Clara Bewick Colby and the Oregon Woman Suffrage Campaign of 1905–1906

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“WHEN A MONARCH DIES, THE PEOPLE CRY ‘The king is dead! Long live the king.’ We say ‘The campaign is ended! The campaign is begun.’” Thus declared Gail Laughlin of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) to the Oregon Equal Suffrage Association (OESA) on the evening of June 8, 1906, following the defeat of Oregon’s third attempt to provide women with voting rights. Had Oregon’s constitutional amendment been ratified, it would have been the fifth territory or state to grant woman suffrage, succeeding Wyoming (1869), Utah (1896), Colorado (1893), and Idaho (1896). The defeat was keenly felt. The death of Susan B. Anthony at the height of the campaign in March had prompted NAWSA President Anna Howard Shaw to declare: “Make Oregon’s freedom for women the cornerstone on her monument.” But that was not to be. Shaw’s farewell remarks to OESA reflected her bitter disappointment that the four-star suffrage flag would not be flown that June evening, with a fifth star now affixed.

After Oregon’s 1905–1906 suffrage campaign, a series of engagements every two years ultimately resulted in victory in 1912. In many ways, the 1905–1906 effort was different from Oregon’s previous campaigns. Abigail Scott Duniway — who had principally controlled Oregon’s suffrage activities since the 1870s — was largely sidelined. The campaign was activists’ first use of the new initiative and referendum law, which allowed for a direct vote on suffrage. National suffragist intervention, a broadly public propaganda campaign, and high-profile conventions legitimized suffrage activities and increased press coverage, as did controversies. All these activities expanded dialogue about suffrage and women’s rights in Oregon and around the region.

A key figure in this campaign, Clara Bewick Colby (1846–1916), a White woman, was among its primary fieldworkers and brought to Oregon her...
IN 1883, Clara Bewick Colby established the The Woman’s Tribune, a woman’s rights journal, and served as its editor and publisher until it ceased publication in 1909. It was issued variously from Beatrice, Nebraska, or Washington, D.C., until 1904, when Colby and the Tribune relocated to Portland, Oregon. Colby’s journal served as a forum for suffrage news, a historical record for the cause, and an educational and social journal designed to appeal to a wide readership.

CLARA BEWICK COLBY, THE WOMAN’S TRIBUNE, AND OREGON’S RENEWED EFFORTS FOR SUFFRAGE

A recent resident of Oregon in 1905, Clara Bewick Colby was among the generation of women who were the footsoldiers of the movement. Most worked tirelessly for the cause, yet were neither its initial revolutionaries nor present to stand in the winner’s circle when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920. Colby wielded her political acumen on the speaker’s platform and as publisher of the influential The Woman’s Tribune (1883–1909), the second-longest-running woman’s rights journal in the United States. Born in England and raised in Wisconsin, in 1869 Colby was among the first women to earn a Ph.B. (Bachelor of Philosophy) from the University of Wisconsin.7 She then moved with her husband to Beatrice, Nebraska, and became active in civic affairs, including suffrage, after meeting Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the late 1870s.8 In 1880, she was an organizer of the Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association, and her newspaper career flourished when she began writing for the Western Woman’s Journal during Nebraska’s 1881–1882 suffrage campaign. In 1883, she launched the Tribune, which the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) promoted as its official journal, until its merger with the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) in 1890.9 Colby continued publishing the Tribune as an independent source of women’s rights and suffrage news for many years, operating from both Beatrice, Nebraska, and Washington, D.C.

A confidant of both Stanton and Anthony, she was educated and professional, but she often strayed from a single focus on suffrage. Her platform embraced a broad view of women’s rights and social reform that addressed issues relating to rural women, women of color and Indigenous women, childrearing, dress reform, women’s health, history and literature, spirituality and New Thought, American imperialism, and peace.10 She attracted controversy when she wrote for and serially published early versions of Stanton’s Woman’s Bible, and after adopting a Lakota girl, Zintkala Nuni, she advocated for the rights of American Indians and often brought her daughter to suffrage events.11 A lengthy separation following her husband’s infidelity

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ultimately resulted in their divorce, and she struggled to maintain an income when the Tribune faltered in its later years.

By 1904, when Colby took the Tribune to Oregon, she had ascended to and then fallen from the heights of suffrage influence. Separation from her husband and her impending divorce, money problems, and her support of issues unpopular with powerful suffragists who preferred a conservative and politically narrow scope had all but driven her out of active suffrage work in the East and Midwest. Unable to raise cash by selling subscriptions to the Tribune during NAWSA’s thirty-sixth annual convention in 1904, Colby journeyed west. She explained, “I can see no future for the TRIBUNE save to sell off its old type, and take it West where it belongs.”12 A single, fifty-eight-year-old, self-supporting woman, she needed to earn a living — either by waged work or by generating content that would boost sales of the Tribune. Colby also wanted to continue to contribute meaningfully to the suffrage cause.

Oregon did hold promise. Prior to 1902, the state constitution required a bill for a constitutional amendment to pass both houses of the legislature in two successive sessions, and then be ratified by voters. But that year, Oregon adopted a system that allowed electors to vote directly on constitutional amendments.13 This renewed suffrage efforts, which were amplified by two national gatherings in Portland. The Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition, which opened on June 1, 1905, attracted more than a million and a half visitors.14 NAWSA’s thirty-seventh annual convention, held June 28 to July 5, 1905, was strategically timed to capitalize on both the exposition and Oregon’s new legislation. This was NAWSA’s first convention west of the Rocky Mountains and reflected its “faith in the progressive West” as the region most likely to achieve woman suffrage.15 As Sara A. Evans wrote in the History of Woman Suffrage, it “gave to the cause in Oregon a new birth.”16

