



The winning of woman suffrage in Montana  
by Doris Buck Ward

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS in History  
Montana State University  
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Abstract:

The debates of the Montana Constitutional Convention of 1889 on issues related to equal suffrage afford us direct insights into the intellectual setting of frontier society in Montana. Inherent in the suffrage issue were inter-related concepts regarding the proper role of woman and the locus of power in representative government. The delegates were keenly aware that their blueprint for statehood would mold social contours and determine access to political power. They decided that the political rights of their women should be tightly circumscribed.

Suffragists modified their ideology and strategy in successive drives for the ballot. In Montana, as elsewhere, they eventually compromised principles of equal dignity in order to secure a broad consensus for woman suffrage. The Victorian cyst of sexual inequality remained to perpetuate the "woman problem." To many, Jeannette Rankin personified the suffrage movement in Montana. She was a remarkable leader. But others had conducted admirably conceived campaigns under trying circumstances before her. The prospects for equal suffrage rose and fell, not only with quality of leadership, but with reform spirit (particularly with Populism in the 1890's and with Progressivism and Socialism later). But the reform spirit was a conservative one— to restore control of government to the people for social progress compatible with traditional values.

Adoption of the equal suffrage amendment to Montana's constitution in 1914, 25 years after admission to statehood, removed formal barriers to women's full participation in Montana government (except for jury duty). Conservative Montana lagged among western states in granting equal franchise. But in 1916, four years before the nation would have equal suffrage, Montana elected Miss Rankin to Congress.

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*May 29, 1974*

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial  
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History

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Special appreciation is reserved for the author's family for tolerating anti-social behavior as one woman enlarged her "sphere." To many other persons, the author's thanks.

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## ABSTRACT

The debates of the Montana Constitutional Convention of 1889 on issues related to equal suffrage afford us direct insights into the intellectual setting of frontier society in Montana. Inherent in the suffrage issue were inter-related concepts regarding the proper role of woman and the locus of power in representative government. The delegates were keenly aware that their blueprint for statehood would mold social contours and determine access to political power. They decided that the political rights of their women should be tightly circumscribed.

Suffragists modified their ideology and strategy in successive drives for the ballot. In Montana, as elsewhere, they eventually compromised principles of equal dignity in order to secure a broad consensus for woman suffrage. The Victorian cyst of sexual inequality remained to perpetuate the "woman problem." To many, Jeannette Rankin personified the suffrage movement in Montana. She was a remarkable leader. But others had conducted admirably conceived campaigns under trying circumstances before her. The prospects for equal suffrage rose and fell, not only with quality of leadership, but with reform spirit (particularly with Populism in the 1890's and with Progressivism and Socialism later). But the reform spirit was a conservative one-- to restore control of government to the people for social progress compatible with traditional values.

Adoption of the equal suffrage amendment to Montana's constitution in 1914, 25 years after admission to statehood, removed formal barriers to women's full participation in Montana government (except for jury duty). Conservative Montana lagged among western states in granting equal franchise. But in 1916, four years before the nation would have equal suffrage, Montana elected Miss Rankin to Congress.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Historians have written prolifically about Montana's colorful early days--of Indians, trappers, and range barons; of mining camps, Vigilantes, and Copper Kings. Popular attention has turned, also, to the more contemporary exploits of "the Company" and to twentieth century political figures of Montana. However, the history of ideas in the state, of cultural values held by the people and how those concepts interplayed with social and political development, remains largely virgin area for study.

The woman suffrage movement in Montana affords a rich opportunity to fill part of that gap in understanding the state's past. Through successive campaigns for equal suffrage, spanning a quarter century (1889-1914), changes evolved in the status of women and in the locus of political power. The objective of women's rights, broadly conceived by Montana suffragists in the 1890's, narrowed to the goal of ballot in the Progressive period.<sup>1</sup> Montana suffragists, like their national counterparts, adopted political expedients in order to secure popular support. Their reversion to a modified Victorian image of

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<sup>1</sup>The woman suffrage movement always included male advocates so the term "suffragist" herein will apply to any supporter of woman suffrage. "Suffragette," however, will designate only militant women, who became influential in the final decade of the suffrage movement in the United States. "Feminism" will refer to the concept of equal rights and status of persons regardless of sex.



woman was central to the compromise. That strategy meant that some fundamental feminist reforms were laid aside--until today's resurgence of concern for women's rights. Thus basic elements of the current debate echo suffrage arguments of many decades ago.

Although historians have not overlooked Montana's story of woman suffrage, much has yet to be told. To many people Jeannette Rankin symbolizes that movement, and several biographers have dealt comprehensively with her suffrage work.<sup>2</sup> Admirers of Miss Rankin often seem unaware, however, that a great amount of work by many Montana suffragists preceded the final phase of the struggle for equal franchise in Montana under Miss Rankin's leadership (1911-1914). They fail to acknowledge that earlier suffragists had experimented with various ideas and techniques employed in the closing campaign.<sup>3</sup> Jeannette Rankin

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<sup>2</sup>John C. Board, "The Lady from Montana: Jeannette Rankin" (unpublished M. A. thesis, University of Wyoming, 1964), pp. 15-60; Ted Carlton Harris, "Jeannette Rankin: Suffragist, First Woman Elected to Congress, and Pacifist" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 1972), pp. 39-95; Ronald Schaffer, "The Montana Woman Suffrage Campaign, 1911-14," Pacific Northwest Quarterly, LV, No. 1 (1964), pp. 9-15; Schaffer, "Jeannette Rankin, Progressive-Isolationist" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1959).

