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By Melissa Prycer
“Not Organizing for the Fun of It”

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Every now and then, historical forces collide in a way that, when looking back, make absolute sense. But for those living in the moment, it can be overwhelming and exhausting. In March 1918, Dallas women experienced two distinct, but connected triumphs: they opened a large canteen, serving all the soldiers passing through the city on their way to World War I battlefields. And they also won the right to vote in Texas primaries. Many women worked on both major causes. Though we can’t know exactly what Dallas women felt, it doesn’t take much historical imagination to feel their exhaustion and their joy during the events of March 1918.

By the 1910s, many middle class and upper class women in Dallas were involved in at least one organization or women’s club. Called clubwomen, these movers and shakers had launched successful campaigns to build a public library, create a public art museum, and construct playgrounds, among many other causes. These women also formed the nucleus for various suffrage groups. And of course, very few of these women were in just one club.

Although the battle in the United States for women’s suffrage began in the 1840s, the first organization for women’s suffrage didn’t form in Texas until 1893. On May 10, a group of interested parties gathered in Dallas to form the Texas Equal Rights Association. In an interview with The Dallas Morning News, organizer Rebecca Henry Hayes of Galveston said: “But seriously, when I thought of holding this convention and began to reach out over the state with letters, the answers were so favorable, I commenced to think we would not have opposition enough even for a fight, and that discouraged me, for I’m naturally combative.” When asked about the other women joining her, she replied, “Every one of them is a power in herself, cultured and talented and willing to give her time and means to the cause. We are not organizing for the fun of it. We
The fight for woman suffrage was part of a larger campaign for progressive reforms in the early 20th century, as indicated in this *Dallas Morning News* cartoon drawn by John Knott.
The well organized and successful campaign by women to gain the right to vote in state primaries convinced enough legislators, including Dallas representative Barry Miller, to vote in favor of the bill, which passed in March 1918.
are all women of middle age and know what we are about.” They welcomed men to their cause and noted that Texas was one of the last southern states to begin such an organization. The goal for the movement at the time was state suffrage, not a federal amendment. That fall, about 300 women attended a “congress” of women during the State Fair. Large conventions during the State Fair continued in 1894 and 1895, but by 1896, the Texas Equal Rights Association had ceased to function.

The Dallas Equal Suffrage Association formed in 1913, in time for its members to attend the first state suffrage convention in almost a decade. In just six weeks, almost 150 women joined. Requirements for membership were rather broad. In a November article, the Association invited “all women who are interested in the equal rights of the sexes . . . to join the association and become identified with the movement, whether they care to do active work in the movement or not.” Beyond membership, the Dallas suffragists made plans to host a booth throughout the entire run of the State Fair, under the auspices of the Texas State Suffrage Association. They determined to “make this a comfortable and inviting place for women visiting the exposition by furnishing it with a desk, chairs and attractive conveniences. Free literature regarding the ‘cause’ will be distributed every day, and souvenirs of the Dallas organization will be given away.” The focus was clearly on charm, not politics.

The Dallas suffragists also declared October 23 as Equal Suffrage Day at the Fair. More than 300 women gathered to hear speeches by Mrs. W. E. Spell of Waco, vice president of the Texas Equal Suffrage Association, as well as other suffragist leaders, including Miss Kate Gordon of New Orleans. Using the Fair as a prime opportunity both to reach potential new supporters as well as connect with suffragists throughout the state, their work continued in 1914 and 1915. In 1915, they used the coincidence of Equal Suffrage Day also being Traveling Man’s Day and vowed to get an Equal Suffrage badge on every traveling salesman . . . the highways and byways are golden with the admonition of the cause.”

As great an opportunity as the State Fair provided, the greatest opportunity for the suffragist cause came with the entry of the United States into World War I in 1917. Unlike previous wars, women during World War I were more active and directly involved in the war effort. Large marketing campaigns quickly began to encourage women to practice economy at home, as well as get involved in various fundraising efforts and bond campaigns. However, this inclusion was still limited to what women often did at home or in their existing social circles. For many Dallas women, their war work was centered in their club work.

