

KANSAS AND THE WOMAN SUFFRAGE AMENDMENT, 1917-1919

by

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On December 10, 1917 Representative John E. Raker of California introduced a joint resolution to amend the Constitution of the United States. The Raker Resolution, which thus became the first matter of consequence under consideration in the recently assembled Second Session of the Sixty-Fifth Congress, read as follows:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

The Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.¹

Among the individuals serving in Congress in December 1917 were the two United States Senators and eight members of the House of Representatives from Kansas. These ten gentlemen, like their colleagues from other states throughout the nation, would be vested with the responsibility of determining whether to approve or reject the Raker Resolution.²

The Raker Resolution was promptly referred to the Committee on Woman Suffrage. This standing committee, after deliberating for three weeks, decided to issue a favorable report on the resolution. The sole committee member from Kansas, Representative Edward B. Little of Kansas City, joined the majority in voting in the affirmative.³

According to the stipulations prescribed by the Committee on Rules, six hours of general debate were set aside for the Raker Resolution on the House floor.⁴ An analysis of the tone of the House discussion indicated substantial sentiment for the resolution in that chamber. Notwithstanding a few caustic remarks against the propriety of woman suffrage, it appeared likely that the resolution would attract the requisite two-thirds majority.

Voicing enthusiastic support for the Raker Resolution were Representatives Little, Philip P. Campbell of Pittsburg, Guy T. Helvering of Marysville, and William A. Ayres of Wichita. Little, reminding his colleagues that the proponents of woman suffrage were merely adopting the same tactics which had been employed in seeking previous constitutional amendments, insisted that Congress "must give the same power and the same opportunity that you give to men."⁵ Urging the elimination of an "implied inhibition" on the right of women to participate in the democratic process, Campbell predicted that the House was about to make the theory that governments derived their powers from the consent of the governed a "glorious reality for the women of America."⁶ Helvering, asking that the states be afforded the opportunity to determine whether our forefathers "meant to forever shut out women from the intimate circle of equality," concluded that

approval of the Raker Resolution was "the chivalrous thing to do, the logical thing to do, and the just thing to do."⁷ Appealing to the House to "make amends for the wrongs of the past," Ayres argued that woman suffrage would make the nation "a democracy not only in name but in reality, and all that democracy stands for--liberty, justice, equality."⁸

After the Speaker's gavel fell, the official roll call was tabulated. The final count was 274-136 in favor of the Raker Resolution, amounting to a narrow one vote in excess of the two-thirds ratio.⁹ The Kansas delegation in the House balloted 8-0 for the Raker Resolution, thus providing the margin of victory. The unanimous support for woman suffrage came from congressmen representing a state in the geographic heart of the nation and having a population larger than that of any state in the vast expanse between Missouri and California.¹⁰

Fearing the prospect of defeat the advocates of woman suffrage in the Senate were reluctant to place the Raker Resolution on the agenda in 1918. In that year, however, the two senators from Kansas, Charles Curtis of Topeka and William H. Thompson of Kansas City, pledged their firm support of a woman suffrage amendment. Curtis, a future Vice-President of the United States, proclaimed himself a "friend" of woman suffrage and vowed to "work very hard" to expedite passage of the Raker Resolution.¹¹ Insisting that it was "high time that citizenship became a national affair," Thompson maintained that the actual success of woman suffrage in so many states stood "as a conclusive argument against every objection which has been raised against it."¹²

The Raker Resolution was not debated until the final weeks of the Third Session of the Sixty-Fifth Congress in early 1919. On February 10 the Senate voted 55-29 to approve the resolution. Unfortunately, the Senate margin was one vote less than the necessary two-thirds. Consistent with their previous statements, both Curtis and Thompson were recorded in favor of the Raker Resolution.¹³

