

History of the League of Women Voters of Billings

Women's Suffrage

The roots of the League of Women Voters of Billings extend back to July 19, 1848, when the Women's Rights Convention was formed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in Seneca, New York. It's difficult to imagine now, but at that time women could not vote, hold office, speak in public, attend college, or own property. Married women could not make contracts, sue in court, divorce an abusive husband, or gain custody of her children.

After working against slavery and for the temperance movement, Susan B. Anthony formed with Elizabeth Cady Stanton the National Suffrage Association in May 1869 with the single goal of attaining voting rights for women through an amendment to the Constitution. In December of that year the territory of Wyoming passed the first women's suffrage law in the U.S. But the idea was slow to gain support.

When delegates were writing the Montana Constitution in 1889, Clara McAdow, a businesswoman from Billings, talked to each delegate asking him to give the vote to every person and not just men. No other state in the Union allowed women's suffrage and the men leading the Constitutional convention feared the men in Montana would not pass the Constitution if they allowed women's suffrage, so it was defeated 43 to 25. Colorado was the first state to pass the amendment in 1893.

Homesteaders were instrumental in getting the western states to pass the women's suffrage amendment. Women worked hard and were viewed as more virtuous than men. It was believed that if women had the right to vote, laws would be passed that would improve society and end corruption. In 1914, one hundred years ago, the men in the Montana legislature passed the amendment to allow women to vote; Montana tied with Nevada to become the 9th state to do so. In 1916 one of the suffragists, Jeannette Rankin from Missoula ran for the U.S. Congress as a Republican and became the first woman elected to that national body.

Many women were put in prison and even tortured as they worked to convince the nation to allow them to vote. Hazel Hunkins from Billings was one of the many young women who picketed the White House. In August of 1920, the 19th Amendment was passed in Congress, 51 years after the women first organized to do exactly that.

The League of Women Voters of the United States

During the 50th convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in St. Louis, Missouri, Carrie Chapman Catt proposed forming "a league of women voters to finish the fight and aid in the reconstruction of the nation." The next year in Chicago on February 14, 1920, six months before the ratification of the 19th amendment, the League of Women Voters was established. The delegates knew they needed to help the 20 million women to carry out their responsibilities as voters.

Maud Wood Park who had guided the 19th amendment through Congress became the first president. From the beginning, it was seen that legislation needed to focus on the needs of all people and not just on women's issues. Education became primary; it was necessary for women and men to be informed voters. The organization became a nonpartisan, grassroots group where members studied issues before encouraging citizens to become active in supporting social reform legislation.

The League of Women Voters of Billings The Early Years

While there were earlier unsuccessful attempts to establish a group in Billings, the provisional League of Women Voters of Billings was organized December 6, 1951 with Mrs. Ray Smith as president. Studies began on national issues of inflation, the United Nations, and the U.S. budget. To gain local status, the provisional League needed to do a city survey.

During the first year, League members assisted in voter registrations, an ongoing activity every year since the beginning. Mrs. Orville Foreman, the national chairman of Voters' Service, visited Billings. Membership teas and luncheons were held. Billings members joined women from other Montana cities in a state organization meeting in Butte. In November 1952, Mrs. Ray Smith resigned as president and Mrs. Thomas Astle became president.

Full League status was reached in April, 1953 when bylaws were approved. To fulfill local obligations as a League, they continued building the membership and held discussions on city water problems. They conducted a survey on the water bond issue which was followed by a general meeting where Mr. E. R. Waldo, city engineer, explained the need for the issue. A panel discussion was held on water conservation. A public meeting was held to present the various views on the airport bond. In December, 1953, the national League granted League of Women Voters of Billings their membership charter.

In April 1954, Mrs. Dale (Joan Harwood) Galles went as the delegate to the national biennial convention in Denver where she received the charter for the Billings League. That year the national convention chose U.S. tariffs, trade policies, and individual liberties and the national security as items of study. In May, Mrs. Malcolm Hargraves, national board organization and finance chair, visited Billings.

Activities in 1954 for the League of Women Voters of Billings included: presentations by Sheriff Roy Stewart on county government, Attorney John Goff on the parole system and the preferential presidential primary; County Attorney Arnold Berger on proposed juvenile legislation; State Representative John Schiltz on the state legislature; Librarian Ann Whitmack on a proposed bond issue for Montana mental health institutions. League members worked as precinct registrars and election judges. A county candidate meeting was held. Members worked on a state committee to establish the League of Women Voters of Montana which was established in April of 1955.

Mrs. James Sage was elected Billings League president in March, 1955. That year public discussions were held on "Oil Legislation and Our Schools," the U.S. Constitution and Congressional Investigating Committees, and city-county planning and zoning. League members made posters to explain voting locations for the school bond issue (held in schools rather than general election voting places). A League speaker's bureau was established and money was raised to publish the "Know Your Town Government." National Secretary, Mrs. Werner Blanchard, a member of the U.S. Commission for UNESCO was a guest in September, 1955.

Topics in a Freedom Forum series presented in 1956 were "The Right of Work vs. the Closed Shop," "The Constitution and Congressional Investigating Committees," "The Constitution and Loyalty Programs." William Jameson, past president of the American Bar Association concluded the series by speaking on balancing individual liberties with national security. By 1956 the League had established a weekly newspaper column in the Yellowstone News and a monthly program on KOOK radio.

The League of Women Voters of Billings 60 Years of Study, Consensus, Education, and Action

The vital work of the early League continues today. Study groups in the last 60 years have looked at local government, the legal system, education, agriculture, human needs, health issues, immigration, environment, media and democracy, transportation and DUIs. A consensus process is used to form positions which include: local government, alternate sources of revenue, consolidation, incarceration, public education, land use planning, and transportation. These positions can be read at www.lwvbillings.org. From informed study and consensus, the League uses the position statements for action and advocacy.

Annually, the League of Women Voters of Billings registers voters at naturalization of citizens ceremonies and on September 24 National Voter Registration Day, encourages younger and maligned citizens to register, and helps voters know where to vote. Education of the 60 members and the public continues with monthly presentations the first Thursdays at the Elks Club with lunch at 11:30 and program at noon. When needed, candidate forums and voter guides are formed. The League hosts Sunshine Week panel discussions addressing the need for transparency in government. League members are observers at city and county

meetings. The League of Women Voters of Billings participates with the national and state League advocacy programs.

In 2014, the League of Women Voters of Billings established the “Joan Harwood Galles Making Democracy Work” award. An idea from the national League of Women Voters, the award recognizes a citizen who volunteers to safeguard democracy, create positive changes in the community, and improve our systems of government. Together, we can all make democracy work, building a more equitable, healthy, safe, and vibrant place to live.