

SOJOURNER TRUTH

Keeping the Thing Going While Things Are Stirring

The post-Civil War period was a time of division and regrouping in the woman's movement. With the outbreak of hostilities between North and South, women had suspended activities on their own behalf to devote full energy to the Union cause. The contributions of women to the war effort were substantial: they performed nursing service (Clara Barton is noted for her front-line work with Civil War wounded), fund-raising, and even some brave military exploits.

In addition, a National Woman's Loyal League was formed under the leadership of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others, which, in effect, functioned as an arm of the Republican Party's radical wing. In this capacity, the Woman's Loyal League collected hundreds of thousands of petition signatures calling for abolition of slavery.

When enfranchisement of black men became the policy of the very faction of the Republican Party that the League had worked to strengthen, the woman's movement confidently trusted that female suffrage would be granted at the same time. However, bitter disillusionment was in store.

The proposed Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution (adopted in 1866) gave Negroes the vote but omitted any reference to women, and in its second section, actually introduced the word "male" into the Constitution for the first time. Stanton and Anthony felt betrayed and outraged; but their former abolitionist allies for the most part seemed resigned. It was widely held at the time that this was "the Negro's hour," and that women had no decent course available but to stand aside and wait their turn. Frederick Douglass and Frances Watkins Har-

per, both black people; Wendell Phillips and Abby Kelley Foster, whites—all long-time supporters of the woman's movement—now argued that the black slave's greater suffering entitled him to prior consideration.

Among faithful feminists, perhaps no one was more torn in her loyalties at this moment than was Lucy Stone. She wrote, ". . . woman has an ocean of wrong too deep for any plummet," yet "the Negro too has an ocean of wrong that cannot be fathomed." Out of this conflict, Lucy Stone concluded that she could not oppose the constitutional amendment but hoped it would be broadened to include women: "I will be thankful in my soul if any body can get out of the terrible pit."

Stanton and Anthony, on the other hand, not only could but did openly oppose the constitutional amendments which guaranteed suffrage to the black man but not to women. Both believed that this position was the only one consistent with their feminist principles. "The demand of the hour is equal rights to all," Stanton argued.

Into this strife-torn atmosphere came Sojourner Truth to stand alone for the all but forgotten black woman. Her dedication to feminism and her political acumen is demonstrated by this speech, delivered in 1867. Sojourner Truth was greeted by the audience with loud cheering.

My friends, I am rejoiced that you are glad, but I don't know how you will feel when I get through. I come from another field—the country of the slave. They have got their liberty—so much good luck to have slavery partly destroyed; not entirely. I want it root and branch destroyed. Then we will all be free indeed. I feel that if I have to answer for the deeds done in my body just as much as a man, I have a right to have just as much as a man. There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while

things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again. White women are a great deal smarter, and know more than colored women, while colored women do not know scarcely anything. They go out washing, which is about as high as a colored woman gets, and their men go about idle, strutting up and down; and when the women come home, they ask for their money and take it all, and then scold because there is no food. I want you to consider on that, chil'n. I call you chil'n; you are somebody's chil'n, and I am old enough to be mother of all that is here. I want women to have their rights. In the courts women have no right, no voice; nobody speaks for them. I wish woman to have her voice there among the pettifoggers. If it is not a fit place for women, it is unfit for men to be there.

I am above eighty years old; it is about time for me to be going. I have been forty years a slave and forty years free, and would be here forty years more to have equal rights for all. I suppose I am kept here because something remains for me to do; I suppose I am yet to help to break the chain. I have done a great deal of work; as much as a man, but did not get so much pay. I used to work in the field and bind grain, keeping up with the cradler; but men doing no more, got twice as much pay; so with the German women. They work in the field and do as much work, but do not get the pay. We do as much, we eat as much, we want as much. I suppose I am about the only colored woman that goes about to speak for the rights of the colored women. I want to keep the thing stirring, now that the ice is cracked. What we want is a little money. You men know that you get as much again as women when you write, or for what you do. When we get our rights we shall not have to come to you for money, for then we shall have money enough in our own pockets; and may be you will ask us for money. But help us now until we get it. It is a good consolation to know that when we have got this battle once fought we shall not be coming to

you any more. You have been having our rights so long, that you think, like a slave-holder, that you own us. I know that it is hard for one who has held the reins for so long to give up; it cuts like a knife. It will feel all the better when it closes up again. I have been in Washington about three years, seeing about these colored people. Now colored men have the right to vote. There ought to be equal rights now more than ever, since colored people have got their freedom. I am going to talk several times while I am here; so now I will do a little singing. I have not heard any singing since I came here.