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FROM
THEN
TO
NOW
WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION 1900-1982
For Women, Two Paths to Political Action

When I moved to Florida ten years ago, I began to hear about an organization that reminded me of another generation, the League of Women Voters. My grandmother, always ahead of her time, helped to organize in the 1920s a local chapter of the League of Women Voters and later served as state president. My grandmother was typical of the League’s membership back then - white, college educated, committed to bringing women’s “social housekeeping” to the service of the country.

In any conversation with a politician, sooner or later, the League would be mentioned. I was curious to know if my conversations were just anecdotal, or whether we could generalize: the stepping stone to political office in this state was a leadership position in the League of Women Voters. In 1991, the Florida Humanities Council organized a conference on the participation of women in Florida’s political life with the National Coalition of 100 Black Women and the League of Women Voters of Hillsborough County. Former State Senators Mary Grizzle and Jeannie Malcolm; Sadie Martin, former Mayor of Plant City and President of the League of Florida Cities; State Representative Cynthia Chestnut; and historians Joan Carver and Doris Weatherford participated. The conference gave me the opportunity to hear from others how decisive a role the League had played in the careers of Florida’s women politicians.

The answer was a clear cut “yes and no.” For white women whose careers began in the 1960s and 1970s, the League was clearly the arena where women learned and refined political skills. For African American women and Latin women, their communities and its institutions the church, school organizations were all important. Frequently, a woman had become an advocate for a cause and members of the community asked her to carry on her advocacy from public office.

When FORUM editor Rick Edmonds and I began to talk about this issue last summer, our biggest problem was to decide how to focus this topic so we would publish a magazine, not a book. Early on we agreed to limit the articles to women’s political participation between 1900 and the defeat of the ERA, but our authors/scholars stretched even that definition. What is clear is that there is definitely a book waiting to be written on Florida’s women politicians.

This issue of FORUM is also intended to celebrate the Florida Sesquicentennial. Women’s suffrage came in 1920—exactly half way through Florida’s 150-year span as a state. We have enlisted a number of scholars of women’s history to join our Speakers Bureau. If your organization is interested in a speaker who can talk about the history of women’s political participation in Florida, please call our office.

- Ann Henderson
From Then to NOW
By Nancy F. Cott

May Mann Jennings
She was a power even before women won the vote
By Linda Vance

Last Instead of First
Florida bungled its chance to be a leader in ratifying the Nineteenth Amendment
By Doris Weatherford

Varieties of Women’s Suffrage
In union halls and churches and clubs, different kinds of women were winning different kinds of votes
By Nancy A. Hewitt

Ruth Bryan Owen
She was the first woman elected to Congress in the post-reconstruction South
By Sally Vickers

Helen Hunt West
For this feminist, suffrage was just a start on equal rights
By James R. McGovern

The Long Hard Climb
Full participation for women took years; the ERA never did make it
Photos by Donn Dughi

Of Big Gains and Unfinished Business
By Dorothy S. Ridings

Suggested Readings

NationsBank joins the Florida Humanities Council in celebrating the 75th anniversary of women’s suffrage and the proud heritage of Florida women.
Amendment XIX (Adopted August 26, 1920)
The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.
by the 1910s woman suffrage was a platform on which diverse people and organizations could comfortably, if temporarily, stand. The nineteenth-century view of the ballot as representing the self-possessed individual had been joined by new emphasis on the ballot as the tool of group interests. City and state machine politics unmistakably conveyed the message that votes enabled self-identified groups to have their needs answered or their intents manipulated. Population growth and immigration, industrialization and the rise of great cities were compelling people to re-envision the state as the arena in which differing group interests might be calculated and conciliated. Americans turned to political reforms in the 1910s to address the conditions

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The story of women’s political participation in Florida and the battle for the right of suffrage are variations on a national story—one that was largely unchronicled until Cott and her generation of historians began digging into the subject 25 years ago.

These extracts from her writings discuss the surprising continuity of women’s growing political participation pre- and post-suffrage, the early emergence of distinctly women’s issues like social welfare and the unusual role the South and race issues played in the movement.

The essay is drawn with Cott’s permission from her 1987 book, The Grounding of American Feminism, and from “The South and the Nation in the History of Women’s Rights,” her contribution to a 1989 symposium sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.

Women were voting in New York (and a few other states) in 1918, even before the ratification of the 19th Amendment.
brought on by industrialization, immigration, and urbanization: dissident Republicans produced the Progressive Party, and the Democrats the "New Freedom"; the Socialist Party made unparalleled electoral gains. The political arena was seen as the forum in which the competing wants of differing economic, ethnic, and regional groups might be accommodated, in which cooperation on concrete reforms could be engineered without groups losing their particular identities. In synchronous parallel, voting appeared as a more pressing need for women, and diverse kinds of women could see the vote as a concrete goal around which to form a coalition. Since both male and female reformers had been pushing for more than a decade for government investigation and regulation of housing, factory conditions, and community health and safety, suffragists could argue that modern conditions bridged the chasm between the realm of politics and woman's conventional realm of the home. Where in the mid-nineteenth century the proposal of female enfranchisement profoundly threatened the ideology of woman's sphere, by the 1910s the need as well as right to vote in order to ensure domestic welfare could be persuasively presented as part of women's duties as wives, mothers, and community members. By that time, suffragists were as likely to argue that women deserved the vote because of their sex—because women as a group had relevant benefits to bring and interests to defend in the polity—as to argue that women deserved the vote despite their sex.

Because the vote was recognized as a tool of group interests as well as a symbol of equal access of citizens to self-government, the demand for equal suffrage could be brought into accord with the notion that women differed from men. In fact, the more that women's particular interests were stressed—so long as the premise of equal access was sustained—the better the argument for woman suffrage. Thus, when Carrie Chapman Catt summed up "Why Women Want to Vote" early in 1915, she gave two kinds of reasons. The first had to do with justice, rights, women's sameness to men, and democracy: since women are people and in America the people are supposed to rule, she wrote, the vote is woman's right, and disenfranchisement on the basis of sex is unjust. Her second, equally emphatic line of reasoning had to do with women's duties, talents, and difference from men: the vote was woman's duty because the United States government, competent in areas where men shone (such as business, commerce, and the development of natural resources), was inadequate in areas where mothers' skills were needed, such as schooling, caring for criminals, or dealing with unemployment.

The vote harmonized the two strands in foregoing woman's rights advocacy: it was an equal rights goal that enabled women to make special contributions; it sought...
to give women the same capacity as men so they could express their differences; it was a just end in itself, but it was also an expedient means to other ends. “Sameness” and “difference” arguments, “equal rights” and “special contributions” arguments, “justice” and “expediency” arguments existed side by side. Although the gender differences marked out were conventional—defining women as mothers, housekeepers, and caregivers—turning these stereotypes to serve goals of equal access and equal rights minimized their constraints. Not simply accommodationist or conservative in its willingness to point out the need for political representation of women’s differences from men, the suffrage movement of the 1910s encompassed the broadest spectrum of ideas and participants in the history of the movement.

Most histories of the woman’s rights movement in the United States say little or nothing about the South. There are many reasons for this relative eclipse of the South in the history of woman’s rights—not the least of which is the general tendency in U.S. historiography, not only in women’s history, to take the case of the Northeast region as the “general” national case and to see other regional developments as sideline stories or divergences. Rather than dwell here on the possible reasons for this neglect I want to propose a reversal of the common view. I want to propose that the South, because of its character as a biracial society and its “peculiar institution” of black slavery, has crucially shaped the woman’s rights movement in the U.S. through its history.

A cynic might observe that the woman suffrage movement did not become reinvigorated nationally until the question of black voting in the South was fully settled in the negative. The years of the doldrums in the woman suffrage movement were also the years when southern legislatures controlled by white Democrats were inventing legal and constitutional methods—voter registration, literacy tests, poll taxes, and so on—to exclude black men from the polls, as a more respectable and permanent sequel to the force and fraud used in the 1870s and 1880s. It was when the new southern apparatus was fully in place that the woman suffrage movement nationally, as in the South, took off. Whether there was a causal or only a coincidental link here I am not prepared to say. In any case, newly numerous contingents of white southern women and of black women from the North and South, contributed importantly to the decade’s mass campaign leading to passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Some prominent white southern activists had greatly influenced the national woman suffrage leadership in the 1890s, as I mentioned, but it was in the 1910s that southern white participation burgeoned at the local level. Atlanta, Georgia, for instance, harbored two white
woman suffrage groups in 1910 and eighty-one in 1917. And although the suffragists since the Civil War had never been without some black colleagues, it was after 1910 that black women's organizations spoke up for woman suffrage in increasing numbers. Black suffragists were not unaware of the southern argument that giving the ballot to women would enable white women's votes to out-number the votes of all blacks in the South. Nonetheless they mobilized as a matter of race progress as well as gender justice, believing that votes for black women would somehow help to redress the disenfranchisement of black men.

The influence of white southern women remained strong through the last decade of the national suffrage campaign. In the mainstream National American Woman Suffrage Association, their influence helped keep the states' rights approach to suffrage in force until 1916. In the militant National Woman's Party, whose financial angel Mrs. O.H.P. Belmont was southern-born, concern for what were assumed to be southern white predilections meshed with the leadership's general unwillingness to assert or defend black women's rights. To point the finger at white southern suffragists for white supremacist attitudes is misplaced blame, however. These attitudes were virulent nationwide. Among Southerners, as some recent research on the upper South has shown, suffragists were least likely to raise "the race issue" in ways detrimental to black women's, or men's, interests; that was an anti-suffragists' ploy, to which suffragists were forced to respond. More frequently than not former suffragists are the women whom one finds in interracial voluntary work, for instance anti-lynching efforts in the 1920s and 1930s. One must notice too, that while legal disenfranchisement of black men was proceeding apace in the southern states, no white women gained the ballot there.

The Nineteenth Amendment is the most obvious benchmark in the history of women in politics in the United States, but it is a perplexing one for the viewer who wants to include more than electoral events in the category of politics. To neglect 1920 as a political watershed would be obtuse and cavalier. Not only was the sex barrier to the ballot eliminated; but also the women's movement to gain the vote was ended. Leaders of the suffrage movement perceived the change in generational experience as well as political status: "Oh, how I do pity the women who have had no share in the exultation and the discipline of our army of workers!" Carrie Chapman Catt exclaimed in 1920. "How I do pity those who have felt none of the grip of the oneness of women struggling, serving, suffering, sacrificing for the righteousness of woman's emancipation." Nonetheless, too great focus on
the achievement of the Nineteenth Amendment can obscure surrounding continuities in women's political behavior and the situation of that behavior in broader political and social context.

Striking continuities tend to be overlooked if 1920 is supposed to be the great divide and only electoral politics its sequel. The most important is women's favoring the pursuit of politics through voluntary associations over the electoral arena. Since the early nineteenth century women had influenced what took place in electoral and legislative halls from outside, not only by seeking suffrage but also by inquiring into a wide range of health, safety, moral, and welfare issues. Women had built a tradition of exercising political influence and efficacy—admittedly hard to measure—through voluntary organizations. In 1919, as if predicting the release of such energies long tied up in the suffrage campaign, several new women's organizations were founded, and others blossomed after the suffrage was gained. Inez Haynes Irwin noted in her 1933 history, *Angels and Amazons*, that contemporary women were possibly over organized. (Her book ended with a staggering list of associations, from the American Home Economics Association, with 9,000 members, to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, with 12,000 branches and 70,000 members, and the Ukrainian National Women's League of America, with 52 branches and 3,020 members.) In the prevalence of the voluntarist mode (stemming from women's organizations), the use of lobbying to effect political influence, and the kinds of interests pursued (that is, health, safety, moral and welfare issues). There was much more similarity than difference in women's political participation before and after 1920.

In fitting historical sequel to the early 20th-century disenfranchisement of blacks and enfranchisement of white women in the South, the next major push for southern black civil rights established the context and model for a new wave of women's activism on their own behalf. The women's movements in the 1960s began with two different streams. One was peopled mainly by employed and professional women of middle-age, themselves legatees of longstanding voluntary organizations of women, accustomed to operating in the institutional structures of government, unions, the media, and business. The other was the infusion of younger women, students and near-students, riding the crest of expansion in higher education of the 1960s and politically bred in the civil rights, anti-war, and countercultural student movements. For the former as well as the latter, the steady rise in civil rights activism by black Southerners which took place from the mid-1950s and early 1960s was a goad, an avenue, and an inspiration.
Before women had won the vote, this pioneer learned how to cultivate clout

May Mann Jennings was a powerful political player in Florida—and became one several years before women won the right to vote. She was the first key figure in pioneering a place for women in this state’s public life and to many historians is still foremost. She lived 90 years, and her extraordinary public career proceeded, with only the briefest periods of rest, from advocacy of welfare issues in the early 1900s to the dedication of Everglades National Park (of which she was the true founding mother) in 1947. How she cultivated her clout is an exemplary tale of what one woman could do—with the vote or without.

