

6 – Road Trip for Suffrage

By Harriet Sigerman

1915: suffragists organized a daring cross-country auto trip to promote women's voting rights.

On a stormy night in October 1915, three women drove through the desolate Kansas plains in a downpour, hoping to get to Emporia before morning. It was late, and they had the road to themselves. Suddenly, their car lurched and stopped: They had driven right into a mud hole and were stuck. The car would not budge -- it just sank deeper and deeper in the mud.

The travelers cried out for help, but their pleas evaporated in the howling wind and rain. Finally, one of the women remembered seeing a farmhouse two or three miles back. She climbed out of the car and, bending forward to brace herself against the wind, started walking. With every step, she sank knee deep in the soggy ground, and her brown wool suit and high heels were soon covered with mud.

"How had the journey come to this?" Sara Bard Field must have wondered as she struggled through the wind and rain. Only a few weeks before, on September 16, Field had stood in a grand hall decked out in colorful banners and ribbons and crowded with more than 1,000 women. The occasion was a majestic ceremony marking the end of a three-day women's rights convention in San Francisco, Calif., and the beginning of a historic cross-country trip that Field was undertaking to publicize the cause of women's suffrage.

As the ceremony drew to a close, Field climbed into a waiting car covered with streamers. Then, to the cheers and whistles of the crowd, she and her traveling companions had driven off into the foggy night. Their mission: Carry an enormous petition across the country pledging support for a federal women's suffrage amendment to the Constitution. The women would make stops along the way to rally support for the amendment and add signatures to the petition before delivering it to President Woodrow Wilson and the U.S. Congress.

The journey would also serve a symbolic purpose. In 1915, twelve western states - with their more enlightened social and legal institutions and a long tradition of women's social activism -- had already granted women the right to vote. Field, who hailed from one of these states, Oregon, represented a movement of four million Western women voters demanding the same political rights for their disenfranchised Eastern sisters, via a federal amendment.

Now, as she slogged toward a remote farmhouse in the wilderness, Field did not feel like someone who symbolized the political hopes and dreams of so many American women. After trudging through the wind and rain for two hours, she finally stumbled upon the farmhouse she had seen from the road.

Soaking wet and caked with mud, she explained her predicament to the sleepy-eyed farmer who opened the door. He hitched up two sturdy workhorses to his truck and drove Field back to the stalled car. On the way, she explained the purpose of her cross-country trip. The farmer seemed somewhat baffled by Field's description of their mission and simply responded, "Well, you girls have guts."

Indeed, it had taken pluck and courage to make such a journey and endure the harsh road conditions. In 1915, cars were still a luxury item that few people could afford. Cross-country excursions were considered risky.

There were no superhighways and few gas stations, restaurants, and other conveniences along the way. Most roads were little more than dusty, poorly marked two-lane byways. In fact, never before had a group of women driven alone across the United States. The announcement of the journey had created a sensation, capturing newspaper headlines around the country -- just as its organizers had intended.

Field had been hand-picked to make the journey by the leaders of the Congressional Union, the militant branch of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). She was an ideal choice for the task. Petite and youthful, Field was poised and personable in front of large crowds.

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1882, she first became active in women's suffrage after she moved to Oregon with her husband, a minister. She became a paid state organizer for NAWSA and soon emerged as an eloquent and charismatic speaker for the western suffrage movement.

The work was grueling. Field spoke on street corners throughout countless small towns, snatched whatever rest she could and ate on the run.

Meanwhile, she divorced her husband, who opposed her suffrage work and expected her to devote herself to the duties of a minister's wife. She reclaimed her maiden name and joined the Congressional Union to work for a Constitutional amendment for women's suffrage — the same demand firmly expressed in the petition she now carried across the country.

Accompanying Field on the transcontinental trip were Ingeborg Kindstedt and Maria Kindberg, two Swedish immigrant women who were also ardent suffragists. They owned the car and would serve as driver and mechanic. Mabel Vernon, also of the Congressional Union, traveled ahead of the convoy by train to organize parades, rallies and receptions for Field's arrival, like a silent scout paving the way.

