

## **SOME OF N.C.'S FIRST WOMEN TO VOTE LOOK BACK - Charlotte Observer (NC) - August 20, 1995 - page 15A**

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Ila Black Cuthbertson was 27 in 1920 when she joined millions of women around the nation in voting for the first time.

Now, the Charlotte woman is 102 and on the 75th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, she is one of the few still around who remember the early days of women's suffrage in Mecklenburg County.

"I voted the first time we got the vote," and every election since, she says proudly. "It just felt like I was getting a little more privilege. It was something new for us."

Cuthbertson will be among those honored Friday during Charlotte's celebration of Women's Equality Day, which will include a parade down Tryon Street, a women's luncheon and seminars at the Omni.

The local celebration precedes a march in Washington on Saturday, the actual anniversary of the amendment's ratification.

North Carolina holds the dubious distinction of having declined to be the 36th and deciding state to ratify the amendment. When the N.C. legislature rejected it, Tennessee stepped in and became what suffragists called "The Perfect 36."

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Men threaten to leave

On Election Day, Nov. 2, 1920, Blanche Benton, now 99, remembers women's appearance at the polls aroused turmoil in some Union County homes.

"Many of the men said if their wives voted, they would leave them," said Benton of Monroe. "Even my mother didn't want to vote the first time."

The men needn't have worried, as Benton recalls it, since women tended to be open to suggestion on Election Day.

"Everybody voted like their families at the beginning - like their husbands or fathers," she said.

But Benton said her husband, insurance salesman Claude Benton, was different. Not only did he not object to her voting, but he let her make her own decisions.

"My husband, he said to vote the way I wanted and he would vote the way he wanted," she said.

Roberta Shannon, 95, remembers the suffrage issue caused arguments among her family members in Charlotte's old Brooklyn neighborhood near Uptown. ``Next thing I knew it bust open the family," she said.

For her part, she was reluctant to speak up, though she supported the idea. ``I can tell you . . . I thought I was right. Daddy, he had the same idea that I had. . . . It could've been I was his daughter and he was just agreeing with me."

Topping the 1920 ballot was the presidential race between two Ohioans, Republican U.S. Sen. Warren G. Harding and Democratic Gov. James M. Cox.

Benton and Cuthbertson said they have been lifelong Democrats and did not vote for Harding, the eventual winner. ``People did not like him," Benton said.

On Election Day 1921, her first chance to vote, Shannon was excited but uncertain about her own role. ``I didn't want to vote. I was afraid, maybe part of me was right and part of me was wrong" about which way to vote.

But she did.

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## Opposition in the South

After the turn of the century, many Northern and Western states had begun to allow women to vote in local elections. But North Carolina - like the rest of the South - continued to oppose voting rights for anyone other than white men.

In 1897, state Sen. J.L. Hyatt, R-Yancey, introduced a women's suffrage bill, but watched in horror as it was referred to the committee on insane asylums, where it died.

It wasn't until 1913 that suffragists formed their first statewide group, the N.C. Equal Suffrage League.

Between 1910 and 1920, national suffrage leaders made speaking tours through the South.

Blanche Benton remembers listening to speeches, including one by suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt, while she was a college student in Greensboro.

``Miss Eliot, she taught history, she was hepped up on the subject. She had some of the leading suffragists come to speak. The meetings were in the dining room, during dinner. Everybody had to go," she said.

Legislation was introduced in Raleigh in 1917, but failed.

In 1919, William Jennings Bryan, former U.S. secretary of state and former Democratic presidential

candidate, spoke in Raleigh, where he warned lawmakers, ``You can't keep it from coming and you might as well help and reap some of the honor."

The N.C. Senate backed a proposal that year to let women vote in local elections, but the House remained opposed. Rep. Harry Grier of Iredell County called the bill ``the most pernicious legislation ever proposed in the general assembly."

But the women's suffrage crusade was picking up steam elsewhere.

In Washington that June, Congress approved the proposed 19th Amendment, adopting the language first drafted in 1875 by Susan B. Anthony. The measure was sent to the states, where ratification by 36 of the 48 was needed.

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Would N.C. be 36th?

As the months ticked by in 1920, and more states approved the amendment, the battle in North Carolina heated up. By April, 35 states had ratified, and North Carolina had the opportunity to become the crucial 36th. Tennessee legislators were considering the amendment at the same time.

Local suffragists continued to stage speeches, meetings, parades and other events. ``They even had a little parade in Monroe. But nobody paid any attention. No to-do was made about it," Blanche Benton recalled.

Soon, it was clear that ratification was doomed in North Carolina.

On Aug. 11, 63 anti-suffrage N.C. House members, a majority of the body, telegraphed their Tennessee colleagues promising that North Carolina would not ratify and urging Tennessee to reject the amendment.

On Aug. 17, the N.C. Senate voted to postpone consideration of the measure until 1921.

On Aug. 18, the matter was settled when Tennessee House members joined their Senate colleagues in voting for ratification.

Eight days later, Aug. 26, 1920, federal officials certified the ratification and women's suffrage became law.

That fall, 8,000 Mecklenburg women registered to vote.

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Belated approval

The final chapter in North Carolina was not written until 1970-71.

Hila Stratton, 81, a Republican candidate for one of Mecklenburg's seven at-large N.C. House seats in 1970, remembers reading in a League of Women Voters publication that North Carolina had never ratified the amendment.

“I thought that was a good campaign issue,” said Stratton. “I got in the newspaper. I said if I was elected to the legislature, I was going to introduce legislation to ratify the 19th Amendment.”

Stratton lost the election, but during the new legislative session the following year, her idea won unanimous approval in both the House and Senate. The Observer headline from May 6, 1971, reads: “Aw, Let's Let Women Vote, N.C. Says At Last.”

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### 75th anniversary events

For information about Friday's Women's Equality Parade in Charlotte, call Maxine Eaves at 563-8423 between 6 and 9 p.m.

For Women's Equality Day luncheon or workshop registration, call Ange Devivo at 544-0676 anytime.

Also, “North Carolina Now,” the nightly public TV newsmagazine, will broadcast a five-part series this week examining the history of the state's battle for and against women's suffrage. The program airs weekdays at 7:30 p.m. and 12:30 a.m. on WUNG (channel 58).

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### The 19th Amendment

\* Ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was certified on Aug. 26, 1920. The full text states:

1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

2. Congress shall have power to enforce this Article by appropriate legislation.

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