When the war broke out, women’s clubs in Dallas quickly and easily shifted into war work. Many of these groups consolidated their efforts in order to be most efficient, forming the National League of Women’s Service. Individual clubs, and later the City Federation of Women’s Clubs, combined to educate women about food conservation, register women’s skills for possible war work, and sell war bonds. Women were already connected in a way they hadn’t been before, which enabled them to move quickly once war was declared. Their involvement in World War I was unprecedented, but it would not have been possible without the existing network of clubs.

One of the greatest accomplishments by clubwomen was made by the Dallas Federation of Women’s Clubs with its efforts at running a canteen for soldiers passing through Dallas. In January 1918, H. A. Olmstead, chair of the Dallas Council of Defense, pledged support from Dallas businessmen if the clubwomen were willing to take charge of the canteen. He stated that such a canteen would be “a big advertisement for Dallas. The soldiers would write to their various homes and tell of the hospitality of the Dallas women.” The Federation would receive no financial assistance from the state, but would have to raise all operational funds. The members got to work immediately, with various clubs planning fundraisers.
or pledging money. By the end of February, rent money for two months had been pledged, as well as $250 towards furniture. These women believed that “it is our responsibility to help safeguard the morals of the men in uniform who come to our city.” They promised that everything would be done to make the soldiers feel that the canteen, staffed by volunteers from twenty-seven women’s clubs, “is a place to be sought out whenever they are in town.”

Activities included food, reading material, stationery to write letters home, and an eight-piece orchestra which performed nightly for supervised dancing. In just three months, they served over 10,000 men. Just before the canteen opened, there was a great debate as to what this canteen would be named. Many wanted to call it the Dallas Canteen, but the club women involved wanted the canteen to be immediately identified with their work: “While we are glad to have non-federated clubs and individuals who are interested and wish to do so, do so, it is the work of the Federation and the name of the canteen should suggest that it is conducted under the auspices of the City Federation.” These women wanted full credit for their work. In newspaper articles, the canteen was referred to as the Recreational Canteen, under the auspices of the City Federation of Women’s Clubs.

By early summer, the canteen was deemed “a howling success.” But in July, the Dallas War Camp Community Service took over management of the canteen because it was unable to give support money to outside organizations—and the canteen was costing far more than the City Federation had planned for. However, these clubwomen were optimistic in passing the torch. One of the organizers “deemed it quite a compliment that the War Camp Community Service wanted to take the canteen over—that it was the biggest feather in the Federation’s cap and she was highly gratified.” Federation members continued their volunteer work with the canteen, but they were no longer responsible for the finances.

In the midst of increasing war work throughout the country, Minnie Fisher Cunningham, president of the state suffrage association, saw a unique opening in state politics. Six months earlier, the suffragists had worked with others to have Governor Jim Ferguson impeached. He was staunchly anti-suffrage, and they knew he would likely veto any bill that passed the legislature. With mounting charges of corruption against Ferguson, Cunningham saw an opportunity to “break the power of corrupt politics in Texas.” When it began to look as if their efforts would be successful, she wrote to Carrie Chapman Catt, leader of the national suffrage movement, for advice: “After we get impeachment, the Lieutenant Governor will call a special session of the Legislature. . . . It seems to me a wonderfully opportune moment to ask them to put through our primary suffrage bill. What do you think? Would you advise it?” The new Governor, W. P. Hobby, was in favor of primary suffrage, and they decided to begin an advocacy campaign for the March 1918 special session. Because Texas was essentially a one-party state at the time, the ability to vote in the primaries was almost the equivalent of full state suffrage. Their tactic relied on modern technology—sending a telegram every fifteen minutes to State Senators, signed by prominent local residents. They were also able to capitalize on the disgust many felt at the charges against the impeached governor. In September 1917, Cunningham had written to Catt: “It has been full six weeks since I have found any man with the temerity to look us in the eye and say he opposed women’s voting in the face of the outrageous condition that has been proven to prevail in our state government.”

