

Centennial Mini History #11

Women's clubs had significant power at the turn of the century in conservation issues. Aside from Sally Ranney referenced in following article by Terry West, Samuel P. Hayes in *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* mentions a number of times when political leaders sought the favor of women's clubs to support their natural resource positions.

Women's Clubs and Conservation

Women, while they lacked the ability to vote in the United States before 1920, did not exclude them from political activism—the influence of women in shaping the national agenda during the "progressive conservation era" (1890-1920) is testimony. In this era of "club house politics," public policy was often shaped by an influential few. With many members of the male elites of the period enthusiastic about commodity production, it was often left to their female counterparts to concern themselves with the social and environmental consequences, from the plight of urban sweatshops to rural stream pollution. It was in the efforts of State and national federations of women's clubs where women were most effective. The linkage of women's clubs with the conservation crusade at the turn of the century is illustrated in the following accounts. Mary Eno Pinchot—mother of Gifford Pinchot—headed the 100-member conservation committee of the 77,000-member Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). Some of the committee's causes included protecting Niagara Falls and watersheds in the Appalachian Mountains. It was told by a former member that a frequent reply to women's letters asking State governors what they might do for conservation was to "mind the children." This they did by promoting conservation education to school children. Mabel Rosalie Edge (1877-1962) of New York City was, like many of the women leaders in conservation also active in the suffrage movement. An active member of the National Audubon Society in the 1920's and 1930's, she sponsored several reforms in game laws and started the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary of Pennsylvania. Mrs. Lovell White helped found the Save the Redwoods League (1918) and was active in the California Federation of Women's Clubs. The latter group led a successful effort to have a forestry school established at the University of California, Berkeley.

Gifford Pinchot of the Forest Service paid homage to the support of the Federation of Women's Clubs for forest conservation, writing that without it the creation of the Minnesota Forest Reserve "would have been impossible." He claimed that this effort of 1902 led to the first reserve by direct congressional action rather than presidential proclamation (Pinchot 1947:205).

At the American Forest Congress held in Washington, DC, in 1905, Lydia Phillips—chair of the forestry committee of the General Federation of Women's Clubs with 800,000 members in 1905 and its own magazine, *Century*—in an impromptu address described the clubs' work in promoting tree planting, forest preservation, and irrigation.

The partnership of women in forestry and conservation began to fade shortly after this event. The 1910 dispute over construction of the Hetch Hetchy Dam in California split the earlier allies into two camps: The Sierra Club and preservationists versus the Forest Service and conservationists. Many women tended to feel more akin to the values of preservation of parks and wildlife and joined those movements. By 1915 over half the members of the Audubon Society were women and in 1929 the National Parks Association had more female members than male. Another faultline where the genders parted was in occupational and leadership roles. This became apparent by 1913 at the Fifth National Conservation Congress. Despite the presence of women participants, only men were featured in the coverage by the magazine, *American Forestry* (now entitled *American Forests*). Such neglect of women is attributed (Ranney 1990:46) to "the arrival of conservation and forestry as technical professions. Women were excluded."

In the USDA Forest Service, the remaining role of women in conservation was in the field of public education. D. Priscilla Edgerton—who retired in 1938— began work at the Washington Office in 1909 as an editor and wrote, *The Forest, A Handbook for Teachers*, an agency "bestseller," in 1930. Perhaps the most famous Forest Service educator of the time, however, was Margaret March-Mount. She began work in 1923 on the Bighorn National Forest and soon after on the Shoshone National Forest, where apart from her regular job, she did publicity for the Cody Club (a private society to revive the history of Buffalo Bill). The latter experience and her personal desire to restore nature to health led to her work in Milwaukee at the regional office in the role of Conservational Educational Activities with women's clubs. Her work took her on speaking tours before garden clubs, school children, and other civic groups, all the time to promote tree planting. The success of her "penny pines" Children's Conservation Crusade to get student donations to fund the planting of pines on national forests (the Forest Service would plant 1,000 seedlings for every 4 dollars received) led to her transfer to the Washington, DC, headquarters to continue the effort nationwide. An article in the 1942 *Washington Post* credits March-Mount with motivating the national DAR to promote the planting of 5 million seedlings in 36 States and the District of Columbia. It mentions as well the goal of the General Federation of Women's Clubs of establishing a federation forest in every State. This work may be viewed as part of the war effort but the link-age of the Forest Service with Women's Clubs in conservation programs in those years was evidence of past mutual activism. In recent years, the link has faded just as the cutting edge of environmental activism has passed to other, often newer, organizations.

References

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