

Montgomery County Women's History

By Eleanor Williams, County Historian

Aug. 26, 1920, is the date of ratification of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution, giving women the right to vote. The struggle, which lasted over 70 years, took place from 1848 to 1920. The margin of victory when the 19th amendment was finally passed by the US Congress—2 votes in Senate and 42 in the House. This story is one of women creating one of the most remarkable and successful nonviolent, civil rights efforts the world had ever seen. It is all the more remarkable when one considers the barriers the suffragists had to overcome. No financial help, no political help, no legal standing and opposition was firmly entrenched. Without firing a shot, throwing a rock or issuing any threats the right to vote was won. The suffragists were harassed, attacked by mobs; and thrown in jail. They re-emphasized the importance of the most fundamental democratic values — the right to vote and that a peaceful political change was possible.

1869 - First proposal regarding women's suffrage in Tennessee made by Montgomery Co representative Guy W. Wine. It took 50 years for suffrage to get to Montgomery County.

In the late 1800s, African-American women formed the National Association of Colored Women and these women devoted their time to cultural, political or charitable work within the community. They couldn't vote but they became a powerful force in Clarksville.

1917 - The Montgomery County local suffrage league formed - Mrs. R. C. Roach 1st chairman; Mrs. C. G. Wilson, 2nd chairman; Mrs. A. C. Morgan, 3rd chairman; Mrs. Lee Pickering, secretary, Mrs. Henry Bryan treasurer and Mrs. Henry Lupton, publicity chairman.

In 1917, John Osborne, a Montgomery County representative, told the LEAF-CHRONICLE that he admitted some of the suffragists were pretty and that more than once he feared that he was about to waver under their artful solicitations but each time he recovered himself and arose to make protest against the bill in behalf of the girls and women of Montgomery County.

LEAF-CHRONICLE quotes: If equality in privileges be taken, equality in liabilities must be enforced also. Are women to go to this extreme? to become soldiers if they become statesman. We doubt if they are prepared to reach this length. A woman of such brilliant capabilities that she would be fully capable of governing an empire comes once in 5 centuries. Another quote: directing the affairs of government would cause her to neglect the home, forget to mend our clothes and burn the biscuits.

A 1916 quote from Elsie Dunn, a Clarksville novelist, who wrote under the pen name Evelyn Scott: We have been confronted with undeniable evidence that St Paul was not in favor of votes for women. One of us admitted only the other day that neither Elijah, Obadiah nor Jeremiah were advocates of the cause.

On Aug 11, 1919, the local paper stated that to vote, women must register and that registration would begin on August 11 and run through August 21st and this registration would entitle them to vote in Presidential and municipal elections within two years providing they did not change residence. Every woman should register whether she desires to vote or not—the franchise has been conferred upon her and it is a solemn duty she owes to herself and society to put herself in

a position to exercise this franchise. During the first two days of registration, only two women, African-American, aged 51 and 55, registered to vote.

In Aug 1920, the Leaf-Chronicle reported local sentiment was unfavorable to ratification action taken in the Legislature. It stated that while a large number of voters in Montgomery Co favor women suffrage, they are more or less opposed to making it a part of the Federal Constitution. It further stated that as a general rule that those (in the Tennessee general assembly) who favor ratification merely did it through a desire to see the question finally settled and stop agitation.

When this ratification took place in August 1920 it was hot and sultry in Nashville. The Tennessee capitol and the Hermitage Hotel were filled with women whose long white dresses sported either yellow or red roses to signify their stand on suffrage. Yellow for ratification; red opposed. Thirty-six states were needed to ratify the 19th amendment to the US Constitution. Thirty-five states had ratified and there was time for only one more state to act and it was up to Tennessee to decide. The Tennessee Senate passed the amendment 25 to 4. The house vote was 49 to 47 with Harry Burn of McMinn County breaking the tie. Burn's mother had written to her son: "Hurray and vote for suffrage. Be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put rat in ratification." Mrs. Catt, along with Susan B. Anthony, reorganized the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1890, then unified the movement in 1916. Speaker of the House Seth Walker changed his vote, making the final count 50 to 46 to enable him to call for a vote to reconsider. Nevertheless Governor A. H. Roberts certified the vote and sent it by registered mail to Washington. Thus Tennessee was responsible for the final outcome. In September 1920 Evangelist Wood at First Baptist Church here criticized the conduct of certain women at the State Capitol during the recent suffrage fight, placing the guilt on suffragettes and anti-suffragists alike.

WOMEN

First Woman's Bank of TN 1919 - first in world to be staffed entirely by women - Brenda Runyon, wife of a local physician, organized it with other women: Mrs. Wm Bailey Winn, Mrs. J. L. Northington, Mrs. J. E. Elder and Mrs. Dancy Fort. Mrs. Matt Lyle was to be cashier. Runyon and Lyle spent months secretly traveling to Hopkinsville three times a week to learn the banking business from a bank resident in Hopkinsville. A Clarksville banker refused to help Mrs. Runyon, intimating women had no place in the banking business. Bank opened in Hotel Montgomery and the hotel's owner Lulu Epperson was the first depositor. The bank existed for 7 years, merging with First Trust & Savings Bank in 1926 as Mrs. Runyon was injured in a fall and could not continue as president. Mrs. Lyle continued with First Trust for years and I well remember her.

