Susan B. Anthony Inspires Washington

by Shanna Stevenson, WHC Coordinator

In autumn 1871 women’s rights leaders Susan B. Anthony and Abigail Scott Duniway toured the Northwest, accelerating the women’s suffrage movement in Washington Territory. Duniway was already a well-known suffragist in Oregon. She had started the first women’s rights newspaper in the region, *The New Northwest,* in May 1871. Accompanied by her husband Benjamin, Duniway traveled with Anthony as her tour manger, taking lessons on how to run a suffrage campaign.

Their sojourn was not without controversy. Traveling to Walla Walla in September, Anthony and Duniway were dogged by a flap over Anthony’s earlier visit with a Umatilla, Oregon, bartender whose mother had known her in Rochester. When they arrived in Walla Walla, churches refused to host Anthony, stating that she had sipped an alcoholic beverage during the Umatilla meeting. After her departure a local newspaper summed up the campaign for women’s right to vote by stating that it was “worse than the small-pox and chills and fever combined.”

The women regrouped in Portland, then endured a difficult stage trip from Monticello on the Cowlitz River (near present day Longview) to Olympia, the territorial capital, where Anthony spoke about the “Power of the Ballot,” on October 17 to an audience at the Olympic Hall. Attendees paid a one-dollar admission fee, which Anthony donated to benefit victims of the recent Chicago fire. Newspaperman John Miller Murphy, Washington Standard editor and an avowed suffragist, described her arguments as “graceful and elegant.” Her arguments still stand the test of time - including her objections to the inequity between men’s and women’s wages.

On the 18th of October Anthony dined at the home of Daniel R. and Ann Elizabeth White Bigelow in what is now east Olympia, still standing as the Bigelow House Museum. About the dinner, she wrote in her diary, “Dined at Judge Bigelows—his wife splendid—met some members of the Legislature—voluntary vote invites me to address Legislature tomorrow at 2 p.m.” Bigelow and his wife Ann Elizabeth White Bigelow were active in the early women’s suffrage movement. A native New Yorker, Bigelow had honed his views on women’s rights as a law student at Harvard in the 1840s before coming to Olympia in 1851 where he became an important figure in early territorial politics.

Bigelow had introduced a women’s suffrage bill to the legislature on October 14, 1871 but Bigelow and Anthony differed in their approach to winning women’s suffrage. Bigelow thought that women should vote on whether they wanted suffrage while Anthony wanted it granted outright through a declaratory act. Bigelow’s speech was printed separately and is in the collection of the Bigelow House Museum.
On October 19th, Anthony and Duniway addressed the legislature by means of an invitation initiated by Representative Daniel Bigelow through a joint resolution. Three legislators including Bigelow, escorted Anthony and Duniway into the chambers where a number of Olympia women viewed the proceedings. Turned out in a gray silk gown, Anthony lauded the group, saying, “This was the first time in the history of our nation that a woman has been allowed the privilege of addressing the lawmakers in session.” Historian G. Thomas Edwards described it as one of the most effective speeches that she delivered on the West Coast.

In a well-reasoned speech, she spoke about the right to vote being guaranteed by the 14th and 15th amendments to the U.S. Constitution and echoed the words of the Constitution. She said that “the withholding of the ballot and representation while taxes are imposed is the most abject of servitude.” The Olympia Transcript said of her speech: “Miss Anthony is a woman of more than ordinary ability, and the able manner in which she handled her subject before the Legislature, was ample warning to the members of that body who oppose woman suffrage to be silent.” Duniway also spoke to the legislature. The House of Representatives turned down a proposal to print Anthony’s legislative address, but the Washington Standard published a summary of it and as did The New Northwest.

The day after Anthony’s visit to the legislature, a “declaratory” suffrage bill in line with her strategy was introduced, but it failed 11–13, with Bigelow voting no. Bigelow’s bill authorizing women to vote on whether they wanted suffrage was postponed indefinitely on a vote of 16–11. Anthony, for her part, stated that women should not be voting on whether they wished to have suffrage, reasoning that they were being held in a condition of servitude and did not know the value of the vote. Reputedly, she was relying on Washington men to follow the lead of Wyoming, which had enacted women’s suffrage in 1869 to lure women to the territory. Clearly, the Washington legislature did not buy her argument.

