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*Joanne Goodwin, PhD\**

### **Nevada's Campaigns for Woman Suffrage**

Nevada was the last of the Far West states to embrace the right of women to vote before the Nineteenth Amendment spread the franchise nationwide. Suffrage activity there went into high gear in 1914. The legislature had passed a suffrage bill for two consecutive sessions, and in November the state's male voters would decide. Proponents made sure voters understood that Nevada was late to the game. One of the pro-suffrage flyers featured a map with all of the full-suffrage states colored white. Nevada won the moniker as "the black spot" on the map because it was the only Far West state yet to pass full suffrage. A majority of male voters responded, extending the vote to Nevada women in November. This concluded a campaign as old as statehood itself.

Nevada's statehood constitution in 1864, like many newly admitted western states, only enfranchised white men. The right to vote was reexamined in the 1869 legislature when Curtis J. Hillyer proposed one amendment to remove the word "white" and a second amendment to remove the word "male" from the constitution, telling fellow legislators that women deserved the vote because "they were at least as intelligent as men," paying the same taxes, following the same laws as men, and "their participation in the political process could be expected to raise the level of public morality" to a new standard. His rationale combined two themes prevalent in the period's women's suffrage discourse—equal justice based on gendered difference and essentialist ideals of womanhood. The legislature passed both suffrage amendments in 1869, but they would need

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to pass a second time in the legislature of 1871 as stipulated by the state constitution.<sup>1</sup>

Lawmakers in the state were responding to a national debate on the dimensions of full citizenship, including voting rights. The coalition that had supported universal voting rights dissolved as former abolitionists broke with women's rights advocates over the best strategy for achieving voting rights. When the 1869 Nevada legislature passed two bills to open suffrage, they were intentionally or unintentionally doing what Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony had hoped for: eliminating sex and race barriers to the vote with the Fifteenth Amendment. One of those lawmakers, Senator McKaskia S. Bonnifield of Humboldt County, obviously listened, taking the next step to rally support for the woman's vote.

Bonnifield had arrived in Nevada Territory in 1862 and set about practicing law. Rising quickly in legal circles and serving in the state senate from 1869 to 1872, he was familiar with Hillyer's proposals. It is not clear why he supported woman suffrage, but we know that he was one of the organizers of Nevada's first suffrage convention, held in Battle Mountain on July 4, 1870. Newspaper announcements promoted the convention as a way to inform voters and elect pro-suffrage candidates. The featured speakers included Laura de Force Gordon and Emily A. Pitts Stevens, the latter a San Francisco publisher of the women's rights newspaper *The Pioneer*. Gordon came to Nevada in 1867 with her husband, Dr. Charles H. Gordon. She lectured on suffrage rights, and newspapers described her as an electrifying speaker. Following her move to California in 1869, she joined that state's suffrage rights movement. By the evening of July 4, a suffrage organization had been formed, and its attendees elected Gordon its president and Senator Bonnifield its recording secretary.<sup>2</sup> The new members resolved to remain nonpartisan and to hold a state convention the following year.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The original Nevada Constitution, Article 2, section 1 gave the vote only to white men. Although the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1870) removed race or previous servitude as a barrier, states controlled who could vote. "Woman Suffrage. Speech of Hon. C. J. Hillyer, Delivered in the Assembly of the State of Nevada, Tuesday, February 16, 1869," Appendix to the Journal of the Assembly, Fourth Session, Legislature of the State of Nevada, 1869 (Carson City: State Printer, 1869). The most complete documentation of the early campaign is found in Jean Ford and James W. Hulse, "The First Battle for Woman Suffrage in Nevada: 1869–1871—Correcting and Expanding the Record," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 38:3 (fall 1995): 174–75.

2. Dana R. Bennett, *All Roads Lead to Battle Mountain: A Small Town in the Heart of Nevada, 1869–1969* (Battle Mountain, NV: Lander County Historical Society, 2014). For the post-suffrage involvement of women in politics, see Dana Bennett, "'Undismayed by Any Mere Man': Women

Votes for women's suffrage was not without opponents in Nevada. Anna Fitch, the wife of Congressman Thomas Fitch (R-Nevada), represented that view in a letter addressed to Hillyer and published in the *Territorial Enterprise*. A woman involved in politics "challenges the divine law, she violates herself and the woman is gone out of her...the spiritual essence is adulterated...in the gross glare of political license," she wrote.<sup>4</sup>

The measure did not pass a second time in 1871, failing by a slight margin.<sup>5</sup> Only seven of the forty-six members of the 1869 assembly returned.<sup>6</sup> Hillyer did not run for reelection and relocated to Washington, D.C. The national campaign continued to send suffrage speakers, but realistically it seemed the moment for constitutional reform in Nevada had passed.

