

# How Women Got the Vote in Oklahoma

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*Failure IS impossible.*

Susan B. Anthony

*In order to win suffrage a campaign needs four things:  
endorsement by great citizen organizations, endorsement  
by political parties, an adequate campaign fund, and  
organized energetic campaign forces.*

Carrie Chapman Catt

## 1890

### First, saloon keepers

In 1890, the House of the first Oklahoma Territorial Legislature assembled to discuss the question before it: Woman Suffrage. They had listened as Mrs. Alice Williams of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) made a strong pitch for granting women the vote. Now it was time for them to vote on the measure. The House said "no" by three votes. The Council did not even consider the subject. The Legislature would, however, during the session, grant partial suffrage: women could vote in school elections.

This was a toe in the door. By 1890, several states granted partial suffrage in recognition of the changing status of women. But women were demanding more; they wanted full recognition of their citizenship and a part in government. It could only come with access to the ballot box in all elections.

The year 1890 was a benchmark for the woman suffrage movement. That year marked the healing of the twenty-one year schism of the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Suffrage Association when the two groups merged to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Younger, better educated, more conservative, professional women, attuned to the changing American, came to the forefront of the suffrage movement. They believed organization and political skills to be the key to obtaining votes for women.

Over the next thirty years, Oklahoma was to be a proving ground for their beliefs. Suffragists would have to battle Democrats, powerful politicians, liquor interests and racism in their quest for the vote. But first, they had to create support.

Organization for the cause came first. Laura Gregg from Kansas, a representative of NAWSA, came in 1895 on a speaking tour of all principle towns in Oklahoma Territory. She spent six weeks organizing suffrage clubs in twelve towns. In 1896, Julia Nelson from Minnesota, spent three months in the Territory and increased the number of clubs to twenty-three. The issue of granting full suffrage was introduced again in the 1897 legislative session. It passed the House by a vote of 13 to 9, only to be killed in the Council.

Carrie Chapman Catt of the NAWSA came to Oklahoma Territory in the fall of 1898. Her mission was to guide efforts to get suffrage through the 1899 session. This time the suffragists had the support of many newspapers and prominent citizens. On January 16, Councilor James P. Gandy of Woods County, introduced Council Bill 32, "An Act Defining the Rights of Women."

Eight days later, the House and Council Elections Committees met together to hear Carrie Chapman Catt speak on equal suffrage. The *Oklahoma State Capital* reported she held attention of a standing room only audience for two hours. "The Lady makes a favorable impression by the candor and fairness of her remarks...", said the paper, and predicted passage. Legislators received petitions from their home districts urging support of suffrage.

Support also came from Governor C.S. Thomas of Colorado who wrote of voting being a public responsibility. "Women regard the franchise as a serious public trust," he said, and "vote from a sense of duty. They seek to inform themselves, to learn the workings of government." He went on to note that the women of Colorado, since being given the franchise, had 'lost none of their charms, homes were still intact, the ghost of woman's degradation never appeared. In fact the vote helped working women."

On March 4, 1899 equal suffrage passed the House with ease on a vote of 14 to 9. Two days later, the Committee on Elections of the Council recommended a "do pass" motion. But trouble was brewing. Councilor Winkler demanded, and was granted, time to prepare a minority report. Illness of a Council supporter and a flare up in the feud between the Legislature and Governor Cassius Barnes caused the suffrage bill to be put back to the last week of the session. This gave anti-suffragists time to work against the bill.

Carrie Chapman Catt reported to the NAWSA 1899 convention meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that Oklahoma suffragists were done in by a flood of telegrams from anti-suffragists from as far away as Albany, New York, and by the Saloon Keepers League. Both wanted to "Protect sweet womanly dignity from the debasing influence of politics."

Filibustering kept the bill from coming to a vote and parliamentary maneuvering finally killed it. The *Oklahoma State Capital* of March 11, 1899 reported what happened: "The equal suffragists were turned down repeatedly in the Council Friday by a small majority. An effort was made early in the morning to bring the measure to a vote and renewed every few minutes during the entire session and, even after the legislature had ceased to be, the fight was carried on." All votes taken on the question lost by votes of 5 to 7.

Carrie Chapman Catt noted that the Oklahoma experience gave insight into what suffragists were up against in the nature and methods of the opposition. They had seen legislators who advocated suffrage change overnight when pressure was applied by the Saloon Keepers League. Political freedom for women was bartered away.

