

# May Arkwright Hutton and the Battle for Women's Suffrage

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**“...I hope, trust and believe that women will use the ballot as intelligent, enlightened human beings would use any weapon placed in their hands whereby they could better the conditions under which humanity lives.”**

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The scene would have made May Hutton proud: Senator Hillary Clinton, the first woman with a legitimate chance to become her party's presidential nominee, standing onstage in a packed auditorium at Spokane's West Central Community Center, explaining to people why they should elect her the nation's next chief executive. Many of those watching were women, eager to cast their votes to make the senator the first of her gender to lead the most powerful nation on earth. Today, Senator Clinton and others can look back to a long history of accomplishments by women in politics. Those accomplishments were made possible by the groundwork laid by women like May Arkwright Hutton, whose efforts led to the successful vote in 1910 to extend to women in Washington the right to vote.

Hutton was a leader of the women's suffrage movement in Eastern Washington. In addition to her many other accomplishments, she was one of the first two women to attend a national convention for the Democratic Party.

Given Hutton's strong political interest, she certainly would have thrown herself into the middle of this year's hotly contested nomination process, if she could. She would have toiled for her favorite candidate, made arguments for that candidate at her neighborhood caucus, perhaps even become a delegate at her party's national convention this summer. Knowing that she was from the second most populous western state, she would have understood why Washington would be critical as each candidate worked to win support in the West.

A century ago Hutton wanted for Washington women what their counterparts in Idaho had already had for a decade, although she had no illusions about what that would mean. She said in one of her many speeches, "When I ask the voters of Washington to trust their women as Idaho has done ... I bring to you no record of marvelous results accomplished by Idaho women since their enfranchisement."

Hutton didn't give a flowery account of the glories gained by women's enfranchisement in her neighboring state. Instead, she argued that there must be great change in the political arena before women outgrew "the swaddling clothes of their newly acquired citizenship." Surely now, with Hillary Clinton in a leading national role, those swaddling clothes have indeed been left behind.

### **A Life of Activism**

The roots of May Hutton's activism go back to her early childhood. She was born in Ohio in 1860. Before the age of 10, she lost her mother. When she was in the third grade, her father asked her to quit school to tend to her blind grandfather. Living in poverty, she cooked and cleaned for him and led him by the hand wherever he wanted to go. Although he couldn't see, her grandfather loved to hear all he could. Hutton would lead him to the village square where he listened for hours to political speeches or to the words of evangelists. Hutton listened, too. She was introduced to a variety of issues, including those surrounding the mistreatment of miners.

Hutton came from an economically impoverished home, but the environment in which she lived was intellectually very rich. In addition to the words in the square, Hutton was exposed to the talk of political men who visited at the family home. Those men included William McKinley, who was a family friend long before he became president in 1897. One evening, after she served him cider and doughnuts, McKinley told her that when she reached womanhood he hoped for "an enlightened age of equal suffrage." Her father responded that he would rather she find a good husband.

Later in her life, Hutton duplicated that rich environment filled with intellectuals in her home. She hosted people like U.S. Senator William Borah, libertarian Clarence Darrow, and poet and author Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

Hutton was a risk taker. At the age of 23, she sought her fortune by leaving Ohio and heading to Idaho with 40 miners. She worked hard as a saloon cook in the mining areas of the Idaho Panhandle, then bought her own boarding house. In 1887, she married one of her customers, locomotive engineer Levi Hutton (the same Levi Hutton who eventually built the Hutton Building in Spokane and started the Hutton Settlement, a home for children). May Hutton cooked her own wedding dinner for 50 guests.

In 1897, the Huttons invested \$550 with five others in the Hercules Mine in Idaho. For four years they toiled long hours at the mine with no success. After working in the kitchen, Hutton was known to put on overalls, unheard of in her Victorian time, and work alongside the men down in the mine. Then, in 1901, one of their partners struck a rich vein of ore. They had found silver. The

Huttons became millionaires overnight.

Soon the couple had luxuries that they'd never had before. One of May Hutton's luxuries was time. She was freed from her long daily work to pursue her passions. She began to educate herself, including a study of Shakespeare. Through her wide reading, she became exceptionally well informed on the issues of the day.

Her strong attraction to the challenges of the working class and her connections to the unions pushed her to run for state office in 1904. Women in Idaho had already gained suffrage. Hutton was defeated by only 80 votes. To explain the loss, she pointed to the mine owners who contributed \$20,000 to her opponent's campaign.

Levi and May Hutton moved to Spokane in 1906 for a variety of reasons including increased business possibilities for Levi. By moving to the state of Washington, May Hutton not only lost the right to become a candidate, she lost her right to vote. She immediately devoted herself to the suffrage cause.

