

FIRST DRAFT

Colorado women won the right to vote, hold public office 130 years ago

When the male voters of Colorado overwhelmingly approved giving women the right to vote in November of 1893 — the first state to approve women's suffrage by popular vote — the result provoked excitement, congratulation and concern.

Wyoming already allowed women to vote through a provision included in its territorial rules and later, its state Constitution. Utah Territory allowed women to vote for 17 years, until Congress overruled the territorial provision.

However, on Nov. 7, 1893, Colorado became the first state in the country to approve women's suffrage through a constitutional amendment passed by voters.

Congratulations came from women's suffrage groups across the nation, according to Denver's Queen Bee newspaper, an advocate for women's suffrage.

"Such enthusiasm you never saw as among the women here," the president of the Nebraska Suffrage Association wrote to the Queen Bee. "1893 has been a memorable year. It has gained more for the suffrage cause than all the years preceding."

Concern was voiced by the Delta County Independent and many others, even though they supported the measure: "How will they vote?" the paper asked. "What age will vote? Will they want office? Will they all vote for prohibition?"

Many of the groups that stumped for the right of women to vote, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, also pushed for the banning of alcohol.

The Daily Sentinel, which published its first edition two weeks after the 1893 election, suggested the vote would significantly change political campaigns. "The professional politician will be completely thrown off his bearings, in making his estimates for spring elections," it said. "The question of woman suffrage will be quite a factor."

Not everyone was eager to give women the right to vote. The Denver Brewers' Association, which feared that women would vote to ban alcohol, published a pre-election pamphlet arguing against women's suffrage.

One part of it said: "Young man, if you don't want a female lawyer, doctor or politician for a wife, but would prefer a woman who will be a good companion, home maker, wife and mother, then vote and induce all your

friends to vote against EQUAL SUFFRAGE."

Despite such sentiment, the ballot amendment passed by more than 6,000 votes — 55% to 45%. Mesa County led the state in the ratio of support. Seventy-eight percent of the 1,013 men who cast ballots here voted in favor of giving women the right to vote.

Boulder County was second at 72%, and Delta County came in third with 71% of its voters casting ballots in favor of women's suffrage.

Voters in Colorado had solidly rejected giving women the right to vote 16 years earlier. What changed to lead to victory in 1893?

The Colorado Daily Chieftain, in Pueblo, argued it was outsiders in 1877 who pushed for giving women the right, not Colorado citizens.

"Colorado... was considered by the female suffrage shriekers as an excellent place wherein to try experiments," the Chieftain said. "They left their homes in New England to make a desperate effort to have their pet hobby inaugurated here, knowing that its evil effects would not be felt directly by themselves and utterly regardless of the injury which might be inflicted upon us."

But things had changed substantially by late 1893, when the Sherman Silver Purchase Act was repealed and the price of silver plummeted. Other factors also contributed to the economic panic of 1893.

But the devastation of the silver industry hit Colorado and other mountain states particularly hard.

"Most of Colorado's silver mines and smelters closed, banks entered receivership, unemployment jumped to 25%, and many silver mining towns became ghost towns," said Palisade Historical Society President Priscilla Walker, who has researched and presented programs on women's suffrage in Colorado.

"Colorado men were naturally dissatisfied with the panic conditions caused by the government's action and wanted to broaden the voting franchise," she said. "The suffrage campaign quickly embraced the link to the free silver movement, which promised economic recovery for the state."

Although Mesa County wasn't a silver mining community, its banks, retail stores, farms and ranches were deeply connected with mining communities on the Western Slope. Also, agricultural



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As women began to push for the right to vote, many men feared that such a right would make women too forward and relegate men to taking care of families, as this cartoon suggests.



