

November 2005

## Challenges Documenting Early ERA Regional Leaders

Danelle L. Moon

*San Jose State University*, [danelle.moon@ucsb.edu](mailto:danelle.moon@ucsb.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/lib\\_pub](https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/lib_pub)



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), [History of Gender Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), [Women's History Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Danelle L. Moon. "Challenges Documenting Early ERA Regional Leaders" *Oral History Association, 39th Annual Meeting* (2005).

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Library at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@sjsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@sjsu.edu).

OHA Paper  
Danelle Moon

*Documenting ERA Women through Oral History*

The purpose of this article is to examine post-suffrage political activism related to the early ERA campaign in Connecticut from 1923-1959, through the work of Florence Ledyard Kitchelt, a social feminist and political activist. Kitchelt began her early career as settlement houseworker, which launched her life-long struggle to promote women's rights first through suffrage, and later included peace activism and culminated with the early push for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Her activities are well documented through her personal papers, state suffrage papers, organizational papers of the National Women's Party and the Connecticut League of Nation's Association papers. She died in 1961, but her contribution to women's political history during the suffrage and the post-suffrage years is significant. Regretfully, she died prior to the advances made in oral history, but there are a number of oral history projects documenting the early feminist and peace movements that help tie together the global impact of regional grassroots activism to national and international policy.

In this paper, I will focus on the interview of Alice Paul, conducted by Amelia Fry (ROHO) and briefly touch on the interviews from the Connecticut Political Activities of the First Enfranchised Women, 1920-1945, conducted by Carole Nichols and Joyce Pendery (University of Connecticut). These oral history projects document the political activities of the leaders and rank and file women involved in suffrage and ERA. Both projects relate directly to my larger historical narrative documenting women's political participation and activism during the inter-war period.<sup>1</sup>

The history of women's Inter-war activism reveals the significant role women have played in politics following suffrage. Oral history plays an important role documenting women's experiences, and it will continue to be a major primary force. The field has

---

<sup>1</sup> "Conversation with Alice Paul: Woman Suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment," An interview conducted by Amelia R. Fry (Regional Oral History Project, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1976); Connecticut Political Activities of the First Enfranchised Women, Oral Histories conducted by Carole Nichols and Joyce Pendery, (UCONN); Nichols & Pendery, "Pro Bono Publico: Voices of Connecticut's Political Women, 1915-1945," *Oral History Review* 11 (1983): 49-74.

come a long way since the 1970s and 1980s. The lessons learned from some of these projects have fueled debate on historiography, gender, class, race, and oral history methods. In an attempt to understand the changes in the field and to make recommendations for the collection of second wave oral histories (as an archivist), I interviewed Amelia Fry, interviewer and biographer of Alice Paul. In the interview we talked about Paul's memory and character, about oral history and biography, and the value of oral history as a primary source. The most important lesson I learned relates to age and memory, which I will expand on in my final conclusion.

### **Background**

I am writing a biography of Florence Ledyard Cross Kitchelt—a life-long activist for women's rights and world peace. Kitchelt began her career as settlement house worker and in the suffrage campaign in upper state New York. She later became a paid recruiter for the Connecticut Women Suffrage Association in the final push for ratification. She worked as an organizer and canvassed Willimantic and Tolland counties for signatures supporting state suffrage. Following the suffrage victory she served as the director of the Citizenship Department of the Connecticut League of Women Voters. In 1924 she became the Secretary and later director of Connecticut League of Nations Association, and from 1943-1954, she served as the chairman of the Connecticut Committee for Equal Rights.

A longtime supporter of protective legislation and critic of the Equal Rights Amendment, Kitchelt shifted her position and in 1943 offered her services to the NWP.<sup>2</sup> From 1943 to 1954, she lobbied the Connecticut legislature and wrote numerous editorials in Connecticut and New York papers on the validity of the ERA. She corresponded regularly with Alice Paul and other NWP officials, providing updates on the activities in the state and recommending political action. On the local level she lobbied for regional support of ERA and helped found a separate organization the "Connecticut Committee for the Equal Rights Amendment," loosely tied to the NWP. Through this group Kitchelt lobbied for regional support of the ERA, and worked closely with Alma Lutz, the

---

<sup>2</sup> Florence L. Cross Kitchelt to the Secretary of the National Woman's Party, April 1, 1943. National Woman's Party Papers, Microfilm Reel #76.