FALL 1905 AMENDMENT PETITION DRIVE

Historian Kimberly Jensen explains that in 1905, “Oregon was in the vanguard of the votes for women movement.”17 Following Colorado’s success in 1893 through voter initiative, Oregon suffragists hoped to succeed by using a similar strategy.18 It was controversial and hotly argued at NAWSA’s Portland convention, where Carrie Chapman Catt introduced a resolution calling it “a needed reform” and “a potent factor in the progress of true democracy.”19 To place the constitutional amendment before voters, Oregon suffragists first had to file a legal petition request, then campaign for the amendment’s passage. This two-phase campaign would expose the suffrage message to a wide variety of constituents over a long period of time. Duniway chiefly supported the “still hunt” method, which meant privately lobbying powerful male leaders to avoid a public campaign that might arouse opposition. She vigorously opposed Catt’s resolution, fearing “its adoption would advise the opponents of equal suffrage that a campaign was to take place next year.”20 Catt’s resolution was ultimately adopted against Duniway’s wishes. NAWSA directed the campaign at the invitation of OESA, and national organizers Laura Gregg and Laura Clay took charge, opening a headquarters office in September.21 Preceding the convention, Oregon suffragists had conducted petition work throughout the late summer. Their goal was 12,000 voter signatures; they needed only 8,000 but expected certification difficulties. As Colby explained to the Tribune’s readers, this was a complex, time-consuming process.22 In addition to persuading voters to sign the petition, canvassers...
needed to carefully record each voter’s precinct after his name, then send the petitions to OESA vice-president Annice Jeffreys Myers, who ensured they were in order before forwarding them for certification to the clerk of the county where the signatures had been gathered. The clerk compared names against the precinct’s registration books and certified only those he found “written exactly as they appear on the books.” Non-certified names were separated onto another list, and all were returned to Jeffreys Myers. Colby observed that a large percent of the names were often disqualified, informing her readers that such “lists may be returned to some friend in the county who will take them before a notary public, who may save such of the rejected names as he personally knows, and will attest the fact to be those of legal voters in that county.” Jeffreys Myers retained the completed and certified petitions for presentation to the Secretary of State.23

Anticipating the success of the petition drive, OESA held a one-day convention at Portland’s White Temple Baptist church in November to officially launch the larger campaign. Duniway, who had been convinced to retire from OESA’s leadership, avoided the meeting and was elected in absentia to the position of honorary president. Her approved successor, Viola M. Coe, was chosen as the organization’s head, and NAWSA managed the overall campaign.24

The petition drive was one aspect of a varied campaign designed to build support among the people. Suffragists also “solicited endorsements from organizations and individuals, and publicized their cause through conversations with editors, ministers, businessmen, club women, and ordinary citizens.”25 This type of community building required a highly organized campaign carried out by a cadre of fieldworkers who could transmit the suffrage message to a variety of audiences. Gregg explained, “we expect to send speakers to every town in every county,” and initially named Laura Clay of Kentucky, Clara Bewick Colby of Oregon, Gail Laughlin of Maine, Harriet May Mills of New York, and Julia L. Woodworth of Oklahoma as staff speakers tasked with educating the public about the benefits of woman suffrage and persuading them to vote for it.26 Additional speakers and professional organizers, including Emma Smith DeVoe, were later added to this group, which drew attention when the ranks of workers were supplemented by NAWSA luminaries including Anna Howard Shaw, Alice Stone Blackwell, Kate M. Gordon, Mary and Lucy Anthony, Ida Porter Boyer of Pennsylvania, and Mary C. Bradford of Colorado.27

NAWSA organized and funded the campaign, and its staff oversaw a complex structure of local volunteers drawn from OESA and its affiliates, supplemented by paid speakers and organizers from Oregon and elsewhere. Colby was among the paid fieldworkers. As she explained to her friend Clara
MacNaughton, activist work collecting petition signatures provided her with some income, but it was challenging and paid poorly. NAWSA compensated workers a bounty of $5.00 per 100 certified signatures but did not reimburse travel expenses for field canvassers. Colby’s work allowed her to gather rich material for The Woman’s Tribune, where she detailed nearly every aspect of her campaign activities. This was a long-standing campaign support practice engaged by suffrage journalists, and the The Woman’s Tribune served as an important source for those eager to follow Oregon’s progress.

Colby’s fieldwork focused on convincing individual voters to sign the petition, and this represented a break in the quieter method of political influence that solely pressed lawmakers. Her effort employed the strategy of speaking to individuals and groups in both private and public settings. She organized local suffrage clubs; collected signatures in Clackamas, Marion, Multnomah, and Polk counties; and focused on connecting with men — including labor-class men — where they were. She successfully canvassed workingmen at shingle, lumber, and wool mills; found voters among the staff at the state penitentiary and the state insane asylum; and engaged middle-class men around the warm fires of the blacksmith shop or the hardware store. Colby discovered that men gathered outside saloons — she did not enter those establishments — were the least likely to sign the petition. She was sanguine about these difficulties in the pages of the Tribune:

It is not a pleasant task to think about — this going around to talk to all kinds and conditions of men, but none of them hurt me, not even by a coarse word, and I am sure I did not hurt them. . . . Above all I remembered that the least congenial of them all probably was associated with several women as husband, son or father. I thought if they could tolerate him all the time I might for their sake be willing to pass a civil word with him. And when I thought about this some more I even felt that I could stand it to go and vote with him once a year.

But in a private letter to MacNaughton, Colby lamented, “My how I have walked and worked to get those names. I have taken [sic] all sorts and conditions of men and gone into every place where a man might be save the saloons; it is sickening enough to talk with the loafers outside of the saloons. I came home quite heart sick yesterday morning.” Colby’s campaign-support journalism maintained a positive perspective, but her private opinions revealed the travails of canvassing and provide a rare glimpse into a fieldworker’s experiences.

