

Thank you, Matilda: Honoring a women's rights pioneer



BARB GUY

Matilda Gage is being honored this year during Women's History Month, a special time set aside each March in tribute to women's long and difficult progress toward equality. The National Women's History Project chooses several honorees each year.

Gage, a newspaper editor, author, lecturer and civil rights advocate, spent more than 20 years on the national forefront of the struggle for women's rights. She won't be able to attend the festivities, though; she died 109 years ago.

She helped Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton write a "Declaration of Rights of Women" in 1876. Matilda held an umbrella over her friend Susan's head, sheltering her from the sweltering July 4 sun while Susan delivered their speech in front of Independence Hall on

the 100th anniversary of the founding of the nation.

They addressed their speech "to the daughters of 1976." That's me, for one; I was 16 then.

I don't know what Ms. Gage would think of being mentioned in a newspaper more than a century after her death, but I'm sure she'd be pleased a woman is doing the mentioning. Better still, one of the people who decides what goes in this Sunday Opinion section is also a woman and so is the editor of this newspaper.

We just need to buy out the publisher; I'm sure Matilda Gage would welcome that.

I'm kidding - Matilda and her friends weren't after total world domination, just equal rights. She would be happy to see that the daughters of 1976 are far from the "perpetual minor" status that women suffered in 1876.

We won the right to vote, thanks to her and her friends. Their great speech pointed out that taxation without representation, "the immediate cause of the rebellion of the colonies against Great Britain," was being practiced against every woman in the United States who could not legally vote.

(At the time of the speech, women had won the right to vote in a very few states, and Utah Territory, but the right was by no means safe or far-reaching. Their speech even mentions Utah, saying, "A bill is now pending in Congress to disenfranchise the women of Utah.")

We can also be tried by a true jury of our peers now; women used to face all-male juries, when they got a trial at all, "and no woman's voice is heard in their defense." Women are no longer fined or imprisoned for being found out alone at night. Women may now attend the finest universities and pursue any profession they choose. We have the right to earn income, keep it in our own names, and own property.

Yet, if Matilda came back as a daughter of 1976 she would find much important work yet to do. In the wonderful, antiquated language of the speech, the women decry the "aristocracy of sex," that is, the higher privilege of being born male.

And Matilda could still rightly say, "Our most sacred rights [have] been made the football of legislative caprice." Matilda and friends also were upset about tax money being used to fund war.

Wrapping up the speech, the July sun beating down on Susan B.

The Salt Lake Tribune

Anthony and on the immense crowd of women and men, these words rang out: “We ask of our rulers no special favors, no special privileges, no special legislation. We ask justice, we ask equality, we ask that all the civil and political rights that belong to citizens of the United States be guaranteed to us and our daughters forever.”

Thank you, Matilda.

You can visit the National Women’s History Project, a nonprofit organization, at www.nwhp.org. Their Web site has excellent information including educational materials for students of all ages.

BARB GUY is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.