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Women Who Dared: A Celebration of Suffrage History and Local Pioneer Women

ANNA BRONES, SPECIAL TO KP NEWS

The year 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the passing of the 19th amendment, a change to the Constitution of the United States recognizing and proclaiming the right to vote for women.

It is through that lens the Key Peninsula Historical Society and Museum created the exhibit "Pioneer Women Who Dared: Women's Work Was Never Done," which opened in February before being closed to the public by COVID-19.

The show takes a cue from the national centennial celebration of a crucial moment in U.S. history and provides a look at the stories of local women who often have been forgotten.

"A lot of the men were well-known," said Judy Mills, program coordinator for the society and a former president. Names like William Vaughn and Alfred Van Slyke might easily come to mind but, Mills said, "you didn't always know what the women did."

These stories are crucial to understanding not just local history but a larger political context, and the show is an attempt at writing that history back in. "Maybe it's the woman in me rising up and saying 'Pay attention, look at what they did!'" said Cathy Williams, the current society president.

The show focuses on pioneer women, both U.S.-born and

those who immigrated from countries like Germany, Czechoslovakia, Sweden and Norway, who made their way to the Key Peninsula from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. These are stories of women who suffered extreme hardship, who were entrepreneurial in spirit, and who sought to create a community that would support the development and advancement of their often numerous children.

They quickly had to learn to adapt in their new surroundings. "(The women) ended up learning a lot from the Native Americans," Mills said, specifically how to take advantage of the abundance that the Coast Salish people had been doing for millennia. They taught the women "how to use what was in the forest... how to use the seafood from the beaches," she said, as well as medical remedies that could keep

their families healthy, all essential knowledge for survival.

That spirit of pushing into the unknown is personified by the story of Sarah Bradshaw Creviston. Married at the age of 14, she and her husband William Creviston came from The Dalles, Oregon to Washington Territory, arriving in Steilacoom. In 1871 they placed all their belongings on a raft with their three children and went out in search of a permanent home, the tidal currents taking them to Devils Head.

They settled in Taylor Bay, but after bearing 11 children, Sarah was concerned about her children drowning, so they moved away from the water and went inland near Palmer Lake. Here, she started the Key Peninsula's first schoolhouse. Creviston had "aspirations for her children," Williams said,



A Votes for Women pennant was carried by Dr. Cora Smith Eaton, a member of the Mountaineers Club to the summit of Mt. Rainier, fastened to the staff of the Alaskan-Yukon Pacific exposition flag. The flags were planted in the highest snows on top of Columbia Crest, a white dome that rises above the mountain's crater. *Photo taken July 1909 by Asabel Curtis. Collection of Washington State Historical Museum*

and while her own education had been cut short by a young marriage, she took on the role as the school's first teacher.

"The women were a driving force in making sure that (the children) were well-educated," Mills said. That drive to provide a better future for their offspring resulted in institutions that became cornerstones of the community, like the Vaughn Library Association and the Parent Teacher Association. "The women influenced the direction of the community as far as I am concerned," she said.

The Crevistons weren't the only ones to make a notable arrival. When Gertrude Hickson Wyatt and her husband arrived in 1889, it was by steamer. "Her husband told her it was paradise out here," Williams said. "They arrived in the middle of winter in Filucy Bay. It was frozen over. There

was no dock." Men had to hack the ice so that a rowboat could take them from the steamer and bring them ashore. "They pushed the horse into the water to make him go to shore."

"The captain just left them there, the five of them with all their belongings," Williams said. They trudged through deep snow to an abandoned logging cabin. "She had no idea what she was getting into," Williams said. But that didn't stop her; the couple went on to build and run the Wyatt Hotel, Gertrude being crucial to its success.

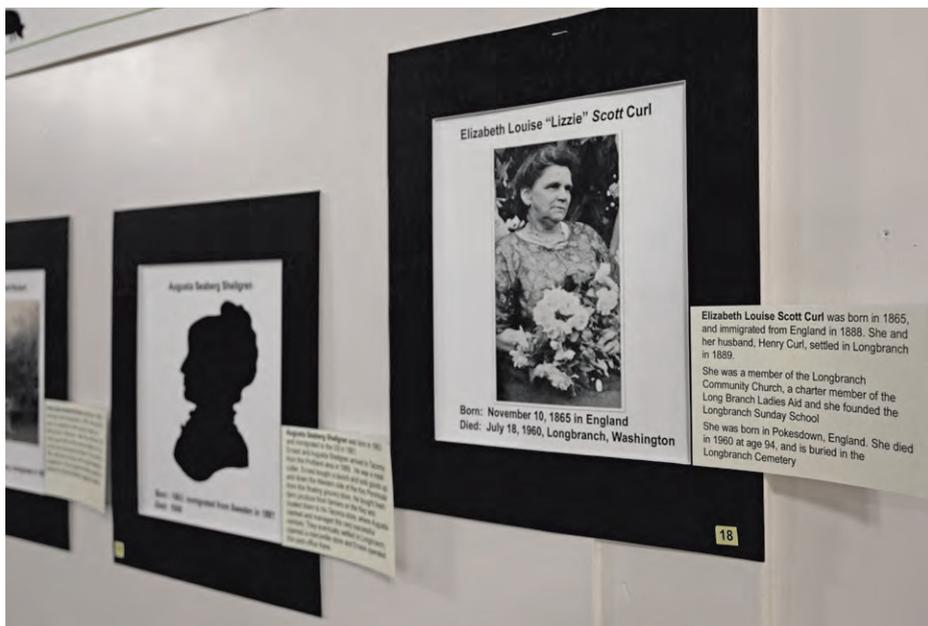
Women like Wyatt and Creviston knew that in this remote location, they wouldn't survive on their own. "Women banded together and they took care of each other," Williams said. "They knew who didn't have enough food on the table for their children and they made extra and took it there. They took care of each other."

