**1920: Women Get the Vote**

After decades of effort by the suffrage movement, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified 90 years ago this summer

By *Sam Roberts, Upfront Magazine 2010*

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Back in July 1776, the Declaration of Independence proclaimed that all men are created equal, but it didn't say anything about women.

That omission was surely not lost on Abigail Adams. A few months earlier, she had written her husband, John, who was debating independence from England in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, and urged him to "remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors." Otherwise, she warned from their home outside Boston, "we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation."

But it took another 144 years, until 1920, for America's women to be get that "voice or representation," in the form of a constitutional amendment that gave them the right to vote in all of the country.

That 19th Amendment says simply: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." It took effect 90 years ago in August, after a dramatic ratification battle that came down to a single decisive vote.

The amendment was a long time coming. At various times, women were allowed to run for public office in some places but could rarely vote. (As far back as 1776, New Jersey allowed female property owners to vote but rescinded that right three decades later.)

The campaign for women's rights began in earnest in 1848 at a women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, N.Y., organized by 32-year-old Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other advocates. Stanton had drafted a "Declaration of Sentiments," patterned on the Declaration of Independence, but the one resolution that shocked even some of her supporters was a demand for equal voting rights, also known as universal suffrage. "I saw clearly," Stanton later recalled, "that the power to make the laws was the right through which all other rights could be secured."

Stanton was joined in her campaign by Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Lucretia Mott, and other crusaders. Some were militant. Many faced verbal abuse and even violence. Often women who were already active in the abolitionist movement and temperance campaigns (which urged abstinence from alcohol) enlisted in the fight for voting rights too.

**Wyoming Is First**

They staged demonstrations, engaged in civil disobedience, began legal challenges, and pressed their case state by state. In 1869, the Wyoming Territory gave women the vote, with the first permanent suffrage law in the nation.

"It made sense that a place like Wyoming would embrace women's rights," Gail Collins of *The New York Times* wrote in her 2003 book, *America's Women*. "With very few women around, there was no danger that they could impose their will on the male majority."

In 1878, a constitutional amendment to give women the vote was introduced in Congress. Nine years later, in 1887, the full Senate considered the amendment for the first time and defeated it by a 2-to-1 margin.

But the suffrage movement was slowly gaining support. With more women graduating from high school, going to college, and working outside the home, many Americans began asking: Why couldn't women vote?

There was plenty of opposition, according to Collins: Democrats feared women would support the Republican Party, which was the more socially progressive party during this period. The liquor industry, concerned that many women supported Prohibition, also opposed women's suffrage.

In 1918, after much cajoling and picketing by suffragists, President Woodrow Wilson changed his position and backed the amendment. The next year, both the House and the Senate approved the amendment, and it was sent to the states for ratification. (Ratification by three fourths, or 36, of the then 48 states, was required for the amendment to become part of the Constitution.)

By then, 28 states had already amended their own constitutions to permit women to vote, at least for President, and supporters of the federal amendment predicted victory. Within a little more than a year, 35 of the required 36 states had voted for ratification.

The last stand for those opposed to women voting was in Tennessee in the summer of 1920. The showdown in the legislature, which became known as the "War of the Roses," featured pro-amendment legislators sporting yellow roses, while those opposed wore red.

For two roll calls, the vote was tied, 48-48. But on the third vote, 24-year-old Harry T. Burn, a Republican and the youngest member of the legislature, switched sides. He was wearing a red rose but voted for ratification because he had received a letter from his mother that read, in part: "Hurrah and vote for suffrage! Don't keep them in doubt!"

Burn later said: "I know that a mother's advice is always safest for her boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification. I appreciated the fact that an opportunity such as seldom comes to mortal man—to free 17,000,000 women from political slavery—was mine."

By 1920, a number of countries had already adopted women's suffrage. New Zealand was first, in 1893. Norway, Denmark, and Canada followed in 1913, 1915, and 1916, respectively. Other countries lagged far behind the U.S.: France and Italy, for example, didn't enact women's suffrage until 1945.

**Reluctant Voters**

The 1920 presidential contest between Republican Warren G. Harding and Democrat James M. Cox was the first election in which all American women had the right to vote. (In the South, however, black women—and men—would largely be kept off voter rolls until 1965, after passage of the Voting Rights Act.)

But the newly enfranchised women voted in much smaller numbers than men.

"Women who were adults at that time had been socialized to believe that voting was socially inappropriate for women," says Susan J. Carroll of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Many of the other political and social changes sought by suffragists in the 19th century took longer. A proposed Equal Rights Amendment, stipulating equal treatment of the sexes under the law, failed to become part of the Constitution after it was passed by Congress in 1972 but ratified by only 35 of the necessary 38 states.

Just a few years later, in 1980, women surpassed men for the first time in turnout for a presidential election. And in 1984, Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro of New York was the Democratic nominee for Vice President, the first time a woman ran on a major party's national ticket.

Twenty-six years later, women—who make up more than half the population—represent only 17 percent of elected officials at all levels, says Marie Wilson of the White House Project, a group that promotes women in public office. Women are, however, getting elected in bigger numbers than ever before, now holding a record 17 Senate and 73 House seats, as well as six governorships.

Internationally, the U.S. ranks 69th in terms of women's participation in national legislative bodies, according to Victoria Budson, director of Harvard's Women and Public Policy Program. "It places us behind virtually every other industrial democracy," Budson says, and way behind Afghanistan and Iraq, which are ranked 32nd and 39th, respectively. (Both countries, along with many of the others ahead of the U.S., have quotas to guarantee the election of a minimum number of women.) And while the U.S. has never elected a woman as President, a number of other countries—including Britain, Ireland, Israel, Chile, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Liberia—have had female leaders.

**'The Story of America'**

"I think the suffragettes would have envisioned that within 90 years, you would have seen sweeping participation by women in the electoral system," Budson says. "I think they would be stunned that we've never done better than 17 percent" in Congress.

But Wilson sees a reason for optimism: Many of the young women who worked on Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign have begun running for public office themselves. That could mean an increase in the number of women elected at upper levels within a generation, she explains.

Clinton, who was appointed Secretary of State by President Obama last year, was optimistic about women's prospects when she spoke at the 2008 Democratic convention.

"My mother was born before women could vote; my daughter got to vote for her mother for President," she said. "That is the story of America, of women and men who defy the odds and never give up."