

Hello. Welcome to the Washington State Historical Society's podcast series. With me today, is Shanna Stevenson, curator and author of the upcoming suffrage exhibit, at the Washington State History Museum which will be opening February 28, 2009.

FP: Shanna, can you tell for our listeners, what does your book and the exhibition focus on as far as Washington state history?

SS: The exhibit will open with what we hope will be a though provoking discussion of what it means to vote focusing on the idea of "Franchise"—or who got to vote when and why. This is an interactive element as well as a chance for exhibit goers to cast their own vote and register to vote on-line if they are not registered voters. Of course we want to make sure people learn a new word—suffrage which does not mean suffering but comes from the Latin word suffragium, which means to vote for or to support.

Background of suffrage movement—tie through Catharine Blaine, how it was different in the west, the political backdrop of suffrage, tactics as well as the actual chronology of suffrage through ups and downs. Emphasis is on pro-active nature of suffrage in Washington—women worked for change—despite setbacks, they kept at it. We also of course recognize it was the men of Washington who cast their ballots to change the constitution so women could vote. Also covered; how voting changes because women voted, early reforms fueled by women's voting such as Mother's Pensions and 8-hour day.

The exhibit also links the suffrage story with 2nd wave feminist achievements in Washington including history of elected women, Title IX, Blair vs. Washington State, Equal Rights Amendment, state and federal, and the role of women's clubs and organizations in working for change.

We are also featuring outstanding women from various backgrounds and periods in individual displays.

The interactive portion of the exhibit will give exhibit-goers a chance to find out about interesting women again from all backgrounds and period themselves.

The exhibit I hope will give viewers an intimate connection with the women and events of suffrage. SBA, EC Stanton, Declaration of sentiments—being able to physically connect with the icons of the movement as well as the actual items used by women campaigning for suffrage.

Hopefully those leaving the exhibit will want to know more and come away feeling that this is a compelling story of human rights but also that it was a "movement" as women worked together for this basic right. We also want viewers to see themselves in the organizations and individuals who are featured and feel empowered to make changes—comes at a good time right after the inauguration.

We make clear, however, in both the exhibit and book, that it was an uneven victory for Native American Women, Immigrant Asian Women, and immigrant women who could not read and speak English—their right to vote in some cases would not come until they could attain citizenship in the mid 20th century.

The book is meant to be a narrative but also a reference source for those wanting to know more about the history of women's right to vote, and what it has meant to Washington. Of course the book is much more detailed than the exhibit—it will also feature many of the images in the exhibit—breaking up the more detailed information in the book. I hope people will have an appreciation of the “struggle” but also understand how Washington was a leader—men of the west.

FP: Why is this subject important for today's audiences?

SS: Purpose of history is to draw strength from the past—this is definitely an “empowering” subject, like the civil rights movement, women were denied rights and worked to gain those rights and most importantly they form a long line towards increasing equality and opportunity. Quote for Susan B. Anthony. We would love to have especially young women, but also everyone come out of the exhibit ready to register to vote. We include more modern history particularly Title IX to help people understand how this story of striving for equal rights affects them today, not just voting but also all ways in which women are able to achieve—home, church, school, business, sports, government philanthropy.

We make the point though without the right to vote, women did not have a voice in how things were going to be and could not influence many things that directly affected not only them but also their homes and families. The rationale was that their husbands or other male relatives could vote for them but they needed their own voice through the vote.

FP: How long have you been working on this project, as a historian?

SS: Directly on this project since 2006 but as a long time historian and preservationist, I have been interested in women's history for over twenty years. The centennial give us an opportunity to renew the history of this story, to put it into context and to link the right to vote with modern women.

Some people will be surprised that women did not always have the right to vote but I think more people will be surprised that Washington was the fifth state in the union to permanently enact women's suffrage and the victory in this state really re-ignited the national movement which had been stalled for 14 years. California, 1911; Oregon, Kansas and Arizona, 1912; Montana and Nevada 1914; New York, 1917, Michigan, South Dakota and Oklahoma, 1918.

Voting women in the west were pivotal to helping non-voting women gain the vote in other parts of the country. Washington led the way then to 1920 and the 19th amendment to U.S. constitution. It took over 130 years to change the U.S. Constitution.

The opening will be fun but also a time to honor featured women and to bask in the history of Washington—which of course to historians is always interesting and more complex than first meets the eye.

FP: Thank you Shanna. For more information about the exhibit, and the Women's History Consortium, please visit the Washington State Historical Society's website at www.washingtonhistory.org. And, please see the exhibit once it opens at the Washington State History Museum in downtown Tacoma.