

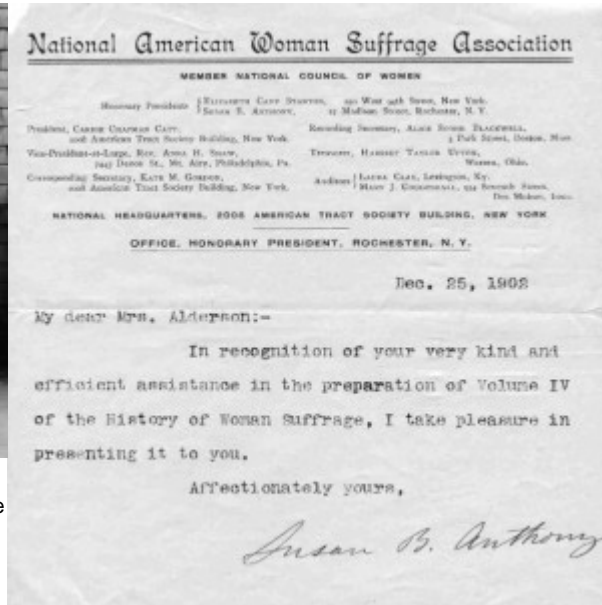
Mary Long Alderson fought for women's freedom

By GAIL SCHONTZLER, Chronicle Staff Writer The Bozeman Daily Chronicle, 6/12/11

Photo Courtesy of Montana State University Special Collections Mary Alderson, second from right poses for a photo with Anna Gordon, the president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and other members of the organization in 1916 in Helena.



when a trip to Chicago changed her life. Bright, energetic and idealistic, Alderson, 33 attended the Congress of Women at the World's Columbian Exposition, along with her husband, Avant Courier editor Matt Alderson, and their 3-year old daughter Myrtle. It was "glorious." Mary Alderson later recalled. There heard "dear" 'Aunt' Susan B. Anthony" and other feminist leaders speak before thousands of women." And we returned with "Organize, organize' ringing in our ears." Mary Alderson wrote.



Mary Long Alderson was a young Bozeman wife and mother in 1893

she

She was already a feminist, born in 1860 and raised near Boston, where she met Louisa May Alcott and other prominent women. She was educated and worked as a teacher. In 1887 she was a 27-year old spinster teacher when Matt Alderson, a 32-year old widower from Montana, met her and "fell in love with her at first sight," their daughter recalled. They married in Braintree, Mass., in 1888, moved to Bozeman and would eventually have three daughters. In Chicago, Mary Alderson's ideals were on display. She wore the new, sensible style of women's attire, a business suit, a feminist rejection of "tight corsets, hoop-skirts, bustles, layers of crinoline, long skirts, etc." Chicago seems to have been the spark that inspired Mary Alderson to become one of Montana's pioneer feminists and suffragettes.

Over the next 40 years, Alderson was a leader in the successful fight for women to gain the right to vote, as well as the battle to ban alcohol through Prohibition. She wrote a newspaper column and attended Montana Press Association meetings in an era when nearly everyone in newspapers was a man. In a front-page 1940 obituary, the Bozeman Chronicle called Mary Alderson a prominent worker for women's rights and "perhaps Montana's foremost woman lobbyist at the state capitol for more than 20 years. Her greatest achievement was the campaign to win Montana voters' approval of women's suffrage in 1914, six years before the 19th amendment to the U. S. Constitution passed and gave women across the country the right to vote. "We asked for the ballot that we might speak more effectively and help our good men secure a better civilization for our children," Alderson wrote.

Today Mary Alderson's role is largely eclipsed and forgotten – perhaps because women's right to vote is taken for granted, or because her most public role was as state president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union from 1913 to 1916. The WCTU succeeded in passing Prohibition in Montana in 1916, but lost credibility when the policy proved a spectacular failure that created widespread lawlessness and was repealed.

Mary Alderson's name does not appear in many books or websites about prominent Montanans. Histories of the Alderson family tend to focus more on the men's colorful exploits and wild West adventures. Her father-in-law – farmer, preacher, Indian agent and Avant Courier owner William W. Alderson – was one of Bozeman's founders, who suggested in 1864 naming the fledgling outpost after John Bozeman. His son and Mary Alderson's husband, Matt Alderson, was a federal messenger during Montana's Indian war

days, became the newspaper's editor, built the handsome Willson Avenue home that is today's Voss Inn, and later chased dreams of making it big in gold mining, from Montana to Nova Scotia to South America.

It's the men who get the headlines, noted John Russell, director of the Gallatin County Historical Society's Pioneer Museum. Yet as Ann Butterfield, museum assistant director, said of Mary Alderson, "You and I wouldn't be where we are today without her pushing for women's rights."

Flowers, clubs and coffee

After the thrill of the 1893 Chicago Exposition, "We returned to Bozeman – and we organized." Mary Alderson recalled 40 years later in "A Half Century of Progress for Montana Women," her hand-typed 1934 manuscript, archived in Montana State University's Renne Library special collections. Mary Alderson's first political success was her campaign to choose a Montana state flower, part of a national WCTU program. In 1893 she formed the Montana Floral Emblem Society, wrote to newspapers, gained endorsements and organized balloting that mimicked a real election. Thousands of Montanans, particularly women, voted in the informal poll. In 1895 the state legislature unanimously voted to make the bitterroot Montana's state flower.

Alderson and other wives of leading Bozeman businessmen and college professors started a Magazine Club, an Art Club, a small French Club, a Botanical Club, a Montana State Housekeepers Society and a Bozeman Society for the Promotion of Physical Culture and Correct Dress. If state flowers and housekeepers clubs sound quaint and inconsequential today, Derek Strahn, Bozeman High history teacher and researcher, pointed out that. "Through these 'acceptable' means, early feminists furthered their political educations and exerted increasing amounts of influence in public life of their male-dominated society."

