

## MAUD WOOD PARK

### *A Perfect Moment*

AUGUST 1920

Planning was already well advanced for the ratification fight before the Senate vote on June 4, 1919. The most pressing challenge was the threshold of a three-fourths majority: supporters had to win ratification in thirty-six states, but opponents only had to prevail in thirteen to stop the amendment. It did not have an expiration date for ratification, which helped project a certain sense of inevitability, but the suffragists were determined to have the amendment in place in time for women to vote in the 1920 presidential election. As Maud Wood Park retells the story here, it all came down to Tennessee. After overcoming a few last-minute legal challenges, the Nineteenth Amendment was certified as part of the U.S. Constitution on August 26, 1920, now celebrated as Women's Equality Day.

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Ratification by at least thirty-six states—that was the mountainous load that Mrs. Catt took upon her shoulders as soon as the amendment was through the Congress. In fact, she assumed that burden long before the work in Washington was completed. Her plans were therefore all ready—plans that, like her ratification dress, had been made, outdated and remade more than once.

In her own words:

Every Legislature had been polled, Governors had been interviewed, the press kept informed of the necessary procedure of the campaign, and an expectant, eager army, thoroughly well-equipped and trained, was waiting for the next move. Before the sun set on June 4, telegrams had been sent to all Governors where special legislative sessions would be necessary, urging that such sessions be called. Instructions for still more intensive campaigns with Governors, legislators and the press were wired to State auxiliaries to the National [American Woman] Suffrage Association, and when the sun rose on June 5 the campaign was already under full speed. . . .

The Legislatures of Illinois and Wisconsin being on the eve of adjournment, the Suffrage Amendment was wired to both from

Washington for ratification. Thereupon started a lively contest between the two States for first place. Illinois newspapers helped by calling loudly upon the Legislature to be "First"; her Governor, Frank O. Lowden, helped by sending a spirited message to the Legislature; and her Assembly helped by introducing into the Senate a resolution for ratification twenty-four hours after the passage of the amendment and before the receipt of the official notification. Action was taken on June 10.

Two letters in the alphabet came near losing Illinois first place. A sentence in the joint resolution transmitted from the federal Secretary of State's office to the Illinois Governor read "which shall be valid for all events and purposes as part of the constitution." "Events" should have been "intents." Legal authorities said that ratification was not invalidated, but to be safe the Illinois Legislature re-ratified June 17.

Wisconsin ratified on the same day. . . . Wisconsin had the distinction of filing her certificate first.\*

Ratification followed in rapid succession in Michigan, Kansas, Ohio and New York: "six ratifications in as many days." Then three states, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Texas, in which the antisuffragists had been hopeful of defeat, disappointed them by ratifying; and special sessions in Iowa and Missouri brought the number of ratifications within a month up to eleven. But the total of thirty-six was still a long way off.

Surprisingly, the far-western states, which had been counted on to ratify at once, were dilatory. Some of their political leaders took the selfish ground that inasmuch as their women were already enfranchised by state action, they had nothing to gain by the federal amendment.

In July, in order to get definite pledges of special sessions from governors, Mrs. Catt sent four women as "envoys": two, who were Republicans, to Minnesota, North Dakota, Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Wyoming; and two, who were Democrats, to Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Oklahoma.

That month Arkansas, Nebraska and Montana all ratified by means of special sessions. They were followed in September by Minnesota, New Hampshire and Utah, making seventeen in all.

\* Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), pp. 343-46.

Then came a pause, inexplicable in view of the continued delay of most of the early suffrage states—a delay that led Mrs. Catt to “put on her bonnet” and set forth to hold conferences in twelve states, with “Wake up, America!” as the slogan of her efforts. The trip brought calls for special sessions in California, North Dakota, Colorado, Oregon and Nevada, though in one of those states the suffragists had to get the legislators to agree to pay their own expenses before the governor would consent to call the session. By the end of the year, Maine, California, North Dakota, South Dakota and Colorado brought the total number of ratifications up to twenty-two.

By that time opponents had begun a series of systematic attempts to find legal flaws in the ratifications or to have them held up by a referendum to the voters. The problem of the antisuffragists, who had only to keep thirteen states from ratifying, was far simpler than that of the suffragists, who had to get favorable action from thirty-six. But, in spite of the difficulties that the opposition put in the way, five states ratified in January, 1920: Rhode Island, Kentucky, Oregon, Indiana and Wyoming. Five others followed in February: New Jersey, Idaho, Arizona, New Mexico and Oklahoma.

Mrs. Catt knew that the opposition had grown exceedingly bitter with every one of the later states, and in West Virginia, the thirty-fourth, the outcome was so close that a state senator who was in California when the special session was called and to whom the opponents refused a pair, was obliged to hurry back across the continent in order to cast the deciding vote in favor of ratification. Then, in March, 1920, Washington, the last of the far-western states, by action of a special session, brought the total number of ratifications up to thirty-five. The fight then narrowed down to the crucial thirty-sixth state.

At first Vermont seemed the most promising field, and, to overcome the objection of cost of a special session, the suffragists secured the pledges of a majority of the legislators to pay their own expenses. But even then Governor Percival W. Clement, who was a confirmed opponent, refused to call the session. Governor Marcus H. Holcomb of Connecticut, also an opponent, took a similar course. Efforts were then concentrated upon Delaware, where, after terrific work by both sides, ratification was defeated in the lower House, making Delaware

the tenth state and the only one north of the Mason-Dixon Line to take adverse action.