<sup>3</sup>Board prefaced his thesis with the remark that his work did not treat the suffrage campaign in Montana fully enough, still he summarized the pre-Rankin era with: "In the 1880's Montana had experienced a flourish for suffrage and the movement had died," and he added that Jeannette Rankin was not to let it die again (p. 34). Harris noted that suffragists formed several societies and held conventions in Montana before 1900, then he moved quickly through the next decade to his story of Jeannette Rankin's suffrage work (p. 46).

surely was a devoted and inspiring leader, but it does not diminish her distinguished contribution to learn about other eminent suffragists on the Montana scene. Two accounts of Montana's woman suffrage movement reach back to territorial days and trace the movement through ratification of the equal suffrage amendment in 1914.<sup>4</sup> However, neither chronicle relied adequately upon primary research from contemporaneous Montana sources, and both emphasized the record of events rather than development of popular thought related to the suffrage issue.

This study aims to contribute to a better understanding of Montana's character, an enlarged view of its people and their political expression. In a more restrictive but pertinent sense, it should inform today's citizens in their on-going search for human fulfillment by defining the course of women's rights. The author assumes that woman suffrage was desirable, if only as a principle of justice, and that, even though women bore the burden of the battle for change, repression of political equality stemmed from attitudes shared much alike by men and women.

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<sup>4</sup>The older reference is a pair of volumes: Mary Long Alderson, "Montana," The History of Woman Suffrage, IV, edited by Ida Husted Harper and Susan B. Anthony (Rochester: Susan B. Anthony, 1902), pp. 796-801; Lucille Dyas Topping, "Montana," Ibid., VI, edited by Ida Husted Harper. (New York: National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1922), pp. 360-367. More recent is T. A. Larson, "Montana Women and the Battle for the Ballot," Montana, the Magazine of Western History, XXIII, No. 1 (1973), pp. 24-41. The HWS chapters depended heavily upon personal recall. Larson's access to archives outside Montana enabled him to relate suffrage events in Montana to national developments and personalities.

The history of an idea is woven into a complex social fabric, so time frames must be arbitrary. Montana at statehood seems a logical point at which to pick up the thread of woman suffrage thought. The Constitutional Convention of 1884 raised the issue of equal suffrage, but the journals do not indicate that those delegates gave the subject serious consideration. Montana's first significant public discussion of woman suffrage evidently occurred in the Constitutional Convention of 1889, and full records of the extensive debates are available.<sup>5</sup> Deliberations by those prominent men over principles of suffrage reveal ideas of early Montanans toward political and moral control of their frontier society.

A sense of community and agitation for statehood developed markedly in Montana during the 1880's. Governor Benjamin Potts brought administrative order and solvency to the territory during his 12 1/2-year tenure ending in 1883. The Indian menace declined rapidly after the Custer massacre of 1876 and the flight of the Nez Perce the following year. Railroads penetrated the territory, bringing settlers and expanding markets--the Utah Northern to Butte by 1881, the Northern Pacific across southern Montana by 1883, and the Great Northern with its northern route by 1893. The harsh winter of 1886-1887 spurred the

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<sup>5</sup>Proceedings and Debates of the Constitutional Convention, 1889  
(Helena: State Publishing Company, 1921).

end of the open range, and cattlemen increasingly became residents on fenced lands. Placer mining of gold, characterized by unstable camps of individual fortune-seekers, was superseded by quartz mining of silver by 1880. By the late 1880's copper had become the state's most valuable product. Although many mine operations were still small and independent through the 1880's, the new type of extraction required substantial capital, a large labor force, and associated commercial services. These changes meant greater economic permanence and communal awareness.

The Territory of Montana, anxious to develop, competed with a vast western region and Canada for settlers. Montana's non-Indian population more than tripled during the 1880's, from 39,000 to 132,000. In 1890 nearly one-third were foreign-born. Males outnumbered females nearly two to one, and the disparity was much greater among adults.<sup>6</sup> The mobile, expansive conditions of the frontier evidently encouraged more open-mindedness and willingness to experiment than was the case later. Mary Curtis Knowles, wife of Judge Hiram Knowles, worried in 1910 that Montanans might become narrow provincials, "prisoners of conventionality." She recalled that in the 1870's Montanans had been

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<sup>6</sup>Ellis L. Waldron, Montana Politics Since 1864: An Atlas of Elections (Missoula: Montana State University Press, 1958), pp. 38, 62. Evidently Waldron's census figures prior to 1900 excluded Indians, although they numbered over 11,000 in 1890 (pp. 24n, 62, 91n). Proportions both of the foreign-born and of males had been higher in 1880 (Ibid., p. 38).

a cosmopolitan people. Their heterogeneity "compelled a charity regarding the opinions of others," and their territorial status kept them knowledgeable about national affairs.<sup>7</sup>

Legislatures of the 1880's experimented with broader political rights for women. Prodded by Robert Howay, Superintendent of Public Instruction, the 1883 legislature granted women the right to vote in district school elections and to hold the Office of Trustee and County Superintendent of Schools. Two women served as County Superintendents the following year. And territorial women with property had equal franchise on tax issues.<sup>8</sup>

The prospect of statehood seemed to inhibit the liberal, experimental tendency exercised by political leaders when dealing with territorial affairs. In shaping a permanent state, those with substantial stake wanted to secure their interests in a society of their ideal. This required careful definition of political structure and curbs against change. The constitutions fashioned by both the 1884 and the 1889 conventions proposed a weak executive and increased restrictions on legislative operations. The 1889 constitution changed apportionment of the senate from a populate base to equal representation of

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<sup>7</sup>"The Making of the State," Montana Lookout (Helena), December 31, 1910, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup>James McClellan Hamilton, From Wilderness to Statehood: A History of Montana, edited by Merrill Burlingame (Portland: Binford and Mort, 1970), pp. 498-499; HWS, IV, p. 799.

counties and made constitutional amendment more difficult. The state's constitution provided not only a detailed framework for government, but prescriptive laws for 1889.

In this mood of conservative ordering, concepts of the status of women were central to debates over political privilege. Legitimacy of political privilege, as conceived by Montana's dominant leadership in this early period, did not rest on natural rights of individuals, but in practical politics. These men answered to frontier exigencies and tried to maintain control over a fluid society. Suffrage was an ingredient of power, so theories of political equality were not particularly relevant. A double standard of citizenship for men and women was inherent.