literature chairman of the NWP and Vice President of the CT Branch. During this period, the NWP faced constant internal conflict between the old guard and new members, while working towards the ERA. Kitchelt and Lutz corresponded regularly on regular NWP business, but their correspondence is laden with their personal views on the NWP leadership under Alice Paul, reinforcing some of the internal conflicts between the regional branches with the national organization. The letters document the everyday work of the local branch, political strategies and tactics to increase support for the amendment, and reveal a true bond of friendship between women. The 1940s decade proved to be the biggest challenge for NWP, with a major lawsuit and power struggle between the old and new guard. Yet despite some of the conflicts and turmoil, there was common ground and all of the members were committed to women's equality.<sup>3</sup>

Kitchelt's contributions to women's history had both regional and national significance. Her life-long commitment to equal rights and peace is a compelling story. In order to understand her contributions, it is necessary to fill-in the gaps through other sources. To this end, the feminist oral history projects of the 70s and 80s help piece together personal views on women's roles as voters, as activists. The suffrage interviews provide a context to relate regional activism to the national leadership. For this paper I have drawn from the interviews of Alice Paul and Mabel Vernon conducted by Amelia Fry from the Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, the Post-Suffrage Oral Histories of Connecticut Women from the University of Connecticut, and the *Parlor to Prison* interviews conducted by Sherna Gluck from the Feminist History Research Project of Los Angeles.

### **Introduction:**

In 1977 *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* devoted a special issue to women's oral history. Oral Historian, Sherna Gluck openly challenged traditional historiography with her groundbreaking article "What's So Special About Women's History." This pioneering effort resulted in the cross-pollination of academic and community feminist researchers interested in documenting the lives of ordinary women

---

<sup>3</sup> Becker, 92.

through oral history.<sup>4</sup> Western women scholars developed their own interviewing manual as they gained experience interviewing women. These experiences resulted in a diversity of oral history projects and new methodologies.

And as noted by Gluck's article, women's scholars actively challenged

“...the traditional concepts of history, of what is “historically important” and we are affirming that our everyday lives are important. Using an oral tradition, as old as human memory, we are reconstructing our own past.”<sup>5</sup>

The flurry of new projects helped shape the field of women's history and filled an important gap in documenting women's experience. The 1977 series focus on oral history gave voice to women, and the editors Sherna Gluck and Joan Jensen provided basic guidelines for conducting women's oral history. (The original series has been reprinted and updated in a new volume entitled *Women's Oral History* (2002).) The majority of these early projects were collaborative, community based, and well-funded.<sup>6</sup>

Funding from the Rockefeller Foundation enabled ROHO and the Feminist History Research Project of Los Angeles (Gluck) to record twelve first hand accounts of the early women's movement, and included the interviews of women ranging in age from 74-104. Five held key positions in the National Women's Party, including Alice Paul, Sarah Bard Field, Burnita Shelton Matthews, and Mabel Vernon. Seven were rank and file members representing the different state campaigns, including Jeannette Rankin, Valeska Bary, Jessie Haver Butler, Miraim Allen de Ford, Ernestine Ketler, Laura

---

<sup>4</sup> Sherna Gluck, “What's So Special About Women's History,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2, no.2 (Summer 1977): 3-13; Sherna Gluck, “Women's Oral History, The Second Decade,” *Frontiers* Vol 8, no. 1, “Special Issue: Women's Oral History 2 (1983), 1-2. The series was republished in 2002. See Susan H. Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon, *Women's Oral History, The Frontier Reader* (University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Sherna Gluck, “What's So Special About Women's History,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2, no.2 (Summer 1977): 3-13

<sup>6</sup> Susan H. Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon, Editors, *Women's Oral History* (University of Nebraska Press, 2002).ix-xii.

Ellsworth Seiler, and Sylvie Thygeson. With the exception of the Jeannette Rankin and Valeska Bary, Sherna Gluck published the rank and file members oral history memoirs in *From Parlor to Prison: Five American Suffragists Talk about their Lives* (1985). In the early 1980s, the Center for Oral History and Women's Studies Program at the University of Connecticut launched a similar project, resulting in recording of 21 politically active women from 1915-1945, supported by the Connecticut Humanities Council.<sup>7</sup>

