

Suffrage –New Mexico’s Story

Thanks to the peculiar history and culture of New Mexico, its campaign for woman suffrage differed in many ways from all of the other western states. Beginning with Wyoming in 1867, ten western states granted full suffrage to women prior to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. New Mexico did not. There were many inhibiting factors, one of the most powerful being the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church. The predominance of the Spanish language likewise caused difficulties. The English speakers from the established suffrage organizations in the country did not, at least in the early years, communicate well with the New Mexican Spanish speaking population.

New Mexico was colonized beginning around 1598 by Spaniards traveling north from Mexico City in what was then New Spain. Their numbers included Franciscan friars and not too many years after the first expedition, women as well. In the early years, the explorers were looking for cities of gold. Finding none, they settled along the Rio Grande and its tributaries looking for other treasure. All of the other western states – even Arizona – were settled much later though the draw was similar - usually gold. By the time New Mexico became a U. S. Territory in 1850, Spanish-Catholic culture was well established, and the primary language was Spanish. It was not until the arrival of the railroad in 1879 that significant numbers of English speakers began migrating to the territory.

A scattering of women’s clubs, an important vehicle for organizing, appeared in urban centers beginning in the late 1890s. These tended to have a civic improvement agenda and it was natural for them to take up the cause of suffrage.¹ As their numbers

grew, the clubs became a network through which women could work for common causes and pass important information on to each other. The first of the women's service or civic improvement clubs in Las Vegas was founded in 1903 and was named the Women's Federation. The Las Vegas Woman's Club replaced it in 1912.² . Santa Fe women founded the Santa Fe Board of Trade. Its name was unusual but it adopted goals similar to other women's clubs. Among the earliest clubs was The Woman's Improvement Association, founded in Las Cruces in 1893. The club in Albuquerque was the largest and most active. Most of the club membership was Anglo, English-speaking, no matter where located.³

The year 1910 might be considered a watershed moment for the suffrage effort in New Mexico. President Taft had signed a statehood-enabling act and New Mexico immediately convened a state constitutional convention. New Mexico's club women, who had come to recognize the importance of the vote, saw an opportunity, and jumped into action. Julia Asplund, a professional librarian, had come to New Mexico in 1903 to direct the opening of the University of New Mexico Library. Asplund attended the convention proceedings every day it was in session. The Woman's Club of Albuquerque probably sent her or the New Mexico Federation of Women's Clubs, and one of those entities, through Asplund, petitioned the convention to provide partial suffrage for women to vote in school elections.⁴ Club members lobbied ceaselessly for the measure. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), a single-issue organization, was also active during the time. While not concerned primarily with suffrage, the group nevertheless assisted the cause. Just prior to the constitutional convention it organized

and sponsored the first public debate in New Mexico on the question of votes for women.⁵ The constitution ultimately approved by the convention did include limited suffrage for women. It was a tiny victory and was thanks to the sustained pressure exerted by the women's clubs.

Universal suffrage, however, was no closer. The new state constitution contained an amending process that made it nearly impossible to pass an amendment that would change voting stipulations. The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) sent organizers to New Mexico, but their focus was on obtaining the franchise via state action – a route incompatible with New Mexico's situation. In 1914, Alice Paul's organization, the Congressional Union (CU), sent the first of four organizers. The CU was working to pass the Nineteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, known as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, which enfranchised all women, no matter where they lived. At last, New Mexico's suffragists had a method and some guidance to reach their goal.⁶

The CU provided resources and ideas. Its organizers recruited from women's clubs and identified leaders. The New Mexico women did the work. One of the most effective campaigners encountered by the CU organizers was Angelina Otero Warren, known as Nina. She was well connected as the daughter of two powerful political families. She was acceptable to the Anglo community, having kept and used her former husband's name. She became, to nearly everyone's surprise, an excellent political lobbyist, and in 1917 was made president of the New Mexico State CU. When the Nineteenth Amendment end game came down to ratification in the New Mexico State

