

The Women's Liberty "Justice" Bell

The Women's Liberty "Justice" Bell - a replica of the original Liberty Bell of the American Revolution - toured Pennsylvania in 1915 to dramatize the effort to pass the Women's Suffrage Amendment to the state constitution. The 2000 pound bronze bell was carried throughout all 67 counties of the state on a specially built truck. The clapper of the bell was chained to its sides and would not be rung until women achieved the right to vote.

In 1915, the Women's Suffrage movement focused on passing voting rights amendments by the states. Women already had the right to vote in the Wyoming territory (1869), Colorado (1893), Utah and Idaho (1896), Washington state (1910) and Illinois (1913).

The Liberty Bell came to Union County on September 18, 1915, through Gregg Township, then stopping at Allenwood. It traveled down the river road to Lewisburg where Bucknell President Rev. John H. Harris, and suffragists Mary Bakewell and Adelle Potter spoke. After resting for a day, the many accompanying suffragists followed the bell to Laurelton, passing through Vicksburg, Swengel, Millmont, Glen Iron, and Hartleton. The group continued to Mifflinburg, where there was a parade and a meeting with speeches. That afternoon the bell and supporters moved on to New Berlin, through Dry Valley and Winfield, and then on to Snyder County.

Wherever it traveled, the Women's Liberty Bell was met with great interest. Union County Suffrage Committee chairperson Dr. Mary W. Wolfe of Lewisburg encouraged townspeople to celebrate the bell's tour with decorations and community gatherings. "We do not want Union County to fall behind. Please see that your house and your town are decorated. The suffrage color is yellow. In decorating, please use yellow or a combination of yellow and National colors." [Mifflinburg Telegraph, 17 Sept. 1915]

From school children with yellow sashes in New Columbia to yellow bunting in each town along the way, the bell was met by colorful displays and large crowds.

Prior to the bell's arrival in Union County, the Lyric Theatre had hosted an evening of films, music and speeches on women's suffrage. Dr. Wolfe gave an eloquent and well-received speech, as did Dr. Raignel of California (son-in-law of Mrs. George S. Matlack of Lewisburg). Raignel told how in states where women had the right to vote, there was a positive impact on education, the economy and community welfare. The week after the bell's tour Mifflinburg Telegraph editor George Schoch urged men to vote in favor of women's suffrage, noting the accomplishments of women in the community as workers, storekeepers, teachers, and the invaluable assistance women had provided in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. "Of, for and by the people, should be our battle cry in favor of women's suffrage." [Telegraph, 24 Sept. 1915]

The Women Suffrage Association of Mifflinburg had a meeting room and library in the office of the Glover and Glover law firm to which the public was invited to discuss and read about the issue of women voting. Supporters pointed out that at the time women

could vote in western US states and in Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland.

The Women's Suffrage Amendment did not pass in Pennsylvania in 1915; it appeared to carry in rural area but not the cities.

The Women's Suffrage movement refocused as a national, rather than a state, effort. At rallies throughout the country and in Washington DC, the Women's Liberty Bell was used to support the cause. In 1918, the suffrage amendment passed in the US House of Representatives but failed to pass in the US Senate.

The 19th Amendment to the US Constitution - giving women in the United States the right to vote - was approved in the House in May, and in the Senate in June of 1919, and was ratified on August 26, 1920.

The Women's Liberty Bell was finally rung Sept 1920.

Celebrate **Women's History Month** by learning more at your local and school libraries, and at the Union County Historical Society. The Society office/library, in the county courthouse, S. 2nd Street, Lewisburg, is open Monday through Friday, 8:30-noon and 1-4:30. For information on membership, events and reference material call 570-524-8666, Email hstor1c1@ptd.net or visit the website www.unioncountyhistoricalsociety.org.

Sources:

Snyder, Charles M., *Union County, a Celebration of History*, Union County Historical Society, 2000

Mifflinburg Telegraph, September 17 and 24, 1915

League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania website: palwv.org

