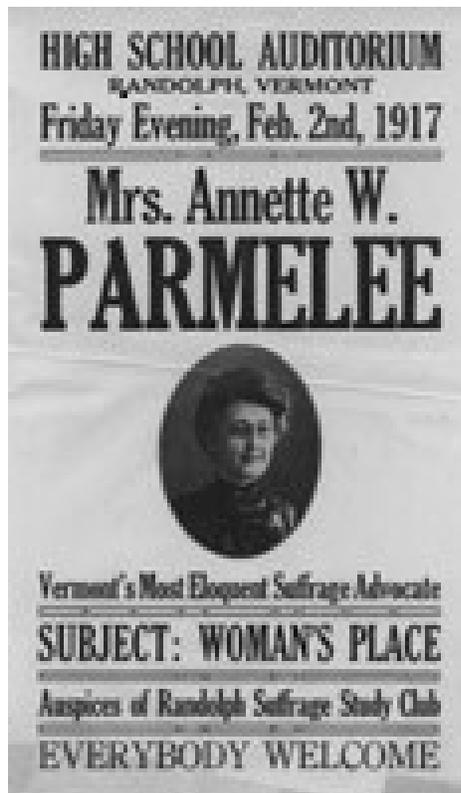


The Famous Suffragist from Enosburgh: Annette W. Parmelee

by Marilyn Blackwell



On January 24, 1911, during a mock session of the Vermont Legislature, a young representative from Londonderry suddenly appeared in the modest feminine attire of “Annette ... the suffragette.” The prim “Annette” proceeded to recite a poem in defense of a facetious universal suffrage bill, which required married men to vote only as their wives had dictated. Watching the farce from the gallery, Annette Parmelee joined in the fun, as “tickled” as anyone that evening. The appearance of this ubiquitous lobbyist for the Vermont Equal Suffrage Association (VESA) was testimony to the statewide celebrity of Annette W. Parmelee and the cordial relationships she had fostered with legislators, who had branded her the “Suffragette Hornet” for buzzing around the statehouse.

In this year marking the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, we would do well to honor the state’s most noted champion of women’s right to vote. Raised in Washington, Vermont, Annette Watson moved to Enosburgh Falls in 1889 at the age of 24 when she married Edward J. Parmelee, an accountant for J.B Kendall Co. His first wife, Lillian, had died six months earlier, and he was left with two young children.

Trained as a teacher and a nurse, Annette left her nursing career and her membership in the Congregational Church behind to marry. She quickly became a stalwart member of the Methodist Episcopal Church and committed to the charitable work of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society. Also active in the Ladies Village Improvement Society, the Library Club, and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), Parmelee became well-known for her literary pursuits, her devotion to sacred music, and her artistic endeavors. It was not long before she was in demand as a lecturer on art and music, as a vocalist, and as an occasional performer. A gracious host, she welcomed everyone to her home on Orchard Street, decorated with her own artistic works.

Just as Parmelee garnered admiration in Enosburgh, so too she earned respect for her political work statewide. After her death, the editor of the St. Albans Messenger surmised that, “a comprehensive history of Vermont of her time could not be written without due credit being given to her activities.”

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Parmalee continued from page two..

With a ready wit that served her well, Parmelee first became known for the “sting of her pen” against the “wet” newspaper editors of the state. As head of the franchise department for the WCTU, she believed like other temperance advocates, that the women’s vote would enhance the prospect of achieving prohibition, at a time when local option allowed some towns to cater to the liquor trade.

After becoming the press secretary for VESA, Parmelee gained her unique celebrity as a suffragist by regularly appearing at the statehouse. In 1908 she gave her first legislative address, advocating municipal suffrage for women, a proposal that VESA had submitted every session since 1884. Women were equal citizens who paid taxes, Parmelee claimed; moreover, they had proven themselves “superior” to men, who normally represented “their own interests and not those of the wife, sister or single woman.” Given their virtuous motives, the women’s vote would surely result in “good government,” she assured them, thereby improving the state. For years members of the senate and house had passed the bill back and forth with no action while claiming politely that the women in their town did not want the vote, but when they did, the lawmakers would be happy to give it to them.

Making little headway at the statehouse, Parmelee wrote witty letters to Vermont’s newsmen, hoping they would print suffrage material. When a few did, she thanked them graciously, earning another chance to reach the public and respect from her editorial correspondents as well.

Yet not all were thrilled; one editor recommended she move to Iceland where women can vote, which led to a debate among several newsmen whether to get rid of Parmelee or keep her as a form of entertainment. Rising to the occasion, she invited them all to her house, where they would hear “plenty of women’s suffrage and prohibition chin music, ending with a Victrola concert.” If they tired, she offered them “couch hammocks,” a cot, or easy chairs. “Now what more can a real live hornet do to stir things up and give them a rest?” she queried. Grateful for the attention, she thanked the editor for not suggesting a “hotter place than Iceland.”

Parmelee’s wit, her diplomacy, her poise while under attack, and her persistence were legendary by 1917, when lawmakers finally passed municipal suffrage for taxpaying women. She continued working in various roles for VESA and its successor, the League of Women Voters, until she had exhausted her energies. Unfortunately, in August 1924, she died of pernicious anemia at the age of 59, a woman who had certainly made history in Vermont.



The house, today, at 92 Orchard Street where Parmalee once lived. Cindy Weed photo.