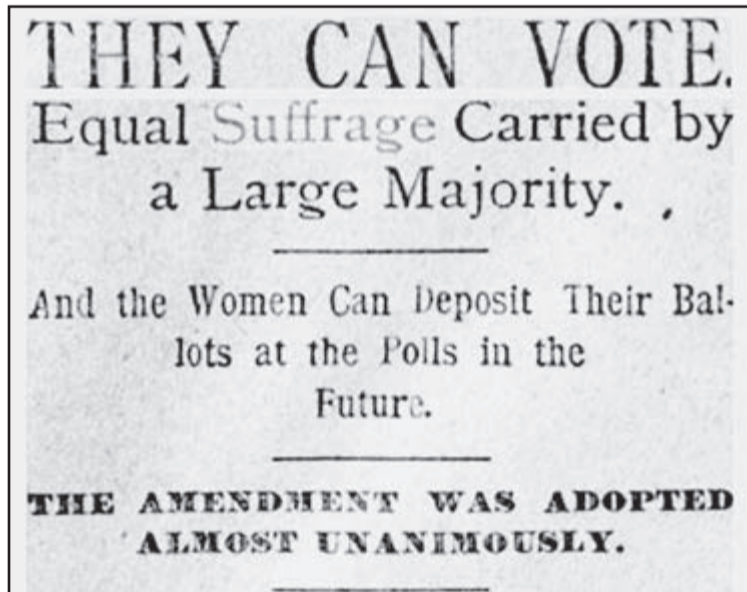
PUBLIC DOMAIN PHOTO THROUGH WIKIMEDIA

Carrie C. Holly of Pueblo was one of three women elected to the Colorado Legislature in 1894, the first three elected women legislators in the United States.



PUBLIC DOMAIN PHOTO THROUGH WIKIMEDIA

Ellis Meredith, a reporter with the Rocky Mountain News, became known as the Susan B. Anthony of Colorado and was a leader of the 1893 drive to win the right to vote for women.



Headlines in the Rocky Mountain News on Nov. 9, 1893, proclaimed the news about the success of the amendment.

interests supported the Free Silver movement as a means to help the overall economy.

That helps explain why Mesa County voted overwhelmingly in favor of allowing women to vote.

Across the state, 75% of newspapers endorsed or did not oppose the women's suffrage amendment. It would result in "the elevation of (the state's) politics," wrote the editor of the Larimer County Register, "a consummation devoutly to be wished."

In early 1893, state Rep. J.T. Heath, a populist representing Delta and Montrose counties, introduced a bill to put the constitutional amendment before the voters of the state to give women the right to vote. It was passed the Legislature on April 13, 1893.

Suffrage supporters throughout Colorado and from around the country mobilized to win passage of the measure in November.

One person who wasn't enthusiastic about the prospects for the Colorado amendment was Susan B. Anthony, leader of the national women's suffrage movement. She had traveled to Colorado in 1877 and stumped hard for the suffrage measure then, only to see it overwhelm-

ingly defeated. She believed the same thing would occur in 1893, and refused to visit the state.

But Carrie Chapman, secretary of the National American Women's Equal Suffrage Association, did come. She spent September and October of 1893 stumping throughout the state.

Numerous Colorado women also pushed hard to support the measure, with journalists Ellis Meredith and Minnie Reynolds among the most prominent. Wealthy women such as Elizabeth Tabor and Margaret "Molly" Brown also backed the amendment.

Men such as former Gov. John Routt were also vocal supporters. So was Routt's wife, Eliza Routt. After the measure passed, Eliza became the first woman to register to vote in Colorado.

There were suffrage organizations in nearly every county, and at least 30 women in Mesa County were listed in an 1898 book that looked at the history of women's suffrage in Colorado — women such as Dr. Ethelle Strasser and Mrs. S.C. Buckley.

After the 1893 election, women in Colorado not only voted, they ran for political office. In 1894 Colorado elected three Front Range women to the state Legislature, the first female

legislators in the nation. In 1912, the first woman state senator was elected.

In Mesa County, the first female was elected to the Legislature in 1950. Rena Mary Taylor of Palisade served until 1962, first in the House of Representatives, then in the Senate.

Equally important, passage of the Colorado amendment led other states to follow. Idaho gave women the right to vote in 1896. By 1914, seven more states, all in the West, also had approved women's suffrage. Nationally, women's right to vote was approved in 1920.

Sources: "Colorado Women's Vote," by Priscilla Walker; "The Road to the Vote," by Leslie Karnauskas, History Colorado, www.historycolorado.org/story/womens-history/2019/11/07/road-vote; "History of Colorado's Elected Women," www.strong-sisters.org/the-elected-women; "Historical Photos of Fruita and Western Colorado, Mesa County suffragists," by Denise and Steve Hight; "The History of Equal Suffrage in Colorado 1868-1898," by Joseph G. Brown, at the Library of Congress; historical newspapers at www.newspapers.com and coloradohistoricalnews-papers.org.

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