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Brimstone, Booze and the Ballot revivifies suffragists' struggle

Posted by Frances Marion Platt on March 14, 2013 in Events, History, Stage · 0 Comments



Matilda Joslyn Gage and Susan B. Anthony. (Library of Congress)

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The Women's Suffrage Movement sounds like ancient history, doesn't it? When we try to imagine it, we picture sepia-toned images from the earliest days of photography showing genteel women covered discreetly from wrist to ankle in layers of ruffles, broad hats and buttoned-up shoes. But it wasn't all that long ago that the right to vote was not a given for women, even in America.

Prominent suffragist Alice Paul was still around to get involved in the unsuccessful campaign to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s. When this correspondent's grandmother reached voting age in 1919, ratification of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution was still a year away. How I wish that I'd thought to ask her about what that was like!

Seven years from now, we'll be hearing a lot about the centennial of that watershed event. A not-for-profit organization called Votes for Women 2020 (www.votesforwomen2020.org) was recently established to "create an educational narrative, celebrate women's right to vote, inspire women to take leadership roles and promote the importance of this part of American history." New Paltz town supervisor Susan Zimet and her husband Steve Auerbach are Votes for Women 2020's founders.

Earlier this month, there was a march on Washington to mark the 100th anniversary of a major Suffrage Parade led by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns to the White House in 1913. And it wasn't just a historical reenactment; speakers at the event addressed very current issues, like the case now before the Supreme Court seeking to overturn parts of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

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With all the talk during the 2012 election campaigns about a “war on women,” a reappraisal of the Women’s Suffrage Movement and just how far its goals have actually been achieved is bound to loom large in the national consciousness. Here in New York State, we can reasonably expect to see Seneca Falls, the cradle of the suffrage movement and home to the Women’s Rights National Historical Park, become the epicenter for heritage tourism promotional dollars spent over the next seven years.

Though her story has largely been forgotten, overshadowed by more famous Finger Lakes residents like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the key suffragist leaders back in the 19th century was a woman named Matilda Joslyn Gage. Her son-in-law L. Frank Baum, author of the Oz books, called her “the most gifted and educated woman of her age.” Raised in a home that was a stop on the Underground Railroad, Gage was a prolific author, editor of a radical political journal called The National Citizen and Ballot Box, freethinker, Abolitionist, Native American rights activist and staunch advocate for the separation of church and state.

It was the latter position that got her into trouble with more “mainstream” suffragists of the day, who were allied with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in a campaign to outlaw alcoholic beverages, regarded by many women of the time as the chief culprit behind domestic violence. A series of contentious letters on this subject between Gage and Susan B. Anthony has been preserved, and forms the basis of a theatrical piece titled Brimstone, Booze and the Ballot that will be performed at the Rosendale Theatre on Friday, March 22. Sally Roesch Wagner, executive director of the Gage Center in Fayetteville, will read Anthony’s letters, while Deborah Hughes, president and CEO of the Susan B. Anthony House in Rochester, will read Gage’s letters. For anyone who tends to lump all feminists together under one stereotype, this discussion should be quite an eye-opener.

The presentation of Brimstone, Booze and the Ballot will begin at 7:30 p.m. Following the performance, the audience will be invited to join in the dialogue. All tickets cost \$20.20, appropriately enough, and the funds raised will benefit the Susan B. Anthony House, the Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation and Votes for Women 2020. Know some young female person who takes her right to vote for granted and doesn’t think much about the sacrifices that were necessary to win her the franchise? Definitely bring her along to this event.

Brimstone, Booze and the Ballot: Susan B. Anthony vs. Matilda Joslyn Gage, a Dialogue, Friday, March 22, 7:30 p.m., \$20.20, Rosendale Theatre, 408 Main Street, Rosendale, (845) 658-8989, <http://votesforwomen.brownpapertickets.com>. For more information on Votes for Women 2020, log on to its website (www.votesforwomen2020.org) or its blog (www.votesforwomen2020.com).

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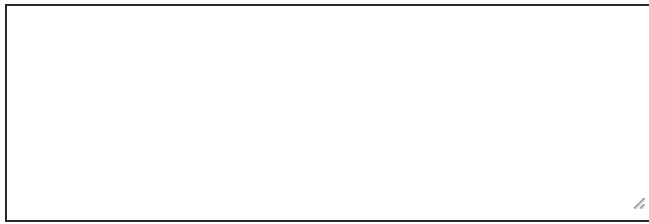
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