

“Ideal Press Work”:  
The Contributions of Kentucky Suffrage Press Superintendents to Public  
Relations History

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**Abstract**

Kentucky state press superintendents, who might be called today publicists, performed vital work in women’s suffrage associations. Keeping Kentucky newspapers supplied with ready-to-print material on the women’s suffrage movement, writing original articles, maintaining relationships with newspaper editors, and clipping published material were among the responsibilities and activities of the press superintendents. In April 1898, Jessie Jane Cassidy, press superintendent for the National-American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), described the importance of “ideal press work” in reaching most U.S. newspapers and cited reasons why the state suffrage associations did not meet “ideal press work.” This research examines the press work of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association (KERA) in response to NAWSA’s “ideal press work” paradigm. Overall, Kentucky’s press superintendents had difficulties in meeting the “ideal press work” standard set forth by Cassidy, but progress and achievements were noted. This examination not only showcases the worthiness of publicity efforts among suffrage press superintendents, but it also sheds light on the balance these women sought to achieve between gaining their full right to vote and living their lives. Further, this study helps to fill a gap in the public relations historiography on the contributions of women. This study has implications for today’s women who face similar struggles in their battles for equalities.

**Introduction**

State press superintendents, who today might be called publicists, publicity agents or public relations specialists, performed vital work in women’s suffrage associations in Kentucky. Among their responsibilities were keeping newspapers supplied with ready-to-print material on the women’s suffrage movement, writing original articles, maintaining relationships with newspaper editors, and clipping published material. In the April 1898 *National Suffrage Bulletin*, a monthly newsletter for the National-American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), Jessie

Jane Cassidy, national press superintendent, wrote a nearly three-page article that described the importance of “ideal press work” in reaching the majority of U.S. newspapers:

Ideal press work for suffrage would reach, at least, all of the dailies, tri weeklies, semi-weeklies and weeklies, – which would be 17,148 papers. Do we do this now? No, we do not.<sup>1</sup>

Cassidy cited three reasons why “ideal press work” was not being met by the state suffrage associations. For one, the number of press workers was insufficient; also, newspaper editors preferred original content over duplicated material; finally, getting the best material to be published as news was challenging.

The press superintendents for the Kentucky Equal Rights Association (K-ERA), which submitted their reports to NAWSA and received correspondence from the national organization, observed these three problems in carrying out their work, according to minutes of the organization’s state conventions.<sup>2</sup> On November 22, 1888, representatives from Fayette and Kenton counties had formed K-ERA and elected Laura Clay as its first president. Until Kentucky became the 23<sup>rd</sup> state to ratify the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment on January 6, 1920, K-ERA’s press efforts documented progress in rallying publication of their materials in newspapers, as well as the personal and professional setbacks that the press superintendents encountered along the way.

This research examines the press work of the K-ERA against the “ideal press work” paradigm set forth by the NAWSA, while also exploring the balance women sought in their suffrage actions and their personal lives. Focusing on one state allows a deep dive into the issue, rather than the broader strokes of a national focus. Women who were heads of households and taxpayers won the right to vote on tax and education issues in rural areas of Kentucky in 1838, ten years before the Seneca Falls Convention, making Kentucky the first in the nation where women could participate in the electoral process since New Jersey revoked women’s access to the ballot in 1807. Convention reports for most years since the founding of the K-ERA and during the suffrage movement were obtained. Plus, convention minutes, primarily those containing reports of press work, were included in this study. These materials showed that Kentucky’s press superintendents had a difficult time meeting the “ideal press work” standard

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<sup>1</sup> J. J. Cassidy, “Ideal Press Work,” in *National Suffrage Bulletin* 3, no. 8 (April 1898): 2. The *National Suffrage Bulletin*, volumes 3-5, is available for download via Google Books.

<sup>2</sup> Reports of the Fifteenth Annual Convention held November 17 and 18, 1904, in Lexington, Kentucky, and the Nineteenth Annual Convention held November 17 and 18, 1908, in Richmond, Kentucky. These documents, and other Kentucky ERA convention reports, are available through the Kentucky Digital Library, <http://kdl.kyvl.org/>.

set forth by Cassidy, despite Kentucky's prominence in the suffrage movement. Progress and achievements, however, were noted in convention reports and minutes, too. Other variables also prevented an "ideal press work" from occurring for a press superintendent, such as illness, death and other personal affairs. Two superintendents offered accounts in their reports as to why press work might have slipped, as women of this era were trying to raise families, be involved in other community engagements, and take care of themselves. Therefore, this examination not only showcases the worthiness of the publicity efforts among suffrage press superintendents in Kentucky, but it also sheds light on the balance these women sought to achieve between gaining their full right to vote and living their lives. Further, this study helps to fill a gap in the public relations historiography on the contributions of women in this field. Plus, it draws parallels for today's women working in highly competitive fields such as journalism and public relations as they face similar struggles of choices between career and family, and continue to fight for work-related equalities. Through this study, the work of one press superintendent, Lida Calvert Obenchain, is discussed extensively, largely because of the resources available.