Under the majoritarian system of government, the right of franchise is fundamental to political potency. Montana's early leaders knew this well. Although territorial delegates to Congress exercised floor privilege in the House of Representatives, they lacked the clout of a ballot to defend the interests of their constituents. This weakness was a prime factor in Montana's agitation for statehood. While Montana's male politicians chafed at being "political eunuchs" under an infamous "colonial system," they failed to see the parallel political impotence of their women. Few of them empathized with women, a class of citizens disfranchised in the general public forum and limited to

means of persuasion which the men found inadequate. Montana's Founding Fathers still blocked equal suffrage.<sup>9</sup>

Montana's founders acknowledged, too, that men universally valued the ballot. In competition for settlers, Montana enticed prospective immigrants with its liberal political privilege--for men. The 1884 constitutional convention proposed to enfranchise resident male aliens (predominantly Teutonic) provided that not less than four months prior to a given election the foreigner had declared his intent to become an American citizen. The constitution of 1889 was less generous to foreign voters; the national origin of immigrants was shifting to southern Europe, especially Italy. While those aliens already enfranchised would never be barred, the privilege for new aliens would terminate five years after adoption of the constitution. Neither the 1884 plan nor the 1889 constitution made any literacy demand. The Fathers were not motivated so much by a magnanimous concept of suffrage as by a hard-headed bid for rapid economic development. They did not see a need to court women politically; women would follow their men. Even though the nearby territories of Wyoming and Utah had granted full suffrage to women two decades before Montana became a state, Montana's

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<sup>9</sup>See Clark C. Spence, "Beggars to Washington: Montana's Territorial Delegates," Montana, the Magazine of Western History, XXIV, No. 1 (1974), pp. 2-13.

lure of franchise was for men only.<sup>10</sup> Presumably no immigrants, whether from the Old World or from older parts of the United States, had a tradition of equal suffrage, so woman's political status would rarely be a significant criterion in resettlement. Montana was not compelled to offer woman suffrage.

However, woman suffrage was recognized as a threat to the lifestyle of Montana's surplus males. These men found conviviality and politics in the saloon. Especially for the foreign-born, the saloon eased the newcomers' orientation in a strange community. Prior to 1889 the only organized promotion of equal suffrage in Montana had come from the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Its declared goal was not temperance, but prohibition, and it needed woman's vote as a weapon. Therefore, men associated woman suffrage with prohibition. But whether the woman voter would prove to be a prohibitionist or not, here dedication to build a home and society befitting a family called out a cluster of values quite different from those of the mobile, unattached males. Her ballot would increase the political effectiveness of the stable folk. The ambitious politician reckoned with the reality of his saloon constituents, who had the vote, and did not promote equal suffrage.

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<sup>10</sup> Alan P. Grimes, The Puritan Ethic and Woman Suffrage (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), Ch. 1-2, develops the Wyoming and Utah cases.



Few of Montana's frontier leaders worried about abstract rights for women. They were caught up in practical concerns: land and tax policy, mineral and timber rights, railroad privileges, control of power, and statehood. By the late 1880's a few men (including William A. Clark, Marcus Daly, Samuel Hauser, and C. A. Broadwater) wielded remarkable economic and political power. It was the era of Social Darwinism, which theorized that social good derived from rugged competition, force, and inequality; the fittest rightfully achieved superiority (i.e., wealth and power), and society thus "progressed." In this dynamic, male-dominated frontier, what would full woman suffrage do for Montana? What could persuade political leaders to share their control of power?

Partial suffrage for women could be rationalized, outside the question of individual rights, as a social benefit. Woman's ballot and trusteeship in local school affairs constituted an extension of her traditional function, that of tending children and teaching morals. Her equal ballot on tax issues recognized sacrosanct property rights. Security of property was a prime purpose of government, and property offered assurance of the owner's stake in society. Woman suffrage, thus limited, posed little threat to conservative politics; its exercise seemed safe and predictable. Nor did it disturb social mores, since premise of individual equality was avoided.

When Montana's Constitutional Convention gathered in 1889, woman suffrage was not a new issue, nationally or in the West. A diligent corps of women's rights leaders had struggled for a generation (since the Seneca Falls convention of 1848) before Montana suffragists enlisted. The period of public ridicule and internal dissension was largely past by 1890. Pioneer feminists, all abolitionists, had sharply disagreed after the Civil War over strategy in regard to the Fourteenth Amendment--whether to accept it for the full citizenship it proposed for Negro males or to resist the amendment because it defied woman suffragists' expectation of equal political rights. From 1869 until 1890 participants in the women's movement aligned either with the aggressive National Woman Suffrage Association, led by New Yorkers Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Miss Susan B. Anthony, or with the conservative and compromising American Woman Suffrage Association under the leadership of Lucy Stone, her husband Henry B. Blackwell, and Henry Ward Beecher. The National maintained open membership for women (but excluded men) and worked for broad women's rights and a federal suffrage amendment. The American moved carefully among the more elite society and promoted state campaigns for equal suffrage. Its Woman's Journal, founded in 1870, served the suffrage cause long and influentially. By 1890 the factions of the suffrage movement had drawn together in respectable conservatism to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Urbanization and industrialization

were changing and polarizing American society. Suffragists, along with old stock Americans, saw a threat to their interests in new immigrants, urban masses, and political machines. Suffragists nationally were aligned with conservators of traditional values.

Suffragists were working from a sophisticated philosophical base for women's rights, not just for political equality. They lifted much of their thought from Lockean ideas of natural and inalienable rights and of government as a social contract validated by consent of the governed. Therefore, they argued, American government in practice violated fundamental principles of justice revered in the Declaration of Independence. Women generally gave no consent to government, could not sit on juries, and were taxed without representation. Many in the women's rights movement (especially the Quakers and Unitarians among them) challenged the subordination of women as taught by orthodox religions. The feminists saw God-given equality of rights and capacities, which social custom thwarted. They subscribed to faith in progress. Equal justice would continue to advance under republicanism. Already political aristocracies of birth, of property, and of race had yielded to democratic principles, and class discrimination against women would fall. With political equality women would contribute to greater morality in public affairs, and men and women together--and only together--could fashion a utopia.

