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Bossie O'Brien Hundley and the Alabama Equal Suffrage Association's Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1914- 1915

By Shenandoah Gallitz

Today, more than eighty years after the ratification of the Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution securing women's right to vote, the idea of opposition to this right seems remote and curious. However, during the early part of the twentieth century, women's suffrage was a very controversial issue. It took women with drive, resources, and a desire to fight the battle. In Birmingham, Bossie O'Brien Hundley was one of the most significant contributors to the cause. Her campaign of 1914-1915 to have the Alabama legislature put the question to the people, while ultimately unsuccessful, greatly advanced the cause in Alabama and helped change citizens' attitudes towards the subject.

Although proposals to enfranchise Alabama's women can be found as far back as 1867,¹ the movement would not gain true momentum until the 1890s, when it became more acceptable socially for women to leave the home and organize into clubs for purposes of fraternization and education. Many of these clubs held progressive ideals. The largest statewide organization, the Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs, worked tirelessly on behalf of stricter child labor laws, compulsory education and other civic projects. While suffrage associations did form during this transitive decade, their success was limited by their tendency to use the issue as a racial wedge, promising it would ensure white supremacy by exponentially enlarging the pool of white voters. So controversial was the issue that by 1906, the official history of the AFWC only records one mention of women's suffrage, and

this was tabled.² By the time the state constitution was rewritten in 1901, white women's votes were no longer necessary to ensure white supremacy, and the issue was virtually abandoned for the next decade.

The women's suffrage movement in Birmingham was resurrected in 1911 after a group of interested women met at the National Child Labor Conference in Birmingham. These women concluded that conditions would only improve if women were allowed to vote. In turn, this led them to form the Equal Suffrage Association (ESA) in Birmingham, with Pattie Ruffner Jacobs presiding.³ Interest had been growing in the subject for years, especially after women in western states gained the ballot, but until the formation of the Birmingham ESA, interested women found little outlet for their concern. A year later the Birmingham ESA joined with the Selma ESA and formed the Alabama Equal Rights Association (AESA), with Mrs. Pattie Ruffner Jacobs again selected as the first president.

Clubs began springing up around the state, mostly attracting young, affluent women with the leisure time and financial support necessary to pursue their interests.⁴ Mrs. Bossie O'Brien Hundley of Birmingham answered the call, and swiftly worked her way up into the forefront of the suffrage movement in Alabama. She was from a prominent Birmingham family, her father Frank having served terms as Birmingham's mayor (1908-1910) and as Jefferson County's Sheriff (1896-1900).⁵ As the second wife of Mr. Oscar R. Hundley, Bossie polished her political skills during the time Oscar served as Alabama State Representative and Senator, and later while he presided in U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Alabama. Eventually, Bossie was able to expand the AESA's reach, reestablishing the chapter in Huntsville, and was later named President of the Birmingham Chapter. She was also appointed Legislative Chairman of the state organization, and it was in this latter capacity that Bossie proved most effective. After Congress and President Wilson

decided to leave the issue of women's suffrage to the states, Hundley realized that the men of Alabama would be more likely to consider the matter, since states-rights sentiment always ran high. Using her contacts and organizational skills, she mounted a campaign in 1914-1915 to get the Alabama legislature to put the question of suffrage directly to the voters. Her first step was to organize a petition drive, eventually collection over 10,000 signatures to present to the Legislature.⁶



Bossie O'Brien Hundley. (Courtesy, Birmingham Public Library Archives.)