The time was also ripe in Dallas for activity. Between war work and the momentum of the suffrage movement, attendance was growing rapidly in many women’s organizations. On March 5, the minutes of the City Federation of Women’s Clubs reported, “With new aims and interests, the club work is more vital and important than it has ever been before and as a result the attendance has increased to such an extent that it has become necessary to seek larger accommodations.” That same day, an article in The Dallas Morning News...
Passage of a bill by the Texas Legislature in March 1918 to grant women the right to vote in state primaries was characterized by *Dallas Morning News* cartoonist John Knott as an Easter gift.
Barry Miller was a resident of Oak Cliff, where he lived at Millermore, the home his wife, Minnie, inherited from her father, William Brown Miller, a Dallas County pioneer. Minnie ran the farm while Barry drove the five miles into town to continue his law practice. Evelyn, their youngest child, wrote a sketch about her parents,

announced that the Dallas Equal Suffrage Association was beginning a petition for support of any legislation promoting women’s suffrage. State legislator Barry Miller told the group that he would change his mind and vote for women’s suffrage if they could gather 5,000 women in his district to sign the petition.

The patriotic service of women during World War I was closely tied to the campaign for suffrage.
sharing the following about her father’s political career: “Papa became increasingly active in politics. Most often, he campaigned for friends or causes in which he believed, but occasionally for himself. He served in the Texas State Senate from 1899–1901, received a gubernatorial appointment to a district judgeship in Dallas in 1911, and served in the Texas House of Representatives in 1917–1922, and as Lieutenant Governor of Texas, 1925–1930. At first mamma HATED politics, and never came to like having her husband a candidate.”

Among his early political accomplishments was authoring the legislation that made the bluebonnet the state flower of Texas in 1901. Apparently, the wife of the lawyer he apprenticed with when he first came to Texas always loved the flower—and he did it to honor her. Barry Miller certainly didn’t change his opinion about suffrage through conversations at home. Evelyn wrote: “Mamma had NOT wanted the vote, but when she got it, she took it very seriously.”

The Dallas Equal Suffrage Association participated in the war effort and joined other local clubwomen in raising funds for the Women’s Oversea Hospital Unit. Barry Miller contributed. “Dallas suffragists take this as a hopeful sign and hope that Judge Miller may yet be counted among the friends of equal suffrage.” Judge Miller, ever the politician, set before the suffragists a challenge to gather 5,000 signatures, although no legislation was currently pending. Two days later, the News reported that 1,000 names had already been collected. “These signatures are necessary,” explained Mrs. Nonie B. Mahoney, vice president of the Equal Suffrage Association, “in order to persuade one man, Barry Miller, that there is a silent sentiment in favor of suffrage in Dallas County. We are going to win. There is no chance for us to fail.” In addition to canvassing the women in their immediate circles, they also made special efforts to reach out to working women, visiting local businesses such as Sanger Brothers, Neiman Marcus, Butler Brothers, Brown Cracker and Candy Company, and the Wilson Building. In a March 9 article, announcing that they expected to go over the 5,000 mark that day, Mrs. Mahoney stated, “The interest in this petition is not confined to any one class. The women of Highland Park and the mill districts are equally interested and equally anxious to sign.”

Anecdotes about the signing efforts include a mother who had five daughters working in the factories who believed that their working conditions would improve with suffrage. Another woman, age 70, brought in a petition with over 200 signatures—and apologized. “I would have got a good many more, but I happened upon so many of my old friends that I just had to stop and chat with them a while.”

By March 10, the suffragists had reached 8,000 signatures. Upon their success, Mrs. Mahoney declared, “The suffragists of Texas welcome the support of Mr. Miller. The suffragists accepted Barry Miller’s challenge and have shown what they are capable of doing, but they refuse to accept any more such challenges to unproductive labor. They can not spare any more time from war work.”

