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Carrie Clinton Lane Chapman Catt

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About this Person
Born: February 09, 1859 in Ripon, Wisconsin, United States
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Full Text:
Catt, Carrie Clinton Lane Chapman (Jan. 9, 1859 - Mar. 9, 1947), feminist, internationalist, and leader of the woman suffrage movement, was born in Ripon, Wis., the second of three children and the only daughter of Lucius Lane, a farmer, and Maria (Clinton) Lane. In 1866 the family joined the westward migration to northern Iowa and settled near Charles City. There in the frontier atmosphere Carrie Lane grew to be a spirited, self-reliant, and intellectually precocious girl, ambitious, and quick to challenge any suggestion that her sex was a handicap to achievement.

After she graduated from the Charles City high school, she taught school for a year, before enrolling at Iowa State College (Ames) as a sophomore in 1877. The curriculum emphasized science courses, and she thus obtained a thorough acquaintance with the theories of Darwin and Spencer. The result was a belief in evolutionary progress through social change which served as a lifelong "working faith"--furnishing both an interpretation of history and a philosophy of action. She left Ames with the B.S. degree in November 1880 and read law for a year, hoping to attend law school. In October 1881 she accepted the principalship of the Mason City high school. She still hoped to study law, but success as principal won her the superintendency of the Mason City schools in 1883, a post necessarily, although reluctantly, surrendered two years later (Feb. 12, 1885) when she married Leo Chapman, owner and editor of the *Mason City Republican.* As assistant editor of her husband's newspaper, she attended the 1885 convention of the Iowa Suffrage Association, and was readily converted to the suffrage cause.

In August 1886 Leo Chapman, while in California for the purpose of buying a larger newspaper, contracted typhoid fever. He died before she could reach him. Stranded in San Francisco, she found work on a trade paper and saw at first hand the wretched exploitation of working women. A year later an emotional crisis precipitated by frustration and despair ended in a resolve to devote her life to the emancipation of women--a resolve from which she never thereafter deviated. Returning to Iowa, she became recording secretary of the Iowa Suffrage Association (meanwhile earning a precarious living as a lyceum lecturer) and discovered her talent for organizational work.

In 1890 Carrie Chapman went to Washington, D.C., as an Iowa delegate to the historic national convention that reunited, after twenty years of schism, the sundered halves of the suffrage movement as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Susan Anthony instantly sensed that the attractive young widow with the commanding platform presence, low-pitched voice of rare carrying power, and vigorous ideas was a valuable recruit, and engaged her to campaign in South Dakota for an approaching suffrage referendum. Before undertaking this task, however, Carrie Chapman married on June 10, 1890, a civil engineer, George William Catt, who had been a fellow student at Ames. Catt not only approved of his wife's dedication to reform but supported it by signing jointly with her a legally attested document providing that she would spend four months each year in suffrage work. They initially lived in Seattle, but left in 1892 for permanent residence in New York City, where Catt became president of a marine construction firm. The partnership whereby he earned the living for both while she did the reforming for both was a source of practical and psychological support to Carrie Chapman Catt throughout her husband's life. At his death in 1905, he left her financially independent, able to devote the rest of her life to the woman suffrage movement.

From 1890 to 1895 Carrie Chapman Catt participated in a series of state suffrage referenda and congressional hearings on the federal suffrage amendment, under the tutelage of Susan Anthony. As she rose to leadership, she studied the social, economic, and political forces arrayed against woman suffrage, and also sharply analyzed the flaws in the reformers' efforts. It was a period of quickening political concerns among women, with the temperance and woman's club movements pressing for increased social consciousness and insurgent political parties drawing heavily on the moral energies of women. Yet the single-goaled woman suffrage movement, with aging leaders and meager resources, remained on the fringe, safely ignored by the major political parties. At Catt's

suggestion, a national organization committee was set up in 1895 to intensify efforts to mobilize widespread latent support for woman suffrage. As chairman, she was director of operations, training and sending out organizers to establish new auxiliaries and galvanize old ones, raising funds, establishing administrative procedures, preparing carefully detailed plans of political work for auxiliaries, and attempting, against internal resistance, to coordinate the activities of state and local auxiliaries. In these years her extraordinary gift for executive leadership was coaxed forth and developed. When Susan Anthony, in her eightieth year, retired from the presidency in 1900, she chose Carrie Chapman Catt as her successor.

During the four years of her presidency, Carrie Chapman Catt worked vigorously to shift NAWSA emphasis from propaganda to political action. "The time has come to cease talking to women," she insisted, "and invade town meetings and caucuses. . . ." In the annual conventions she encouraged interest in political action by workshops in organizational and political techniques, and engaged convention speakers on electoral and government reforms such as the direct primary, the initiative and referendum and civil service reform in place of the traditional recitals of feminist grievances. Swinging the organization into the orbit of the progressive movement, she won allies among liberal and "social justice" reformers of both sexes and attracted many outstanding women, including Florence Kelley and Jane Addams, into active suffrage work. When she felt impelled to withdraw from the presidency in 1904 because of her husband's ill health, she left to her successor, Anna Howard Shaw, a thriving nationwide organization.