No academic literature could be found specifically on the role of press superintendents in suffrage organizations such as the K-ERA through a search using "suffrage press superintendents" in the databases Communication & Mass Media Complete, ComAbstracts, Communication Abstracts, Proquest Theses and Dissertations, Google, and Google Scholar. This research apparently would be the first scholarly investigation of such work.

### **Method of examination**

The Kentucky Digital Library has an online collection of 13 publications containing the minutes and reports of the K-ERA's annual conventions, beginning in 1890 and ending in 1907.<sup>3</sup> This amounts to 412 pages. Unfortunately, not every year within that 17-year span offered a press report. Although Cassidy wrote her article in 1898, every publication in the collection was reviewed for any indications of hardships or progress that the press superintendents experienced in advancing suffrage news. Thus, the following nine publications provided reports of press work and were included in this paper as primary sources: 1894, 1898, 1899, 1901, 1903, 1904, 1905, 1906, and 1907.

Each of these available reports on press work was reviewed for instances in which the superintendent explained hardships (personal, such as family, or association, such as problems with the demands of the position), challenges, progress or celebrations that she might have experienced in preventing her from achieving "ideal press work." Specifically, attention was devoted to comments that could respond to one or more of Cassidy's three reasons why "ideal

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<sup>3</sup> The Kentucky Digital Library was accessed at [kdl.kyvl.org](http://kdl.kyvl.org).

press work” was not being met. Other aspects of the press superintendent’s reports also were documented, and this paper highlights some of these instances where appropriate. The next section provides insights into newspapers and public relations of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that will serve as helpful context to the suffrage press.

### **Background information: Early 20<sup>th</sup> century newspapers and public relations**

This section provides information on two landscapes: 1. the newspaper industry before the suffrage era, particularly in the first decade of the early twentieth century when the intensity of Kentucky’s press efforts increased, and 2. public relations, particularly on the idea that nineteenth and early twentieth century publicists used their press relations and reputations to influence and change public opinion.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the number of newspapers registered at a record high. According to the U.S. Census of 1910, there were 2,200 English-language daily newspapers of general circulation and about 14,000 weekly newspapers.<sup>4</sup> In many instances, the owners of small, weekly papers were the only staff members, and some operated as family businesses.<sup>5</sup>

For newspapers in small towns and rural areas, the wire services would prove essential in filling the pages with state, national and world news. Using automated transmission equipment, The Associated Press, United Press International, and other wire services established uniform news products that went to small towns as well as big cities and served to standardize the formats of news articles.<sup>6</sup>

With 51% of the population of the United States still classified as rural before World War I, small newspapers played vital roles in their respective communities, often serving as political voices.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, coverage of the campaign for women’s right to vote, ending with the addition of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920, set the agenda for enhanced visibility of women’s issues. Large newspapers established women’s pages, where content about suffrage and other items of interest for women could be found. In the early 1900s, women’s sections covered “the changing progress of women in jobs and professions and their demands for voting and other legal reforms.”<sup>8</sup> Women’s pages have long been criticized for offering frivolous content, but they have been a platform where women’s voices were heard

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census 1910, Final Reports, Vol. 8: Manufactures: General Report and Analysis, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Wm. David Sloan and James D. Startt, *The Media in America: A History* (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 1996), 352.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>8</sup> Marion Marzolf, *Up From the Footnote: A History of Women Journalists* (New York: Hasting House, 1977), 207.

on several issues, including the suffragist movement.<sup>9</sup> In many newspapers, stories about women's suffrage first appeared on the women's pages rather than the front pages of American newspapers.<sup>10</sup>

An important development of late nineteenth and early twentieth century newspapers, which has implications for the scope of this essay, was the emergence of the byline – a reporter's name placed before the start of a story to signify the source of authorship for the reader. The practice of using a byline started after the Civil War. Most correspondents wrote anonymously during the war, using a pen name or no name at all. The practice brought an element of secrecy, allowing the reporters to work better.<sup>11</sup> Signatures and signed articles became more common at newspapers by the late 1890s to reflect the growing status of journalists.

In the southern states during suffrage, women largely made up the readership for newspapers. The *Birmingham Iron Age* in Alabama featured a short notice penned by an editor in 1874 that established just how readily women in the South invested in their news:

An experienced editor pays a high and deserved compliment to the fair patrons of the press. 'Women,' he says, 'are the best subscribers in the world to newspapers, magazines, etc. We have been editor for forty years, and never lost a dollar by female subscribers. They seem to make it a point of conscientious duty to pay the preacher and the printer – two classes of the community that suffer more by bad pay and no pay at all than all the rest put together.'<sup>12</sup>

Although southern women were invested news consumers, evidence of their contributions to journalism during this time was minimal. The frequent absence of bylines could have easily hidden the identities of female writers, but reporters during this time were largely male. There were exceptions. For instance, bylines were used for Dorothy Dix, a Tennessee native known for her work as a journalist and advice columnist and early suffrage supporter.<sup>13</sup> Bylines for Dix and other "celebrity journalists" became indicative of the era of

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<sup>9</sup> Dustin Harp, *Desperately Seeking Women Readers* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Marzolf, *Up From the Footnote*; Kay Mills, *A Place in the News: From the Women's Pages to the Front Page* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1988); S. Miller, "Changes in Women's/Lifestyle Sections," *Journalism Quarterly* 1976, 53.