Jennings came to her breakthrough role with every conceivable advantage. Born in 1873 to a well-to-do family, she spent her early years in the lap of luxury near Crystal River—insofar as luxury was possible in frontier Hernando County. Tragedy visited the family when her mother died of tuberculosis in 1882. But that, in turn, encouraged her father to send May to St. Joseph’s boarding school in St. Augustine—by all accounts a first-class convent school for young ladies.

May’s father, Austin Mann, was a successful businessman and promoter and for ten years an influential state legislator. As a teenager, she served as corresponding secretary for his campaigns and hostess at his social events. Through him she met, and a few years later married, William Sherman Jennings, a lawyer, businessman and aspiring politician ten years her senior. In 1900, Jennings plunged into a crowded Democratic field for governor and after many ballots at a wild convention emerged the winner. So as the new century began Jennings was governor; he and his young wife were the toast of Tallahassee society.

Jennings was an energetic, progressive and effective governor. But he made tough decisions, lost popularity along the way and failed in a 1904 bid for the U.S. Senate. Jennings agreed to become general counsel to a new financial institution and moved to Jacksonville, his political career effectively over. But for his confident, intelligent and politically seasoned wife, a career in public life was about to be launched—from the genteel base of The Jacksonville Woman’s Club.

In 1906 the Jacksonville club supported a pure food and drug exposition by arranging a parade of decorated baby coaches and “goat carriages” on Bay Street. A women’s lounge was opened in the club building for downtown shoppers and female employees to use as a “haven of rest,” and the clubwomen petitioned to city hall about the cows roaming free throughout residential neighborhoods. They also petitioned the Board of Public Works to provide playgrounds in the parks. The club became so successful at getting things done that Claude L’Engle editorialized in the Jacksonville Dixie that “Women’s Clubs with the wonderfully feminine energies underlying them, have the levers in their possession like Old Atlas to move Mother Earth off of its pegs.”

May Jennings was interested and active in many things during her lifetime, and through careful organization of her time she was able to involve herself in many types of civic, club, and political projects at the same time. While involved in the many activities of the Friday Musicale she could also...
solicit funds for an orphanage, lead a petition drive, organize political tactics for a lobbying effort on the legislature, and maintain a full entertainment and travel schedule. Her interests and her ability to work assiduously for disparate movements reveal a woman with an active mind and a high level of physical energy. She retained this energetic and peripatetic life-style all of her life. Occasionally she would narrow her vision to concentrate on one project, but it was usually just for long enough to get a favorite project started or terminated.

The pace she set for herself was astonishing. Few women were able to match the number of projects she promoted, the number of clubs she belonged to, the many people that she knew on a first-name basis, or the intensity of effort which she brought to her work. Her name appeared frequently in the newspapers and on the rosters of scores of clubs and organizations. By 1910 she was well known to the general public, and four years later when she was elected president of the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs she was easily identified as the most prominent woman in the state.

Her first statewide project began in 1906, when the Jacksonville Woman's Club members decided that the city's old railroad station needed renovating. Jacksonville was known as the "gateway to Florida," through which hundreds of thousands of tourists passed each year, most of
them traveling by train. The local depot was a decrepit and uncomfortable building, an unsightly introduction to both Jacksonville and Florida. As chairman of a committee formed to look into the situation, May argued that the women should not limit their efforts to Jacksonville. The problem was statewide; most of Florida’s depots were antiquated and uncomfortable. The women passed a resolution, the first of many such documents bearing May’s signature, calling for a statewide campaign to repair, clean, and beautify every depot in the state. Local citizens in each community were called upon to lead the effort. May mailed a copy of the resolution to every town government, village improvement association, woman’s club, newspaper, and railroad official in the state. The Jacksonville officials who received copies also received a personal lecture from her and her committee members on the problem....

By 1907, the Jacksonville club had 215 members. As chairperson of the civic’s committee, May had begun working on behalf of child welfare, a cause that was to consume much of her energy over the next decade. On her agenda was the State Reform School at Marianna, in which clubwomen had shown an interest since its establishment in 1897. Facilities were inadequate, and the inmates were often mistreated. The majority of children were black boys; only three were girls. Medical attention was lacking, the mortality rate was high, and the inmates received little formal education and no religious or moral teaching. Boys as young as ten years were observed working the school’s farm with their feet shackled by chains.

The clubwomen’s publicizing of conditions at Marianna paid off for both the child welfare movement in general and the Marianna children in particular. In 1907 Governor Broward called for doubling the appropriation to the school to $10,000 per annum. May supported this action and made the improvement of the Marianna school the major objective of her committee. She read a paper to the Jacksonville club that she had written about the conditions there and called for a memorial to the legislature endorsing Broward’s request. The women stated that they “heartily agreed that the institution should be made a real reformatory school [with industrial training] and not a Juvenile Prison.” Signed by May and 173 Jacksonville clubwomen, the memorial was sent to the governor, the cabinet, and each legislator. Telegrams and letters poured in from the women, and the 1907 legislature, one of the state’s most progressive, not only heeded the governor’s request concerning the reform school but also passed Florida’s first comprehensive child labor law. Mrs. C. H. Raynor, president of the Florida Federation of Women’s Clubs, was presented the pen with which Broward signed this bill. May was pleased for she had written and talked to every official that she knew urging support of the bills....

The federation’s legislative committee devoted 1910 and 1911 to further study of the reformatory. The committee was now headed by Susan B. Wight of Sanford, an aggressive leader. The school was still underfunded, and the women believed that a special legislative committee of 1909 had whitewashed its report on conditions there. One morning soon after the lawmakers had issued this report, Mrs. Wight and Mrs. William B. Young “put on their hats, and, uninvited and unannounced and unexpected and evidently unwanted, arrived at the Reformatory for a spend-the-day visit.” The report these women issued created a sensation in Florida, and it gave progressives the ammunition they thought they needed to convince the legislature that the school was a disgrace. May, now chairman of the Jacksonville club’s legislation committee, again submitted a resolution on behalf of the school to the 1911 legislature. She published a small pamphlet entitled Plea for the Marianna Reform School, which was mailed to all legislators, women’s clubs, and newspapers. Speakers traveled throughout the state to lobby among citizen’s groups on behalf of the bill.

The women’s 1911 resolution to the legislature urged the lawmakers to fund the Marianna school adequately, but it also called for enactment of other progressive laws, including compulsory education, a child labor law, and the prohibition of horse racing and all kinds of bookmaking and betting in the state. The women worked hard to get the legislation enacted, but the effort was for naught; their bills failed to pass.

When the 1913 legislative session convened, May and other clubwomen were ready. The platform they submitted was no timid document; it included a list of fifteen demands that the women wanted the legislators to act upon. The women called for amendments to strengthen the 1911 juvenile court law; an annual $25,000 appropriation for the reform school; creation of a state board of charities; enactment of a comprehensive child labor bill; a prohibition against newspapers printing gory details of murders, executions, and suicides; establishment of a hospital for the feeble-
minded; a law prohibiting placement of advertising signs on trees, telephone poles, fences, and other structures along public highways; a bill allowing women to be elected to school boards; a law giving women the right to enter into contracts relating to their own property; a law making wife and child desertion a felony; and a law that would establish certification of nurses.

The results of their efforts were gratifying. The 1913 legislature voted a sizable two-year appropriation of $65,000 for the reform school and, reorganized the facility, fired the management, and renamed the place the Florida Industrial School for Boys. It passed the most comprehensive child labor laws that had ever been enacted in the state, a wife and child desertion bill, and a measure authorizing women to serve as county probation officers. It enacted laws regulating the certification of nurses, strengthened the state's pure food and drug law, created the office of rural school inspector, raised the standards leading to teacher certification, and authorized special taxing districts to issue bonds for public education. In addition to these progressive measures it enacted conservation laws that established a game and fish commission and protected wild birds and animals.

May was elected president of the FFWC in 1914 and under her guidance the federation increased in numbers and in political strength. During her three-year tenure 59 new clubs joined the federation, bringing its membership to 9,163. The federation became one of the state's largest organizations. During May's first month as president one goal was quietly added to those that had been determined at the Lakeland convention: on the federation's books since 1905, the conservation resolution called for the preservation of Royal Palm Hammock on Paradise Key, an Everglades islet twelve miles southwest of Homestead in Dade County. From travels with her husband to inspect the dredges and drainage canals, May realized that the construction of roads into the interior would probably destroy much of the wilderness and serenity of the Everglades. Her decision only hours after her election as federation presi-
dent to make the preservation of Paradise Key one of her administration’s main goals was to have historic and far-reaching consequences for Florida, launching her upon a political, economic, and public relations struggle that would span 33 years.

During May’s tenure as federation president, many of the organization’s major goals would be achieved. Under her guidance the federation would wield effective political power by capitalizing on its unique old-girl network, a web of statewide friendships among the clubwomen, many of whom were related to the state’s most powerful male business, political, and civic leaders. During May’s presidency the federation would use its only real political weapon—these family and friendship connections—to gain access to the state’s highest circles of power.

An aggressive and perceptive federation president had only to call upon the network to gain entry to the governor’s mansion, the legislature, the courts, state boards and commissions, county commissions, and town and village councils in a roundabout but effective way. Many, though not all, men seemed to be more receptive to the urgings of female relatives—mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters—than to demands of nameless clubwomen. These first family contacts often smoothed the way for May and her lobbyists. Even the cult of southern womanhood occasionally worked in the federation’s favor, disposing men to give the women respectful, if grudging, audiences. But it was the network—a device well known to men for so long—that May relied upon the most often to gain the ears of Florida officials and politicians.

During her years as federation president, May called upon the services of perhaps a hundred of the organization’s most prominent members. Among the women’s families were one sitting governor, three former governors, one U.S. senator, nineteen state legislators, six prominent journalists, two state supreme court justices, one state railroad commissioner, two members of the state Board of Control, three state judges, a private secretary to two governors, and three college presidents. In addition to this core, there were hundreds of members who were related to prominent local businessmen, bankers, civic leaders, and city and county officials. (In 1915, May got the Flagler estate and the State of Florida to donate 900 acres each for the establishment of Royal Palm Park. It would be years more of campaigning, though before she succeeded in winning appropriations to run it as Florida’s first state park.)

Beyond the group’s legislative program, May had many other federation business matters to attend to during her first year as president. The volume of her correspondence continued to grow; she was the leader of an organization with twenty departments, ninety-one clubs, and 9,000 members. She employed a second part-time stenographer to help not only with her federation correspondence but also that relating to her duties as president of the Springfield Improvement Association, and of the DAR and the YWCA. She had also been appointed state chairperson of the Belgian Relief Committee with the responsibility of raising money and goods for war-stricken European refugees, and she was laboring tirelessly to promote the club movement and to bring even more women into civic work. She wanted the women of Florida to become better educated in practical politics and civic service. She wrote a paper about the federation and its work and her views and feelings about women’s clubs and mailed a copy to each unaffiliated club in the state.

May was often asked to solve domestic problems stemming from family opposition to her colleagues’ club work. When one woman wrote May that her husband was demanding that she stop her club work, May wrote back, “I do not think a man has any right to ask a woman to stay home and do everything for him. It takes a good deal of conceit to imagine he is so complete that he can satisfy anybody all in himself...I am not going to give you up without a struggle, husband or no...I am very belligerent just now.”

During 1915 May took no vacation. In July she spoke before the State Board of Control on behalf of the
As an organizer, May Mann Jennings was what we would call these days action-oriented. Usually she was patient and reflexively polite too. But very occasionally her frustration at those less energetic and talented would surface.

She took on the task of organizing all 54 Florida counties for the Florida Women's Liberty Loan Committee in 1917. Even with her statewide network of contacts, she was trying to get the effort staffed up quickly. To one recalcitrant group she wrote: "I must confess that it is quite a surprise to me that none of you Fernandine women seem to realize the great importance of financing the war. . . . When women are giving their sons to the trenches, it does not seem possible to me that anyone should feel they have a right to refuse a request from their government as long as they have the strength to hold out. Will you kindly say to the women who you have consulted about this work that I more often than not work until two o'clock at night . . . . The soldiers have in a way sacrificed their lives uselessly, while some women have stood idly by, unwilling to assist.”

May Jennings was the informal leader of a network of Florida suffragists that battled—ultimately unsuccessfully in Florida—for legislative approval of their full rights as citizens. (See following story). But suffrage was just one of her “projects” during the period, war relief seeming at times to occupy equal or greater attention.

