

Women Suffrage Memorial Dedicated

By Tessa Lemos Del Pino and Jerome Del Pino

Under the blazing heat of the Tennessee August sun, dozens of women, some even daring to wear the heavy women's attire of the 1920's, marched to Market Square in Knoxville to re-enact a women's suffrage parade and dedicate the Women Suffrage Memorial. TLAW President Jackie Dixon led the TLAW delegation which was attired primary in white, the color the suffragists usually wore. TLAW recording secretary, Heather Anderson, literally carried the TLAW banner in the parade. Other TLAW members who marched included Judge Patsy Cotrell, Margaret Behm, Marcia McMurray, Amy Hollars accompanied by her young daughter, Sharon Frankenberg, Pamela Reeves, and Martha Lionberger. The memorial stands in honor to the achievements, on behalf of all women, of Lizzie Crozier French of Knoxville, Anne Dallas Dudley of Nashville, and Elizabeth Avery Meriwether of Memphis. The keynote speaker at the event was the Honorable Martha Craig Daughtrey, of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, who is, herself, a looming figure in women's history.

In her address, Judge Daughtrey gave an eloquent history of the movement and applauded the efforts of the suffragists, noting the important role of Tennessee in the movement. Characterizing their efforts as "herculean", the Judge told how Tennessee women, to the great amazement of many, actually convinced the General Assembly to grant women the right to vote in presidential and municipal elections in Tennessee." She made clear the enormity of the issue by describing the sacrifices that some had made in order to obtain the vote. "[M]ore militant women suffragists under the leadership of Alice Paul . . . had chained themselves to the White House fence, been dragged off to prison and force fed in response to hunger strikes." The most difficult campaign of all – what the Judge referred to as "the last-ditch, in-the-trenches, 'bring in the heavy artillery' battle" – was to be fought here Tennessee. It involved not only Tennessee's own stalwart suffragists, but also the national pro- and anti- forces, which descended on Nashville in the unnaturally hot August of 1920 and set up the battle headquarters in the new Hermitage Hotel, just opposite the state Capitol.

Judge Daughtrey recreated the mood of the momentous event as she recounted the roll call vote. "When the resolution was finally put to a roll-call vote, it is said that Harry Burn's vote 'aye,' coming near the beginning of the roll, was so softly expressed and so unexpected that several moments passed before those on the floor and in the gallery realized what had occurred." She explained that the event taught an important lesson that still applies today. "[W]ith a simple change in his vote from nay to aye, Burn had virtually single-handedly enfranchised 27 million American women. The next time someone tries to convince you that one person or one vote can't make a difference, be sure to tell them this story. I do it whenever I can."

The Judge went on to observe the propriety of the role women undertook in society having gained a voice in democracy. "[I]f there are out there today certain threats to the continued existence of the human race, it is not because women vote, and hold office, and serve on juries, or because they are guaranteed equality in the workplace, in our schools,

and on the playing fields.” She exhorted the audience to follow the lead of the three women honored in the dedication. “If there is still work to be done to guarantee true equality for women and girls in this state and elsewhere, we have the sterling example of the three dedicated women we honor here today They certainly knew that nothing worth doing comes easily. And yet they persevered. “

In keeping the history of women leaders alive – particularly Tennessee women and woman layers – Judge Daughtrey admits that she is a history buff of the suffragist movement much like Wanda Sobieski, whose tireless efforts and common interest with the Judge resulted in the memorial dedication. In speaking of Ms. Sobieski, Judge Daughtrey said, “The magnificent statue . . . this wonderful celebration, this historic occasion would not have come about without the vision, the organizational skills, and the sheer determination of Wanda Sobieski. In her tireless efforts over a period of a decade to see this project through, she has been a worthy successor to all the women who worked so long and so hard to gain universal suffrage and on whose shoulders we all stand today.”

TLAW applauds the efforts of the suffragist who helped establish our right to vote that we recently exercised and the efforts of those who helped to make this dedication and memorial possible.

More about the Woman Suffrage Memorial

The suffragists depicted on the statue include Lizzie Crozier French, Anne Dallas Dudley, and Elizabeth Avery Meriwether. Lizzie Crozier French was founder and first President of the Knoxville Equal Suffrage League and the first woman to address the Tennessee Bar Association. Anne Dallas Dudley was President of the Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association and Vice-President in the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Elizabeth Avery Meriwether called the first Women’s Suffrage Meeting in Tennessee and traveled with Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Anna Howard Shaw as they made speeches from Connecticut to Texas.

Alan Lequire, a well-known historical sculptor, created the memorial. One of his most famous pieces is the Athena Parthenos sculpture in the Parthenon in Nashville.