<sup>11</sup> Ford Risley, "Birth of the Byline," *The New York Times Opinionator* blog, April 22, 2013, [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/22/birth-of-the-byline/?\\_r=1](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/22/birth-of-the-byline/?_r=1).

<sup>12</sup> "An Experienced Editor," *Birmingham Iron Age*, September 28, 1874.

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Dix was the pen name for Elizabeth Meriwether, who became involved in early suffrage efforts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She wrote a series of advice columns, "Dorothy Dix Talks," and covered murder trials for

yellow journalism – a style of nineteenth-century newspaper reporting that emphasized sensationalism over facts and focused on investigative reporting and crime and city life.<sup>14</sup> This period in journalism history was ushered in by competing newspaper publishers Joseph Pulitzer (*New York World*) and William Randolph Hearst (*New York Evening Journal*), both of whom promoted their best writers, such as Nellie Bly and Ambrose Bierce, respectively, by rewarding them with bylines, making celebrities out of them, or adding to their established celebrity.<sup>15</sup> Many other publishers of the Pulitzer and Hearst era, however, discredited bylines because more attention was placed on the writer, not the publication as a collective unit.

Now that the pre-suffrage newspaper industry has been explored briefly, attention now will turn to discussions of how nineteenth and early twentieth century publicists used their press relations and reputations to influence and change public opinion. The role that publicists played in public relations history in the United States often is overlooked.<sup>16</sup> However, the work of Edward L. Bernays generally is noticed in the public relations historiography.<sup>17</sup> A young entertainment promoter, Bernays worked on the Committee on Public Information designed by the U.S. government to combat the threat of German propaganda during World War I. Because Germany's use of propaganda during the war corrupted the meaning of the term, Bernays created the "counsel on public relations" in the early 1920s.<sup>18</sup> For Bernays, this reflected a significant milestone because it paved the new professionalized field of public relations practice.<sup>19</sup>

Given the role that Bernays had in early public relations development, three major assumptions often are regarded as the foundation of public relations history.<sup>20</sup> First, this early history argues that pre-World War I public relations was unethical, unprofessional, and poorly

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William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*. Known as a "sob sister," Dix's courtroom stories often portrayed women on trial as victims.

<sup>14</sup> "U.S. Diplomacy and Yellow Journalism, 1895-1898," *Office of the Historian*, accessed December 26, 2016, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/yellow-journalism>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Cayce Myers, "Publicists in U.S. Public Relations History: An Analysis of the Representations of Publicists, 1815-1918," *American Journalism*, 34:1 (2017): 71-90.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Bernays, *Public Relations* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), 11-125.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Bernays, *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel Edward L. Bernays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 287.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (New York: Liveright, 1923), 11-60; Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Liveright, 1928), 37-58; Edward Bernays, "The Engineering of Consent," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 250 (March 1947): 113-20.

<sup>20</sup> Myers, "Publicists in U.S. Public Relations History: An Analysis of the Representations of Publicists, 1815-1918."

regarded in popular society. Second, this history established an era of public relations that argues that modern public relations is a post-World War I phenomenon that originated in the United States. Third, Bernays is seen as a facilitator of great change in public relations, that he constructed the field by making his new “counsel on public relations” a stand-alone profession that relied on psychological communication.<sup>21</sup> However, this early history of public relations leaves out the significant contributions of grassroots organizations, women, politics, press agents, semi-professional public relations practitioners, lesser-known practitioners, international influences, and publicists.<sup>22</sup> Scholars have noted that a complete PR history requires the acknowledgment of the contributions of women, minorities, and other non-institutionalized PR practice.<sup>23</sup> Publicists used relationships with the press, popular writings, and public speeches to advocate for particular viewpoints to shift public opinion, making their presence noteworthy in early U.S. public relations.<sup>24</sup> This information is critical to keep in mind as the suffrage press work in Kentucky is visited.

### National suffrage press work

It is necessary to discuss how suffrage press work was perceived on the national level before exploring Kentucky’s press efforts. Cassidy, in the same newsletter article, wrote that press work to advance suffrage was accomplished on two levels. First, agents were assigned by national headquarters to all suffrage states to act as state press superintendents. Second, each local club had a suffragist to oversee press efforts. This two-fold process was necessary to avoid duplication of material published in newspapers and to oversee publication of suffrage work. In the early years since the formation of the K-ERA, efforts by Kentucky’s press superintendents to increase newspaper coverage of suffrage were slow. Cassidy argued that national press organizers should educate clubs on the subject of press work more fully than most of them do.

