

ASKS MUNICIPAL SUFFRAGE

Mrs. Abigail Scott Duniway's Appeal to the Charter Commission.

The Portland Charter Commission gave a hearing on municipal suffrage for women on the evening of January 26, by invitation of Chairman McGinn, to Mrs. Abigail Scott Duniway, who said in part:

In grateful acknowledgement of the courtesy you have extended to me to-night, and on behalf of the many present, prospective business and tax-paying and home-building women of our rapidly growing metropolis. I wish, first of all, to impress you with the fact that we come before you in the spirit of fair dealing, amity and friendly association. I myself had spent the greater part of a quarter century in mothering men before the public had heard from me at all. And, although, since my children have long been useful and honored citizens of the Union, residing in homes of their own, I have become the recipient of fame and honor far beyond my early anticipations, I am proud to tell you that there is no other part of my long and strenuous life upon which I look backward with the extreme satisfaction that crowns the memory of those busy years when, "With little children clinging to my gown," I was one of the faithful, old-fashioned mothers who "Trod the old kitchen floor."

But the world for working women has changed front since then. The manufacture of food and clothing, which formerly occupied the time of working women within the home, has been transferred to the restaurant, the store, the hotel, the office, the lodging-house, the creamery, the laundry and the factory. Women who are so situated that they must work or starve, whose financial and physical necessities are equal to men's, and their moral obligations to others dependent upon them often greater, have been compelled to follow the work that modern enterprise has taken away from the home, in quest of the gainful occupations they are compelled to pursue if they are to have any homes at all to keep.

I admire the power and enterprise of men. I admire their pretty theories about women, whom they call "clinging vines"; and their own assumption that they are "sturdy oaks" makes pretty reading and only lacks the application of truth to make them universally irresistible. We all know that the average man (present company of course excepted) is not a "sturdy oak," nor is the average woman a "clinging vine." If this honorable body really believes that women, as a class, are "supported" by men, let them consider the numerous rooming-houses, boarding-houses, apartment-houses and little hotels, kept by women, whose husbands stand at the receipt of customs; or, if the wife demands her right to take over that part of the business herself (as these unreasonable creatures called women sometimes do), look at the divorce docket and study, as I have so often been compelled to do when, in their helplessness, deserted women have appealed to me for advice and assistance.

Then, let them follow the crowds of women on almost any week-day morning going to their work. Note the clerks, stenographers, day laborers, sewing-machine operators, typewriters, laundresses, house cleaners, none of whom are adequately supported within the home, not to mention the professional women, such as teachers, doctors, etcetera, whose livelihood depends upon their own efforts, and you cannot help but see that the list of women who contribute to the support of the home on the outside is much larger than the sheltered classes, including the few whose husbands or themselves have inherited fortunes, manipulated franchises, wrecked banks, conducted speculations successfully, or maneuvered skillfully to outwit the law.

If I do not appeal for the few women who pay taxes upon inherited property to any considerable amount, it is because they are able to speak for themselves; and when the shoe of the law pinches them, they will, like Mrs. Russell Sage, Mrs. Clarence McKay and other millionaire legatees of New York, begin to make protests on their own account.

I am not coming before you with any tentative proposition. But I do ask, in all seriousness, that you do not barter away the women's franchise as men bartered away other franchises against which they now struggle in vain.

All we ask is that you incorporate in the new charter a provision extending the privileges of the elective franchise to taxpaying women. You need not be afraid of us. We will do you good, and not evil. See what we are doing, or trying to do through the Women's Clubs, all along the line. Most women are, as yet, too timid to make protest before you on their own account. They fear men more than I do, because they, as yet are too young to have raised boys to manhood on their own account. But they are alive to the situation, as you will discover when you invite them into their rightful heritage, for which they expectantly wait. I know that lawyers, especially those educated in archaic universities, such as abound in archaic states, will say our demand for municipal enfranchisement for taxpaying women by charter is "unconstitutional." But I have often noticed that lawyers and judges can find ways to stretch the constitution, throw planks across it or tunnel through it, if they or their clients so desire. I might cite many decisions of the courts to illustrate this point if I had the time.

In the masterly argument made at the People's Forum recently, your honor said (alluding to Judge McGinn), and the speech was applauded to the echo, that "nothing was more ridiculous than attempts to compel the people of today to live under the rigid restrictions imposed upon them by men long since dead, who, by the very nature of our changed conditions, could not have foreseen our Twentieth Century necessities." And this frank admission of facts, as applied to men, is doubly true of women who are denied to this day all the rights as to citizenship which dead men bestowed upon you before you were born.

The tax-paying, business-managing home-making women of industrial Portland are not asking you to insert a patch in your constitution. All we ask is that you open the way for women to go around it, or as you do when you so desire, to bridge, or tunnel through it. In so doing you will deal by women exactly as you know we should do by our husbands, fathers or sons under like conditions.

I have here a summary of precedents to which I wish to call your attention. Passing over school suffrage, which men have accorded to women in the majority of the States of the Union without the formality of a constitutional amendment—states in which Oregon is a notable example—and omitting mention of the many governments of the Old World where municipal suffrage prevails, please note that this form of suffrage is now enjoyed by the women of Kansas, Louisiana and many towns and cities of New York and was granted to them without any change in their state constitutions. That the women of the four states directly to the east of us are enjoying full suffrage is another story, not germane to this contention.

I have, myself, voted, in company with other tax-paying women of Portland, upon bonds for bridge building, and you all know that the constitutionality of that vote has never been called in question. Yet it is exactly in line with municipal suffrage for which we ask a place in the new charter. Your honor (addressing the chair), informs us at the Forum that "everybody" might have a vote for or against the new charter. But when you were asked if "everybody" included women, the blush that overspread your features did credit to your manhood when you shook your head and answered "No."

We are employing you, men and brethren, to insert for taxpaying women a municipal suffrage plank in the new charter, to maintain which the tax gatherer will never miss us. We know you can do it if you will, and you know you ought to do it if you don't.