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Henry Hardin Cherry, Suffragist
by Lynn Niedermeier

It was called the "Great Petition,"[1] a grassroots drive begun in 1908 by the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). After decades of agitation, women had gained equal voting rights with men in only four western states, and the NAWSA's objective was to present Congress with the signatures of one million citizens calling for a constitutional amendment to enfranchise all women. In Bowling Green, Lida Calvert Obenchain,[2] an active member of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association, was enlisted to obtain as many signatures as possible from the presidents and faculty of local colleges, including the two-year-old Western Kentucky State Normal School.[3]

Her success was mixed. Supporters of the Great Petition included J. Lewie Harman, vice president of the Bowling Green Business University, and Carrie Mitchell, dean of Potter College for Young Ladies. With the exception of Mrs. Obenchain's husband, mathematics professor William A. Obenchain, the faculty of Ogden College was united in opposition. At Western, opinion could not properly be sampled because an outbreak of smallpox had put the campus under an informal quarantine.[4]

Over the next few years, however, Western would prove to be a useful forum for spreading the suffrage message. Its president, Henry Hardin Cherry, became a valuable ally, working with Mrs. Obenchain and other Kentucky suffragists and lending his name to the cause in the crucial decade leading up to ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

Two years after Mrs. Obenchain first promoted the Great Petition, she received some encouragement from Western's faculty—but not without a test of her powers of diplomacy. When she held a meeting to recruit members for her county suffrage league, one of those attending was a woman teacher from campus. She delivered a membership card signed by English professor Macon A. Leiper, but his pledge of support for woman suffrage was expressly limited to school and municipal elections. Keeping in mind her organization's goal of full suffrage, Mrs. Obenchain decided to return the card. The teacher who had delivered it took great offense. A native of Virginia, she claimed angrily that such a breach of Southern decorum would never have occurred in her home state! Mrs. Obenchain was mortified. Had she alienated the entire Western faculty, which she knew to be like one big family?[5]

Fortunately, Professor Leiper held no grudge,[6] and soon President Cherry himself became more closely involved in suffrage activities. In summer 1913, he was one of sixteen prominent locals who signed another petition to Congress seeking the ballot for women.[7] Earlier that year, Mrs. Obenchain had also secured Cherry's agreement to Western's participation in an annual contest awarding a ten-dollar prize for the best equal rights essay written by a student at a Kentucky institution of higher learning.[8]

At the same time as she was promoting the essay contest, Mrs. Obenchain received a request from two students to arrange a suffrage lecture at Western. She considered inviting Madeline McDowell Breckinridge, the president of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association and a talented orator, but the episode with Professor Leiper undoubtedly reminded her that certain courtesies had to be strictly observed. In a letter to Cherry, Mrs. Obenchain carefully disclaimed any intent to force such an event upon him—besides, she added helpfully, Mrs. Breckinridge never lectured "except by formal invitation."[9]

Cherry immediately took the hint. He extended to Mrs. Breckinridge a "formal and urgent invitation" to speak, and assured her that she would find a large and interested audience at Western. Cherry knew that after hearing the case for suffrage and receiving a pamphlet or other piece of literature, students could then carry the message to their home communities at the end of the semester.[10]

After the United States entered World War I and Cherry became chairman of a speakers' bureau for the State Council of Defense, he invited suffragists to take leading roles in programs designed to foster patriotic sentiment throughout Kentucky.[11] Casting suffrage as both a just and necessary element of President Woodrow Wilson's "war for democracy," in fact, proved to be a breakthrough for the cause. In January 1918, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a constitutional amendment to grant the ballot to women.

With confirmation of the amendment pending in the Senate, the Kentucky Equal Rights Association asked Cherry to write his senators urging them to approve the measure.[12] Cherry quickly cooperated, sending letters to Senators Ollie James and J. C. W. Beckham in Washington. Unfortunately, Beckham's negative reply to Cherry foreshadowed Senate defeat of the amendment the following October.[13]

Despite this setback, suffragists across the nation remained confident, and were rewarded the following year when the amendment finally passed both houses of Congress. In 1920, Kentucky became one of only four Southern states to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment—a tribute to the progressive spirit of all its believers in the cause of woman suffrage, including Henry Hardin Cherry.

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[1] Paul E. Fuller, *Laura Clay and the Woman's Rights Movement* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975), 119.
[2] For further information on Mrs. Obenchain, see Lynn E. Niedermeier, *Eliza Calvert Hall: Kentucky Author and Suffragist* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).
[3] Laura Clay to Lida Calvert Obenchain, 13 January 1909, Laura Clay Papers, University of Kentucky.
[4] Lida Calvert Obenchain to Laura Clay, 12 February 1909, Laura Clay Papers.
[5] Lida Calvert Obenchain to Laura Clay, 9 November 1911, Bennett Deposit, Laura Clay Papers.
[6] Lida Calvert Obenchain to Laura Clay, 31 December 1911, Bennett Deposit, Laura Clay Papers.
[7] Louisville *Courier-Journal*, 1 August 1913.
[8] Lida Calvert Obenchain to H. H. Cherry, 18 March 1913, Henry Hardin Cherry Papers, University Archives, Western Kentucky University.

[9]Ibid.
[10] H. H. Cherry to Madeline McDowell Breckinridge, 20 March 1913, Cherry Papers.
[11] H. H. Cherry to Christine Bradley South, 8 September 1917, Cherry Papers; *Normal Heights*, August 1917, 1.
[12] Adelaide (Mrs. Harry R.) Whiteside to H. H. Cherry, 18 January 1918, Cherry Papers.
[13] Ollie M. James to H. H. Cherry, 7 February 1918; J. C. W. Beckham to H. H. Cherry, 5 February 1918, Cherry Papers.