During this critical time, the AESA aggressively kept the issue of women's suffrage in front of the Alabama public. The association put together four traveling libraries of pro-suffrage works for use at high schools and universities.⁷ The women appeared at the state fair every year wearing "Votes for Women" sashes, and in 1913 alone handed out over 25,000 printed sheets to fairgoers.⁸ These "vote-wantingist, flag-wavingist" women also held fund-raising bazaars, a husbands' luncheon at the Tutwiler, and even public lectures featuring local and nationally renowned speakers including Dr. Anna Howard Shaw.⁹

Hundley rarely missed an opportunity to bring attention to the cause. Most notably, in May 1915 she and Mrs. A.J. Bowron set out in Bossie's new Hudson Six automobile on a cross-state trip to raise awareness and gather signatures on a

petition to the Alabama Legislature. With stops including Helena, Tuskegee, Dadeville, Sylacauga, Calera, Auburn, and Alexander City the women tried to convince the often skeptical rural citizens of the "urgent necessity that the good women of the state be constitutionally enabled to assist the good men of the state in bettering conditions."¹⁰ In August of that year, shortly before the legislature would vote on the question, Hundley spoke before a crowd of thousands at a barbecue in Wetumpka. She was well received, but was followed immediately by Congressman Tom Heflin, a staunch anti-suffragist. He immediately laid down the gauntlet, saying, "I can't say that I much enjoyed Mrs. Hundley's speech." After a few minutes of speaking, Heflin was politely interrupted by Hundley and a spontaneous debate began. Heflin conceded that Hundley was correct on a key point, and bowed politely.¹¹ Although this act may have not converted many to the cause of women's suffrage, it did result in good press for the women, showing that their position and their leaders could hold their own against one of the state's leading politicians.

One of the most unusual publicity promotions occurred on August 18, 1915. "Suffrage Day" at Rickwood Field featured the stadium decked out in "Votes for Women" banners. Even the Birmingham Barons and their mascot got into the act, donning "sashes of gorgeous yellow". Nearly 5,000 attended, with both suffragists and anti-suffragists snapping up tickets "like hotcakes."¹² Asked by the *Age-Herald* to write an account of the game from the suffragist perspective, Pattie Ruffner Jacobs, President of the Alabama Suffrage Association, opined that "the ancient tradition that the sexes can be divided by rigid lines, on questions like baseball, or suffrage, received a rude shock, for it was a self-evident proposition that the women were as good fans as the men."¹³

This concentrated statewide activity paid large dividends for the suffragists, who were in just their third year of

MRS. OSCAR HUNDLEY AT HER DESK IN THE SUFFRAGE HEADQUARTERS



Courtesy, Birmingham Public Library Archives.

—Portrait by L. C. Greer.

existence in 1915. It also had the added effect of attracting donations from sympathetic Alabamians. With the newfound revenue stream, in 1913 the Birmingham chapter was able to establish a more permanent headquarters downtown at Cable

Hall. This headquarters, which would remain open until 1919, became a congregating place not only for the suffragists, but also for downtown businesswomen, who often did not find the restrooms in their office buildings acceptable. Business women were encouraged to bring their lunches and associate during the noon-hour, and coffee was sold for only one penny. Gradually, other women's clubs including the Music Study Club would hold meetings there.¹⁴ This proved to be a great boon for the AESA, so much so that at a meeting at Cable Hall in March, 1915, Hundley proudly announced that the AESA had grown over two-hundred and fifteen percent in from 1914 to 1915.¹⁵

This growing momentum, however, was not proving to be enough as the women were still having trouble finding sympathetic legislators to vote in favor of the proposition. As early as October 1914 the *Age-Herald* predicted defeat in the Alabama legislature.¹⁶ Hundley, as the State Legislative Chairman of the Alabama Equal Suffrage Association, took the initiative and began an organized letter writing campaign to each member of the incoming legislature in an effort to sound out their attitude on the subject of suffrage and identify opponents whose minds could be changed. As part of this process, Bossie organized a scrapbook with photos and biographical sketches of each representative as published by the *Age-Herald*. This allowed her readily to recognize and engage the representatives during her frequent lobbying trips to Montgomery.

