Speech by Sandra Connor, LWV ABC member

Opening Ceremony for *A Century of Civic Engagement: League of Women Voters Minnesota Traveling Exhibit*

Anoka County Library - Northtown Branch

Monday, January 13, 2020

Good evening. I am Sandy Connor from the League of Women Voters Anoka, Blaine, Coon Rapids Area.

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization which encourages informed and active participation in government and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

League of Women Voters arose directly from the Women’s Suffrage movement which formally began at a convention held in Seneca, New York in 1848 and ended when the 19th Amendment became part of the US Constitution on August 18, 1920. The wording of the 19th Amendment is the exact wording proposed by Susan B. Anthony in 1875.

The Seneca Falls Convention was organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. It produced a document entitled “Declaration of Sentiments” which stated that “All men and women are created equal”. Women suffrage gained support during the 1850’s, but fell into the background during the Civil War. During the 1860’s the women’s suffrage movement divided over the questions of whether it should be tied to voting rights for blacks and whether there should be a National Constitutional Amendment or state by state action. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton believed both blacks and women should be granted voting rights, and opposed the 15th Amendment for not doing that. A member of this group, Lucy Stone, formed the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869 to advocate for a National Suffrage Amendment to the US Constitution. Another faction believed voting rights for women and voting rights for blacks should be separate issues and formed American Woman Suffrage Association to work for women’s suffrage on a state by state basis. The groups also disagreed on tactics. In 1890 the two groups resolved their differences and united under the name National American Woman Suffrage Association with Elizabeth Cady Stanton as the first President.

Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Lucy Stone are names from the Suffragist movement that may be familiar to you. Names that might not be familiar are Deliah Blasley, Addie Hunton, Mary Church Turrell, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. They are women of color who were important Suffragists. Women of color were part of the Suffragist movement. They participated in the parades and other activities with the white women. However, women of color were required to march separately at the end of the parades. That is one reason they seldom appear in pictures. Another reason is that most newspapers of the time did not publish pictures of women of color.

The first bill for national universal suffrage was introduce in 1878 by California Senator Aaron A. Sargent. That bill was introduced annually for 41 years. By 1920 women had full voting rights in 15 states, presidential voting rights in 28 states, and partial voting rights in many states.

Minnesota women had been active in the suffragist movement since the 1870’s and had sometimes organized in local groups. The Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association was founded in 1881 in Hastings, Minnesota as a state wide organization. The first president of MWSA was Sarah Burger Stearns, one of the 14 women who organized MWSA. Another prominent organizer was Harriet Bishop. Locally, prominent Anoka resident Dr. Flora Aldrich was a Suffragist. Minnesota suffragists used methods which were used on the national level – marches, parades, rallies, speeches, gathering signatures on petitions, writing letters, publishing pamphlets, and attempting to influence the legislature.

 In 1875 an amendment to the Minnesota State Constitution granted women in Minnesota the right to vote in School Board elections. In 1885 the efforts of Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association President Martha Ripley brought the American Woman Suffrage Association annual conference to Minnesota. When National Woman Suffrage Association and American Woman Suffrage Association merged in 1890, Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association became a Chapter of National American Woman Suffrage Association. Clara Hampson Ueland organized a parade in 1914 in which 2,000 suffragists and suffragist supporters participated. This parade gained national attention. Nationally, Minnesota was considered an important player in the suffragist movement.

In 1893, Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association made its first attempt to have the Minnesota Legislature pass a bill granting full voting rights to Minnesota Women. Working with the Populist Party, they came close. The Senate voted to remove the word “male” from state voting requirements. However, the House did not consider the bill before the end of the Legislative session. Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association continued to bring the proposal to every session of the Legislature until Minnesota ratified the 19th Amendment.

The Minnesota branch of the National Women’s Party was another suffragist group active in Minnesota. They supported more radical actions such as hunger strikes. The two organizations frequently worked together for a common goal. There were other smaller suffragist groups. By 1919, 30,000 Minnesota women belonged to some suffragist organization.

On March 20, 1919 the Minnesota Legislature granted Minnesota women the right to vote in Presidential elections.

In March 1919 the National American Woman Suffrage Association created League of Women Voters as an auxiliary organization. When a state ratified the 19th Amendment, women in that state became eligible to join League of Women Voters. On September 8, 1919 Minnesota became the 15th state to ratify the 19th Amendment. On October 29, 1919, Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association reincorporated as League of Women Voters, Minnesota. Clara Ueland served as the first president for a few months, then was replaced by Marguerite Wells. On February 14, 1920 League of Women Voters became an independent organization.

The original goal of LWVMN was to educate and encourage women to participate in political activity. This soon expanded to educating and encouraging everyone to participate in political activity, studying issues and forming positions in the public interest, and taking a position on many public welfare issues such as education, natural resources, public finance, and civil rights.

