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Teresa Opheim

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The Woman's World

Carrie Lane Chapman in the Mason City Republican

Edited by Teresa Opheim

Carrie Lane Chapman Catt, who directed the successful campaign to win voting rights for women in the early twentieth century, began her career as a political feminist while working as a journalist in her native Iowa in the mid-1880s. When Carrie Lane graduated from Iowa State College in Ames in 1880, she returned home to Charles City and soon took a job as high school principal in nearby Mason City. Three years later she became superintendent of the Mason City schools, one of the first women in the United States to hold such a position. Lane retired from the school system in 1885 and married Leo Chapman, editor of the Mason City Republican. Four weeks after their marriage, her name appeared on the masthead as co-editor of the weekly newspaper. One of her first actions as co-editor was to begin "Woman's World," a column devoted to a discussion of the place of women in American society.

Carrie Chapman's active suffrage work began at about the same time, in early 1885. A bill granting municipal suffrage to women had been introduced in the Iowa legislature, but had received little local publicity. Carrie prompted Mason City residents to circulate a petition in support of the suffrage bill. (All but a handful of the women in Mason City signed the petition.) In 1887, after her husband's death, Carrie became more deeply involved in the suffrage movement, serving as recording secretary of the Iowa Suffrage Association. By 1900, Carrie Chapman had

earned a national reputation as a driving and efficient strategist. Susan B. Anthony chose her as her successor in the National Suffrage Association, where she served as president for four years before resigning to concentrate on the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. In 1915, when the National American Women's Suffrage Association organized its national office, she took charge of the nationwide campaign to win voting rights for women. Carrie, who had married George Catt in 1905, viewed herself as a field commander. Her "Winning Plan," a strategy that stressed both federal and state efforts, helped achieve ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919.

In the early years of her career, her "Woman's World" column demonstrated young Carrie Chapman's potential as a suffrage leader. In discussions of topics ranging from the frivolity of the fashion world to the economics of women's labor, Carrie voiced her outrage at the condition of women in the United States. The "Woman's World" expressed views that later made Carrie Chapman Catt a major spokeswoman for the generation of feminists who won the right to vote.

The first "Woman's World" column introduced Carrie to her readers and then launched into a discussion of a woman's need for self-sufficiency, a theme that she would return to in subsequent columns. As a career woman, Carrie knew the advantages of self-support. She also knew about the wasted potential of daughters taught only to be "pampered and petted belles of society."

March 1, 1885

SELF-SUPPORT

The "Woman's World" will be devoted to the discussion of such questions as purport to the welfare, the social, political and intellectual position of women. It will contain news of interest and reports of woman's work throughout the world. It will welcome communications from its readers and will hope to win many friends. Let those who are interested in the advancement of women speak their sentiments through the "Woman's World."

There is a rapidly growing sentiment among women to endeavor to make themselves self-supporting. The example of lives made miserable by dependence is seen on every side and girls are profiting thereby. In New York City, within the lifetime of one observer, the number of employments open to women has increased from twenty-six to fifteen hundred. The benefits of this change can scarcely be estimated. Girls are no longer forced to marry to secure homes, and wives need no more bear the abuse of unkind husbands because of their own incapacity for self-support. Women are everywhere more intelligent and more respected. Society has been elevated and purified. Let the good work continue. Let every mother see that her daughter is prepared with a trade, profession, or work to enable her to meet any fate the future may have in store for her. . . . [It] is truer womanhood to make and hold a position where she can earn a livelihood than to be the pampered and petted belle of society. Teach her that she is refusing life's grandest offering when she dawdles away her time with novel dress and foolish pleasures. If she has talents, teach her to develop them; if she has none, teach her to make talent by energy. At all hazards teach her to be a woman and not a mere doll-baby.

It is a mistaken idea that girls are to be cared for and supported in idleness. Your daughter may marry well, as the saying is;

she may never know want, nor even have a desire ungratified; but quite as likely she may be obliged to walk in poverty all her life, she may be left a widow with children to support, or she may be left with a debt to pay. How is she to keep her family from starving, herself from wearing out, and her home bright and cheerful? You have taught her nothing. She may play the piano, sing sweetly, paint pictures and thus be called accomplished, but in none of these is she expert enough to earn a livelihood. She perhaps can sew, but she can make only starvation wages at that. What then? Ah, what indeed! Would it not be wiser, O, ye mothers, if you would insist that your daughters know one thing thoroughly, the knowledge of which would make them independent? Has your own helplessness made you miserable? Then do not let your daughter repeat your experience. Ah, but your foolish pride tells you people will think it strange that your daughter works for a living, your friends will talk about it and perhaps laugh over it. Perhaps some of them may, but more probably you will make converts to your plan, and your example prove a boon to many a girl. Try it.

