

Febb and Harry Burn: Women's Right to Vote

Mary Ann Reeves

The first women's rights convention was held in a Seneca Falls, New York church in July 1848. It was at this convention that the topic of women's right to vote became more public.

Voting was not the only right denied to women. They had no right to their children (husbands could, and did, give them away); married women could not own property; women had no right to their own wages; and generally, as far as the law was concerned, women were invisible.

Fast forward 72 years and, after numerous suffragists' hunger strikes, picket lines, and campaigns, the US Congress finally passed the Susan B. Anthony Amendment in 1919. Ratification by thirty-six states was required to make it law. By the summer of 1920, thirty-five states had ratified the amendment, but unexpected losses in some northern states now made its future uncertain. Southern legislatures seemed solidly opposed to suffrage for women. The post-Reconstruction southern block was definitely not interested in giving black women the right to vote while they were busy trying to deny the vote for black men.

In August of 1920, Tennessee, in a special session, the right to vote passed overwhelmingly in the Senate. Then it was the House's turn to vote. The session turned tumultuous, tempers flared, and there was extreme pressure from anti-suffrage outsiders. Time was running out, with only days left to ratify the amendment. Tennessee was the last chance for this amendment to be ratified.

Finally the day of the vote came. Each legislator wore a rose in his lapel indicating his vote: red for no to suffrage, yellow for yes. Harry Burn, the youngest Tennessee legislator, was 24 years old and from McMinn County in East Tennessee.

He was a budding politician, and he knew that his future in politics would be affected by his vote on suffrage. Harry Burn had considered the merits of both sides of this longstanding, contentious issue. That day, his lapel showed a red rose. The equal number of red and yellow roses in the chamber spoke of another deadlock.

Faced with this tie vote, Harry, still wearing his red rose, pulled a letter from his pocket that he had received that morning from his mother, Miss Febb. In it she said, "Hurrah, and vote for suffrage! Don't keep them in doubt. I noticed Chandlers speech, it was very bitter against. I have been watching to see how you stood, but have not noticed anything yet." She ended with "Don't forget to be a good boy...."

Harry voted "aye," startling his fellow legislators. With that one word, the ability of the women of the United State to vote was extended, and with that one word decades of tireless and grueling campaigning ended.

He was called in by his fellow legislators the next day to explain his changed vote. In his defense, holding his mother's letter, Harry expressed his support for universal suffrage. He made no secret of his mother's influence, and her equally crucial role in this long-fought battle: "I know that a mother's advice is always safest for her boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification."

The 19th Amendment to the US Constitution was officially ratified and became law eight days later.

Editor's note: Mary Ann Reeves is Immediate Past President of LWVOR, and is a current board member. Since we do not currently have a president, board members will be responsible for the column traditionally prepared by the president. Thank you, Mary Ann.