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<sup>21</sup> Bernays, *Biography of an Idea*, 287.

<sup>22</sup> Myers, “Publicists in U.S. Public Relations History: An Analysis of the Representations of Publicists, 1815-1918.”

<sup>23</sup> Karen Russell and Meg Opdycke Lamme, “Public Relations and Business Responses to the Civil Rights Movement,” *Public Relations Review* 39, no. 1 (2013): 63–73; Margot Opdycke Lamme, *Public Relations and Religion in American History: Evangelism, Temperance, and Business* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1–37; Meg Opdycke Lamme, “The ‘Public Sentiment Building Society’: The Anti-Saloon League of America, 1895–1910,” *Journalism History* 29, no. 3 (2003): 123–132; Meg Opdycke Lamme, “Tapping into War: Leveraging World War I in the Drive for a Dry Nation,” *American Journalism* 21, no. 4 (2004): 63–91; Karla Gower, “US Corporate Public Relations in the Progressive Era,” *Journal of Communication Management* 12, no. 4 (2008): 305–318.

<sup>24</sup> Myers, “Publicists in U.S. Public Relations History: An Analysis of the Representations of Publicists, 1815-1918.”

Our state officers should see that it is their responsibility to educate their clubs to do the press work in this way. State press officers were responsible for teaching clubs how to do effective press work. They should all co-operate with the state press superintendent.<sup>25</sup>

Cassidy's push for ideal press work reflected a foundational belief that the purpose not only was to educate the public about suffrage but to encourage women to join the campaign. Suffragists generally had little money to give. Time and money were viewed as equal resources. "She who cannot give money, but wants the suffrage, must be led to see that it is her responsibility to give her time," Cassidy wrote.<sup>26</sup>

In 1907, the argument for more press work resurfaced under national press superintendent Elizabeth Hauser, who also urged state suffrage associations to handle their own press work and rely less on the national organization.<sup>27</sup> At NAWSA's fortieth annual convention in October 1908 in Buffalo, New York, Hauser, in her press report, acknowledged that press work on the national level was tedious in assisting state press work officers in 24 states and sub-chairmen in eight others. Addressing "more than 20,000 envelopes yearly," engaging in "correspondence with the State Chairmen," and reading newspaper clippings were among the "mere mechanical part of this work."<sup>28</sup>

Hauser reported further that suffrage states should pursue their own press work with as much autonomy as possible, given that they were organized to do the work. This would allow the NAWSA press superintendent to have more time and energy for special work, such as greater publicity efforts.

If each State would assume its own press work, requiring nothing of the National but regular consignments of material, and we had to carry no mailing list except one of State Chairmen, this would leave the National Chairman free to do special work. Our principal energies have been devoted to building up the work in the States and to supplying such material as we have learned by experience is most apt to be used by the newspapers.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cassidy, "Ideal Press Work," 4.

<sup>26</sup> Cassidy, "Ideal Press Work," 4.

<sup>27</sup> The Hand Book of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and Proceedings of the fortieth annual convention of the National-American Woman Suffrage Association, Buffalo, New York (Oct. 15-21, 1908).

<sup>28</sup> The Hand Book of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and Proceedings, 53.

<sup>29</sup> The Hand Book of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and Proceedings, 53-54.



Suffrage press superintendents were responsible for educating the public and newspaper editors about the campaign, Hauser said. In fact, writing articles and establishing cordial relationships with newspaper editors had paid dividends for the suffrage cause. In addition to promoting suffrage, state press officers were to handle what Hauser called the “best kind of press work,” which was to respond to newspaper content that pushed the anti-suffrage influence.<sup>30</sup>

And we do not hesitate to state that there never was so much woman suffrage material in the newspapers and other publications as today. ... We have had many opportunities to supply material to writers preparing stories for the magazines and have not failed to take advantage of them in a single instance. It has been our privilege to suggest articles ... to several writers and subsequently to see these articles in some of the leading publications; also to ask various state workers to reply to adverse newspaper stories. This is the best kind of press work.<sup>31</sup>

### Kentucky suffrage press superintendents

Beginning in 1890, the earliest year when the digitized version of a K-ERA convention report is available, no woman filled the position of superintendent of press work. Therefore, no press report was issued. However, this does not mean that concerns of newspaper coverage were not important. Often, the suffragists wrote papers that were converted to articles for publication in newspapers or the national magazine, *Woman's Journal*.