At the same time they were gathering thousands of signatures from all of Dallas, they were trying to open a canteen to serve traveling soldiers. In fact, that very same day saw the announcement of the location of the canteen. The link between club work, war work, and suffrage work was deep and powerful. And it was a link that was often acknowledged during this time period. Pauline Periwinkle, well known clubwoman and Dallas Morning News columnist, wrote years before: “Women’s clubs everywhere have crossed the Rubicon dividing self-seeking from the world’s work. It would be hard to find a band of women nowadays content solely with filling up on literary pabulum whether represented by hardtack or syllabub—the classics or current fiction. Nowadays, when women meet and ask ‘what is your club doing?’ the answer expected is not, ‘we’re studying French history and literature,’ but ‘we’re establishing free kindergartens,’ or ‘we’re working for civic improvement,’ etc. Even in States southernmost in feelings—and sentiment snaps its fingers at geographical lines—it is no longer considered unwomanly for women to take a good-sized dish in municipal affairs.”
On March 15, just a few days after Mrs. Mahoney delivered 10,000 signatures to Rep. Barry Miller’s office at the Capitol in Austin, the House voted 84 to 34 to give women the right to vote in primary elections. As promised, Barry Miller changed his vote. In addition, he spoke on behalf of the bill, truly providing an example of a politician who changed his position due to the will of the people. Because the timing of the vote was a bit of a surprise, only a few suffragists, including Minnie Fisher Cunningham, were in attendance. Although there was some debate, no one really doubted that it would pass. A few argued that they should wait for a federal amendment so that the question could be taken to the people, but as Rep. Jose Canales said, “if the women are so anxious to have this right that they would rather have a half measure than a full measure, let them have it and let them take the full responsibility for the same.”

Within a week, the bill passed the Senate with amendments, went back to the House, and was signed into law on March 26, 1918. In a letter to Carrie Chapman Catt, Minnie Fisher Cunningham wrote: “When [the final vote] was taken we rose to leave the gallery of the House and when the men saw us they all stood up and gave us a perfect ovation, cheering for some minutes and calling for a speech. It was a surprising and greatly appreciated tribute to the work that the women have been doing.”

But there was no time for rest or celebration. The canteen had opened just a few days before, and there were regular calls for volunteers to staff the canteen, provide baked goods, and more. After all, the war was still on, and now, these newly enfranchised women had to register to vote. As Katherine (Mrs. Isaac) Jalonick, president of the Dallas Equal Suffrage Association, told the News: “The members are too heavily engaged in war work to stop for a celebration. We are too occupied with helping the Red Cross and promoting the gardening campaign to take time for a public jubilee, and we think it would be unpatriotic to cease this important work to rejoice over something that benefits ourselves merely.”

With a primary election looming on July 27, there was only a 17-day registration window—and yet 386,000 women across the state registered. Dallas suffragists declared themselves unconcerned with getting other women to register after the success of the petition drive just a few weeks before. They set up a committee to call everyone who signed the petition. When it came time to register, booths were set up in key department stores, as well as at the courthouse. They also began actively campaigning, both for Governor Hobby, as well as for Annie Webb Blanton, who was running for the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. She ultimately became the first woman elected to a statewide office in Texas.

This isn’t to say that all clubwomen supported suffrage. However, with their increasing involvement in civic affairs, it is probable that the majority of women active in club work were supportive of suffrage. And it’s impossible to know how many women were involved both in the work of opening the canteen and gathering signatures for the suffrage petition. But we do know this: the Texas Federation of Women’s Clubs, of which all major clubs were members, made extraordinary changes in how it was talking to its membership during this same period. As it encouraged its members to get involved with war work, it also encouraged them to become more educated on local politics. The Texas Federation of Women’s Club created a political science committee as early as 1912. In 1914, there was a strong push for all of the clubs to begin a Civil Service Reform Committee. Blanche (Mrs. A. P.) Averill, the president, urged the delegates to do this immediately. “Let this be a body alert for opportunities and emergencies,” she urged. “You cannot turn in any direction to try and better things without becoming linked with government.”

The work towards suffrage made shifting into war work easier. And the lessons learned during the war helped prepare women for the vote. Historians have long linked these two issues, but how remarkable is it that two key moments in this larger story occurred during the same month here in Dallas?
Although Barry and Minnie were both born with the surname Miller, they were not related. Millermore was moved from its original site in 1966 and subsequently reconstructed at Old City Park, where it is now a signature historic structure at Dallas Heritage Village.


Ibid., 9.

“Equal Suffragists to Petition Legislature,” DMN, March 5, 1918.

“Suffragists Already Have Over 1,000 Names,” DMN, March 7, 1918.

“Suffragists Drive Will Close Today,” DMN, March 9, 1918.

“Suffragist’s Drive Goes Beyond 8,000.” DMN, March 19, 1918.


House Journal, 333.

Citizens at Last, 167.


Texas Federation of Women’s Club Annual 1914-15, 41.