The defeat of the early suffrage campaign only strengthened the resolve of its advocates. Hannah Clapp, Dr. Eliza Cook, Mary Stoddard Doten, Frances Slaven Williamson, and other northern Nevada suffrage supporters kept the issue alive by holding meetings and debates as well as submitting resolutions to the Nevada legislature at least eight times between 1877 and 1897.<sup>7</sup> An equal suffrage meeting at the Austin, Nevada, courthouse on November 30, 1894, attracted 125 supporters of both sexes who elected Frances Williamson corresponding secretary of the newly formed Lucy Stone Non-Partisan Equal Suffrage League. Williamson, a widow, had thrown herself into suffrage work after she survived the deaths of five of her six children.<sup>8</sup> National suffrage leaders Susan B. Anthony and Anna Howard Shaw visited Nevada in the spring of 1895 on their way to California and generated significant press and interest. By fall, the first

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Lawmakers and Tax Policy in Nevada, 1919–1956" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2011).

3. No documentation of a subsequent meeting has surfaced. Phillip I. Earl, "Bustles, Broadsides and Ballots: The Story of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Northeastern Nevada, 1869–1914," *Northeastern Nevada Historical Quarterly* 6 (spring, summer, fall 1976): 5–6.

4. *Territorial Enterprise*, Feb. 25, 1869.

5. Ford and Hulse, "The First Battle for Woman Suffrage," 183.

6. Phillip I. Earl, "Bustles, Broadsides and Ballots," 7.

7. According to Dana R. Bennett, the legislature received proposals in 1877, 1881, 1883, 1885, 1889, 1891, 1895, and 1896 ("Women in the Nevada Legislature," Background Paper 95-1, Legislative Counsel Bureau, Nevada Legislature [undated]).

8. Mrs. Lund and Mrs. Weller worked with Williamson to organize the convention. For a full biographical profile of Williamson, see Sally Wilkins, "Frances Slaven Williamson," Nevada Women's History Project, <https://www.nevadawomen.org/research-center/biographies-alphabetical/frances-slaven-williamson/>.

convention of the renamed State Equal Suffrage Association was held in Reno, and attendees elected Williamson president.<sup>9</sup> During her tenure she traveled by stagecoach or rail across the state and formed local suffrage groups, represented the state at the national organization's annual meeting, and testified before a committee of the U.S. Senate, which was considering a women's suffrage bill. The organization has been credited with the passage of the 1895 resolution in both legislative houses. Submitted in 1897 and heatedly debated, the measure failed by virtue of a tie vote.<sup>10</sup> In the fall of 1897, the *Nevada State Journal* reported that the third annual meeting of the Nevada State Equal Suffrage Association attracted three hundred people who heard speeches by educator Hannah Clapp and Williamson. All thirteen counties participated "by delegate, proxy or greeting."<sup>11</sup> The flurry of activity slowed significantly when Williamson moved to California, where she continued her work toward suffrage. In 1899, another constitutional amendment bill made it past the senate but failed in the assembly. Support came from three governors, all of whom said the issue should be submitted to the voters. Although the suffrage amendment stalled, some laws that benefited women and children passed. The suffrage movement did not regain momentum until 1910.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, more middle-class women had the opportunity to attend college than at any prior time. Club work had taught women and their daughters how to organize and participate in building communities, which at times included lobbying government. They participated as disenfranchised but active citizens. In this context, Mrs. Clarence Mackay, the President of the New York Equal Franchise Society, wrote to Jeanne Wier, faculty in the University of Nevada Reno History Department and founder of the Nevada Historical Society. Significantly for Nevada, Mackay was the daughter-in-law of Comstock mining magnate John Mackay, and she wanted the state to join the national movement. Mackay encouraged Wier to form a Nevada Equal Franchise Society (NEFS). She agreed, and at the initial meeting in January 1911, forty-seven attendees became founding members.<sup>12</sup> Native Nevadan Felice Cohn co-founded the Society and led the group's legislative committee through the 1911 session.