And her pace didn’t slow nor her method of operating change much once the franchise was won in 1920. Though a woman of her times who believed in the traditional Southern arrangements that separated races, she early on made common cause with Mary McLeod Bethune, her counterpart as leader of Florida’s network of Negro women’s clubs. Jennings mix of issues through the 1920s continued eclectic—including new versions of the child welfare and education causes with which she began, and which some would still consider issues on which women politically bring special force and authority. May could advocate with equal vigor causes which are now merely quaint—cattlegoing, for instance, which in its time was taken as a serious problem of health and public safety.

But she had her priorities and, unlike some political figures, a fabulous staying power. First among her countless projects was Royal Palm Park on the east edge of the Everglades. The movement to create a larger national park, stretching westward from that base, started in the mid 1930s and culminated after the Second World War. When President Truman traveled from his winter retreat in Key West to dedicate the park on December 6, 1947, May Jennings was front and center among the prominent Floridians on the platform.

Her hometown newspaper, the Florida Times-Union, ran a long editorial that morning, commenting: “All who are familiar with the work of Mrs. Jennings will agree that a large measure of the credit for the park is due to her determination and persistence which at times bridged wide gaps of disappointment in the progress of the program. Today Mrs. Jennings, who is attending the dedication at Everglades City, declared that ‘It has been a long hard fight, but the final outcome is very gratifying’; with that there will be general agreement.”
Florida had a suffrage movement, but a reluctant legislature balked at ratification.

Floridaians, like other Americans, have been patting our collective backs this fall, as we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment that—we usually simplistically say—gave women the vote. The complexity of this enfranchisement is seldom detailed, but in fact, 15 states had followed Wyoming’s 1869 example and granted women full suffrage by 1920. Others offered variants of partial suffrage that allowed some women to vote on particular races or issues, but not on others.

It was the West that pioneered female enfranchisement, with the Midwest and Northeast slowly following. In the South—and Florida was very much a southern state prior to its World War II population explosion—only Arkansas and Texas offered any ballot rights. Women there achieved the vote in 1917 and 1918, respectively, but only for primary elections. This form of partial suffrage was candidly designed to allow white women to vote in the only election that mattered, the Democratic primary. Blacks, who almost always considered themselves to belong to the Republican “Party of Lincoln,” remained effectively barred. (Legislators did not bother to hide their racism in this era. One example of many is that of Florida House Resolution No. 82, introduced in 1915, which stripped the vote from anyone ineligible on January 1, 1867, and from their “lineal descendants.” This was intended to take the ballot from those few Florida blacks who dared to vote.)

While American women had worked in literally hundreds of state campaigns for the vote from 1848 onwards, they also pushed for a federal constitutional amendment that would apply to all states. Finally, on May 21, 1919, the House of Representatives passed the proposed Nineteenth Amendment by the requisite two-thirds majority. And on June 4, the Senate followed. As mandated by the Constitution, the amendment went on to the states for the essential ratification by three-quarters of the legislatures.

It was then that Florida stumbled. We could have been the first state to ratify, for our legislature was one of the few still in session on June 4. Instead, we were dead last, not ratifying until 50 years later. Florida’s legislature distinguished itself by being the only one in the nation to take no action at all on the Nineteenth Amendment. And our lawmakers could have—except that they wanted to go home at noon.

Atlanta decked itself out in 1895 to greet the Yankees who came down for the annual convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Though such conventions had been held for almost a half-century, this was their first foray into the South, and even Georgians who disagreed with the ladies’ platform were eager to prove their southern hospitality. A local preacher who used his pulpit to sermonize against the arriving women found his bad manners roundly condemned in the week’s newspapers, and his admonition backfired, instead building attendance. “Every chair that could be found had been utilized,” one participant recalled, and “many prominent professional and business men were standing on the stage.”

Sitting in one of those chairs was Floridian Eleanor McWilliams Chamberlain of Tampa, the president of some one hundred members in Florida’s two-year old NAWSA affil-

Doris Weatherford, historian of the Florida Commission on the Status of Women, lives in Tampa. She wrote this piece originally for this issue of Forum.
Susan Anthony, eager to showcase evidence of activism in the South, introduced Ella Chamberlain warmly: "For several years a big box of oranges has come to me from Florida," Anthony said. "Not long ago, I got home [to Rochester] on one of the coldest nights of the year, and found a box... . Next morning the papers reported that all the oranges in Florida were frozen, but the president of the association saved that boxful for me."

When Chamberlain moved to the Midwest in 1897, however, Florida's suffrage association died. Though Anthony and her NAWSA protégé, Rev. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, spent February and March of 1905 in the St. Augustine area, even these top national leaders exhibited the attitude of many, both then and now: Florida is the perennial place to relax, not to work. Anthony simply rested; Shaw wintered in Polk County's Florence Villa for many years but spoke only a few times at suffrage events.

Ella Chamberlain's leadership had been crucial, and for 15 years, Florida drifted along without a suffrage association. The 1913 inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson, however, put suffrage within reach. He had been elected in a three-way race. The incumbent Republican was defeated when Theodore Roosevelt split from the Republicans to form the Progressive Party, which openly advocated woman suffrage. The result was the first Democratic victory since Grover Cleveland won the presidency in 1892, and suffragists from all over the nation greeted Wilson with a giant march.

The enthusiasm reached to Florida, and Jacksonville—the state's other big, blue-collar port city—replaced Tampa as the center of activism. A group of Jacksonville women participated in the national march, and the next month, they moved on to state action. Just as...
Washington had never seen anything like the militant parade of March, 1913, so Tallahassee had never seen anything like the women who addressed the legislature in April. Roselle C. Cooley, president of the Equal Franchise League of Jacksonville, wrote of the excitement in the Capitol:

The House of Representatives decided to hear us in a Committee of the Whole, at an evening session. In this case, it meant the whole House, the whole Senate and the whole town. Seats, aisles, the steps of the Speaker’s rostrum were filled, windows had people sitting in them and in the hall as far as one could see people were standing on chairs to hear the first call for the rights of women ever uttered in the Capitol of Florida.

The crowd was generally well-behaved and asked no heckling questions at the end. Cooley was one of five women and three men who spoke briefly, but the speaker whom suffragists found most formidable was not well-recognized by the press. The Tampa Morning Tribune gave her no first name, calling her merely “Miss Rankin,” and the Jacksonville Times-Union, in an article written a week after the speeches, muffed her name as “Miss Ruskin”—while carefully recording that she “was dressed in a plать или hat and white plume.” She was in fact NAWSA organizer Jeanette Rankin of Montana, and just three years later, she would become the first woman elected to Congress.

The Tribune was also careless in listing Dr. R.C. Safford of Orlando as a speaker, for this was Dr. Mary A. Safford, a Unitarian minister who had a doctorate in theology. Safford’s Tallahassee speech was sufficiently impressive that suffragists elected her to the league’s presidency in December, and except for 1917, when Ivy Stranahan of Broward County served, Safford would be Florida’s suffrage league president for most of the issue’s existence.

The Tampa Times ran no news story as such, but did speak editorially of “feminine eloquence” and of the “striking exemplification of the influence of women given within the last few days in Tallahassee.” The editorial concluded optimistically, “If the two houses will give those women the freedom of the floor and allow them to discuss the question the resolution will carry through both chambers and will be submitted to the people—just what ought to be done with it.”

Suffragists’ eloquence clearly converted many legislators to the cause, but their House resolution had been introduced “by request”—a legislative device that more sophisticated women would have known meant that its alleged sponsor, H.L. Bussey of Palm Beach, was actually disavowing it to his colleagues. In fact, Bussey did not even move his bill, leaving that to W.A. MacWilliams of St. Johns County, who became a faithful friend to suffragists. After appreciable parliamentary maneuvering, the final House vote came on May 2, and the resolution lost 26-39.

As the disappointed women were leaving for their homes, they were told, “If you will come into the Senate we will show those men how to treat ladies.” Fred P. Cone of Lake City took up their cause; the women stayed on, and even took a daring move the next week: “The prominent Florida women who are making a brilliant fight...for woman suffrage,” enthused the Tallahassee Daily Democrat, “this morning sprang a decided surprise on the senate by challenging...[senators] to a joint debate.” The paper printed the women’s detailed debate plans and added its own bit of goading by saying that if the senators refused, “it will not be the first time that a man ‘beat it’ when so challenged.”

The debate did in fact take place the next day, though under less formal circumstances than the women proposed: The two senators the women had targeted, reported the Tampa Morning Tribune, were “compelled to accept a challenge to appear in open debate...when the overflow of the fair sex appeared in the corridor of the Senate.” The tactic got them some favorable publicity, and the senate committee soon issued a favorable recommendation for their bill. Finally, on May 28, after more waiting and filibustering, the matter was tabled indefinitely by a 16-15 vote.

Senate records indicate James E. Calkins of Fernandina, long a supporter of the cause, switched sides on the last roll call. The vote, the women felt, had been lost to “the corporation members and the whiskey men.” Several legislators used less candid and more florid language to explain away their votes. That they found it necessary to write their reasoning into the record makes clear that—much though they disliked the thought—they knew this issue was not going away. Like W.J. Epperson of Levy County, their thoughts were often tortured; he began explicating his nega-
Marjory Stoneman Douglas goes to Tallahassee

In 1917, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, then a writer for the Miami Herald, made a trip to Tallahassee to lobby for women's suffrage. Her companions were Mary Bryan, wife of William Jennings Bryan; May Mann Jennings and Annie Broward, both wives of former governors and Ivy Stranahan. Douglas gives this account in her autobiography, Voices of the River.

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We went to Tallahassee by Pullman train. I remember the red dust of those red hills beyond the Suwannee seeping in around the joints of the Pullman car. In Tallahassee we stayed in the old Leon Hotel, which was full of lobbyists where you'd expect to see them, down in the lobby discussing politics all night long. Mrs. Broward was sick and had to stay in bed, but she'd go over and speak to the legislators and return to bed as soon as she got back. We'd sit on her bed and she'd tell about the days when her husband was governor and when he was running guns to Cuba in the Spanish-American War. Mr. Broward was a comely old pirate, and he'd smuggled guns down the Florida coast. I liked Mrs. Broward and her stories even though my father was her husband's greatest enemy in the dredging of the Everglades.

Mrs. Jennings was younger than Mrs. Broward, and Mrs. Stranahan and I were younger still. All four of us spoke to a joint committee, wearing our best hats. It was a large room with men sitting around on two sides with their backs propped up against the walls and large brass spittoons between every other one of them. Talking to them was like talking to grooved images. They never paid attention to us at all. They weren't even listening. This was my first taste of the politics of north Florida. These were the so-called "wool-hat boys in the red hills beyond the Suwannee" and they ran the state. Because of them, Florida was the last state in the union to ratify the suffrage amendment. Even though our testimony was ignored, it was valuable for me to work with women who'd struggled in this political arena. It was a long time before you began to feel that the legislators from north Florida even knew there was a south Florida. That was also a thing I had to learn.

In that era—when Florida's population was about 14 times smaller than it is today—the legislature met for the same 60-day session that it does now, but these were held only in odd-numbered years. Suffragists therefore devoted 1914 to organization-building, including a Jacksonville rally that attracted 1,400 people. Men's suffrage leagues were also formed; the first was in Orlando, and the president was the city's mayor. Perhaps the biggest encouragement came early in the year: the January convention of the Florida Federation of Labor surprised everyone by taking up the AFL's recommendation and endorsing women's suffrage without waiting for the state's women to ask.

Though 1915 was a session year, it yielded little legislatively for the suffragists. But other important changes were occurring outside of the legislature.

The Florida Federation of Women's Clubs (FFWC), which had voted down a suffrage resolution the previous year, endorsed it by an overwhelming margin in the 1915 convention. This attitudinal change was due mostly to FFWC president May Mann Jennings, the wife of former governor William Sherman Jennings, whose leadership on suffrage became of inestimable importance. She turned the 10,000 women in the federation's 175 clubs from their traditional civic aims to agitation for their own rights: When, for example, the FFWC submitted its platform to be read into the 1919 legislative record, suffrage was first in a 22-item agenda.

The other important event of 1915 was, in fact, the state's first enfranchisement of women. The town of Fellsmere in St. Lucie County (whose 1920 population was 898, compared with Palm Beach's 113) applied for its municipal charter, and because women had played an active role in establishing the community, its men included a provision allowing women to vote. It passed the legislature without notice, along with dozens of other local bills that are not traditionally debated. Other municipalities followed. By the time that the Nineteenth Amendment was finally ratified in 1920, women had the right to vote in 23 Florida municipalities. Their ballots, of course, were accepted only in city races, but they had elected some women mayors and commissioners.

Sidney J. Catts, a populist who became governor in 1916, was all over the map on suffrage. While capable of declaring himself "unequivocally and eternally for the enfranchisement of women" in front of a favorable audience, he vetoed some municipal charters with suffrage provisions. The result was a confused record that opened itself to cynicism.

