

August 13, 2010

My Favorite August

By [GAIL COLLINS](#)

The story in American history I most like to tell is the one about how women got the right to vote 90 years ago this month. It has everything. Adventure! Suspense! Treachery! Drunken legislators!

But, first, there was a 70-year slog.

Which is really the important part. We always need to remember that behind almost every great moment in history, there are heroic people doing really boring and frustrating things for a prolonged period of time.

That great suffragist and excellent counter, Carrie Chapman Catt, estimated that the struggle had involved 56 referendum campaigns directed at male voters, plus “480 campaigns to get Legislatures to submit suffrage amendments to voters, 47 campaigns to get constitutional conventions to write woman suffrage into state constitutions; 277 campaigns to get State party conventions to include woman suffrage planks, 30 campaigns to get presidential party campaigns to include woman suffrage planks in party platforms and 19 campaigns with 19 successive Congresses.”

And you thought health care reform was a drawn-out battle.

The great, thundering roadblock to progress was — wait for the surprise — the U.S. Senate. All through the last part of the 19th century and into the 20th, attempts to amend the U.S. Constitution ran up against a wall of conservative Southern senators.

So the women decided to win the vote by amending every single state constitution, one by one.

There were five referenda in South Dakota alone. Susan B. Anthony spent more time there than a wheat farmer. But she never lost hope. The great day was coming, she promised: “It’s coming sooner than most people think.” I love this remark even more because she made it in 1895.

Sometimes I fantasize about traveling back through time and telling my historical heroes and heroines how well things worked out in the end. I particularly enjoy the part where I find Vincent van Gogh and inform him that one of the unsold paintings piled up over in the corner will eventually go for \$80 million. But I never imagine telling Susan B. Anthony how well American women are doing in the 21st century because her faith in her country and her cause was so strong that she wouldn’t be surprised.

The constitutional amendment that finally did pass Congress bore Anthony’s name. It came up before the House of Representatives in 1918 with the two-thirds votes needed for passage barely within reach. One congressman who had been in the hospital for six months had himself carted to the floor so he could support suffrage. Another, who had just broken his shoulder, refused to have it

set for fear he'd be too late to be counted. Representative Frederick Hicks of New York had been at the bedside of his dying wife but left at her urging to support the cause. He provided the final, crucial vote, and then returned home for her funeral.

The Senate failed to follow suit. But Woodrow Wilson, a president who had the winning quality of being very vulnerable to nagging by women, pushed the amendment through the next year. The states started ratifying. Then things stalled just one state short of success.

Ninety years ago this month, all eyes turned to Tennessee, the only state yet to ratify with its Legislature still in session. The resolution sailed through the Tennessee Senate. As it moved on to the House, the most vigorous opposition came from the liquor industry, which was pretty sure that if women got the vote, they'd use it to pass Prohibition. Distillery lobbyists came to fight, bearing samples.

"Both suffrage and anti-suffrage men were reeling through the hall in an advanced state of intoxication," Carrie Catt reported.

The women and their allies knew they had a one-vote margin of support in the House. Then the speaker, whom they had counted on as a "yes," changed his mind.

(I love this moment. Women's suffrage is tied to the railroad track and the train is bearing down fast when suddenly. ...)

Suddenly, Harry Burn, the youngest member of the House, a 24-year-old "no" vote from East Tennessee, got up and announced that he had received a letter from his mother telling him to "be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt."

"I know that a mother's advice is always the safest for a boy to follow," Burn said, switching sides.

We celebrate Women's Suffrage Day on Aug. 26, which is when the amendment officially became part of the Constitution. But I like Aug. 18, which is the day that Harry Burn jumped up in the Tennessee Legislature, waving his mom's note from home. I told the story once in Atlanta, and a woman in the audience said that when she was visiting her relatives in East Tennessee, she had gone to put a yellow rose on Harry Burn's grave.

I got a little teary.

"Well, actually," she added, "it was because I couldn't find his mother."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: August 14, 2010

An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that the House of Representatives was composed of only men in 1918. Jeannette Rankin, a female representative from Montana, served from 1917 to 1919.