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Women's History Project of Northwest Michigan

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I want to recognize Anne Magoun for her founding and her ongoing leadership of the Women's History Project of Northwestern Michigan. It is recording and preserving "her-story" — the story of women who have helped shape and been a part of the fabric of the development of our community.

Mary Beard, historian/wife of Charles Beard (probably more famous) once noted that the achievements of women in history were often either neglected or entirely omitted from our history books, due, she stated, to the fact that mostly men were the historians.

My immersion in women's history occurred some time after college, marriage, and children. Yes, I became a feminist. If you look up that word in the dictionary it may surprise you. It is defined as "someone interested in the social, political and economic condition of women". It says nothing about bra-burning.

It was the early seventies, a time of confluence of major events in my life — my husband had become Governor, the women's movement had burst into bloom with such activists as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, our daughter had graduated from Smith College and had entered Law School at the U of M. I was thrust into the swirl of a political wife's life with no experience and probably little expectation of what lay ahead. At that time in my life I was a happy 3rd year student of Landscape Architecture at M.S.U. Reporters were calling to do "life stories", and one of them called to ask me how I viewed the Equal Rights Amendment, newly passed by Congress. It was a "deer in the headlights" reaction on my part, and I promised to call her back later. I called Elaine, our law student daughter, who said, "Mother, you must become informed about women's issues. You are in a wonderful position now to help women." And the lights went on and I embarked on learning. An experience that still goes on.

The ensuing years became the second great education of my life as I learned and became deeply involved with the women's movement. It was an enriching time. Why should an amendment be so controversial which said simply: "Equal Rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex"? Because it contravened long held deep social and political institutions in our land.

One has to go back to our country's beginnings to discover the roots of our democracy. English common law was part of the basis of our constitution and embodied the concept that women were the private property of men. A woman was chattel. She had no rights. Neither colleges nor high schools were open to her. Her husband controlled the children, their property, their wages. If a wife ran away she was forced to return and her husband collected damages from anyone who had "harbored" her along the way.

In the early 19th century only one state, Massachusetts, forbade wife beating. But to give others credit, they did have some restrictions. The law said a man could beat his wife "with a stick no bigger than a judge's thumb."

It has occurred to me as I have become involved with contemporary issues of violence against women that its roots reach far back in history. Our local shelter for abused women and children is always full.

Abigail Adams had admonished her husband, who was one of the framers of the constitution, "Do remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. . . ." But the founding fathers forgot the ladies. The vote was denied to slaves, Indians, mentally unfit and women. The vote was given to white males only.

Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, said, "Were our state a pure democracy, there would still be excluded from our deliberations women, who to prevent deprivation of morals and ambiguity of issues, should not mix promiscuously in gatherings of men."

The status of women for the first half of the 19th century was similar to the status of slaves, and the first feminists fought for freedom and equality for both. They fought against the opposition of our entire society, and even, as in the struggle for ERA, were against women themselves. Ernestine Rose, an outstanding nineteenth century orator and proponent of the first petition for a married women's property law in New York State (a married woman could not own property) put it. in describing her difficulties collecting signatures: "After a good deal of trouble, I obtained five signatures. Some of the ladies said the gentlemen would laugh at them; others said they had rights enough; and the men said the women had too many rights already... ."

In 1848 a long line of horse drawn carriages of women converged in Seneca Falls, New York, for an historic event, the first national women's conference. Its organizer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, set forth a "Declaration of Rights and Principles" for the inclusion of women's rights in the laws of the land. Her premise: The Constitution should have said, "All men and women are created equal." The assembled group passed resolutions dealing with social, legal, and economic issues. Its signal clarion call one for women's right to vote.

Reportedly Mrs. Stanton's father was so upset he paid his daughter a visit to see if she had had a mental breakdown. When he found her sane, he said, "My child, I wish you had waited until I was under the sod before you did this foolish thing."

The seed had been sown — the quest for equality and dignity for every individual — including women. Its fruitage would be borne out by history, in the Civil War and women's ongoing struggle for suffrage.

It took over half a century, 1848 to 1920, for women to get the vote--campaigns, strategizing, organizing. With the turn of the century came escalating marches and picketing. The great suffrage parade of 1913 saw suffragists in white marching down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House. They were greeted by derisive crowds which sometimes yelled and spat on the white clad suffragists. Women were thrown in jail, subsequently went on hunger strikes and then were force fed. There were many heroines in the struggle. Susan B. Anthony, who formed a life-long friendship and collaboration with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, spent a lifetime working for suffrage, traveling and speaking for the vote for women. This in an era when it was not "seemly" for women to either speak in public or travel alone. She did not live to see the fulfillment of her life's dream, passage of the 19th amendment to the Constitution in 1920.

