

# EPICENTER OF THE FIGHT FOR WOMAN SUFFRAGE

## OPPOSING SIDES HEADQUARTERED IN NASHVILLE'S HERMITAGE HOTEL

BY TOM VICKSTROM

The Hermitage Hotel today enjoys its second century of hospitality. “Meet me at the Hermitage” evokes a feeling of excitement and a ring of quality for many Nashvillians. The storied hotel has hosted presidents, sports heroes, movie stars, opera singers, generals, soldiers, traveling salesmen, conventioners, honeymooners, and more.

Once upon a time, Tennessee women campaigning for the right to vote also made the hotel their favorite place. During the decade leading to a great victory in August 1920 hundreds of woman-suffrage meetings and events took place inside the Hermitage Hotel. As early as 1912 the hotel hosted a convention of equal suffragists from across the state.

In 1914 Nashville was honored to host the national convention of National American Woman Suffrage Association. The Hermitage was the headquarters hotel, decorated with yellow streamers that floated from the chandeliers in the lobby, and festoons of yellow that hung pendant-like, attracting no end of favorable comment. A woman suffragist even gave birth at the hotel; she named her newborn son “Tennessee League.”

In 1915 hotel management provided a rent-free office to the Nashville Equal Suffrage League to help promote their cause. The Nashville ladies were energetic. The May Day parades of 1914,



*Legislators, lobbyists, newsmen, and women both for and against their right to vote, all crowded the ornate lobby of the Hermitage Hotel in August 1920. The hotel's quality and proximity to the Capitol made it a popular choice. (Image: Nashville Public Library, Special Collections)*



*Noted anti-suffragist Josephine Pearson is among the women pictured in the front office of the anti-ratification headquarters at the Hermitage Hotel 100 years ago. (Image: Tennessee State Library and Archives)*

1915 and 1916 formed up near the Hermitage and made their way to the Parthenon for rallies and pageantry. At other times guest speakers were brought in, including Emmeline and Sylvia Pankhurst, known worldwide for their suffrage campaigns in England; they were guests at the hotel.

These events, flavored with a Tennessee brand of pleasant but firm and relentless campaigning, turned many an old-fashioned view of women's roles into a more progressive

acceptance. The times were changing. Evolving public opinion would eventually tip the scales. Ultimately one single vote in the Tennessee state legislature on Aug. 18, 1920, made the difference when the ratification of 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed, recognizing the voting rights of some 27 million women across the land.

The hero who cast the deciding vote was Harry T. Burn. On the eighth day of vigorous debate, and amidst constant

wheeling and dealing by the legislators, young 24-year-old Burn became an instant celebrity. He wore an anti-suffrage red rose on his lapel but had received an encouraging letter from his mother, Febb, that very morning (see story on page 1). When he cast his “aye” vote, a 48-48 deadlock turned to 49-47 for the suffragists.

Amidst the cheers from the women in the gallery and the chaos on the house floor, Burn escaped from a bodyguard the governor had assigned to him. When he stepped out a window onto a narrow ledge of the Capitol, and back into the library attic, he found it too hot there as well. Out the back door he went, and then escaped into the crowd.

According to Tyler L. Boyd’s book *Tennessee Statesman Harry T. Burn*, the young representative later reminisced: “Two or three of those young sergeant-at-arms were pretty close to me, but I outran them. I ran to the Hermitage Hotel.” A fellow senator later remarked, “You certainly did a nice sprint there. Your coat tail stuck out so far you could have played checkers on it!” Burn continued, “I knew that if I raced through the lobby of the Hermitage Hotel, they would know who I was. The minute I got inside the Hermitage lobby I just strolled through. Nobody ever noticed me going through. The minute I got through the door I put on glasses and pulled my hat brim down; and I went out on the sidewalk on the other side of the Hermitage and watched them. They were just like a bunch of dogs after a fox or something...and I watched them hunt me.”

An interesting coincidence in history is the fact that just about where Harry T. Burn once stood watching the crowd is today the site of a historical marker commemorating the War of the Roses, as it came to be called, due to the yellow roses worn by suffragists and the red roses worn by anti-suffragists.

Some six weeks earlier, national suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt had arrived with light luggage to size up the situation in Tennessee (see last month’s cover story). She expected to stay just a few days. Such was her national and international status that dozens and dozens of Nashville’s most prominent leaders came calling to her suite on the third floor of the Hermitage Hotel. Right away she stopped a mean-spirited newspaper attack against the governor



*The Hermitage Hotel’s central role in the suffrage battle was memorialized in 1997 by artist Alan LeQuire in this bas-relief sculpture, which today hangs in the State Capitol. (Image: Tennessee State Library and Archives)*

and got two competing women’s groups to work together. While she never stepped foot inside the Capitol building (leaving the campaign to Tennesseans), her hotel suite, with a nice view of the Capitol, was the command post. People came and went daily to Catt’s suite, an epicenter of strategy, tactics, and social change. This would be the place she would first enjoy the crowning moment of over two million women campaigners. None but a mighty army could have won, she said.