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9. Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, eds. *The History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 4 (1883–1900), chap. 52, "Nevada," (Rochester, NY, 1902), 813. The convention was held October 29–30, 1895. A second convention was held Sept. 24, 1896, and Elda A. Orr was elected president.

10. Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, eds. *The History of Woman Suffrage* (1883–1900), 4:813.

11. "Suffrage Convention—A Large and Enthusiastic Meeting," *Nevada State Journal*, Nov. 3, 1897. On the number of counties in 1897, see <https://www.nvnaco.org>.

12. Sarah Emeline Mack, "History of the Suffrage Movement in Nevada, 1900–1920" (Reno, NV: [n.p.]), Special Collections and Archives,

Like Wier, Cohn attended college, with two years at Stanford. She studied law and was admitted to the Nevada bar in 1902. After several years spent working on mining and land claims, she became interested in the welfare of women. She used her legal expertise to draft and lobby for bills in the legislature. The *Carson City Daily Appeal* reported that among the many resolutions supporting women's suffrage in the 1911 session, Cohn's draft was selected in part due to her legal skills and lobbying.<sup>13</sup> Cohn became a driving force in the suffrage campaign, forming the Non-Militant Equal Suffrage Society and co-founding the Nevada Voters Club following the success of the state campaign. She was the fourth woman to have the privilege to practice before the United States Supreme Court. The dozens of county-level leaders who knew it was time for the political equality of women needed a leader who would bring the parts together and relentlessly push the issue.<sup>14</sup>

That would fall to a young Stanford graduate who had returned to create the history department at the University of Nevada Reno (UNR). Precocious as a child and ambitious as an adult, Anne Martin is credited as the architect of the successful strategy that led to passage of woman suffrage in Nevada. While studying at the London School of Economics, she discovered the English suffrage campaign and Emmeline Pankhurst. She shared that cathartic experience with two Americans already involved in the U.S. campaign—Alice Paul and Lucy Burns. They had revived the Congressional Union (CU) to reflect a direct-action approach to suffrage focused on a federal amendment. Martin spent time with them upon her return to the United States, and suffrage became the defining cause of her life. Returning to Reno in the late fall of 1911, she quickly became recognized as an experienced public speaker, writer, and organizer. Working as the press secretary for the NEFS, she relayed suffrage columns to the state's forty-nine newspapers, keeping the topic of suffrage present in the lives of Nevadans. Elected president of the state organization in February 1912, she continued in that position through the success of the 1914 campaign. Her relationships with the national leadership of both the National Association of Woman Suffrage Associations (NAWSA) and the

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UNLV, 1920; Anne Bail Howard, *The Long Campaign: A Biography of Anne Martin* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1985), 75.

13. "Will Celebrate," *Carson City Daily Appeal*, Mar. 16, 1911, p. 1.

14. "Interesting Members," *Women Lawyers' Journal* 25 (1938–39): 18. For a more complete biography of this accomplished attorney, see Jean Ford, "Felice Cohn," Nevada Women's History Project, <https://www.nevadawomen.org/research-center/biographies-alphabetical/felice-cohn/>; and Oliver B. Pollak, "Felice Cohn," Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/Cohn-Felice>.

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Congressional Union helped the state organization recruit national speakers and organizers.<sup>15</sup>

Martin's winning strategy contained old and new elements. Local suffrage leagues had been tried before, yet she had greater success with county-level suffrage leagues that stayed engaged under her leadership. Martin made sure to involve supportive and powerful men—elected officials, businessmen, and newspaper editors—who supported suffrage in a statewide advisory committee. She brought newer methods (parades, public speeches, and a news bureau) that had been used by the CU and British suffrage campaigners. She adopted the successful California strategy that targeted voters in rural areas. A persistent and focused leader, Martin also gave credit to those men and women in the local organizations who persuaded neighbors and friends to support suffrage candidates and the women's vote in 1914.

In the early fall of 1912, a suffrage victory in the 1913 legislature looked possible. Anne Martin reported to the NAWSA convention on November 26, 1912, that numerous state legislators, as well as Governor Tasker L. Oddie, had written pledges of support. The bill did pass both houses, leaving the last feat: to win in the general election.<sup>16</sup> They had ten months to gain the rural vote, despite opposition by liquor interests and one of Nevada's richest men at the time who opposed women voting, George Wingfield.