Happily for the suffrage forces, their grievous disappointment about Delaware was offset that same week by a decision of the United States Supreme Court that a referendum on a federal amendment, such as the antisuffragists were seeking in several states, would be illegal.

The last hope of getting a thirty-sixth state in time for women to vote in the presidential election of 1920 rested then in Tennessee. But there the Governor had refused to call a special session because he believed that a provision of the state constitution required action in regard to ratification to be taken at a regular session. In this emergency the suffragists appealed to President Wilson, and, through the instrumentality of Helen Gardener, the President asked the Department of Justice to render an opinion about the applicability of the Supreme Court's recent decision to the situation in Tennessee. When the Department rendered an opinion to the effect that the state constitution could not put an obstacle in the way of a method of ratification permitted by the federal Constitution, the President sent a telegram to the Governor urging a special session of the Tennessee legislature. After considerable delay the session was called for August 9.

Mrs. Catt, who had gone to Tennessee on June 15 with the idea of expediting the preparations, stayed on through the devastating heat of the intervening weeks because she realized how relentless the opposition had become and how unscrupulous its tactics were likely to be. Her insight proved prophetic, for every known or imaginable device for preventing or delaying a favorable vote was tried during the twelve days of the special session.

In spite of the excitement, Mrs. Catt held resolutely to her conviction that her presence during the legislative session debates would be an almost unbearable strain with no corresponding advantage for the cause; but through the open windows of her room in a nearby hotel, she could often hear cheers and applause, without knowing until some of the suffrage workers came to report which side was ahead.

Although the resolution for ratification passed the Senate with comparatively little difficulty, the struggle in the House

was marked by a long series of dramatic surprises in which first one side and then the other appeared to have the upper hand. Even when a vote of 49 in favor to 47 against was taken on August 18, a motion to reconsider held up the decision for three days longer, during which 38 opposed legislators tried the trick, at that time a novel one, of fleeing to a neighboring state in the hope of preventing a quorum. When that device failed and reconsideration was voted down on August 21, the Speaker of the House, who was the floor leader of the opposition, announced that an injunction against forwarding the certificate of ratification to Washington had been issued by one of the judges of the state Supreme Court. Two days were spent by the suffragists in getting the injunction dissolved, and on the twenty-fourth the certificate was signed by the Governor and started on its way to Washington.

Meanwhile Helen Gardener had arranged with the Department of State to have the certificate examined as soon as it came so that the Secretary of State would be able to take the final step of announcing that the amendment had been adopted. We were fearful that any delay would give opportunity for further injunctions to be brought by the antisuffragists, who were leaving no stone unturned in their efforts to hold up the announcement of ratification.

At four o'clock on the morning of August 26, the certificate from Tennessee reached Washington, and the Solicitor-General, who had sat up all night waiting for it, made the examination needed before the signature of the Secretary of State could be affixed.

Shortly after eight, that same morning, Mrs. Catt, on her way back from Tennessee, arrived in Washington, and the first thing she did was to telephone to the office of the Secretary of State. Mrs. Harriet Taylor Upton and I were in the room with her and heard her ask him whether the Tennessee certificate had been received. In a moment she put down the telephone, turned to us and said, "The Secretary has signed the proclamation, and he wants us to go over to his office and see it before he sends it out."

So quietly as that, we learned that the last step in the enfranchisement of women in the United States had been taken and

the struggle of more than seventy years brought to a successful end.

We were all too stunned to make any comment until we were in the cab on our way to the Department of State, where we almost had to stick pins into ourselves to realize that the simple document at which we were looking was, in reality, the long sought charter of liberty for the women of this country.

Then Mrs. Catt had a conference with the Solicitor-General about the legal aspects of the fight in Tennessee, for she anticipated that the antisuffragists would bring suit on that score, as later they did without success.

That evening we had a jubilee meeting at Poli's Theatre, where every seat was taken and standing space was crowded to the last limit permitted by the fire regulations. The greetings and congratulations of the President were presented by the Secretary of State. Mrs. Harriet Taylor Upton and Miss Charl Ormond Williams, who had had important roles in the campaign in Tennessee, told about the "ways that were dark and the tricks that were vain" on the part of the opponents there, and then Mrs. Catt made one of her greatest speeches.

Her journey to New York the next day was as truly a triumphal procession as anything I ever expect to see. At every station at which the train stopped, deputations of women, many of them smiling through tears, were waiting with their arms full of flowers for her. When she reached the Pennsylvania Terminal in New York, Senator William M. Calder, a Republican, was standing at the door of her car; and Governor Alfred E. Smith was waiting on the main floor to voice the official congratulations of the state of New York on the outstanding achievement of its "distinguished citizen, Carrie Chapman Catt." The Woman Suffrage Party of New York City presented her with a huge sheaf of her favorite blue delphinium and then formed a procession, led by mounted police and a fine band, with the other officers of the National American Woman Suffrage Association marching, like a guard of honor, beside her motorcar on its way to the celebration at the Hotel Astor.

There is a beautiful picture of her taken just before the procession started, when she stood in the car, the flowers in her arms and her face alight with the joy of triumphant home-coming.

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No one of us who saw her then will ever cease to be thankful for that perfect moment when she must have felt to the full the happiness of a great task completed.