Both her low pay and the lack of subscriber remittances, despite the Tribune’s amplified content, frustrated Colby. By mid November, she had personally secured more than a thousand signatures, but she observed that, even with careful instruction, the men were likely to incorrectly state their precinct. This resulted in the loss of up to half the signatures when they were submitted for certification and negatively affected her income, which she hoped would supplement funds earned from Tribune subscriptions and room rentals at her home. Instead, it left her with just enough to pay her expenses. As she explained to MacNaughton from the field, “with a board bill at hotel to pay car fare etc, I just about come out even to saying nothing about the wear and tear on clothing.” She also admitted, “I am in a very serious condition and after my hard day’s work I spend the evening in my cold room (No second class hotel heats its bedrooms in this country) and write dunning cards [to subscribers in arrears].” Yet, Colby remained motivated. In Oregon City, she secured more than 300 signatures, but at St. Johns, an hour’s car ride from Portland, she had less success, securing only 80 names after two days’ canvassing of registered men in the mills. The Statesman, however, reported she gained particular success in Marion and Polk counties, having secured nearly 500 signatures just in Marion county.
As Duniway feared, the initial, moderate success of the suffragists’ petition drive raised anti-suffrage forces, including the Oregon State Association Opposed to the Extension of the Suffrage to Women (OSAOESW) — which Colby critiqued as “far too cumbersome a name to use since ‘art is long, and time is fleeting’” and declared, “they must expect to be called the ‘Antis’ for short.” The Antis launched opposition tactics designed to disparage the campaign and stigmatize supporters who emphasized women as having high moral character, and thus deserved to participate in civic duties such as voting. The Antis claimed, for example, that suffragists created a petition that purposefully did not conform to legal requirements and was designed so that signatures could be gathered without voters understanding what they were signing. And as the petition drive gained momentum and publicity, the Antis accused suffragists of cheating by stuffing petitions with names of famous men, men who signed the register at the Oregon building during the Exposition, or men who did not know what they were signing.37

Some Antis engaged in tactics suffragists did not anticipate, such as signing petitions as someone other than themselves. One newspaper declared this “a lesson in practical politics” given to the women by “a practical joker.” This also stigmatized suffragists by characterizing them as thoughtless and irresponsible, because their message in support of women’s rights was anchored in the fact that women were equally intelligent to men. Incensed, the suffragists denounced the accusations of cheating, name stuffing, and other mishandling of petitions through counter arguments published in various newspapers and penned by Jeffreys Myers, Laughlin, and Colby; Colby also personally met with the Salem Statesman to deny the accusations.38 In the end, increased press coverage of these controversies perhaps allowed suffragists to further expand their reach and energize supporters, for they triumphed when their petition was accepted by the state at the end of December 1905, ensuring the amendment would be voted on the following June.40

**THE “MISSIONARY” CAMPAIGN**

In January 1906, Oregon suffragists transitioned to the second phase of the campaign: a five-month effort focused on voter education and turnout. Colby described her activities as “missionary work,” aimed at securing suffrage converts.41 The high-profile effort Colby and others conducted sharply contrasted with the “still hunt” strategy and provided visible structure to the movement by broadcasting women’s rights ideologies to widely dispersed supporters who could then connect with like-minded people. This visibility allowed activists to establish new clubs and groups, strengthen existing ones, and then politicize them into larger organized networks primed to turn out the vote. The campaign was comprehensive and public. Its goals included securing pledges to vote “Yes” in June, distributing pro-suffrage propaganda, using the press to promulgate a pro-suffrage message, and organizing local suffrage societies to aid the work. The backbone of these strategies was the speaker-organizer who worked to build grassroots support. The campaign educated voters about the importance of woman suffrage through programs that featured local women and men — pro-suffrage community leaders — and professional women speakers sponsored by NAWSA. Colby occupied an in-between position. She promoted herself as a resident of Oregon, yet NAWSA paid her to lecture and organize.

Colby immersed herself in Oregon’s suffrage work. In addition to leveraging her strengths as an organizer, lecturer, and journalist who amplified the campaign through a series of lengthy editor’s letters in *The Woman’s Tribune*, Colby applied a deep knowledge of rural culture — learned through years of organizing among rural populations in Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin — to tailor speeches and programs for those audiences. She had no fear of campaigning among coarse workingmen and was not bothered by travel to rural or mountainous areas in need of organization. Nevertheless, her remuneration remained low; for example, she received $49.21 from NAWSA for her first month’s work in January — much of which was expense reimbursement.42 Her net pay was well below the $1.00 per day she believed should be a minimum wage for working-class women. Unfortunately for Colby, NAWSA’s remuneration model was influenced by the social class structures of most White women’s organizations at that time. Activists were viewed as “volunteers” who were presumably supported by husbands or other family members, or less preferably, earned their main income through paid work as journalists, writers, or lecturers.43

Colby’s goal was to campaign in every precinct in her assigned counties, which over the course of five months included at least fourteen of Oregon’s then thirty-four counties (Baker, Clackamas, Clatsop, Columbia, Grant, Lane, Lincoln, Linn, Multnomah, Polk, Union, Wallowa, Wasco, and Washington), amounting to at least 40 percent of the state’s geography. The Mormon woman’s rights journal *Women’s Exponent* was impressed with her effort. Of Colby’s eastern Oregon work during three weeks in May, it reported, “She addressed twenty-two meetings, rode eight hundred miles by rail and two hundred by stage, visited mining towns, distributed literature and made friends and converts wherever she went.”44

Colby and other campaigners fanned out across the state to educate the uninformed and convert them to supporters who would vote. Their activities built on Anthony and Duniway’s efforts in the 1870s.45 Colby’s suffrage message was offered to diverse groups in a variety of public, private, and civic spaces.
COLBY'S CANVASSING took her to both populous and rural places throughout Oregon, including Elgin. Colby sometimes relied on local transportation to get to some destinations, including freight wagons such as the one parked in front of Elgin's harness shop in about 1900.

Churches and fraternal organizations offered both space and ready-made audiences, and her evening programs frequently followed scheduled services or meetings. Colby addressed Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Mormons; she also spoke to ethnic religious communities such as the Norwegian Methodist Episcopal Church. Supportive organizations such as the Grange and the Maccabees (a foresters fraternal organization) provided their meeting halls. She lectured in the parlors of homes as well as commercial sites such as lumber camps, mining stores, and workmen's halls. She appropriated civic venues as well, delivering pro-suffrage programs in a courtroom, an opera house, and a city hall as well as at educational locations such as Pacific University and a variety of local schoolhouses.