After her husband's death in October 1905, Catt divided her energies between suffrage activities in New York and international feminism. In New York City, beginning in 1908, she and a group of suffragists organized the New York Woman Suffrage Party--the name emphasizing its political character--on the basis of precincts, wards, and districts, consolidating the ward and district captains in the Interurban Suffrage Council. In 1913 the council served as the nucleus of the Empire State Campaign Committee, led by Catt, which conducted the brilliant though unsuccessful referendum campaign in 1915. Two years later an intensified effort by the same disciplined organization was successful in enfranchising the women of New York state, a decisive victory in the long struggle.

Catt's efforts in behalf of international feminism were a logical extension of her belief that evolutionary progress in Western society had made the eventual emancipation of women inevitable. Beginning in 1902, she had encouraged a sharper focus on woman suffrage among the affiliates of the International Council of Women, preparing the way for the establishment of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance at the Berlin Congress in 1904. Elected president, Catt was the acknowledged leader and chief fund raiser of the IWSA until 1923, presiding over congresses in Copenhagen (1906), London (1908), Amsterdam (1909), Stockholm (1911), and Budapest (1913). Accompanied by the Dutch feminist Dr. Aletta Jacobs, she toured the world (1911-1913), organizing feminists in several Asian and African countries, and increasing the affiliates of IWSA from nine to thirty-two. The outbreak of war in 1914 was a severe blow to international feminism. In January 1915, Catt joined Jane Addams in organizing 400 representatives of American women's organizations in a Woman's Peace Party to ally with a similar coalition of European feminists. This group pressed for mediation to end the war through a conference of neutrals, but circumstances proved intractable. Catt's global evangelism was rounded out in 1922-1923 by an organizing trip to South American countries, where women were not yet enfranchised.

When Carrie Chapman Catt yielded to demands that she return to the national presidency in December 1915, she faced a bleak situation. The organization was challenged on the one hand by the dynamic Midwestern suffrage organizations riding the progressive wave, and on the other by an ardently militant group led by Alice Paul, whom Shaw had named chairman of NAWSA's Congressional Committee in 1912, charged with lobbying for the federal woman's suffrage amendment. Paul played a dual role as chairman of the Congressional Committee, bound by NAWSA policies, and as the imaginative and charismatic leader of her personal followers in the Congressional Union, dedicated to promoting the federal amendment and holding the party in power, i.e., the Democrats, "accountable" for failure to pass it. Catt led the opposition to Paul's demand that all other efforts be abandoned in order to concentrate on the federal amendment. The delegates to the 1914 convention formally repudiated Paul's approach as politically unrealistic, because it flouted the support of friendly Democratic congressmen and was unacceptable to the southern auxiliaries with their insistence on suffrage by state action. This forced Paul and her followers to withdraw from NAWSA and thereafter go their own way as the National Woman's Party.

In 1916 with a board of her own choosing, Carrie Chapman Catt developed a comprehensive but flexible program: intensified lobbying pressure on Congress for passage of the federal amendment; pressure for state constitutional referenda in promising situations; pressure for action by state legislatures to grant women the right to vote for presidential electors, as in Illinois in 1913, the breakthrough that had turned the tide in the suffrage struggle; and pressure for the right to vote in primaries. The 1916 elections were approaching and both parties gave indications that women suffrage was an issue they could no longer evade. Party platforms carried suffrage planks, although not wholly satisfactory ones. Catt summoned delegates to a convention in September and invited the presidential candidates to speak. President Wilson accepted and made a notable speech. Catt later dated his "conversion" from this occasion, though it was nearly two years before his commitment to the federal amendment was unqualified. After the convention, Catt divulged the outline of her "Winning Plan" to the board and presidents of state auxiliaries. She had prepared a special task for each state. While the details were kept secret, the tactic was to force their opponents to fight on all fronts at once.

United States entry into the war in 1917 caused a partial suspension of plans, but Catt insisted that women must take part in war work as well as continue to fight for suffrage, which would assure their right to play a role in achieving a lasting peace. She herself set the example by continuing her suffrage work, while serving on the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense. Her judgment and tact, enhanced by the realization of the part women voters had played in his reelection and reinforced by the string of suffrage victories in 1917 and 1918, including the spectacular New York victory, won Wilson's commitment to the suffrage amendment. In the meantime the suffrage cause had received an unexpected boon in 1914 when Carrie Chapman Catt was named chief legatee of Miriam Florence Folline Leslie's publishing fortune amounting to $2 million, with the stipulation that the money be expended to promote woman suffrage. Litigation by dissatisfied heirs and other claimants and legal fees cut the amount in half, but nearly $1 million became available to suffrage workers in 1917 and was spent in a nationwide educational and publicity campaign, creating the momentum that carried the movement to victory. The federal amendment passed the House of Representatives on Jan. 10, 1918, but did not finally pass the Senate until June 4, 1919. Fourteen additional months were consumed before ratification by the legislature of Tennessee, the thirty-sixth state, with one vote to spare, on Aug. 18, 1920. It was proclaimed part of the Constitution on August 26. Carrie Chapman Catt stands alongside Susan B. Anthony as one of the two great women whose lifework it was.