LWV does not support or oppose any candidate or political party. LWV does not endorse candidates for office. From the beginning LWV has worked to help people understand the voting process, register voters, inform voters through candidate forums, lobby legislators to support positions which LWV research has found will benefit the public, observe public meetings to promote openness and public access, and provide information about the election process. Our goal is for everyone to become informed and active participants in the political process and to vote.

Since 1946, League of Women Voters is organized as LWVUS, LWVMN, and local Chapters. Since 1974 men are eligible for full membership. In 2016 it was decided that citizenship would no longer be a requirement for voting members in League. Full membership is open to anyone age 16 or older.

In 1938 a Chapter of League of Women Voters was founded in Anoka which today is League of Women Voters Anoka, Blaine, Coon Rapids Area. The Chapter was organized at a Tea held by Mrs. Mary Hensler Spurzen on May 18, 1938 Two women from LWV MN came to Anoka to help establish the new Chapter. At that time it was customary for ladies to wear their hats at formal meetings. When Mary took the ladies upstairs to show them where to leave their coats, they asked whether they should wear their hats. Mary replied that Anoka was pretty informal and the ladies usually didn’t wear hats at meetings. The visiting ladies wanted to fit in, so they took off their hats. When they went downstairs, they found that every one of the Anoka women was wearing her hat! Hats or not, LWV was soon active in Anoka and has continued to be active to the present time.

As you would expect, one of the first projects was having a booth at the Anoka County Fair to help women register to vote, show them how to vote using a sample ballot, and let them know what to expect at the polling place and what documents to bring with them.

Not so expectedly, another early project was working to establish city wide garbage collection in the City of Anoka in 1940. Until that time, some people buried garbage in their back yards. The League went on to help get public garbage cans on city streets in Anoka to keep the city clean.

Later the Blaine, Columbia Heights, Coon Rapids, and Fridley Chapters merged with the Anoka Chapter to form League of Women Voters Anoka, Blaine, Coon Rapids Area.

LWV ABC has been involved in many projects to benefit local communities. These include working to establish city wide garbage collection in Anoka, study of the Rice Creek Watershed, Ban the Can, permanent absentee ballot legislation, the Bee Safe program, and work for a pollinator friendly environment.

The Permanent Absentee Ballot which requires absentee ballots to be mailed to eligible voters for each election rather than requiring the voter request a ballot every time was achieved in 1990 largely through the lobbying efforts of LWV ABC member Sandra Shanley.

The Bee Safe program

During 2004 LWV ABC conducted a “Bee Safe” campaign to raise awareness about hazardous household products in an effort to protect children, families and the environment. We applied for a grant from Community POWER (Partners on Waste Education and Reduction) and worked with Anoka County Integrated Waste Management Department to design graphics and a curriculum to inform citizens about household hazardous chemicals and safe disposal of waste. We hired an intern who set up multiple events during the year including tables at the Anoka Co. Fair and Andover and Champlin festivals, and Early Childhood classes for parents.

Pollinator/Environment

Loss of habitat and widespread use of neonicotinoid pesticides are implicated in the collapse of bee colonies and sharp decline in numbers of butterflies, birds and other pollinators. LWV ABC members conducted a year-long pollinator project in 2015 to raise awareness and influence our cities to establish more pollinator friendly practices. We had speakers at meetings, walked in parades sometimes in bee and butterfly costumes, had displays at libraries and community festivals and collected “Bee Safe Cities” proclamations.

Opportunities for becoming active in LWV ABC include:

Membership Committee works to attract new members and retain current members.  They look for ways to enhance the membership experience.

New Member On-boarding group strives to make new members feel welcome and have a successful start in LWV ABC.

A Speakers group arranges non-partisan factual speakers on topics of local interest for the monthly membership meetings.

Observer Corps members attend public meetings such as City Council, County Board, School Board, etc. and attempt to make sure public meetings are open and transparent to the public and that community members have a chance to comment.

Voter Services works to encourage participation in government by voting, holds forums where voters learn about local candidates and issues, and works to register voters.  There are opportunities to join experienced members to register voters at high schools, new citizen ceremonies, and community events.  There are many ways to join experienced members assisting at forums, and training is provided for those who want to become forum moderators.

Lobby Corps organizes groups to go to the State Capital to meet with legislators and lobby them to support LWV positions.

Positions are an important part of LWV.  Members with concerns or interests in an issue can propose that LWV adopt a position on that issue.  An impartial committee researches and studies the facts about that issue.  The committee proposes that LWV adopt a position in the public interest.  If the group reaches a consensus the position is adopted.  Positions may be local, state, or national. Positions of LWV ABC are reviewed annually, and may be continued, revised, or ended.

League of Women Voters provides many paths for becoming an informed and active part of the political process which impacts all of our lives in many ways – snow removal, taxes, health care, education, street repairs, garbage collection, affordable housing, public transportation and more. We encourage all of you to participate in the ways that are best for you. By becoming active in the political process you help shape the future of our city, our county, our state and our country. You do make a difference. Your voice is your vote!

Thank you for you attendance and attention. If anyone would like to register to vote or join LWV members are available at a table in the lobby to assist you.