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# The New Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics

Julie Pergande  
*Iowa State University*

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**“To the wrongs that need assistance,  
To the right that needs assistance,  
To the future in the distance,  
Give yourselves.”**

**—Carrie Chapman Catt**

**The New**

# **Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics**

-by Julie Pergande  
Design -by Scott Wamsley

These words, spoken by Catt in her address to the 1921 graduating class of Iowa State, are of the variety transcendent in time, and sure to inspire progress for at least another 70 years.



Looking into the sea of faces that afternoon, Catt was behind the podium as the first woman to give the commencement address at her alma mater. In what she coined her “foghorn voice,” the one she used for public speaking, Catt touched on such universal graduation sentiments as the hope for achievement, growth and new beginnings. As Catt stood before the rows of individuals filled with anticipation, she was already a pillar of accomplishment.

Besides giving a groundbreaking speech at Iowa State, Catt had already made a name for herself nationwide as a premier feminist leader and speaker as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and the International Woman Suffrage Alliance.

**Perhaps one of her greatest gifts to society, however, was her instrumental role in seeing the 19th Amendment to the Constitution ratified, which gave women the right to vote. For Catt, it was reward for more than a quarter century of dedicated work.**

Three years ago, the Political Science Advisory Board and several alumni initiated a campaign to honor Catt by establishing the Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics. It was decided that Botany Hall, one of only three major 19th-century buildings still left on campus, would be spared demolition and become home to the new center.

**The Plaza of Heroines was an idea designed to “give permanent honor to women from all walks of life.”**

“It’s been an amazing project,” development officer from the college of Liberal Arts and Sciences Kay Kirkman said of the extensive fundraising efforts to renovate the building. Kirkman wanted to take an unorthodox approach to raising the money. Of the \$5 million determined budget, Kirkman and her colleagues were informed that the university would fund all but about 20 percent.

“I thought, ‘let’s do a fundraising project to bring in lots of small donations,’” said Kirkman, who wanted to avoid reaching the \$875,000 goal with the help of just a few large contributors. The plan was more than successful, and the money was actually accumulated six months ahead of schedule, thanks to a creation called the **Plaza of Heroines.**

The Plaza of Heroines was an idea designed to “give permanent honor to women from all walks of life.” Gracing the front entrance of the Center will be a collection of thousands of bricks inscribed with the names of women who, in ways great or small, have made an impact on the lives of others. “We were hoping to raise \$200,000 from it,” Kirkman said. “We’ve already raised more than \$400,000 and request for bricks keep coming in. We like to say we completed the building one brick at a time.”

Kirkman noted the response has been “remarkable.” Those who dedicated bricks are invited to share the story of their heroine, each of which Kirkman said will be stored on a computer just inside the Center for the public to read. She added that, in the future, she would like to make a book of the stories.

For Kirkman and the others who spent months of time and energy generating what has exceeded more than \$1 million, all that remains is a week of celebrating the 75th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, and finally, opening the doors to the long-awaited Catt Center.

Kirkman promised a **“cultural and educational experience”** the week prior to the dedication of the Center in the form of a CHATAKWA, a 19th-century style art festival. Planned activities include historical re-enactments, guest speakers Molly Ivans and Wilma Mankiller, discussion sessions, and even a bicycle parade to pay tribute to one of the first vehicles to “really liberate women.” The week will conclude on Friday, Oct. 6, when Iowa State officially dedicates the Catt Center. It will be “one of only two university-based research centers of its kind in the country.”

The building itself has undergone a number of small changes. It was built in 1893 at a cost of \$35,000 and was Iowa State College’s Agricultural Hall. The psychology department spent a brief period of time in Botany Hall as well, from the late ‘60s until the early ‘80s, when city fire marshals condemned use of all but the first floor of the building. Until the plans for renovation surfaced in 1992, the ground floor

remained in use but faced almost certain demolition. Assistant university architect Scott Sankey, who is working on the restoration, is excited that the Hall is getting the opportunity to become such a “good example of adaptive reuse. The building has given us 100 years, now it’s ready to give us another 100.

Baldwin White of Des Moines were the contractors commissioned to do the job, and Sherry Peterson, an Iowa State alumna and classmate of Sankey’s, handled the design. “The design team studied old photos and drawings of the building,” Sankey said, “We recreated a feel very historical in character. We tried to do that throughout.” The hall will retain its classical high ceilings and woodwork. However, Sankey and the design team sought to slightly beautify the building with a modern touch, as opposed to its more utilitarian original design.

As well as being a research base for the study of women and politics, the center will also house offices for the college of LAS, the department of philosophy, Women’s studies, African American studies, Native American studies and other cross disciplinary programs.

When she spoke to the graduates of 1921, Catt said, **“It is only in combination with others that progress may be accomplished.”** Surely, if she were alive today, Catt would be pleased to see just what that idea, and some people driven toward a common goal, can do.



## Chronology

# Carrie Chapman Catt

**1859**

Born to Lucius Lane and Maria Clinton, Ripon, Wisconsin.

**1865**

Moves to farm outside Charles City, Iowa.

**1877**

Enrolls at Iowa Agricultural College and Farm.

**1880**

Graduates in three years as Valedictorian of her class. Earns bachelor of science degree. While at Iowa State, initiates military exercise drills for women. Becomes first woman to give an oration at literary societies. Earns money washing dishes; later as assistant librarian.

**1885**

Becomes assistant editor of Mason City Republican. Establishes a column titled "Woman's World" which deals with political, economical, social and legal issues rather than food/fashion.

**1892**

Travels to 20 states, attends 15 conventions and makes 51 speeches. Becomes President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

**1903**

Becomes President of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance.

**1911**

Tours world promoting woman suffrage and international peace. Visits Norway, Sweden, South Africa (meets with Gandhi), Egypt, Ceylon, India, Malaya, Hong Kong, Philippines, China.

**1919**

Suffrage amendment passes in U.S. House and Senate. Catt continues to work to ensure ratification by 36 states.

**1920**

Amendment ratified.

**1921**

First woman to deliver a commencement address at Iowa State College. Active supporter of League of Nations.

**1922**

Gives \$100,000 to Iowa State as an endowment fund. Income from the fund to be used for undergraduate scholarships. (Fund now totals over \$270,000.)

**1926**

Appears on cover of Time magazine.

**1931**

Gives commencement address at Iowa State College.

**1937**

Chosen nationally as one of the greatest American women.

**1941**

Receives the Chi Omega award at the White House from long-time friend, Eleanor Roosevelt.

**1944**

Works toward establishment of the United Nations.

**1947**

Dies at her home in New Rochelle, New York. Bequeaths entire estate to Iowa State University. Includes over 1,000 volumes from her peace library, furniture, statuary, paintings.

**1948**

Featured on U.S. postage stamp along with Elizabeth Stanton and Lucretia Mott.

Timeline courtesy of ISU Foundation