### **Post Suffrage Political Activism**

The post-suffrage era offered women new opportunities to pursue a variety of issues in the political arena. Prior to the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, women had worked long and hard to influence public policy by supporting a variety of issues from suffrage, moral reform, health, safety, labor and welfare reform. Over two million Women united under the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) to secure the right to vote. Historians writing about the aftermath of the suffrage victory characterized women's political participation as divided and ineffective. A number of studies and articles were written decrying the failure of women's movement to create a political voting block. Some of this criticism was grounded in low voter turnout during 1920s decade, but the most glaring division was apparent in the conflict over the Equal Rights Amendment, proposed by the NWP. It is important to note that despite perceived or real conflicts between women's organizations, the splintering of the NAWSA and the formation of new voluntary organizations like the League of Women Voters did not reflect political inaction; quite the contrary. Nancy Cott pointed out there were "striking continuities" and overlapping participation between organizations. Suffrage did not fail, but represented a watershed for women's participation in politics and international relations, and women played a significant role as policy makers.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> "Conversation with Alice Paul," i-ii; "Connecticut Political Activities,"

<sup>8</sup> Nancy Cott provides a thorough analysis of women's political role in this era. She shows a continuity of female voluntary organizations that continued to press for social legislation. As noted, women moved from the suffrage campaign to support issues that they were interested in from child welfare, women's legal rights, peace, labor, citizenship education, international feminism, and ERA. See *Grounding of Modern Feminism* (Yale University Press, 1987), especially chapter three "Voluntarist Politics," 85-114; For contemporary studies on post-suffrage voting trends and political participation see: Stuart A. Rice and Malcolm M. Wiley, "American Women's Ineffective Use of the Vote," *The Current History Magazine* (July 1924): 641-647; Florence E. Allen, "Participation of Women in Government," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol. 251 (May 1947), 94-103; Florence Boeckel,

## **The National Woman's Party and Equal Rights Amendment**

The NWP formed out of the Congressional Union, founded by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns. Initially a branch of the larger NAWSA, this band of radical women split with NAWSA, and worked towards the federal amendment using militant tactics, from parades, picketing, hunger-striking and jail. The NWP's leftwing ideology and tactics hardened the lines with NAWSA leadership, and particularly with Carrie Chapman Catt; these old resentments resurfaced at home and abroad. Following the introduction of the ERA, mainstream women's organizations mobilized an anti-ERA opposition on the basis that the amendment would nullify sex-based protective legislation mandating working conditions, hours, and wages. The membership base of the NWP prior to the ERA debate included a number of women who had worked for suffrage and protective legislation, including Florence Kelly. Maud Wood Park, a longtime critic of Paul, said that she [Paul] would "...divide the woman's movement." Both Kelly and Park went on record opposing the amendment. Other heavy weights opposed to the ERA included Carrie Chapman Catt, the League of Women Voters, Mary Anderson of the Children's Bureau, Dr. Alice Hamilton, champion of industrial medicine and labor advocate, National Women's Trade Union League, Women's Christina Temperance Union and General Federation of Women's Clubs.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the lack of support from major women's groups and from laboring women, Paul charged a head to promote equal rights. The NWP did not object to labor legislation or protection of motherhood, rather they argued that sex-based legislation reinforced women's economic dependence, and "...relegated them to the lowest, worst paid labor."<sup>10</sup> Paul remarked in her oral history that the real challenge was not getting the amendment into Congress, but changing the minds of American women. In 1923 the NWP convention, held in Seneca Falls, unanimously adopted Paul's draft amendment,

---

"Women in International Affairs," *American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol 143 (May 1929); Sophonisba Breckenridge, *Women in the Twentieth Century: A Study of their political and economic activities* (McGraw Hill, 1933).

<sup>9</sup> Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 120-129; Cott, "Equal Rights and Economic Roles: The Conflict over the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1920s," in Kerber and Dehart, *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 357-58.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

and in December of 1923 it was introduced to both houses of Congress; and each year thereafter until the Senate approved it in 1972.<sup>11</sup>

It would take another twenty-one years to build support from mainstream groups. Protective labor legislation would dominate the conflict, but reorganization in the NWP following the 1923 convention, slowly worked to increase awareness and support of the amendment. The Depression further delayed Congressional interest or action, while female labor conditions worsened. The deep seeded distrust of Paul and the NWP compounded by tactical and personality conflicts reinforced bitterness between social feminists and the NWP. In 1941 the LWV and labor still opposed the amendment, but by 1944 major organizations gave their support, including the National Federation of Business Women, Professional Women's Club, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and most significantly both the Republican and Democrat parties endorsed the ERA.<sup>12</sup> Florence Kitchelt was among the converted and in 1943 she offered her full support to the NWP, and spent the remainder of her life fighting for ERA.

