LaRue Spiker

In this issue of *Chebacco,* devoted to women's history, we juxtapose stories of two people who could not have been more different: Francis Parkman and LaRue Spiker. Spiker embodied the worst that Francis Parkman feared might come of women's suffrage: a difficult female who could not be silenced, active in politics, insistent on justice for the lowest classes of society. A friend described her as "a feisty little woman who never shied away from a fight."[1]

Born in 1912, Spiker was educated at the University of Chicago as a social worker. In the 1950s she fought against segregation, and as a result of her protest activities she was charged with sedition and briefly jailed in Louisville, Kentucky. A letter that announced her dismissal from her job as a social worker said the cause was "aiding and abetting the work of the Civil Rights Congress, which organization has been officially listed by the Attorney General of the United States as an organization of a subversive nature."[2] Her travels brought her eventually to Maine, where she became a reporter for many publications, including the *Bar Harbor Times* and the *Ellsworth American.* According to her long-time friend and colleague, Nan Lincoln, Spiker was "one of the formative voices at the *Bar Harbor Times*, as it evolved from a pleasantly innocuous little hometown paper into a forum that addressed the serious issues facing the local citizen and the country at large as they hurtled toward the 21st century." Spiker's editor, Polly Saltonstall, said, "I have never worked with a reporter with greater integrity or conscience." When LaRue Spiker died on November 5, 1995, her obituary was headlined, "LaRue Spiker, 83, Woman of Conscience."

The Mount Desert Island Historical Society keeps a collection of LaRue Spiker's photographs, manuscripts, her camera, and typewriter. One of the manuscripts is a draft of a piece that appeared in *The Maine Times* on April 25, 1969. The article is published here in full.

—*Tim Garrity*

---

[1] Obituary of LaRue Spiker, *Bar Harbor Times* (Bar Harbor, ME), November 9, 1995.

[2] Maurice O. Hunt to LaRue Spiker. Formal notification of Spiker's dismissal from the Indiana Department of Public Welfare, July 11, 1950. Collection of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society.

Collection of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

Women got the vote fifty long years ago

LaRue Spiker

This article first appeared in *The Maine Times*, No. 30, on April 25, 1969; the original manuscript is in the collection of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society.

They were graceful and good-natured about it in Maine. But they were also persistent and determined. Women were going to have the vote; the hard-shells might as well face up to that fact. Fifty years ago, a little tardily and more than a little reluctantly, they did. But not without a bitter holding action.

No one will ever know how many Maine women, if any, were brooding over their political impotence as they stirred the family soup or sweated over the wash tub in the early 19th century, but women in other parts of the country were brooding and were saying so. If Maine women were less articulate, they were at least spared the opprobrium which was smeared with a generous brush over their spunkier sisters.

The Syracuse, New York "Daily Star" referred to one woman's rights meeting as a bunch of "brawling women and Aunt Nancy men" who preached "such damnable doctrines and accursed heresies as would make demons of the pit shudder to hear."

Some pointed suggestions on equal rights for women, with the franchise basic to all others, became audible long before the Civil War. For the most part, they had to be sneaked into the agitation for abolition of slavery, a more respectable subject for debate than votes for women. Since the abolition movement was strong in Maine, echoes of women's rights must have reached the state, but they were never more than a tinkle during this period.

By the middle of the 19th century, the issue, respectable or not, had had a good deal of exposure. The efforts of such women as Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were evoking squeals of pain in many sections of the country.

During the Civil War years the rights of women were submerged in the blaze of battle over the more basic economic problem and the broader political question of one union. But the issue would not lie dormant long.

In 1868 Wyoming, while still a territory, extended full suffrage to women. In 1869 an amendment to the federal constitution was introduced into the House of Representatives. In the 1890's Colorado, Utah, Idaho gave women the vote. From 1910 to 1915 Washington, California, Oregon, Kansas, Arizona, Nevada, and Montana followed suit; and women could vote for president in Illinois.

The sky didn't fall in a single one of these states; but, by the time the woman suffrage movement reached Maine as an organized force, there were fears that it might blossom in New England if women got the vote here. The struggle to extend the franchise was a full-blown agitation in most of the country, and women throughout the nation had demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt their equality in educational and occupational talent and commitment.

The early activists in Maine showed little interest in records and scrapbooks; so evidence of the way they went about the job is lacking. But from 1912 there is ample record of how they hitched their wagon to a star.

