By Chris Enss

On September 6, 1870, 70-year-old housewife Louisa Ann Swain pinned a clean apron over her gray serge dress and marched down the dirt streets of Laramie, Wyoming, to cast the first vote for her sex in America. That momentous event was made possible by a number of women and men over the course of a 90-year period – starting with Abigail Adams. In March 1776, she implored her husband, John Adams, and other framers of the Constitution to “remember the ladies.”

Years before Mrs. Swain’s vote, the battle for women’s suffrage was officially being discussed in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, at the first women’s rights convention. It was a time when women were legally recognized as little more than chattel. Social activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the speakers at the convention, made a bold prediction: “The right [of suffrage] is ours. Have it we must. Use it we will. The pens, the tongues, the fortunes, the indomitable wills of many women are pledged to secure this right. The great truth that no just government can be formed without the consent of the governed, we shall echo and re-echo in the ears of the unjust judge, until by continual coming we shall weary him.”

Although the women in New York were organized and determined, no one could have foreseen that the greatest strides in the suffrage movement would not be realized east of the Hudson River, but west of the Mississippi. And before any progress could be made out west, women had to make that rugged journey over the plains to the new frontier.

Starting in the 1840s, and reaching a peak between 1846 and the end of the Civil War, the Oregon Trail served as a pathway for nearly half a million emigrants who set off to the West to form new communities and societies from their individual stakes as farmers, settlers, ranchers and miners. Most of the emigrants were men, but a few women tackled the overland journey bent on mining or homesteading on their own. Men could make the journey alone as drovers for the large wagon trains or with a plan to mine, strike it rich and return to their homes in the East.

Women traveled west as part of families and on their own to seek new opportunities. The experience of crossing the plains changed many of them – and helped demonstrate their grit, even as they held onto their identities as the protectors of family and morality. In their new homes, women took on public roles due to economic necessity and the needs of the community. They earned more authority, and, combined with their perceived moral directive, they began to influence politics individually and pragmatically.

Women found plenty of opportunities in the West that were not available in the East: everything from the right to vote to equal pay for women teachers to more liberal divorce laws. Wyoming Territory passed a series of such laws in 1869, partly in an effort to attract more white settlers. Thus, the West was the first home of women’s suffrage in the United States, with nearly every Western state or territory enfranchising women long before women won the right to vote in eastern states. Before the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote, was passed in 1920, almost every Western state had already given women statewide suffrage. Four Western states – Wyoming, Utah, Colorado and Idaho – had granted it before 1900.

The fight for women’s suffrage in the West wasn’t a new, separate movement, distinct from the efforts in the East. But the fight proceeded with a sense of inevitability in the newly
minted territories. The ideologies and reforming zeal that spread from the Great Awakening, from the fiery rhetoric of the abolitionist movement, to the emerging natural ally of the woman’s movement – the temperance movement – weren’t abandoned in the West. Those ideologies were tempered by circumstance and taken up by women who were part of the Cult of True Womanhood, but who had earned their reputation for grit on the Overland Trail and as part of the new frontier. The women who agitated for their rights were sure of their worth – and aware of their power in the new communities springing up around gold strikes and homestead stakes. And they used the tools at their disposal to influence the outcome. They knew that their power came from the fact that they were women, not in spite of it.

The fight for women’s suffrage across the country waged on. Between Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson and all those doughboys heading off to fight in World War I, women demanded to be seen as full citizens of the United States. Some historians refer to the years between 1890 and 1920 as the women’s era because it was in that time that women started to have greater economic and political opportunities. Women were also aided by legal changes like obtaining the right to own property, control their wages and make contracts and wills.

By 1900, almost 5 million women throughout the nation worked for wages, mainly in domestic service or light manufacturing such as the garment industry.

American women in every part of the country were active as reformers and those reform movements brought women into state and national politics before the dawn of the progressive era. Unfortunately, one of their greatest achievements, prohibition, was a detriment to the cause.