Nevada had a scattered population of eighty thousand people in those days, with only twenty thousand eligible male voters. Many men moved often as part of their work in mining. Martin shared specifics of the difficulty reaching male voters: "One would have to travel 100 miles all day from a county seat to a mountain camp...to reach seventy voters. In one case a three days trip was necessary to reach eighty voters...personal contact with the voters through public meeting is necessary." The challenges proved worth it as suffrage received "the endorsement of every party in the state but the Republican...[and] was endorsed by every labor union which has voted on the subject, and by a state-wide conference of labor representing 6,000 members."<sup>17</sup>

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15. Howard, *The Long Campaign*, 78–79. Unpublished works on Nevada suffrage include Ann Warren Smith, "Anne Martin and a History of Woman Suffrage in Nevada, 1869–1914" (PhD diss., University of Nevada Reno, 1976); Jeanne Wier, "History of the Suffrage Movement, 1900–1913," unpublished manuscript, Nevada Historical Society, Reno, NV; and Sarah Emeline Mack, "History of the Suffrage Movement in Nevada, 1900–1920" (Reno, NV: [n.p.], Special Collections and Archives, UNLV, 1920).

16. Earl, "Bustles, Broad-sides and Ballots," 33; Sara Bard Field, "The Clash in Nevada: A History of Women's Fight for Enfranchisement." Special issue, *Out West* (Aug. 1914): 4.

17. Anne Martin, "The Winning of Nevada," *Suffragist*, Nov. 7, 1914. The discussion of endorsements, mobile male population, and support of labor

In the central and southern parts of the state, Bird Wilson oversaw the suffrage campaign for the NEFS. A graduate from Hastings Law School in California, she came to Nevada in 1906 to provide legal services during the mining boom. She had mining interests in Tonopah, Goldfield, Manhattan, and Round Mountain. In June 1906, she became the seventh woman admitted to practice law in the state. Moving to Goldfield in 1909, Wilson took part in many civic activities, including those of the Goldfield Woman's Club became the first female stockbroker in the state. Wilson compiled and wrote a pamphlet called "Women Under Nevada Laws," which outlined the legal inequities that the state's women faced. Twenty thousand copies were distributed across the state during 1914.<sup>18</sup> Wilson held the position of vice president of two statewide organizations during the greatest suffrage activity in 1913 and 1914—the NEFS and the State Federation of Women's Clubs. The latter was divided on the issue of suffrage. Nevertheless, with others' assistance, Wilson gained an endorsement to study and then support suffrage.<sup>19</sup>

Las Vegas had no active suffrage league in 1911, but it did have an active women's club, the Mesquite Club.<sup>20</sup> The service organization founded in 1911 had a club membership that included many of the town's community builders. When the state suffrage office wanted to coordinate speakers in the southern part of the state, Reno reached out to Delphine Squires, a founding member and president of the club during 1913 and 1914, and one of the first families of the small desert town. Her husband, Charles P. Squires, was the editor and publisher of the *Las Vegas Age*, a paper that ran numerous items on national and state suffrage news.<sup>21</sup> Delphine Squires agreed that women should have the vote but chose to pursue that diplomatically and through the more conservative Federation of Women's Clubs. Nevertheless, she facilitated the visit of Charlotte Perkins Gilman through the Mesquite Club in the fall of 1912, multiple visits by Bird Wilson, a talk by Anne Martin on suffrage in April 1913, and an October 1914 visit by Dr. Anna Howard Shaw,

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unions is repeated in Mack's "History of the Suffrage Movement," 12; on travel, see Howard, *The Long Campaign*, 94, n87. Martin may have exaggerated the value of the campaign's political support. See Sally Zanjani, "The Black Spot: Nevada Woman Suffrage," *Nevada in the West* 6, no. 1 (spring 2015): 10–11.

18. Bird M. Wilson, "Women Under Nevada Laws" (Reno: Nevada Equal Franchise Society, 1913).

19. Nonsupporters viewed the endorsement as a sneaky ploy by Wilson and Martin. Wilson viewed it as a progressive move from study to support.

20. Clark County had separated from Lincoln County in 1909, and while the latter had an active group, Las Vegas support remained subdued.