Because the campaign took place during winter and spring, travel was usually difficult and sometimes dangerous. Colby's modes of conveyance were as varied as her audiences. She traveled by train, stage, and on foot, by river steamboat, motorcar, lumber wagon, general freight wagon, narrow-gauge logging and mining rail, and sleigh. To reach a lumber settlement in northwestern Oregon's swamp logging area, she disembarked from a train at Blind Slough drawbridge, was ferried more than a mile along the slough to a rail terminus, walked a mile and a half along the railroad ties, and finished the five-mile trip on a hand car. Traveling alone, she relied on locals for transportation. Of her ride some fifteen miles to Buxton on a freight wagon, she humorously noted, "There were in the wagon three milk cans with loose handles and some tin sheeting so that we announced our approach well before-hand." And while traveling to Delena — "six miles up in the hill country" — she was transported by the "meat man, who does the errands for the hill folk, and carries passengers, if he has any, twice in the week." Once she literally rode to town on an apple cart, hitching a ride with a farmer bringing a load of apples to the market. Of that bumpy experience she said, "The first thing I want to vote for is larger road tax."

Travel in rugged logging and mining country of eastern Oregon depended on narrow-gauge rail, then stage. Her over-mountain journey to eastern Oregon's Prairie City first took her sixty-five miles by narrow-gauge rail built by the Oregon Lumber Company, a Mormon business that also ran Columbia River sawmills at South Baker City and Inglis. After a stop at the rail terminus, she continued her journey up and over the mountain in an open stage pulled by four horses. Explaining the journey's difficulties, she noted, "At times we crunch through the snow on the road and again we sink in mud almost hub deep, and have difficulty in keeping our seats, and at length we all get out to lighten the pull for the horses, all but the woman whose baby is the especial concern for all of the passengers." Travel from Elgin to Joseph found her on an "old-fashioned stage" crowded with eleven other passengers "on and in" the vehicle for a sixty-mile ride that required them to disembark in order to lighten the load on upward climbs and to change horses multiple times, ultimately using sixteen. Back at campaign headquarters in Portland, Gregg explained to NAWSA's journal Progress, "I do not believe those of us who have lived in the middle states have any comprehension of what it is to campaign in a mountainous country in the winter season." And in response to Colby's field report, Shaw acknowledged "the numerous conveyances" Colby used, declaring, "It sounded like old times when you told of this way of getting out, just as we used to have to go twenty years ago. The young people of today have no realization of what the older days were, as even pioneer life now is so much better than it used to be." Population was slim in Oregon's extremely rural or mountainous locations; however, it was important to locate, evangelize, and organize every
actual and potential suffrage supporter — for every vote counted. Rural and mountain audiences clearly valued Colby’s programs, often walking miles through rough country in the cold and dark, or through inclement weather, to reach her lecture venue.58 Of this, Colby said she “could appreciate the zeal [for the cause] which led people to traverse such a distance at night.”59 To support turnout, Colby connected with local hosts who arranged favorable locations, yet there were sometimes barriers to participation. At a small lumber settlement in northwest Oregon, Colby’s program had been moved to the area meeting hall to accommodate farmers and ranchers living on the other side of the camp, who would not walk up the timber flume to the mill area. She was forced to do what her audience would not, and as she explained to Tribune readers, “With some misgivings I followed my hostess. ‘Walking the flume’ is going along the board on the trestle work which supports the flume, down which the dashing mountain stream carries the logs or the lumber to the railroad below. . . . The board is sometimes a comfortable width, sometimes narrow, and occasionally broken so that pedestrianism under these circumstances is not without its excitements, especially when the trestle is built over or along a creek.”60 On arrival at the hall, she found under these circumstances is not without its excitements, especially when the hall was undergoing repairs and unsafe.” After calling on a suffrage supporter who was also an Adventist, Colby secured that church for the evening and thought her program was all set. “After going around and putting in posters” to advertise her lecture, however, she found that “a lot of people on the watch phoned to the central office [the central telephone exchange] to know if I had come. As I had not come in the hack, and had not known of the office [the local switchboard operator] where I should have left word, the operator said I had not arrived and this kept the country people from coming in.”61 Clearly, the lack of organized communication from the campaign’s headquarters office dampened the suffragists’ efforts.

What was more, after making their own arrangements, fieldworkers like Colby often found that the campaign headquarters had made conflicting plans. Following her arduous journey and late-night arrival at Prairie City, Colby was dismayed to find her program was advertised to occur three days after several days’ sojourn among small mountain camps in rain and snow, she concluded: “The next time I go up in a logging country to talk to lumbermen it is going to be right at their boarding house door, right after their supper.”62 Colby was typically the only woman’s rights organizer in a particular locale. She was therefore personally responsible for distributing handbills to promote her work, mounting publicity posters around town, and visiting with local leaders to encourage them to drum up an audience. This type of public campaign created some risk, in that speakers like Colby opened themselves to the possibility of encountering hostile community members. They needed to be prepared to deliver a persuasive message, respond meaningfully to questions, and offer rebuttals to anti-suffrage arguments.

Other difficulties for individual organizers in this complex campaign resulted from NAWSA’s struggle to fund, staff, and maintain control over the sprawling effort.63 Paid speakers like Colby were to be scheduled by the Headquarters Campaign Office in Portland, but at the height of the campaign in early spring, the suffragists were in disarray. Anthony died on March 13, 1906, and the following month, campaign manager Laura Gregg fell ill — likely a result of exhaustion brought on by the strain of campaign work. Shaw, who personally excelled at campaigning but was a less successful organizer and political strategist during the early years of her NAWSA presidency, thus directed fieldworkers to plan their own work with little assistance from the central campaign office. Writing to Colby, Shaw explained, “I am not unmindful of the difficulties and irritations you will be called upon to encounter, but we must all make up our minds to accept the situation as it is and make the best of it.”64 Gregg’s departure exposed one of the weaknesses of a centralized, public campaign’s attempt to coordinate fieldworkers traveling to Oregon’s extreme locations. It also amplified the confusion already present in such a complex operation. Staffing issues at campaign headquarters complicated Colby’s effort enormously, for even prior to Gregg’s withdrawal, Colby sometimes found no arrangements made for her programs. After arriving at Gales Creek in northwest Oregon, for example, no plans had been made, and her host swore “no place could be had for the lecture.” Colby found that “the Adventists and the Baptists were unwilling to have their churches used, the schoolhouse could not be lit in the evening because of the insurance; and the hall was undergoing repairs and unsafe.” After calling on a suffrage supporter who was also an Adventist, Colby secured that church for the evening and thought her program was all set. “After going around and putting in posters” to advertise her lecture, however, she found that “a lot of people on the watch phoned to the central office [the central telephone exchange] to know if I had come. As I had not come in the hack, and had not known of the office [the local switchboard operator] where I should have left word, the operator said I had not arrived and this kept the country people from coming in.”65 Clearly, the lack of organized communication from the campaign’s headquarters office dampened the suffragists’ efforts.