By 1890 seventeen states had accorded women equal school suffrage, three had extended tax suffrage, and Kansas had granted them the municipal ballot. And in the West three territories had instituted full woman suffrage: Wyoming since 1869, Utah from 1870 until Congress denied it in 1887 (over the issue of polygamy), and Washington from 1883 until 1887 when court action invalidated the privilege. Thus the principle of woman suffrage was neither radically aligned nor novel when Montana's Constitutional Convention debated the issue in 1889.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>For interpretations of the woman's rights movement see Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States (New York: Atheneum, 1970); Aileen S. Kraditor, The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920 (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1971); and William L. O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave: A History of Feminism in America (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971). For particular views of woman suffrage see Grimes, The Puritan Ethic and Woman Suffrage; and Ross Evans Paulson, Women's Suffrage and Prohibition: A Comparative Study of Equality and Social Control (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1973). For an inside account of the women suffrage movement see National American Woman Suffrage Association, Victory: How the Women Won It: A Centennial Symposium, 1840-1940 (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1940).

## CHAPTER II

### CONCEPTS OF WOMEN AND SUFFRAGE FOR A NEW STATE

Montana's territorial legislatures had exercised unrestricted power to extend franchise as they saw fit. But the Constitutional Convention of 1884 drew a rein on legislative discretion regarding woman's vote. While that constitution would have provided no direct suffrage for women, it allowed the legislature to grant them only the local school ballot and the right to serve as school trustee. Judge W. J. Stephens of Missoula did propose equal suffrage, but evidently the convention readily accepted the Suffrage Committee's cryptic rejection--on grounds that it was "not expedient to grant to women general suffrage."<sup>1</sup> Because Congress, in political impasse, denied statehood to Montana, the 1884 constitution was not implemented. Five years later another Constitutional Convention met in Helena (from July 4 through August 17) and fashioned the constitution which served Montana until 1973.

The 1889 convention fought a preliminary skirmish over woman suffrage when Henry Blackwell of Boston, secretary of the American Woman Suffrage Association, arrived in Helena on July 17. A huge western region of the United States was in transition to statehood, and suffragists nationally hoped to bring many of these new states into the

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<sup>1</sup>Records of the Montana Constitutional Convention, 1884  
(Historical Society Library, Helena), proceedings of January 23, 1884.

Union with feasible prospect for equal suffrage. Under territorial governments, in constitutional conventions, and in state legislatures, broader suffrage provisions could be obtained by a simple majority vote. Experience had already demonstrated to suffragists that the process of constitutional amendment was a formidable barrier to their cause. Skeptical of achieving the prize of constitutional provision for equal suffrage, Blackwell meant to persuade the various constitutional conventions to structure their governments so as to allow response to progressive change, specifically to permit legislative expansion of suffrage.

Although the public-spirited McAdows, Perry and Clara, had arranged for Blackwell's stopover in Helena, resentment flared among the convention delegates and in the press that the Bostonian should intervene in Montana's deliberations. He was an intellectual in his mid-60's, who had fully agreed that Lucy Stone should keep her own name and continue her women's rights work when they married.<sup>2</sup> These personal factors did not mesh well with the masculine ideal in Montana. Also, territorial experience with Washington politics had taught Montanans

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<sup>2</sup>Their wedding ceremony, in 1855, included the reading and circulation of a signed "Protest" against laws which promulgated male domination and advantage in marriage. An 1847 graduate of Oberlin College, Lucy Stone was instrumental in bringing Susan B. Anthony, Julia Ward Howe, and Frances Willard into the woman suffrage movement. The couple's daughter, Alice Stone Blackwell, also devoted her life to equality for women. (NAWSA, Victory: How the Women Won It, pp. 39-40, 42f.)

to be wary of outsiders' solutions to frontier problems. Why should Blackwell try to impose reforms in Montana that the East had rejected? A chronically cantankerous delegate, John C. Robinson, protested "even dignifying the application of men from outside" since those convened were perfectly capable of managing their own affairs. Judge Hiram Knowles sought to restrain the xenophobia by contending that the question of equal suffrage widely interested prominent men, and Blackwell was an able advocate; only hear him. "Let us not by a sneer or by narrowness, or by wrapping ourselves up in the opinion that Montana knows everything she needs to know, . . . close the door to everything that can come from outside," Knowles urged his colleagues. The convention granted Blackwell audience, not as a special petitioner on the floor, but in an evening appearance in the convention hall open to the public.<sup>3</sup>

Blackwell marshalled the common arguments for woman suffrage: to fulfill democratic principle, bring greater morality to government, and strengthen women's bid for economic equality. He tried to tempt the delegates, keenly conscious of community-building, with a vision of "100,000 of the most progressive and the most desirable immigrants that America can furnish" thronging within five years to a Montana

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<sup>3</sup>Proceedings and Debates, 1889, pp. 78-80. For press reaction see especially the Great Falls Tribune, July 20, 1889, p. 2.

enlightened enough to offer equal suffrage. Blackwell acknowledged that women hesitated to vote, but social custom had taught that it was unwomanly to meddle in politics. He predicted that if Montana men accepted the idea, women would conscientiously share the civic responsibility. All humanity would benefit. Blackwell's major plea, however, was that the new constitution retain the suffrage rights women already had under territorial law and that it continue legislative discretion over suffrage. Constitutional restriction of woman suffrage in Montana would be a new obstruction to progressive public will. While constitutional amendment was possible in the abstract, political mobilization to arouse sufficient public support for the cause would be extremely difficult. To Blackwell the legislative avenue seemed to be a familiar, conservative, and responsive solution.<sup>4</sup>

The impact of Blackwell's speech is unclear. The ideas he expressed permeated many aspects of the suffrage debates that followed, but nobody cited him. And his major recommendation, for continuance of legislative discretion to expand the franchise, was rejected by the convention. The delegates decided that the confines of political power in the future state seemed safer under their paternalistic stamp.

