

## Readers' Theater Production

# “Window on the Past: Revisiting the First National Woman’s Rights Convention”

By Karen Board Moran (Adapted by Patty Jantho)

*(This space can be used to relate what you are about to tell to the group or organization you are addressing: the group’s purpose, perhaps something about the time when the org/group was founded. If that is not applicable, just rewrite the first sentence to suit the situation.)*

*But why review our origins when the subject of the moment is an event that took place over 150 years ago? We look to our past to contrast the needs of women in the 1920’s with women at the midpoint of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What was happening in America at that time?*

The total population of the country in 1850 was just over 23 million. Millard Fillmore had become president following Zachary Taylor’s sudden death—natural causes—during that summer. It was the years after the California Gold Rush and two years before the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

There were so many changes happening in America and in growing New England industrial cities like Worcester. More and more factories were producing large numbers of similar goods, creating more jobs for the newly arrived immigrants—mostly from Ireland.

Working in a factory was so different from working on a farm. Husbands went off to work while the wife stayed home to manage the household tasks and children.

Many critical events were emerging at that juncture of American history that generated the First National Woman’s Right Convention. Simply stated, three movements were about to converge or clash—these movements were concerned with **temperance, anti-slavery and women’s rights**.

But first we must set the stage: In 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York together with Lucretia Mott and others, Elizabeth Cady Stanton first articulated the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* that set forth grievances from every aspect of women’s lives. This marked the formal beginning of the Women’s Rights movement in America.

Now we are in Worcester, Massachusetts in the fall of 1850. We're in the midst of gorgeous Indian summer weather on October 23 and 24. Even though it was the middle of the week, a chance to hear discussion of woman's rights drew a huge crowd from all walks of life to

Brinley Hall on Main Street. Mechanics, craftsmen, teachers, housewives, dentists, waiters, doctors, nurses, and reporters were all part of the audience.

Many temperance people were there as well. A newspaper reported that Catherine Leonard's drunken husband murdered her in New York. Stories made temperance—a woman's issue. Women have no legal recourse against abusive husbands and fathers. In fact, they can hit their wives with anything smaller than the thickness of their thumb and make all decisions controlling guardianship of the children—all with the letter of the law.

Two area women, Abby Kelley Foster and Lucy Stone organized the Call with seven others after the annual convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society in Boston. People were focused on the new Fugitive Slave Law that would impose heavy penalties on anyone interfering with recovery of runaway slaves or who aided in their escape. That law was part of the Compromise of 1850, which would gain free statehood for California. We tried to put aside those concerns during the Convention but both Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth were in town to remind us that woman is part of all races and conditions.

But there were another kind of slavery with our society—sometimes subtle and sometimes blatant, and it was time now for women's issues to be discussed.

The speeches that you will hear are quoted directly from the proceedings, which were recorded in the press—the New York Daily Tribune was a primary source.

Our hearts were stirred by the opening speech of the Convention by President **Paulina Wright Davis**, a health reformer from Rhode Island. She set the tone by reminding us that it had been two years since the convention in Seneca Falls, New York and that more would be expected of this convention. She proclaimed:

**“It is one thing to issue a declaration of rights or a declaration of wrongs to the world, but quite another thing—wisely and happily—to commend the subject to the world's acceptance, and so to secure the desired reformation. Nature does not teach that men and women are unequal, but only unlike;.....so naturally related and dependent that their respective differences by their balance establish their equality.”**

The crowd swelled to over 500. At times it was difficult to hear, but **Lucretia Mott**, elder leader of the woman's movement, frequently had to quiet the room. She had our attention as she said:

**..."In the Society of Friends to which I belong, women are constructed with lungs for use rather than show; but a part of their education is to keep silence. Our voices will be heard in all parts of this crowded room if there are no whisperings."**

Mrs. Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton first planned to do something about woman's rights in London when the American female delegates were denied equal participation at the 1840 World's Anti-Slavery Convention. Eight years later they helped organize the first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls.

**Abby Price** from Hopedale, a nearby utopian community, spelled out some of the issues we discussed.

**"The natural rights of woman are co-equal with those of man...Each of the sexes is equally necessary to the common happiness, and in one way or another is equally capable, with fair opportunity, of contribution to it...We contend:**

- **That women ought to have equal opportunities with men for suitable and well compensated employment.**
- **That women ought to have equal opportunities, privilege, and securities with men for rendering themselves pecuniarily independent.**
- **That women ought to have equal legal and political rights, franchises, and advantages with men.**
- **Men's abuse of power throughout history has degraded his equal companion, the mother who bore him—the playmate of his childhood and the daughter of their love.-**

Ernestine Rose of New York worked with Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Stanton to gain New York women the right to retain their own property after marriage. She observed...

**"When men and women are trained as human beings, without regard to sex—in schools, in academia, in Church and in State, when their education and thoughts become more spiritual and less animal, then we shall not suffer this inequality any longer. The sphere of woman, oh, how limited! When woman suffers then man suffers —they must both suffer from this inequality. What we most want is this- a determination NEVER to give up the rights of humanity.."**

Worcester's pioneer female lecturer and recognized radical thinker, Abbey Kelley Foster, caused a great stir when she brought up the idea that newspapers called the "cut throat theory."