## **1906**

### **Then, a question of race**

Approaching statehood intensified the resolve to include full woman suffrage in the state constitution. Laura Gregg returned to the Territory and spent March through

November of 1904 organizing suffrage clubs. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, president of NAWSA, came in December and spent two weeks working on the series of conferences. At a convention of delegates from both Indian and Oklahoma Territories, held in Oklahoma City, December 15 and 16, 1904, a letter from Susan B. Anthony was read urging "No stone should be left unturned to secure suffrage for the women while Oklahoma is yet a Territory, for if it comes into the Union without this in its constitution it will take a long time and a great deal of hard work to convert over one-half of the men to vote for it."

During the next two years, the suffrage movement spread throughout the twin territories. Support came from women's clubs, the WCTU, state labor and press associations, the Socialist Party and the Farmer's Union. Robert L. Owen, a prominent Muskogee lawyer and delegate to the Constitutional Convention, was recruited to the suffrage cause, as was Peter Hanraty, of the A.F. of L., a McAlester representative to the convention.

As anticipated, the woman suffrage issue was among those heatedly debated during the Constitutional Convention held at Guthrie in 1906 and 1907. Again, on the whole, things looked good for the suffragists. But there were some concerns. William Murray, chosen president of the convention, was on record opposing recall, woman suffrage, and mandatory referendum. Charles Haskell, of Muskogee, also prominent in the convention, opposed suffrage...he was said to be influenced by his wife, who felt women would vote their emotions. Delegates from counties with no blacks nearly all favored woman suffrage, while those with a great number of blacks were unanimously opposed.

Petitions urging suffrage arrived throughout the January and February debate. They came from Norman, Chickasha, Fairland in the Indian Territory, Elk, City, Agra, Prague, Enid, Shawnee, and Kingfisher. One, presented by Hanraty, came from the trade unions and contained 24,000 signatures. Suffrage advocates also came to testify before the convention. Laura Clay of NAWSA and former Governor Alva Adams of Colorado spoke at an evening meeting on January 8. Adams noted that since Colorado women got the vote "women haven't been unsexed, domestic serenity hadn't be neglected, the home is not neglected, womanhood has not gone into exile or been tainted. The state is better; the destiny of youth is safer and woman has lost no charm."

The outlook for suffrage looked bright indeed. Then Guthrie held a school election in which women could vote. Convention delegates had to pass a polling site to reach convention meeting rooms. As they did, they took note of the line of voters—black voters—men and **women** voters. That killed the chances for woman suffrage. For one issue nearly uniting convention delegates was the desire to deprive blacks of the votes and to break Republican domination of the state. The possibility of woman suffrage meant that black women would vote and probably would vote Republican.

Once again woman suffrage was sacrificed, this time to racial prejudice. The Constitutional Convention did allow women partial suffrage with voting in school elections.

## **1909**

### **Try the Initiative Petition**

Undaunted, women renewed their efforts to get the vote by legislative action. They were rebuffed. One petition, with 8,000 signatures, sent to the Legislature suffered the discourtesy of a member removing the sheets from his district and throwing them in the wastebasket. With both houses of the Legislature against it and Charles Haskell as Governor, it became obvious the question of suffrage would have to go the initiative and petition route.

Quietly, during 1090, women circulated a petition to have suffrage put on the ballot for a vote of the people. They gathered 38,600 signatures, more than the number needed. A snag developed when the women, led by Kate Biggers of Marlow, presented the petition. Secretary of State Bill Cross would not accept the petition because women were not qualified voters. J. Luther Langston, Secretary of the A.F. of L. and Judge J.B.A. Robertson, Democratic candidate for Governor, came to their rescue. Langston allowed his name to be used for receipt of the petition and Robertson acted as attorney for the petitioners.

The political "machine", astounded and dismayed at what the women had accomplished, made immediate plans to challenge the petition. At a hearing, January 26, 1910, Senator R.M. Roddie challenged 5,000 signatures as fraudulent but offered no proof. Secretary of State Cross ruled the petitions valid. Roddie appealed to the State Supreme Court where, on June 10, the petition was sustained. Suffrage was assigned to the general election ballot.

In the 1910 Oklahoma Primary, a constitutional amendment on voter registration qualifications was passed. It became known as the "grandfather clause" and effectively denied blacks the right to vote. Part of the question included the "silent vote" whereby a state question, in order to pass, must receive a majority of all votes cast as a regular election. This did not apply to special elections...the suffrage question was placed on the general election ballot along with five other propositions.