Although Bossie elicited many pledges of support from some progressive-minded legislators, correspondence she kept reveals widespread opposition and animosity towards the cause of women's suffrage. The opponents warned Bossie time after time that the 1915 session was an inopportune time to submit the request for a statewide referendum, and came up with a wide variety of reasons why they could not personally support the AESA's request. Many of the responses concerned

the perceived archetype of the southern woman as saintly, delicate, and above the political realm. Representative Y.L. Burton of LaFayette exemplified this attitude when he wrote to Hundley, "Just why your sex should desire the ballot, is surprising to myself, as well as to many others, occupying as they do, socially and otherwise, a more enviable position, in the south especially, than they enjoy anywhere on the face of the earth."¹⁷ Representative David A. Grayson of Huntsville echoed this logic, arguing that women are not asked to fight in war, work outside the home, and noting that divorce laws were heavily stacked in favor of women. He went on to note that if:

"Husbands and wives are going to vote alike then there is no need for the wives to vote. If they are going to vote against each other, then there comes the greatest firebrand into the family that could possibly be thrown."¹⁸

Not all of the arguments against passage of the proposal centered on the delicacy of southern women. Many legislators, having just rewritten the state constitution a decade and a half earlier to disenfranchise the Negro population, were concerned that allowing women to vote might open the door back up for Negroes as well. In public, Pattie Ruffner Jacobs made it clear that the AESA was only asking that gender-specific language would have to be changed if the citizens of Birmingham would approve the proposition. Privately, however, Jacobs believed that suffrage was a woman's right no matter her skin color. In spite of this, she realized that the question of black women's suffrage would cause irreparable damage to their current legislative campaign and would not advocate it.¹⁹ The mere possibility of the door opening back up for Negro women (or men) was enough to put several legislators in the "nay" column. John Darden, a representative from Goodwater, wrote "If I knew the white women of

Alabama wanted to exercise the right to vote, I would be in favor of submitting such proposition to them alone."²⁰ Lewis Easterly, a representative from a black belt town of Hayneville made his thoughts even more transparent:

"I would therefore want to be assured that the amendment submitted to the voters of Alabama provided for the elimination of the negro women from the provisions of the suffrage for women in Alabama before I would consent to vote for its submission... We people in this section would be as helpless under a condition giving the vote to negro women as we were when the men could go to the polls and cast their votes. It was an era of corruption when the negro man voted..."²¹

Others gave more pragmatic reasons for their opposition. Ernest Jones of Clio expressed a desire to avoid subjecting the taxpayers of Alabama to the expense of a vote on the matter since it appeared to be "foredoomed to defeat", and others felt that their district opposed the measure by a large margin, or even felt that most women were against having the vote.²²

Despite the widespread opposition, some influential people and publications came out in favor of letting the voters decide the question. The *Birmingham News* gave space to a regular Women's Suffrage column authored by Ms. Amelia Worthington, which Mrs. Hundley identified as the most important piece of exposure for the movement.²³ Even the conservative *Age-Herald* got in the act, endorsing the upcoming question in the legislature as a "reasonable appeal," which should be put to the voters to approve or disapprove of.²⁴ Much was also made of the fine conduct of the southern suffragists, especially in comparison to some in England who were "violent... revolutionary and incendiary."²⁵ Bossie was singled out as "one of Alabama's most brilliant women," and even her opponents in the legislature went out of their way to thank her for "the ladylike manner" in which she approached them.²⁶

Despite the warnings that 1915 was not the right time to submit the question to the legislature, Hundley pushed forward, realizing that the next legislative session would not be for another four years. Representative J.W. Green of Dallas County introduced the bill to a joint session of the legislature in January of 1915, but it was quickly sent to the Committee on Privileges and Elections. The women pushed hard on the legislature to get the bill out of committee, and on January 28th they were allowed to speak before a joint session of the legislature. Hundley was only the second woman ever to have time yielded to her on the House floor, and along with Mrs. Jacobs, argued eloquently in favor of the bill.²⁷ This effort and continuous further lobbying seemed to help the cause, as the bill was finally scheduled for a vote in the second half of the session, on August 24, 1915. However, just days before the vote, two major setbacks were handed to the women: An anonymous pamphlet, entitled "A Protest Against Women's Suffrage in Alabama," was distributed to the press and the legislators. This pamphlet made wild claims that an affirmative vote would end the traditional southern way of life, and again raised an objection against the possibility of Negro women gaining the vote. Mr. J.W. Green, the author of the bill and one of the AESA's most vocal supporters, struck shortly thereafter, coming out against the bill. Saying he had been misled, he too played to the fear of Negro suffrage, and also accused the AESA of being a tool of northern Republicans.²⁸ Hundley and Jacobs were stunned, and after collecting themselves, wisely got the legislature to postpone the vote for another day.

