

Honoring the Suffragists: Reprinted from the LWV VA Voter, 8/2004

Remember How Women Got the Vote?

By humbled and voting

The women were innocent and defenseless. And by the end of the night, they were barely alive. Forty prison guards wielding clubs and their warden's blessing went on a rampage against the 33 helpless women wrongly convicted of "obstructing sidewalk traffic."

They beat Lucy Burn, chained her hands to the cell bars above her head and left her hanging for the night, bleeding and gasping for air. They hurled Dora Lewis into a dark cell, smashed her head against an iron bed and knocked her out cold. Her cellmate, Alice Cosu, thought Lewis was dead and suffered a heart attack. Additional affidavits describe the guards grabbing, dragging, beating, choking, slamming, pinching, twisting and kicking the women.

Thus unfolded the "Night of Terror" on November 15, 1917, when the warden at the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia ordered his guards to teach a lesson to the suffragists imprisoned there because they dared to picket Woodrow Wilson's White House for the right to vote. For weeks, the women's only water came from an open pail. Their food—all of it colorless slop—was infested with worms. When one of the leaders, Alice Paul, embarked on a hunger strike, they tied her to a chair, forced a tube down her throat and poured liquid into her until she vomited. She was tortured like this for weeks until word was smuggled out to the press.

So, refresh my memory. Some women won't vote this year because—why, exactly? We have carpool duties? We have to get to work? Our vote doesn't matter? It's raining?

Last week, I went to a sparsely attended screening of HBO's new movie "**Iron Jawed Angels**." It is a graphic depiction of the battle these women waged so that I could pull the curtain at the polling booth and have my say. I am ashamed to say I needed the reminder. There was a time when I knew these women well. I met them in college—not in my required American history courses, which barely mentioned them, but in women's history class. That's where I found the irrepressibly brave Alice Paul. Her large, brooding eyes seemed fixed on my own as she stared out from the page. Remember, she silently beckoned . . .

I thought I always would. I registered voters throughout college and law school, worked on congressional and presidential campaigns until I started writing for newspapers. When Geraldine Ferraro ran for vice president, I took my 9-year-old son to meet her. "My knees are shaking," he whispered after shaking her hand. "I'm never going to wash this hand again."

All these years later, voter registration is still my passion. But the actual act of voting had become less personal for me, more rote. Frankly, voting often felt more like an obligation than a privilege. Sometimes, it was even inconvenient. My friend Wendy, who is my age and studied women's history, saw the HBO movie, too. When she stopped by my desk to talk about it, she looked angry. She was. With herself. "One thought kept coming back to me as I watched that movie," she said. "What would those women think of the way I use—or don't use—my right to vote? All of us take it for granted now, not just younger women, but those of us who did seek to learn." The right to vote, she said, had become valuable to her "all over again." HBO will run the movie periodically before releasing it on video and DVD.

I wish all history, social studies and government teachers would include the movie in their curriculum. I want it shown on Bunko night, too, and anywhere else women gather. I realize this isn't our usual idea of socializing, but we are not voting in the numbers that we should be, and I think a little shock therapy is in order. It is jarring to watch Woodrow Wilson and his cronies try to persuade a psychiatrist to declare Alice Paul insane so that she could be permanently institutionalized. And it is inspiring to watch the doctor refuse. Alice Paul was strong, he said, and brave. That didn't make her crazy.

The doctor admonished the men: "**Courage in women is often mistaken for insanity.**"

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