



From Seneca Falls to the Polling Booth

By Mike Peterson

Illustrations by Christopher Baldwin

CHAPTER SEVEN: A New Century, A New Generation

The young suffragists who joined in at the start of the 20th Century had an advantage that had been won by the women who came before them: Education.

Sojourner Truth had been illiterate, and even those who had good educations for the time had grown up when few colleges would let women attend.

Three of the young women who were about to become prominent in the movement had bachelor's degrees. The colleges they graduated from hadn't even existed at the time of the Seneca Falls Convention.

Alice Paul's degree was in biology from Swarthmore College and she also had a master's in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania.

Lucy Burns graduated from Vassar College, then did graduate work at Yale University and at the universities of Bonn, Berlin and Oxford.

Inez Milholland was also a Vassar graduate, and, when Yale, Harvard and Cambridge law schools refused to enroll a woman, got her law degree from New York University in 1912.

They were not any smarter than the women who had come before, because there were many very intelligent women in the first group of suffragists, but they were better prepared and had also grown up knowing that they had a right to demand fair treatment.

Inez Milholland had even caused a bit of trouble at Vassar, where she was an honor student and star athlete. She wanted to hold a suffrage rally on campus, but the administration refused to allow it, so she held her meeting in the cemetery just on the other side of a short fence.

By the time Inez was done organizing, two-thirds of the students at Vassar had joined the suffrage group.

Meanwhile, Alice Paul and Lucy Burns had met at a suffrage rally in England, where suffrage workers known as “suffragettes” had given up on polite tactics. In fact, the two Americans were arrested at the march where they met, and then again several other times after.

The suffragettes had found ways to keep legislators, and newspapers, from ignoring them. The night before a political meeting in Glasgow, Scotland, Paul hid on the roof of the building so she could make a speech to the crowd when they gathered the next day.

After she was forced to come down, she and Burns tried to enter the building with other suffragettes and were beaten by the police while the crowd tried to protect them.

A few weeks later, she and another suffragette disguised themselves as cleaning women to sneak into a building where the Prime Minister was having a banquet with other important politicians. When he started his speech, they began shouting “Votes for Women!” and threw their shoes, breaking some windows.

They got attention for their cause, but they were sentenced to a month in jail and, when she refused to eat, a tube was forced down Paul’s nose so they could pump food into her stomach. This got even more public sympathy for the suffragettes, but it harmed her health and, in 1910, she came home to the United States.

The suffrage movement in America remained less confrontational, but this new group of suffragists did not want to collect 600,000 signatures on a petition only to have it ignored as had happened to the older women.

Stunts got attention, and Milholland had already proven it: In 1909, she disrupted a New York City parade that featured President Taft by leaning out a window overlooking the street and shouting “Votes for Women!” and then, when hundreds of men gathered to see what was happening, she made a speech to them about suffrage.

Alice Paul was also intent on gaining attention for the suffrage movement, and organized a grand parade for Washington, DC, on March 3, 1913, the day before the new president, Woodrow Wilson, was to be inaugurated.

She had put on some parades before, but this was to be a major effort to gain publicity for the suffrage movement. Inez Milholland was known not only as an inspirational speaker, but also for her tall good looks, and was recruited to lead the parade in white robes, riding a white horse.

Washington was crowded with people expecting to attend the inauguration, and a quarter of a million people gathered to watch the parade. But things got out of control as some men in the crowd began to curse the women, throw things at them and even attack the marchers.

Newspapers reported that 300 women were treated for injuries and blamed the police for the disorder. Cavalry units in town for the inauguration finally came to the scene and separated the marchers and the rioters.

It could have been a disaster for the movement, but most people were outraged by the way the women were treated, and, though organizers had not expected so much trouble, the parade ended up creating publicity and support for the Suffrage Movement.

The traditional members of the National American Woman Suffrage Association still felt it was better to move forward with meetings and petitions, and to work constructively to change minds.

And so, in 1916, Alice Paul and Lucy Burns formed their own group, the National Women's Party, and invited young women like Inez Milholland to join them.

Their most important decision was this: They didn't care about Republicans or Democrats, or about individual legislators who promised to support suffrage.

Whichever party was in control was responsible. Whichever sat in the White House, whichever had a majority in Congress, would have to support suffrage, or pay the price.

*Text Copyright 2015, Mike Peterson
Illustrations copyright 2015 Christopher Baldwin*