### **Oral History of Alice Paul**

In 1966 Amelia Fry conducting research on suffrage leader, Sarah Bard Field, met Alice Paul, who maintained a residence in the Alma Belmont House in Washington, D.C. Paul gave her permission to access the NWP suffrage papers, and soon thereafter Fry approached Paul for an interview. Paul would not agree to interview until the ERA passed Congress; a bargain was struck: Amelia would lobby Congress and Alice would agree to a tape-recorded interview. Fry found herself appointed as the Northern California chairman for ERA, and worked closely with Paul and California Congressmen, Don Edwards. In describing her impressions of Paul, Fry remarked that Paul at age 85 had a remarkable memory—a “running-record” of every congressmen, his past and present actions on ERA; she knew the attitudes of the wives, secretaries and assistants. The interview took place in Paul's home in Ridgefield, Connecticut. The interviews took

---

<sup>11</sup> Alice Paul Oral history, 442-443, 448-450; Susan D. Becker, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment: American Feminism Between the Wars* (Greenwood Press, 1981), 19-21.

<sup>12</sup> Cott, “Equal Rights and Economic Roles,” *Women's America*, 361-363. It should be noted that during the 21 year struggle to gain women's group support, the NWP participated in number of organizations to promote equal rights, including international work with International Alliance of Women, supported the equal rights treaty from the Sixth Pan American Conference in 1928 and lobbied the League of Nations through other international women's groups. See Becker, *Equal Rights*, 22-25.



six months to complete, using 22 audio-tapes, producing 650 pages of transcripts. The interview has a thematic approach, which includes basic family history, college and social work, suffrage work in Great Britain, U.S. Suffrage campaign, international feminism, conflicts in the NWP and other organizations, final victory of ERA, and Paul's major accomplishments in promoting International Treaty for Equality, and her most important contribution changing the United Nations charter to include equal rights for men and women.<sup>13</sup>

Paul's oral history is far too complex and long to fully describe for this session, and for the sake of time, I will focus on her role as the leader of NWP, describe some of her reflections on her role and the role of other leaders, and some of the conflicts that transpired between 1935-1948. According to Fry, Alice Paul "paradoxically, was shy and not often visible even though she was an autocrat." She granted few interviews during her long life, and she didn't leave behind a large group of personal papers. Historians interested in Alice Paul the woman, will find very little documentation. Her oral history is the only document that provides a personal account of her life.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the interview, Fry asked Paul to describe her leadership role in the NWP, and to admit that she controlled the organization. Paul spent most of the 1930s and early 1940s in Europe working on international equal rights, and was not actively in charge of the NWP. Her perception of her leadership role was as advisor.

In this excerpt:

Fry: Can you tell me when you were in Europe and ran the ERA campaign while you were working in Europe?

Paul: Well you see, I have never run the ERA campaign since I went out as national chairman excepting about two years which was in the last world war...Mrs. Harvey W. Wiley was the national chairman and she didn't

---

<sup>13</sup> Alice Paul Oral History, Interview History and Interviewer's Impressions of Alice Paul, iii-xix, 598.

<sup>14</sup> Amelia Fry, "Two Searches for Alice Paul," *Frontiers* VII (1983),

want to run again....So then I was elected...in 1942. I came down and took over the campaign all through '43, '44, '45 I think, and during that period we sent women out and got the equal rights clause in the United Nations Charter you know, in San Francisco. That was '45. That was perhaps the biggest thing we accomplished in that time period. Anyway that is the only I have had the financial responsibility and the real responsibility of the campaign. [Anita Pollitzer was elected the next term]<sup>15</sup>

Pressing her further:

Fry: I had the distinct impression... you were the continuous leader and spirit and energy behind the campaign.