According to the digitized collection, the first superintendent of press work for the K-ERA was Mrs. M. F. Hibberd, a member of the Louisville Equal Rights Association. She served in the role in 1891 and 1892. No press reports from her, if any were written, were published in the convention minutes. Her successor, Sarah G. Humphreys of Versailles, fulfilled the role from 1893-97. Beginning in 1894 and each year thereafter, Humphreys submitted brief reports at annual K-ERA conventions. These reports shed little explanations. For instance, in 1894, her report consisting of one paragraph of nine lines indicated “the support of the Lexington papers has been secured.”<sup>32</sup> No other details were provided to support this phrase. She noted many women who had contributed articles, with Humphreys having written “frequent articles” for the *Lexington Gazette* and several for the *Courier-Journal*.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The Hand Book of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and Proceedings, 54-55.

<sup>31</sup> The Hand Book of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and Proceedings, 54-55.

<sup>32</sup> Item 16 of Kentucky Equal Rights Association, Minutes of the Seventh Annual Convention, Held at Merrick Lodge, Lexington, Kentucky (1894).

<sup>33</sup> Item 16 of Kentucky Equal Rights Association, Minutes of the Seventh Annual Convention, Held at Merrick Lodge, Lexington, Kentucky (1894).

Humphreys issued no report in 1895, and no minutes were available for 1896. Her next report came in November 1897, when she indicated that she sent eight articles a week in the past year to papers in Kentucky. Although she claimed to have had 102 papers on her “regular list” and have sent articles to other papers, the report did not indicate how many of the articles were published.<sup>34</sup>

In the following year, from November 1897 to August 1898, Humphreys was deterred from work by sickness.<sup>35</sup> From August to October in 1898, she only kept up with weekly installments of literature. As a result of her circumstances, Humphreys decided to leave her post.

Owing to an absence of probably six months each year from the state, I regretfully tender my resignation as Superintendent. I suggest that a fund be raised in the Association to supply my successor with postage for the work.<sup>36</sup>

After Humphreys resigned, the K-ERA would not have a press superintendent for nearly two years. The digital collection did not have any press reports in 1899 or 1900. The search for a new state press superintendent became a priority, even on the national level. This was likely because the NAWSA president at the time was Laura Clay of Kentucky.

### Lida Calvert Obenchain

In 1899, Elnora Babcock, superintendent of press work at the NAWSA headquarters, urged the Kentucky association to appoint a press superintendent and recommended that postage be paid for by the state association, which the convention delegates later approved. The call was answered in 1900, when K-ERA President Laura Clay recruited Bowling Green ERA President Lida Calvert Obenchain to the role of press superintendent. While she advanced ready-to-print material on the women’s suffrage movement to newspapers, much of the material she submitted was her own commentary. In her role as press superintendent, Obenchain was remarkably successful, publishing more than 500 articles in Kentucky newspapers in 1901.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Item 27 of Kentucky Equal Rights Association Journals of the Ninth Annual Convention Held at Guild Hall, Trinity Church, Covington, Kentucky, October 14 and 15, 1897, and of the Tenth Annual Convention Held at Court House, Richmond, Kentucky, December 1, 1898.

<sup>35</sup> Item 27 of Kentucky Equal Rights Association Journals of the Ninth Annual Convention Held at Guild Hall, Trinity Church, Covington, Kentucky, October 14 and 15, 1897, and of the Tenth Annual Convention Held at Court House, Richmond, Kentucky, December 1, 1898.

<sup>36</sup> Item 27 of Kentucky Equal Rights Association Journals of the Ninth Annual Convention Held at Guild Hall, Trinity Church, Covington, Kentucky, October 14 and 15, 1897, and of the Tenth Annual Convention Held at Court House, Richmond, Kentucky, December 1, 1898.

<sup>37</sup> Amy Roe, “Eliza Calvert Hall, 1856-1935,” *ExploreKYHistory*, accessed September 29, 2018, <http://explorekyhistory.ky.gov/items/show/381>.

The one newspaper in which she failed to obtain space for her articles was the *Courier-Journal*, whose editor, Henry Watterson, was unrelenting in his opposition to women's suffrage.<sup>38</sup>

Based on the minutes provided in the digital archives, Obenchain had been involved in suffrage concerns since 1897 when she wrote papers and other contributions to the K-ERA conventions each year. She was a frequent contributor to the *Woman's Journal* in 1899. She also served as corresponding secretary in the Bowling Green association, handing out literature and traveling to Nashville to present papers.<sup>39</sup>

Obenchain had a two-year gap in reports, her first one given in 1901.<sup>40</sup> Each report thereafter until 1908 contained rich explanations about her work – successes, challenges, and failures in increasing press activity about suffrage. Her elaborate reports, eventually noticed by national suffrage officials, were a stark contrast from the reports of her predecessors. In 1901, on her newspaper contact list, she had 38 papers, “the leading ones in the state.”<sup>41</sup> Having published more than 500 suffrage articles in the past year, she began a frequent plea for local associations to appoint superintendents. She also expressed “a special desire that all our college papers may have frequent contributions.”<sup>42</sup>

She did not issue a report at the 1902 convention. Therefore, her October 7, 1903, report contained the work of two years. Obenchain indicated that she had a “disappointing” year in 1902, “owing to sickness, death and the loss of a servant who had been a tower of strength to me for thirteen years.”<sup>43</sup> Consequently, she begged Clay to relieve her of her duties, at least temporarily. Rather, the K-ERA – through Clay's suggestion – helped Obenchain to hire a house girl with a monthly payment of \$5. “I gladly consented to this arrangement,” Obenchain wrote in her report.<sup>44</sup> This might have been a factor to help Obenchain increase her contact list of newspapers from 38 to 60, which was “one-fifth of the newspapers in the State.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Roe, “Eliza Calvert Hall, 1856-1935.”

