

League Of Women Voters Celebrate 92nd

POTSDAM - Feb. 14 marks the 92nd anniversary of the founding of the League of Women Voters.

The League was founded by Carrie Chapman Catt in 1920 during the convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. That convention was held just six months before the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, giving women the right to vote after a 72-year struggle.

Carrie Chapman Catt had ties to St. Lawrence County. Born Carrie Lane in Ripon, Wisc. in 1859, she was the daughter of Lucius Lane and Maria Clinton Lane. Both of her parents had graduated from Potsdam Academy and several generations of the Lane family had farmed the family homestead in West Potsdam. Her parents migrated west in 1855.

Carrie worked as an organizer for the National American Woman Suffrage Association from 1890 to 1900, when she became its national president. In May 1914 Catt came

to Canton to conduct a school for suffrage workers at the first woman's suffrage convention ever held in St. Lawrence County, where she spoke to between 500 and 600 people in the Opera House. She returned to the county in 1915 and again in 1917 to further the work of suffrage.

The League began as a "mighty political experiment" designed to help 20 million women carry out their new responsibilities as voters. It encouraged them to use their new power to participate in shaping public policy.

The successful suffragists were determined that with women voting they would be able to right all the things that were wrong with American society. They reasoned that "with how much was accomplished without the vote - how much more would be accomplished with the vote." They thought this might take five years. They were overly optimistic.

From the beginning, the League has been an activist, grassroots organization

whose leaders believed that citizens should play a critical role in advocacy. It was then, and is now, a nonpartisan organization. League founders believed that maintaining a nonpartisan stance would protect the fledgling organization from becoming mired in the party politics of the day.

The League started in 1920 in St. Lawrence County with local leagues in Canton, Potsdam and Ogdensburg. From the beginning its purpose was to educate all voters - men and women alike. Then as now, League members educated citizens about, and lobbied for, government and social reform legislation.

Canton's Elizabeth Best Ford (Mrs. Robert Ford) was the founder of the St. Lawrence County League. She was the chair for several years, and served as the regional chair for the area.

The first local League convention was held in 1922. Dues that year were \$1 and it was voted to set aside 10 cents of each dollar to promote a regional League, to include

Franklin and Clinton counties.

At another early League function, members held a tea for Jeanette Rankin, the first woman to sit in the House of Representatives, elected from Montana.

Over the course of its life, the county League has undergone many name changes as membership ebbed and flowed. In 1970 it was called the Canton-Potsdam League. In the 1980's the name was changed back to the St. Lawrence County League, and in the 1990's the League joined with Jefferson County.

The League ceased to operate for a few years after the turn of the new century, but in 2009 a group of local citizens reactivated the League in St. Lawrence County. Inspired by calls to bring back civility and civic engagement to the political process, the League today works with community partners to foster citizen participation and education about the pressing issues of the day.

The next League event is a public town hall with Rep. Bill Owens on the 2012 Farm

Bill, which must be reauthorized by Congress this year. The new Farm Bill will set the course of federal agriculture and food assistance programs for the next five years. It takes place from 11 am to 12 p.m. Feb. 25 in the Barben Rooms in the Clarkson University Cheel Center in Potsdam.

The Farm Bill has a major impact on farmers, consumers, rural communities, the 40-plus million people receiving food assistance and, in a significant way, global agribusiness - a primary beneficiary of U.S. federal agriculture programs.

The 2007 Farm Bill, an extension of the 2002 Farm Security and Investment Act, cost approximately \$300 billion, with 75 percent going to food assistance. The remaining 25 percent went to conservation, energy, nutrition, education and, most importantly, farm safety-net programs, including payments to farmers and crop insurance.

Designing a Farm Bill that can address these fundamental human, social, economic and environmental needs is an

incredible challenge, needing citizen comment and ideas.

The League sent comments to the NYS Dept. of Environmental Conservation about hydro-fracking in January. Other recent League activities have included Conversations with Candidates, video presentations on redistricting, wind energy, K-12 education and the dissolution talks in Potsdam, with its community partners, AAUW-St. Lawrence County, Seedcorn, Common Ground and Clarkson's Center for Excellence in Communication.

The St. Lawrence County League is a nonpartisan political organization open to women and men that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

You can learn much more about the work of League by visiting its website, <http://slc-leaguewv.org/>. Contact League chair Sue Cypert at 386-8659 or by email at gardency@yahoo.com.