

The Legacy of Gail Laughlin

Gail Laughlin was a pioneering suffragist who left an indelible mark in California. She dedicated her life to boosting the rights of women with a goal of “absolute equality in custom and law.”

She was a Maine native, and while a young lawyer in New York in 1900, she was offered a job with the United States Industrial Commission investigating poor working conditions for rural, immigrant and nonwhite women in domestic service. It was then that she decided to dedicate much of her life to the suffrage movement. As an organizer for the National American Woman Suffrage Association, she traveled the west advocating women’s voting rights. In 1904, she landed in California to help women in their epic suffrage battle.

The suffrage campaign had been moribund since the 1896 statewide election that delivered a decisive rebuke to women’s voting efforts. In quick fashion, Laughlin created 52 new suffrage clubs and doubled the state’s club membership. The *Los Angeles Times* – a fervent anti-suffrage newspaper back then – described her as someone who “talks like a phonograph, dresses as near like a man as she can without appearing ‘mannish,’ and she is quick and decisive in action.”

Working out of Denver, Laughlin returned to California during the 1911 suffrage statewide campaign. On election day, she was placed in charge of keeping track of the vote count. Early in the morning she staffed a voting precinct and was delighted when a man walked up to her and said he would vote for the suffrage amendment. She told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, however, that the man said he was doing it on the same theory that he would use in having a bad tooth pulled – it had to be done some time, and he might as well get over it now.” California women won the franchise by a razor-thin 3,500 vote margin.

Laughlin's influence in California extended well beyond suffrage. She opened a law office in San Francisco in 1914 and worked on legislation that gave women the right to serve on juries. She also served as a judge in the police courts and was vice president of the state's Republican Party.

In 1919, Laughlin became the first president of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, which she co-founded. Her mission hadn't changed over the years; she was dedicated to erasing inequalities women faced in the work place.

For a century, the California Federation of Business and Professional Women has lobbied for equal rights for women in and out of the workplace. It has advocated for community property and inheritance tax reform led the way in creation of the Commission on the Status of Women. Over the years, it helped defeat a proposal to limit the number of hours a woman could work in a 24-hour period; it helped defeat legislation that would have prevented a women from working if her husband earned more than \$125 a month; and it sponsored the "Wife's Paycheck Law" that allowed a woman – not her husband, father or brother – to pick up her own paycheck. The Federation is merely a part of Gail Laughlin's legacy and dedication to "absolute equality in custom and law."