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Chris Powell

## Suffragette's notebook is a relic of great struggle

By Chris Powell

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Having elected two women governors, including the first elected without following her husband in office, and being largely indifferent politically to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, Connecticut seems to have lost appreciation for the country's first great civil rights movement -- the movement for women's suffrage.

But maybe that will change a little with the discovery by Connecticut's League of Women Voters of a notebook compiled in the summer of 1918 by a suffragette, Gladys Bragdon, recording her interviews with state legislators about granting women the right to vote.

The notebook, donated this week to the state archives, shows how the world war then raging, a war "to make the world safe for democracy," led many men to wonder how a political system could be democratic while it excluded half the population. Other men were persuaded by the war work then being performed by women in armaments factories and the Red Cross.

Years before enactment of the 19th Amendment in 1920, which nationalized women's right to vote, most states in the western part of the country already had come to such a realization about democracy, on account of their recent frontier experience, which had shown that women had to do anything men could do if the community was to survive. While women in those western states already had full voting rights by state law, since 1893 women in Connecticut had been allowed to vote only in local elections.

The Bragdon notebook records how women were influential with their legislator husbands even without the right to vote. One legislator is said to be "indifferent. Will do as wife says but doubts if wife knows or cares anything about public affairs or politics." Another legislator, while listed as anti-suffrage, is said to be possibly persuadable even though he has a "rabid anti wife -- poor man."

As quaint as the suffrage movement may seem today, participation in it required great courage and some of its advocates were persecuted. Perhaps the greatest suffragette, Susan B. Anthony, was even prosecuted criminally in federal court in New York State for managing to vote in the 1872 presidential election. Though Anthony noted that the recently enacted 14th Amendment had just guaranteed "equal protection of the law" to everyone, the judge ordered the jury to convict her and fined her \$100. In court Anthony was defiant, declaring, "I shall never pay a dollar of your unjust penalty" -- and she never did. She had so embarrassed the government that it never dared to try to collect the fine.

Two women governors are more than most states have had -- the country has had only about 35 altogether -- but Connecticut has sent only six women to Congress, and only one of its current seven members is female. This seems odd, since in recent decades Connecticut has had many excellent women state legislators and mayors and the state's election results suggest that being a woman is worth a few extra percentage points because of women's gender loyalty and because women in politics are believed to be less partisan and self-interested. There are a few notable exceptions but in general women also seem to be less ambitious politically.

Connecticut's suffrage campaign won the state's ratification of the 19th Amendment in September 1920, but this was too late to matter. Giving the amendment its decisive three-fourths majority of the states a month earlier was Tennessee, which did so with a dramatic flourish, a great if also overlooked moment of history.

Tennessee's Senate had approved the amendment comfortably, but it would have failed in the House except for the reversal of position by state Rep. Harry T. Burn, which gave the amendment approval by a vote of 49-47. Burn, then 24 and the House's youngest member, had just gotten a letter from his mother, which approvingly cited suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt. Mrs. Burn wrote:

*Dear Son: Hurrah and vote for suffrage! I noticed some of the speeches against. They were bitter. I have been watching to see how you stood but have not noticed anything yet. Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the 'rat' in ratification. -- Your Mother.*

Burn was compelled to explain himself on the House floor the next day: "I know that a mother's advice is always safest for her boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification."

And thus the hand that rocks the cradle won its rights.

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**Chris Powell is managing editor of the Journal Inquirer.**

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**Marguerite Kearns** wrote on Mar 24, 2011 2:10 PM:

" Some people might consider the woman's suffrage movement "quaint," but I'm finding an increasing interest when history is combined with storytelling --especially when it comes to my family. I have a blog addressing my grandmother Edna Buckman Kearns' suffrage work in NYS, plus suffrage news from around the country. And the NYS Museum will hopefully place Edna's suffrage campaign wagon on permanent exhibit. It was on display for two months in 2010. For more information: the web site suffragewagon.org or the blog, suffragewagon.wordpress.com. Hundreds of thousands of women worked for the right we take for granted today. The new manuscript that has just come to light is a terrific addition to the story!"

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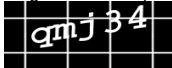
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