Mrs. Runyon successfully organized the Red Cross here during World War I. She along with others started a public library and a city/county hospital. She also was instrumental in securing public restrooms in the courthouse. Many women who came to town on Saturdays with their husbands had their children and babies with them and had no place to change or feed them, especially to breast-feed their children. She made a place for these women to rest and tend to their children. I might add the men benefited also as men's restrooms were provided. Mrs. Runyon was the first woman member of the Clarksville School Board and she taught the men's Baraca Bible class at First Baptist Church for many years.

Lulu Bringhurst Epperson in 1913 lobbied for appointment as Clarksville's second woman postmaster (Mary Johnson was the first in 1886) but P. L. Harned, a local educator, was appointed instead.. She didn't let that stop her, however. Having learned the hotel business from her father, W. R. Bringhurst, in 1918 she purchased the Arlington Hotel, renamed it the

Montgomery and began a successful business career. Her motto was "Perseverance Commands Recognition." When women gained the vote, Mrs. Epperson organized the first Democratic Women's Club.

Public Library - In fall of 1900 Wilhelmina Barksdale suggested a building be purchased for a library. Earlier in the late 1800 Judge Tyler kept books of library in his office; this was Clarksville's first library. Then when the courthouse burned in 1900 it was decided a permanent home was needed for the library. The next few years saw women have ice cream suppers, carnivals and concerts to raise money for a building. One early fund raising project involved a cookbook; however, one of the ladies pointed out that many of the recipes contained alcohol and she was sure they would not endorse alcohol and the project was abandoned. Many of the women belonged to the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Around 1918, the Clarksville Federation of Women's Club was chartered and needed a home. About that time, bidding on the Elk's Club building, a choice downtown property, soon narrowed to Mrs. Austin Peay for the Federated Women's Clubs and Mr. George Rawlings. After each of Mr. Rawling's bids, Mrs. Peay would raise the bid by \$ 1.00. Finally, when the bid reached \$ 6,000 and Mrs. Peay raised it \$ 1.00, the auctioneer said: "A woman who has nerve enough to raise a \$ 6,000 bid by one dollar deserves to win, so, I will knock it off to Mrs. Peay." After nearly 25 years, Clarksville and Montgomery Co finally had a Women's Club and a place for the public library. Mrs. Runyon, Mrs. P. L. Harned, Mrs. Albert L. Macon, Mrs. E. E. Laurent and Mrs. Peay signed the charter for library.

After Wilhelmina Sickenberger's marriage to William Barksdale, publisher of LEAF-CHRONICLE in 1893 she assisted him in its publication. At his death in 1922 she became editor and publisher. Later that same year she was elected a director of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Assn. In 1924 she sold the Leaf-Chronicle but later with her son published the Clarksville Star.

In 1922, Ella Roberts organized the Crocus Art and Study Club and became the first president of Clarksville's Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. The Crocus Club secured housing for the needy, raised scholarships for Burt graduates, honored top students and began the sponsorship of Negro History Week in the schools. Mrs. Roberts was the first president of the PTA of Burt School, an organizer of the USO, treasurer of the Baptist Training Union and parliamentarian of the TN Federation of Women's Clubs.

Dr. Robert Burt founded the first hospital in Clarksville in 1906 for the African-American community but it also served the white community as it was the only hospital in Clarksville at that time. His staff, in the beginning, consisted of one nurse, Rebecca Carter, but he was assisted by many doctors, both black and white. In 1913 when Dr. Burt married Emma Williams, a registered nurse, she became part of his staff. Mrs. Burt was also a founding member of the Women's Auxiliary of Memorial Hospital when it opened in 1954.

In 1916 Claire Brooks opened the Barbara Louise Hospital (named for her mother) on Madison Street in the B. O. Keese home that just became the home of Cumberland Bank and Trust. This later became the Clarksville Hospital with Miss Irene Johnson as administrator. Mrs. Runyon led the effort for an improved hospital. In 1925 the Anderson home on N. Second St was purchased and the hospital moved to that location. That location served until 1954 when Memorial Hospital opened.

At the turn of the century, women worked, some filling the new factories and department stores, or as telephone operators, office clerks and typewriters. Some colleges and universities began

opening their doors to women. Southwestern Presbyterian University in Clarksville allowed daughters of faculty members to sit in class (but not to recite) in 1880. In 1916 women were admitted to credit classes on a 10-100 ratio with men. When APSU replaced SPU in 1929 most of the first class was female. Miss Ursula was one of the women who attended SPU. She and Brown Harvey used to spar over who made the best grades in math. Teaching was the obvious career choice for many women.

During First World War women gained new opportunities to work outside the home. Many worked in the Red Cross. Brenda Runyon was one of those women. During 1918, 1919 women began to smoke and drink in public and this began to equalize the sexes and reduce some of the serious criticism women had endured for centuries. Also the issues of sex were more openly discussed among young people in comparison to previous generations. By 1900 4 states permitted women to vote, by end of 1918 another 11 states were added to this group. At the turn of the century very few women wore makeup for it was seen as a mark of a disreputable woman. However, by 1920 makeup was being accepted. Clothing made a drastic change between 1900 and 1920. At the turn of the century women typically wore a shirtwaist blouse and long high-waisted skirt. Underneath a corset was worn. By the early 1920s the corset was no longer popular and had been replaced by the style of the flapper, bobbed hair, knee length skirt or dress and a much less curved figure. The term flapper was first used in 1915. At the turn of the century most women did not swim—the bathing suit was heavy and had to cover every inch of her body. By the early 1920s swimsuits were sleeveless and reached to the mid-thigh in length.