Legislature, Otero Warren conducted a continuous conversation, mostly among the Republican legislators, until she had secured enough yes votes to ensure passage.⁷ Much earlier in the campaign, a letter-writing crusade led by Alice Morley of Datil targeted New Mexico's congressional delegation urging them to support the Amendment. In July 1916, several women could be seen motoring around Las Vegas in an open car decorated with a placard saying "Votes for Women." Cars being a rarity, and women driving them, even more so, this little demonstration drew much attention.⁸ Mass meetings, rallies, demonstrations, and parades organized in all communities encouraged women and men both to support the effort. Most of the action occurred in Albuquerque, the largest town, or in Santa Fe, the seat of political power. All of the activity was aimed at badgering, cajoling, convincing, and one way or another getting the New Mexico congressional delegation to support the Susan B. Anthony Amendment.

Las Vegas, while the second largest municipality in the state, was geographically removed and somewhat isolated from the centers of population and power.⁹ Nevertheless, Las Vegas and San Miguel County -produced some influential and reliable suffragists for the cause. One of the CU organizers, recognizing that Spanish-speaking women in New Mexico made up at least fifty percent of the female population, enlisted Aurora Lucero to deliver a speech in Spanish at an Albuquerque rally. Lucero was a bilingual educator from Las Vegas and she, like Otero Warren, was politically well connected. With Lucero's help, the women designed and distributed a Spanish language promotional flier and Lucero then addressed the crowd, exhorting everyone to join the campaign. That effort produced positive results¹⁰.

The New Mexico women knew their enemies and one of the most immovable of them was Thomas Catron, U. S. Senator. He was rigidly anti woman suffrage. He would not listen to them and was unaffected by their entreaties. The first New Mexico Legislature had elected Catron U. S. Senator for a 4-year term beginning in 1912. He sought the Republican nomination for a second term, but the party did not choose him, and instead selected the pro-suffrage candidate Frank A. Hubble. Hubble in turn lost to A. A. (Andrieus Aristieus) Jones of Las Vegas in the general election. New Mexico suffragists believed, and with good cause, that through their organization, they had enlightened the Republican Party regarding the liability that Catron had become and thereby contributed to his defeat.¹¹ The voters, not the legislature, decided the general election contest between Hubble and Jones. Jones' success was due, in part, to the Democratic landslide of 1916.

Jones had arrived in Las Vegas in 1885 to take up the position of teacher/principal in the East Las Vegas public school. He later studied law and also, in 1893, was elected mayor. He turned out to be an ardent suffrage supporter and a key player in the final push in the U. S Senate to adopt the Nineteenth Amendment. Jones exhibited a personal commitment to woman's suffrage when he visited suffrage advocates who had been jailed in Washington, D. C. for picketing the White House. He entered the U. S. Senate in 1916 and assumed the chairmanship of the Senate Committee for Woman's Suffrage. Immediately he undertook to move the Amendment out of committee and on to the Senate floor for a vote.¹² The Senate rejected it not once, but twice. The House almost routinely voted twice in favor of adoption. Finally, in June 1919, the Amendment passed the Senate. Jones had a long political career, yet the

historical record of his achievements does not always include acknowledgement of his contributions to the suffrage movement. The women of the National American Woman Suffrage Association did appreciate his efforts, however, and several wrote and told him so.¹³ When Jones died in 1927, his fellow New Mexican Senator, Sam Bratton, in his memorial address to the Senate, emphasized the important work Jones did to move the Nineteenth Amendment forward.¹⁴

