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Iowa State's Famous Alumna

She Cleared the Way For Women's Rights

by Sandra Cruickshank, T. Jl. 4

Carrie Chapman Catt, one of Iowa State's most famous and distinguished alumnae, is little known on campus. She brought national and international recognition to Iowa State as she carried the banner for women's suffrage and education around the world and was named one of the 10 greatest American women.

Because this courageous fighter dared to test her ideas and fight for her beliefs, four states claim her as their own. Wisconsin claims her because she was born there, Iowa claims her because she began her work here, New York claims her because she lived there during her adult life and Washington, D.C. claims her because she was a national figure. Here at Iowa State, where she started her work, she is virtually unrecognized.

This school is many things. To eighteen-year-old Carrie Lane, who entered Iowa Agricultural College in March of 1877, the school was ripe for improving the status of women. While working her way through school as a dishwasher and librarian, Miss Lane organized the first ladies' military battalion. The general said he would be glad to drill women, but they would have to supply their own uniforms. Their first drills were with broom handles. In 1893, after Miss Lane was out of school, the drill squad went to the World Exposition in Chicago.

Another custom to fall under Miss Lane's attack was that of debate exclusively for men. Literary societies recognized debating by men but only the reading of essays by women. Miss Lane decided women could debate on a level equal to that of men. She organized meetings for Saturday afternoon, the time traditionally reserved for men to take the ladies walking. The venture was successful and women earned a place in debate alongside men.

Miss Lane graduated in November, 1880. In 1885 she married Leo Chapman, but their happiness was brief. He died in 1886 of typhoid. Carrie Chapman then married George W. Catt in 1890. As she had no family, she spent all her energies on the suffrage movement. She traveled, worked for and was president of many women suffrage associations and groups on a national and international level. She visited most of the countries of the world furthering women's suffrage and education. She also was interested in studying peace and treaty settlements of wars.

In 1904, Mr. Catt died while still young. He had spent a lifetime in 45 years, and had become wealthy in a marine enterprise. His wealth financed his wife's movements. Without him, it is doubtful that she could have been so successful. In 1919, Mrs. Catt established the League of Women Voters. The Iowa State chapter of Pi Beta Phi sorority received $6,000 from her in 1926. She had belonged to the local

Carrie Chapman Catt

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Carrie Chapman Catt, — Cont. from page 11

group as an undergraduate. In 1931 Mrs. Catt was elected to a list of the 12 greatest American women and in 1937 to a list of the 10 greatest American women. Because she lived to be 80 years old, she was recognized in her lifetime and enjoyed a place of respect on the American scene. Her natural talent and world schooling, poise and balance gave her the needed diplomacy for every situation. She was a courageous woman who was best when the fight was hottest.

Mrs. Catt once said the happiest day of her life was when Tennessee finally ratified the suffrage amendment. It was all over then — her long campaign for women to gain the right to vote. But she didn’t live to see the fulfillment of her other dream of world peace.

In her will, Mrs. Catt left portraits, statuary, two tables, four chairs, a display cabinet and a side-board piece to Iowa State for a Carrie Chapman Catt memorial room. The private library of Mr. Catt had been placed earlier in the engineering reading room and Mrs. Catt’s 1,000 volume collection of war and peace books had been donated to the main library. Some of her books are now in the reference room. The main portion of the collection is filed under the XCA mark.

There is a George W. Catt scholarship which Mrs. Catt set up in memory of her second husband, also an Iowa State graduate. The $100,000 in securities for the scholarship was given to the school in 1922, the same year she gave Iowa State most of her personal library. Mrs. Catt retained use of the annuities until her death when the money was put into the scholarship fund.

For lack of space, a memorial room where the Carrie Chapman Catt furniture can be displayed has never been established. It is hoped that in some future building, a spot will be set aside to honor this valiant fighter for women’s rights.

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