Catts did not mention the issue when he made his first speech to the legislature in 1917, nor was he among the prominent men who welcomed Mary Baird Bryan to town that spring. Mrs. William Jennings Bryan, as she was always termed in the era's documents, had a lifetime of political experience: Not only did she play a role in her husband's three presidential campaigns, but she was independent enough to pass the Nebraska bar exam in 1888—when her daughter Ruth,
who would become Florida’s first congresswoman in 1928—was three.

After Williams Jennings Bryan served as President Wilson’s first secretary of state, the Bryans retired to Miami, where partly through their family kinship with former Governor Jennings and his activist wife, they quickly became part of Florida’s political life. The respect that legislators had for Mrs. Bryan is clear: The 1917 House Journal featured seven separate entries concerning arrangements for her speech. The Senate adjourned to join them, and on April 18, she held their attention in the same way that her husband’s famous oratory spellbound crowds. The Tampa Morning Tribune called her forceful hour-and-a-half speech “the opening of the real campaign that will be waged to pass bills already introduced to grant equal suffrage in Florida to women.”

“The real campaign” did in fact begin immediately, as other South Florida women also came to Tallahassee to lobby. They included not only such luminaries as former first ladies May Mann Jennings and Annie Broward, but also Ft. Lauderdale founder Ivy Stranahan—and a young Miami newswoman on her way to decades of Florida fame, Marjory Stoneman Douglas. In the face of such feminine power, the House committee unanimously recommended the suffrage resolution, while only two senators mustered up the courage to vote no in committee.

The majority held when it reached the floor—but a simple majority was not enough. The resolution, which had been drafted by ex-governor Jennings for his FFWC president wife, called for amending the state constitution, and that required a three-fifths majority. After much parliamentary maneuvering and energetic debate, 40 House members voted for the resolution and 27 against, leaving it five votes shy. A motion to reconsider failed by an even greater margin, though the male legislators spent most of another day expounding their thoughts on the status of women.

The suffrage leaders understandably decided not to test the limits of their legislative allies by introducing the subject when the governor unexpectedly called a special session in
December 1918. Into the vacuum rushed Helen Hunt, a Jacksonville attorney who led the tiny number of Floridians associated with the National Woman's Party. These women emulated the law-breaking style of British suffragists, and their political strategy was based on the British method of holding the party that holds the executive branch responsible for everything. They thus opposed President Wilson even after he endorsed suffrage and were proud of their record in the 1914 congressional elections, when they targeted and helped defeat 20 Democratic congressmen—who supported suffrage.

Naturally, May Mann Jennings warned that the Woman's Party represented Republicans, who could do nothing in Democratic Florida except run up still another defeat. Perhaps unaware of these internal divisions between women, Rep. Edgar W. Waybright introduced his Jacksonville constituent's resolution. Even Gov. Catts sent a message to the legislature approving this new approach, for the Woman Party's resolution differed from earlier versions in that it was a petition to the state's congressmen, asking them to vote for the federal amendment. Waybright was wise to point out within his resolution that the National Democratic Committee endorsed the federal amendment, and he even added, "Whereas, President Wilson has personally urged its passage..."—but that was not enough. It failed 31-37.

The final act in this legislative drama began only a few months later, in April 1919. Suffragists introduced a bill to allow the vote in primaries, as well as a state constitutional amendment to grant full suffrage. Senator W.H. Malone of Key West came up with still another bright idea: His bill would have settled "the great conflict of opinions on whether the womanhood of Florida desires the ballot or not" by calling on the Democratic Executive Committee to arrange an opportunity for women to express their view during the general election of 1920—except that "only such women, who desire the electorate franchise in Florida, be requested to vote...and those who do not...be ascertained by refraining." In other words, if a woman did not vote, she would be counted as having voted negatively! Mercifully, the bill was laid on the table, where it died quietly.

Suffragists had reason to believe that they were at last on their way to victory in Florida when their proposed constitutional amendment finally received a three-fifths majority vote in the Senate on April 18th. The election was short-lived, however, for on the 22nd, the House voted for it 40 to 33—still four short of the required three-fifths. This turned out to be the last vote that Florida would cast on the enfranchisement of women.

The legislature took up other matters but was still in session on Wednesday, June 4, when the U.S. Senate emulated the House's May action and passed the proposed Nineteenth Amendment by the requisite two-thirds majority. Gov. Catts, whose commitment to suffrage had seemed so equivocal, quickly swung into action. He immediately sent a message to the legislature:

While this office has not received verification from... Washington, still The Associated Press would not dare publish something of so vast importance as this, if it were not true.

The legislature... will adjourn tomorrow and it has an opportunity, while now in regular... [session] to be the first state in the sisterhood of states to ratify this great movement...

Therefore, as governor of our great state, I earnestly recommend that you ratify this action... and add an imperishable laurel to your state, which can never die; the fact of being the first state of the Union to recognize women as an equal with her brother man.

His language was stirring, but the legislature, the Tribune reported, paid "no attention to the governor's message." This was not surprising, but most observers were taken aback when women did not rush to push the question on to the final-day agenda. After years of disappointment, suffrage leadership had become wary enough to see that extraordinary majority rules would trip them up again: While their head count showed that they could pass the measure, they could not get the two-thirds majority to waive the rules and introduce new business this late in the session. The Tampa Daily Times summed up the situation best in a headline that read: "FLORIDA WILL NOT BE FIRST STATE TO RATIFY SUFfrage AMENDMENT; Women Leaders Not Willing to Take Chance on Putting Land of Flowers In Line as the First to Turn It Down."

The women had shown political sagacity once more, for they dismissed possible glory rather than risk the disaster of having the amendment lose its first state in its first test. Given the legislators' propensity for double-dealing, and knowing well how they rush out of Tallahassee like schoolboys set loose for vacation, May Mann Jennings made the right judgment call in choosing not to cast women's hard won pearls before them.

No vote was taken. The legislature adjourned at noon on Friday, June 6th, 1919, and on Tuesday, the 10th, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Michigan all finalized their ratification on the same day. By the time that Florida's next session rolled around in 1921, not only had the Nineteenth Amendment been added to the Constitution, but Florida women had already voted in a presidential election year under its protection. Finally, in 1969, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the League of Women Voters, the legislature belatedly ratified the Nineteenth Amendment. No one voted against it.
In the 1920s, women won the vote in associations and union halls as well as the civic ballot.

**Varieties of Women's Suffrage**

By Nancy A. Hewitt

Whether professional historians or interested citizens, we tend to think of the achievement of women’s suffrage as an event, a national event that occurred with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. We can pinpoint that event to a day. The critical vote was cast by a male legislator in Tennessee on August 26, 1920; on November 5, women went to voting booths across the country to cast their first ballots in a presidential election. Seventy-five years later, we celebrate this moment as emblematic of women’s long and difficult struggle to gain first-class citizenship in the United States.

When I became a women’s historian in the 1970s, it was this image—of women’s suffrage as an event—that kept me from focusing my attention on the topic. The story had been told and retold many times and seemed clear in both its outline and its outcome. Over the past decade, however, as I read powerful portraits of African Americans fighting to gain access to the ballot and watched the moving footage of *Eyes on the Prize*, which documents the modern struggle for voting rights among blacks, I came to see the potential for a different history of women’s suffrage.

The fragments of that history were all around me, emerging from dozens of community-based studies of women’s activism. These studies sketched local and national movements from the 1820s through the 1920s and stretched from Richmond, Virginia to Rochester, New York, from San Antonio to Seattle, from Chicago to Tampa. As I examined these fragments more closely, I saw a new story taking shape, one in which gaining the right to vote was less an event than a process. The process culminated in a constitutional amendment, but it was the paths to and from that amendment that formed the real legacies of women’s struggle.

Struggles for the right to vote occurred in many arenas—in churches, union halls, and voluntary associations as well as in city, state, and federal legislatures. Women often disagreed with each other as well as with men about their proper place in politics. In some locales, women voted in school board, city council, and statewide elections years before the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified; in others, federally-mandated suffrage offered women the first opportunity to cast ballots in any electoral contest. And for still others—women living in the territory of Puerto Rico, African American women in the South, and recent immigrants in any...
area of the country—the Nineteenth Amendment removed only one of several barriers to voting rights. Thus even as campaigns for the ballot sought to mute distinctions of sex, they often intensified differences of region, race, class, and nationality.

If we look across a range of communities and regions, we find in most that forceful women leaders were critical in shaping local campaigns and that suffrage almost always emerged from or was grafted onto other social movements. Despite these shared characteristics, there were important differences in the timing of local movements, the network of causes in which they were embedded, the racial, ethnic, and class composition of local suffrage advocates, and the roles played by male civic leaders. It is through the exploration of these complex community-based stories that we can re-imagine the meanings women attached to suffrage seventy-five years ago and thereby gain some insights into

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its legacy for our own day.

In Florida, the city first and most closely identified with the campaign for women’s votes was Tampa. The story there illuminates the ways that race, ethnicity, and class shaped the significance of suffrage for women and for the city as a whole. It also reminds us that even where women campaigned vigorously for access to the ballot box, they did not necessarily control the conditions under which it would be granted. Perhaps recognizing that fact, they did not give up well-honed but non-electoral forms of public activism once suffrage was secured.

Florida legislators, to the bitter end, refused to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, and thus it was their counterparts in Tennessee who finally assured that women in the Sunshine State would gain the right to vote. When the news of the woman suffrage victory broke in August 1920, Tampa politicians were in the midst of a heated contest over the merits of replacing a ward-based system of city government with a commission system. Ward voting supposedly heightened the power of ethnic and racial minorities to achieve a voice in local government; a commission system, in which city officials were elected at large, favored the white majority. Yet white men who had achieved power under the existing ward system—often through graft and corruption—were reluctant to give it up. Despite disagreements among themselves, white male civic leaders on both sides of the city charter fight hoped to keep women from entering the fray. The state attorney soon informed them, however, that women must be allowed to register and vote.

Overnight, Tampa civic leaders traded their anti-suffrage posturing for paeans to “intelligent” womanhood. They also immediately infused women’s entry into electoral politics with racist overtones. On September 21, Wallace Stovall, the editor of the Tampa Morning Tribune, decried the “unexpected and uncouth treatment of the white women of Tampa” by opponents of the proposed city charter. His attack was aimed most directly at the Tribune’s journalistic rival, the Tampa Daily Times, which supported the existing system of ward politics. Stovall granted that the registration of women to vote was newsworthy, but he cried foul when the Times embarrassed socially prominent and “home-loving” ladies by making fun of their anxiety at the registration office, ridiculing them as “potential candidates,” and, worst of all, printing “the age of those offering to register.”

Such actions are “certainly indicative,” argued Stovall, “that among a certain class the old-time chivalry, deference and honor, reverence and protection, which the Southern gentlemen throw about woman has decayed most lamentably.” In explaining the ill treatment of white women registrants, Stovall pointed to the opposition’s concomitant deference to potential black voters. As evidence, he noted, “Not one Negro woman of Tampa has been embarrassed or humiliated by having cheap fun poked at her” in the Times. “Can it be,” he concluded, “that the opposition knows it can count on Negro women’s vote to help defeat the charter...adoption of which means a cleaner Tampa, a better governed Tampa, a Tampa such as we have dreamed of?”

These racist diatribes echoed sentiments expressed by whites across the former Confederacy, yet Tampa was as closely tied to the Caribbean as to the Cotton South and was home to as many Cuban and Italian immigrants as African Americans. Moreover, there were women advocating suffrage in Tampa long before 1920. We cannot understand the events of that fall by examining only the rhetoric of white male partisans. We must look as well to those circles of women—Anglo, African American, and Latin—whose efforts prepared a path to the polls at this crucial moment in Tampa’s history.

Until 1880, Tampa was a sleepy village of 800 residents. With the establishment of the cigar industry in 1886, thousands of men and women poured into the city from Cuba, San Stefano, the Canary Islands, Spain, and the Bahamas. Though few became citizens—largely as a result of the poll taxes and literacy tests instituted in the
Mary McLeod Bethune, a suffragist too

Mary McLeod Bethune is famous first as an educator. Taught to read surreptitiously in rural South Carolina, she completed her schooling at Moody Institute in Chicago, thanks to a benefactor. She dedicated her professional life to education, striking out to establish a small school for Negro girls in Daytona Beach in 1904. (Bethune is shown with a row of her students in the background in the accompanying picture.)

The little school went on to combine with another into what is now Bethune-Cookman College. Bethune became well-known late in life as a national political figure. She served first for President Hoover and later for President Roosevelt on a series of commissions that marked the beginning of inclusion of African Americans in the federal government.

But Bethune was also a suffragist and a political activist back home in Florida. She served from 1924 to 1928 as president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). She and Blanche Armwood Beatty were both active Negro clubwomen, and their agenda at times overlapped with May Mann Jennings’ effective advocacy for the Florida Federation of Women’s Clubs. Bethune and Armwood Beatty also were outspoken advocates of anti-lynching laws in the 1920’s.

