholic husband.

Their hope was to build stronger families and communities. And, as grassroots Populism spread across Kansas, it was

led in part by women such as Annie Diggs and Mary Elizabeth Lease who imagined a Kansas where families, farms and communities had more freedom from the whims of bankers and railroad barons.

In each of these movements, Kansas women were leaders and championed the efforts, long before they had the right to vote.

Nationally, that wouldn’t happen until the 19th Amendment was ratified in August 1920. And systematic discrimination and legal hurdles remained. Native American women, for example, weren’t granted a right to vote until 1924, and the fight to secure this vote continues to this day.

But long before then, Kansas would be a stronghold for hope.

Kansas women had earned the right to vote in local elections by 1887, and, in 1912, Kansas voters—white men—approved the Equal Suffrage Amendment, becoming only the fourth state to do so.

Why Kansas?

Kansas was founded with a can-do spirit where everybody had to pitch in.

And, I believe, it began with abolition.

The Land

Kansas was a keystone state for human rights when abolitionists and slavery proponents fought over how Kansas would enter the Union.

In the territorial years of Kansas, from 1854 to 1861, there are many heroes.

But when it comes to the overlap of abolitionism and women’s rights, let’s look to Clarina Nichols, who made a few suggestions to the Kansas Constitution.

Nichols, an associate editor of the *Quindaro Chindowan* (Quindaro was a small town that is now part of Kansas City, Kansas), was an abolitionist and suffragette. In 1859, she was the only woman invited to the white, males-only state constitutional convention.

Despite the invitation, she was not allowed to talk while the convention was in session.

So, she sat and knitted. And listened.

Then, she lobbied for women’s rights while the men took breaks. And like a master politician, Nichols flattered her rivals as she advanced her cause.

“I have great respect for manhood,” Nichols said in her 1851 speech, “The Responsibilities of Woman,” at the second National Woman’s Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts. “When I listen to Fourth-of-July orations and the loud cannon, and reflect that these are tributes of admiration paid to our fathers because they compelled freedom for themselves and sons from the hand of oppression and power... I labor in hope; for I have faith that when men come to value their own rights ... they will feel themselves more honored in releasing ... the ‘inalienable rights’ of women.”

Once Kansas entered the union on January 29, 1861, Kansas women played an integral part in preserving the state.

It was largely the women, the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters, who picked up the pieces after Confederate guerilla William Quantrill’s violent raid into eastern Kansas in August 1863. They were the ones left to bury family members and to rebuild and their homes, businesses and farms. And it was women across the state who filled the roles their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers vacated when they left to fight for the Union. Women across the continent and on both sides of the battle lines faced similar adversities, but Kansas women faced these challenges at the edge of the frontier and often without a network of families and community ties to assist them.

Kansas men—or at least those who could vote—failed to repay those debts in 1867 when they rejected a statewide

(continued on page 55)





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Mary Elizabeth Lease



Susanna Madora Salter



On April 4, 1887, Susanna Madora Salter was elected mayor of Argonia, becoming the first woman to be elected mayor in the United States.



“Self Trust” and the Abilene Ladies Literary League

In 1884, a small group of Abilene women traveled by wagon to Junction City to meet with organizers of the territory's first women's literary club. Following this visit, the Abilene Ladies Literary League held its first official meeting on January 22, 1885, making it the second ladies club on record in Kansas.

The group continued to meet bimonthly for three hours of intense and serious study. They read a Shakespeare play each month. They studied English and American history. They read German, American, Italian, Greek, English, Scandinavian, Spanish, and Dutch literature. Together, they read *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and other classics, assigning a pronunciation committee to make certain that they learned each word of the classic literature correctly.

Gradually, the club's interest in education began to overlap with civic affairs. In 1900, they organized the Abilene Library Association and collaborated in local fundraising efforts, including a lecture by William Jennings Bryan. In 1904, after renting vacant downtown spaces to house their growing library collection, the women of the Literary League circulated a petition calling for a vote to approve a one-mill tax levy to support a public library. The vote passed a city election in 1905 and led to the establishment of a public, tax-supported institution. To this day, at least one member of the Abilene Ladies Literary League serves on the library board.

Throughout the suffrage campaigns of the 1890s and 1910s, there are no records of the club participating in parades or actions to promote women's right to vote. But the league's educational focus was becoming decisively more contemporary.

Topics from the 1907–1908 program included “What Americanism Should Stand For” and “Leading Statesmen of this Period.”

In 1913, members formally voted to act upon current events they would study. Members encouraged development of domestic science and manual training courses for high school students. They equipped a kindergarten class in the library basement and supported playgrounds for schoolchildren. They contributed to educational scholarship funds. They raised money for hospital equipment and tree plantings. During the war years, they suspended formal meetings and volunteered at the Red Cross. During WWII, members sent Christmas gifts to veterans. Beginning with the 1950s, the Literary League campaigned for safer traffic laws, drivers training programs, and seat belts.

Now, 135 years after its founding, the Abilene Ladies Literary League continues. Roll is still called at the beginning of each monthly meeting in the Carnegie Room of the Abilene Public Library. One member prepares and presents an educational program each month while a second serves as official hostess. To accommodate women in the workforce, meetings are now held later in the day.

