

Florence Cotnam Speech – February 14, 1920 – First National Convention of the League of Women Voters in Chicago

All's Well that Ends Well

We rejoice that the bonds are loosed from the minds and abilities of one-half of the American people. We rejoice that men and women meeting on an equal plane will soon gather together in the great political conventions and uniting a diversity of perception in a common purpose will be able to make intelligent plans for the upbuilding and re-establishment of a better and truer America.

American ideals, that so lately, like a living, burning thing set aflame the hearts of all the people of the world, enkindled the thought and fired the determination which won the victory we celebrate tonight. Then here in this hour of triumph and rejoicing, we recognize and accept the responsibilities that have come to us with our enlarged opportunities, and pledge our best efforts to give our country what she needs above all things, an interested and intelligent electorate.

It was in 1869 that the National Woman Suffrage Association organized for the avowed purpose of winning a Federal Amendment for Woman Suffrage, and it was fifty years later, in 1919, that the purpose was accomplished. The stream of years which flowed from 1869 to 1919 knew every aspect save placidness and stagnation, and mirrored every feeling save unbelief in a successful outcome. Those gallant spirits who embarked for the great adventure did so without illusions. Some of these had been dispelled when the word “male” went into the 14th Amendment and the remnant had been shattered when sometime friends and ardent supporters refused to join with

them in an effort to get the word “sex” written into the 15th Amendment, rudely saying, “Stand back, this is another’s hour.” Facing the undertaking with a realization of its difficulties, Miss Anthony said, “I see I must row up stream”; and seeing, she and a steadfast few bent their backs to the oars and pushed out into the current.

Those who looked on with seeing eyes prophesied the end, but there were few of these in 1869, and some who watched became discouraged when difficulties multiplied and progress was hardly perceptible.

What audacity of spirit, what cheerful endurance of hardships, what inflexibility of purpose and what supreme faith in the final triumph of right was theirs, make an astonishing and inspiring chapter in the history of Democracy.

There were powerful enemies, false friends, unhappy circumstances and sometimes the current of public opinion flowed with such strength and swiftness that their hopes were well nigh wrecked. But there were also good friends and true growing in number lonely at first...For it took courage to espouse a cause unpopular with the majority, conditions for propaganda became more favorable and by increasing persistence they reversed the current of public opinion which in these last years has borne them rapidly forward. Wyoming stands alone as an equal suffrage territory and state for twenty-four years.

After the winning of Colorado in 1893 there was here and there a state victory, sometimes two and even three in one year for twenty-four years and

then the success of New York campaign of 1917 started an avalanche which aroused and threatened to overwhelm a sleeping Congress. The Senate voted on the amendment four times in the 41 years from its introduction in 1878 by Senator Sergeant of California to its final passage on June 4, 1919. It took 37 years to get the first vote in the House of Representatives, which occurred January 12, 1915. Before 1915 and up to 1917 when a woman Suffrage Committee was created in the House, the amendment was locked for some time in the great safety deposit vault of the House known as the Judiciary Committee and some one had lost the key.

But neither locks nor bolts could hold against the pressure brought to bear in 1914 and 1915 and it was let out grudgingly unaccompanied by even a recommendation. It was voted on January 12th after ten hours of debate. There were earnest men who from conviction and experience spoke of the worthiness of the women of America and the justice of the measure. There were those who jested and laughed with no understanding of its importance or imminence, and there were those who still put women and angels in the same class and held that their attributes could never find a place in politics. The amendment lost, but 174 voted aye. By 1918 the avalanche was coming so fast not even the House of Representatives could mistake its import and on January 10th, exactly 40 years from the day it was first introduced in the Senate, it passed by one vote. One man had arisen from a sick bed and risked his life to be present, others had rushed across the continent at top speed, and one left the supreme sorrow in his home to do an act of justice to the human race. It is an old story but fresh in your minds how the Senate of the 65th Congress refused to pass the amendment, how it was the first measure to be considered in the House of the 66th, how it passed that body in

May 1919 by a handsome 42 more than 2/3, and how June 4, 1919, was made Independence Day for the women of America by its final passage through the Senate and then ratification as it has been told you tonight... While millions of women have finally enlisted in this struggle, there is no doubt that we have won at this time by reason of our remarkable leadership. Where in all the world could three such women be found as those who have led this movement for the message and interpretation of a Federal Suffrage Amendment. Susan B. Anthony, determined, untiring, clear visioned, selfless – “Better lose me than a State:”, she said when she when into the first campaign in South Dakota while her health demanded that she should rest. Anna Howard Shaw, the great orator, moving men to justice and women to fresh endeavor; the big human heart beating in unison with the world, touching the depths of adversity unembittered and rising to the height of fame unspoiled. Carrie Chapman Catt, the great constructive mind, the states woman and general, who has rallied to her standard the women of all the world, and has inspired a devotion among her followers that is unexampled.

Surely the divine power raised up these women to carry out a mighty purpose; for it is because they lived and strived and wrought – determined, yet generous and tolerant, - that we look into the future that begins tonight and with only joy and thankfulness in our hearts can say to the world what every Valentine says to him who opens its doors on Feb. 14th, ”all’s well that ends well.” “I love you.”