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Apr 17th, 4:40 PM - 5:00 PM

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Queen, Anyssa M., "Delia Peets: A Montana Suffragist" (2019). *University of Montana Conference on Undergraduate Research (UMCUR)*. 3.

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Delia Peets: A Montana Suffragist

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University of Montana Conference on Undergraduate Research

In 1914, the state of Montana granted women the right to vote. Two years later, Montanans voted Jeanette Rankin into Congress, and she became the first woman to hold a federal office in the country. Despite its rurality and small population, Montana proved itself to be near the head of the women's suffrage movement, which did not win national recognition until 1920 in the form of the 19th amendment. The lives and work of many of the women who were deeply entrenched in the movement, however, have been lost to us. Jeanette Rankin and other well-known women are clearly important to our history, but these women do not represent all the work done by others. I have attempted to unearth the story of another suffragist that has fallen through the cracks.

Delia Peets was a Montana suffragist and activist that deserves recognition for her work. She made numerous strides in gaining rights for women and worked tirelessly throughout her life to ensure that women received the treatment and equality they deserved.

Peets was born as Delia Moore in November 1862 in Williamstown, New York. Her father was a Canadian immigrant and her mother came from Ireland. She lived in New York into her 20's, though little is known about her time there. Data can be both limited and complicated, as Moore was not a fairly common name in New York at the time, and it is not often that you

find information about children or teenagers outside of censuses unless it was something particularly important. However, there is some information about her connection to the Knights of Labor. She appears to have begun her involvement with them early on and continued her affiliation after moving to Montana. The Knights of Labor was an organization designed to help protect workers from retaliation from their employers. The organization was largely focused on strikes around the time that Peets was associated with them in New York, but due to events such as the Haymarket Square Riot in 1886 and the Panic of 1893, the Knights of Labor's numbers dropped drastically, and they lost much of their relevance by the time Peets was once again involved with them while living in Montana.

By 1890, Delia Peets had moved to Butte, Montana, where she became most involved in club work. From the time she moved to Butte until at least 1913, she worked as a housekeeper at several hotels, namely the McDermott, though many records only show that she worked at a hotel without a proper name given. Her time in this position led to a lot of her activism in the community. She understood the needs of other working women and decided early on that she was going to try to do something that would help meet those needs. Seven years after her move to Butte, she married a man by the name of Enoch W. Peets, and thus from 1897 on she was known as Mrs. Delia Peets. Her activism surrounds this date, thus in her many organizations she can be found as Delia Moore or Delia Peets, but I have referred to her as Peets and will continue to for clarity.

Peets quickly made a name for herself as an activist in Butte. In 1890, she was a founding member of the Butte Women's Protective Union. Thirty-three members gathered at their first meeting and Peets was one of six women that was appointed to the committee to draft the constitution and bylaws of the union. She then served as their president from at least 1890 to

1891. The purpose of the union was to “elevate the sex intellectually, morally, and socially, and to bring the members into close relations with one another.” It was the only union in the state consisting of all women, and they campaigned for a fair wage, unemployment insurance, shorter working days, and national health insurance, among other things. In 1894 the Women’s Protective Union had established the Women’s Industrial Institute, which was one of two homes in Butte that was created to house working women. Peets served as matron of the house.

Throughout its existence, the Women’s Protective Union associated itself with various other worker’s groups, such as the Knights of Labor, the Western Labor Union, which was later called the American Labor Union, and was partially founded by the Women’s Protective Union, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union, also known as HERE. The Women’s Protective Union originally was a class union which accepted all working women, but its association with HERE beginning in 1907 pushed it toward becoming a trade or craft union instead. In this same year, they began to accept black women into the union.

Though it had humble beginnings, by the time of Delia Peets’ death in 1929, the Women’s Protective Union had around 500 members. By 1945, that number had nearly doubled, and they had made numerous strides throughout their existence. The union had not only procured an eight-hour work day, but they had also reduced the work week to six days a week and got the right to overtime, paid vacation, and sick leave.

Peets was involved in other groups, such as the Deer Lodge Trades and Labor Assembly, the Butte Consumers’ League, the Ladies of Blue and Gray, and the Women’s Relief Corps. She served as president of the Consumers’ League in 1919 and 1920, which fought for better working conditions, particularly for those who made consumer goods, and higher quality and regulation

of the goods themselves. The Ladies of Blue and Gray, created in 1898, had a different, more patriotic focus, and aimed to provide aid for widows and dependents of fallen soldiers.

Delia Peets was particularly active in the Women's Relief Corps, another patriotic organization, which she was involved in from at least 1894 until 1922. During this time, she held several important titles. In 1909 she first served as an inspector for Montana during the 27th National Convention of the Women's Relief Corps, in 1911 she was an alternate for the 29th National Convention, and in 1915 she was the chairman of a Women's Relief Corps committee that attended the Forty-third Annual Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic, which the Women's Relief Corps was an auxiliary of. From 1921 to 1922, Peets became the president of the Montana chapter of the organization. The Women's Relief Corps was established after the Civil War for patriotic women who were loyal to the Union and desired to help veterans, their families, and the memory of the war. Given that there is only so long that a group can help veterans of a particular war, this original basis shifted over the years, and the organization chose to aid veterans of all wars and focus on patriotism and loyalty.

Many of the organizations that Delia Peets played a role in had deep connections to the suffrage movement. Of particular note were the Women's Relief Corps, the Consumers' League, and the Women's Protective Union. Peets also was personally involved in the successful statewide campaign for women's suffrage in Montana overseen by the National American Woman Suffrage Association, which concluded with the adoption of woman suffrage in 1914.

There is not much information about Delia Peets' life outside of her organizations. As stated earlier, she married Enoch W. Peets in Butte in the winter of 1897, which is known to be her first and only marriage. Based on census records, it does not appear that the couple ever had children, though the exact reasoning for this is unknown. Delia Peets' sister, Mary Hughes lived

in the area around the same time that Peets did and was buried with the same tombstone as her sister and Mr. Peets. Delia Peets died in 1929 in Butte after a life of activism. The research I have done shows that no one is ever insignificant when they are so dedicated to their cause.