On the opening day of the Sixty--Sixth Congress in May 1919, Representative James R. Mann of Illinois introduced a measure identical in wording to the Raker Resolution.¹⁴ After deliberating less than a day, the Committee on Woman Suffrage recommended that the House approve the resolution.¹⁵ The Mann Resolution reached the House floor under a "Calendar Wednesday" rule, a seldom used procedure under which the resolution had to be disposed of in one legislative day. Based on the overwhelming verbal support for a woman suffrage amendment, it was anticipated that the resolution would easily command a two-thirds majority. The final tally was 304-90 in favor of passage of the Mann Resolution, a figure which included the affirmative votes of all eight Kansans.¹⁶

When the Mann Resolution reached the Senate, it was submitted to that body's Committee on Woman Suffrage. The committee chairmen, who strongly favored woman suffrage, sought to dispense with hearings and immediately place the measure before the entire Senate. Because of a number of complex parliamentary objections, however, the committee

scrutinized the Mann Resolution for five days and then endorsed its passage.¹⁷

In sharp contrast to the House the Senate debated the Mann Resolution in leisurely fashion over a period of several days. After rejecting several substantive amendments by wide margins, the Senate on June 4 agreed to vote on the merits of the resolution itself. It was generally estimated that the resolution commanded the support of at least fifty-five members of the Senate. The final vote was 56-25 in behalf of passage, two more than the two-thirds mandated by the Constitution. These two additional votes were provided by the two Kansans, Curtis and his freshman colleague Arthur Capper of Topeka.¹⁸

By the time the Mann Resolution had been approved by the two Houses of Congress, signed by the Speaker of the House and Vice-President, and dispatched to the states as the proposed Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, Governor Henry J. Allen announced his intention of summoning a special one day session of the Kansas Legislature. Returning to the State Capitol on June 16, the Kansas House of Representatives and State Senate voted unanimously to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment.¹⁹

There were four basic reasons why Kansas proved so sympathetic to the cause of nationwide woman suffrage. They were: 1) The presence of the Republican Party as the state's dominant political force; 2) The close geographic and cultural identification of Kansas with the various other states of the Great Plains; 3) The similarity between Kansas and the seventeen other states which had been admitted to the Union after 1850; 4) The previous and future performance of Kansas in liberalizing the requirements for suffrage and fostering rights for women.

During the years from 1913 to 1918 Congress was controlled by the Democratic Party. Largely based on their insistence that voting was a matter to be regulated by the states rather than the national government, an appreciable number of Democrats in the House and Senate had remained steadfastly opposed to woman suffrage.²⁰ When the Republicans swept the elections of 1918 and secured majorities in the two houses,²¹ many advocates of woman suffrage became optimistic that a constitutional amendment would soon become a reality. The roll calls on the Mann Resolution established that such optimism was well-justified. Republicans in Congress favored the Mann Resolution by the almost unprecedented majority of 236-27 (89.8%).²² It was the pronounced Republican support for the Mann Resolution which really provided the momentum for a woman suffrage amendment. Much of this momentum emanated from Kansas. Between 1915 and 1919 a virtual political revolution had occurred in the state. In 1915 seven of the ten members of the Kansas congressional delegation were Democratic in political affiliation, while in 1919 nine of the ten congressmen were Republicans.²³ These gentlemen were to cast votes reflecting the overwhelming Republican sympathy for woman suffrage, and their unanimous support of the Mann Resolution certainly enhanced the likelihood of its adoption on Capitol Hill.

Prior to the introduction of the Mann Resolution in May 1919, the states of the Great Plains, including states immediately to the north and south of Kansas, had been favorably disposed toward woman suffrage. Two Great Plains states, South Dakota and Oklahoma, had consented to woman suffrage without any restrictions, while two other states, North Dakota and Nebraska, had granted women the right to vote in presidential elections.²⁴ Moreover, the legislatures of three other Great Plains states, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska, in early 1919 had memorialized Congress in behalf of an equal suffrage amendment to the Constitution.²⁵ This was in sharp contrast to the South, where six states prohibited women from voting under any circumstances, and the Northeast, where four states did not permit woman suffrage in any form.²⁶ When the Mann Resolution came before the House and Senate in the spring of 1919, congressmen from the Great Plains supported it by a majority of 39-1 (97.1%).²⁷ On the vital question of ratifying the Nineteenth Amendment the Great Plains states exhibited a conspicuous degree of solidarity. By February 1920 Kansas and four sister Great Plains states had registered their formal approval of woman suffrage.²⁸ It was the South which mobilized the opposition to woman suffrage. Six southern states flatly rejected the Nineteenth Amendment, while two other states chose to ignore the issue.²⁹