Carrie Chapman saw women's place in society rapidly expanding in the late nineteenth century. With more opportunities for women outside the home, she speculated that the division of labor in the home would have to change. The Scott County settlement of Amity suggested one direction that change might take.

March 26, 1885

AMITY KITCHENS

There is an important problem which is presented to the women of our land for solution. By whom or how is the labor of our future homes to be performed? With the care of a house, preparation of meals, and watching over a family, to the ordinary woman help is a sheer necessity. Housework has

grown into such disrepute among girls that it has driven them into other lines of work, more "respectable," if not more remunerative. The number who are willing to become house servants is constantly diminishing. So few are left in the field that even now a mistress is left wholly at the mercy of her servants. They domineer over her in a most humiliating manner, but she is compelled to submit or accept the only alternative of doing her own work. It is probable circumstances will force new fashions and customs into prevalence which will be in accordance with this state of affairs. However, it may do well to speculate as to the results.

In the settlement of Amity, in Scott County, where all property is held in common and profits are equally divided, a custom exists which may be of value in determining this question. In this town are several large kitchens and dining rooms. Here the whole community gathers at mealtime. The work is performed by a few women, who are detailed for a day at a time. This plan has several advantages. It leaves the homes free from smoke and smells of the kitchen; it gives to each woman several days in the week which she is at liberty to employ at other work; it is an economy of strength, time, utensils, materials, and fuel. While this plan is not feasible in all its details, it is quite likely [communal] dining rooms would be highly practicable. . . . It could be so managed [that] the expense of board would be no greater than the cost of living at home and would also leave the women of the family at liberty to seek employment for which they could receive pay, if they so desired. Moreover, it would be a welcomed reform which could so dispose of housework that mothers might have opportunity to devote more time to the training of the mental and moral natures of their children.

Carrie was known for her caustic wit, which was often directed at the specious and ridicu-

lous in her opponents' arguments. One victim of Carrie's barbed pen was one Reverend Dr. Dexter.

April 23, 1885

DR. DEXTER'S ARGUMENTS

Rev. Dr. Dexter, editor of the *Congregationalist*, has been publishing a series of letters upon the subject of woman's suffrage. The articles themselves are not particularly different from most others, written by a wholly conservative man, but he should have credit for having introduced two entirely new arguments. [So] powerful and reasonable are these that a sense of fairness will not allow them to be concealed from the public. His farseeing mind pictures the time when both mistress and servants shall go to the polls, and then propounds the overwhelming question, with an air of triumph, "Who, when the lady of the house and all her servants have gone out to vote, who I say, shall answer the door bell?" It is strange that during the many years in which this question has been agitated no one has thought of this impregnable barrier to woman's suffrage. To the great mind of Dr. Dexter belongs the honor of its discovery and perchance he will have the satisfaction of seeing all the work of the past years utterly demolished by his little question and the intelligent women of the land accept without a murmur this new "sphere" of "answering the door bell."

But the logical mind of this extraordinary man is capable of more than one original idea, and what is most astonishing, the second is quite as profound as the first. He says he is confident that in case of woman's suffrage many a man would repeat his vote under the disguise of a woman's bonnet and veil. Ah, great mind! could you only have spoken a quarter of a century ago, what amounts of money, time and talent might have been saved for some nobler cause.

Although feminists of Carrie Chapman's

generation were interested primarily in obtaining the vote, other cultural issues also received their attention. In this column on women's fashions, Mrs. Chapman describes the relationship between styles of dress and the emancipation of women.

May 14, 1885

FASHION

The modistes of Paris create the fashions of dress and the civilized world makes haste to follow. These authorities, ignorant of hygienic laws and caring only to perpetuate their own business, add new complications every season. So absolutely do they control the manner of dress that if one woman who sees the evil of their system desires to don more comfortable garments, she is ostracized from society, hooted at in the streets and dubbed a "crank." The modistes crowd the form into a stiff corset, preventing a natural breathing even when not worn so tight as to cause greater injury; they hang heavy skirts by close bands around the waist, pressing out of position the internal organs; they put thin shoes upon the feet and a tiny bonnet upon the head, which serves as no protection from wind or cold; they will not allow a coat in winter sufficiently warm to keep one comfortable, lest she present a bungling appearance; in fact, they clothe a woman in as uncomfortable and unhygienic a manner as possible. But what is to be done?