Paul: Well, I wasn't suppose to be, but you can't always—even if you don't have officially the responsibility, if you care very much about something, you do your very best, to help.<sup>16</sup> [Play audio of Paul](#)

Her responses accurately reflect the leadership and core responsibilities to set policy, but the executive council was handpicked by Paul, and she dictated goals and strategies of the Party Susan Becker's work on the ERA and the NWP, confirms that the Party was controlled by a small group of women. Paul, as "advisory chairman" directed the political agenda. Paul returned to the U.S. in 1942 to resume control of the NWP and was elected the National Chairman.<sup>17</sup>

There is no doubt that Paul was the NWP, but her early role during the 1920s and 1930s was erratic at best, and she participated very little in the day-to-day operations. Paul cast

---

<sup>15</sup> Alice Paul Interview, 273.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>17</sup> Susan D. Becker, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment; American Feminism Between the Wars* (Greenwood Press, 1981), 80-83. Between 1920-1940, the following women served as national chairman: Elise Hill, 1921-1925; Edith Houghton Hooker filled in for Hill at the end of 1925; Jane Norman Smith, 1926-1929; Mrs. Harvey Wiley 1929-1932, and in 1939-1941; Sarah Colvin, Florence Bayrad Hilles, and Sarah Pell, served in between Wiley's last term. See 32-35.

herself very humbly as an advisor, which may have reflected her Quaker roots, she was also a very private person and she rarely responded to public discourse about her role, and she was very measured in how she responded to the media. Fry described Paul as shy, but also autocratic. Other histories paint Paul as difficult and domineering woman. Mabel Vernon's oral history provides some insight into the inter-workings of the Party before and after the suffrage victory. Before accepting the position as executive secretary (1926-1930), Vernon spoke with Paul, who encouraged her to come back to the Party:

**Interview Excerpts:**

Vernon: "She wanted me to come back and take charge of the Woman's Party while she did this. That was a mistake, probably; Alice never really wants anybody to take charge.

Fry: Alice was really the leader, all the way?

Vernon: Yes

Vernon: She [Alice Paul] made the plans and we helped carry them out.

Vernon's reflections mirror other contemporary observations that Paul was the NWP, and that she was indomitable."<sup>18</sup> Paul's direct personality and martyrdom charmed her admirers and disarmed some of her detractors. Simone Tery, a French feminist wrote: She speaks little, laying on you the straight and thoughtful look of her big dark eyes. She knows what she wants and she doesn't need shouting." Crystal Eastman remarked that Paul "...possessed a rare combination of the shrewd calculating mind of a born political leader...with the ruthless driving force, sure judgment and phenomenal grasp of detail that characterize a great entrepreneur."<sup>19</sup>

It is clear that Paul's determination and charisma carried the Party, but her doggedness did not prevent conflict between the old and new guard of the organization.

---

<sup>18</sup> Fry, *Frontiers* 1983, 22; Mabel Vernon, "Speaker for Suffrage and Petitioner for Peace," transcript of the tape-recorded interview conducted by Amelia R. Fry. Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, 1976, 87, 1799, 181. In 1933 Vernon and the headquarters staff resigned over the dominating leadership of Paul. See Becker, 89-90. Vernon could not recall or chose not to say why she left the NWP and told Fry: "Now I can't tell you why I left. [Laughter] Maybe Alice can. See page 101 of the transcript.

<sup>19</sup> Becker, ERA, 30.

There were numerous personality conflicts and frequent struggles for power. The most significant conflict took place over the election dispute of 1945 between Anita Pollitzer and Anna Kelton Wiley, which was fueled by the distribution of funds received from Alma Belmont's estate. Doris Stevens spearheaded the conflict after being cut-out of Alva Belmont's will, which she blamed on Paul. With the support of Laura Berrien, a reluctant Anna Wiley, and a small group of new members, they contested the election, filed a lawsuit, and tried to take over the Belmont House and the Party. The coup d'etat eventually failed, but the lawsuit tied up access to the endowment and investment accounts for year.

Paul hesitated to tell the story of the election contest, because she wasn't sure that it was that important. With Fry's tactful prodding, Paul described a vivid account of the events, which resulted in forty pages of transcripts describing the events, the players, and the impact on the NWP and the ERA. Paul's version of these events provides important insight to the events leading up to the schism, which was brought on by Doris Stevens over the distribution of the Alva Belmont's. Stevens had been a long time confidant of Mrs. Belmont and she expected to receive a sizeable gift upon her death. To her surprise she had been written out of the will, which she blamed on Paul. The NWP received a \$100,000 legacy, which further fueled Steven's contest and created a permanent chasm between Paul and Stevens. Paul remarked that Stevens "...was just like an iceberg, and from that time forward she was an iceberg to me."<sup>20</sup>

Paul was not surprised when Stevens led the defector take-over, and she talks at length about each of the primary dissenters, including the new entry of the Alma Lutz, who she described as a Stevens sympathizer. Yet she carefully avoided open criticism of these women. After referring to Lutz as a sympathizer, she described her strengths and stated: "I didn't mean to speak in any way against her and I wouldn't say she was an insurgent."<sup>21</sup> Lutz was among a growing group of younger leaders who wanted to reform the Party constitution and leadership structure, and while she disagreed with

---

<sup>20</sup> Alice Paul Interview, 560-567. Stevens believed that Paul had persuaded Mrs. Belmont to write her out of the will, and that she was promised \$50,000. The NWP received \$100,000. According to Paul, the Belmont family settled out of probate court with Stevens.

