

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
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Voting is on everyone's mind this year, with several upcoming elections. It was on everyone's mind 100 years ago, too, when the 19th Amendment passed, granting voting rights to most women in the U.S. The amendment states that, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." We like to say that the 19th gave all women the right to vote, but we have to put an asterisk (*) after that statement.

Today I'd like to look at that asterisk. Who *didn't* get to vote? In 1920, the new law actually didn't apply to all women who had been born in the U.S. because some minority groups were denied citizenship. For example, many American Indian women didn't have the right to vote (in federal elections) until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 was passed, making all Native people U.S. citizens and giving them the right to vote in federal elections. (The right to vote in state elections was not granted to American Indians in some states until several decades later.)

Let's look at just one Vernon County family probably affected by this situation. The 1920 census shows us an "Indian" family living in the Town of Genoa, near the village of Romance. They were most likely Ho-Chunk, and at least one person in the extended family household bore the family name "Decorah", a well-known Ho-Chunk name.

The handwritten census record is hard to read, but three women lived in this home, and their names and ages appear to be Emma Lowery, possibly age 83; Reid Decorah or Sime, age 48; and Georgia Decorah, age 18. Emma's Ho-Chunk name may have been Ha Pe Win Kah.

So far as I know, these women were not considered U.S. citizens because they were Ho-Chunk. Emma and Reid were born in Wisconsin, and Georgia was born in Minnesota. All of their parents were born in the U.S. Georgia was too young to vote, because voting age for both men and women in 1920 was 21 years old, but the older women were well above that age. All three probably had to wait until 1924 to have the right to vote in U.S. elections.

Other women who weren't covered by the 19th Amendment included women who were born as citizens in the U.S. but who had lost their citizenship. Between the years 1907 and 1922, a woman born as a U.S. citizen would be stripped of that citizenship if she married a man who was *not* a U.S. citizen, such as an immigrant from Norway or Germany. This happened to at least 14 women in Vernon County, including Lizzie Albrecht of Westby, Edna Christianson of Stoddard, Amanda Haugen of Coon Valley, Agnes Stanek of Hillsboro, and Josie Vlasek of La Farge.

The law was modified in 1936 to say that if the husband died or if the marriage ended in divorce, then the woman could regain her citizenship. The remaining U.S.-born women, including those listed just above, regained their citizenship in 1940 and could then vote.

Many other women are included in the "asterisk", including African Americans who were denied access to the polls, and Chinese Americans who were not considered full U.S. citizens at that time. Eventually all gained the right to vote, but that occurred many years after the 19th Amendment was first passed in 1920.