In fact, African American historian Maxine D. Jones argues that Bethune, Beatty and other activists of the period “were perceived as less of a threat than black men by the power structure (and) were allowed to say things that might have gotten a black man lynched or run out of town.” Bethune did not pull punches in talks like “The High Cost of Keeping the Negro Inferior,” stressing how much it cost Florida in dollars and sense to keep the Negro in his place.

Said the New York Times of one of her speeches, Bethune “went straight to the heart of the race problem, pleaded for social justice, pointed out injustices being practiced upon her race, and did it with such sincerity and zeal that her remarks were followed by applause instead of the derogatory comment that usually follows when a Negro speaks with such candor.”

1890’s to disfranchise the state’s black male residents—immigrants were central to city life. They formed the backbone of the cigar industry, battled to liberate Cuba from Spanish rule, and engaged in periodic industry-wide strikes. Even as native-born Tampans joined battle over commission versus ward-based government, they also had to contend with a six-month strike by cigarworkers.

And Latin labor militancy was not the work of men only. In fact, women workers were so central to the strike of 1920 that on the very day Tennessee legislators ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, cigar manufacturers resolved to hire “American girls”—that is, native-born women—as the best means to break the union. In response, Latin women and chil-
children led the biggest labor parade ever seen in Tampa. How had these immigrants gained such clout in local affairs, and what was their relation to arguments over women's suffrage couched in the rhetoric of race and white supremacy?

First, we know that Tampa's Latin women were aware of the suffrage campaign. In 1912, Luisa Capetillo, an advocate of workers' rights and women's rights in her native Puerto Rico, settled in the cigar city of South Florida. She was notable on a number of accounts: she was an experienced labor organizer; she was divorced (a status unusual for any woman in 1912, but especially for a Catholic, now an ex-Catholic); she wore men's clothing and cut her hair short; and she was elected to the prestigious position of lector by local cigarworkers. A lector was an individual, selected and paid by the workers, who sat on a stage in the middle of the factory and read out loud as the cigars were rolled. Capetillo, the only woman known to have gained the reader's chair in Tampa, undoubtedly read suffrage pamphlets along with the usual dose of newspapers and novels.

Though Capetillo's call for suffrage fell on deaf ears in Tampa's Latin Quarter, her call for working women's rights resonated with both older and younger Latinas. Older women recalled their youthful participation in revolutionary clubs that supported the overthrow of Spanish tyranny in Cuba during the 1890s and their ongoing contributions to labor agitation, especially during the prolonged strikes of 1899, 1901, and 1910. Younger women were inspired by Capetillo to demand gender equality in union ranks, and in 1916, a group of these Latin "new women" staged a wildcat strike. When male comrades refused to follow them out the factory doors, they called the men at work "women" and offered them their skirts. Yet by 1920, the women wildcatters made common cause with their Latin brothers as they struck for higher wages and better working conditions.

Tampa's Anglo and African American women had also been active since the 1890s. Native-born white women had supported the work of Cuban women's revolutionary clubs and had established charitable associations, medical facilities, orphanages, and temperance and moral reform societies—all for Anglos only. Then in 1892, Mrs. Ella C. Chamberlain, returning to Tampa from a suffrage convention in Des Moines, Iowa, founded Florida's first woman suffrage association. Over the next five years, she and a small band of supporters formed a small state-wide organization, headquartered in Tampa, whose members distributed literature, petitioned the legislature, and presented lectures. Mrs. Chamberlain, for instance, spoke to the Tampa Carpenters' Union and the Adventists' Camp Meeting in the winter of 1895.

Mrs. Chamberlain argued for suffrage on the basis of both justice and prejudice. On the one hand she took as her slogan the revolutionary maxim, "no taxation without representation." One the other, she claimed, "I am a free born American woman... How can I, with the blood of heroes in my heart, and with the free and independent spirit they bequeathed me, quietly submit to representation by the alien and the negro?" In 1897, the Chamberlains left Florida, and soon thereafter, the state society disbanded. By 1900, when the newly-formed Tampa Woman's Club hosted a visit by Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, none of its leaders suggested that women should wield ballots in his behalf. Instead, the ladies of Tampa focused their collective efforts on aid to orphans, immigrants, and the impoverished.

As white women's associations multiplied in the early 1900s, black women also gained public visibility. They established the Clara Frye Hospital in 1908, the School of Household Arts in 1915, and a citywide federation of colored women's clubs a year later. By the 1910s, the most famous clubwoman in Tampa was Blanche Armwood Beatty. She had graduated at age 15 from Atlanta's Spelman Seminary, returned to Tampa to teach, founded a School of Household Arts in the city in 1915, and participated in several women's clubs and mutual benefit associations. By 1916, the National Association of Colored Women had recruited Armwood Beatty to lecture across the South on behalf of domestic education and women's suffrage. During her extended absences, a small circle of African American educators and entrepreneurs took the lead in community organizing, including teachers Christine Meacham and Inez Alston and hairdressers Gertrude Chambers, Lila Robinson, and Annie House.

Tampa's white women activists were rethinking their political potential by this time; and in 1916, they supported the candidacy of Mrs. Alice Snow for a seat on the school board. A year earlier, the Florida state legislature passed a Municipal Reform Act, that allowed for local option on a number of electoral matters. Neighboring cities, including St. Petersburg, had taken the opportunity to institute municipal suffrage for women; Tampa officials did not, so women remained dependent on male voters to make their case. Under the existing ward system, Alice Snow ran in the Ybor City district, which housed Tampa's Latin population. She lost by 15 votes of 4,000 cast, the margin of defeat provided by a set of contested ballots in a district long considered corrupt.

Anglo women in the city were clearly disappointed, but they did not retreat. Instead, they hosted a statewide meeting the very next year...
to form an Equal Suffrage League. Alice Snow was one of 21 charter members. The Florida Suffrage League envisioned itself as socially respectable but, within the context of southern society, politically radical. Still, the leaders of the association explicitly denied membership to their African American neighbors and never invited any Latin women to join.

As we have seen, however, black women had already organized on their own. When suffrage was ratified and Tampa women entered the battle over municipal reform, Inez Alston moderated a series of debates at black churches and invited white clubwomen to participate. One such speaker was Mrs. Julia Norris, the former president of the local United Daughters of the Confederacy, who spoke in favor of commission government. That she was invited at all was remarkable since she had previously urged white women to register to offset the heavy registration of Negro women. Most African American speakers, women and men, supported the existing ward system as did a few white women reformers, most notably those whose husbands held office under the old regime.

On October 19, Tampa women cast their first ballots in a city election, on the special city charter referendum, and the commission plan won by 270 votes. White women were praised as providing the margin of victory, having outnumbered black women registrants 2,100 to 1,300. Though we know that some in this group, most notably civic leader Kate Jackson, supported ward politics, it does appear that most white women voted for reform. “Tampa women,” a Tribune reporter concluded, “have shown they are able to rock the cradle and the politicians at the same time.”

That same week, some 3,000 cigar workers rocked the city economy. Packing the Centro Asturiano clubhouse, cigar workers—“about 50 percent of them women”—voiced their unwavering support for continuing the strike. In February 1921, when strikers finally voted to return to work, Latin women cast their ballots alongside men. They still may not have been convinced of the benefits of suffrage, since at least some women workers claimed they would stay out on strike regardless of the outcome of the vote. Their male coworkers responded by assuring them that they would not accept a settlement that failed to meet women’s demands.

Over the next decade, Anglo, African American and Latin women continued to pursue power in Tampa, and their paths began to cross with greater frequency. Anglo clubwomen invited more affluent Latin women to join in fundraising activities and opened the Children’s Home to a few immigrant orphans. African American women founded the Helping Hand Day Nursery and invited Afro-Cuban mothers to send their children—and some did. The Urban League, Tampa’s first interracial organization, was founded in 1921 and attracted support from progressive white clubwomen and outspoken black activists, women as well as men.

For most of these women, electoral politics did not replace older forms of voluntarism as the primary vehicle for affecting social change. Anglo women were able to register and vote, but most continued to wield their greatest influence through associated action in clubs and social welfare institutions. African Americans in Tampa faced serious obstacles to voter registration, though they never entirely relinquished the ballot box as a vehicle for change. Latins in the city—women and men—had one of the lowest registration rates of any immigrant community in the country into the 1930s, a result of discriminatory legislation, disinterest in acquiring U.S. citizenship, and the corrupt character of local elections even after charter reform. Yet they continued to vote with their feet—by leaving unsavory employers and by leading militant strikes.

Given this brief history of suffrage in one Florida community, what legacies have been left by the suffrage movement for our own time? First, women participate in politics in a variety of ways. In celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment, we must not let the glow of constitutional change overshadow the efforts of women who struggled to gain power through voluntary associations, mutual benefit societies, boycotts, petitions, demonstrations, and strikes. Second, even voting takes a variety of forms. For instance, women had to fight for voting rights within unions and church councils as well as within municipalities, and these battles should form part of the history of women’s suffrage. In fact, given the restrictions on many women’s right to vote even after 1920, these other histories are especially significant in providing women with a sense of political legitimacy. Third, women are as diverse as men in terms of class, race, religion, and ethnicity, and therefore as divided in their political loyalties. Thus it is unlikely that they will vote as a bloc even on so-called “women’s” issues.

The history of women’s struggle to gain political clout in one city—on the school board, in the union hall, and in municipal, state and national politics—offers rich legacies for the present generation. By recognizing the complex and varied ways that women of different communities sought access to power in the past, we gain multiple models for battles in the present.
Ruth Bryan Owen was one of only a dozen women who served in the U.S. Congress from 1920 to 1930. She was not only Florida’s first congresswoman, she was the first female Democratic member elected from the post-reconstruction South. To be a woman and to be elected to Congress in Florida in 1928 (in a district that spanned from Key West to Jacksonville) obviously took some doing. But Owen was an extraordinary person with a mixture of talent, political savvy, fame, and grit that carried her to a pioneering role for women in this state’s politics.

She was, for a start, first-born daughter and a prodigy of William Jennings Bryan—“the Great Commoner,” three-time presidential candidate, secretary of state for Woodrow Wilson, and legendary orator. In retirement in Florida, he was one of the state’s and the nation’s most famous men, giving Owen a status similar to the younger generation of Kennedys today. Owen’s mother, Mary Elizabeth Baird was a strong and intelligent woman who attended law school at night and was one of the first women admitted to the Nebraska bar. Ruth traveled the campaign circuit with a father and served with her mother as a corresponding secretary. She entered the University of Nebraska at age 16. As an adult she was an accomplished public speaker (a professor of speech at the University of Miami), able to support herself on the Chautauqua tour.

As a politician too, Owen was skilled and curiously modern. She was compelling, charmingly courteous to her opponents, and at times studiously vague on the issues in stump speeches. She emphasized new forms of citizen participation and constituent service. She even had a campaign gimmick (a forerunner to Walkin’ Lawton, perhaps), touring her vast district in a Ford coupe, driving and changing the flat tires herself. And by the end of her congressional service in 1932, Owen had caught the Potomac fever bug, moving on to a career in Washington and as an ambassador, never to return to her adopted state.

Notwithstanding her intimate knowledge of the American political process, Ruth Bryan Owen had a path to victory in the 1928 election that was neither direct nor without anguish. The political climate toward women was still frosty. In the South the exclusion was particularly rigid. Congress had remained the exclusive domain of men until 1917 when Montana elected Jeannette Rankin to the House of Representatives. Three years later came the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women ballot power and the apparent means to begin their political integration.

Yet the suffrage victory did not immediately transform women’s position or the cultural barriers affecting them. Public opinion still often portrayed women as illogical and unsuited for the rigors of political life. The more extreme holdouts were predicting scenarios from the destruction of home and family to anarchy and communism as women began to vote and hold office.

In the South women had to contend with the archaic southern belle mentality plus a lack of economic power, political experience, and solid organization. Florida’s anti-suffrage attitudes severely handicapped female
political aspirants. In 1922, the first Democratic primary in which women could either vote or seek office was a disaster for women candidates. Yet women gradually triumphed over the disappointments. They began to organize, to educate one another and the public, and to employ traditionally male political techniques to gain access to the system. These included networking, lobbying, political patronage, special interest groups, fund raisers, publicity stunts, and personal appearances.

In Ruth Bryan Owen’s case, involvement in Florida politics came by a circuitous route. Her travels commenced in 1910 with her marriage to Reginald Altham Owen, a British army officer. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Captain Owen was assigned to the Gallipoli Peninsula. As the war raged in Europe, Ruth grew restless in London. After eight months of separation, she wanted to be nearer her husband. Just before civilian travel was halted, Ruth and her two-year-old son left for Alexandria, Egypt, the closest city to the military base of supply.