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On my return walk in the afternoon, I had seen a woman harrowing in the field. . . . I stopped at the fence and waited till the woman drove up. I said you must be a good suffrage woman. She said no, she had so many more rights than women had in her own country, Alsata, that she had no thoughts about the government only of how thankful she was. She liked to work out of doors better than in the house, she said; besides, her husband was unable to work. She promised to come to the meeting, and here she was well dressed, erect, and not looking her seventy-two years by at least a decade. I seized upon her for chairman of the meeting, and she took the position without demur, made a pleasant introductory speech, a collection speech that brought me twice as much as the average, and consented to serve on the campaign committee. I obtained nineteen names.68

Colby’s anecdote demonstrates her commitment to the evangelical spirit of her campaign for suffrage.

Thus Colby also directed her message to allies who might influence voters. As a result, her audiences were varied and included mixed groups of adult men and women, families with children, and women with children. Her single-sex audiences were made up of lumbermen, miners, or women’s groups.69 She would do nearly anything to get in front of potential voters. At Kelley’s lumber camp in Clatsop County, Colby had the good fortune to present to a captive audience of men, but it required extra effort on her part. There, her host was Mrs. Kelley, who had recently been called to duty as the camp’s cook. Colby helped her host prepare the midday meal for sixty men, thus making it possible for Kelley to also attend Colby’s lecture in the dining hall. Of this experience Colby said, “It was really refreshing to talk to a crowd of voters” instead of “the usual preponderance of women and children.”70

Colby was sympathetic to Mormon women — a stigmatized cultural community not always engaged by political activists — and she sought rural communities of Latter Day Saints to discover voters and deliver her educational woman’s rights message.71 Colby was delighted to present her programs to communities “where no previous suffrage lecture had been delivered,” and she contended “there are many young men of this faith who know nothing, as their elders do, of the value of woman suffrage in Utah, and so need to be reached.” At the mountain town of Union, her program for a large group of Mormons showcased her ability to tailor her message to specific audiences. The group sang Eliza R. Snow’s hymn “To Father and Mother,” which, Colby explained to her Tribune readers, was “one of the earliest enunciations of the idea that there is motherhood in the Deity as well as fatherhood,” thus underscoring her pro-suffrage equality message.72

Colby’s campaign work among these varied communities demonstrated that every vote did count. It did not matter if voters were isolated by geography, culture, or social status; she would make an effort to reach them. It was her optimistic belief that, uplifted by pro—woman’s rights education, it was only a matter of time before all would be convinced that woman suffrage was the right thing to do.

As Colby’s experiences demonstrated, variations in local culture required organizers to use diverse strategies tailored to meet the needs of those communities. The most effective messages employed community-supporting activities attractive to locals as well as gender-appropriate rhetorical strategies. Colby excelled at creating suffrage presentations designed to draw a wide variety of audiences. Her programs included more than political speech and aimed to both educate and amuse audiences who did not have access to the types of speakers and entertainments available in more populated areas. She was an accomplished extemporaneous speaker, and while her centerpiece was the pro-suffrage lecture, her presentations frequently included music such as group singing of suffrage songs, guest vocal solo performances, or piano or organ recitals by locals.73 She offered a more
moderate woman’s rights message than many speakers, and one newspaper concluded that she “makes her work effective by removing all signs of a political harangue from her discourse and instead making it a kind of ‘heart to heart’ talk . . . in the manner of an educational course.”

Appropriately, then, for a talk in Forest Grove to a modest audience of “about 20 voters and a goodly number of women,” Colby argued that in light of the modern woman’s changing roles, equal suffrage was “not a revolutionary measure, but one in harmony with the evolution of civilization” that ensured “woman’s opinion shall be counted.” She emphasized her belief that suffrage for women reflected the “consent of the governed” and conservatively assured her audience that women would hold public office only if “her brother man thrusts that responsibility upon her.” In answering the objection that women must participate in military service in order to earn the ballot, Colby insisted that “brute force was rapidly passing away,” and women “need not carry a gun to know how to use the ballot.” Colby also presented a racially moderate message that contrasted with the explicitly racist ones given by suffrage leaders such as Shaw. As one newspaper observed of Colby’s speech, “in her opinion the race problem in the South would not have assumed such gigantic proportions had the negro women been enfranchised as well as the men.”

Colby’s Oregon lectures used natural-rights and justice arguments, often emphasized the theme of “harmony,” and promoted the idea that women’s civic status in the nation “marks the progress of its civilization,” thus making suffrage “a human question and not merely a woman question.” She reasoned that equal suffrage was a sympathetic indicator for humankind’s progress and was in alignment “with the development of our Republic” as well as “in harmony with the evolution of woman herself.” Her concluding point: “Thus we have today four reasons why women should have the ballot which belongs to the later development of women; they are educated, they own property and pay taxes, they are personally free and they are an important factor in the industrial world.” Her messages for the Oregon campaign focused on themes she had highlighted for years, including an emphasis on modern women’s larger sphere of work. Women’s labor, “spinning, weaving, and preparing all the clothing, the teaching, nursing, preparing food. . . . [and] even the butter making,” that had once been done in the home was now supplied to the home, thus freeing women for other pursuits. She concluded, “woman can not sit down in idleness, so she has had to hunt new fields of work outside the home in order to gain her daily bread. This call to wider labor with man also requires greater rights in order to compete on an equality with him.” By carefully considering her audiences, Colby aligned the woman’s rights movement with ideas, beliefs, and values important to a variety of local communities. This helped facilitate personal change in individuals, who were then willing to join the movement to work for larger social change.