Alderson joined the 10-year old Bozeman chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. The WCTU opened a coffee house on Bozeman's Main Street, on the south side between Grand and Willson Avenue, to offer home-cooking, a reading room with newspapers and magazines, and "a drink different from that served in the flourishing twenty-one saloons around town," wrote Phyllis Smith in her book, "Bozeman and the Gallatin Valley, A History."

The WCTU stood for more than just banning alcohol, gaining women the vote and shutting down brothels. Smith quoted from an article on the WCTU: "We believe in one standard of morals for men and women, in equal rights, in a living wage, in an eight-hour day, and equal pay for equal work." Mary Alderson wrote newspaper columns highlighting local women and attacking corsets, a "bondage" and "oppression" that made it hard for women to breathe or enjoy freedom of movement, and long skirts, which dragged through the dirt and mud. The corset "is not only absurd, but criminal," she wrote. "A woman might master a science in the time she spends cleaning and repairing her skirts." The women's courage in the face of jeers and sneers from men won converts. A Bozeman Chronicle editorial complimented ladies who adopted the new style, calling it "modest, becoming and sensible."

Votes for women

In her hand-typed history of women's suffrage, Alderson recounted how women started agitating for their rights at an 1840 international ant-slavery convention in London, when the men abolitionists insisted women delegates sit in a balcony behind a screen. In 1848, the women's convention in Seneca Falls, N. Y., demanded the vote and equality for women. As the Civil War approached, abolitionists asked women to wait and defeat slavery first. Women waited, she noted, but after the war, the men did not rally to the women's cause.

In Montana, the attempt to gain women the vote started with statehood in 1889 and the first constitutional convention. Every legislative session after, it met defeat after defeat. In 1902, Alderson wrote the Montana chapter for a national "history of Woman Suffrage: 1883-1900," for which she received a note of thanks signed by Susan B. Anthony herself. In her chapter, Alderson noted that most Montana teachers were women – 885 to 201 – yet the women's average pay was \$48.61 a month compared to the men's \$69.28.

"By 1905, the women's suffrage movement in Montana appeared to be dead," wrote Mike Malone and fellow historians in "Montana, A History of Two Centuries." But the Progressive movement breathed new life into the cause. Women no longer demanded the vote on the grounds of equality, but argued society needed their superior moral qualities to rescue "misguided man" from his "rotten condition." In 1911, feminist organizer Jeanette Rankin was granted the privilege to speak to a joint session of the Montana Legislature. Seated on the speakers platform with her were leading Montana suffragettes – two women physicians and Mary Alderson." They gave her the violets, but not the votes we desired," Alderson wrote. The suffrage bill failed. Yet women had momentum, and in 1913, the Legislature almost unanimously voted to submit women's suffrage to Montana voters. Feminists swung into action

"There were meetings, parades, headquarters, distribution of literature and speakers," Alderson recalled. She raised money, arranged speakers, and wrote pamphlets. "There was little open opposition but much quiet work by the liquor interests." Alderson and the WCTU saw the vote as "a step to Prohibition." Rankin and others argued women's votes would offset those of immigrants. Election day came Nov. 3, 1914. Women's suffrage passed by 41,302 in favor to 37,588 against, or 52 percent of votes cast. Suffrage lost in Helena by 250 votes, but passed in Butte with help from the socialist vote, Alderson wrote.

The long struggle of over seventy years for the political emancipation of women, to which Susan B. Anthony ... and other women and men had practically devoted their lives, to educate people to the justice of giving women the ballot, was over, for the state," Alderson wrote. Two years later, Montana's women voters helped elect two women to the Legislature, a woman as superintendent of public instruction, and Rankin as the first woman member of Congress

Victory and heartbreak

A 1916 photo of Montana WCTU leaders posing on church steps with national President Anna Gordon shows Mary Alderson, state president, then 56, looking formidable and determined. For her and the Montana WCTU, 1916 was a "victorious – a triumphant" year. Montana voters passed Prohibition. It passed 102,776 to 73,890, or 62 percent in favor, a wider margin than for suffrage. But the experiment in outlawing liquor failed, spawning widespread bootlegging. After 10 years, Montana became the first state to repeal Prohibition in 1926. Alderson's efforts in the late 1920s to bring the state back into the "dry" fold failed. In 1933 national repeal passed with the 21st Amendment.

| Mary Alderson experienced other heartaches. Her husband, Matt, died in 1924 at age 69, after many years in the mining industry, from Colombia to Honduras, back to Montana. "Father's hope through the years was to 'strike it rich,' "Myrtle wrote, "but he never did." In 1930, Mary Alderson resigned from the WCTU after 34 years of service. Some had pushed the nonpartisan group to endorse political candidates, and she felt blamed for it. "She was unflinching in her stand for what she thought was right, but was not radical or aggressive, nor did she practice feminine wiles," her daughter wrote. "She was always a gentlewoman."

In 1934, when Mary Alderson sat down at her typewriter to write a history of Montana women's suffrage, she knew she had helped accomplish great things. "In Montana, woman has been absolutely freed from the legal boundary imposed on her for centuries by the common law." Alderson wrote. The rational dress movement "has dramatized in women's clothes the freedom for which she was struggling," she wrote. "And women today may wear anything they wish." "It has been the dream of girls through the ages to be boys and do the things boys do. Nothing hinders them today. Yes, any girl at the present time may do anything any boy may do ... and may wear a velvet train or trousers. She is free."

Mary Alderson died in a Bozeman nursing home in 1940 at age 79. She and her husband are buried in Sunset Hills Cemetery.

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