Never content with being idle, the thirty-year-old took a course in nursing and joined the British Volunteer Aid Detachment in Cairo. Owen served for three years as a ward nurse, operating-room nurse, and surgical nurse in Egyptian war hospitals. Ironically her husband became one of her patients. Reginald Owen contracted Bright’s Disease, an acute and chronic inflammation of the kidneys. Although he continued to serve in the war effort, he never fully recovered. A subsequent case of scarlet fever further weakened him. Prescribing a warm cli-
began her second campaign for the House. The race presented familiar obstacles: incumbent William J. Sears and the electorate’s traditional disdain for female candidates. Owen designed her campaign strategy to overcome both. Ruth knew that she had to arouse and to mold public opinion if she was to defeat an entrenched veteran. She also understood the power of the press. Accordingly, Owen met with each of the 90 newspaper editors in the district to convince them of her congressional qualifications and her dedication to the people of Florida.

To meet the voters personally, Owen campaigned in every precinct in the Fourth District. Larger than some states, it included 588,286 residents—more than half of the state’s total population. To cover such distances, the candidate purchased a green, 1928 Ford coupe and christened it “The Spirit of Florida.” Wherever she visited in the car, Ruth drew a crowd automatically. In true Chautauqua fashion, Owen logged 16,000 miles and delivered over 600 speeches in three months. Often she made as many as seven speeches a day and routinely covered 250 miles or more. On a typical campaign day, Owen addressed seven meetings in five East Coast counties, with a total audience of 4,500. Ruth ignored fatigue and its cumulative effect, boasting proudly that she never once broke a speaking engagement or was late for an appointment. One editor credited Ruth and her vigorous campaigning with wiping out the “weaker sex” stereotype.

Owen discussed a myriad of topics in her speeches but made only two concrete campaign promises. She vowed to visit each of the 18 counties every year, not only to report on her congressional actions but to explain political developments in Washington as they influenced the Fourth District. Additionally, she pledged to take two young people from each county to the nation’s capital and expose them to the character of their government and the responsibilities of citizenship. Owen did not differ too much from other politicians who recited broad platforms without the actual means to deliver on them. Agriculture, citizenship, and economic recovery emerged as the main planks of her campaign.

Large and enthusiastic audiences greeted Ruth across the state. On one occasion, the crowd drove their cars up to the speaker’s platform, honking their horns in approval when the candidate delivered her proposals. Another time at a construction site
where there was no platform available, Owen spoke suspended above the ground on a large crane. In addition to these campaign rallies, the candidate’s female supporters formed Ruth Bryan Owen clubs all along the state’s Atlantic seaboard. Besides championing her bid for Congress, club members set up voter registration booths at courthouses and lobbied civic organizations on her behalf. They even wrote a campaign song, “Florida Is Calling,” in her honor.

In response to Owen’s campaign tactics, Congressman Sears also traveled the district, but not as intensely. He seemed confident of victory, simply on the strength of his years of political experience. Instead, the voters rewarded Owen’s energetic, passionate, and ceaseless work on the campaign trail with a Democratic primary victory on June 5, 1928. Ruth carried all the Fourth District counties except for Duval and Osceola, where Sears’ margin of victory was only about 750 votes. The results reflected the largest voter turnout in history for the district’s Democratic primary.

A few weeks after her primary victory, Owen left for her annual Chautauqua lecture tour of the Northeast and Midwest. In the interim the Florida Republican state convention nominated William C. Lawson to run against her in the November general election. Lawson, a Virginia native, had lived in the Orlando area for 20 years but had lost badly to Sears in 1926. The state papers took little notice of Ruth’s opponent. They appeared to be caught up in Ruth Bryan Owen fever and did not give Lawson much of a chance in the election. Several publications even claimed not to know his name.

In the fall of 1928, Owen returned to Florida to begin her campaign for Congress in earnest. Ruth’s primary nomination assured her a general election victory in the solidly Democratic district, but she set a frenetic pace, continuing the themes of helping agriculture, economic recovery, and motivational citizenship. Then, South Florida experienced a devastating hurricane on September 16, 1928. Property damage was massive, with over 1,800 people killed. A freeze in December destroyed many of the crops that survived the hurricane. These disasters gave credence to Ruth’s calls for federal government aid to agriculture. She reiterated her support of a tariff to protect Florida growers from foreign competition.

Owen’s message was taken to heart by the Florida voters. On November 6, 1928, the people gave their new “First Lady of the South” an overwhelming victory. Ruth Bryan Owen carried all the district’s counties other than Orange, which she lost by 178 votes. Although Democrats took Florida’s statewide offices, Republican presidential candidate Herbert Hoover carried traditionally Democratic Florida.

The Bryan family legacy had come full circle. The “Great Commoner’s” daughter was prepared to embark on a political adventure of her own. Capitol Hill acknowledged Representative Owen’s engaging personality, compelling oratorical skills, and strong sense of political purpose. Within a few months she was hailed as the best speaker among the women
Representatives. In recognition of her popularity, the one committee on which Owen desired to serve enlarged its membership to make room for her. The House voted unanimously to increase the number of members on the Committee on Foreign Affairs. The appointment was a significant honor for the first-year representative and an early recognition of her expertise in international affairs.

Once the clamor of her arrival in Washington settled, Ruth began fulfilling her two campaign promises of congressional accountability and motivational citizenship. In addition to sponsoring high school citizenship contests, which rewarded winners with a week in Washington, D.C., she created a resident secretary post in the geographical center of the Fourth District. Ruth's liaison attended meetings, answered inquiries, and conducted questionnaires to inform the congresswoman about her constituents' concerns. At the adjournment of each congressional session, Ruth also visited every county in her district by trailer with her youngest daughter, Helen Rudd. Owen often spoke to more than 40,000 people on these trips.

The congresswoman’s accomplishments were substantial. When the Mediterranean Fruit Fly threatened widespread disaster to Florida’s fragile fruit industry, Owen successfully sponsored a $4 million appropriations bill. The federal support offered an important financial prop for farmers, providing money to help pay for experts, quarantine procedures, and educational programs on eradicating the fly. In addition, growers were reimbursed 75 cents per field box of unmarketable produce.

Owen additionally backed a measure to establish a flood disaster program for farmers in the southeastern states. The law authorized federal loans totaling $6 million for flood-stricken regions. In Florida, it created drainage programs for eleven South Florida counties and initiated the Okeechobee Flood Control District to prevent future destruction similar to that caused by two recent hurricanes. Eventually, federal-state cooperative programs accounted for a series of floodway channels, control gates, and levees that maintained the water level of Lake Okeechobee.

Mindful of Florida’s maritime economy, Representative Owen also secured a total of $8 million in federal appropriations for developing Florida’s rivers and harbors. Her efforts included the approval of Port Everglades, the continuation of Okeechobee flood control, and the improvement of the Miami River. These programs led to her reputation as one of the most successful advocates of river and harbor legislation in Congress.

Despite these victories, Congresswoman Owen failed to secure enactment of two of her more visionary bills: the creation of a Department of Home and Child in the President’s Cabinet; and the preservation of the 2,000 square mile Everglades as a national park. In an era of national depression, both proposals were considered too costly and gave way to legislation for economic survival.

In June 1930, Representative Owen ran for re-election. Her opponent in the Democratic primary,
Dewitt T. Dean, campaigned as a “wet.” He favored repealing or amending the Eighteenth Amendment which mandated national prohibition of alcohol. In response, Owen promised to uphold the law and the Fourth District’s wishes concerning Prohibition. She defeated Dean in a landslide. Owen won every county—even Dean’s home county of Volusia—and was unopposed in the general election. Several state newspapers hinted that her next election should be for the United States Senate. Dean’s prohibition theme came one campaign too early when a majority of voters in the District still supported the “noble experiment.” Two years later prohibition became the definitive campaign issue.

During the next election cycle, Congresswoman Owen announced her bid for renomination early, in August 1931. Already the “wet” political forces were gaining support to revise or repeal Prohibition. Ruth disregarded the threat, stating that unemployment would be the issue in the campaign because most people in the country were hungry, not thirsty. Her announcement ended persistent rumors that she would run for the Senate or the Florida governorship.

The following spring I. Mark Wilcox, a West Palm Beach lawyer, announced his decision to seek the Democratic nomination. Wilcox aggressively campaigned on a platform advocating the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, which he considered a failure. In contrast, Owen upheld her “dry” stand. That proved to be a serious miscalculation as Wilcox successfully galvanized the “wet” sentiment and won the primary by 1,200 votes.

Although initially devastated by the defeat, Owen soon found herself once again in a position of political prominence. In 1933 President Franklin Roosevelt appointed her United States Minister to Denmark, making her the first woman to represent the United States in a foreign country as the head of a diplomatic legation. From 1933 to 1936 she served in that position during the tumultuous era of European nationalism, Nazi fascism, and world-wide depression. In 1945, President Harry Truman added further honor and recognition of her abilities by appointing Owen as special assistant to the San Francisco Conference to create the United Nations. She later served as an alternate delegate to the fourth United Nations General Assembly. In 1954, while in Copenhagen to receive Denmark’s Medal of Merit for her role in strengthening Danish-American relations, Ruth suffered a fatal heart-attack. She was sixty-eight years of age.

Not only was Ruth Bryan Owen Florida’s first congresswoman, she made a tangible difference as a legislator, then broke more barriers as a woman diplomat. Owen challenged social restrictions and opened new frontiers to women. She proved that women and politics were a complementary mix.
For Florida’s first feminist, suffrage was just a step toward equal rights

By James R. McGovern

When women won the right to vote in 1920, the split in the two main factions advocating suffrage became a true fork in the road. Mainstream suffragists flowed into the newly formed League of Women Voters and continued club work of other kinds. May Mann Jennings is exemplary of that group’s upper crust roots and focus on effective work within the system. But there was a more militant group—Alice Paul’s National Woman’s Party, which regarded suffrage as just one aspect of women’s liberation. By 1923, the NWP had shifted its focus to advocacy of an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)—a platform and organizational lineage that runs straight through to the National Organization of Women and the mass drive for the ERA in the early 1970s.

Though Florida was hardly a cradle of radical feminism in the early part of the century, it was home to one of the stalwarts of the movement—Helen Hunt West. She was born in 1892 in Oakland, Florida—then a country town, now on the city edge of Orlando, out toward Winter Garden. She was educated at Stetson Academy, graduated from the Florida State College for Women (now Florida State University) and in 1917 was among the first women admitted to the Florida Bar. She settled in Jacksonville and took up a career as a newspaper writer, mainly of society columns. She and May Jennings were social friends, collaborators on the push for suffrage. Both continued their career into the 1940s and lived till the early 1960s. But Helen Hunt West advocated quite a different set of causes in the post-suffrage years.

West, described as “a very pretty little thing with bright brown eyes,” became a leading member of the National Woman’s Party in Florida in 1917. Alice Paul, whose speech in Jacksonville in May 1917 had influenced Ms. West to join the NWP, later observed: “We got one of the best members we ever had in the whole Woman’s Party history, Helen West...never faltered. She dedicated her life to this [ERA] campaign...she was a born feminist.”

West was a member of the intrepid NWP group that demonstrated in front of the White House that year. When Alice Paul realized Helen’s superb organizing talents, she asked her to try to change the anti-suffrage positions of Florida Senators Duncan Fletcher and Park Trammell and to assess attitudes toward suffrage in the Florida legislature. Paul wanted to know whether Florida might possibly ratify the suffrage amendment even though other key states failed to provide support. Hunt secured signatures on a petition for suffrage from 38 members of the House and from 17 senators. She declared later that if Tennessee had not cast the decisive vote for the Nineteenth Amendment, Florida would have done so.

The effort to get Florida legislative support failed, but it did not deter Helen West from becoming the first Duval County woman to register to vote on August 19, 1920. She told an inquiring reporter from the Florida Times-Union “of course we don’t
I expect the millennium by any means... but we hope now that we are represented in politics to make a better county for all."

After the suffrage amendment passed, some of its members wondered whether there was any reason for NWP to continue to exist, but a determined faction argued that there was much more work that needed doing: suffrage was not freedom but only a first step. Women like Helen West wanted to eliminate every vestige of inequality between the sexes. They resolved at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1923, to work for an equal rights amendment to the Constitution. Alice Paul stated their goal: "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction."

Later in 1923, NWP representatives were startled to find themselves alone among women's organizations supporting ERA at the Senate's judiciary committee hearings. Opposition came from the League of Women Voters and the Women's Division of the United States Department of Labor, both of which espoused protective legislation. NWP found itself relatively isolated with only a small national organization that averaged about 8,000 members in the 1920s. There were approximately 50 members in Florida.