A few years ago a number of New York women banded themselves into an organization called the "Reform Dress Society." It was their object to establish new and comfortable styles of dress, with the expectation that sensible women would follow them, but the public refused to recognize them as authorities, and but little was accomplished. The time had not yet come for the change.

Of late there has been a similar awakening among women. They have arisen in answer to a universal demand for more laborers. Thousands of them have launched out into



Carrie Lane Chapman (Division of Historical Museum and Archives)

new trades and professions. To these business women the inconvenience of the present fashion is apparent, and from them comes a cry for a reform. As yet their demand has been unheeded. The modistes are still the authorities. But is it possible the silly belles of society, with no thought further than their wardrobe, are to establish the forms of dress for intelligent, thinking women to follow? It cannot be. The number of working women is being daily increased, and with every addition their power is strengthened. Soon the right to dictate the dress suitable to their labors will be recognized and the mass of women follow the advice of the pioneer women of New York.

Carrie urged women to pursue careers other than the traditional roles of wife and mother. This, she believed, would help to build women's sense of self-worth and alleviate the tendency to label any woman who remained unmarried past her early twenties an "old maid."

May 21, 1885

OLD MAID

One great cause of early marriages is the pernicious habit of calling a girl who remains [unmarried] until twenty-five an "old maid." This is done by many well-meaning but thoughtless persons who would be sorry if any act or expression of theirs had ever caused one an hour of misery; yet this very dread of being called an "old maid" has driven more women into marriage and life-long misery than any other thing excepting perhaps poverty. A girl, young, sensitive, unused to the rough ways of the world, shrinks from having any stigma cast upon her. When she first hears herself called an "old maid" it is a revelation, and she falls under it as if it were a blow. She feels as if it were an imputation upon her character in some way; and though she may try to laugh it off, the wound is there, and festers and corrodes till the life that was once happy as a bird's has now a skeleton, which she thinks can only be removed by marriage. It is a mistake to think that single life is any less noble than marriage, especially if the spirit of discord is permitted to inflict its horrors upon a whole household.

Let mothers treasure their daughters more; seek to know their inmost feelings in a kind and sympathetic way; win their love and confidence by showing that they have hearts and were once girls and often made mistakes. A girl who has her mother for a confidant is not so anxious to leave the shelter of her home to take "the leap in the dark." For what is it but a leap in the dark? — a species of slavery to one-half the women who marry.

A very mischievous writer once said: "An offer of marriage is the highest compliment a man can pay a woman." It is in some few cases. A great many women have learned to their sorrow that it would have been nearer the truth if it had been written "injustice" instead of compliment. Here is an instance: A young man decides he has reached an age when it would be well for him to take a wife and settle down. He has just started in life, and has enough to furnish a house plainly and comfortably. He and all his friends think the best thing he can do is to marry. He looks around for a wife. Does he look for one in the same station with himself, for one who is earning her own living, who has had experience in the school of economy, who has had a hard struggle and come off conqueror, and would be a true helpmate to him, and who wants a helpmate for herself? No. He goes into society and looks around for the best and most attractive girl he can find. He meets a beautiful young lady, fashionably educated, amiable, confiding, and helpless. He is charmed and decides she is the one he would like to marry. There his reason stops. He "makes love," of course, and "compliments" her with the offer of his hand.

But if he would look on the other side for a moment and ask himself why he wants that beautiful girl, graceful, intelligent and lovely, he would be forced to reply, "I want her to cook, make my beds, clean my house, darn my hose, watch longingly for my return, put up with my ill-humors, economize in every particular for my benefit, be the mother of my children, and bring them up properly, and in return for this I will support her, allow her to bear my name, and when she dies I'll give her a Christian burial." Now, if he looked squarely at this side of the question, he would not be likely to feel that he was doing such a complimentary thing, nor go about it so complacently. And if the young lady saw the realistic side, without the

gloss and roseate hue of poetry, she would not consider that she had been so very highly complimented by the offer.

In the same issue of the Republican, Mrs. Chapman listed several non-traditional careers pursued by the state's women.

Mrs. Scott, the commissioner of the Women's Department at the New Orleans Exposition from Iowa, has supplemented the Iowa exhibit with the following valuable statistics, which will be published in her official report: Number of Iowa farms owned and directed by women, 965; number managed by women, 18; stock farms owned and directed by women, 6; dairy farms, 80; green houses, 8; market gardens, 9; number of women serving at present as County School Superintendents, 13; number managing institutions of learning, 37; number of women physicians, 125; dentists, 3; attorneys at law, 6; ministers, 10; professional nurses, 110; civil engineer, 1.