Back in New Mexico, the legislature, meeting in February 1919 (before the U. S. Congress adopted the Nineteenth Amendment) was considering a woman suffrage amendment to its own state constitution. Newly elected Governor Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazolo, Republican from Las Vegas, addressed the legislature. In a stirring message, he urged the convened members to approve the measure. The legislature did not do so, and Larrazolo was scathing in his criticism - especially of his own Republican caucus. He reminded them of the party's campaign promises in the 1918 election and begged them to discharge their duty and redeem the pledges.¹⁵ He vowed to call a special session of the legislature and this he did on February 16, 1920. In the meantime, opposition to woman suffrage heated up and got organized. It became apparent that passage of the ratification resolution would be difficult. Larrazolo called on Republican state leaders for help and used whatever methods he could to force Republicans to come around. With the help of the highly effective lobbyist Nina Otero Warren, the necessary votes materialized and the ratification passed. Larrazolo, having made some powerful enemies as he pushed for ratification, was not nominated for a second term as governor. No good deed goes unpunished.

The New Mexico woman's suffrage campaign was important not only to the state but also to all those resident in other states that had neither amended their own constitutions nor ratified the Nineteenth Amendment. World War I changed public opinion regarding "woman's place" and also changed women's attitudes toward themselves. It made passage of the Anthony Amendment easier but not a slam-dunk. Holdouts abounded. Nothing was assured until the final vote was counted. We must applaud New Mexico women who worked so long and patiently to achieve the vote. And we must likewise, acknowledge the men who worked alongside of them.

¹ Young, Janine A. "For the Best Interests of the Community": The Origins and Impact of the Women's Suffrage Movement in New Mexico, 1900-1930, (Master's Thesis, UNM, 1984), 9.

² Perrigo, Lynn, *Gateway to Glorieta: A History of Las Vegas, New Mexico*, (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing Co.) 1982.

³ Jensen, Joan, "'Disenfranchisement is a Disgrace,' Women and Politics in New Mexico, 1900-1940," appearing in Jensen, Joan M. and Darlis M. Miller, editors. *New Mexico Women, Intercultural Perspectives*, (Albuquerque: UNM Press), 1984.

⁴ There is no apparent agreement among historians regarding which woman's organization was responsible for the petition for limited woman suffrage that was presented to state constitutional convention nor is there agreement about which club (or clubs) sent Asplund or even if any club sent her.

⁵ Young, 33.

⁶ Jensen, 307

⁷ Jensen, 316; Young, 70.

⁸ *Santa Fe New Mexican* August 18, 2012. Photo accompanying article, "Events to Honor New Mexico Suffragists" by Molly Talbert.

⁹ In 1910, New Mexico's five largest towns had populations of 11000 (Abuquerque); 7000 (Las Vegas); 6000 (Roswell); 5000 (Santa Fe) and 3000 (Las Cruces). Until 1979, Las Vegas was two distinct towns – East LV and West LV. West Las Vegas was the original town established 1835 and largely Hispanic; East Las Vegas grew up with the coming of the railroad in 1879 and was mostly Anglo.

¹⁰ Gonzales-Berry, Erlinda and David R. Maciel, *The Contested Homeland: A Chicano History of New Mexico*, (Albuquerque: UNM Press, 2000), 196.

¹¹ Gonzales-Berry, 199.

¹² Jensen, 314.

¹³ *A. A. Jones Family Papers, 1865-1942* Archival material. Fray Angelico Chavez Library, Museum of New Mexico.

Letter from Illinois Equal Suffrage Assoc to "My Dear Senator Jones" signed Grace Wilbur Trout, state president. "You were one of those true friends and I shall never forget your unselfish and untiring efforts on behalf of our movement."

Letter from NAWSA to “Dear Senator Jones” signed Carrie Chapman Catt, president. “The NAWSA wishes to express the deepest appreciation of the consideration, patience, and courage which has so characterized your every movement in our difficult campaign.”

¹⁴ *Congressional Record*, April 8, 1928, pg 6054

“He distinguished himself in his advocacy of the Nineteenth Amendment. No man in the entire republic is due more credit for bringing about the enactment of the Woman Suffrage Amendment than is Senator Jones.”

¹⁵ *New Mexico State Record*, January 17, 1919, p1



Women from Las Vegas, N.M., campaigning for women’s right to vote in July 1916. Courtesy Kathryn Bennett



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