They were restrained but dedicated. Few of the antics of the militants—chaining themselves to lampposts, getting arrested, then going on hunger strikes in jail, etc.—seem to have occurred here. But the woman suffragists in Maine chased their rainbow with conviction and talent. Indeed in 1919 Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the national Woman's Suffrage Association, declared Maine the critical state in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.

By 1912 votes for women was a full-blown movement here spearheaded by the Maine Equal Suffrage Association. When the organization held its annual meeting in October of that year the Portland Telegram reported the morning and afternoon sessions at length.

"Woman's suffrage is coming to Maine!" exclaimed the reporter. "It is bound to come and every day the time grows nearer and nearer when the ballot will be given to the women of the state. This was the feeling at the sessions of the Maine Suffrage Association which held its meeting in the Friends church on Oak Street yesterday. . . . "

Under the presidency of Miss Helen M. Bates of Portland the association had bent most of its efforts to broadening discussion of the question. They had handed out and mailed out reams of printed material from the national Women's suffrage Association and pressed their cause in the columns of the state's newspapers.

"A few years ago it was not an easy matter to induce editors to publish suffrage news or suffrage articles. . ." reported Miss Bates who wore two hats both labeled "votes for women," the one as association president and the other for publicity.

"When I first took the office of superintendent of press work, I wrote to editors of papers of the state asking if they would occasionally publish items of interest in regard to equal suffrage. The editor of one influential paper in the interior of the state replied that there was absolutely no interest in the subject among his readers. I am sure he could not say that with truth today. . . ."

The association furnished speakers to other groups and organized meetings of their own. In April the Portland group had organized a meeting at the Pythian Temple at which Mrs. Beatrice Forbes Robertson Hale lectured. . . "Her lecture was pronounced one of the best expositions of the suffrage question ever given in the city," Miss Bates reported.

The annual meeting voted to present a petition to the upcoming Maine legislature in person. The men didn't know what was in store for them.

Decked in their enormous be-plumed hats and sweeping skirts, the women descended on Augusta in force to present their case for a referendum on a state constitution committee. They weren't asking for much. Only that the people (i.e., the men) of the state be allowed to strike one four-letter word from the constitution. They would do away with the word "male" in Section 1, Article 2.

Three of them—Mrs. George F. French, Mrs. L.M.N. Stevens, both also of Portland, and Miss Bates—got to the capitol early. There they haunted the halls talking with legislators and anyone else they could button hole. They also handed out buttons with "Votes for Women" printed boldly on them and cards with the same sentiment. The cards were bordered with a facsimile of velvet lavender ribbon.

"No rioting was manifested in their conduct, no cheers were made; there were no songs and no parades," reported A.L.M. Hart for the Press. "What if they didn't have banners and sky rockets and other fireworks? They were armed with much more effective weapons; they had well prepared speeches, short and concise."

Short and concise speeches were apparently more dramatic than fireworks in an assembly whose members were noted for the wind they brought to the capitol. The hearing was held in the Hall of Representatives, no ordinary hearing

"Parkman's opponents pointed out that a man's greater muscular strength is not needed to mark a ballot and put it in a box." *Photo by LaRue Spiker, Collection of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

room being large enough. The women who had come to testify were seated at the front of the room, observers in the back. "The men, of whom there were hundreds present, stood in the rear of the hall and heard and saw what they could by dodging picture hats and warding off threatening hat pins."

The speeches of the women who had come to testify were reported, but except for the statement of Miss Bates which was carried verbatim, received somewhat less attention than their costumes.

Mrs. Effie Lambert Lawrence of Lubec was "strikingly beautiful in a gown of taupe charmeause trimmed with cerise velvet and wearing a brown hat with willow plumes to match. She argued her case with a sincerity and emotion that caused her voice to shake and the blushes to mantle her cheeks in her enthusiasm." Her élan caused the chamber to shake with applause.

The women won the day with the judiciary committee. It voted nine for "ought to pass" with one coward abstaining. After that the women must leave the question for debate on the floor of the House and Senate to the men. It was no stranger to these august chambers where it had been volleyed back and

forth like a shuttlecock during a number of earlier sessions. In the immediately preceding one it had won 70 to 66 in the House but been defeated 15 to 10 in the Senate.