Carrie Chapman believed that women must ignore the frivolities heaped upon them in American society, including the well-meaning but ultimately degrading "women's pages" in magazines and newspapers.

June 18, 1885

WOMEN'S PAGES

One of the greatest insults paid to modern womanhood, although probably its authors are innocent enough of any wrong intention, are the numerous columns in newspapers "devoted to women," as the head-lines announce, and which contain all sorts of slush and nonsense. They are composed of quibs upon ridiculous subjects that ordinary people would not consider worth reading. Poodle dogs, hair-pins, ice-cream eaters, and "mashes" are specimens of the subjects treated. No true woman can read the headings and then peruse the matter without a feeling of honest indignation. And if any

woman, however weak-minded, could read them with enjoyment, she is so rare an individual as not often to be seen within the pale of common society. Strange as it may seem, some of the largest and most influential newspapers are among the class which publish these columns. If it is necessary to publish such stuff at all, it should at least be placed under a proper head and not cast a stigma upon all womankind by the insinuation that it is mainly intended for her reading. Whatever may be the cause for the appearance of these columns in newspapers, it is certain they do much harm by leading the thoughtless reader unconsciously to a belief that women are only interested in such reading and the natural conclusion to such a belief, that they, as a class, are foolish and nonsensical.

Women's supposed unfamiliarity with politics was a common argument against women's suffrage, and it was one that Carrie strongly objected to. It disgusted her that intelligent, college-educated women were denied the vote while recent and often illiterate immigrants were welcomed to the polling places with open arms. While modern readers may find Carrie's position on immigration and naturalization callous, it must be viewed in the light of the frustration bred of many defeats in the battle for women's suffrage.

August 3, 1885

INTELLIGENT VOTING

One objection to women's suffrage is that "women do not know enough, and would increase the number of ignorant votes."

Upon one occasion, a famous woman's suffragist, who was a college graduate, an author, and a distinguished public speaker, was present at a polling place, using her influence with voters as they came up to accomplish some purpose in which she was interested. She handed a ballot to one man whom she saw standing a little aloof from the others. He could not read it and did not

know which ticket it was. He told her how he wanted to vote and asked her to scratch the ticket for him. After it was prepared, she asked him if he was not in favor of allowing women to vote. He drew himself up with all the dignity he could muster and pronounced a contemptuous "No." She begged him to give his reason and received the comforting reply, as he proudly walked away with his doctored ballot, "they don't know enough."

This objection is generally presented by this class of people, those who are themselves ignorant and have been associated with ignorant women. For this reason, their opinion is scarcely worthy of consideration. Now and then, however, a man or woman of intelligence will use this argument upon the ground that women have but little knowl-

edge of politics.

It is ridiculous to assert that women are more ignorant than men, for statistics give us the fact that there are no more illiterate women than men. The privilege of suffrage given to women could not consequently give an increase of ignorant votes.

It is quite probable that the majority of women are not so familiar with the details of politics as are the majority of men. This fact is, however, no proof of incapacity for such knowledge. There has been no incentive for her to inform herself in this direction. It has been a kind of information she could not use, therefore she made no effort to gain it. . . . The records of schools and colleges have proven beyond a doubt that the mental calibre of the average woman is fully equal to



The Iowa Woman Suffrage Association meeting in Oskaloosa, 1889. Carrie Lane Chapman, wearing a cape, is seated in the first row. (Division of Historical Museum and Archives)

that of the average man. Give her a use for political knowledge and she will possess it. It is not supposed all women would have a love for political knowledge even if the incentive were given them to gain it. All men have not. It will be remembered that Gen. Grant had never voted for President but once before the war, simply from lack of interest. It is possible no longer for opponents of suffrage to cling to this argument of ignorance. Hundreds of women are yearly graduated from our best colleges with the honors of their classes. They are entering every business and profession, and amid protest are rapidly proving their ability and success. They are energetically elbowing their way through all obstacles to that equality of rights which justice declares should be theirs. No one who observes her persevering progress can longer say the mind of woman is unfit to grasp this or that, for there is no field in which she has not manifested her ability to work.

When the negroes were granted the privilege of suffrage, few could read, and they knew nothing of the nature of government. After twenty years of citizenship, even under the most adverse circumstances, they are able as a whole to cast a moderately intelligent vote, while from among them there have developed political thinkers whose opinions have won consideration from the wisest men. Will anyone with fair mind suppose that American women would not achieve as great a success in the field of politics?