The first leg of the journey took the women through California, Nevada and Utah, then on through Wyoming, Colorado and Kansas. Enthusiastic crowds greeted the travelers at dozens of stops along the way. Before entering each town, the women decorated the car with purple, gold and white flags and with a suffrage banner that read: "We Demand an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, Enfranchising Women."

In some cities, suffrage workers welcomed the voyagers with huge motorcades, bands, fireworks, and other pageantry. Women thronged around the car to add their names to the growing petition. Governors, mayors and congressmen greeted the suffrage envoys at formal receptions, and Field succeeded in persuading some to sign the petition as well.

At every stop, Field gave impassioned speeches. In Colorado Springs, she aimed a stinging rebuke at opponents of women's suffrage, especially men.

"They are very slow in awaking to the fact that the womanhood is being wasted in the struggle for enfranchisement, when it could be used to better advantage in creating a real civilization," Field chided. "Steam cars and airships do not make a civilization, but

give woman the ballot and she will use it as a tool for the upbuilding of civilization, such as the world has never seen before."

As the travelers passed through small towns and villages, curious onlookers often gathered to see the banner-bedecked car rumble by. Never missing an opportunity to win a convert to the suffrage cause, Field sometimes stopped at street corners to deliver an impromptu speech from the back of the car.

The trip was exhilarating. And exhausting. The women drove through rain, sleet and dust storms. They endured frigid temperatures, flat tires and engine difficulties. Outside Reno, Nev., the voyagers spent an entire day lost, without a map, in the stretch of barren land known as the "Great American Desert." On several occasions, the women had to get out and push the car through huge snowdrifts to make it to the next stop on time. But buoyed by the outpouring of support, and the importance of their cause, they pressed on.

Not every reception was a warm one, however. Women's suffrage was, after all, an issue that divided households, as well as the nation. As the women progressed eastward, they prepared themselves for their entry into "enemy territory" — those states that had rejected legislation giving women the vote.

As Field told a gathering in Kansas City, "Hard times still are ahead of us. Up till now we have been traveling in suffrage states, and it is hard to readjust ourselves now to the attitude of men who say, 'No, we don't want women to vote because they don't get up and give us their seats in streetcars.' I'd rather have a seat of justice than a streetcar seat, anyway."

After stops in Nebraska, Iowa, and Missouri, Field got a taste of those hard times in Chicago, Illinois. There, a massive crowd of supporters turned out to meet Field and her companions.

Scattered throughout the audience, however, were some suffrage opponents — "antis" — who tried to shout Field down as she delivered her speech.

"The women were the worst opposers," Field said later, "the right-wing DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) and all associations of that kind were extremely anti, and they sent their speakers right on my trail in the East."

Despite these new difficulties, the hardy band of travelers continued on, making stops in Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan before heading to Albany, the capital of New York. Reports of Field's exploits had reached the state's governor, who greeted the suffrage crusader in the executive mansion. He paid the diminutive Field the highest compliment of all: "I thought you would be ten feet tall." He then signed the petition, despite the recent defeat of women's suffrage by the male voters of New York State.

But Sara Bard Field felt neither tall nor powerful. Instead, she was tense and exhausted after traveling two months in a crowded car over bumpy, pitted roads, making countless speeches, stopping in a different town or city almost every day. Although the petition was growing longer with every stop, her task was not yet finished. She still had most of the East Coast to cover.

After a quick succession of stops in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York City, Delaware, and Maryland, the weary travelers approached their last stop: Washington,

D.C. They had spent nearly three months on the road, logging more than 5,000 miles and collecting numerous signatures for their petition.

The women prepared the valiant little car — now dented and scratched and covered with stickers from every stop — for its entrance into the nation's capital. Shortly after 11:00 a.m. on December 6, 1915, the car moved slowly down the Baltimore Turnpike, like a war-weary soldier triumphantly marching into the final battle. Across its dusty front fender stretched a vivid purple streamer with the words emblazoned in white, "On to Congress." The car stopped just outside the city. There, they were met by a welcoming committee befitting royalty. Undaunted by the bitterly cold weather, the crowd assembled for a parade through Washington, D.C. As a band began to play, Mrs. John Jay White, the grand marshal, led the way on horseback, holding her riding crop aloft like a torch.