<sup>21</sup> Alice Paul Interview, 595-596.

Paul's leadership of the Party, she never wavered in her support of the Party and she continued to work for NWP at the national and regional level after the dispute ended.

Paul approached the interview in the same measured way that she interacted with the NWP and other individuals and organizations. Referring to her conflicts with Carrie Chapman Catt, she stated: "I don't like to attach anyone going down in history." She was very conscious of her own historical significance, and she was aware that Fry was also interviewing Sarah Bard Field and Mabel Vernon. Both Vernon and Paul were very aware of the other and they were slow to criticize each other.

Paul's oral history is especially rich and is an important source for historians documenting the national organization. The obstacles and challenges to promote ERA were tremendous, and despite some of the personality conflicts, jealousy, and power plays, these women were deeply committed to equal rights. In 1949, 1953, and 1959 the Senate passed the Equal Rights Amendment, while the House Judiciary Committee refused to hold hearings until 1970. The inter-party conflict within the NWP, while a small interruption to the lobbying activities did little to improve the general support for ERA.<sup>22</sup>

### **Connecticut**

In the early 1980s Carole Nichols and Joyce Pendery interviewed twenty-one Connecticut women who worked as public servants. The women interviewed were overwhelmingly middle class, came from prominent families, were well educated and worked as professional women. Seventeen were prominent republicans, and thirteen held elective office prior to 1945 (10 republican, 3 democrats). Fifteen were married, 11 were childless, two working class, one Polish and one African American. The success of the female candidates was clearly marked by the domination of the Republican political machine during this time period, and both parties courted women to run for office.<sup>23</sup>

Women interested in social reform did not find favor with the Republican party, and ran on the Democratic platform or were third party candidates; they were largely unsuccessful. Even withstanding the early success of the first 13 candidates, they were

---

<sup>22</sup> Alice Paul Interview, 551-596.

<sup>23</sup> Carol Nichols, Joyce Pendery, "Pro Bono Publico; Voices of Connecticut's Political Women, 1915-1945," *The Oral History Review* 11 (1983), 57-58

relegated to minor committees, and they had very little leverage in the General Assembly. The Republican machine wedded business with government. Republican Chairman J. Henry Roraback controlled state politics, handpicked candidates, and made committee assignments and determined legislative priorities. He half-heartedly relented in his opposition to women's suffrage by supporting female republican candidates. These early pioneers focused on education, social welfare policy, public health, birth control, and protective labor legislation. They learned quickly how the legislative process worked through the support of the CT LWV's Citizenship Education Program and with the formation of the Order of Legislative Women (OWLS) in 1927. These two groups provided women with the tools they needed to succeed in politics.<sup>24</sup>

All of these women were committed to bettering their communities through public service, whether in the form of social activism, benevolence, or as political representatives. Florence Kitchelt came from a similar middle class background: college educated, politically active, first as a socialist and later as a democrat, and she held membership in American Association of University Women (AAUW) and the LWV. Immediately following the suffrage victory, Kitchelt became the Citizenship Director of the Connecticut League of Women's Voters (1920-1924), and authored "The Mechanism of Law-Making in Connecticut; A Diagram of the General Assembly," to teach women about the legislative process.<sup>25</sup> From 1924-1942, she served as the Secretary and Director of the Connecticut League of Nations Association, before joining the ranks of the NWP. Individually these women supported a variation of causes, but together they affected change through services, lobbying activities, and direct political participation. While Kitchelt worked for peace and equal rights, other women worked to improve maternal welfare, children's health, education, birth control, and the environment.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 61-64; Herbert F. Janick, Jr., *A Diverse People; Connecticut 1914 to the Present* (The Pequot Press, 1975), 25-26.

