

WASATCH COUNTY SUFFRAGE HISTORY

by Ann Engar

Residents of Wasatch County early demonstrated their support of women's suffrage.

On January 20, 1870, in the Utah Territorial Legislature, Representative Abram Hatch of Wasatch County moved that the committee on elections inquire into the propriety of bringing a bill granting suffrage to all women in the territory. The Legislature unanimously passed such a bill two weeks later, and Acting Governor of the Territory, Stephen A. Mann, signed it into law on February 12, 1870.

In 1887, however, the federal Edmunds Tucker Act repealed women's right to vote or hold public office. As Utah Territory moved toward statehood in 1895, constitutional convention meetings reconsidered women's suffrage. Its passage was far from as smooth as its earlier granting. In fact, one contemporary news report called it "the greatest legislative fight in the territory." Wasatch County again supported suffrage. Representative Joseph R. Murdock, a Democratic delegate from Wasatch County, voted against attempts to postpone consideration of women's suffrage in April 1895. Fifty-six petitioners from Wasatch County demanded that women's suffrage be incorporated into the state constitution.

Four months later, on August 15, 1895, Emmeline Wells (who had formed the first LDS Stake Relief Society in Heber in 1879) and Emma J. McVicker traveled from Salt Lake to Heber City to help form the women's Republican league club. Fifty-seven women joined and elected Lillie Southworth as president and Jane Turner and Jennie Watson as first and second vice-presidents. Other women played a prominent role in the Republican Wasatch County

convention. Elected as precinct delegates to the state convention were Mary E. Moulton of Charleston, Sarah Cummings of Elkhorn, and Maria Hatch (wife of Abram Hatch) of Heber.

Women in Wasatch County then began to take on city and county governmental offices. Lavina Murdock, for example, became Heber City clerk and recorder in 1903. In 1904, she moved on to become Wasatch County treasurer, a position she held for twelve years. For over thirty years women in Wasatch controlled the county finances: Lavina Murdock (1904-1916), Millie Witt (1917-1920), Gladys Briggs (1920-1922), and Geneva Cliff (1923-1934). Several of these women were single mothers of large households. For example, Cliff, a single mother of eight, capably taught herself bookkeeping and accounting before taking office and instituted the practice of having county funds earn interest. These women came from both political parties and ran against other women candidates for the office. Unfortunately, women held no other elected Wasatch County offices, though they did serve on the school and library boards and as deputy county officials. Cloa Huffaker Clegg was elected to the state legislature in 1920 and Grace Thelma Garff represented Wasatch County in the Utah House of Representatives from 1937-40.

By the time the Susan B. Anthony amendment to the federal constitution was moving through Congress in 1915 and 1916, even more Wasatch women participated in politics at the local level. In 1916, five of the fifteen Republican county delegates were women, many of whom were related: Mary Miles Hatch (daughter-in-law of Maria Hatch), Lavina Murdock, and Cynthia Sophia Luke (sister-in-law of Maria Hatch).

Though Wasatch County with its farmers and miners had a small population made even smaller with the break-off of Duchesne County in 1915, its representatives supported women's

rights and its women took active roles as political party delegates, county officials, and members of school and library boards. They were entrusted with county property taxes and funds, supported their families as wage earners in addition to their work at home, and encouraged each other to be politically active.

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