At the 1919 NAWSA Convention, Catt called for the women in the enfranchised states to organize a league of women voters to "finish the fight" and prepare women to play a political role. A year later the national League of Women Voters (LWV) was established, with officers drawn from the younger generation of suffragists. Catt exercised a strong and constructive influence on the league during its early years and always maintained friendly ties, although she did not conceal her disappointment that integrating women voters in a resistant political order proved too massive a task for rapid accomplishment. Soon after her death in 1947, a group of league members established the Carrie Chapman Catt Memorial Fund (now the Overseas Education Fund) to accelerate political participation among newly enfranchised women in foreign countries.

In 1921, with women suffrage a fact and the League of Women Voters established to promote women's political socialization, Mrs. Catt turned her talents to writing and speaking on behalf of the League of Nations. Dismayed by the Senate's rejection of the league, she made a dramatic appeal to the 1921 LWV Convention to organize the sentiment for peace existing among women and enlarge public understanding of the necessity for international cooperation to prevent war. Seizing the initiative, she invited leaders of national women's organizations to join her in calling upon women to use their political power to put an end to war and to bring the issue of peace out of the realm of "cloudy idealism" into the forum for study and discussion of war's causes and possible cures. Leaders of nine organizations signed the call to the first Conference on the Cause and Cure of War, which met in Washington, D.C., in 1925, and annually thereafter until 1939. Catt remained chairman of the Conference Committee until 1933.

After her husband's death, Carrie Chapman Catt shared her home with her close friend, Mary G. Hay, first in New York City, then on a farm near Ossining, N.Y. In 1928, shortly before Hay's death, they moved to a spacious house with gardens in New Rochelle, N.Y. A feminist to the end, Catt's last major project was the Women's Centennial Exposition, 1840-1940, held in New York in 1940, honoring distinguished women in a hundred professions not open to women in 1840. Seven years later she died of a heart attack at her home in her eighty-eighth year and was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in New York City.

The most widely admired woman of her generation, Catt possessed throughout her life a distinction of person and manner, and also a certain aloofness suitable for "relations on a grand scale." The prototype of the professional career woman, she successfully integrated her private and public lives by the strength of her adaptive intelligence and resolute will. She was the recipient of many honors and awards, including a citation of honor from President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1936); the Cross of Merit of the Order of the White Rose (Finland, 1939); the Medal of the National Institute of Social Sciences (1940); and the National Achievement Award sponsored by Chi Omega (1941).

FURTHER READINGS

[The Carrie Chapman Catt Papers in the Manuscript Div., Lib. of Congress, is an extensive collection of correspondence, speeches, articles, diaries of world travels, and memoranda. Related manuscript materials in the Lib. of Congress include the papers of the Nat. Am. Woman Suffrage Assoc., the Leslie Commission, and the League of Women Voters. Also useful are the Blackwell Papers. Additional Catt correspondence is in the Schlesinger Lib., Radcliffe College, the Sophia Smith Collect., Smith College, and the New York Public Lib.

Also of value is Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie S. Shuler, *Woman Suffrage and Politics* (1923). Her faith in evolutionary progress is discussed in "Why I Have Found Life Worth Living," *Christian Century,* Mar. 1928, and "Evolution--Fifty Years Later," *Woman Citizen,* July 11, 1925. Valuable for her criticism of isolationist foreign policy during the 1920's are her editorials in successive issues of the *Woman Citizen,* 1920-1927. See also "A Suffrage Team," *Woman Citizen,* Sept. 8, 1923.

The only biography of Carrie Chapman Catt is Mary Gray Peck, *Carrie Chapman Catt* (1944), an intimate and detailed portrayal by a devoted associate, with illustrations. Also helpful are Maud Wood Park, *Front Door Lobby* (1957); Lola C. Walker, "The Speeches and Speaking of Carrie Chapman Catt" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern Univ., 1950); Rose Young, *The Leslie Commission: 1917-1929* (1929); Louise Degen, *History of the Woman's Peace Party* (1947); Elizabeth Cady Stanton et al., *History of Woman Suffrage,* vols IV-VI (1902-1922). The best interpretive treatment of Carrie Chapman Catt is Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the U.S.* (1959); *N.Y. Times* obituary, Jan. 10, 1947.

Carrie Chapman Catt's feminist library (900 volumes) is deposited in the Rare Book Div., Lib. of Congress; her "Peace and War" collection (600 volumes) is in the library of her alma mater, Iowa State Univ., along with a collection of memorabilia.]

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