The major battles over woman suffrage took place in late July. The convention first turned its attention to the Suffrage Article on

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<sup>4</sup>Proceedings and Debates, 1889, pp. 81-88.



July 25. The Committee on Right of Suffrage, chaired by German-born Louis Rotwitt, had recommended severe limitations on political privileges of women, modelled verbatim after those set by the 1884 document. The committee proposed that the legislature might "pass laws allowing women the right to hold any school district office and vote at any school district election." That was all. It would omit any direct political privilege to women, subtract their territorial eligibility to the office of County Superintendent of Schools, eliminate women's tax ballot, and withdraw legislative discretion over expansion of suffrage.<sup>5</sup>

The convention rejected the stringent limits on women's political rights as proposed by the suffrage committee. It made local school ballot and office a mandatory provision and restored women's eligibility to the office of County Superintendent of Schools (since "the ladies" had shown that they were fully competent to take charge of that public service). Just before adjournment, the convention reinstated the equal tax ballot. Proposed by former governor B. Platt Carpenter, the measure passed without discussion, 34 to 26. However, proposals to make women eligible to vote for State Superintendent of Public Instruction and to hold that office were rejected by the convention, as was an effort by Timothy Collins to grant women the municipal ballot.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 330. See pp. 330-408, 448-466, 855-857 for full suffrage debates.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 404-408, 871, 915.

It was over the question of legislative power to enfranchise that the storm raged. Walter Bickford, a junior law partner of Judge Stephens (who proposed equal suffrage in the 1884 convention), offered a substitute to the section of the Suffrage Article which defined qualifications of electors. Bickford did not disturb constitutional provision of the ballot for males only. His key clause would empower the legislature "to confer upon women the rights and privileges of electors to vote in any or all elections."

Whether viewed as a natural right or one bestowed by the state, Bickford thought that the right of general suffrage belonged to women; they were as capable of a discriminating vote as were men. He argued for as conservative a position as possible, but he wanted Montana's legislature authorized to respond to the issue of equal suffrage when, in the march of progress, prevailing public sentiment should so warrant. He cited growing evidence that women did want the ballot and would use it well. Meeting the moral arguments, pro and con, Bickford declared that neither the fears of those who opposed woman suffrage nor the hopes of its supporters would be realized. Woman was not degraded at the polls; neither did she greatly purify the ballot nor dispose of all public problems. He urged the convention to do what was just, to be liberal enough to vote in the interest of progress and good government,

and by so doing "add one ornament . . . to the bright crown of the state of Montana."<sup>7</sup>

Bickford's basic premise was that the constitution should allow flexibility for response to social change. Therefore, his proposal won support from delegates who respected the procedural rights of public opinion and future citizens; position of the delegates on the substantive issue of general franchise for women was a secondary consideration in the debate.

Proponents of Bickford's clause for legislative power dominated the debates. Perry McAdow, miller and miner whose wife (Clara) ably managed their business, backed Bickford and women's rights. He thought that woman suffrage belonged in the constitution, but if that were impossible, he entreated his colleagues for sufficient liberality "not to close the doors and build up a wall against the rights of our women." John Rickards, a Butte Republican who would be elected governor in 1892, was convinced that if the constitution itself incorporated woman suffrage, there would be "ungallant men enough" to defeat it. Without arousing dispute, Rickards claimed that Montana's territorial legislatures had not abused their public trust. He was confident that the state legislature would be a safe repository for the power of enfranchisement. Walter Burleigh, a story-spinning lawyer from Miles City,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 347-350.

pleaded that the convention not put the "seal and signet of death" on the suffrage issue through constitutional restriction, but to allow the intelligence of those who would come after them to mold a legislated solution in accordance with changing circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

Two of the convention's most prominent delegates, Hiram Knowles and Joseph K. Toole, paired off in final debate with very different concepts of the nature of women. Still these men agreed that woman suffrage should be a matter for legislative decision. Judge Knowles pointed out to the convention that the changing milieu had brought new opportunities and new roles for women. They were proving themselves in clerical, business, and professional pursuits in addition to their traditional dedication to education and religious institutions. While Knowles granted that many opponents of woman suffrage were "actuated by as knightly principles as ever actuated the knights of old," he argued that the protected, regal role into which they were trying to cast women was illusory for the large majority. Women were taking part in affairs of life, so why not in public affairs? They were educated, and this was significant in a world moving away from government by force to one guided by reason. Knowles held no great expectations that equal suffrage would bring about major reform. But women, like men, had property and personal rights that government was charged to protect.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 364, 365, 452.

Then why shouldn't women be allowed to participate in government?

Knowles wanted the legislature (where a simple majority opinion could prevail) to be able to say when Montana was ready for woman suffrage.<sup>9</sup>

Joseph K. Toole, recent territorial delegate to Congress and future governor, thought it was not expedient to encumber the proposed constitution with "this much mooted question" of woman's ballot. Ratify the constitution, he recommended, then discuss the suffrage matter in the legislature as circumstances might demand. Toole did not favor equal suffrage at that time. Although the plausible arguments of the convention's suffragists had caused him to waiver, he was not yet persuaded. The Missouri native regarded the sexes in classic Victorian model with well-defined spheres: man the provider and protector who dealt with the perplexities of life; and woman the tender mother and minister of sublime virtues in whom man sought "reciprocity and repose." Toole was skeptical that greater political privilege would benefit women; and not all of them wanted to vote or to sit on juries. If men would fulfill their obligations, the onerous responsibility of government would not be thrust upon the softer sex. But should men fail, who would not permit woman to experiment with administration of government? Should popular opinion recommend universal

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 453-456.

suffrage, the legislature should not have its hands tied; it represented the people, whom Toole said he trusted.<sup>10</sup>

Few delegates took the floor to oppose the Bickford amendment openly. But Henry Whitehill, a Deer Lodge lawyer, was deeply disturbed over the social implications of a changed political status for women. He was unwilling to grant the premise that women had the same natural rights as men or that they were entitled to the same political privileges. Opponents to woman suffrage were not tyrants, Whitehill argued; rather they were "animated with quite as chivalric principles as any of the advocates." But a higher law was in operation. "Man is to the woman as the cord is to the bow," he declared, and woman suffrage would threaten that "divinely implanted" marital relationship.<sup>11</sup>

The powerful Martin Maginnis, Montana's delegate to Congress from 1873 to 1885, was the major spokesman against Bickford's amendment. He firmly opposed constitutional experiment with broader political privileges for women, he did not want the question left to legislative judgment, and he voted against submitting the issue to the electorate in a separate proposition.