### **Tough Battles**

The woman's right to vote in the state of Washington was a long, hard-fought battle filled with advances and disappointing setbacks. In 1883, the territorial government of Washington passed legislation that gave women the vote, but the courts declared the new law unconstitutional in 1884. That cycle of win and loss was repeated. In 1888, the Legislature approved "An Act to Enfranchise Women" which was voided later that same year by the Territorial Supreme Court. It took more than 20 years of fighting after that court decision before enfranchisement successfully passed the legislature and become permanent.

Spokane society was not used to a lusty woman like the 6-foot-tall, 225-pound Hutton, who dressed outlandishly and spoke her mind forcefully and directly. While other women wore subdued Victorian dress, Hutton wore bright colors, flowered prints and wide-brimmed hats with roses spilling down to her shoulders.

Not only did Hutton frequently rub the women of Spokane the wrong way — she often was in conflict other suffrage leaders in Washington. After Hutton returned from a Seattle suffrage convention where her views were not endorsed, she formed her own organization based in Spokane: the Washington Political Equality League.

Between 1906 and 1910, during the heyday of Hutton's activism around suffrage, she clipped hundreds of articles and pasted them into ledger books that she used as scrapbooks. Hutton's pasted pages, now housed at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, include articles that quote directly from her speeches as well as other long-yellowed articles reflecting her broad interests. The material opens a window into May Hutton's life and provides insight into the fascinating history of her time.

In the early 1900s Hutton fought against many anti-suffrage attacks from both women and men. A woman identified in one of the clipped articles from Hutton's scrapbooks as simply "Mrs. Bacon" argued for "more babies, not more ballots." Bacon said, "No woman living will ever do a great work who could not have borne great children, and if she can bear great children she can do no other great work." Bacon admonished women "not to paint pictures or to attempt to make laws, but to make men."

Hutton responded, "According to this acknowledgement, Mrs. Bacon's writing cannot be very great, and how great her children will be time will tell." Hutton goes on to write that, although motherhood is beautiful, economic conditions have forced women out of the home "to earn her bread, and have made motherhood a burden instead of a joy as God intended it to be." Hutton also had a rebuff for another argument with the slogan "No Babies, No Ballots." A priest, Father Phelan of St. Louis, suggested that only men and women with babies should be allowed to vote. Archbishop Diomedea Falconia, apostolic delegate to the United States, heartily agreed with the St. Louis clergyman.

One suffragist, D. A. Steward, condemned it vigorously, saying, "It's simply preposterous!" Another suffragist, W. J. Gleason, stated, "What have babies to do with ballots?" She argued that a widowed woman with property should have the same right to vote in the country that she supports as any man. Hutton simply commented that if only men and women with babies are allowed to vote, that would mean that both Father Phelan and Archbishop Falconia would be disqualified from voting, along with all priests and bishops.

Sometimes the accusations made about suffragists and their roles in the family hit a tender spot. Hutton said, "The charge is made that suffragists don't care for the home. I can only say that suffragists do. In our family, while we have no children of our own, yet we have raised five girls. And now the grandchildren are coming around to the house. Then people charge that I am in suffrage work because I haven't the mother instinct."

In other cases, Hutton strongly defended the ability of suffragists to contribute to the home environment. For example, a woman named F.F. Emery joked that there should be a cooking school for the husbands of suffragists. Hutton responded that there should be cooking schools for all men, not just those who are husbands of suffragists. She went on to suggest that the courses be taught by some of the most well-known suffragists because, "among them are some of the best cooks in Spokane."

Hutton often talked about the benefits to homemakers of suffrage. "It is a good thing for woman to have the ballot. The more a woman knows about civil government the better homemaker she will be. Management of a household these days is an economic problem. A woman should know why prices are as high as they are and why wages are as low as they are. The wife cannot make ends meet now."

The articles that fill May Hutton's scrapbooks are without notation or marks, with one exception.

One article she clipped attacked the intelligence of women. Hutton underlined with a heavily pressed black pen this quote from Professor Frederick Starr, a famous scientist and ethnological explorer from the University of Chicago: "Women are not civilized. Furthermore, they should not be civilized. What's more, they can't be for the fundamental nature of woman is barbaric, and it is better so ..."

In a related clipped article, Reverend J. E. Seth stated, "It is an open question whether women will vote as intelligently as man. If she does not vote more intelligently than men, then nothing is gained by women suffrage, either for its country or its people." He added, "Politics must have its very deepest roots in the home and in the home atmosphere. Therefore, let us be careful lest we drag woman down from her high station to equal that of man."