Women’s greatest influence came through their membership and leadership in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. The WCTU was founded in 1874 and by 1890 had 150,000 members, making it the largest female organization in the United States. Under the leadership of Frances Willard, the WCTU embraced a large reform agenda, including pushing for the right for women to vote. The feeling was that the best way to stop people from drinking was to pass local laws that made it harder to drink, and to do that it would be helpful if women could vote because American men were alcoholic scoundrels who darn well were not going to vote to get rid of beer. Consequently, men were reluctant to give women the right to vote for fear of losing the pleasure of drinking.

Access to alcoholic beverages wasn’t the only objection men had to denying women the right to vote. Opposition to wom-
Women register to vote in San Francisco in 1911 after California adopted women’s suffrage.

Women’s suffrage ran a wide gamut. There were those who believed that voting would damage women’s health and therefore was too harmful. There were some who believed that women would vote as their husbands did, arguing that women didn’t need to vote when they had a male protector to do it for them.

In 1895, Willard boldly declared, “A wider freedom is coming to the women of America. Too long has it been held that woman has no right to enter these movements … politics is the place for woman.”

The movement Willard referred to continued to spread in the West. Overland pioneers like Abigail Scott Duniway, who was one of the leaders of the suffrage movement in Oregon and Idaho, quickly became part of the movement to extend votes for women in the region. She organized many campaigns and protests until a bill was passed in 1896 that allowed women the right to vote in Idaho, and a year later, Duniway was the first woman to register to vote in Idaho. In addition to advocating for women’s rights in her own state, Duniway was instrumental in establishing Oregon’s Equal Suffrage Proclamation.

Women also protested to gain the right to vote in Colorado. Suffragists established the Colorado Non-Partisan Equal Suffrage Association and approached women’s organizations, churches, political parties and charity groups to gain allies for their cause. And after agitating nonstop from 1877 on, the Women’s Suffrage Referendum passed on November 7, 1893. The following year, Colorado became the first state to have elected female legislators.

Martha Hughes Cannon, the first woman elected to the Utah state senate – in 1896 – was a polygamist wife, a practicing physician and an astute and pioneering politician. Her husband was the Republican candidate. She, a Democrat, defeated him in that historic election.

And in 1916, four years before she would be legally allowed to vote in an election, Montana’s Jeannette Rankin was sent to Washington, D.C., as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Montana. Four years later, in 1920, Nellie Taloe Ross would be elected governor of Wyoming.

The passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment was a significant event in American history, and it’s also a recent event. When my grandmother was born, women could not vote in the United States.

The long fight for the female to vote ended with the ratification of the 19th Amendment on August 18, 1920. The suffrage wind had blown from west to east. The West had made it possible for the world to see what it meant for women to have the right to vote. It had been extremely persuasive in convincing other states and congress as to the value of women voting.

Women’s suffrage associations across the country congratulated one another on the victory and promised to continue the fight toward equal rights in other areas. On August 26, 1920, Carrie Chapman Catt, one of the movement’s key leaders, summed up the importance of the conquest best: “The vote is won. Seventy-two years the battle for this privilege has been waged, but human affairs with their eternal change move on without pause. Progress is calling to you to make no pause. Act!”
From left, three champions for women's equality: Quaker-born Susan B. Anthony (circa 1870), who campaigned for women's rights and served as president of the National Woman Suffrage Association from 1892-1900; Abigail Scott Duniway, a suffrage leader in the Pacific Northwest, shown signing Oregon’s Equal Suffrage Proclamation on November 30, 1912, while Governor Oswald West and Viola M. Coe look on.; and Dr. Cora Scott King of Seattle, Washington (circa 1913), an Advisory Council of the Congressional Union for Women Suffrage member and treasurer of the National Council of Women Voters.

In 1916, Arizona’s suffrage movement campaigned against Democratic President Woodrow Wilson, Arizona Senator Henry F. Ashurst and Arizona Congressman Carl Hayden. According to legend, the banner hung for three weeks before a Republican banker feared Democratic deputies would withdraw their funds from his bank.