

Who was Carrie Chapman Catt?

Carrie Chapman Catt was a teacher and eventually Superintendent of Schools in Iowa. In the 1880s she got involved in the women's suffrage movement in Iowa.

At the 1890 Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), Catt attended as an Iowa delegate. With her vibrant voice and forceful ideas, she was recruited as an organizer for a forthcoming suffrage referendum campaign. Catt quickly rose to prominence, providing a "molding influence" over the suffrage movement. From 1890-1895 Catt received a demanding education in the politics of woman suffrage.

At the 1895 NAWSA Convention Catt was named chair of the new Committee on Organization. She drafted a plan to change the structure and methods of work. She worked for the next five years to strengthening, organize and reform the NAWSA. In 1900 she became the President of the association. In her first address she asserted that "a tightened organizational structure and training in political techniques were the key to success." She was President for four years and stepped down to care for her ailing husband.

She was brought back as President of the NAWSA in 1915. At the 1916 Convention Catt invited the two presidential candidates, Woodrow Wilson and Charles Evans Hughes to address the Assembly. Hughes could not attend. Wilson addressed the group, saying the suffrage movement was "something that has not only come to stay but has come with conquering power..." He did not endorse the federal suffrage amendment. The two major parties moved the woman suffrage movement to state action. (Women in 12 states had at least presidential suffrage.)

Catt's "winning plan" was to coordinate state suffrage campaigns moving toward a federal constitution amendment. She was a woman of the times and in her efforts to win votes for the movement, she appealed to the prejudices of the time ("white supremacy would be strengthened", "cut off the vote from the slums"). She supported an educated electorate - which meant restrictions on voting based on education, and thus included barriers for immigrants and African-Americans.

At the NAWSA Jubilee Convention in 1919, Catt challenged the women to "stay on the battlefield as an army of citizens to 'finish the fight' for the changes in 'custom, laws and education' so needed." The suffrage movement, with more than two million members, was a "composite army united only in pursuit of a single goal". Women had to be trained for their "political role...grounded in self-confidence and independence habits of mind".

When the question came up if NAWSA should dissolve when its work was finished, there was a vote “for an ongoing organization to secure political education and improved legislation”. Fast forward to the Victory Convention of 1920 when the members agreed to “reconstitute” NAWSA as the National League of Women Voters. Catt’s final address reminded the delegates that “the real struggle for emancipation is yet to be won...on the inside of the political parties”.

Catt retired after passage of the 19th amendment. She served as Honorary President until her death in 1947.

Thank you to “In the Public Interest The League of Women Voters, 1920-1970” by Louise M. Young and Wikipedia.