



## **Celebrating Our Past; Embracing the Future – 2016 LWV-TX Convention**

**By Elaine Wiant, LWV-TX President**

I'd like to thank each and every one of you for all the great work you do all around Texas. You all make Texas a better place and you help to make democracy work .

Our Convention theme is “Celebrating Our Past; Embracing the Future.” And we have much to celebrate. We are celebrating 96 years since the League of Women Voters was founded by Carrie Chapman Catt and 97 years since Governor William Hobby, Sr., signed the Texas Woman Suffrage Resolution on February 5, 1919. It is a great time for celebrating our past – and looking to and embracing the future.

You may recall that Governor Hobby, Sr., in 1931 married Oveta Culp, who was then the President of the League of Women Voters of Texas, in addition to her many other accomplishments including being the first secretary of the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the first director of the Women’s Army Corp. League members are amazing!

As we approach the League’s 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I’ve been reading histories of the Texas League – one written for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and one for the 75<sup>th</sup>. It’s instructive and eye-opening to review some of the issues we have addressed over the years, our accomplishments, and how many of the issues continue today. We often are so caught up in the issues of today, that we don’t take time to celebrate the work we’ve done and the many years it took to make a difference. Don’t forget that achieving the right to vote for women took decades and even now we continue to work to protect the vote.

So a few highlights of League in Texas over the years:

In 1916 the Texas Women’s Suffrage Association convention was held in Dallas. The delegates asked for suffrage planks in the state and national Democratic platforms. (Remember at that time, there were only Democrats in Texas.) At the National Democratic Convention in St Louis that year, the National American Woman Suffrage Association staged a striking demonstration called "The Golden Lane." A line of women, including many from Texas, dressed in white with yellow sashes and parasols, spaced four feet apart, stood along the curb beside their state suffrage banners on both sides of the street, forming a lane the Democratic delegates had to walk through.

The convention included the suffrage plank in the platform, but Texas women wore black bands because Texas governor James “Pa” Ferguson, who served on the platform committee, made a speech against it.

In 1918, the Texas Equal Suffrage Association (formerly Texas Women’s Suffrage Association) worked with many other groups and won the right for women to vote in primary elections and nominating conventions in Texas. The bill was signed by Governor Hobby on March 26, 1918. The suffrage leaders sponsored a citizenship school to instruct the new voters on how to register and vote – and 360,000 women were registered in the 15 days of registration.

When the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was sent to the states for ratification, Texas was the first southern state and the 9<sup>th</sup> state overall to ratify it.

On October 19, 1919, the Texas Equal Suffrage Association became the Texas League of Women Voters. Women now had the right to vote – how to use it was something else entirely. A Get Out the Vote campaign was launched and schools of citizenship were conducted throughout the state.

The League also undertook a broad legislative program which included establishing a minimum wage for working women, securing matching federal funds for Maternity & Infant care, reorganizing the Texas education system, and reorganization of the prison system. Needless to say, the work is not yet finished!

In the 1930s Texas Leagues focused on property rights for married women, child welfare, legal status of women, voter registration, jury service for women, rural schools, immigration and international cooperation to prevent war.

In 1949, Texas League President Betty Ann Row stood with the governor when he signed into law the secret ballot and a bill establishing the juvenile court system. He gave full credit to the League– it was the result of 8 ½ years of hard work “during which the League learned new techniques, experienced bitter frustrations, and made friends as well as possible enemies.” The first state League environmental study was in 1949 and it focused on water!

In 1942 the Dallas League asked “Why should we live internationally at the present time? Why is it important in war time? Why will it be imperative for post-war peace?”

Leagues across Texas and around the nation played a role in League education efforts for postwar cooperation that led to the formation of the United Nations. The League was a major force in the United States in getting public support for the UN. Texas League President Betty Ann Row, along with other League representatives attended the signing of the UN Charter,

recognizing the role of the League in the formation of the UN and its influence on the UN emphasis on human rights.

In the 1950s Governor Allen Shivers signed a Clean Elections bill with the League present. And jury service for women was achieved in 1954. The League started pushing for revision of the Texas Constitution in the 1950s and published *Texas Constitutional Review* in 1955 which was used for high school and college civics classes.