Kansas was one of the eighteen states which had entered the Union after 1850. Thirteen of these eighteen states had voluntarily agreed to woman suffrage before 1919.³⁰ This was very much at variance with the record of the thirty states which had been admitted prior to 1850. Only two of these states had opted in favor of woman suffrage.³¹ When the Mann Resolution was voted upon in the House and Senate, it was supported 100-2 by the congressmen from the comparatively new states.³² Thereupon these eighteen states ratified the Nineteenth Amendment in rapid succession.³³ These states were obviously not as bound by tradition on franchise questions as the original thirteen states or the seventeen states admitted between 1789 and 1850. More than a half century later fourteen of the eighteen states were aligned in favor of the proposed Twenty-Seventh (Equal Rights) Amendment.³⁴

By every standard Kansas has ranked among the country's more progressive states on the questions of extending the franchise and promoting woman's rights. On January 19, 1870 Kansas had ratified the Fifteenth Amendment, eliminating "race, color, or previous condition of servitude" as a factor in determining eligibility to vote, and on January 17, 1913 it had ratified the Seventeenth Amendment, mandating the popular election of United States Senators.³⁵ Kansas was also among the states sanctioning the Twenty-Third (Presidential Voting in the District of Columbia) Amendment on March 29, 1961, the Twenty-Fourth (Anti-Poll Tax) Amendment on March 28, 1963, and the Twenty-Sixth (Eighteen Year Old Vote) Amendment on April 7, 1971.³⁶ After the Kansas congressional delegation unanimously supported the joint resolution proposing equal rights for women, the Kansas Legislature on March 28, 1972 ratified the Twenty-Seventh Amendment.³⁷ In officially endorsing the Nineteenth Amendment in June 1913 the House of Representatives and State Senate of Kansas were simply

reaffirming the sentiments contained in a concurrent resolution of July 13, 1919. A relevant portion of the text of this resolution read as follows:

Whereas equality and justice for all people for which the nations of the world have been struggling and for which the great war has been waged, requires the granting of suffrage to American women who equally with the men of this country have borne the burdens of the war and have loyally and ungrudgingly given their sons and their personal services that liberty might live and the world be made free to the end that our own Government might not perish: Therefore

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Kansas, That the Senate of the United States is most earnestly requested to without delay pass the Federal amendment giving the women of the United States full suffrage.³⁸

Between the introduction of the Raker Resolution on December 18, 1917 and the official ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution on August 26, 1920, the citizens of Kansas and their duly elected representatives in Congress and the State Legislature were keenly interested in the issue of nationwide woman suffrage. A review of the record clearly established that an overwhelming majority of the people of the nation were committed to the proposition that it was necessary to extend the franchise to women and that Kansas was among the states which most enthusiastically supported woman suffrage.³⁹

NOTES

1. U.S. Congress, House, H.J. Res. 200-A joint resolution proposing an amendment of the Constitution extending the right of suffrage to women, 18 December 1917, 65th Congress, 2nd Session.

2. A scholarly account of the events in Congress preceding the introduction of the Raker Resolution is David Morgan, Suffragists and Democrats: The Politics of Woman Suffrage in America (West Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1972), 105-121.