THE ANTIS RALLY

While Colby and other fieldworkers were hard at work to promote their cause, the Antis were as well, and the suffragist effort was ultimately outmaneuvered. Well-funded anti-suffragists, including prominent women and men as well as liquor and business interests, organized a public counter-campaign that also employed speakers, the press, and propaganda. The Oregon suffrage campaign emphasized public discourse, so as it got underway at the beginning of 1906, the suffragists preemptively struck at the Antis and made political hay out of the wealthy women who had established the OSAOESW in the fall of 1905. Laughlin received particular attention for her provocative comments at the People’s Forum in Portland, where she declared, “I am told there are 18 women in this state who are opposed to woman suffrage. . . . We have heard of the dog in the manger who would not let the ox eat hay, but he has never been spoken of as a model dog.”

The Corvallis Times recognized an opportunity for content by highlighting the gendered nature of the battle when it declared, “The prettiest political fight that ever took place in Oregon is now on,” and used sexism to liken the competing campaigns to a high-stakes prize fight. “The battle is straight slugging with no sparring for wind, and no lying down to escape punishment,” it reported, concluding, “the outcome of the struggle will be watched with interest, for the battle is a hot one, as is always the case when Greek meets Greek, or woman meets woman.”

The political fight was definitely on, but it was not always pretty. A prime anti-suffragist tactic was to attack the political machine organized by NAWSA, especially its use of paid organizers who were not Oregonians. In late March, the Antis distributed a lengthy anti-suffrage circular denouncing “professional suffragists” and calling for an immediate parallel “campaign of enlightenment” to be brought “to the remotest hamlets to offset the effects of the oratory and organization of the Suffragists.” Signed “Veritas Vincit” (“Truth Conquers”) it was supposedly circulated widely, including to Gov. George E. Chamberlain. In May, anti-suffragists organized their own petition and published the names of businessmen who opposed the measure. QESA responded: “The Anti-Suffrage Association is officered and run by a little group of millionaires’ wives, who are opposed to anything that would give more power to the people” and countered with a circular that capitalized on Oregon’s pioneer veneration by citing support from “hundreds” of “survivors of the forty’s and the ‘fifties.’”
IN MARCH 1906, the Anti-Woman Suffrage League published a lengthy circular, of which a portion is shown above, denouncing organizers such as the National American Woman Suffrage Association for its “professional suffragists,” and calling for the “spheres of men and women” to remain separate.

As the campaign stretched into its final weeks, the Antis increased their activity by attempting to pay newspapers to publish anti-suffrage editorials, which Colby exposed in The Woman's Tribune after learning of the practice from her old friend Charles F. Soule, editor of Toledo, Oregon’s Lincoln County Leader. Colby also used her platform to investigate another anti-suffrage propaganda letter purportedly signed by a number of prominent women and circulated by the Antis in late May. After obtaining a copy while traveling in the western part of the state, she learned one of its signatories, Mrs. Percy A. Young (likely Florence Gibson Young), resided in nearby Albany. Assured by Young’s friends that the letter “did not represent her sentiments,” Colby sought Young at home. Finding her absent, Colby obtained answers from her husband, Percy Young, at his place of employment. She reported, “it was by a conversation carried on by phone that Mrs. Young’s name had been secured, and that while not wishing to vote herself she had no intention of having her name used in this way. Her desire had been to keep out of the controversy and avoid notoriety, and now the most unpleasant notoriety in the world had been forced upon her in thus placing her in seeming coalition with the liquor interests of the State. Doubtless others of the 16 were equally misrepresented by their names being added to this letter.”

The most controversial action by the Antis took place just a week ahead of the vote — the circulation of an anti-suffrage card featuring an image of a woman’s underskirt that proclaimed, “Vote for [Petticoat] Government? No Petticoat Government in Mine.” Originally thought to be distributed by the Brewers and Wholesale Liquor Dealers’ Association, it later came to light that the card had been printed and distributed by businessman Wallace McCamant, an anti-suffragist whose wife was an officer of OSAOESW. Suffragists were enraged at its distribution so close to the vote. On the defense, OESA and its members published several rejoinders denouncing the “scurrilous card bearing a picture of a woman’s undergarment” as “a sample of the lowest, political scheming that has disgraced the State of Oregon.” Clearly, the Antis’ strategy to target suffragists by virtue of their subordinate gender status, amplified with an image loaded with social meaning, stirred the anti-suffrage pot well.

But there was more trouble afoot. The anti-suffragists now planned to work the polls not only to ensure the vote went their way, but also to counter the suffragists’ poll-watchers — a new tactic by Oregon suffragists that had not been used in previous state campaigns. Colby assisted with this effort after returning from the field. Days before the vote, how-
ever, OESA learned from a "reliable source," that "three hundred men are wanted by the anti-suffrage people to work for them on Monday. They are to be paid $4 if they win, and $3 if they lose." This led OESA to ask, "Is this bribery?"94 It appeared that Shaw’s memo outlining the suffragist strategy for election day had fallen into the hands of the Antis.95 On May 31, the Oregonian exposed the plan to stage pro-suffrage women at the polls and reported the anti-suffragists’ counter strategy. Ferdinand E. Reed, manager of the Anti-Suffrage League, had announced: "Ordinarily we do not believe in having women at the polls, but in this fight we may have to. It is a case of woman against woman, and I think we are justified in taking such measures to defeat the amendment."96 Speaking on behalf of the central campaign office, Kate Gordon initially denied the plan, then clarified the suffragists’ position:

If we do decide to have workers, they will probably be instructed to avoid talking to the men and confine their work to the distribution of printed matter....We are still undecided as to the advisability of adopting such tactics, and it all depends upon the emergency of the situation. I will admit that we have done something along the line of organizing the workers, because it would not do to let it go until the last minute. But it may be that we shall not have the workers at all. It is rather a disagreeable task to ask ladies to perform, but there are plenty of them willing to do it.97

Gordon clearly downplayed the situation. The suffragists’ poll-watching plan was well underway, for the Oregonian confirmed that suffragist Esther C. Pohl had identified “at least 500 women in Portland who were willing to volunteer their services.”98 This included Colby.