All objections to woman suffrage had been petty, Maginnis declared, for they missed the essential philosophy that the primary element behind all government was force. And force was the principle

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 456-458.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 365-366.

of majority rule. The majority enforces its views upon the minority because both have agreed not to fight on the field of battle, but to count at the ballot box. Maginnis argued that suffrage was not a natural right, but a political privilege bestowed by governments to maintain the state against all threats. Man's responsibility to preserve the state, even to the "last grand arbitrament of war," entitled him to suffrage. That was why men universally, even the poor and the black, had the franchise. But woman, due to natural limits, was precluded from a call to enforce decrees of government. The sexes had their proper and equally noble spheres--woman to perpetuate, educate, and regenerate humanity; man to "conquer the savage world." Maginnis said he did not want woman to be dependent upon man's will, and he respected her capacities. But in government, founded upon force, she was out of place. Furthermore, women did not want the ballot, and men had no right to insist that they take it. Then confessing to a faltering faith, Maginnis expressed fear that women, morally prone as they were, might be guided by the clergy in their political decisions. And of all classes of men, he rated priests and preachers as the least knowledgeable of the interests of mankind and the least adapted to legislate and govern.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 369-371, 856.

Maginnis was chivalrous in manner and democratic in phrase. But his colleagues understood that at the heart of his argument was a political determination to protect the status quo. In 1912, as the Democratic state convention thrashed out endorsement of submission of the equal suffrage amendment, Maginnis acknowledged that he had been judged responsible for defeat of the woman suffrage movement in 1889.<sup>13</sup>

William A. Clark, president of both the 1884 and 1889 constitutional conventions, summarized the practical alternatives in dealing with the suffrage issue. He conceded that maybe women did not want general suffrage--no one knew. Perhaps it was not expedient to incorporate a woman suffrage plank in the constitution; and it was "impracticable," in his opinion, to submit it to the voters in connection with the constitution because of evidence of popular disfavor in Montana--"and then we will have to face the impossibility of its ever being brought up again except by a constitutional amendment." Clark asked that the constitution leave the way open for women to express a desire for franchise. He saw no objection to legislative discretion in the matter.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Helena Independent, August 30, 1912, p. 2. Shortly after the close of the Constitutional Convention, Maginnis reassured Montana women of their attributes: "We are so proud of the beautiful ladies of our land, for when they smile it is a glimpse of Paradise and the white robed angels are forgotten in comparison." (Great Falls Tribune, September 25, 1889, p. 2.)

<sup>14</sup>Proceedings and Debates, 1889, p. 374.



On July 25 the Committee of the Whole rejected Bickford's proposal, 29 to 34. Proponents tried again during final consideration of the suffrage bill on July 30, but the convention again defeated Bickford's amendment, with a tie vote of 33 to 33 (and 2 paired). After Bickford's proposal failed, McAdow tried to salvage some advance for women by proposing limited legislative discretion to extend suffrage "without regard to sex, provided that women shall not be liable for military or jury duty, nor shall they be eligible for any office except that pertaining to schools." This compromise should have met the declared reservations of many of the delegates, but it was defeated by a vote of 31 to 38.<sup>15</sup>

James Callaway, Virginia City lawyer, had voted against the Bickford amendment even though he claimed to be "rather favorable to the proposition of woman suffrage." As was the case with a large majority of the delegates, Callaway's paramount consideration was Montana's admission to statehood. He strongly feared that any constitutional provision for equal suffrage, whether directly incorporated or left to legislative discretion, would endanger approval of the constitution by the electorate. To resolve the dilemma, Callaway sponsored Proposition 29 on July 31 (the day after Bickford's final defeat). Callaway wanted to submit the question of legislative power over woman suffrage to the electors as a separate proposition at the time

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 374, 459, 465-466.

they would vote on the constitution. If accepted by the voters, the article would become a part of the constitution. This course of action would solicit the sense of the people without risk to the basic document. Thirteen days later Callaway's proposition was pried out of the Committee on Suffrage "without recommendation." A move to table it was narrowly defeated. Because the convention was near termination, the delegates suspended rules (thereby requiring a two-thirds vote for passage) and immediately took the final vote. Callaway's measure lost in another tie vote, 34 to 34. Montana's electorate would not be tested on the issue of equal suffrage for another quarter of a century.<sup>16</sup>

Delegates had sharply divided into consistent voting blocs on the issues related to woman suffrage. On the major measures (Bickford's amendment, McAdow's compromise, Callaway's proposition, and the equal tax ballot) 32 delegates supported at least three, while 33 others opposed at least three. Within both blocs, only rarely did anyone cross over with a vote. Of the 33 in the "anti" blocs, only one voted for the Callaway proposition. This fact blew away their rhetorical smokescreen that the suffrage issue might endanger the constitution. Thus the delegates who opposed woman suffrage in principle also rigidly opposed constitutional provision for legislative reappraisal, as well

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 364, 452, 491, 856.

as public expression on the issue. They did not want woman suffrage by any procedure. Political partisanship was not a factor. Nor did nativity of the delegates seem to affect their position, except among the foreign born. (Nine of the eleven foreign-born men opposed woman suffrage.) However, regional division is clear. The eight eastern counties, mostly plains, supported woman suffrage approximately three to one, while the eight counties of the western mountain area (where population was more concentrated) opposed it in a ratio of about three to two.

