

Receiving, Losing, and Winning Back the Vote: The Story of Utah Women's Suffrage

By Barbara Jones Brown and Naomi Watkins

Utah was at the forefront of women's suffrage, a movement to give women the right to vote in political elections. Wyoming Territory first granted voting rights to women in December 1869. Utah Territory did the same several weeks later, on February 12, 1870. Since Utah held its next election before Wyoming did, women in Salt Lake City became the first to vote (in a municipal, or local election) in the modern nation. Seraph Young, a schoolteacher, was the first woman to vote in this election, on February 14, 1870.



This painting, by muralist David Koch, depicts Seraph Young and other Utah women first voting in Utah and the modern nation, on February 14, 1870. It hangs in the Utah House of Representatives Chamber in Utah's Capitol Building.

Receiving the Vote: Enfranchisement (1870)

In the late nineteenth century, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believed in the practice of polygamy, a marriage system in which a husband could have more than one living wife. Latter-day Saints, or "Mormons," called it "plural marriage" and considered it a religious tenet. After slavery was **abolished** and black men received voting rights with the passage of the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, many American reformers turned their attention from ending slavery to ending polygamy. They considered polygamy morally wrong and oppressive to women. Initially, some believed giving Utah women voting rights would politically **empower** them to end polygamy.

Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, believed that Mormon women would use their vote to show their support for their religious practice of polygamy. They thought giving women the vote would be a way to change negative perceptions about the LDS Church and its treatment of women. They wanted to show that Utah women were not oppressed, helpless and enslaved as many anti-polygamists believed. Finally, granting suffrage to Utah women (most of whom were Mormon) would strengthen support for the People's Party, a Utah political party recently organized by Latter-day Saints in opposition to the new Liberal Party, formed by non-Mormon settlers whose numbers were increasing in Utah.

After receiving the vote, women throughout Utah became very involved in political life. Leaders of the Relief Society, the woman's organization of the LDS Church, developed programs to educate women about the political process and civic engagement. Utah women elected delegates like Emmeline B. Wells to represent them at national suffrage conventions and formed ties with national leading suffragists like Susan B. Anthony. However, Utah women did not vote for candidates opposed to polygamy like anti-polygamists had hoped.



Political cartoons in the late 1800s depicted women in Utah as being slaves of the LDS Church because of its belief in polygamy.



Emmeline B. Wells, a leading Utah suffragist and General President of the LDS Relief Society

Losing the Vote: Disfranchisement (1871-1887)

Since giving Utah women the vote did not end polygamy, anti-polygamists lobbied Congress to pass anti-polygamy laws to pressure the LDS Church to **disavow** polygamy. In 1887, seventeen years after Utah women began exercising their voting rights, Congress passed the Edmunds-Tucker Act. Part of this legislation took away the voting rights of all Utah women, whether they were Mormon or not, polygamous or **monogamous**, married or single.

Winning Back the Vote: Re-enfranchisement (1887-1896)

Utah women enjoyed the privilege of exercising voting rights for seventeen years, so many of them felt outrage when Congress took those rights away. They worked hard to win them back. They created the Woman Suffrage Association of Utah, an **affiliate** of Susan B. Anthony's National American Woman Suffrage Association, and organized local chapters throughout the territory.

In 1890, LDS Church president Wilford Woodruff officially announced the end of the **contracting** of plural marriages in Utah. With this official change in policy, Congress passed the 1894 Enabling Act, inviting Utah to again apply to enter the Union as a state. Congress had rejected Utah Territory's prior attempts over the previous four decades, largely because of polygamy. During Utah's 1895 Constitutional Convention, delegates debated whether to include women's suffrage and right to hold public office in the state constitution that Utah would propose to Congress.

Most Utahns supported a woman's right to vote and hold office. Many in other parts of the nation did not. Both national political parties in Utah-- Democrat and Republican--supported these rights in their party **platforms**, and women's suffrage organizations throughout the territory **lobbied** delegates to include these rights in Utah's constitution. Despite minor opposition, the delegates voted to include a clause in the constitution that granted women's suffrage and right to hold office. Utah's electorate, all of them male, then voted overwhelmingly to approve the proposed constitution. Utah women were given back the vote, or re-enfranchised, in 1896, after Congress accepted Utah's constitution and granted Utah statehood.

Utah Women and the National Suffrage Movement (1896-1920)

Even though Utah women had voting rights again, they remained committed to winning those rights for women throughout the nation. They continued to work with national suffrage organizations, helping to fund these organizations, serving as leaders in these organizations, and attending national and international women's rights conventions. In August of 1920, Congress **ratified** the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, granting women's suffrage throughout the nation. Even though there was now an amendment granting women's suffrage nationally, many minorities were still not able to vote. The fight for suffrage for all in the United States was not yet over.



Jennie Froiseth, editor of a Salt Lake City newspaper called the Anti-Polygamy Standard. Although she was a suffragist, she was so strongly opposed to polygamy that she thought Utah women should lose the vote until after polygamy was abolished.



Western suffragists, including Utahns Martha Hughes Cannon, Sarah M. Kimball, Emmeline B. Wells, and Zina D. H. Young, pose with national suffrage leaders Susan B. Anthony and Anna Howard Shaw at the 1895 Rocky Mountain Suffrage Meeting in Salt Lake City. Photo courtesy Utah State Historical Society

Glossary

abolished: (*v*) to end or stop; to completely do away with something

affiliate: (*n*) an organization that is a part of a larger organization

contracting: (*v*) to enter into a legal agreement

disavow: (*v*) to give up doing something

empower: (*v*) to give power to someone, including legal power

lobbied: (*v*) to try to influence government officials to make decisions for or against something

monogamous: (*n*) being married to only one living person at a time

platforms: (*n*) the official beliefs and goals of a political party or candidate

ratified: (*v*) to make official by voting for and signing (a constitutional amendment)