

Morganton News Herald – Sunday, Oct. 7, 2016

Generations



Ladies, Don't Let Carrie Down in November

By Peg DeMarco - Special to The News Herald

I've been reading about how people have decided that they're not going to vote in the Presidential election this November because they don't like either candidate.

Well, that's so wrong in so many ways, but please consider the fact that a heck of a lot of people fought long and hard to get the right to vote for everyone, including us women who are also witnessing for the first time that a woman is running for our highest office.

Our right to vote didn't just magically appear. I recently saw the movie "Suffragette" about the women willing to lose everything in their fight for equality in early-20th-century Britain. Women from all walks of life sacrificed their jobs, homes, children – and even their lives for the right to vote.

It opened my eyes to what must have also happened in the U.S. when women decided they were good enough and entitled to vote right alongside of men. And it was Carrie who led the brigade – a fighter who happened to have died on the year I was born.

Carrie Chapman Catt, born in 1859, is one of the best-known women in the United States in the first half of the 20th century and she's on all lists of famous American women – but I didn't know her until I looked her up on Wikipedia and I was amazed by this woman's courage.

Carrie was a pioneer all her life. Her father was reluctant to allow her to attend college, but he relented, contributing only a part of the costs. To make ends meet, she worked as a dishwasher, in the school library, and as a teacher at rural schools during school breaks. Her freshman class consisted of 27 students, only six of whom were female.

Carrie decided to join the Crescent Literary Society, a student organization aimed at advancing student learning skills and self-confidence. Because only men were allowed to speak in meetings, she defied the rules and spoke up during a male debate. This started a discussion about women's participation in the group, and ultimately led to women gaining the right to speak in meetings.

It's hard to imagine women not given the right to speak in debates, but such was true during Carrie's time. So, to make her point and advance women's rights, she started an all girls' debate club, and advocated for women's participation in military drills. What a pistol she must have been.

After three years, she graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree. But Carrie just didn't get a degree — she was valedictorian and the only female in her graduating class.

Carrie knew heartache during her early years in San Francisco. She had married a newspaper editor in 1885, but he soon died from typhoid fever. However, Carrie became the first female reporter.

In 1890, she married George Catt, a wealthy engineer, and he encouraged Carrie to keep plugging for women's right to vote, which stance was usually not taken by husbands during those times.

In 1892, Carrie was asked by Susan B. Anthony to address Congress on the proposed woman's suffrage amendment. She later succeeded Anthony as president of the National American Women Suffrage Association and served as president twice, taking out some time to care for her ailing husband. That must have been a difficult decision for Carrie, but she persevered and took the presidency of the organization for the second time.

Under Carrie's leadership, the movement focused on success in at least one eastern state because previous to 1917, only western states had granted female suffrage. She led a successful campaign in New York state, which finally approved suffrage in 1917. During that same year, President Woodrow Wilson and the Congress entered World War I. Carrie made the controversial decision to support the war effort, which shifted the public's perception in favor of the suffragettes who were now perceived as patriotic.

The suffrage movement received the support of President Wilson in 1918 and, after endless lobbying by Carrie and NAWSA, the movement culminated in the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution on Aug. 26, 1920.

Carrie and all those courageous women worked hard for future generations. So, to all the women who "don't like either candidate," please go out and vote. It's your right and many people worked hard to give it to you.

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