Even the president of a major university at the time argued against women's suffrage. In one article in Hutton's scrapbooks, W. E. Stone, the president of Purdue University is quoted as saying, "I am not in favor of extending the voting privilege to women. ... I do not think that women are less intelligent than men or less well qualified to exercise suffrage than a good many men who now do so, but I think that the sphere of work and influence of women is not directly concerned with politics or business affairs in general. I am not convinced that any considerable number of women wishes for suffrage and I see no reason at this time why it should be granted." Although Hutton did not respond directly to these articles, in another she said, "I think self-supporting, self-respecting women of the present age resent the implied thought that man is woman's superior. Man is not and has never been woman's superior — only in brute strength." Some clippings are amusing. One says, "Let the women have the ballot, that will relieve the men of half the work and worry of running the government. Besides it will put all men in a Garden of Eden where they can blame the women for all the political blunders that are made."

Women, even strong women like May Hutton, became discouraged at times. But they kept fighting. For example, Hutton said, "I believe that the injustice of denying the woman the ballot is so glaring and the justice of the cause so apparent that it will soon rouse the women from the apathy into which they have fallen."

### **Finally... Victory**

On November 8, 1910, the suffragists' hard work finally paid off as women's enfranchisement passed in the general election in the state of Washington and became law. Hutton must have been deeply satisfied to paste in her scrapbook, "Resolved; that the National American Woman's Suffrage Association, in Convention assembled, send greeting to the men of Washington in appreciation of the twenty-four thousand majority vote, which gave their women the ballot, and whose example must be, and has already been, an inspiration to men of other States." Hutton also received a letter of congratulations from Governor M. E. Hay on November 11, 1910. The Governor said, "The quiet, ladylike manner in which this campaign was conducted has won the admiration of all our people and won success at the polls." This letter must have amused Hutton given that "quiet" was not a word typically used to describe her.

Hutton gave credit to one group in particular in winning the vote for women in Washington and in the other four states where women were enfranchised. In a letter, she states, "The enfranchised women of the five free States of this Republic owe this privilege principally to organized labor." After that successful campaign, Hutton stayed involved in women's political issues. She helped establish mining unions and worked throughout her life for the underprivileged. She also brought property under her own name for the sole purpose of being qualified to serve on a jury and became one of the first two women to serve on a Spokane County jury.

In one clipped article Hutton said, "I am often asked the question of what women are going to do with the ballot now that they have it." She pointed with pride to work by enfranchised Seattle women that resulted in ousting political grafters. She also pointed with equal pride to Spokane women who helped inaugurate a commission form of government and helped elect a set of new commissioners. She commented, "I invariably reply that I hope, trust and believe that women will use the ballot as intelligent, enlightened human beings would use any weapon placed in their hands whereby they could better the conditions under which humanity lives."

In addition to continuing work on women's issues in Washington, Hutton supported the cause of the vote in other states. On her way home from the national Democratic Party convention in Baltimore in 1912, Hutton made 13 political speeches in Ohio. She was reported to be "the saddest woman in Spokane when she read that news of the defeat of the woman's suffrage amendment in Ohio." To encourage Hutton, Elizabeth Hauser from Ohio's suffrage movement wrote a letter to her stating, "It cannot be defeated. It is doomed to success."

Indeed, the suffrage movement won its ultimate victory in 1919 and 1920 — after May Hutton's death — when three-fourths of the U.S. states ratified the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, bringing the vote to the women in every state.

Hutton did not always concur with the ways of the suffrage movement in other countries. She was particularly opposed to militant approaches in England at the time. When British suffragist Emmeline Goulden Pankhurst wired Hutton and said she would give a dozen speeches in the state of Washington for \$1,200, Hutton wired back and said she would give Pankhurst \$1,200 to stay away.

Whether she agreed with their methods or not, Hutton followed suffrage movements from afar. She clipped articles from places like France and Germany. One article said, "The recent elections have demonstrated that the suffragette movement in France is not yet in the realm of practical politics."

An article from Chicago describes suffragists handing out yellow cards saying, "No Vote, No Tax," to women standing in line for a special tax assessment. The article notes that some women left their place in line after receiving the cards.

At the national level, Hutton had a strong dislike for President Theodore Roosevelt and wrote articles against him. Her negative feelings for him started when he said, "Only twice should a

woman's name appear in public, when she marries and when she dies."

Hutton's public work diminished after 1912 as her health deteriorated. She died in 1915 at the age of 55. People of all classes and backgrounds attended her Spokane funeral.

Now, nearly a century after Washington women received the franchise, our state is represented by women at the highest levels, including our governor and U.S. senators. Hillary Clinton's candidacy has proven that millions of Americans will vote for a woman for president. Perhaps if Hutton were still with us, she would address women in politics today with the words she sometimes used to close her letters: "Yours in liberty, May Arkwright Hutton."

Notes:

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