Abigail Scott Duniway & the Struggle for Women’s Suffrage

Grades: Adaptable for 4-8
Subjects: American History, Oregon History, Civics, Geography, Social Studies
Suggested Time Allotment: 2 Class Periods

Overview:

In 1912, Oregon became the 7th state in the Union to pass an amendment granting the right of suffrage to women. This lesson aims to personalize the effects of this amendment for students via an in-class voting exercise, then to deepen their understanding of the issues framing the suffrage debate through research on the Oregon Digital Newspaper Website http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu. Particular emphasis will be given to The New Northwest, the suffragist newspaper that Duniway published in Portland, and contrasting coverage in contemporary issues of the Portland Oregonian, which was edited at the time by Harvey W. Scott, Duniway’s brother and political adversary.

A) An Exercise in Model Democracy

Inform students that you would like to determine the popular—or consensus—opinion of the class on a number of topics. Therefore, they will be asked to “go to the polls” and cast their votes on a secret ballot. You can have the ballots printed out ahead of time, or write the questions on the blackboard or an overhead projection, and have students record their answers on notebook paper. You might even consider creating an electronic ballot with open-source software such as Google Docs (included with and requires a Gmail account) or a survey site like www.surveymonkey.com and having students log on via computer to cast their votes either before or during class. You can use these questions or come up with your own—the intent, obviously, is to pose questions whose responses would be expected to skew along boy/girl lines.

Sample Ballot Questions:

1. The class will spend ten minutes in open discussion of ONE of the following subjects. Please vote for your favorite:
   a. professional sports
   b. fashion
   c. comic books
   d. pets
2. A Student-In-Chief will be elected and appointed with the power to make a number of important decisions for the class as a whole. All other students will have to abide by their decisions. Please vote for one of the following candidates:
   a. (name of girl in class)
   b. (name of boy in class)
   c. (name of girl in class)
   d. (name of boy in class)

3. Everyone will study one subject today. What is your favorite subject?
   a. Math
   b. English
   c. Science
   d. Social Studies

4. If we had a (or another) class pet, what should it be?
   a. iguana
   b. guinea pig
   c. snake
   d. a pair of hamsters

If you are using paper ballots, you may want to appoint official ballot collectors and counters from among the class. When the students have finished filling out their ballots, inform them that the tallying of the vote will happen in two stages.

For the first stage, the votes of the boys and ONLY the boys will be counted. Collect the ballots of only the boys in the class, tally the results and post them on the board or projected overhead for the class to review. Initiate a class discussion on the results of this boys-only ballot. Are the boys in class largely satisfied with the results? How about the girls? How confident did the boys feel when they found out only their votes would count? How did the girls feel when they learned they’d be left out? To what
extent does the result of this vote accurately capture the opinion of the whole class? Was this vote truly fair and democratic?

Now announce that the vote will be re-tabulated, including the ballots of BOTH the boys and the girls. Collect the girls’ ballots and recalculate the vote totals. Post these new results for the class to see and examine together. Discuss: Were the results of any poll results changed by including both boys’ and girls’ votes? How were the votes affected? Is this result more or less fair and representative than the boys-only vote? Would a girls-only vote be any more or less fair?

B) Background on the State and U.S. Constitutions

At this point it will be useful for the class to review relevant sections of the U.S. Constitution and 1857 Oregon Constitution in order to contextualize Abigail Scott Duniway’s life and mission as a suffragist.

Complete text of the U.S. Constitution is available from a number of online sources, including usconstitution.net (http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html). The most relevant sections to this discussion will be the 14th Amendment and the 19th Amendment.

As it was originally written and ratified, the U.S. Constitution made no direct mention, positive or negative, of the right of women to vote—social conventions of the day simply implied that women did not have that right. The nature of the suffragist’s struggle was striving to change this mindset. In the pages of The New Northwest can be found an Oregon suffragist’s speech arguing that the Constitution, in fact, guarantees women the right to vote:

“The Constitutional Right Of Women To Vote: Read Before The Yamhill County Woman Suffrage Association May 17, 1876” (Note: story begins top of column 5.)

