

Voting Right: 86 years Ago, A New Ashford Woman Made History

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NEW ASHFORD - Forecasts threatened overcast skies and possible snow for Berkshire County on Nov. 2, 1920, as Phoebe Jordan marched down from her farm on Brodie Mountain and quietly made national history.

She approached the schoolhouse in a pre-dawn darkness broken only by lanterns dangling from the work-worn fingers of her neighbors. According to reports, 34 of 36 registered voters in town had postponed the morning milking to mark their ballots.

The early morning effort was not only a duty to the nation, but a fulfillment of town legend. New Ashford votes were the first in the country to be counted in the last presidential election. In 1916, it had been a point of pride for the men. In 1920, however, the 19th Amendment - ratified 86 years ago this month - allowed women to share in the honor and Jordan was first in line.

The first woman to vote in a presidential election was a mysterious figure according to 91-year-old Cecile Love. Love was just 5 years old when Jordan first contributed to the ballot box, but Love said she still remembers the sturdy woman who always wore a hat.

"She was never married," said Love, dusting off fragments of town gossip. "But she had two men living with her."

Local historian Edward LeFebvre, 81, did not know Jordan personally, but collected newspaper clippings of her achievements in suffrage over the years.

"I think if she was a woman in the big city, she would have been one of the people involved in the movement," said LeFebvre, flipping through photographs of Jordan at the polls, "She had a one-track mind."

Love, however, said she disagreed. "I think she was just a nice, independent lady."

Love and LeFebvre described life in New Ashford in the early 20th century. The community was tied together by women who were strong, but who had few choices.

"I think all the men I knew thought that women should be pregnant," said Love.

Love's family owned a farm on what is now Route 7. She grew up without electricity, indoor plumbing or, for the most part, money.

"We never bought anything," said Love, "What we had, we raised it. When I was first married, we only had \$19."

Love's father churned butter and brought it via horse and buggy to sell to Williams College professors. When he returned, sometimes he brought candy for his children. The rest of the money bought fuel for kerosene lamps.

"When I dream of those days, it's always very dark," said Love.

Though Love's family rarely left New Ashford, she said you never talked about being bored.

"If I had said I was bored, my father would have just said, 'Well, go milk the cows,'" said Love.

Eagle scoop

Sources of town entertainment included weekly games of whist and occasional square dances. In the 1936 presidential election, an article printed in Time Magazine said The Berkshire Eagle held a turkey supper and square dance for New Ashfordites to squeeze the secret on how the town would vote. At that time, New Ashford's expedient voting was national news and NBC was vying to scoop The Eagle on the story. The Eagle got it in the end, however. Not only did the townspeople spill the secret at the square dance, but an Eagle reporter slept all night in New Ashford's filling station, next to the town's only phone, to make sure no other news sources called sniffing for a lead.

"The story was kept under cover till 15 hours before the opening of the polls, then 'broken' in The Eagle," said the Time article, which concluded, "Featured voter: Miss Phoebe Jordan who announced that she was switching from the GOP to plump for Roosevelt."

(Once first in the nation, New Ashford's luster has paled: In 2000, none of the 202 registered voters turned out.)

The tone of the news clips released Election Day in the North Adams Transcript 16 years earlier, however, was a bit more patronizing.

"Contrary to the fears expressed by many that the women would cause disorder and extensive confusion at the polling places ... the women caused almost no trouble," wrote one reporter. "In not a few cases where man and wife appeared together ... the weaker half of the family had finished ... first."

A political cartoon displayed a few pages beyond the article showed an embarrassed-looking young man walking by a group of women chatting about voting in the election. The caption indicates that the young man is embarrassed because he is three months short of being old enough to vote - yet the women can. The cartoon title: "Life's Darkest Moment."

Listed in paper

Jordan's name was listed that day in the paper along with 11 other women and 22 men as being the first citizens to vote in the election between Republican Warren G. Harding and Democrat James M. Cox. New Ashford and the nation voted Harding into office.

"She was a hard worker," said Love, giving the last of the few details that remain of the farmer of Brodie Mountain. Jordan's name is not in history textbooks, but it is on a small plaque on the chipped, white schoolhouse in the center of town. Her name is spelled wrong: It says "Phobe."

Looking through the rippled windowpanes, the space is only large enough for a few desks and a small chalkboard, for a ballot box and a few women who stood in front, while a line of men waited behind them one day on a snow-scented November morning.

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