<sup>25</sup> Florence Kitchelt, "The Mechanism of Law-Making in Connecticut; A Diagram of the General Assembly (Dept. Citizenship Connecticut League of Women Voters, copyright Kitchelt, 1920, 1927) Box 2, folder 16, Florence Ledyard Cross Kitchelt papers, Schlesinger Library, Harvard.

<sup>26</sup> Carol Nichols, Joyce Pendery, "Pro Bono Publico; Voices of Connecticut's Political Women, 1915-1945," *The Oral History Review* 11 (1983), 57. The Citizenship Education Program played a significant role in educating women on the civics and government, and it became a model for other LVW branches in other states. The group of oral histories reveal that women were skeptical about their power to affect the political parties, their platforms, and public policy. The fierce suffrage battle in Connecticut and the Republican dominated machined contributed to women's disaffection with politics. The bitter-enders who

For example, Marian Bigelow focused on town government and was especially interested in public education. An original founder of the Old Lyme branch of the Women's League of Voters, she worked with the town selectmen, the board of education, and the Yale Education department to build a new school. Typical of progressive era reform, Bigelow's connections and interests mirrored the "social housekeeping" mentality modeled after Jane Addams. Bigelow's community service provided her with a social and political outlet, while raising her son. While she benefited from vote, she never supported women's suffrage and she didn't believe that women's votes had changed government.<sup>27</sup>

Nichols: The League was active in promoting the Equal Rights Amendment...What was your feeling about that? [The League did not support ERA until the 1972]<sup>28</sup>

Bigelow: Well it was part of the suffrage picture. I think if women want the vote, they should have it. I can't see that they have improved things...I can't say that giving the vote to women has improved the machinery of our governments."<sup>29</sup>

Yet she maintained committed to her community and believed that is was an extension of her home.<sup>30</sup>

Between 1920-1945, the majority of women elected to office were aligned with the Republican party. Virginia L. Blood served as an officer in the Republican County office,

---

opposed the League of Nations, applied the same bitterness to the suffrage, namely Boss Roraback and Senator Brandgee. See Herbert F. Janick, Jr. *A Diverse People; Connecticut 1914 to the Present* (The Pequot Press, 1975).

<sup>27</sup> Nichols and Pendery, "Pro Bono Publico, 55; Marion Bigelow Oral History Interview, 27-30; Roby Muncy, *Creating A Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (Oxford University Press, 1991), xxi-xv, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Alice Paul Oral History Interview., ROHO, 182-183.

<sup>29</sup> Marion Bigleow Oral History Interview, UCONN, 42.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 44.

and later was elected to the Connecticut General Assembly in 1942, and again in 1944. Emily Sophie Brown was one of five women elected to the General Assembly in 1920, served as the commissioner of New Haven County, and was very active with the Republican Town Committee in Naugatuck, and with the Board of Education. [Miss Brown was quite frail and her companion of many years answered many of the questions.]<sup>31</sup>

The oral history transcripts demonstrate that political action took many forms, while showing great determination and commitment. Edith Valet Cook served as the Director of the Connecticut Child Welfare Association, and she served two terms in the state assembly. She quickly learned the power of Republican Boss Roraback, and succeeded in getting his endorsement for the Juvenile Court Bill, ensuring its success.

Cook: ...he was the unchallenged boss of the Republican party. I remember I was so pure at the time that I was shocked that anyone could run things the way he did. But nevertheless, in order to get the Juvenile Court Bill through, I remember, I went over to him and talk to him about it and he finally said, "All right." Later on...one of the men who were there---said to me...You're not going to get it through." Another man in the elevator said, "oh yes, she is. J. Henry said so." So that was that.<sup>32</sup>

She later ran for Mayor in New Haven, and was a long-term member of the LWV. [She was aware of Florence Kitchelt's work with the League of Nations Association, but she did not know her personally.]<sup>33</sup>

Ruth McIntire Dadourian was very active in the early suffrage movement, and was one of the founders of the CT LWV. She ran as an Independent and was supported by the GOP, serving two terms. She was particularly interested in child welfare, endorsed the

---

<sup>31</sup> Virginia Blood Oral History Interview, UCONN, preface, 11-15; Emily Sophie Brown Oral Interview, with her companion, Mrs. Marion Rollins, UCONN, preface, 13-21;

<sup>32</sup> Edith Valet Cook Oral Interview, UNCONN, 12-13.

<sup>33</sup> Edith Valet Cook Oral Interview, UCONN, preface, 13-27.



