

Emma Smith DeVoe: The Suffragist Who Wouldn't Back Down

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When Emma Smith DeVoe was eight years old, she heard Susan B. Anthony talk about women's suffrage (voting rights). At that talk, Anthony asked everyone who supported women's suffrage to stand up. DeVoe was the first person in the audience to rise to her feet.

DeVoe stood up for women's rights for the rest of her life. She worked as an organizer for the National Woman Suffrage Association. In that job, DeVoe organized support for women's suffrage in Dakota Territory, Idaho, and Oregon. When she moved to Tacoma in 1906, DeVoe was named president of the Washington Equal Suffrage Association.

How Did She Do It?

Before DeVoe, the suffrage campaign took a low-key approach. They tried to influence politicians one-on-one. DeVoe expanded the campaign. She tried high-profile strategies, like writing a women's suffrage-themed cookbook and covering neighborhoods with posters. She used polls to figure out voters' opinions on women's suffrage.

In 1909, the national women's suffrage association held its convention in Seattle. DeVoe organized a "Suffrage Special" train. Suffragists would give speeches from the train at stops on their trip to Seattle. DeVoe also arranged for a Suffrage Day at Seattle's 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition.

May Arkwright Hutton was the vice president of the Washington Equal Suffrage Association. She wrote, "I think if we had raked the nation with a fine-tooth comb we could not have found Mrs. Emma Smith DeVoe's equal as an organizer."

Eastern and Western Washington

Yet Hutton and DeVoe would soon clash. The women's styles were very different. DeVoe was ladylike, good-natured, and cheerful, while Hutton was over-the-top and sometimes vulgar. More importantly, the two leaders disagreed over strategy. Hutton and the Eastern Washington women's suffragists did not agree with DeVoe's more public tactics.

The differences between DeVoe and Hutton led to a major split in Washington's suffrage movement, but they both kept working toward the same goal. Washington voters approved women's suffrage in 1910, with 64% of people voting "Yes." It was only the fifth state to do so.

Mother of Woman's Suffrage

After success in Washington, DeVoe dedicated herself to the national campaign for women's suffrage. She died in Tacoma, Washington on September 3, 1927, at age 79. The Tacoma News Tribune called her the Mother of Woman's Suffrage.



Emma Smith DeVoe. Image via Washington State Historical Society



Washington State History Museum Suffrage Curriculum
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