Sentiment obviously was not ripe for equal suffrage as Montana prepared for statehood. Evidence of popular interest in woman suffrage in 1889 is meager. Two unimpressive petitions in support of equal suffrage reached the convention--one from Jefferson County signed by "several citizens" and the other, from Madison County, signed by "Edwin Cooley, and 30 others."<sup>17</sup> Eva Warren Collier of Bedford, a tiny gold mining town, likely sparked these petitions. A petition form, with exactly the same wording as those later submitted to the convention, was included in a "Letter to the Editor" which Mrs. Collier sent to the Boulder Age (and presumably to other newspapers, since the Age was not sympathetic toward woman suffrage). She asked adults of both sexes to sign, "the men as voters, and the women as caring enough for the ballot

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 64, 74.

to ask for it."<sup>18</sup> The WCTU made no public move on behalf of woman suffrage at this time, nor was there any remonstrance by anti-suffragists.

Since the public had not rallied to the idea of equal suffrage, delegates to the Constitutional Convention were reluctant to sponsor it as a constitutional item. Even Walter Bickford opposed the vote for women at that time, because "they do not avail themselves of the privilege." Only an amendment proposed by Timothy Collins, a Great Falls banker and woolgrower, directly tested the convention's position on constitutional provision for equal suffrage. His amendment to remove sexual restriction from suffrage qualifications was voted down without discussion, 25 to 43.<sup>19</sup> The consensus of the delegates, as expressed in convention debates, was that the male electorate would not be receptive to woman suffrage, and there was doubt among those on both sides of the question that the majority of the women wanted the ballot then.

The framers of Montana's constitution constructed provisions on suffrage with care. They decided to secure, in fundamental law, the several political rights which women had exercised under territorial

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<sup>18</sup> Boulder Age, June 12, 1889, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Proceedings and Debates, 1889, p. 359.

legislative enactments. This was a small gain in security for women's rights. But the convention's decision to shackle women's political rights to their 1889 socio-political view was a giant step backward. The delegates foreclosed any modification of suffrage rights, for men or women, except by the cumbersome process of constitutional amendment. Obtainment of equal suffrage by that process obviously would be laborious and greatly delayed. It would have to be achieved through persuasion of practical political powers and by the grace of those already enfranchised. Montana's crown lacked the adornment of progress in political rights for women.

## CHAPTER III

### WOMEN LIBBERS OF THE 1890'S

#### Suffragists and the WCTU, the Early Tie

Montana's first organized effort to gain the ballot for women came through the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). In 1883 Frances Willard, national president of the WCTU, helped to organize a territorial chapter in Butte and local unions in Great Falls, Marysville, Helena, and Bozeman. Conceiving broad reform and feminist functions for the WCTU, she encouraged education of women, fuller development of their capacities, and their right to vote. Organizers of the Montana chapter unanimously endorsed the ballot for women, but within the context of casting on "all questions pertaining to the liquor traffic." The WCTU needed woman's ballot to obtain its moral legislation--"to protect Montana homes." Thus the Union rationalized a public sphere for women in respectable Victorian rhetoric, but it shied off from promotion of woman suffrage as a natural right.<sup>1</sup> The infant organization petitioned Montana's 1884 Constitutional Convention for a temperance provision, but it did not suggest woman suffrage. During the 1889 convention the WCTU kept silent, for the national mood had turned decisively against prohibition.

In 1892 the Prohibition party, supported by the WCTU, ran a nearly full slate of candidates in Montana. While most of its

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<sup>1</sup>Butte Miner, August 2, 1883; August 3, 1883.

candidates drew poorly (around 550 to 750 votes) its nominee for State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Mrs. Eva M. Hunter, attracted more than 4,000--even though women were not eligible to that office. Except for that election, the Prohibition party in Montana served primarily as an appendage to the national party, underwriting its platform, and naming Congressional candidates and presidential electors.<sup>2</sup> It no longer ran local candidates. The national Prohibition platform as early as 1869 (and except for 1896) called for universal suffrage, usually qualified by education and full citizenship. By 1888 its platform also struck at sex discrimination in employment by demanding equal wages for equal work.<sup>3</sup> However, women's rights remained subordinate to other Prohibition proposals for legislated reforms. Not even the WCTU's publication in Montana, The Voice, gave much space to the suffrage stand of its political ally.

Nationally, the WCTU's own emphasis on woman suffrage declined after 1887, when Miss Willard began to devote much of her time to international organization of women's interests. The shift was reflected in Montana. Mary Long Alderson wrote in 1900 that many of Montana's

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<sup>2</sup>Waldron, Montana Politics Since 1864, pp. 66-74, passim.

<sup>3</sup>Grimes, The Puritan Ethic and Woman Suffrage, pp. 81, 86; Boulder Age, June 6, 1888, p. 2.

members thought that the WCTU had moved too slowly on suffrage, and some had resigned in order to work more vigorously for woman's franchise. But then the suffrage clubs became discouraged and disbanded (except for the brief rally in 1902 and 1903), and the WCTU turned its attention to passage and enforcement of local option prohibition. In 1909 the 1,000 members of Montana's WCTU circulated petitions sent by NAWSA for a federal suffrage amendment. In the meanwhile, the WCTU offered its members experience in organization and in public expression, and for many years it supplied leaders to mushrooming women's organizations.<sup>4</sup>

Of the WCTU suffragists, Mary Long Alderson was the most remarkable and enduring. A native of Massachusetts, she was inspired by the "Bostonian" suffragists (including Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell, and their daughter Alice Stone Blackwell). This influence was encouraged by her father, and later by her husband, Matthew Alderson (a farmer, mine operator, and editor). Mrs. Alderson always credited

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<sup>4</sup>Mary Long Alderson, "Thirty-Four Years in the Montana Women's Christian Temperance Union, 1896-1930" (pamphlet, Montana State University archives, Bozeman), passim; Mary Long Alderson, "A Half Century of Progress for Montana Women" (typescript, Montana State University archives, Bozeman), p. 8; Alderson, "Montana," HWS, p. 796; The Real Issue, February 1, 1909, p. 7; April 1, 1909, p. 5.

