

Women's suffrage debate captivates Twin Cities in 1870

Next year will mark the 100th anniversary of the 1920 passage of the 19th Amendment granting women the constitutional right to vote.

Fifty years before that unconscionably overdue correction in the nation's trajectory—back in the spring of 1870—Bloomington was the stage for a debate on the question, headlined by no less than Susan B. Anthony, the celebrated social reformer and women's rights activist who most famously championed suffrage.

The event's promoter, A.D. Ray, promised a "great discussion," with Anthony in the affirmative (naturally), and Illinois State Normal University professor Edwin C. Hewett in the negative.

The debate was held Fri., March 18, at Herman Schroder's Opera House on the east side of the courthouse square. Tickets were 50 cents, with reserved seating costing an extra 25 cents (for perspective, 50 cents in 1870 would be the equivalent of something like \$10 today, adjusted for inflation.)

Anthony, in the midst of a lecture tour across the Prairie State, had already delivered suffrage speeches earlier that month in Peoria and Bloomington, among other communities. "Miss Anthony," noted *The Pantagraph* two days before the March 18 debate, "has labored, written and spoken during the best years of her life, and she brings to its discussion a conscientious belief in its justice and right." Likewise, Hewett was described as a "gentleman of high talent, and great ability, an independent thinker and a logical debater."

"We know him to be an honest, conscientious opponent of woman suffrage," acknowledged *The Pantagraph* of Hewett, "not from mere prejudice, but from deliberate conviction." Hewett had joined "The Normal" (as the university was often known in its early days) in 1858 to teach history and geography. In 1876, he became the third president of the institution, serving in that capacity until 1890.

For the 1870 debate, the opera house was "filled to its capacity—every seat, the aisles, galleries and stage, were occupied by an intelligent and eager audience," observed *The Pantagraph*. "The streetcars brought crowds of people from Normal and the trains on the various railroads brought many visitors from the adjoining towns."

By all accounts the two-hour or so debate was lively but exceedingly civil. "The franchise begets respect," declared Anthony in her allotted twenty minute opening. "Give it to woman and it will give her corresponding power for protection."

For Anthony, prohibiting women from voting hindered their drive for independence and equality—not only politically, but economically and socially as well. Without access to the ballot box, she believed, women were overly and unnecessarily dependent on men. “The laws are such and the conditions of society are such that women are compelled to seek marriage as a condition of support and maintenance,” she noted.

Anthony told the audience that if women were given the right to vote, long-neglected issues involving prison reform and prostitution, among others, would be given their due.

The celebrated suffragist was careful, though, not to argue that expanding the franchise would be a panacea for all the ills and evils facing women in 19th century America. “The speaker said that the women would not all vote right, but the use of the ballot would make her responsible for her own actions,” reported *The Daily Leader*, another Bloomington newspaper of the day. “As it is, the whole of her time is spent trying to please her husband instead of educating herself . . . The will of the woman is always secondary. She is the junior member of the firm, without capital and without a vote in the management of it.”

“Women,” Anthony said at one point during the debate, “should cease this ‘butterfly’ existence—should arise from the mere agency of pleasing other human beings.”

Hewett—let it be duly noted—made no apologies for the patriarchal paternalism of the age. “Voting,” he simply declared, “would not develop the womanly element in the opposite sex, and therefore it was undesirable.”

“He thought women had enough to do already without the responsibility of voting,” recounted *The Leader* of Hewett’s argument. “Her brain, hands and arms were full of work without voting . . . There was different work for men and women to do. It was shown in every relation of life, and voting seemed to him to be peculiarly man’s work as was digging ditches, cutting wood, etc.”

The ISNU professor also maintained that the “great mass of women of the country did not want to vote.” What’s more, he added, because of such societal and legal strictures, women were thankfully free from the corrupting influence of politics. “And would [elected] offices be of any benefit to women?” he asked. “They certainly are a curse to men, make them corrupt, lazy, and worse off.”

Anthony would have none of this line of argument. “Voting is not dirty work,” she said. “It won’t contaminate women any more to vote with men than to live with them.”

Hewett believed that granting women the right to vote was, of all things, redundant. “Women can get anything they ask for. Men respect them and yield to them,” he said without a hint of irony. “There is then no need for women to vote in order to protect themselves.” In fact, he maintained that women already “ruled” the nation through their “moral suasion,” as well as the courtesy and deference given to them by men in particular and society in general.

Again, Anthony countered with thoughtfulness and passion. “She asked the professor what he would take for his right to the ballot, and premised that he would lose his life first,” noted *The Leader*. “Voting was a powerful thing for the men—then why not for the women?” She also said that women who did not want to vote “put her in mind of Henry Clay’s sleek, fat, and well-kept slaves, who were perfectly satisfied with their lot.”

The following evening, March 19, 1870, Anthony spoke in Lincoln. She returned to Bloomington for several days, staying at the Ashley House on the courthouse square. She debated Hewett again, this time in Peoria, on March 31.

In 1891—21 years after the debate between Anthony and Hewett in Bloomington—the Illinois General Assembly granted women the right to vote in school elections. Twenty-two years after that initial step, the Illinois Municipal Voting Act of 1913 extended the franchise to women in all elections not specifically referenced in the state constitution. That made the Land of Lincoln the first state east of the Mississippi River to allow women to vote in presidential elections. Then, on June 10, 1919, Illinois became the first state to ratify the 19th Amendment. A little more than fourteen months later, it was signed into law.

Back in the spring of 1870, *The Leader* had the last word on the suffrage debate in Bloomington. “We have been asked frequently today who came out ahead,” mused the newspaper. “Our invariable reply has been [promoter] A.D. Ray, under whose auspices the discussion was gotten up and who pocketed nearly \$200 clear of all expenses.”