<sup>39</sup> Item 27 of Kentucky Equal Rights Association Journals of the Ninth Annual Convention Held at Guild Hall, Trinity Church, Covington, Kentucky. October 14 and 15, 1897, and of the Tenth Annual Convention Held at Court House, Richmond, Kentucky. December 1, 1898.

<sup>40</sup> Item 9 of Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Trinity Church, Covington, Kentucky, October 17-18, 1901.

<sup>41</sup> Item 9 of Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Trinity Church, Covington, Kentucky, October 17-18, 1901.

<sup>42</sup> Item 9 of Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Trinity Church, Covington, Kentucky, October 17-18, 1901.

<sup>43</sup> Item 15, Minutes of the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Guild Hall, Trinity Episcopal Church, Covington, Kentucky, November 11-12, 1903.

<sup>44</sup> Item 15, Minutes of the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Guild Hall, Trinity Episcopal Church, Covington, Kentucky, November 11-12, 1903.

<sup>45</sup> Item 15, Minutes of the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Guild Hall, Trinity Episcopal Church, Covington, Kentucky, November 11-12, 1903.

Along with her personal struggles, Obenchain noted the “usual difficulty in getting replies from all the editors.”<sup>46</sup> However, based on the replies she received, the editors were “molders of public opinion,” specifically “men of broad and enlightened views of the woman question, and when it comes to the battle royal for Equal Rights the press of Kentucky will give us chivalric aid.”<sup>47</sup>

At the 1904 convention, Obenchain reported that 76 newspapers in 59 cities published suffrage matter “either regularly or occasionally.”<sup>48</sup> Further, within the past year, she had launched efforts to approach the non-suffrage editors. “No matter how many times an editor has refused our suffrage articles, he must be appealed to at least once a year,” she reported.<sup>49</sup> She considered this initiative as evidence of the growth she was having early in her tenure as press superintendent.

... a year ago the editor of one of the best papers in the state said, in reply to my annual letter of inquiry, that he hardly thought it worth while for me to send any more suffrage articles, as he published very few of them. I retained the paper on my list, telling him that even two or three articles in a paper like his were worth much to the suffrage cause. Twice in the last few weeks I have had papers from him with marked articles printed in large print and conspicuously placed with ornamental borders around them. Another who had refused twice to publish suffrage matter gave a courteous acceptance a month ago. Somehow or other he had become converted.<sup>50</sup>

In the same 1904 report, Obenchain described the kind of responses she received from the newspaper editors.

One editor reminds me that “The hand that rocks the cradle rocks the world;” another says that if women attend to their home duties they will have no time for anything else; another expresses skepticism as to the final success of the suffrage movement, but says he admires our persistency; another consents to publish our articles occasionally, but

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<sup>46</sup> Item 15, Minutes of the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Guild Hall, Trinity Episcopal Church, Covington, Kentucky, November 11-12, 1903.

<sup>47</sup> Item 15, Minutes of the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Guild Hall, Trinity Episcopal Church, Covington, Kentucky, November 11-12, 1903.

<sup>48</sup> Item 16 of Minutes of the Fifteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Rooms of the Lexington Woman's Club of Central Kentucky, November 17-18, 1904.

<sup>49</sup> Item 16 of Minutes of the Fifteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Rooms of the Lexington Woman's Club of Central Kentucky, November 17-18, 1904.

<sup>50</sup> Item 16 of Minutes of the Fifteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Rooms of the Lexington Woman's Club of Central Kentucky, November 17-18, 1904.

says he does not want to give us too much help. The most satisfactory form of reply I have ever received was an emphatic “yes!” with an exclamation point after it. Just that word and nothing more, but it said plainly: “I am an enthusiastic believer in women suffrage and will gladly publish your articles.” I commend this style of answer to all editors.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to writing articles for papers, state press superintendents wrote articles for the national press superintendent. Obenchain frequently contributed pieces to Babcock, so much so that she began to advocate for greater resources, such as “facilities for syndicating the articles” she wrote, to help her meet press work demands.

