

A Different Perspective

Historian Reveals the Other Side of Susan B. Anthony

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By Ryan Hutton, North Adams Transcript

ADAMS — Many people may think they know Susan B. Anthony, the town's most famous daughter. Champion of women's rights. Suffragist. Lecturer. But a fashion icon? Paparazzi target? Victim of stage fright?

Suzanne Schnittman said Anthony was all that and more.

Mixing humorous stories and trivia with Anthony's own writings, Schnittman painted a very different picture Sunday at the Adams Free Library of the woman who always looks so severe in her pictures. Her lecture, "What you may not know about Adam's most distinguished ancestor," was hosted by the Adams Historical Society in the library's Memorial Hall. A second talk about Anthony and equality is scheduled Tuesday at 7 p.m. in Griffin Hall at Williams College in Williamstown.

"The more you can make someone a person, the easier she is to understand and the more lovable she becomes," said Schnittman, a former American history professor at State University of New York. "If she's Adams' most famous daughter, you want her to be the favorite daughter, too."

Schnittman said one of the overlooked "fun facts" about Anthony was her fashion prowess. Anthony always made sure she was properly dressed and never ventured out in casual wear.

Schnittman said although she was a staunch feminist, Anthony was very much in favor of preserving the femininity of women, going so far as resisting the popularity of "bloomers." One of Anthony's trademarks was a finely woven red shawl she always wore while lecturing. That way, the public and the press had something with which to associate her, Schnittman said.

"Once when she was in New York to speak, she had a white shawl on instead of her red one," she said. "She was asked to go get the red one so she would look more like herself for the crowd."

Schnittman said the attention Anthony got from the public and the press was not always welcome. Anthony had reporters following her everywhere she went who often heaped criticism on her for speaking about children and marriage when she was childless and single. She said Anthony's reputation for disliking children was unfair and unfounded because she once wrote that having a child was the most important thing one can do.

"Susan gets a lot of bad press for being anti-child and anti-pregnant women," Schnittman said. "But she once wrote 'to be a mother or a father is the highest wish of any human being.'"

She said part of the reason so much attention was paid to Anthony was because she was a curiosity, a woman speaking out on an incendiary issue.

"Most people in our day go to a movie or a hockey game for enjoyment. But back then people went to lectures," Schnittman said. "Half of the people went out of curiosity because back then, seeing a woman lecture was like us going to see a 5-year-old lecture."

Schnittman also said that although Anthony was a strong, stubborn, outspoken woman who had lectured hundreds of times all over the country, she always suffered from a bad case of stage fright. She said Anthony sometimes had to grip the podium hard to restrain herself from getting too nervous. Schnittman read a passage Anthony wrote in 1878: "It always requires a painful effort to face an audience. I have never felt at perfect ease on a platform."

After her lecture, Schnittman fielded a handful of questions from the audience. They ranged from Anthony's political and religious affiliations to her handling of insults and heckling to what she would be like in today's political arena. She said she hoped that people took away from the lecture a new view on Anthony that was bigger than her participation in women's suffrage.

"Susan B. Anthony defended women and their children at every stage of life and for every struggle that they might encounter," she said. "Her focus was the vote, but her passion was women's lives."

Anthony was born in Adams in 1820 and her family's home still stands on East Road. The home was purchased at auction last August by Carol Crossed, a member of the board of directors for Feminist For Life (FFL) of New York, which will run the home. Schnittman is a former president of FFL and her son is married to Crossed's daughter. Crossed was in attendance at Sunday's lecture and said Schnittman was the perfect person to speak on Anthony.

"Suzanne is the most like Susan B. Anthony of anyone I know," she said. "She's driven, she's committed to women's issues so I feel like its a real treat for Adams to have her speak."

Both women have high hopes for Anthony's birthplace. Some of the ideas FFL is kicking around include a museum, a women's retreat and a home for pregnant students. Schnittman said she wishes the town and the organization luck in picking a use for the house that Anthony would have believed in.

"A house is more than just boards and brick," she said. "A house can breathe the beliefs of a person who called it home."

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