The intense efforts of the suffragists came up short, 88,808 yes, 128,928 no. The question lost by 40,120 votes. (The other questions lost, too, two to the silent vote.)

## **1918**

### **Try, try again**

Nationally, the pendulum began to swing in favor of women suffrage. The doldrums of the 1896–1910 period, when no state voted suffrage, were replaced by a burst of ratification.

Oklahoma suffragists had kept the issue before the Legislature. In time, the question gained needed legislative and political support. The Democratic party endorsed it and, in 1917, the Legislature acted favorable. The House voted 75 to 12 and the Senate, unanimously, for suffrage. A state constitutional amendment on woman suffrage would go to the people in the 1918 general election.

A skirmish was won. The real battle was ahead. Strong opposition existed from the National Anti-Suffrage Association and from powerful state political figures including Governor Robert L. Williams, Attorney General S.P. Freeling and Election Board

Chairman W.C. McAlester. The *Daily Oklahoman* came out against it. "Anti" literature was distributed, tying suffrage to Germans and the black vote.

NAWSA wasn't enthusiastic about the campaign because Oklahoma's silent vote made passage of state questions nearly impossible. Nevertheless, the national association did lend considerable assistance, sending workers and money into the state. Nearly \$20,000 was spent in Oklahoma to secure ratification, the largest sum ever put into a state campaign. NAWSA took charge of political and press work. A vigorous campaign, pro and con, raged during the summer and fall of 1918. Suffragists countered anti-suffrage efforts to link suffrage to socialism, an increase in the divorce rate, and a decrease in the birth rate.

Serious obstacles to suffrage were the flu epidemic of 1918, manipulation of Oklahoma's election process by the State Election Board, and the silent vote.

Anti-suffragists sent into Oklahoma one of their most prominent speakers, Charlotte Rowe, to campaign against the suffrage amendment. Speaking in Oklahoma City on October 18, she told an audience, "After the war there will be no place in the world for cheap imitations of men, It will be real women and real men upon whom American will depend."

Carrie Chapman Catt was scheduled to speak in Oklahoma City the following day, October 19, but was not permitted. Governor Roberts had ordered, because of the flue epidemic, no meetings larger than 12 people could be held. The order went into effect October 19!

Much of the final campaign took place in the newspapers. Accounts of petitions presented to the Governor, statements by prominent politicians of both parties, endorsement from President Wilson, articles and editorials kept the suffrage issue before the public.

The silent vote was a major stumbling block. Throughout the campaign, suffragists stressed the necessity of marking the suffrage ballot rather than leaving it blank. Blank ones counted as "no" votes.

Undoubtedly, the worst opposition came from politicians controlling the election process. This was an era when vote fraud in many areas was a common practice as politicians endeavored to have certain elections come out the "right way". W.C. McAlester, head of the State Election Board and an opponent of suffrage;, used the power of his office against the suffrage question. In September, he claimed the Secretary of State failed to supply the official wording in the proper amount of time. When that did not work, he ordered only half the needed number of ballots printed. However, local workers were aware that extra ballots could be printed at State expense whenever there was a shortage. This was done.

Soldiers, at camps around the state, who wished to vote on the suffrage question were not given constitutional question ballots. The governor, wishing to be "fair" issued a statement that soldiers could mail the constitutional question ballot in separately. The catch was that the election law required that only **one** sealed envelope could be returned to the election board. The number of lost votes because of this was estimated at 4,197.

Poll watching on election day, November 8, was imperative, given the attitude of the State Election Board. Suffragists, aware the election might be stolen, took the precaution of obtaining the result immediately after the ballots were counted and had them certified by the chairmen of the County Election Boards.

As results came in to the State Election Board, it was evident the suffrage question was passing handsomely. The *Daily Oklahoman*, on the morning after the election, printed the returns indicating suffrage approved. The State Election Board panicked and sent word to certain counties to open sealed ballot boxes to count returns from stub books which would include mutilated and spoiled ballots, thus increasing the silent vote.

This repeat of Oklahoma election chicanery was too much for the state. Many, who in the past had winked at voter fraud, came out in favor of playing fair with the suffrage question. A torrent of letters and telegrams and the information that suffragists held firm evidence of voter fraud rained on the Governor and the Election Board. Even Oklahoma's congressmen wanted to know what was going on. Finally on December 6, the politicians capitulated and acknowledged the suffrage amendment passed.

Two years later, after another intense campaign, Oklahoma ratified the nineteenth amendment, the thirty-third state to do so.

Failure **was** impossible!

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