The 1960s were devoted to constitutional revision and repeal of the poll tax. In the 1970s the League was credited with passing an amendment to have the Legislature sit as a Constitutional Convention – which didn't go well. We worked on voting rights and election reform, public school finance, water planning and air quality, and the Equal Rights Amendment. Sound familiar?

In the 1980s, the League sponsored a national health care debate in Dallas. And the first direct mail voter registration drive was cosponsored with the Secretary of State and Val-Pak. 1.5 million Texas households were reached!

We have continued to work on so many of these issues – very few of our goals are ever “done” – even when we win, there is more work to do. Repeal of the poll tax was “done” in the 1960s, but in 2014 a Federal Judge declared that the Texas voter ID law amounts to a poll tax because of the costs involved in obtaining the required documents to get one of the accepted IDs. Her decision is still on appeal, but in the meantime the law continues and hundreds of thousands of Texans don't have an accepted ID – many of them minorities, the elderly and students.

### **Recent Accomplishments/Activities**

You have heard about some of our accomplishments already – and you will hear more tomorrow, but it doesn't hurt to repeat a few.

Leagues all around the state continually do Voter Registration --- on National Voter Registration Day, Citizenship ceremonies & many other registration opportunities. The Leagues in Irving and Houston registered over 24,000 new citizens last year alone!

We continue to produce Voters Guides in English and Spanish and candidate information on the League's nationwide website for all things elections [VOTE411.org](http://VOTE411.org). For the November Constitutional Amendment Election we had more than 23,000 Facebook hits and 12,000 Twitter

impressions. And we had fun creating videos on YouTube for each of the Constitutional Amendments. And they had 11,000 YouTube views!

For the Primary this year, we had a Facebook reach of over 60,000 in the 30 days leading up to the election. And we have over 1,100 Facebook followers (compared to 450 two years ago). Our posts were shared an average of 23 times a day in February! Fifteen local Leagues used VOTE411 for the Primary and I hope that every League will participate for the November election. LWV-Texas has already paid for statewide use, and we will help you get started. The Primary Voters Guide was accessed almost 400,000 times on our website alone – and many more times as a part of local League Voters Guides and on VOTE411.org.

We've done great studies that both engaged the communities around Texas and led to positions.

- Study on Human Trafficking in 2012.
- And this year we worked on the State study on Payday & Auto Title Loans in Texas which led to a new state position that will allow us to work at both the state and local levels to improve regulation of the small dollar loan market.

Our Advocacy Champions followed 511 bills during the last legislative session and presented testimony at 66 hearings! We made at least 398 personal visits to legislative offices.

You heard from Cinde Weatherby about election issues and our work on Online Voter Registration. We worked hard in 2015, but were not able to get Online Voter Registration to a vote – it would have passed in the House if had come to a vote! We hosted a briefing at the Capitol for legislative aids about Online Voter Registration. And we are working on a strategy to pass online voter registration in 2017 – and that strategy includes asking for your help in getting support from local and state officials.

The Membership and Leadership Development program is growing and it is working! If you League doesn't participate yet, I encourage you to sign up. Our membership numbers aren't quite final – the new national database, you know. But it appears that we had an increase in membership over last year. Let's keep up the good work!

Obviously, League members are amazing!

### **Now and the future**

And our work continues. In this critical election year, we have so much to do. Texas is last or nearly last in the nation in voter turnout.

You have already heard from Susan Morrison about the **strategic plan** adopted by the board, looking toward the League's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020. We can't thank David Overton enough for his expert guidance in developing the plan. And we are really excited about getting to work to achieve our goals. You've been hearing about The Get Out The Vote action plan from Nancy Parra, Elizabeth Erkel and Kate Lattimore Norris. It is an important part of the plan. We know we can't achieve all of the goals all at once, but by 2020 our goal is to increase voter turnout in Texas by 5 percentage points. To reach that goal, in addition to the Get Out The Vote action plan, we will work to expand the vote by passing Online Voter Registration, continuing to register new citizens and students, and working to repeal or at least improve the onerous photo voter ID law in Texas. Our work is cut out for us.

We will only accomplish it with the participation of every local League and every League member. With your help, I know we can do it.

Join me in making our vision – Empowered citizens to shape better communities – a reality.