Several Montana women (including Mary Long Alderson, the Reverend Alice Barnes Hoag, Laura Howey, Delia Kellogg, Martha Rolfe Plassman, Anna Walker, and Mary Wylie) were early leaders in both the WCTU and the woman suffrage movement.



Montana's men with generosity and sincerity, even when she was baffled by their illiberal resistance to woman suffrage. Although she valued woman's ballot as a tool to achieve "reformatory and progressive measures," as a meliorative social force to complement men's qualities, she expected no panacea in woman suffrage. Mrs. Alderson worked persistently through the years to increase the ranks of the "white ribbon sisters" in Montana's WCTU and to prepare them for responsible citizenship. As legislative superintendent for the WCTU, she took an educational approach in persuading the public and legislators. During Montana's final suffrage campaign in 1914, Mary Long Alderson (as president) gave the WCTU suffragists plucky leadership that matched Jeannette Rankin's forcefulness.<sup>5</sup>

Ella Knowles, Populist

In her 1900 manuscript, Mary Long Alderson paid special tribute to several Montana women outside the WCTU who worked individually for women's rights: to Mrs. P. A. Dann of Great Falls (later Kalispell), a contemporary of Susan B. Anthony, for suffrage service and financial help; to Clara McAdow as the "most prominent among the earliest workers for suffrage;" and to Dr. Mary Moore Atwater of Marysville for her

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<sup>5</sup> Alderson, "A Half Century of Progress for Montana Women," and miscellaneous memorabilia in the archives of Montana State University, Bozeman; interview with Myrtle Alderson Griswold, daughter of Mary Long Alderson, April 30, 1973.

sustaining efforts. But Mrs. Alderson's highest commendation was bestowed on Ella Knowles, "by far the most prominent woman in the political history of the state," who "nobly battled for the enlargement of woman's legal rights."

Ella Knowles was born to an old-stock, rural gentry family in New Hampshire in the early 1860's, a precocious only child. When Ella was fourteen, her mother died. She enrolled at Bates College (Lewiston, Maine) in 1880, when coeducation was still a controversial issue there. Rising to the challenge in a mostly male school, she became the first female editor of the college magazine and the school's first female debater. After graduating with high honors, Miss Knowles studied law with a New Hampshire law firm. However, for reasons unclear, she headed West, teaching at an Iowa college and then in Salt Lake City before settling in Helena, Montana, in 1887. There she taught in public school and quickly advanced to principal. But law was her abiding ambition, so she associated with the Kinsley law office in Helena and resumed study of law. At that time Montana did not permit women to practice law. On behalf of Miss Knowles, Councilman Walter Bickford successfully sponsored a bill in the Territorial

Legislature of 1889 to admit women to the bar.<sup>6</sup> In December of that year Ella Knowles became Montana's first woman lawyer. By April her privilege extended into federal courts.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1892 election campaign, Ella Knowles walked into the political limelight as the Populist (People's Party) candidate for state attorney general. The Helena Independent, annoyed that its rivals had recommended endorsement of Miss Knowles by the major parties, questioned her eligibility for the office. The paper planted doubt that Miss Knowles met the minimum age of 30 to serve that office. It quoted an "esteemed and venerable" journal of her native community which estimated her age at "about 20 years old." The Independent pointed out, too, the constitutional implication of Section 2 of the Suffrage Article: that only persons who were privileged with the general franchise could be eligible to state offices. The constitution plainly

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<sup>6</sup>Miss Knowles was credited with drafting that bill. During final House debate, Representative J. D. Joslyn, of Deer Lodge County, proposed that "any lady desiring to practice law should be over 30 years of age, have decided convictions on the question of matrimony, and be firmly of the opinion that marriage is a failure." He was ruled out of order and evidently dropped his idea. (Butte Miner, February 9, 1889.) Some years later Miss Knowles reflected that the legislators had played a "fine joke" on her: by prearrangement nearly all had spoken against the bill then voted in favor of it. (Reprint from the San Francisco Examiner, in the Helena Independent, May 28, 1895, p. 5.) The Miner had given no clue of jest in its report about Joslyn.

<sup>7</sup>Progressive Men of Montana (Chicago: A. W. Bowen and Co., 1901), pp. 472-473; Helena Independent, January 12, 1890, p. 5.

limited woman suffrage to district school elections. So how could Ella Knowles hold the high office to which she aspired?<sup>8</sup>

Answering rebukes for his ungallant attempt to force the lady to declare her age, the Independent's editor revealed that what gravelled him was the audacity of women in politics:

In these days when women are competing at every point with men, holding immense conventions to secure political privileges, campaigning all over the country, running for office, serving as school superintendents, and in many cases casting their ballots like men, no sensible woman cares a rap about concealing her age.<sup>9</sup>

Ella Knowles coyly assured the public that, if elected, she would meet the constitutional qualification on age.<sup>10</sup>

An anonymous lawyer, in the Helena Herald of August 4, presented a public brief defending the eligibility of female lawyers to the post of state attorney general. He cited statutes which admitted women to the bar and which defined masculine pronouns to be generic.<sup>11</sup> Ella

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<sup>8</sup> Helena Independent, July 29, 1892, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., July 31, 1892, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> In the interview with the San Francisco Examiner, op. cit., Miss Knowles admitted that she was not yet 30 when nominated.

<sup>11</sup> That month District Judge William J. Pemberton, of Butte, also asserted broader legal rights for Montana women. Mrs. Thomas Leonard had charged a boy with larceny as bailee. His attorney asked Judge Pemberton to dismiss the case on the ground that the plaintiff, as a married woman, could neither own money independently nor be recognized by the court; her husband could have taken this legal action or they could have brought it jointly. Judge Pemberton recognized equal





























































































































































































































































































