

Hitch a ride on the women's suffrage wagon

90 years ago the movement was active on LI. There's still more ground to gain

BY MARGUERITE KEARNS

Women today are extremely involved in the political process. But we still don't hold half the elected leadership positions in New York State. We're still fighting many of the same battles as in years past, even if there are isolated examples of women who have risen to the top. There's an adage about a woman's work never being done. In the political arena, this boils down to rolling up our sleeves to elect more women to public office.

We aren't the first generation of women to take our responsibility seriously. Many of our grandmothers, great grandmothers and great-great grandmothers believed that if we were going to turn things around, here and around the globe, it would take concentrated effort: personal and political power, more women in leadership roles, and full equality not only between men and women, but among all people.

A Women's History Month exhibit at the New York State Museum in Albany, "Women

Who Rocked the Vote," connects the past with the present for me. The exhibit, which will be up until the end of April, features some lesser-known New York women who worked behind the scenes and carried out the hard work of winning the vote for women.

Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Carrie Chapman Catt, Harriet May Mills and others were the well-known leaders in the women's rights movement. But they relied on a strong network of organizers and activists in communities across New York State and around the nation.

My grandmother was one of these grassroots organizers. She lived in Rockville Centre. For many years, she devoted herself exclusively to the cause of Votes for Women. In 1913, Edna Buckman Kearns hitched a horse to a wagon — which is in the museum exhibit



NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM ARCHIVE

Edna Kearns and her suffrage wagon, on display in Albany



— and, dressed in colonial clothing, she drove from town to town on Long Island to give speeches about the importance of women voting. She drove the wagon to the Mineola Fair each year to keep the issue alive.

She called the wagon the "Spirit of 1776," and this freedom theme attracted attention from newspapers, people on the street and, ultimately, the men who agreed with her and voted for women's suffrage in New

York in 1917.

Voting is taken for granted by women today, but for the decade my grandmother dedicated herself to the state and national suffrage campaigns, the outcome couldn't be predicted. Edna edited suffrage news for the Brooklyn Eagle. She collected petitions and recruited women to participate in

huge New York City parades that contained men's divisions.

As a member of the Woman's Party, Edna picketed the White House in support of a constitutional amendment. She gave numerous speeches on suffrage to organizations on Long Island and turned her Rockville Centre home over to an endless number of meetings, receptions and fundraisers. Activists like my grandmother worked from dawn until dusk, until all American women were finally able to vote in 1920.

Though Edna died in 1934, many years before I was born, I realize the many ways in

which I have inherited her awareness of the importance of women taking pivotal leadership roles in social change movements on the local, state, national and international levels. Edna's suffrage wagon and other suffrage memorabilia in the exhibit symbolize the hard work of yesteryear — how far we've come in the 90 years since all American women won the vote through a constitutional amendment in 1920, and how far we still have to go.

Women throughout the world today carry a disproportionately heavy burden of poverty, malnutrition, and lack of access to education and political power. Yet despite these limitations, in nations large and small, women are meeting the challenges and participating, like never before, in the political process. We can all assume the same determination and commitment as when Edna Kearns first drove the "Spirit of 1776" wagon out onto the streets of Long Island and New York City to make visible her vision of a just world.



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