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Spellecy and Anthony: Abortion debate fits with Wyoming's women's suffrage history

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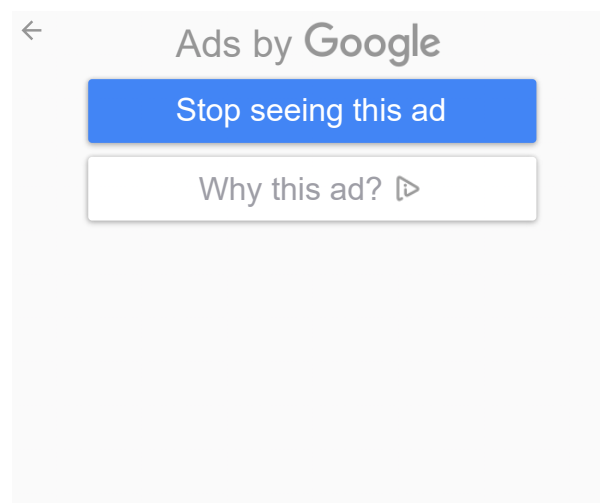


Colleen Kelly Spellecy

Wyoming's recent legislative ruling was not the first time in our nation's history that laws were discussed and decided about abortion medications being sent through the mail.

In 1868, Susan B. Anthony's newspaper, *The Revolution*, forbade advertisements for what the paper's policy called "quack or immoral medicines." As many as 20 subsequent editorials condemned drugs that caused abortion, calling the practice a "social evil," and "the murder of children, either before or after birth."

Suffragists may not have been surprised that in today's conflict, Wyoming is the first state to make mail-order abortions illegal in 2023. It was also the first state to grant women's suffrage. A full half century before the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave all women of the U.S. the right to vote, Wyoming's territorial legislature delivered equal suffrage to Wyoming women, who one legislator called their "better half."



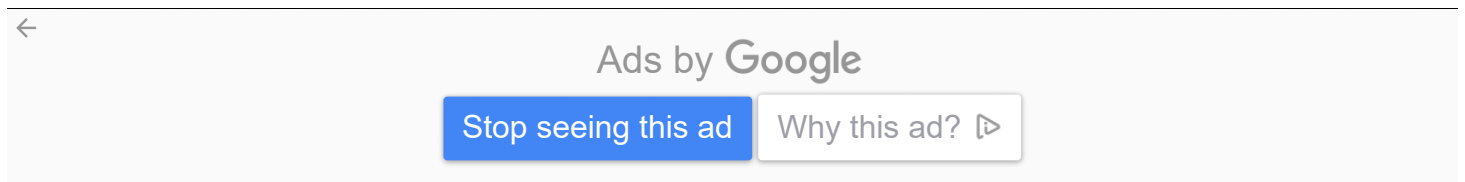
Whether women were too busy homesteading or repairing stagecoaches, there was little fanfare and few accounts of suffrage protests, either for or against. In fact, even before the Wyoming Women's Suffrage Act, these rugged frontier women maintained progressive measures like guaranteeing teachers equal pay as men and the right to own property, as well as guardianship over their minor children when widowed. They set the trail for other states.

Secretary of the Territory Edward M. Lee believed that they were "... placing the youngest territory on Earth in the vanguard of civilization and progress." Another legislator commented that Wyoming women were "... the more virtuous and intelligent half of its citizenship."

Although the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870 only granted Black males and formerly enslaved men the right to vote, Wyoming's progressive Suffrage Act extended the vote to Black women, as well. Justice Kingman, who was a member of Wyoming's first Supreme Court, shocked the rest of the prejudiced world when he recalled a group of African American women voting in the 1870 Cheyenne election.

Susan B. Anthony, who maintained that she was not just for women's rights, but for human rights, was so elated with the Wyoming's Suffrage Act that she called Wyoming the "land of the free."

At every turn, when Wyoming experienced a possible setback to women's enfranchisement, the Wyoming leadership fought for suffrage as a fundamental right and never lost it. During the 1871 Wyoming legislative session, there was a push to repeal the Women's Suffrage Act. The concept and the effect of the law had been good, but the political parties held different views. The final vote was along party lines, with Democrats pushing for the repeal of suffrage. However, Republican Gov. John Campbell vetoed any repeal of suffrage.

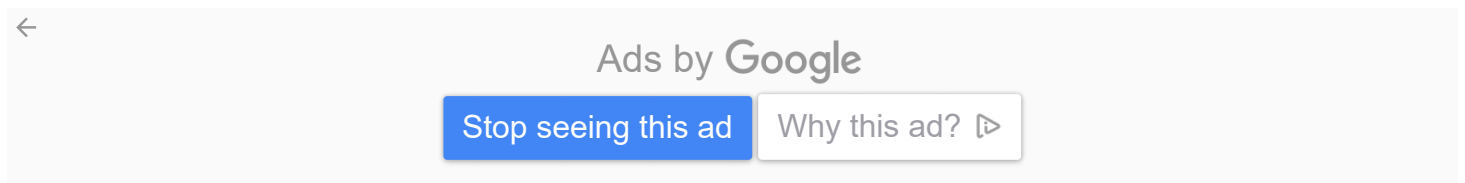


Wyoming's inclusiveness, its effort to value equally human rights, was a threat to the rest of the country. When the time came for Wyoming to consider statehood (1889-90), Congress threatened to keep Wyoming out of the Union if it didn't rescind the Suffrage Act. Susan B. Anthony recorded that Wyoming held fast to the Suffrage Act, and even said they would not join the Union without it.

Meanwhile, in 1868, Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, another giant of the suffrage cause, formed the official publication of the National Woman Suffrage Association called *The Revolution*. It gave voice to suffrage leaders airing their own unique perspective related to women's rights and other progressive concerns.

Their newspaper, despite rendering it financially strapped, refused to run lucrative ads that promoted “ante-natal murder.” The paper even exposed and took to task manufacturers and other major newspapers of the day, such as the New York Herald and Sunday Mercury, and even some religious publications, that were gaining great profit by advertising nefarious medicines. The Revolution charged them responsible for “destroying the national health and life, beginning with the embryo and ending at whatever age death closes the scene ...”

So it was no surprise when, in 1869, a New York bill was reported to support The Revolution policy. A strongly worded statement congratulated the bill for supporting the prohibition of advertisements for “patent or quack medicines or abominations.” The intent of the legislation nearly mimicked the newspaper’s own verbiage. In the 19th century, “quack” referred to practices that violated the real purpose of medicine, which is to heal. The Revolution decried that women “were forgetting that motherhood is their highest and holiest mission ...”



One can only guess what suffrage sentiment would be when, more than 150 years later, Wyoming became yet another first. Its Legislature enacted the Life is a Human Right Act, a law that seeks to protect unborn life, and ensure maternal health and safety.

In considering the Wyoming Legislature from its earliest beginning, it has voiced the will of the people regarding suffrage, and even in later years, when it was challenged. The Wyoming Legislature rebuked any attempt to disregard or undermine their suffrage victory, a victory that encapsulated feminine strength and virtue, creating a greater “civilizing influence” on the rest of the world.

It remains to be seen if this strong and virtuous state will be allowed to retain suffrage standards opposing medications that harm, rather than heal.

Colleen Kelly Spellecy and **Eric Anthony** are board members for The Susan B. Anthony Birthplace Museum in Adams, Massachusetts. Anthony is a family descendant of the historic suffragist.