Frequently, I write a special which ought to be sent out immediately, in order to be timely, and sent to all the newspapers in the state, all I mean that are on my list. I cannot afford to have 75 or even 35 copies made, so there is nothing to do but send it as a special to one paper, or send it to Mrs. Babcock and wait one, two or three weeks for it. A suffragist with a typewriter or a mimeographing apparatus would be a great help in this work.<sup>52</sup>

Obenchain also wrote in 1904 that an assistant press superintendent ought to be appointed by each local association. “These assistants could watch the papers, report to me whether the editor was using our articles or not, and send me newspaper clippings concerning events that have a bearing on the suffrage question,” she reported.<sup>53</sup>

In 1905, Obenchain’s press work continued to grow. She submitted 1,974 syndicate articles and pamphlets to newspapers, and fifteen special articles were written for the national press bureau and individual papers. In addition, her list of newspapers grew to 90 papers, 14 more than previous report.<sup>54</sup> It is unclear how the papers were identified. However, once a paper was placed on the contact list, Obenchain viewed it as opportunity to educate the editor about suffrage, even if he refused to print her articles. This differed from what Babcock suggested to state press chairs at a national convention the same year.

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<sup>54</sup> Item 15 of Minutes of the Sixteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at the Spiritual Temple, Newport, Kentucky, November 10, 1905.

I notice that in Mrs. Babcock's report at the convention in Portland, she recommends dropping a paper unless it publishes half the articles sent. ... it seems to me too exacting a measure at this stage of suffrage in Kentucky, and I continue to cling to any paper that once comes on my list unless the editor positively refuses to publish anything for me. .... I think an editor is very likely to read our literature even when he does not publish it, and a year's reading of such suffrage matter as we send must have its effect on the most prejudiced mind.<sup>55</sup>

Enlightening newspaper editors about suffrage and the purpose of the K-ERA was one of Obenchain's "two aims" in 1905.<sup>56</sup> Her second goal was to ensure that they did not see the press function of suffrage as "a machine for sending out syndicated articles written by strangers" and to personify her role as press superintendent who "watches every newspaper on the list, reads every newspaper that the editor sends, takes note of every suffrage article published, and is grateful for every courtesy an editor shows."<sup>57</sup> What she learned was that many editors were ignorant of the group's work and purpose. To help change that, through K-ERA President Laura Clay, Obenchain obtained a bundle of pamphlets, titled "What the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Has Done," and sent copies to the editors. She asked them to read the literature and write an editorial about the value of the suffrage work being done. Plus, she invited them to comment on any part of the work they would like to see changed or undone. Only four editors sent her the papers containing the editorials she requested.<sup>58</sup>

By 1906, Obenchain claimed 100 papers on her contact list. One-third of those were edited by men "in favor of Equal Rights or who are willing to hear both sides of a question, and gladly give place to our literature."<sup>59</sup> Perhaps her proudest moment as press superintendent – likely more so as a suffragist – during this time was the shift in opinion at the state's largest newspaper, the *Louisville Courier Journal*.

... more striking is an editorial utterance of the *Courier Journal*, within the last month, recommending that the sphere of woman's influence be extended in order that she may

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<sup>59</sup> Item 12 of Minutes of the Seventeenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Ashland, Kentucky, November 21 and 22, 1906.

have some supervision over our factories, our public schools, our insane asylums, and all other charitable and eleemosynary institutions — just what the Ky. E. R. A. has been striving for these many years.<sup>60</sup>

Obenchain also described the positive direction of the presence of suffrage material in the newspapers. She wrote, “I think no one can read the newspaper of this state without realizing that public sentiment is everywhere moving in the direction of “Equal Rights for All; Special Privileges for None.”<sup>61</sup> It is possible that more newspapers in the commonwealth championed suffrage by publishing her material or reported both sides of the issue on the news pages. However, Obenchain lacked the resources to obtain such information, thus resonating again in her reports the need for additional press workers in the local associations.

From the other two thirds I have courteous promises to print an occasional article, but having no local press workers in the towns where these papers are published, I cannot tell whether their promises are always kept.<sup>62</sup>

In 1907, Obenchain’s press work was regarded highly at the state convention, so much so that the executive committee approved that she be paid \$50 as salary for her work up to November 1, 1907. Then, after she was voted press superintendent for another year, convention delegates affirmed the executive committee’s recommendation that she be paid a salary of \$60 a year, “provided there are sufficient free will offerings.”<sup>63</sup>

Obenchain, in her 1907 report, wrote that she tried not to increase her list of papers in the past year. Rather, her main goal was to seek which papers on her list were publishing the articles she sent. She described the manner she practiced and thought would be most helpful to busy newspaper editors.

My method is to send a marked copy of some suffrage paper, and at the same time a postal card calling attention to the marked article and requesting the editor to publish it in his paper and send a marked copy of the paper to me. About one editor in six will do

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<sup>62</sup> Item 12 of Minutes of the Seventeenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Ashland, Kentucky, November 21 and 22, 1906.

