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Minnie D. Morgan

Farrell Hoy Jenab

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MINNIE D. MORGAN

Wilhelmina (Minnie) D. Morgan was the first female mayor of Cottonwood Falls, Kansas. She and her all-woman city council were elected thirty-one years before women won the right to vote in the United States.

Despite this surprising achievement, little has been documented about Morgan's mayorship; much more was recorded about her husband's and son's accomplishments than her own. Her time in office is not even mentioned in *Chase County Historical Sketches*, the four-volume history of Chase County. Yet this intriguing interlude in Cottonwood Falls' history, as well as the important role that Minnie Morgan played in Kansas politics and activism during her lifetime, deserve to be remembered.

How is it that a woman could be elected mayor at a time when the United States Constitution denied women the right to vote? In Kansas, the women's suffrage movement was a prolonged struggle that spanned more than fifty years. It began in 1859, with a group of women sitting, "unelected and uninvited, with their knitting in their hands," at the Wyandotte Constitutional Convention, hoping to encourage men to omit the word "male" from the phrasing of the franchise clause. Through continued activism, overcoming many barriers, and sheer perseverance, Kansas women suffragists gradually succeeded in securing the vote for women: first came school elections in 1861, then municipal suffrage in 1887, and finally, in 1912, the men of Kansas gave women voting rights at the state level. It was another eight years before the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted all American women the right to vote.



BREATH (DETAIL)
Shin-hee Chin



FAITH
Allan Chow

Hence, when Morgan was elected mayor in 1889, women were permitted to vote and participate in city-level government, long before they were allowed to vote on a state or national level.

The suffrage movement in Kansas was closely linked to the temperance movement, and Morgan was an active member of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) for many years. In fact, the battle between "wets" and "drys" in Cottonwood Falls was the impetus for her election and that of her five councilwomen.

Their election started off as a prank played on them by "the whiskey element of the town" — a group of men who were irritated with the women's efforts to rid the town of saloons, bootlegging, and alcohol. On Election Day, these members of the "coarser element" of town anonymously circulated an all-female ticket as a joke. At first the women, shocked and insulted, asked the townspeople to ignore the ticket, but after some deliberation among themselves and

an informal canvass of the community that indicated wide support, they changed their minds and turned their rivals' trick into an unexpected triumph for themselves.

Mrs. W.D. Morgan received 105 votes while her opponent, J.W. McWilliams, received fifty-five votes. The councilmembers — Alice Hunt, Sadie Grisham, Elizabeth Porter, Barbara Gillett, and Elizabeth Johnson — won by an even wider margin. And Police Judge Mrs. D.G. Groundwater defeated her opponent with 112 to 45 votes.

Thus ushered in "the cleanest administration Cottonwood Falls had ever had up to that time." Mayor Morgan and her council were well-respected. Accounts of their activity in the *Chase County Ledger* describe their "practical and business-like manner." The new court administered justice with "dignity and discretion." Opponents to Prohibition were likely less satisfied than most with the new administration because "punishment was meted out to the prohibitory violators and evil-doers, good and plenty."

Morgan's son, William Yoast Morgan, himself an activist and politician who served as lieutenant governor of Kansas under Governor Arthur Capper, said of his mother:

She was elected along with a council composed of women because of the determination of the voters to secure better law enforcement. The success of her administration was hailed as an outstanding argument for woman suffrage, a cause in which she was always a leader, and which was before the people of Kansas for many years.... She believed thoroughly in the rights of women, and was never too much occupied with other affairs to refrain from speaking, writing, and working for women's causes, regardless of personal convenience or present popularity.

After their one-year term, neither Morgan nor her council sought re-election, but Minnie Morgan continued to be politically active and worked for suffrage until the illness that led to her death in 1910. She helped found the Kansas Women's Press Association and

served as its president. In 1899 she was elected department president of the Woman's Relief Corps. Throughout her life, she belonged to innumerable women's societies, clubs, and civic organizations.

Though they might easily be dismissed as seemingly inconsequential "ladies' clubs," these organizations were essential in changing women's status in society. These women wielded influence within the existing system and maneuvered it, usually with civility, through social change and political pressure, both at home and in the public arena, to convince men to vote to give women the right to vote. Minnie D. Morgan was widely regarded, both at home in Cottonwood Falls and across the state of Kansas, for her important role in this process, and for the gracious manner in which she fulfilled it.

Farrell Hoy Jenab grew up in Emporia and is a fifth-generation native of the Flint Hills. She is the director of the Kansas Studies Institute at Johnson County Community College.



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