August 25 was the pivotal day on which the House finally considered the issue. In front of a packed gallery, under a banner reading "Justice, not Favors," debate on the bill commenced and a vote was taken. The women did secure a majority in favor of the bill, counting 52 yeas and 43 nays.²⁹ However, the majority did not prove to be enough, as

three-fifths majority, or sixty-four votes, was needed. The Senate followed suit several days later, and rejected the proposition by a margin of twenty against to twelve supporting. The women showed bravery in the face of such tremendous disappointment. Pattie Ruffner Jacobs praised the fifty-two "chivalrous" representatives, and promised to go "before every Legislature that convenes in Alabama until the whole suffrage question is settled and settled right."³⁰ Hundley was stoic also, predicting that "there are enough men and women in Alabama who believe in a democracy, who shall yet help us to win."³¹

The Alabama Legislature would not convene again for four more years, and the intervening years proved to be a period of decline, both for the AESA and for Bossie O'Brien Hundley personally. The United States' entry into World War I refocused women's efforts on supporting the war, the troops, and their nation. This mobilization ultimately convinced many that women deserved the vote, paving the way for the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, guaranteeing women the right to vote.³² In the immediate term in Alabama, though, this refocusing of women's attention had a deleterious effect on the push for suffrage, and the movement faltered. Pattie Ruffner Jacobs resigned as president to take a position with the national organization, and Bossie O'Brien Hundley put her name into running to replace Jacobs. Mrs. Carrie Parke of Selma also ran for the presidency, and at the 1916 convention was elected by a wide margin over Hundley. In spite of Hundley's tireless efforts during the legislative campaign, and close proximity to the state headquarters in Birmingham, historian Gillian Goodrich argues that Parke's personality may have had wider appeal than Hundley's.³³ More likely, however, is the possibility that a combination of Hundley's politics and religion aroused the ire of many delegates. Her husband Oscar switched his registration from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party in 1896, and remained active in

the party, serving as a delegate to its national convention in Chicago in 1916, an event to which Bossie accompanied him.³⁴ As if this were not an expedient enough way to lose favor in a heavily Democratic state, both Oscar and Bossie were devout Catholics (with Oscar serving from 1915-1916 as State Deputy for the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal men's organization)³⁵ during a time in Alabama in which the nativist movement was becoming powerful. Hundley was the sole Catholic in the Birmingham chapter of the AESA, and this may have been the deciding factor causing delegates to support Parke over her. In any case, Hundley was assigned a consolation position as the chair of the printing committee.³⁶ In spite of this rejection, Hundley pledged to remain active in the organization, but she would only participate sporadically in the years following, which some historians have read as a display of bitterness.³⁷ Certainly the defeat affected Hundley, but her husband's health was also declining during this period, which presumably required much of her attention. Oscar would finally die in 1921 at age sixty-six, and after a period of mourning, Bossie would remarry and re-enter society as Mrs. Bossie O'Brien Hundley Baer.

In spite of the 1915 Legislative campaign's defeat, Bossie O'Brien Hundley's contribution to both the Alabama Equal Suffrage Association and to the advancement of women in Alabama should not be minimized. Under her leadership, Alabama women got closer to securing the vote than ever before, and she helped soften the attitudes of many fence-sitters and opponents of suffrage, including future Gov. Thomas E. Kilby, who would experience a change of heart and speedily call a special session of the Legislature in September, 1920 to ensure women could vote in the general election.³⁸ Bossie O'Brien Hundley and the women who followed her lead deserve an honored place in Alabama's history, as they were pioneers in securing rights of participation that are essential to our democracy today.

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