ELECTION DAY

“Go to bed early tomorrow night, get a good night’s rest and get up sweet-tempered the next morning.”99 This was Shaw’s advice to suffragists on the afternoon preceding the election. The following morning, women volunteers headed to the polls to distribute literature and engage voters a final time.100 OESA ensured pro-suffrage volunteers arrived well before the polls opened and organized more than 650 women in shifts throughout the day. The Antis had poll activists as well; however, suffragists generally found one anti-suffrage man assigned to each precinct. Reed’s promise to dispatch a cadre of anti-suffrage women appears not to have materialized.101 Nonetheless, the Evening Telegram reported that the voter “found himself between the horns of a serious dilemma, for as he reached the polling place an equal-suffragist worker shoved a little white card in one hand with the request that he vote for the cause, while a man thrust a big blue card into his other hand urging him...
ON ELECTION DAY, suffragist women distributed literature and lobbied voters one final time in an effort to ensure the amendment would pass. The women also encountered anti-suffragist men engaging voters in an effort to ensure the amendment would fail.

not to ‘handicap Greater Oregon with woman suffrage’.”

Returned to Portland at campaign’s end, Colby arrived at her local precinct around 7 p.m., taking over for those who had worked earlier. She distributed the suffrage appeal to voters returning home from their workplaces and noted a growing anti-suffrage effort focused on the distribution of the blue anti-suffrage cards. Colby found the card ironic, in that “its color [was] not true blue, but electric blue that fades quickly.” She confirmed that the young men handing out blue cards were paid three dollars for the day — with an extra dollar guaranteed should the amendment be defeated. She recognized “the other dollar was a marginal bribe,” and said to them: “It ought not to be surprising that women will work at the polls for the freedom of their sex, but that a young man can be hired to work against it is astonishing; you must be hard up!”

After working the polls, Colby departed for Lents precinct to monitor the count, remaining until 4:00 p.m. the next day. Frustrated with the election men who attempted to stymie her observations, she complained, “The majority of the night shift of judges plainly showed their sympathies were against us by arranging the barrier which fenced us off from them so as to make it as difficult as possible to see where the X was placed.” Never one to back down, she “sweetly and firmly said I was there to see the vote, with the legal authority to do it and I did see every one.” As the evening wore into morning, the count revealed that the campaign strategy to target a variety of constituencies including working men had been successful, for Colby reported that votes “from the top of the box were nearly two to one in favor of woman suffrage, showing that the workmen of the longer hours who had come home latest were largely with us.” Votes in the next layer, cast at midday by businessmen, were “against us more than two to one.” At noon, suffrage was only sixteen votes behind. By mid afternoon, when the early morning voters’ ballots were counted, suffrage gained again. The dramatic conclusion was a tie.

Across the state, it appeared that votes cast early and late were in favor of suffrage, but those cast midday were greatly against it, indicating that suffrage outreach to the laboring classes had borne fruit. What was more, Colby’s analysis of the votes she observed revealed that while Socialists and Prohibitionists were overwhelmingly in favor of suffrage, neither Republicans nor Democrats could be counted on as sure supporters. Her observation was later underscored by Shaw, who concluded, “we watched the ballot very closely to see who our friends really were, and we found in proportion to the ballots cast we could depend on no one party more than another.” Historian Rebecca J. Mead concluded that, “as a result of this experience, suffragists everywhere became vigilant poll watchers and vote counters, regardless of concerns about appropriate female behavior.”

After all the votes were counted, the statewide measure received 44 percent support and was defeated by more than 10,000 votes: 47,075 for no, 36,902 for yes — “MAJORITY AGAINST SUFFRAGE Thirty-Five Hundred Plurality Snows It Under in Multnomah County,” proclaimed one headline.

The defeat left Oregon suffragists in chaos. NAWSA organizers departed to focus on other work, and key members of OESA stepped down. Colby and a few others remained, hoping to build on their moderate successes for a second attempt in 1908. Duniway reemerged, claimed the campaign’s failure as a vindication of her methods, and aimed her wrath squarely at Colby as a representative interloper she believed needed to be excised from future work in Oregon — along with everyone else associated with NAWSA or in favor of a public campaign. She named Colby “the greatest menace” to Oregon suffrage and fanned the flames of her vendetta throughout the summer.
This built to an inferno on September 9, 1906, when Duniway re-published in the Oregonian her address given to the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) convention in Washington, D.C., on January 23, 1889, that had effectively cemented her break with many Eastern suffrage leaders. In that speech, she had singled out the “untimely invasion” of Colby and other “self-imported Eastern Suffragists” who “created a ‘hurrah’ campaign” as being responsible for the defeat of woman suffrage around the time of the Washington State Constitutional Convention. Duniway believed the 1906 Oregon campaign repeated that history and extended her attack by forwarding to Shaw clippings of her speech from the Oregonian, accompanied by a letter that leveled a number of personal invectives at both Shaw and Colby. After insulting Shaw by describing her previous letter as “an incoherent reply (as from one intoxicated),” Duniway singled out Colby as a “fool” with a history of “butting in” to campaigns where she was not wanted: “Have you some place on earth to put the old tramp where there is no campaign pending?”

Believing their missionary campaign tactics had borne fruit, Colby and other Oregon suffragists hoped to continue this style of suffrage work in the state, but Duniway successfully blocked them when she secured her power at OESA’s acrimonious November annual meeting. She packed the house with her supporters and regained the presidency by a large margin over Ada Wallace Unruh. The resentment rose to a crescendo when anti-Duniway factions nominated Colby for vice-president; in response, Duniway declared, “I positively cannot work with Mrs. Colby.” This set off a volatile exchange among the assembly, but Colby restored the peace by moving to have Duniway’s friend Elizabeth Lord unanimously elected vice president.

Others were ousted and replaced with Duniway allies, and Duniway doubled down on her effort to purge Colby and any remaining women she believed were antithetical to her cause. She insulted Colby as a “hoo-doo” and characterized Mary A. Thompson — a physician and suffragist who often tangled with Duniway — as an obstructionist in the pages of the Oregon Daily Journal. Ousted suffragists believed Duniway’s leadership and strategy would only lead to failure, and their grievances were also aired in the press. Unruh asserted in the Oregon Daily Journal that “I have been connected with the suffrage movement in Oregon for 16 years and have studied the suffrage situation in every state and not only know the situation in Portland but in every portion of the state, and I am convinced that the much vaunted ‘still hunt’ of Mrs. Duniway is mischievous in practice, wholly illogical and can only result in defeat.” In the pages of The Woman’s Tribune, Colby explained, “the election of Mrs. Duniway, while it was an endorsement by the majority of those present, by no means represents the sentiments of the majority of those who have done the work for suffrage in Oregon.” Her concluding assessment was that Oregon needed a well-organized machine, not a singular leadership: “The reason suffrage has been defeated three times in Oregon is because we lack such a representative body which could rally the splendid sentiment throughout the State and focus it in united action. Our great departed leader, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, used to say we could never cope with our enemy on their own ‘still hunt’ plan, but education must be our watchword.”

