

# Opening - the long-locked door

BY CLAYBURN PEEPLES

Most people think Tennessee women could not vote 100 years ago, but actually, they could. In some elections, that is, but they were not allowed to vote in state elections.

But that all changed, on a hot, sweltering Nashville summer day in 1920 when Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the 19th Amendment, giving women the right to vote in every election in America.

Women had been clamoring for the vote since 1848, but their requests for an amendment to the national Constitution that would guarantee them that right were repeatedly rebuffed by Washington politicians, leaving the matter to the whim of individual state legislatures.

By the beginning of 1920, 15 states had full suffrage for females, and another six allowed women to vote in presidential elections only, but in the rest of the nation women either could not vote in any election or were restricted in exercising their franchise to municipal elections and primaries.

Here in Tennessee, women had enjoyed limited success, and by 1915 had begun making inroads with the state legislature. This limited progress, however, gave rise to a rural anti-suffrage movement, funded primarily by railroad, liquor and manufacturing interests. Manufacturers feared women voters might demand higher wages for female workers and might also push for child labor laws. Liquor interests feared they would vote for prohibition.

But in 1919, real progress was made when the legislature enacted laws giving women the right to vote in both local and presidential elections, but paradoxically, not in state elections. (Their own elections, in other words.) So complete voting rights were still denied to Tennessee women.

But the battle for women’s suffrage was now a national one. In 1919 Congress passed the 19th Amendment, giving American



Nashville memorial honoring women’s right to vote

women the right to vote in every election, everywhere in the country, but it wouldn’t become law until ratified by three-fourths (36) of the 48 states. No problem, they thought; an easy and early approval was predicted.

But by the summer of 1920, only 35 states had ratified the amendment, and 12 had either rejected it or weren’t planning to vote on it at all, making Tennessee, which had not addressed the issue, the last, best hope for ratification.

So early in June, suffragists petitioned the governor to call a special session of the legislature to take the measure up. In the middle of a hotly contested reelection contest, however, he was reluctant. Under pressure, he relented, but capily scheduled the special session to begin Aug. 9, four days after the

Democratic primary for governor. Thus, the stage was set for one of the great political showdowns in American history, and the story of that battle, that of how our own Tennessee became the state that made the 19th Amendment part of the law of the land, is one of our most treasured tales.

The legislative chambers of Tennessee’s capital building have seen many thrilling, historic political struggles, but up until 1920 they all pitted men against men. The struggle for women’s votes, however, involved both men and women on each side of the issue, and the nail-biting climax to the struggle would have made a Hollywood screenwriter proud.

Ground zero for the struggle was the Hermitage Hotel, where anti-suffragists had set up headquarters,

and where the lobby and surrounding sidewalks were daily filled with sweet talking ladies on both sides of the issue, armed with fervent entreaties and baskets of either red or yellow roses, yellow for the suffragists and red for the anti-suffragists, which they pinned on every man available. The national press corps, loving it, began referring to the struggle as “The War of the Roses” after the famous 15th- Century struggle between the Houses of Lancaster and York for the throne of England, but Tennessee had already dubbed one political contest, the 1886 gubernatorial race between brothers Bob and Alf Taylor, “The War of the Roses,” so the struggle for women’s votes became Tennessee’s “Second War of the

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