Women finally got the vote, but did not get equal rights under the law. There is no guarantee in the Constitution that women's rights will be protected. Many of the gains by women, such as being able to own property, could be changed with a new Congress, a new administration, or new appointments to the Supreme Court. There is no consistent pattern in state laws in regard to women.

In Georgia, the family home belongs exclusively to the husband, even if the wife is the principle wage earner. Different states have different standards. In some states women are considered "property" of their husbands and cannot get automobile insurance in their own names or on their own driving records. This realization led to the introduction in Congress of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1923. A redoubtable feminist, Alice Paul, subsequently worked for its reintroduction for over half a century, and like Susan B., never saw

the fruition of her efforts. The Amendment is still reintroduced in every session of Congress. Women still do not have equality of rights under the law.

Passage of ERA was dependent on ratification by 38 states. Several, including Michigan, ratified early before the momentum slowed, and organized opposition intensified. Many of the same opponents of suffrage were active in opposing ERA. The misinformation about the amendment was rampant: it would damage family life, put women in military combat, create unisex public restrooms, legalize same sex marriages. The columnist Ellen Goodman in this past year opined that despite the fact we have no ERA some of these fears of its opponents have come to pass.

Particularly opposition to the amendment came from the deep South, the Old Southern Guard that a century earlier fought against emancipation of the slaves. Their allies; the most reactionary political and religious elements of American society; The John Birch Society, the American Independent Party, The Daughters of the American Revolution, The Mormon Church, Stop ERA. Senator Sam Erwin of So. Carolina stated that the southern women needed no further legal protection because "we already put our women on a pedestal."

By 1979 the original time limit of 7 years needed for ratification by the states had expired. We had only 35 of the 38 states. Intense lobbying in Congress produced an extension of 3 years to pass the amendment. It was during this time that Sharon Rockefeller and I, the co-chairs of ERA America, lobbied the legislatures of 2 crucial states, Florida and Illinois. But politics prevailed over the fundamental issues of women's rights. By narrow margins and for political reasons neither legislature ratified.

One last major effort for ratification took place in the form of a national march in 1980 in Washington. One hundred thousand women from all areas of the country assembled on the Washington Mall and marched down Constitution Avenue, dressed in white just as the suffragists had done in 1913. My daughter Elaine had persuaded me that we must be part of this. And it was an exhilarating experience — a highlight of my life. Such an assemblage of women — of all ages, races, and social conditions — together expressing the belief that in a democracy 53% of our population, women, deserved equal protection under the law.

Ratification by the states in the proscribed time limit failed — but the ERA is still alive, and is still being introduced in Congress every year. Its time will come.

And by any measure, social, economic, or political there is much to be done. Women hold only 15% of seats in Congress, and 14% of seats on Fortune 500 boards. On average they still earn less than men. Poverty is a huge issue for women, as are reproductive rights, and violence against women.

These issues are not unique. They are global. In all parts of the world, by virtually every measure of well-being, women have long suffered from the burdens of inequality. According to the United Nations women comprise half of the world's adult population, yet perform nearly two-thirds of all work hours, receive only one-tenth of the world's income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property. The type of problem differs from country to country, but the fundamental problem of discrimination against women is common to all nations. Recognizing the need to focus attention on the status of women the United Nations General Assembly declared the period 1976-1985 as the United Nations Decade for Women, with themes of equality, development, and peace.

Three global, consciousness-raising conferences were held: Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi. Over 200 workshops were presented on wide-ranging issues at the Nairobi Conference of 1985 which I attended. I learned of

unheard of issues of 3rd world women including the circumcision of young girls and women. This is a Muslim tradition still practiced today.

Whether in the economy, education, health, or government, there is no major field of activity and country in which women share attained equality with men.

I was privileged to join the first delegation of American women to China in 1975. President Nixon had opened China to the West in 1974. We were hosted by the Chinese Women's Federation with its purpose to further understanding between Chinese and American women. Chairman Mao, whose name and picture were everywhere had proclaimed, "Women hold up half the sky." To learn something about the historical role of women in China — their emergence from feudalism — was a huge learning experience.

Yet throughout the world women are still disproportionately represented among the poor, the illiterate, the unemployed and underemployed. They remain a very small minority of the centers of political power.

Betty Friedan maintains that the second American Revolution has occurred in the latter half of the 20th Century, with women at the heart of civil rights and women's rights struggles, in pursuit of the "American Dream": liberty and justice for men and women. The silent revolution is slowly gaining in strength. Women are more educated, more active economically, more successful politically than they were a few decades ago. There is an undercurrent of confidence and sisterhood among them that is new to the world.

Surely this vast resource of women-power and inspiration will be tapped as we face our future both here in America and in the world. For as Susan B. Anthony proclaimed, "Failure is impossible".