Helen Hunt West married Bryan West, city editor of her newspaper, in 1927. But her militant political activity didn't skip a beat. In talks before women's clubs in Florida, she reiterated the necessity for justice for modern women, hence equality under the law, for which women would willingly exchange a few deceptive social amenities. In a speech before the
Florida Federation of Women's Clubs in Lake City in 1935, she set forth that view: "Women who are smug in their contentment in comfortable homes with husbands, brothers, and sons of unapproachable characters, who minister to their every need, seldom pause to think that their own daughters and granddaughters have to look to an entirely different set of men for justice. Generation after generation passes. The only measure of security comes through the fundamental law of the land, and that is the reason women need an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. By the accident of birth we are women, and we are dissatisfied with our inheritance of injustice and inequality. By the same accident of birth our brothers are men and they have inherited both. All we ask is the right to share that inheritance."

West conceded a major obstacle to the success of ERA in the state was that "in Florida the women were not really aroused over Equal Rights." Much of this indifference stemmed from a misunderstanding of the intent of equal rights legislation. "The greatest difficulty in putting over the idea of the Equal Rights Amendment with women," she declared, "is that some women do not understand what it means and what it proposes to do.... It merely means that the law applies the same to one citizen as it does to another: it makes no attempt to change the laws of nature—of course two persons are not equal—either men or women—but the law applies equally to both. In addition, she argued, many women lived in sheltered domesticity and failed therefore to identify with the disadvantages experienced by working and professional women. They did not see the need for equality because, as housewives, the issue did not seem to touch them personally. And men would not jump on the ERA bandwagon either because, according to West, they were generally adverse to giving up their superior status and power.

Despite prevailing indifference or hostility to ERA in Florida and elsewhere, West believed that the NWP could bring about effective change. She called it "an organization of high-powered persons" and chided those who believed the group too small to effect its objective by asserting, "I hope you all believe as I do—that it is not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog that counts."

Helen West successfully implemented both the educational and lobbying tactics of the Woman's party in Florida. During the 1920s when most of her time was taken up in her position as society editor of the Jacksonville Florida Times-Union, she also served as editor of the Southern Club Woman. This magazine, published in Jacksonville, was more concerned with the political activities and legal status of women than social affairs. Articles bore such titles as "Legal Disabilities of Married Women in Florida," "Florida Woman Power is Mobilized," and "A Gallery View of the Florida Legislature by a Mere Woman." (See separate article, page 38.) West's remarks about the Florida legislature had a touch of H. L. Mencken to them.

As a lawyer, West assumed special responsibility to acquaint Florida women with "the equal rights we women only think we have." She diligently researched inequities of state law affecting women and often wrote and spoke on the subject. Florida's laws, she noted bitterly in 1934, too often prohibited women from the exercise of adult prerogatives. Contemptuous attitudes toward women were responsible for laws that stated they could not enter a contract, except in specific instances, sue or be sued, manage prop-
she believed they were designed by men not to protect, but restrict women’s labor. Legislation regulating the hours of work or working conditions for women were particularly threatening to Helen West; she feared these laws might lead to a curtailment of employment opportunities for women. West contended that protective laws should be based on the type of work done, not the sex of the worker. For West, sexism explained the seeming preferential treatment of women in industry; no one cared whether housewives were protected because they did not compete with men.

Her analysis of the relationship of housewives to the labor movement is typically feminist: “They belong to those unprotected women whose hours in the home cover a period of twenty-four hours a day and include not only the dishwashing, cooking, sewing, scrubbing, garden work and the thousands of nerve-trying and back-breaking tasks of the home, but the training of little minds, the guiding of little feet, the molding of character and pointing the way to that far off divine event toward which the whole creation moves.’ Those women, whose reward is only in achievement, poetry and song, are seldom the sub-

Confessions of a lobbyist

This piece from Helen Hunt West’s papers is not dated or identified by source. It describes a lobbying trip she made to Washington for the suffrage cause, probably about 1917.

I had believed if women went to Congress in a dignified way, and in a business-like manner put their case before that body of law-makers, they would be received in the same spirit and that in consideration of the fact that they represented a rather large proportion of the country’s population, their question would receive serious attention. I had quite a shock coming to me. To say that I found a humorous side to lobbying would be expressing it mildly. I found a ludicrous side. While I met many able and intelligent men I was appalled and chagrined to find that many had not let the weight of their positions weigh very heavily on their shoulders.

The very first day one Representative told me that women were too easily influenced by men, that a woman would always be more or less influenced by “the persuasion of a good-looking man.” His final contradictory remark was, “If you people want to gain votes tell them to send all of you young girls to lobby!” This same man argued at great length about the “protecting chivalry” of Southern men.

Representative J. F. Byrnes of South Carolina told me that he had had innumerable letters from women of his district asking for suffrage, but that since he was opposed to the measure he had given orders to his secretary that no more of these communications be turned over to him, but that they be consigned to the wastebasket. Of course he is not representing the women of South Carolina; but I thought it rather too bad that they could not even reach him.

Three men in succession whom I interviewed ejaculated, “Good Lord!” when I broached the subject of suffrage. I was at a loss. Did they consider it a prayerful subject, or what meaning exactly did the exclamation carry with it? One of them told me to “go home and get married.” “Suffrage is all right,” he said gravely, “but lots of times we have to compromise with right.”

Representative Heflin of Alabama was most interesting. He was ornamented with a full-blown rose the size of an ordinary corsage bouquet and was for “giving the women anything they wanted”—except suffrage. He pleaded states’ rights. I told him that that phrase had been worked overtime and that child labor and good roads and a dozen other federal measures have been passed, but he could not see any parallel between such bills and federal suffrage.

I am proud of my own state, Florida, in spite of the fact that I am only a passenger when it comes to electing congressmen. Most of the Florida delegation believe in women enjoying the privileges of citizenship, and they considered the subject with the dignity and care which it deserves. One Floridian told me that he had been so closely associated with women in educational work that he knew they would be as helpful in politics...

I feel about our lobby in Congress that it is the right of everyone to present his case. There can be nothing more dignified than the request of a serious-minded woman for serious consideration of an injustice that has been allowed to stand too long. While the men of this country are asking for emergency legislation to assist in righting the wrongs of other nations, I worked with all my small might in the hope that I might help to make our careless Representatives feel that there are wrongs here in America that need attention.
A Gallery View of the Legislature (By a Mere Woman)

Helen Hunt West wrote this impression of the Florida legislature for her magazine, The Southern Club Woman, in 1929. The publication, under her editorship, had more political bite than one might have expected.

I found that I could return to my gallery seat when the Governor delivered his message, if I got there early enough. I was there when they opened the doors—in fact they had just about finished sweeping out when I arrived. I was determined on this point. I would hear one Governor deliver a message. After numerous preliminaries someone announced in a loud voice "The Governor", and the Speaker answered "let him in." It did seem to me they might have done it more ceremoniously, but maybe that is the way to receive a Governor.

Anyway—he accepted what sounded to me like a sort of doubtful invitation and mounted the Speaker's stand. I guess his speech was a good one, but I got so nervous for fear he would forget it that I am afraid I lost much of the content. That new Governor of Florida did not read his message, as I hear is customary. He must have sat up nights learning it by heart. I remembered my own High School days when I had to do such things and my heart ached for him. One time he hesitated and I feared he was lost, but he remembered it all right and steered for port.

Not knowing the inside of Florida politics there were lots of things in the speech I did not understand, but I wondered a lot when I saw some of those legislators winking at each other, nodding approval or disapproval and smirking over certain passages. One legislator, in the corridor, after the session seemed to be expatiating on the subject, so I sitched over to hear what it was about. All I could gather was "he hasn't a Chinaman's chance!" As this was Greek to me I closed in on another huddle. The leader was saying "a masterpiece". Another boldly stated "he'll crack up in sixty days"......

I couldn't see everything at once, but I spent some time in the Senate, where a man named Parrish had been caucused into the presidency and a traveling salesman named Bill Phillips, had been "railroaded" into the office of president pro tem. And that reminds me—the corridors were filled with people someone told me were lobbyists. I don't know just what they have to do with it but they were there. There were editors, who I heard were not there to write—just spectators. There were railroad officials, who never missed a session. There were representatives from numerous corporations and women who were also representing business concerns as well as various activities. All were mingled in a hodgepodge about the legislative mill, which began its grind after the first week....

I'm going back some day. I have finished the kindergarten and am ready for more. I am sophisticated after the initiation and the next visit will not hold such surprises.

I may be a mere woman, but I got a new slant on a lot of things. The woman member of the house did not appear ill at ease and the things you learn in the corridors clarify to a large degree, the things you see in the Senate and House.

Some people may prefer vaudeville, the zoo or other forms of amusement, but for me, I will take a legislature, and I think they were right when they tried to pass that anti-monkey law. Everybody believes in self-protection.

Reformists of West's ilk are sometimes criticized as impractical. However, she made a major contribution to Florida politics in the 1930s as sponsor and supporter of the bill that amended the state's election laws to guarantee that women be placed in equal numbers with men on the executive committees of its political parties. Mary W. Dewson, chairman of the women's division of the Democratic party in the early 1930s, noted that women had little standing in politics except in states where they held executive positions on a mandatory fifty-fifty basis with men. Women, of course, had the right to be elected to all party committees along with men, but they seldom succeeded in winning these races. Viewing the women's vote as critical to the outcome of the 1936 national and state elections, Dewson was able to convince James Farley, the Democratic party's national chairman, that the fifty-fifty formula, if adopted widely throughout the country, would assure a greater turnout of Democratic women voters. Carolyn H. Wolfe, director of women's activities in the Democratic party, then called upon women to lead the fight for fifty-fifty representation in their respective states. Helen West accepted responsibility for Florida. She was an apt choice since she was a member of the Duval County Democratic Women's Club and as a reporter for the Jacksonville Florida Times-Union and the Pensacola Journal she had covered the legislature for five years. As a colleague in the Jacksonville Bar Association and another old friend noted, her political contacts, including campaigning for David Sholtz when he was running for governor in 1932, gave her real clout in the legislature. She won immediate endorsement of the Duval County women's organization and then obtained promises of support from Governor Sholtz, the president of the Florida Senate, and the speaker of the House, by stressing the increased strength that would accrue to the Democratic party if women were added equally to the party's leadership.

The "50-50" bill appeared side-tracked in the House when, just one day before it was to reach the floor, Chairman S. P. Robineau of Dade County inaugurated a special order calendar, requiring unanimous support to introduce a bill. Sensing parliamentary subterfuge, West swung into action. In the best lobbying style of the NWP, she contacted her friends and professional acquaintances in other women's groups supporting ERA and asked them to write letters to members of the Florida House of Representatives. She also contacted James Farley who immediately pres-
suited Democratic legislative leaders to place the “50-50 bill” on the special calendar. Finally, when the bill still appeared to be buried, she went directly to the chairmen of powerful committees seeking their intervention. When one of them suggested her best technique might be to “vamp” the chairman of the rules committee, she understandably was irritated. Her legislative friends finally managed to bring the bill to the floor of the House when Robineau was temporarily absent from deliberations. Telegrams between Helen West, Mary Dewson, and Carolyn Wolfe tell the outcome: “Our bill just passed House, 75 to 8. Love, Helen” “Congratulations, you are a peach. We appreciate greatly the help you have been. Mary W. Dewson, Carolyn H. Wolfe.”

The new election law, signed by Governor Sholtz on May 24, 1935, required equal participation by women at all levels of state party organization and established equal opportunity for women to be elected as chairmen or vice-chairmen on state and county political committees. If the chairman were a man, a woman automatically became a vice-chairman and vice-versa. West happily summarized the import of the new law: “By virtue of the bill becoming a law, about 1,400 Florida women take their places in the ranks of the Democratic party in Florida on an equal footing with men. This is the most revolutionary thing in Florida politics since the passage of the Suffrage amendment and is the greatest gain for Florida women since that epochal event.” Mary Dewson concurred when she wrote her Florida colleague that the “50-50 plan” was “the next necessary step after suffrage.” But she warned, “Don’t expect too much, for the men will still try to get the most easily manipulated of our sex on to the committees.”

West also became a major figure in the equal rights movement at the national level during this period. From December 1935 to October 1938, West served as acting chairman of the Congressional Committee, the NWP’s executive board, and from 1937 to 1940, as editor of its national magazine, Equal Rights.

Helen West was the NWP’s most useful lobbyist with the judiciary committees of the United States Senate and House between 1935 and 1939. She exerted leverage on legislators through her friends in the Democratic party, a result of her work in the “50-50” campaign in Florida. Indeed, Alice Paul once suggested, “since you have more access to those in authority in the Democratic Party than most of us, you could have a real discussion of the equality program with Mrs. Roosevelt.”

There were hearings on ERA and other hopeful signs in the period, but ultimately proposals for the amendment did not advance. In West’s view, opposition from the White House was largely to blame for that disappointment. The New York Times quotes her in 1936 as saying President Roosevelt had let women down: “Patted on the back and slapped in the face.” In 1940 she switched parties and was among speakers who convinced the platform committee of the Republican convention that year to support ERA.

