

Women's Suffrage in Alberta©

by Faye Reineberg Holt

On April 19, 1916, Alberta became the third province in Canada to grant women the vote. Preceding it by twelve weeks was Manitoba which gave royal assent to an equal suffrage act on January 27 and Saskatchewan which stamped its bill on March 14. With the passing of these laws, prairie women became "absolute equals" in law, and finally were entitled to exercise any privilege of citizenship enjoyed by husbands, fathers, sons, uncles and brothers."

Some provincial histories claim the vote was granted without a fight. As a result, the real struggle in the Alberta story is little known.

The first rustling of discontent had begun early in the century. In 1902, the newly organized Calgary Branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union became committed to female suffrage. In 1907, the related cause of dower rights was already the basis of a petition drafted by Mrs. Henrietta Muir Edwards and circulated in Calgary. Similar work was spearheaded in Edmonton by newly arrived Emily Murphy. Unfortunately, according to the Calgary Herald, "the time was not ripe... . Not willing to give up at the apparent disapproval which met their efforts in this project, they went slowly and quietly on with their educational work."

By 1908, Calgarians Mrs. G.W. Kerby and Mrs. P.S. Woodhall, 1st president of the WCTU provincial franchise body, were among the reformers. Along with Edmontonian Murphy and the Edmonton Local Council of Women, they pushed for laws to protect a woman if her spouse died without a will, excluded her, sold or gambled away the property, or left her destitute after marital break-up. Yet with no political clout, the activists' problem was convincing legislators.

For the entire article, contact the author or see *Alberta History*, Autumn 1991, pp 25-28.
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