Sheppard-Towner Act, which failed in the state; and she led the jury duty for women reform through the LWV. During the WWII she was appointed supervisor in the Division of Women's and Professional Projects of the Works Progress Administration. She began as an independent, but later joined the Democratic party and worked as a lobby to support child welfare and education. In 1922 and 1923, she did not support the ERA amendment because the LWV believed that state laws "took care of it." And given her commitment to child welfare and connection to the LWV, she probably believed that protective legislation would be eliminated if ERA succeeded. She did not recall any of the primary issues surrounding the debate, but later in life she changed her view.<sup>34</sup>

Margaret Nordhoff Morrison spent her political years working for international peace, and she traveled in the same peace circles as Florence Kitchelt. She credited her peace work to LVW where she served as the delegate to the National Council for the Prevention of War. As secretary of the Connecticut Council on International Relations, she worked closely with long-term friend Rachel Nason, co-worker of Florence Kitchelt, and one of the primary peace advocates in the state. Her oral history provides some interesting details on the local peace organizations, and her friendship with Rachel Nason, who went on to become the secretary of the National LWV, and who worked as an aid to Eleanor Roosevelt. She devoted her life to pacifist causes and worked with a number of peace organizations including the World Federalists.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the early limitations of female political activism, particularly as candidates, by 1931 forty-seven women were elected to the Connecticut General Assembly. Forty of these women were members of the GOP. Female office holding was dependent on alliance with the GOP, and women who were socially progressive were forced to run as Democrats/Independents/Socialists, but with limited success. While both parties courted women during the 1920 election, most of these women served one term only, and the party leaders were not interested in special interest issues in child labor, equal rights, or birth control. Despite the lack of real interest on the part of the male leadership, women worked within the system, and managed to endorse a number of bills

---

<sup>34</sup> Ruth McIntire Dadourian Oral Interview, UCONN, preface, 15-44

<sup>35</sup> Margaret Nordhoff Morrison Oral History, UCONN, preface, 6,44-104.

that would eventually pass and improve women's lives. The most significant was *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which finally granted married women the right to birth control.<sup>36</sup>

Regretfully, the audio tapes capturing the voices of Connecticut women are not accessible. According to the use policies dictated by the Oral History Program at UCONN, only the transcripts can be used for research. This policy is opposite of the views of other oral historians who believe that the audio/digital tape is the true record, the true raw primary source. Sherna Gluck falls on this side of the debate, and she only provides limited access to the transcripts, believing that the true history is represented by the audio recordings. Students and scholars can access the audio from the Parlor to Prison oral histories through Gluck's award winning website the Virtual Oral/Aural History Archive, at Cal State Long Beach.

Power point/play audio

Here is a example from the interview of **Ernestine Hara Kettler**

Kettler was active in NWP during the early suffrage movement. She was arrested for picketing the White House and she served time in prison, and was one of the Iron Jawed Angels. Kettler moved to California and became involved in union organization in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Her experience on the picket line for the NWP shaped her life experiences, and she continued as an ardent feminist, labor and socialist activist. Her interview took place over the course of seven hours in 1973, at age 78.<sup>37</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

There are number of comparisons that can be made between the different approaches used to capture pre and post-suffrage experiences. Alice Paul's interview and the multiple interviews conducted in Connecticut together provide facts on important events, as well as great antidotes on the struggles these women faced. Paul lived her entire life fighting for equal rights, and her memory of events, dates, and people is

---

<sup>36</sup> Nichols and Pendery, Pro-Bono, 60-66.

<sup>37</sup> Biography of Ernestine Kettler, "Suffragist" Interviews, Virtual Oral/Aural History Archive [http://salticid.nmc.csulb.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/OralAural.woa/]

reflective of her life-long struggle. In contrast, the memories of some of the Connecticut political leaders was much more vague and more antidotal in character. Paul's interview provides important context for understanding national and regional conflicts, while the local interview provide some context for understanding regional behaviors and is important to my overall goal to fit the life work of Florence Kitchelt into the regional, national, and international movements. These women laid the groundwork for future protest against gender discrimination, and for which *Griswold v. Connecticut* could not have succeeded, and thereby *Roe v. Wade* would have lacked precedence to guarantee women the right to govern their reproductive rights.<sup>38</sup>

#### Funding Sources:

Many of these early projects benefited from short-lived funding from private foundations.

---

<sup>38</sup> Nichols & Pendery, "Pro-Bono," 67-68.