The Oregon Blue Book provides scans of the original state constitution of 1857: the relevant material on voting rights is found in Article II, Section No.2 (http://bluebook.state.or.us/state/constitution/orig/article_II_01.htm).

Compare the wording of the original document with the same section of the Oregon Constitution as it currently stands (http://bluebook.state.or.us/state/constitution/constitution02.htm).

C) The Life and Work of Abigail Scott Duniway

Abigail Scott Duniway was Oregon’s most prominent early advocate of women’s rights. From 1871 to 1887, she published The New Northwest, a Portland-based, weekly newspaper dedicated to women’s issues and rights, particularly suffrage-- the legal right to vote and to run for elected office.

Provide the class with some autobiographical background on Abigail Scott Duniway: Abigail was born in Illinois in 1834; when she was eighteen years old, her family traveled 2,400 miles over the Oregon Trail and settled near Lafayette in the Willamette Valley. Her mother and her youngest brother died on the journey west. In 1859 Abigail wrote a book inspired by her pioneer experience, Captain Gray’s Company, or Crossing The Plains And Living In Oregon, which was the first novel to be professionally published in Oregon. In 1866 Abigail, along with her husband Benjamin and their five children, moved to the town of
Albany. Benjamin Duniway had been injured in a farming accident, and Abigail was thrust into the role of providing for her family. After working for a time she would prove her business acumen by opening a hat shop, which she successfully ran for five years before relocating to Portland to launch *The New Northwest*.

1871— the year of *The New Northwest*’s debut—also saw the first campaign to try to win the vote for Oregon women. In managing this effort, Duniway was personally advised by the prominent national activist Susan B. Anthony, who came west for three months to help Duniway strategize and wage the battle. The two women became fast friends, but also discovered differences in their personalities and modes of tactical thinking that would, through the years, place a strain on their relationship. Anthony considered Duniway stubborn, overbearing and disorganized; while Duniway for her part regarded Anthony as something of an eastern elitist. *(A research and compare/contrast activity built around Duniway and Susan B. Anthony can provide interesting lessons in the ways that seemingly unified political movements can also harbor deep ideological divisions within their ranks. It can also demonstrate the ways in which differing personal histories and backgrounds can lead like-minded people to take very different approaches to a shared problem.)*

In the pages of *The New Northwest*, Duniway would advocate not only for voting rights, but greater social and legal equality for women in general. Among her staunchest political opponents was her own brother, Harvey W. Scott, who was editor of the Portland *Oregonian*. Because both titles have been digitized, comparison and contrast of editorial opinion on the women’s suffrage debate is an excellent topic for guided research on Historic Oregon Newspapers.

*More than 1,600 pages of the New Northwest have been digitized on Historic Oregon Newspapers.* Almost every page has good, historically important material related to women’s rights and/or the women’s suffrage movement. An excellent and informative class discussion can be set up simply by having students conduct an advanced search of this title. Assign individual students or groups different terms to search, such as: suffrage, woman’s rights, equal rights, property rights, marriage, voting rights, etc.

Some articles have been provided here as a starting point:

‘Some Are Pretty: Women’s Club Has Debate’ from Portland Morning Oregonian, January 23, 1904:

http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn83025138/1904-01-23/ed-1/seq-12/

‘A Protest’ From Coos Bay Times, November 4, 1912:

http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn85033159/1912-11-04/ed-1/seq-7/

* counterpoint arguments from a women’s group opposed to suffrage
The class will spend ten minutes in open discussion of ONE of the following subjects. Please vote for your favorite:

☐ professional sports
☐ fashion
☐ comic books
☐ pets

Everyone will study one subject today. What is your favorite subject?

☐ Math
☐ English
☐ Science
☐ Social Studies

A Student-In-Chief will be elected and appointed with the power to make a number of important decisions for the class as a whole. All other students will have to abide by their decisions. Please vote for one of the following candidates:

☐ ____________________________
(name of girl in class)

☐ ____________________________
(name of boy in class)

☐ ____________________________
(name of girl in class)

☐ ____________________________
(name of boy in class)

If we had a (or another) class pet, what should it be?

☐ iguana
☐ guinea pig
☐ snake
☐ a pair of hamsters