3. U.S. Congress, House, Report Number 234, 8 January 1918, 65th Congress, 2nd Session.

4. H. Res. 213-A resolution for the consideration of H.J. Res. 200, 9 January 1918, 65th Congress, 2nd Session.

5. Congressional Record, Washington, D.C., 1918, 56, 796-797.

6. Ibid., 767.

7. Ibid., A39-42.

8. Ibid., A46-48.

9. Ibid., 811; Washington Post, 11 January 1918, 1, 5; Washington Evening Star, 11 January 1918, 1.
10. According to the Census of 1910, Kansas had a population of 1,690,948. The less populous states between Missouri and California were Nebraska (1,192,624), Oklahoma (1,657,115), Colorado (799,024), Utah (373,351), Nevada (81,875), New Mexico (327,301), and Arizona (204,354).
11. Congressional Record, Washington, D.C., 56, 8344-8346, 10780-10781.
12. Ibid., 6310, 7793.
13. Congressional Record, 57, 3062; Washington Evening Star, 10 February 1919, 1.
14. U.S. Congress, H.J. Res. 1-A joint resolution proposing an amendment to the Constitution extending the right of suffrage to women, 19 May 1919; Washington Post, 20 May 1919, 3; Washington Evening Star, 19 May 1919, 1.
15. U.S. Congress, House Report One, 20 May 1919; Washington Post, 21 May 1919, 1, 4; Washington Evening Star, 20 May 1919, 1.
16. Congressional Record, 58, 78-94; Washington Post, 22 May 1919, 1, 5; Washington Evening Star, 22 May 1919, 1.
17. Congressional Record, 58, 348; New York Times, 24 May 1919, 3; 29 May 1919, 4.
18. Congressional Record, 58, 635; Washington Post, 5 June 1919, 1, 4; Washington Evening Star, 5 June 1919, p. 3; New York Times, 5 June 1919, 1.
19. United States Senate, The Constitution of the United States: Analysis and Interpretation (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1973), 36; New York Times, 7 June 1919, 11; 17 June 1919, 9.
20. In the 10 January 1918 and 10 February 1919 roll calls, the Raker Resolution was supported 196-44 (81.7%) by Republicans and 128-120 (51.6%) by Democrats. Ninety-seven of the one hundred and twenty dissenting Democrats were from the South, thus indicating that the issue of "states' rights" was a serious obstacle to the adoption of a constitutional amendment.
21. In 1918 the Republicans gained seven seats in the Senate and thirty seats in the house. Among those experiencing defeat either for renomination or re-election were eight Democrats and four Republicans who had been aligned against woman suffrage. Another Republican adversary was unsuccessful in his quest for his party's nomination to the United States Senate. One of the Republican dissenters died, while another opted to retire in 1918.
22. Twenty-two of the twenty-seven Republicans voting against the Mann Resolution were from the Northeast. The negative votes were distributed as follows: Massachusetts 6; Pennsylvania 5; New York 4; Connecticut 2; Vermont 1; New Hampshire 1; Rhode Island 1; New Jersey 1; Maryland 1.

23. Between 1914 and 1918 the Republican House vote in Kansas increased from 198,704 to 244,372 (23.2%) and the Republican Senate vote escalated from 180,823 to 281,931 (55.6%). Guide to U.S. Elections (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1975), 492, 725, 731, 737; Lawrence F. Kennedy (comp.), Biographical Directory of the American Congress (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1971), 316, 322, 328.

24. In 1918 the North Dakota House and Senate had approved woman suffrage in presidential elections by majorities of 88-19 (82.2%) and 37-11 (75.5%) respectively. The comparative figures from the Nebraska Legislature in that year were 73-24 (75.2%) and 20-13 (60.6%).

25. The legislatures memorialized Congress on the following dates: 11 January 1919 (North Dakota); 16 January 1919 (South Dakota); 17 January 1919 (Nebraska).

26. New York was the only one of the twenty-four states of the South and Northeast which had accepted woman suffrage without qualification.

27. The sole Great Plains congressman to oppose woman suffrage, Senator Gilbert M. Hitchcock of Nebraska, was defeated for re-election in November 1922 by a margin of 220,350-148,265. J.L. Sellers, "Gilbert Monell Hitchcock," Dictionary of American Biography, Supplement One (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 410-411; Guide to U.S. Elections, 497.

