

# NONAGENARIAN SUFFRAGIST: Dr. Steven Smith, at the Age of 97, Tells of His Conversion to Women's P...

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### Dr. Steven Smith, at the Age of 97, Tells of His Conversion to Women's Progress

RETURNING from a month's trip to the West, where he celebrated his ninety-seventh birthday by giving a talk on longevity to the employes of the National Cash Register Company, Dr. Stephen Smith, dean of American surgeons, was asked what it was in the present life of the nation that had most greatly changed since he was in his prime. His answer was: "The part that women are playing in the educational, political and economic life of the nation."

"In my time," he said, "women were little concerned with anything but the things they were going to wear, the social functions they were going to attend, and the attentions they were receiving from the opposite sex. All of these things are important; nobody would gainsay that, but there are other things equally, if not more important. The woman of today has made these

other things a part of her life. Not the least satisfactory change in this activity of hers is the change in her dress. I remember when I was a youngster that hoopskirts reaching to the floor were the only things considered permissible in polite society. The wider the hoop, the more correct and more fashionable the young woman. I remember seeing my sister come through the door, smilingly and serenely lifting the hoop to one side so as to be able to pass through. And then the sleeves! I don't remember what they called them; they looked like balloons and were puffed out so as almost to meet in the back. A male person wasn't supposed to know the shape of a woman's arm. It was considered immodest. I can't understand what made those girls imagine that it was all right to have the world believe that all that mass of material was necessary to cover them up.

"Educationally, perhaps, the women

have made the greatest strides. It is nothing out of the ordinary today to have a young woman decide that she is going to college. In fact, it is expected of her. It is considered part of her training and preparation for life. I remember the first young woman who was admitted to our medical schools. It was Elizabeth Blackwell. I was attending Geneva Medical College at the time. Elizabeth Blackwell had made several attempts to get into other medical colleges. She had been turned down every time. The thing was unheard of. Finally, through the influence of a prominent physician, her admittance to the Geneva school was proposed.

"Geneva Medical College was made up of the rowdiest lot of young ruffians it has ever been my good fortune to meet. I was one of them, so my saying this is all right. They were farmers' sons and tradesmen's sons and came to the college partly because the family expected it of them and partly because they wanted to have a good time. They did. So greatly did they manage to disturb the community, that a petition was signed by the people and submitted to the authorities asking that the college be closed as a public nuisance. I am telling you these details in order to give you some idea of the sort of place Miss Blackwell decided to come to.

"Out of respect for the physician who recommended her the Faculty took up the matter. All were against it. Desiring, however, to get out of giving a direct refusal, they decided that they would put the matter up to the students, and that if one of them voted against 'the woman,' as she was called, she must stay out. Knowing the type of boys they were instructing, there wasn't a doubt in the minds of any of them that the matter would be arranged satisfactorily. For them, I mean. They felt they could trust the boys to do the right thing.

"At the earliest opportunity the subject was presented to the roomful of boys. It was made clear to them that if even one of them was averse to the woman's being admitted she would be barred. Speeches were made by all the members of the Faculty, impressing upon us how advisable it was for us to keep the school a school for boys and how important it was that medicine be held a subject for men only. This went on at great length. After the instructors thought they had sufficiently filled us with their ideas the subject came to a vote. The Chairman asked for the 'Ayes.'

"Never in all my life do I remember such an uproar as took place then. Hats were thrown up into the air, chairs overturned, and a score of brazen-throated voices shouted 'Aye!' Nonplused but hopeful, the Chairman asked for the 'nays.' From out the recesses of one corner of the room came a timid, half-frightened squeakly little 'nay.' With one accord there was a football dash to that corner. A short scrimmage took place, and a moment later from out the circle of waving arms and hoarse yells came a begging voice, 'I vote yea.

I vote yea.' Miss Blackwell came. That was way back in '46 or '47.

"There was a distinct change in the manners of the school from that day. Miss Blackwell, a little Quaker woman, with all the pluck in the world, changed that howling mob of boys into a lot of well-mannered, respectful young men. Not the least of her effect on the school was her influence on the instructors.

"There was one of them I especially remember. He was the instructor in anatomy, a powerful man, with a big voice and a big heart and a big sense of humor. The boys liked his classes not because of the lectures he gave but because of the stories and anecdotes he told. The vast majority of them could not be repeated. He was among those most averse to Miss Blackwell's coming to the school. One day, previous to giving a course of lectures on a subject which he thought might be embarrassing to her and to the boys, he wrote her a note asking her to stay away and telling her he would arrange for her to make up this work some other way.

She answered him politely and pertinently. She told him that she had come to the college to study medicine; that she had paid her tuition fee and intended to attend every lecture; that she did not see anything embarrassing or disquieting in the scientific study of the human body and that the thing that pained her most was to have a man, presumably a scientist, raise a question of that nature. Again, the subject was put to a vote and again Miss Blackwell came into the lecture rooms. That marked the end of the periods spent in funny stories and the beginning of a brilliant, course of lectures on human anatomy.

"My turning suffragist dates back to that period. If one woman without any conscious effort could accomplish that reform in that school of rascals, think what a country of enlightened women can accomplish once they set their minds to it!

"What interests me greatly today is to see the attention people are giving to politics. Everybody with the aver-

age amount of intelligence is conversant with the subject. I remember way back in the community where I was born and raised the political development of the people was fixed by the pioneer and his sons. They were a fine old lot, but mighty bigoted in their opinions. In my own special town General Andrew Jackson was the leading political figure. The rough and ready character of this dominant political leader was well adapted to inspire the profound admiration and even veneration of the self-assertive New Englander. It was said that the people continued to vote for Old Hickory long after his death. The minority party was Whig, and though some of the most prominent men were of that party the Democrats maintained their supremacy for a long time.

"The feeling between the two was very hot. Very much like the feeling between the two parties who are fighting over the Peace Treaty today. This following incident is reported to have occurred in the contest between the two parties. The Whigs called a meeting

to be held one Saturday afternoon. The Democrats, hearing of this, employed a well-known hotel loafer to disturb the meeting. To prepare himself for this delicate task he drank so freely that he was quite overcome on his way to the church where the meeting was to be held and lay down in a corner, where he slept until the next morning. On awakening, he saw the people passing into the church and, believing that they were going to the Whig meeting, he joined them. On reaching the edifice, he chose a corner near the door where he could deliver his message in the middle of the speaker's speech and then make a quick get-away. The clergyman came in and read the text of the morning lesson: 'When the wicked rule, the righteous do mourn.' The Democrat in the corner saw his opportunity and, standing up in his pew, he shouted 'That's a damned Whig lie'—and ran.

"The first break in the Democratic ranks occurred when Frederick Douglass began his anti-slavery campaign. At first he was received with unsavory eggs and other missiles, but his good-

nature and eloquence finally overcame all opposition, and he grew to be a favorite visitor in the community. Meeting him many years afterward, I asked him if he remembered his first reception in my town. He replied, laughing: 'Oh, yes, I remember it well; the American eagle laid mighty poor eggs in those days.'

"The question has always been asked me what I have done to have lived so long. Not a little of it is due to the fact that I am a physician and have always regulated my habits of living in accordance with the knowledge of my personal condition. There was a popular saying in our neighborhood, 'If a boy is good for nothing else, make a doctor of him.' I do not think this phrase decided my fate, but I can say without qualification that had I not had the scientific knowledge of the human body which I did, I not only would not have reached this mark in my life, but, owing to my weakened physical condition as a boy, I doubtless should not even have reached the age of manhood."