The same day Catt arrived in July, an archrival also checked in to the Hermitage Hotel. The bold Tennessee anti-suffragist Josephine Pearson reserved the meeting rooms at the front desk upon arrival. In her hot room, pre-air conditioning, she recalled, “The only way I could endure the heat was to stand all night under the cool shower, from whence I composed telegrams to send out to Anti-suffrage leaders all over the nation. Came promptly the official assurances from New York and Boston, ‘Our forces en route.’”

In they flocked by the dozens. The numbers are substantiated by reports on the anti-suffragists who attended a garden party on Aug. 8. According to Carol Lynn Yellin and Janann Sherman’s book, *The Perfect 36*: “More than forty automobiles gathered in front of the Hermitage Hotel to collect passengers for the lovely party.”

The anti-ratificationists made the hotel mezzanine the headquarters of the Southern Women’s Rejection League. One can imagine them looking over the railings into the busy lobby below.

The lobbyists and special interest groups deserve mention. Well over 100 influencers came to Nashville—mostly trying to defeat ratification. Manufacturing interests, the railroads, the liquor interests and others all were apprehensive about what women would do to change the rules once they got into government. Surely it was like cats and dogs and a barrel full of monkeys all thrown together. The Hermitage lobby was sometimes filled until 2 o’clock in the morning.

Although many of these women had been crusading members of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and helped force nationwide alcohol prohibition, the anti-suffragists at the Hermitage Hotel found themselves juxtaposed with the efforts of the liquor industry lobbyists. From Yellin and Sherman’s book: “More and more legislators, single and in small groups, were observed making their way to the elevators and requesting passage to the eighth floor. Word had gone around that a certain eighth-floor suite, in guarded privacy as discretion and 18th Amendment enforcement laws demanded, legislators would find available and free in any quantity desired their choice of bourbon, moonshine whiskey, or Tennessee’s favorite, Jack Daniels. By midnight, many of the state’s lawmakers could be seen and heard, reeling happily up and down the halls of the hotel. Some of them were singing the Anti’s theme song, ‘Keep the Home Fires Burning.’”

The Hermitage Hotel today cherishes those colorful times with a cocktail menu featuring crafted drinks named for the leading suffragists, each recipe infused with their distinct personality traits.

The ladies here in August 1920 did not depend altogether on hope, rather



they acted with energetic and highly organized ability. Waiting is the hardest part, however. One evening the National Woman's Party state leader, Sue Shelton White, decided she could not sit still and made her way to the eighth floor, attempting to listen in on the anti-suffs through the transom windows of the "Jack Daniels suite." She was discovered and asked to leave. When she refused, the men had her escorted out of the hotel. The newspaper headlines on Aug. 15, 1920, shouted, "Two Woman Spies Caught in Hotel."

A few words ought to be said here about the ladies' entrance. Most all the fine hotels of the day had a separate ladies' entrance. In Nashville the Maxwell House, the Tulane, the Duncan and the Hermitage all had a dedicated entrance, typically leading to a tearoom or lunchroom and parlors. This was designed to appeal to local society and to attract patronage, contrary to a misunderstood perception that it was because of second-class status, although women's rights as citizens were, in fact, subordinated. At the Hermitage Hotel, the side entrance along Union Street can be seen today.

Inside that original hotel entrance was an ornamental ladies lobby. Walking right or left, then led to either the main dining room (Grand Ballroom today) or the loggia (Veranda today,) or up a staircase near the elevators to the mezzanine where three exquisite parlors awaited. It was there a soon-to-become famous Anne Dallas Dudley and her friends hosted the first public event on the mezzanine in 1910, although she was named Mrs. Guilford Dudley in the newspaper.

The exceptional Dudley was the first woman to give a large outdoor speech in Nashville. That was at Centennial Park in 1914 where today her likeness marches with others in the Tennessee Woman Suffrage Monument. Dudley left politics after 1920 but was influential in future endeavors—such as saving the Belle Meade plantation, and advocating birth control rights for women (see page 7 for more about her).

We all owe a huge debt of gratitude for these amazing women and the brave men who stood up for their beliefs. They were on the right side of history, but it was not so obvious at the time. And the Hermitage Hotel was no silent

sentinel watching history march by—it helped make history that will be forever imprinted upon its identity.

On Aug. 18, 1920, the *Evening Tennessean* reported: "Upon the motion to adjourn the galleries and lower floor of the House went wild, as suffrage advocates realized the victory was theirs. Women shouted and waved American flags and suffrage colors. Men shook hands with each other and with the women. Someone started the song, 'America' which was caught up and carried on until the great room was filled with sound. Then down to the governor's office the crowd surged. There it stopped to shake hands with Governor Roberts. It carried its joy and song into the Hermitage Hotel where the song and cries continued. Those who had stood for suffrage, including members of the House, outside men, and women gave a reception to themselves. 'Rah for the immortal forty-nine' was the shout. And the joy was unrestrained."

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