**"I do not talk of woman's rights, but of human rights, the rights of human beings. I do not come to ask for them but to demand them; not to get down on my knees and beg for them, but to claim them. 'Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.' We have our rights, and the right to revolt, as did our fathers against King George the Third---the right to rise up and cut the tyrants' throats. On this subject I scorn to talk like a woman. We must give them the truth, and not twaddle. We must not be mealy mouthed with our tyrants in broadcloth and tight clothes...a woman was just as well qualified to be President as a man."**

These were indeed shocking words! Lucretia Mott rightly feared Abby would be construed to favor the use of violence and bloodshed as one of the means of obtaining woman's rights.

Many preferred Mrs. Mott's Position that "non-resistance is the strongest kind of resistance." At the end of the first day,

**Mrs. Rose** summed up what our life is like in this century.

**"Two positions we have assigned to woman. Either to play the puppet in the parlor, or the drudge in the kitchen. And till all these old prejudices and restrictions, and this whole system of woman's slavery from beginning to end, are done away with—and not till then—will man and woman be brought to a happy state of existence."**

That same afternoon William Lloyd Garrison added his thoughts on the convention. His paper, *The Liberator*, has often been the sole voice for equality in America since 1831. He said, **"I cannot but feel how much we have lost—how much has been lost to the world of the eloquence, the wisdom and the power of Woman by the deprivation of her rights. What eloquence, what burning words we have listened to at this Convention from the lips of Woman."**

A new voice at the Convention was **Sojourner Truth**, a freed New York slave. Her first major speech about woman's rights received several burst of applause and praise. Even the sympathetic papers that carried her speech failed totally to capture her unique way of speaking.

**"It is not fair to let woman suffer because she ate the apple, and to say that she was the weaker vessel, and turned the world upside down accordingly. If she had really**

**done so, what should hinder her to turn it back again? Nothing but the intolerance of man!**

**Knock down *that*, and all will come right that is a plain truth...it is wonderful how things have come round. Slaves used to do all the scrubbing in New England, and they complained of the hard work; they were emancipated and the hard work fell on the wives and daughters of New England and they have begun to complain. The men, seeing that they have got into a fix, are, too beginning to squirm and complain; and improvement in the condition of their wives and daughters will have to come before their complaints will have caused to be at an end; and all this arose out of the abolition of slavery in the north."**

Sojourner certainly reminded us how the abolition of slavery and woman's rights are linked. But some were unhappy that the issue of race had been included in the proceedings,

especially when the resolution that called for the suffrage and **"Equality before the law without distinction of sex or color"** was passed.

The second day more speeches and letters were read before the Convention voted to accept eleven resolutions, including the controversial one on suffrage. Many were disappointed that **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** could not attend because of the birth of her fourth child. Her letter brought her persuasive thoughts to us...

**"Some tell us that if woman should interest herself in political affairs, it would destroy all domestic harmony....There is not a true happiness where there is subordination – no harmony without freedom.... We have many noblewomen in our land, who free from all domestic encumbrances, might grace a Senate chamber, and for whose services the country might gladly forego all the noise, bluster, and folly of one-half the male dolts who now flourish there...The voice of woman is the essential element wanting in the political organization of our Republic."**

**Harriet Hunt** spoke forcibly for woman's rights in the vocation of medicine based on her personal frustration. After hearing that Elizabeth Blackwell had been admitted to Geneva Medical College, she was denied permission to attend lectures at the Harvard Medical College in 1847. Hunt was finally given permission a month after the Convention, but male student protests prevented her attendance. Using medical analogies, she said.

**"We have been working upon the outer skin....preventing a palsy in the community; but still the heart, the central point of circulation has not been reached...now, we need something internal....we demand equal freedom of development, equal**

**advantages of education, for both sexes. We ask that medical colleges may be opened to MIND, not sex.”**

The Convention did not hear “silver tongued” **Lucy Stone** until the last evening. She was recuperating from a bout of typhoid fever, but insisted upon seeing her dream of a National Woman’s Rights Convention take place. She held the audience captive as she urged that **action begins from “the triumphant success: of the Convention.** She was the first woman to speak in public about woman’s rights just three years earlier in Gardner, Massachusetts. Stone had been frustrated by the lack of movement after the “Declaration of Sentiments” was issued at Seneca Falls, NY in 1848. In her speech she said:

**“We want....to be something more than the appendages of Society; We want that Woman should be the co-equal and helpmeet of Man in all the interests, and perils and enjoyments of human life. We want that she should attain to the development of her nature and woman hood; We want that when she dies, it may not be written on her grave stone that she was the “relict” of somebody, meaning she was just the widow.”**

When she married Henry Blackwell five years later, their unique marriage vows would establish a coequal relationship. She would retain her maiden name and those who followed her example would be called “Lucy Stoners.”

It was probably this speech that Susan B. Anthony credited for inspiring her to speak out for woman’s rights within the temperance movement and which ultimately led to her lifelong partnership with Elizabeth Cady Stanton in furtherance of women’s rights.

**So, members and friends, how far have we come? How many of their concerns are still with us today? What changes will another 20 or 25 years bring? Food for thought?**

**Action? Thank you.**

**##**

KBMoran/PNJantho, October 2003

Adapted from a “classroom exercise” purchased in Worcester, MA in 2000 in celebration of the First National Woman’s Rights Convention held in Worcester in 1850.

The first Woman’s Rights Convention, called by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was in 1848 in Seneca Falls, NY, that also had a major celebration in 1998 in Seneca Falls, NY.