Anthony spoke at Tumwater and again in Olympia before embarking on a trip to Victoria, British Columbia, where she enjoyed mixed results advocating for women’s votes in a community much less attuned to suffrage than Olympia. Anthony and Duniway then journeyed to Whidbey Island and Port Townsend where newspapers were less than positive. The editor of the Port Townsend Cyclop mostly concentrated on Anthony as an “old maid” who had never kissed a man over two years old, but he also harped on the unattractive appearance of Port Townsend women generally.

On October 3, Seattle suffragist Sarah Yesler hosted a dinner for Anthony, but others were not as cordial. Beria Brown, editor of the Territorial Dispatch proclaimed Anthony a revolutionist “aiming at nothing less than the breaking up of the very foundations of society,” and predicted the overthrow of religious sanctity, the family circle, and children’s legitimacy if women should receive the vote. He equated her stance with free love and joined Anthony’s name with notorious free-love advocate Victoria Woodhull. Anthony later went on to Port Madison and Port Gamble.

After her swing around Puget Sound, Anthony returned to Olympia to participate in Washington’s first women’s suffrage convention, which began on November 8, 1871. A committee including
Yesler, Daniel Bigelow, and Anthony drafted the constitution for the Washington Territory Woman Suffrage Association (WTWSA), the principle outcome of the convention. Ann Elizabeth Bigelow had been instrumental in calling the convention and served on the executive committee for both the convention and the new WTWSA. Delegates also passed a series of resolutions including one asking the legislature to direct the territory’s election judges to accept the ballots of women citizens in accordance with the Fourteenth Amendment. At Anthony’s suggestion, the group elected only female officers. Pro-suffragists and anti-suffragists debated at the convention. The association ultimately chose Anthony as its delegate to the National Woman Suffrage Association’s convention, presumably to be held in New York in May 1872, and paid her $100.00 for expenses.

The WTWSA spurred the creation of local suffrage organizations in Olympia and Thurston County. These women likely were part of a lobby for the remainder of the 1871 legislative session, who attended each day’s proceedings. Legislators responded by passing a unique anti-suffrage law, which declared that women could not vote until Congress made it the law of the land. Historian G. Thomas Edwards surmised in *Sowing Good Seeds* that this unusual act might have been in response to the 1866 bill (and the 1867 bill with many of the same provisions), which had given women encouragement to vote; and that it was meant to discourage further lobbying by women, which some said wasted time. Edwards noted that Washington was likely the only territory to turn the issue of women’s suffrage over to the federal government.

Susan B. Anthony returned to Washington State in 1896, but confined her trip to Seattle, where her visit was sponsored by the Woman’s Century Club. She did say she would have liked to visit Olympia again. Anthony spoke at the Seattle Theater and was feted at a Century Club reception. Anthony’s last trip to the Northwest was in the summer of 1905. Then a frail 85 years old, she attended the National American Woman Suffrage Association conference in Portland. She died the following year not knowing her 1905 visit would help re-invigorate the Washington women’s suffrage campaign that was successful just five years later.

Notes:

3. Edwards, 86.
4. Susan B. Anthony Papers, Library of Congress, Daybook and Diaries 1856-1906, Box 2
Reel 1-2, October 18, 1871.

5. Edwards, 88. This is likely untrue, but stated by Anthony.
7. The New Northwest, October 27, 1871.
8. “Miss Anthony’s Speech,” Olympia Transcript, October 21, 1871.
14. Officers were J. B. Allen; Annie Mix (Walla Walla), L. Ellen Hewitt (Olympia), Sarah B. Yesler (Seattle), Mrs. Amelia Giddings (Olympia), Lizzie Ordway (Port Madison), and E. T. Munson (Olympia). Serving on the Finance Committee were John M. Murphy, Mary Ann Barnes, Albert A. Manning—all from Olympia. The Executive Committee included Olympia residents Ann Elizabeth White Bigelow, Mehitable Elder, Phoebe Moore and Emily Olney French.
15. “Woman Suffrage Convention,” Washington Standard, November 11, 1871, 2; and Simmons, “History of Woman Suffrage in the State of Washington,” 22. Anti-suffragists were James H. Lasater of Walla Walla and Mrs. J. B. Frost, and pro-suffragists were Father (likely A. A.) Denny, Alfred Elder, John Denny, and Abigail Scott Duniway.
18. Edwards, 216-244.