



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE

LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

By Carly Lough, Archivist

At the Shirtwaist Ball

Billed as “the Most Democratic Fete ever attempted in Pittsburgh,” the Equal Franchise Federation held its Suffrage Shirtwaist Ball 100 years ago on November 10, 1916. Though its centennial is likely to pass quietly amid the din of the receding campaign season, the fundraiser itself was widely attended and lived up to its tagline. The over 3,000 attendees who gathered in East Liberty’s Motor Square Garden to “be merry under the auspices of Suffrage” included students and businessmen, working class men and women, and the prominent socialites who formed the base of the federation.

The Equal Franchise Federation had formed only six years earlier as the Western Pennsylvania auxiliary of the Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association (PWSA). The Federation gained momentum quickly, absorbing much of the member base of its predecessor, the Allegheny Equal Rights Association, which had dissolved by 1909. In the ensuing years, the Federation confronted numerous local civic concerns and turned its attention to the war effort. In 1915, a referendum to enfranchise Pennsylvania women was blocked by voters, but carried in 33 of the state’s 67 counties. Heartened at the percentage, suffragists in the state redoubled their canvassing efforts. The PWSA set its 1916 annual budget at \$40,000 and allocated budgetary fundraising goals to each county

according to its population, wealth, and local suffrage support.¹

In the months leading up to the Shirtwaist Ball, members packaged tobacco for soldiers, established “Bread and Butter Club” suffrage lectures, and initiated a campaign to investigate health conditions in the Hill District and similarly crowded areas.² Despite its busy fall schedule, the Federation formed 12 committees to secure the ball’s entertainment and hospitality arrangements, oversee safety and publicity, and craft the favors to be sold for additional revenue. The success of the ball was widely noted by the press, largely in local social columns. In its annual report, the PWSA made special note of the Shirtwaist Ball, revealing that the fundraiser netted over \$2,500.³

Right:
Winifred Meek Morris
served as general
chairwoman of the
Suffrage Shirtwaist Ball.

HHC Detre L&A, Winifred Meek Morris Papers
and Photographs, MSS 1103.

Below:
Delegate ribbon from
the 1915 PWSA
annual convention.

HHC Collections, gift of Anne Elise
Morris. Photo by Liz Simpson.




DELEGATE



Among the surviving records of this well-attended (but sparsely documented) moment in Pittsburgh suffrage history is a handful of clippings and a spirited promotional poster decked in suffragist yellow. These materials are preserved within the papers of the ball’s general chairwoman, Winifred Barron Meek Morris. In addition to providing some of the only images related to the ball, the clippings Morris saved give evidence of its extensive preparations and narrate the evening’s events. For 50 cents, guests danced to the music of a 22-piece orchestra and enjoyed refreshments in a cafeteria draped in yellow and white. Featured entertainment included a vaudeville show of performances of English Folk dancing, a Hungarian rhapsody, and a foxtrot, while yellow-capped suffragettes

sold boutonnieres, flags, and other favors from booths. The evening was headlined by a contest in which five judges awarded trophies for the most attractive shirtwaist gowns. The ball's more affluent guests reserved theater boxes from which they observed the festivities below.

The clippings, poster, and ephemera Morris saved from the Shirtwaist Ball are housed alongside further records of her civic life. Following her marriage in 1899, the Bellefonte native lived in Aspinwall and Pittsburgh, where she joined numerous social and charitable ventures. Morris was active in the Federation by 1915, when she served as a delegate to the annual convention of the Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association. In 1917, Morris chaired the Woman's Liberty Loan committee and helped to form a Woman Suffrage Red Cross Auxiliary the following year. Her compiled clippings, artifacts, and ephemera relate some of the peak events in the Federation's agenda between 1915 and 1920, and suggest its shift from the suffrage campaign to war work and back again.

The Winifred Meek Morris Papers and Photographs were donated to the Detre Library & Archives by Morris' grandson and granddaughter-in-law in 2015 after items from the collection were featured in a *Pittsburgh's Hidden Treasures* event at the Senator John Heinz History Center. Readers are encouraged to visit this and other collections documenting Western Pennsylvania suffrage history during Reading Room hours: 10 a.m. – 5 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday. 

¹ *Handbook of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and Proceedings of the Annual Convention Held at Atlantic City, New Jersey, September 4-10, 1916*, 195-196.

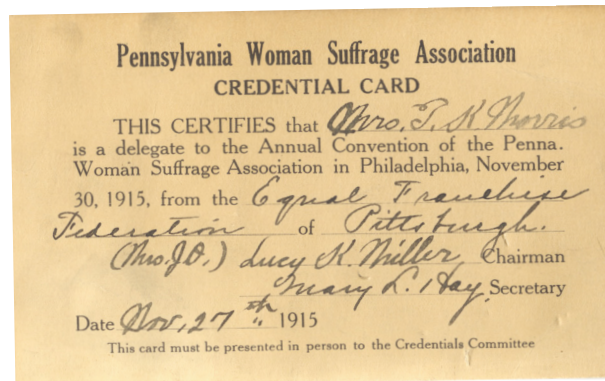
² *Ibid.*, 196.

³ *Ibid.*



Above:
Winifred Meek Morris' "Votes for Women" arm band.

HHC Collections, gift of Anne Elise Morris.
Photo by Liz Simpson.

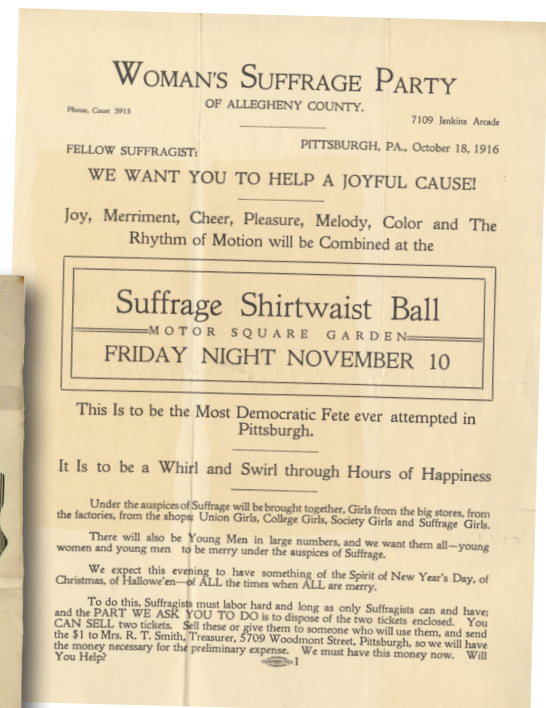


Left:
Morris' delegate credentials card from the 1915 PWSA annual convention. Morris served as delegate at both the 1915 and 1917 state conventions.

HHC Detre L&A, Winifred Meek Morris Papers and Photographs, MSS 1103.

"Her Hope, His Opportunity."
An advertisement poster for the ball created by Liberty Show Print.

HHC Detre L&A, Winifred Meek Morris Papers and Photographs, MSS 1103. Photo by Liz Simpson.



Much of the ball's press coverage focused on its shirtwaist gown contest.

HHC Detre L&A, Winifred Meek Morris Papers and Photographs, MSS 1103.