21. On Squires's election as president of the club, see *Las Vegas Age*, May 31, 1913.



president of the NAWSA, a month before the general election. Squires was elected president of the state Federation of Women's Clubs for 1914–1915, the same period in which that the group endorsed woman suffrage.<sup>22</sup>

It took several days for the results to be tallied from the November 1914 election, but the issue passed by a margin of 3,678 (10,936 to 7258). Four northern counties rejected the amendment, including all ten of the Reno precincts and both Carson City precincts, but it passed with the support of the rest of the state.<sup>23</sup>

Soon after the successful state campaign, supporters developed associations for the education of women voters. Anne Martin's supporters created the Nevada Women's Civic League and Felice Cohn and her associates began the Woman Citizens' Club.<sup>24</sup> Some women already possessed strong political experience, as historian Dana Bennett argues. Their work as legislative office staff, lobbyists, reporters, and public speakers made them familiar with the process. Others had occupied positions on school boards and demonstrated their commitment to public service.<sup>25</sup> Some, like Felice Cohn and Bird Wilson, continued to press for legislation that improved the conditions of women and children. Cohn supported the liberalization of divorce laws as a positive option for women. Wilson worked to expand women's rights on the issues of community property, guardianship of children, and an eight-hour workday.<sup>26</sup>

Those who had the means to travel continued to work in states that had not passed women's suffrage. A few such as Sadie Dotson Hurst ran successfully for office. A resident of Reno since the early 1900s, Hurst had been an active club member, joining the Washoe County [Reno] Equal Franchise Society in 1914 and the Women's Republican Club in 1916. She was elected to the state assembly in 1918 and thus became the first woman to hold a seat in the legislature. Early in her tenure, she submitted the

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22. Las Vegas Age, Oct. 3, 1914. Florence [Squires] Boyer is quoted in Sally Zanjani and Carrie Townley Porter, *Helen J. Stewart: First Lady of Las Vegas* (Las Vegas: Stephens Press, 2011), 147.

23. Washoe, Ormsby, Storey, and Eureka counties rejected suffrage.

24. The two groups formed the Nevada League of Women Voters a few years later.

25. Dana Bennett, "Undismayed by Any Mere Man," 67–68, 72.

26. Phillip I. Earl, "Bird M. Wilson," Nevada Historical Society; Felice Cohn, "Nevada Divorce Laws," *Women Lawyers' Journal* 19, no. 1 (fall 1931): 16–17. The same journal announced in 1924 an office move to 406 Clay Peters Building in Reno. Cohn was elected second vice president of the National Association of Women Lawyers (1938–39).

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resolution ratifying Nevada's support for the Nineteenth Amendment, which added women's suffrage to the U.S. Constitution.<sup>27</sup>

Anne Martin moved to Washington, D.C., for most of 1915 to work with the Congressional Union as the chair of their legislative committee. When the CU changed its name to the National Woman's Party in 1916, delegates at the June convention elected Martin to lead the Party. That role lasted until 1917, when she returned to lobbying. She ran unsuccessfully in Nevada as an Independent for the U.S. Senate in 1918 and 1920.<sup>28</sup>

Why suffrage succeeded in the 1910s when two earlier attempts had failed is largely attributable to the tireless efforts of individuals like Anne Martin and her persistent work and statewide strategies, particularly her emphasis on organizing county-level workers. The times had also changed, with endorsements from organized labor, political parties, and governors. Moreover, women were engaged in the civic and economic life of their communities by the 1910s, and their leadership activities were helpful in convincing voters that women could be a positive force not only in the lives of their communities but for Nevada as a whole.

The campaign for women's suffrage that began in 1869 in Nevada came to a successful end in 1914 for a majority of women but not all. Some women continued to face limitations to becoming citizens, and others faced obstacles to voting. As recently as 2016, tribes in Nevada continued to struggle to ensure their access to voting. The issue of citizenship and its rights continues to be a complicated and thorny one. As we approach the centennial of nationwide woman suffrage, let us think more broadly about voting rights and the availability of those rights to all citizens.<sup>29</sup>

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27. Tammy McMenemy, "Sadie Dotson Hurst," Nevada Women's History Project, <https://www.nevadawomen.org/research-center/biographies-alphabetical/sadie-dotson-hurst/>.

28. Howard, *The Long Campaign*, 108, 115.

29. Willard Hughes Rollings, "Citizenship and Suffrage: The Native American Struggle for Civil Rights in the American West, 1830–1965," *Nevada Law Journal* 5, no. 1 (2004), available at <https://scholars.law.unlv.edu/nlj/vol5/iss1/8>. The Native American Voting Rights Coalition, "Voting Barriers Encountered by Native Americans in Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and South Dakota," Survey Research Report (Jan. 2018), available at <https://www.narf.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2017NAVRCsurvey-results.pdf>.

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## **Book Reviews**