CONCLUSION

Finances forced Colby to close The Woman’s Tribune in 1909 and find other paid work in the suffrage, peace, and New Thought movements, and although she traveled extensively in her later years, she continued her association with Oregon until her death in 1916. Colby’s account of her activities in the 1905 to 1906 campaign demonstrates the Herculean effort given by individual campaign activists who worked to educate voters and turn out supporters through a direct appeal to the people. Importantly, this campaign established a different political culture in support of woman suffrage. Woman suffrage received increased serious attention from mainstream newspapers such as the Oregonian, which historian Lauren Kessler showed had routinely ignored suffrage prior to these events. NAWSA’s 1905 Portland convention marked a positive turn by increasing suffrage reportage, and as Kessler demonstrated, “it took outsiders to make the woman suffrage movement worthy of substantial coverage by the press. . . . the activities of insiders — Oregon women suffragists — were perceived by the press as less newsworthy.” What is more, Kessler found that “the support of outsiders was both the cause and the effect of legitimation.” Kessler’s findings repudiate Duniway’s protest against outside intervention into the campaign, as well as her assessment that she had “made a serious mistake by authorizing our delegates to the National Woman Suffrage Association in Washington in 1904 to invite the National Convention to meet in Oregon in 1905.”

The Oregon campaign likely contributed to what historian Sara Hunter Graham described as the national “suffrage renaissance” in the years following 1906. Colby and other organizers normalized the suffrage message, developed political community, and made supporters feel less isolated. They revealed the need for statewide organizational tactics and rekindled enthusiasm among those who had stopped suffrage work in frustration with Duniway’s “still hunt.” While it did raise the ire of the Antis, the public nature of the campaign and national suffragist intervention legitimized suffrage activities and also exposed how far the Antis would go to oppose suffrage, thus allowing suffragists to create counter-strategies for use in later campaigns.
Ultimately, the 1905–1906 campaign demonstrated that while high-profile leaders were certainly important, the significance of individual campaign workers could not be underestimated. If a better-organized headquarters had employed a larger number of fieldworkers, the campaign might have succeeded through its use of a variety of messaging channels to publicly evangelize for woman suffrage. These valuable learning experiences were refined and applied in Oregon and other states as suffragists continued their quest for equal voting rights, and Oregon ultimately achieved its star on the suffrage flag in 1912.

### NOTES

1. “Meetings in Congregational Church,” The Woman’s Tribune [hereafter Woman’s Tribune], June 9, 1906, p. 46.


4. A state constitutional amendment in favor of women’s suffrage appeared on Oregon’s ballot in 1884, 1900, 1906, 1910, 1912.


7. Catalogue of the Officers and Students of the University of Wisconsin, For the Year 1872–73 and the First Term of 73–74 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, November 1873), 76–77.


11. See Kathi Kern, Mrs. Stanton’s Bible (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Bloomberg, “Cultural Critique and Consciousness Raising,” Clara Colby and her husband Leonard Colby adopted two children, Clarence and Zintka Nuni. Clarence was likely adopted from an orphan train, and Zintka—a known as Zintka or “Lost Bird”—was a surviving Lakota infant in the aftermath of Wounded Knee (1890). Zintka’s history is complex. Leonard, a member of the Nebraska National Guard, removed Zintka from South Dakota and brought her back to Nebraska while Clara was away working on a suffrage business. The Colbys adopted Zintka and named her Marguerite Elizabeth. Scholars acknowledge more than one surviving Wounded Knee American Indian child was adopted; however, as a result of sensational newspaper coverage of the massacre and Zintka’s subsequent adoption, she is among the earliest documented American Indian child adoptees by a White family. A full treatment of Zintka’s life and relationship with her mother as well as a response to the sometimes erroneous history that has emerged regarding Zintka is outside the scope of this article. Clara Colby’s position as a late-nineteenth-century White reformer raising an indigenous child in White culture, however, represents problematic progressive efforts to assimilate Native children into dominant White culture. See A.C. Towner to John R. Brennan, August 7, 1901, and John R. Brennan to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, June 14, 1902, both John R. Brennan Papers, H72-002, Scrapbook Box 28, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, South Dakota, relating to more than one infant adopted from the Wounded Knee site and Clara Colby’s request for Zintka’s enrollment at the Cheyenne River Agency (South Dakota) and to be given full tribal rights, including a land allotment. It does not appear Zintka was successfully enrolled. Also see William S.E. Coleman, Voices of Wounded Knee (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 352; and David W. Grua, Surviving Wounded Knee: The Lakotas and the Politics of Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 89. For additional reading on the history of American Indian child separation, see Margaret D. Jacobs, White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).


cyclopedia.org/articles/lewis_clark_exposition


87. “Last Days In The Field,” Woman’s Tribune, June 9, 1906, p. 1; Soule (1882–1922) had previously worked on the Omaha Bee. Charles and his wife Ada owned the newspaper.


93. “Is This Bribery?” Sunday Oregonian, June 3, 1906, Suffrage Scrapbook 90, p. 113, OHS Research Library.

94. Anna Howard Shaw to Dear Chairwoman Committee, May 11, 1906, MSS 1089, Eva Dye Papers [hereafter Dye papers], OHS Research Library.


97. Ibid.

98. Ibid.


104. Ibid.


109. Anna Howard Shaw to Chairman of the Campaign Committee, June 7, 1906, Dye papers, box 4, folder 10, OHS Research Library.


118. “For Third Time They Appeal For Right Of Ballot,” Evening Telegram, June 4, 1906, Suffrage Scrapbook 90, OHS Research Library.