This time it passed the House again, 88 to 50. It was a long day with a lot of long speeches. Rep. Gallagher of Bangor distinguished himself with one of the shortest. He said he had received a message from his wife and daughters by mental telepathy that he should oppose the measure, and he did. The question was again defeated in the Senate.

The voice for political equality was growing warmer, and opponents decided it was time to fight fire with fire. In 1913 they came up with the Maine Association Opposed to Suffrage for Women. Their main thesis was based on the declaration that most women didn't want the vote and therefore, since democracy was based on majority rule, they shouldn't have it forced upon them.

"To woman nature entrusts the rearing of the child, and to that end the care of the home falls to her lot," wrote Mrs. Clarence Hale in a pamphlet issued by the Association in 1916.

"Opponents of suffrage believe that political life with its antagonisms, its jealousies; its excitements, its strings would be inimical to the repose of life, which is essential to woman's nature if she would bring to her task that poise of nervous and physical strength which insures the best development of the race which she bears. . . ."

They also picked up the argument that "the suffrage movement develops sex hatred which is a menace to society." But this one was a two-edged sword.

Tucked into the files of Miss Mabel Connor, daughter of Maine's 32nd Governor and successor to Miss Bates as president of the suffrage association, is a sheet of paper which seems to knock this argument into a row of willow-plumed hats. Written with a fine hand in black ink at the top of the sheet was: "St. John Chrysostom wrote: 'Woman is the source of evil, the author of sin, the gate of the tomb, the entrance to hell, the cause of all our misfortunes.'"

With a disregard for dialectic almost cavalier in its hauteur, a bolder hand had merely penciled beneath a list of the public issues which ran through the suffrage movement and would extend into the program of its successor, the League of Women Voters: Taxation, education, limitation of arms, care of defectives and delinquents, railroads, forms of city government, child welfare, women in industry, uniformity of laws, social hygiene (their polite term for

LaRue Spiker photographed Representative (now Senator) Olympia Snowe speaking to constituents, ca. 1970s. *Collection of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

institutionalized prostitution), and political education.

In March 1919 the Maine legislature passed a bill extending the right of voting for president to Maine women. The law would have been effective in July but was stalled by a petition, signed by 10,000 men, for a referendum and court action. In the meantime Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment and sent it out for ratification by the states: "The right of the 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."

To say that the National American Women Suffrage Association under the presidency of Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt went into high gear at this victory would be misleading. They had been in high gear for decades. Mrs. Catt did go into something of a panic, however, over the role Maine would play in the drive for ratification by the states.

"I feel considerable anxiety over the State of Maine, and I wish to tell you the cause of my anxiety," she wrote Miss Connor in August.

She felt that the "antis" might use the pending referendum on the state act to forestall ratification of the federal amendment. In eight southern states and two others,

where special sessions could not be called, ratification was a lost cause. In New Jersey and Delaware other issues would probably block it. That left just the 36 states needed to ratify, counting Maine.

"Some time ago I urged you to make no pause in pledging the legislature to early ratification," she plead. "Will you be kind enough as to let me know what you have done and what you are doing and what the prospects are?"

The earth rocked. The Maine legislature did ratify in a special session in November by a close vote. By August 1920 the amendment was the law of the land, and there was a rush to register women to vote. Bangor and Lewiston began registering women before the provisions to do so were passed, and the chairman of the Board of Registrars in the former city claimed that his wife was the first woman in the U.S. to be listed under the amendment.

Victory after a half century of intense struggle left no void for the women who had cut their political teeth in the suffrage movement. Now they could give their attention to some of the broad issues which had bugged them during the battle for the vote. The League of Women Voters, using much of the old organizational machinery and personnel, was formed.

One of the major tasks was educating women to exercise the right they now had. During one membership drive the Maine League received this comment from a potential member:

"Some women belong to the League of Women Voters, but I don't have to, for I just ask my James about things. . . . Of course men know more than women. When I do vote, I always vote a straight party ticket, for James says it's the thing to do, so much easier to count, you know, and so loyal to the Party. One year I didn't quite like to vote for Tom Crook in our Ward but James said he had been a good Party worker, and I do think people like that ought to be rewarded, don't you?"

Discouraging? Well, maybe. If so the League has recognized that political asininity is no respecter of sex and has never allowed this fact to deflect it from its vigorous run on the course.