West continued as second vice chairman of NWP for 13 years after the war and never took her eye off the prospect of women’s progress. In 1958, she predicted, “I think we will see a woman in the Supreme Court before too much time elapses.” Of her lifelong passion, the ERA, she declared in the 1930s, “Before long the amendment will be part of the constitution...and those who fail to support it will be just as anxious to forget their failure as were the men and women who a generation ago lagged in supporting the suffrage amendment.” In that, she was mistaken. But in her broader advocacy of a more prominent and equal place for women in business, political affairs, and before the law, Helen Hunt West has been more than vindicated by time. Viewed through the lens of 1995, she had a remarkably contemporary feminist agenda. And she continued to put those ideas forward in her speeches and writings with wit and steadfast dedication in an era when they were a bit too modern and advanced for a majority of Floridians.
The Nineteenth Amendment settled the question of the vote for women once and for all. Achieving full civil rights and parity in political participation did not follow smoothly on the heels of the vote, however. It has been a bumpy road—bumpier in Florida than most places.

In an eerie replay of the state’s failure to ratify the suffrage movement, Florida became a major battleground in the 1970’s fight to win approval for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). And with a similarly disappointing result. While ERA started strongly in Florida in its first test before the Florida House in 1972, it was then repeatedly voted down or procedurally tabled in the decade that followed until the time allotted for approval finally expired. (The photographs on these pages chronicle the prolonged and highly visible struggle).

At least by the early 1970s Florida had a complement of energetic and effective legislators—Gwen Cherry, the first African American elected to the House, Elaine Gordon of Miami, Betty Castor of Tampa among others. Even getting that far took some doing, over 50 years, as one of the brief stories following recounts. Florida also had a rough transition with the League of Women Voters—its first chapter was expelled in a conflict heavy with overtones of regional rivalry. And the long ERA fight itself was an occasion for mobilizing conservative and traditional forces—suggesting that some of the attitudes that held off suffrage for so long have an afterlife that continues into our times.

ERA activists and opponents made Florida a prime battleground. The issue rekindled conservative celebration of traditional roles for women.
Gwen Cherry and Dade activist Roxcy Bolton (above) lead an ERA march. Elaine Gordon and Cherry, both of Miami, vied for legislative leadership of the movement. Note that Gordon has taped over the “R” on her nameplate so that it reads Ms.

Gwen Cherry and Dade activist Roxcy Bolton (above) lead an ERA march. Elaine Gordon and Cherry, both of Miami, vied for legislative leadership of the movement. Note that Gordon has taped over the “R” on her nameplate so that it reads Ms.

THE LONG HARI
Women enter legislature, slowly

Here were women candidates for public office in the years just after passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, but at first few were successful. Among the trailblazers was Myrtle McCaskill of Taylor County, a campus leader at Florida State College for Women who had studied “expression” and gave popular platform readings. She campaigned from the back of a pickup truck driven by her father or a cousin. Whether because of the prejudices of the times or her advocacy of an unpopular cattle-dipping program, McCaskill lost her election bid 197 to 835.

In 1928, the same year Florida elected Ruth Bryan Owen to Congress, the state elected its first woman legislator. She was Edna Fuller, an Orange County widow of substantial means whose uncle had been Orlando’s mayor. Her own experience was extensive including heading a state commission formulating welfare policy and serving as assistant food administrator in Florida for Herbert Hoover (that year’s presidential winner) during World War I.

It was not until 1942 that Florida elected its second woman legislator—Mary Lou Baker of Pinellas County, a widow and lawyer, who opted to use her maiden name during a brief political career.

Participation in the legislature increased steadily from then on. By the end of the 1970s, Florida was among the leading southern states in the proportion of state legislators who were women. Betty Castor of Tampa became senate president pro tempore and Elaine Gordon of Miami became house speaker pro tempore.
Organization of the League of Women Voters followed hard on the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. And the League remains today a leading vehicle for mainstream political participation, lobbying on a range of issues and sponsoring non-partisan efforts at improving citizenship like voters' guides and debates.

Florida followed the pattern to a point. Three prominent Palm Beach women had started a league chapter in 1920, and a Florida State League was organized the following year. Its chairman of legislation and a driving force in trying to get precinct-by-precinct organization was (who else) May Mann Jennings. The league continues active throughout Florida today.

But there was an awkward break in the 1930s. Organization and participation began to wane. Florida's size and the time of travel from place to place made it difficult to coordinate league activities. The dominance of Mrs. Jennings' federation of women's clubs made it hard in later years to get consistent participation from the most prominent strata of women in the state. There were some mixed successes in lobbying efforts. But as the depression set in, it became harder and harder to collect dues and meet the financial requirements of the national league.

Some of the league's individual members and local leagues ran afoul of the national league's strict non-partisanship standards. National leaders were unsympathetic to the notion that different rules should apply in the essentially one-party system that prevailed in the South. The conflicts came to a head in 1936-37 when the Florida league was suspended and then disaffiliated (one of six state leagues so disciplined).

Within two years the national organization had established a new Florida Non-Partisan League of Women Voters, under the leadership of Catherine Poynter, wife of the publisher of the St. Petersburg Times. Orderly growth resumed. But early troubles, if a footnote to history, epitomize some of the difficulties women in Florida faced in carving out a political role in the 1920s and 1930s.■

Florida's first League of Women Voters gets 'disaffiliated'
The pro-ERA campaign was a series of marches and celebrity appearances. Note actor Alan Alda at center of 1975 march and actress Marlo Thomas in a 1972 appearance. Marchers (top left) crowd Tallahassee’s Apalachee Parkway.
Florida in 1970 had less than half the population of Florida today (6.8 million then, about 14 million now). But the state was beginning to take on some of those characteristics that make it Southern with an asterisk. Forty percent of the population was born elsewhere. There was a mix of liberal political culture, in Southeast Florida especially, with the more traditional conservative Democrats in Jacksonville and the Panhandle.

So ERA backers were optimistic that Florida could be a bellwether new-South supporter of the amendment. In parallel to the final act of the suffrage debate 53 years before, the Florida House considered ERA just two days after its authorization by the U.S. Senate, in March 1972, the final days of that year’s session. The bill’s chief sponsor, Gwen Cherry of Miami, said simply, “I urge you please to vote for this resolution.” Her confidence was well-placed. It was approved by a vote of 91 to 4.

A vote in the Senate might have had similar results, making Florida first to approve the ERA. But Senate leadership cited a disputable constitutional provision that barred immediate consideration. ERA was dead for that year.

By the 1973 session, lobbying had grown intense on both sides. Opponents mobilized effectively at the grass roots, brought busloads of anti-ERA women to Tallahassee, and deluged members with mail. Closing the opponents’ debate on the floor, West Florida representative Billy J. Rish said, “My mail is running 18 to 1 against this amendment....It may not be the right thing to do, but I have taken the approach, the right in a democracy is the right to make a mistake, if it be one, but to do those things which a majority of our people think should be done.”

In April 1973 the amendment failed in the House 54 to 64. Opponents dished up a mixed bag of arguments including state’s rights, a recast version of “the woman on the pedestal” rhetoric of early in the century, the claim that ERA was largely redundant, and the forecast of “horrible consequences” such as women being drafted. In 1973 and the years that followed, ERA proponents brought a host of celebrities to the state—the National Organization of Women’s Gloria Steinem, First Lady Betty Ford, and sensitive guy Alan Alda. But in four subsequent votes and informal consideration other years, the amendment never mustered a majority of both houses.

By the early 1980s, the Senate, under Dempsey Barron’s leadership, had taken on a markedly more conservative cast. So in 1982, as extended authorization expired, Florida could claim the dubious honor of being a key state in ERA’s defeat.
The ERA demonstrators were still in front of the Capitol in 1982; but opponents like Rep. Jim "Trooper" Foster had hardened the resistance. Despite conferences like this one around Speaker Ralph Haben, ERA never emerged a winner.
A Story of Big Gains and Unfinished Business
By Dorothy S. Ridings

My mother was a teen-ager when women in the United States won the constitutional right to vote in 1920. And I was a teen-ager when my mother’s name was drawn as the first woman juror of West Virginia, in 1956.

I remember my excitement when I arrived at my afterschool job at the Charleston (W. Va.) Daily Mail to learn that my mother was on that evening’s front page, marking an end to the state’s prohibition against women serving on juries. To me, my mother was exceptional. But it was a reminder that the women who make history are relatively conventional women who find themselves in circumstances that elevate them to historical stature.

That observation was personally relevant in June of 1982, on my first day in Washington as the newly-elected president of the League of Women Voters of the U.S. A newspaper clipping of an interview with the Washington Post pointed out that I was the 11th successor to Carrie Chapman Catt, the founder of the League and an early-twentieth-century leader in the women’s suffrage movement.

The clipping rested on my office desk, which had belonged to Marguerite Welles when she was the League president in the 1930s. On the writing table was a pen that had been presented to the League’s first president, Maud Wood Parker—the pen used to sign the Act for Independent Citizenship of Married Women, legislation the League had championed.

On the walls of my new office were plaques acknowledging the League’s role in events such as passage of the Social Security Act and child labor laws, and pictures of League activists like Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins. In the bookshelves were handwritten documents of early suffragist leaders.

What was this conventional woman from West Virginia doing in a place like that?

The answer is that this is the heart and soul of the women’s movement, as I see it: ordinary women with passionate convictions finding themselves with challenges to which they rise. During my own two terms as League president, those challenges were the happy passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1982, the sad end to the fight for an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution (how well I remember our frustration with events in Florida!), the League’s entry into the controversy over reproductive choice, negotiating and hosting the Presidential and Vice Presidential debates of 1984, and the increasingly fractious debate over national security issues.

All these, from ERA to national security, were “women’s issues” as defined more comprehensively by many of us in the women’s movement. There is a strong feeling yet today that the more usually labeled “women’s issues” are far too narrow to be an accurate description of those issues that both interest women and have far-reaching impact on our lives.

Certainly that has been my observation since moving to Florida in 1988. The continuing battle against gambling casinos, debates over crime statistics, shortfalls in education funding, radical changes in health delivery systems—these, too, are “women’s issues” to which women bring different and important perspectives.

There is, of course, a great deal of unfinished business in the realm of what would be more traditionally considered issues of major concern to women. The debate is far from over on the entire range of reproductive choices, and if anything, it’s even more heated than it has been. Pay equity is still a major concern, with U.S. women earning 76 percent of men’s wages. One of the great shames of this nation is our low priority on child care outside the home. And there is indeed still a “glass ceiling” for women despite some noteworthy exceptions.

Florida is no exception to this pattern. Just read the yearly report on the state of Florida’s children that is put out by the Florida Center for Children and Youth, and you’ll come away ashamed at our lack of attention to our future. Look at the list of Directors of Florida’s largest corporations and you’ll find few women helping make policy at most of them.

But there’s an active evolution of attention in all of this. Women’s networks have become activated all over the state in the past decade or so, in recognition that women wanting to change things need a supportive environment, valuable contacts, and the power that is magnified by group cohesion. I suspect we will see even more growth of these important alliances.

I welcome that. I also welcome the open debate that accompanies that, since these networks traverse the political spectrum. My own bias is toward progressive change that allows women to control their own destinies, recognizing that those destinies are very different for different women. Not every woman, nor every women’s network, shares that view.

What we do share is grounded in the history of the recognition that women have a place at the ballot box, helping make the decisions that shape our lives. For that, we have thousands of women to thank—conventional women who rose to the challenges that faced them.
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A Florida Gathering at Lake Okeechobee

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The history of women's studies in American academia is a story in itself. It wasn't so many years ago (around World War II) that a noted Duke University historian couldn't get her work on women published. Her colleagues were indifferent to the topic, regarding it as more a hobby than a legitimate field of study. Suffrage was a natural first subject once American history finally began to take note of women, with Eleanor Flexner's Century of Struggle, the classic in the field. Duke made up for its initial indifference during the long tenure of Anne Frier Scott, recently retired. She was a specialist in social history and the South. Her students include many of the current leaders in the field of women's studies.

As Nancy Hewitt notes in the introduction to her piece in this issue, suffrage got so much treatment in the early years that it seemed to scholars a twice-told tale. Studies shifted to women's role in the home, the workplace and in arts and letters. More radical feminists tended to write off conventional political participation for ideological reasons as a form of "patriarchy." Only in recent years has suffrage re-emerged for a second generation of scholarly attention.

So the shelf of relevant writing on women and political participation remains a relatively short one. Here are some of the available resources on Florida and the bigger national picture:


Florida Historical Quarterly has run numerous essays through the years on women's issues.


Readers with a general interest in Florida history should be aware of two new books from the University of Florida Press:


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- Posters and Note Cards
Ruth Bryan Owen, elected to Congress in 1928, toured Florida in a Ford coupe and changed her own tires. See story on Page 28.