Like their counterparts of 1885, the members of the 2020 Abilene Ladies Literary League bring diverse backgrounds, abilities and experiences to each conversation.

And, like their founders, they share a belief that while change sometimes must come from outside, when another group decides to accommodate or grant it, the most fundamental and important transformations are self-education and local action.

It is fitting that the Abilene Ladies Literary League has kept as its motto the same Ralph Waldo Emerson quotation they adopted soon after their founding: “Self-trust is the first secret of success.”

—Patricia E. Ackerman



“Self-trust is the first secret of success.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

amendment that would have granted suffrage to all adult citizens regardless of race or sex. The measure failed despite endorsements and frequent appearances by national suffrage leaders such as Susan B. Anthony.

Without the vote, Kansas women continued the work they had been doing for the past decades.

Many of these stories can be found in Lilla Day Monroe's *Pioneer Women*, a book of more than 800 firsthand accounts of life on the prairie. Monroe's granddaughter Joanna Stratton rescued the work from obscurity when she completed and published it in 1981.

The book contains memories of women who endured floods, droughts, hail, fires, chinch bugs and grasshoppers to create homes—and livelihoods—for their families. And many of them did this as recent emigrants to the state, having left behind the homes, extended families and familiar landscapes of their childhood. "That loneliness, usually borne with dignity and silence, could at times express itself in unexpected ways," Stratton wrote. "Mr. Hilton, a pioneer, told his wife that he was going to Little River for wood. She asked to go with him ... She hadn't seen a tree for two years, and when they arrived at Little River, she put her arms around a tree and hugged it until she was hysterical."

Many years later, Rea Woodman, a noted historian and journalist for *The Wichita Eagle*, would write about Nancy Ann Rogers, who was forced to face crises on her own.

In 1870, Rogers, a single mother, came to Wichita to work as a nurse. A few years after she arrived, she noticed a pain in her left breast. A local doctor diagnosed her with cancer and told her he would charge her \$25 to cut it out.

It was money Rogers didn't have.

So she went home, cooked enough food to last her two boys a week or more, then checked herself into a local boarding house, arranged the furniture to suit her needs, partially undressed and proceeded to cut her own breast off with a sharp knife.

Stories of grit, strength, courage and determination, like Rogers', fill Kansas history.

And yet, men continued to deny Rogers and other Kansas women the right to vote.

The Struggle

Twenty years after losing the statewide suffrage vote, Kansas women were granted the right to vote in municipal elections in February 1887. They showed up in force in the first elections after that, changing the political landscape. On April 4, 1887, Susanna Madora Salter was elected mayor of Argonia, becoming the first woman to be elected mayor in the United States.

A statewide suffrage vote failed in 1894, but came amid other victories for Kansas women who had won the right to buy and sell their own property, retain custody of their own children in cases of divorce, and vote in school district elections.

Granted, these victories were in areas of life that society at the time consigned to the "women's sphere," but they were

precedents and inroads that Kansas suffragettes used to win male voters to their side.

In 1912, Kansas men passed women's suffrage and Kansas women used this power to create groups that strengthened the integrity of the ballot.

Wichitan Jane Brooks, president of the Kansas Equal Suffrage Association, attended the National American Women's Suffrage Association conference in 1919 in St. Louis and returned home to found the nation's first chapter of the League of Women Voters.

Across all spheres of public life, Kansas women were advocates and influencers. Agnes Ozman effectively began the Pentecostal movement from Topeka in 1901; Amelia Earhart captured the world's imagination through her aviation exploits in the 1920s–1930s, and Olive Ann Beech co-founded the Beech Aircraft Corporation in the 1930s.

But perhaps one of the most remarkable and inspiring stories belongs to women of the mining communities of southeast Kansas.

In December 1921, between 2,000 and 6,000 women—some pregnant and others carrying small children—marched 63 miles to support the miners' union representing their families. Dubbed the "Amazon Army," they protested unfair labor practices, hazardous working conditions, poor pay and discrimination. Their union eventually won the dispute, and these Kansas women became part of a larger movement that led to the eight-hour workday and child labor laws.

Other Kansans would make their mark on politics as well. Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker became the second woman (Margaret Chase Smith of Maine was the first) to be elected to the United States Senate in her own right, not preceded by a husband or appointed to fulfill an unexpired term. Kassebaum served from December 1979 to January 1997, at times winning more than 70 percent of the vote in her re-election campaign. She remains one of the most respected women in Kansas politics.

But for Kansas women, winning respect doesn't have to be confused with being "respectable."

There was a girl from Chanute in the early 20th century who became a role model after she defied family expectations to elope with a photographer and travel the world. Osa and Martin Johnson became adventurers, world-famous explorers for their films and books about East and Central Africa, the South Pacific Islands, and British North Borneo—they were the Crocodile Hunters or Indiana Joneses of their day.

After Martin died in a plane crash, Osa would write about their life's journey in *I Married Adventure*. And after Osa died, the city celebrated them with a museum, archives and research center that continue to welcome visitors and honor Osa's bold gamble on a future uncharted.

These women all exemplify the Kansas spirit—adventurous, daring and willing to take risks.

Because whatever a legal document or proud assembly of male legislators might deign to grant, Kansas women have always been about freedom and hope for the future. —*Beccy Turner* **KM**