

Carrie Chapman Catt—Leading the Way for Women’s Rights

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The 19th Amendment made it illegal to deny a person the right to vote based on gender. With the passage of the amendment women all over America voted for the first time. It took 52 years of struggle to pass an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that allowed women to vote.

An Iowan—Carrie Chapman Catt—led the cause and dominated the efforts to pass the 19th Amendment. She devoted 30 years of her 50 year public service career working for woman suffrage. Catt was known as “the brains of the woman’s suffrage movement.” Her greatest achievement in life was reached on August 26, 1920, when the state of Tennessee became the 36th and final state needed to ratify the 19th Amendment. It was because of Carrie Chapman Catt’s dedication to the cause, her brilliant organization skills, and tireless writing and speaking efforts that American women were allowed to vote.

By 1920 Carrie Chapman Catt was known worldwide as a leader who worked for equal voting rights for women. Her career brought her world prominence in fighting for the rights of women. She devoted the remaining years of her public service career to social justice, social welfare and international peace efforts.

Pioneer Upbringing

Carrie Lane was born January 9, 1859 in Ripon, Wisconsin. When she was seven years old the family moved to a farm near Charles City, Iowa. Her girlhood home can still be found southeast of Charles City. She grew up in an atmosphere influenced by attitudes of the frontier times. A curious child and an avid reader, she began to establish her own feminist principles at a young age. At the age of six in the first grade she slapped a rude boy in the face after he teased a classmate who had lost her hoop skirt.

At the age of 13 she wondered why her father could vote but her mother could not in the 1872 presidential election. Before the Civil War era the only people who could vote were white males who were age 21 or over, who owned property or who could show proof of military service.

Carrie graduated from Charles City High School in just three years. Her father opposed his daughter’s wish to attend college. She wanted to become a teacher. He didn’t think a girl should get a college education. However, she was determined to go to college. She obtained a teaching certificate, taught for a year and saved her money before going to Iowa State Agricultural College in Ames. Catt worked her way through college by washing dishes for nine cents an hour and working in the library for ten cents an hour.

A Leader in Her Class

In her long career Catt was an outstanding and effective speaker for the causes she dedicated her life to.

She developed her speaking skills in college. Catt became the first female student to give a speech before a debating society. In the 1870s she helped start military drills for girls at the college. Catt believed that girls should be given the same opportunity to take military training as boys. She started what became a popular unit called "Company G" (G for girls). This military unit continued until the outbreak of World War I. In 1880 Carrie Lane completed her bachelor's degree in general science. Carrie Chapman Catt would return to Iowa State University in 1921 to deliver the commencement address, the first woman to do so at ISU.

Achieving Success in a Man's World

After graduating from college Carrie Chapman Catt's career took her to jobs usually reserved for men. Her first job was with a law firm where she read law. In 1881 she was named the principal of Mason City High School. This was not a typical job for a woman at the time. Two years later at age 24 and single she served as the superintendent of schools in Mason City. One of the first female school superintendents, she served in that position from 1883 until 1885 when she married newspaper editor Leo Chapman.

When she married Chapman, she reluctantly gave up her education career. She became co-editor with her husband, Leo, of the paper the *Mason City Republican*. Both Leo and Carrie's names appeared on the masthead. She started a new feature called "Woman's World." In 1886 Leo Chapman died while visiting California. Carrie Chapman then took a job as a newspaper reporter in San Francisco. She returned to Iowa in 1887 to earn a living and to begin working to "change people's minds about woman's function in society."

Women's Rights Crusade

It was in Mason City where Carrie Chapman Catt first became active in the women's rights crusade. Her success in jobs usually reserved for men convinced her that since women could do the work of men, women should also have the right to vote. She was courageous, intelligent and faced ridicule by people who believed a woman's place was in the home. As a young widow she began lecturing and working for women's suffrage. She joined the Iowa Woman's Suffrage Association.

Carrie Chapman married her second husband, George Catt in 1890. He was a civil engineer and was sympathetic to the women's movement. Catt had a contract arranged with him before their marriage that guaranteed her two months off in the spring and two months off in the fall for suffrage work. When he died in 1905, Carrie Chapman Catt became financially independent and was able to devote the rest of her life to the woman suffrage movement. She lectured in every state and many European countries during her lifetime.

She replaced Susan B. Anthony in 1900 as the president of National American Woman Suffrage Association. She served in the position for four years, leaving to be with her dying husband. In 1915 she became president of the national association for the second time.

This time Catt led the campaign for women's suffrage with a federal amendment to the U.S. Constitution. As an organizer and a strategist she turned the National American Woman Suffrage

Association (NAWSA) from a loosely run local organizations into a tightly knit political machine. Carrie Chapman Catt's leadership kept the cause of women's suffrage alive through her writings and speeches. The years from 1917-1920 were the most important and most climactic years of her work. Iowa was the tenth state to ratify the woman suffrage amendment on July 2, 1919.

In 1916 at the NAWSA convention in Atlantic City, Catt revealed her "Winning Plan" strategy for winning the vote. That plan included a push for suffrage at both the state and federal levels of government. Influenced by his respect for Catt's judgment, tact and statesmanship, President Woodrow Wilson finally voiced his support of the women's suffrage amendment.

It was a monumental event in American history when Congress passed the suffrage amendment on February 13, 1920. Carrie Chapman Catt directed the tough national ratification battle that followed. Success was finally achieved with the Tennessee ratification in August 1920.

Peace Efforts

After the suffrage battle ended, Catt's interests turned towards working for world peace. She was a dynamic leader for the cause. She supported efforts for both the League of Nations and the United Nations.

In 1919 Catt founded the League of Women Voters to help women vote intelligently. She described the league as "A group of...women who want not merely to vote, but to vote for *something*." She explained, "The vote is a tool with which to work, and for years they (women) have struggled and sacrificed to secure it. Now, they want to build a better world for their neighbors and their posterity." The League of Women Voters continues to provide political education to voters. The league sponsors debates among candidates for political office.

Honored as Outstanding Woman

Carrie Chapman Catt received many awards during her lifetime. She received the first honorary degree to be awarded by the University of Wyoming in 1921. Wyoming was the first state to give women the vote. She was given similar awards by Iowa State College, Smith College and Moravian College for Women. She received the American Hebrew Medal in 1933 for her work on behalf of German Jewish Refugees. In 1940, she received the National Institute of Social Sciences gold medal. In 1947 the League of Women Voters established the Carrie Chapman Catt Memorial Foundation (later the Overseas Education Fund) to spread knowledge of the democratic process among women who could vote in foreign countries.

In 1936 Carrie Chapman Catt delivered the dedication address at the Iowa state Capitol for the memorial plaque called "Pioneering Suffragists." She died in 1947 and honors continued after her death. Catt was named one of the first inductees into the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame in 1973. In 1982 she was inducted in the National Women's Hall of Fame. In 1992 she was named the recipient of the Iowa Award. This award is the highest honor the state of Iowa bestows on a citizen who has been an outstanding leader and made outstanding contributions throughout their life and career.

When Carrie Chapman Catt died in 1947 her entire estate was given to Iowa State University. This

included her Peace Library of over 1,000 volumes. The university archives in the library safeguard treasured documents and other relics of her efforts working for women's rights. Iowa State University is home to the Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics. In 1992 the research and education center was established as a memorial to Catt.

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