It is with much injustice this argument of ignorance is advanced at all. Under present arrangements, the illiterate foreigner, with no comprehension of the broad meaning of our government and with ideas shaped by the environments of his home government, has an influence, through his ballot, in the formation of our political policy, while the American-born woman, patriotic, broad-minded, intelligent, is ruled out. What man is there [who,] as he walks to the polls, a

tramp on one side, a loafer on the other, a drunkard behind, can fail to see the injustice of saying "women do not know enough to vote." It is not alone an injustice to intelligent womanhood, but to the government robbed of the influence of her vote.

That suffrage was already Carrie Chapman's primary concern in 1885 is suggested by the number of columns she devoted to it. Explaining that "it is not our desire to conceal any fact or to underscore any argument," Carrie devoted a number of successive columns to popular objections to the suffrage amendment. Here she refutes one of the arguments.

August 13, 1885

HUSBANDS & WIVES

[One objection to suffrage] is "that the privilege of suffrage granted to women would be a cause of family feuds." It is supposed that whenever the husband and wife cast their votes for different ends a political quarrel and family jar would be sure to ensue as the direct result of a difference of opinion, but, without the ballot, women have opinions — and sometimes very emphatic ones — upon political questions. Subjects frequently arise at the polls which touch very closely woman's special domain — the home. It may be a question of moral example of a candidate, it may be some matter connected with the public schools, it may be a law of the city — hundreds of questions may arise in which the woman who has a care for the welfare of her children must feel intensely. Deprived of all right to express her opinion at the polls, she is forced to plead with her husband that his vote may represent her sentiments. Too many times these husbands, echoing the contempt the government has shown for woman's political judgment, only find amusement in the plea. They are not to be blamed for this. Custom, the sternest of all law-makers, has said for centuries back that a woman's reason was deficient and her

judgment valueless. It is not strange [that] men hold some of this prejudice still, but who is there can tell the bitter tears wives have shed or the heartaches they have endured because husbands gave no consideration to their entreaties? Ah! here is cause for family feuds. Had these women an equal voice with their husbands at the polls, all this would be removed.

That husbands and wives would sometimes quarrel over politics, even did wives have the ballot, is without doubt true. Were it not for politics, they would find some other question upon which to take issue. So long as there have been husbands and wives, there have been causes for differences of opinion between them. In all the world's history there has never been any theme over which excitement has raged so high as religion. Yet we find numerous husbands and wives, believing in different creeds and belonging to different churches, who live in perfect harmony. But, even if this were a prolific cause of "family feuds" there is not an individual in the United States who would say that for this reason women should be allowed no opinions upon religious matters, or that the privilege of church membership be withdrawn from them.

Carrie Chapman and other feminists of her time envisioned vast changes when women achieved suffrage. In this final column, Mrs. Chapman discusses social improvements that would result once women won the right to vote.

September 1, 1885

EXAMPLE AND FATE

Much has been said concerning the probable effects of woman's suffrage. Heretofore, theories only could be advanced. But now, if the experience of Washington and Wyoming territories is any criterion, facts can put an end to discussion. All unbiased observers agree in their testimony that woman's suffrage in those territories has been signally successful. It is said a woman's vote there is

decided by the character of the candidate, rather than by party. No caucus or convention dares to place in nomination men who are not morally clean. This fact alone is sufficient evidence that good order and good government must result. But the effect is even deeper than this. If a spotless character is to be one of the qualifications of officers, a strong stimulus is given men to lead upright lives. At present, go-easy good-fellowism, which governs modern political campaigns, is attended by any amount of evil. The question too many times asked is whether a man will buy votes with a glass of beer or a cigar, rather than if he possesses the proper qualifications for the office. Even in Iowa, one of the foremost states in the Union, there are men filling her highest offices whose private records are black enough to make any woman shudder. With such men lifted into the highest seats of honor, what criterion of character can be held before boys to inspire an ambition to live honorable lives? The facts are that the men who take a social glass, smoke a cigar and generously "treat," who have a fund of low-lived stories at their command and possess enough ability to fulfill some of the requirements of business are the men who secure our best offices. Yet mothers are unable to raise a voice against such a standard of manhood and are obliged to see their sons go to a ruin which their vote might have prevented. The greatest and best reforms of our Nation must come through the enfranchisement of woman. □

Note on Sources

These columns were selected from issues of the *Mason City Republican* on file at the Mason City Public Library. The editor of *The Palimpsest* has corrected errors of spelling and punctuation that appeared in the original newspaper columns.



Carrie Chapman Catt in 1910 (S1151)