Behind her came Field and her fellow envoys in the battered car that had carried them across a continent and now toward their final destinations, the Capitol and the White House.

Several women on foot carried the enormous petition, unrolled to only 100 of its almost 19,000 feet. They were followed by more women on horseback, each rider representing one of the 12 states and Alaska Territory that had already granted women the right to vote. And behind them marched another group, representing the 36 states that had not yet granted that right. Next came flag and banner bearers dressed in purple and gold capes, their colors snapping smartly in the wind. They escorted a replica of the Liberty Bell decorated in purple, gold and white. Scores of other women proudly followed, waving their pennants at the cheering crowds along the way.

Finally, the parade reached the Capitol, where a large delegation of congressmen stood at the top of the polished white marble steps to receive Field. Slowly, she made their way to the delegation, followed by 20 women carrying the partially unrolled petition as if they were ladies in waiting carrying the queen's royal robes. Field, along with two pro-suffrage congressmen, spoke briefly, and the parade moved on to the White House. The procession of cars stopped in the semicircular drive in front of the president's mansion, and Field, her traveling companions and 300 other invited guests were ushered into the enormous East Room to be greeted by President Woodrow Wilson.

To Field, the president looked "stern and annoyed" — he had, after all, already endured similar pleas for a federal suffrage amendment from delegations of Eastern women and had told each of them in turn that women's suffrage was a matter for each state to decide, not a Constitutional question.

Dwarfed by the huge, sparkling chandeliers overhead, Field spoke first. "Mr. President, ... I know what your stand [on suffrage] has been in the past... . But we have seen that, like all great men, you have changed your mind on other questions ... and we honestly believe that circumstances have so altered that you may change your mind in this regard."

The women drew his attention to the petition, which Field had unrolled across the polished hardwood floor. Then Field gently but pointedly reminded him that many of the signatures came from governors, mayors and congressmen.

Wilson turned to Field, and said, "I hope it is true that I am not a man set stiffly beyond the possibility of learning. ... Nothing could be more impressive than the

presentation of such a request in such numbers and backed by such influences as undoubtedly stand behind you. ...

"This visit of yours will remain in my mind not only as a delightful compliment, but also as a very impressive thing, which undoubtedly will make it necessary for all of us to consider very carefully what is right for us to do."

But Field knew that he had not been persuaded. Later she said, "I could see at once that he would be a hard man to convince of anything that he did not spontaneously believe. But he listened to what you were saying. And his face — you could tell by his eyes that he was following what you said.

"Oh, the women went out jubilant. They thought this was the turning point. They thought he was going to back the amendment in Congress."

But, sadly, they were very wrong. As rumblings of war in Europe consumed the president's and the nation's attention, the federal suffrage amendment moved at a snail's pace first through the House of Representatives and then through the U.S. Senate. Sara Bard Field and other dedicated suffragists did not give up the cause, however. In 1917, women won the right to vote in eight more states: North Dakota, Ohio, Indiana, Nebraska, Arkansas, Michigan, Rhode Island and New York. Field had visited most of these states during her cross-country tour. Whether her rallying efforts made the difference in those states remains unknown, but she surely helped to raise public awareness wherever she stopped.

World War I ended on November 11, 1918, and Congress soon took up the unfinished business of the women's suffrage amendment. On August 26, 1920, women's suffrage finally became the law of the land. It had been 72 years since American women had met in Seneca Falls, N.Y., to demand their right to vote, and nearly five years since Sara Bard Field had made her momentous cross-country road trip.

As for Field, she remained active in the women's rights movement for a few more years. In 1920, she moved to San Francisco with her companion, the lawyer-poet Charles Erskine Scott Wood and in 1938, they were married. Gradually, Field turned her energy from politics to poetry, and over the following two decades she published three volumes of verse. After her husband passed away, Field lived quietly in Berkeley, Calif., where she died on June 15, 1974.

Although she championed women's issues throughout her life, Field made her greatest contribution to women's social and political progress during her historic journey for justice. Like the larger movement that she represented, she surmounted obstacles and hardships along the way, and pushed on, undefeated, toward her goal. Years later she proudly declared, "The cross-country trip meant waking up a nation to national suffrage. ... [W]e have made history."

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