That community effort wasn't always an easy task. "They weren't living next door to each other. They had to travel," Mills said. That often meant walking, but for the most part on a peninsula surrounded by water, it meant rowing a boat.

It's impossible to discuss the pioneer community on the Key Peninsula without mentioning Home and Sylvia Tyhurst Allen. One of the founding members of the Home Colony, Allen was the first woman to graduate from Toronto University

in 1882. In some ways, her educated and politically-oriented life looked different from that of many of her counterparts. As she would later note in an account to her granddaughter, "My personal emancipation during my college years consisted of abandoning my corsets and refusing to wear rings in my pierced ears." Free of a restrictive corset and armed with a university education, she helped to shape Home into a haven of free thinkers. But the gender norms of the day still kept her responsible for domestic duties, made more difficult by a lack of running water and electricity.

Women even served as the head of the household if the situation required it, like Esther Anderson, whose husband sought work in Alaska for two years while she stayed behind to take care of the farm and their four children. "She worked the farm



The museum exhibit offers a glimpse into the enduring strength of Key Peninsula's pioneering women whose many descendants continue to call the KP home. *Photo: Anna Brones*

just like a man would," Mills said.

In the late 1800s, women's influence on community life and their role in the social fabric that underpins a functioning democracy was becoming a political issue, too. While 1920 stands out as the year for national women's suffrage, in 1854, just two years before the Crevistons made their way to the territory, Washington almost became the first place in the United States to concede women the right to vote. At the first meeting of the Territorial Assembly, Arthur Denny, one of the founders of Seattle, proposed legislation to allow white women over the age of 18 the right to vote. It was defeated by a single nay.

A tug of war between those in Washington who believed in women's suffrage and those who wanted to restrict it later ensued, and it became a focal point of the national movement. In 1883 suffrage was approved, recognizing the right of women in the territory to vote and also to serve on juries, only to be overturned by the Territorial Supreme Court several years later.

"You look at these women and it's hard to believe that as intelligent as they were, and hard-working, that they didn't deserve to vote," Williams said.

Nevertheless, the suffragettes persisted.

In 1909 when the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition was to be held in Seattle, the National American Woman Suffrage Association was invited by suffragettes to hold their annual convention there at precisely the same time. The annual convention coinciding with the enormous world's fair ensured heightened attention to the cause. A group of mountaineering women even climbed to the summit of Mount Rainier to plant a "Votes for Women" pennant,

their words and wishes flying over 14,000 feet above sea level.

Thanks to their efforts, the Washington State Constitution was amended to guarantee women the right to vote in 1910, making it the fifth state in the nation to do so a full 10 years before the 19th amendment. Suffrage was, however, still limited by literacy requirements and restrictive citizenship laws in the state, which helped to keep Black, Native American and immigrant women from voting until a series of additional victories culminated in the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

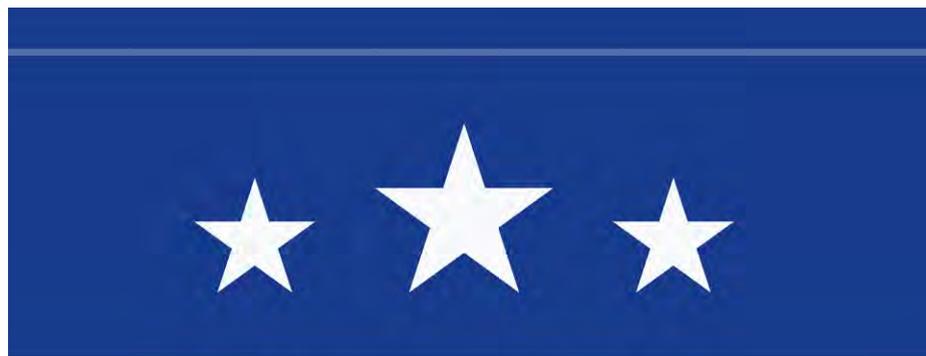
Except for a poster with the history of women's suffrage in Washington, there aren't any personal anecdotes about voting in the exhibit, or of women on the Key Peninsula working for women's suffrage. That's partly because of their location. "They were isolated from the outside world," Mills said.

And yet, looking at the portraits of these women and reading their stories, it's hard not to imagine that at least one of them could have been involved.

One can envision a bold woman rowing her boat around the Key Peninsula encouraging her friends to join the movement. She brings a meal to a friend's house and they discuss the hard work they are required to do every day, and wonder why they shouldn't have a political voice, just like their husbands do.

After all, these were women who dared.

While closed to the public because of COVID-19, the exhibit will extend into next year, enhanced by stories of local women supporting each other through the Great Depression and World War II. Learn more at keypeninsulamuseum.org.



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