28. The ratification dates were as follows: Kansas (16 June 1919); Nebraska (2 August 1919); North Dakota (1 December 1919); South Dakota (4 December 1919); Oklahoma (28 February 1920).

29. The Nineteenth Amendment was rejected by Georgia (24 July 1919), Alabama (22 September 1919), South Carolina (29 January 1920), Virginia (12 February 1920), Mississippi (29 March 1920), and Louisiana (1 July 1920). North Carolina declined to consider the amendment, while Florida did not consent to ratify until 1969.

30. Approving woman suffrage were Wyoming (1890), Colorado (1893), Utah (1896), Idaho (1896), Washington (1910), Kansas (1912), California (1912), Arizona (1912), Oregon (1912), Montana (1914), Nevada (1914), South Dakota (1918), and Oklahoma (1918). Partial woman suffrage had been adopted by New Mexico (1912), Nebraska (1917), North Dakota (1917), and Minnesota (1919).

31. Among the first thirty states woman suffrage had been embraced only by New York (1917) and Michigan (1918).

32. In addition to Senator Hitchcock the only congressman from the comparatively new states opposing woman suffrage was Senator William E. Borah of Idaho. William E. Leuchtenburg, "William Edgard Borah," Dictionary of American Biography: Supplement Two (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 49-53.

33. The Nineteenth Amendment was ratified by Kansas (16 June 1919), Montana (2 August 1919), Nebraska (2 August 1919), Minnesota (8 September 1919), Utah (2 October 1919), California (1 November 1919), North Dakota (1 December 1919), South Dakota (4 September 1919), Colorado (16 December 1919), Oregon (16 January 1920), Wyoming (17 January 1920), Nevada (7

February 1920), Idaho (11 February 1920), Arizona (12 February 1920), New Mexico (21 February 1920), Oklahoma (28 February 1920), West Virginia (10 March 1920), and Washington (22 March 1920).

34. The four comparatively new states failing to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment were Oklahoma, Arizona, Utah, and Nevada. The other such states, including Alaska and Hawaii, ratifying the amendment were as follows: Hawaii (22 March 1972); Idaho (24 March 1972); Kansas 28 March 1972; Nebraska (29 March 1972); Alaska (5 April 1972); Colorado (21 April 1972); West Virginia (27 April 1972); California (13 November 1972); Wyoming (24 January 1973); South Dakota (2 February 1973); Oregon (8 February 1973); Minnesota (8 February 1973); New Mexico (12 February 1973); Washington (22 March 1973); Montana (21 January 1974); and North Dakota (4 February 1975).

35. Congressional Record, 47, 1925; 48, 6367; Constitution of the United States, 33, 34-35.

36. Congressional Record, 106, 12521, 12858; 108, 5105, 17870; 117, 5830, 7569-7570; Washington Post, 11 March 1971, 6; 24 March 1971, 1, 8; Constitution of the United States, 40, 41-42, 44.

37. Congressmen from the states of the Great Plains supported the proposed equal rights amendment by a majority of 19-0. The amendment was subsequently ratified by every Great Plains state except Oklahoma. The dates of ratification were as follows: 28 March 1972 (Kansas); 29 March 1972 (Nebraska); 2 February 1973 (South Dakota); 4 February 1975 (North Dakota). Congressional Record, 117, 25815; 118, 9598; Washington Post, 13 October 1971, 1, 12; 25 March 1972, 1, 9; Constitution of the United States, 47.

38. Congressional Record, 57, 2099-2100.

39. An analysis of the presidential election statistics in Kansas indicated that the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment significantly contributed to the political strength of the Republican Party. Between 1916 and 1920 the Republican presidential vote in Kansas rose from 277,658 to 369,268 and the Republican proportion of the total ballots escalated from 44.6% to 64.8%. Guide to U.S. Elections, 285, 286.