<sup>63</sup> Item 8 of Minutes of the Eighteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Richmond, Kentucky, November 14 and 15, 1907.

this. When I receive the paper I write a card of thanks, and ever after feel confident that I am not wasting postage when I send suffrage matter to that editor.<sup>64</sup>

The 1907 convention minutes ended the digital collection. Searches for reports after this year and until January 6, 1920, when Kentucky became the 24<sup>th</sup> state to ratify the 19th Amendment, failed to produce any other documents about the role of the press superintendent. The K-ERA voted in 1920 to become a non-partisan political organization known as the Kentucky League of Women Voters, which remains in existence today. However, in the report of the 1908 NAWSA convention, Clay recognized Obenchain's diligence for press work, observed especially in the increased number of newspapers on her contact list.

She feels certain that not all of these use the articles regularly and she will revise her list and send weekly to the papers she is sure of, and only occasionally to the others. Mrs. Obenchain has supplied many articles to the National and her counsel has at all times been most valuable.<sup>65</sup>

Along with her press duties, Obenchain also served on the national organization's literature standing committee, along with Elizabeth Hauser and Elizabeth M. Gilmer, the latter better known in journalism as Dorothy Dix. In literary circles, Obenchain was known by her pseudo name, Eliza Calvert Hall. In addition to her commentaries on women's suffrage written for Kentucky newspapers, she used many of her short stories to encode suffrage arguments. Those who read *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, Obenchain's first published book in 1907, observed the seemingly simple mountain wisdom of Aunt Jane without being fully aware of the political subtext contained within the stories. President Theodore Roosevelt even publicly praised Obenchain for this collection of short stories that featured an elderly widowed woman, "Aunt Jane," who plainly spoke her mind about the people she knew and her experiences in the rural south. Clay did the same at the 1908 national convention, referring to Obenchain as the K-ERA's "very capable press superintendent" whose book "brought her success and fame" and "is still informing and educating our people by means of the printed page."<sup>66</sup> Today, historical marker No. 2240 in Bowling Green honors Obenchain as an author and suffragist.

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<sup>64</sup> Item 14 of Minutes of the Eighteenth Annual Convention of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association Held at Richmond, Kentucky, November 14 and 15, 1907.

<sup>65</sup> The Hand Book of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and Proceedings.

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## Conclusion

In the K-ERA's existence, the organization's press superintendents were slow to meet the national press chairman's demand for "ideal press work." Obenchain successfully grew into her role as Kentucky's suffrage press superintendent, but like her predecessors, she encountered trials, both personal issues and those related to the suffrage cause. In comparing the superintendents' work to Cassidy's reasons detailing why "ideal press work" was not being met, some conclusions can be made. First, the number of press workers was insufficient. This was noticed when Obenchain documented the need for assistant superintendents in the local associations whenever possible. Suffragists in such positions would help the state press superintendent to monitor suffrage content in newspapers and report the publication activity to the state press officer.

Second, newspaper editors preferred original content over duplicated material. Based on her reports, Obenchain wrote articles often, given her talent and propensity as an author. The year 1901 provided evidence of this, when she authored most of the 500 submissions to newspapers.

Third, getting the best material to be published as news was challenging. This was observed in this examination in two ways. (1) Obenchain measured her success not only by the number of newspapers on her contact list but also when editors initially unsympathetic or uninterested in the suffrage cause shifted their opinions or original positions to allow suffrage articles to be published on their pages as a way to meet their journalistic standard of objectivity. (2) Obenchain's plea for more press workers was not an empty cry, as she knew that additional press workers could help monitor which articles were published.

Overall, Kentucky's press superintendents had a difficult time meeting the "ideal press work" standard set forth by Cassidy, but progress and achievements were noted. Other variables also prevented an "ideal press work" from occurring for a suffrage press superintendent, such as illness, death and other personal affairs. This examination not only highlighted the worthiness of the publicity efforts among suffrage press superintendents in Kentucky, but the balance these women sought to achieve between gaining their full right to vote and meeting the personal commitments in their lives. Further, this study helps to fill a gap in the public relations historiography on the contributions of women in this field. These narratives continue to be experienced and told by women today. Women pursuing communication careers in highly competitive fields such as journalism and public relations continue to face similar struggles in balancing work and family, all the while yearning to become involved in community affairs and causes that are dear to them. Obenchain's efforts serve as reminders that although women eventually received the right to vote in 1920, women continue to battle for other equalities – gender pay, workplace and a host of others, which they have done for decades.

Further research recommendations could include a study of the press efforts of other state suffrage associations to investigate how newspapers might have worked with suffrage groups to publish content, as well as whether any suffrage associations came closer to meeting the demands of “ideal press work.” Such further exploration also could expand women’s narratives during the suffrage era, uncovering additional stories about the suffragists who were passionate about their work as part of an association. Press work, deemed the public relations arm today, is only one thread in the intricate web of how suffrage associations operated. Historical examinations into the other professional and developmental areas of suffrage associations (e.g., finances, speaker bureaus, literature) deserve scholarly attention.