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Farrell Hoy Jenab

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Katy researches grassland songbird population ecology.
Areca Roe

2016 — Future of the Flint Hills

MINNIE D. MORGAN

FARRELL HOY JENAB

Long before the 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote nationwide, a group of determined women in Cottonwood Falls decided to run for office. Fed up with the town's lawlessness, Minnie D. Morgan became the first female mayor of Cottonwood Falls in 1889 and, along with her all-woman council, ushered in a new era of law and order in Chase County. Minnie's brief but impactful term served as a powerful testament to women's political power in Kansas. As Governor of Kansas, I am proud to continue the work these women began. Their courage and determination continue to inspire Kansans of all genders and backgrounds to strive for a more just and equitable future for our great state. — Laura Kelly, 48th Governor of Kansas, 2019 to present

Wilhelmina (Minnie) D. Morgan was the first female mayor of Cottonwood Falls, Kansas.

She and her all-woman city council were elected 31 years before women won the right to vote in the United States.

Despite the 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 50 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 and sheer perseverance, Kansas women suffragists overcame many barriers, gradually succeeding in securing the vote for women. First came school elections in 1861, then municipal suffrage in 1887, and finally, in 1912, 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.

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

Minnie D. Morgan received 105 votes while her opponent, J.W. McWilliams, received 55 votes. The council members — Alice Hunt, Sadie Grisham, Elizabeth Porter, Barbara Gillett and Elizabeth Johnson — won by an even wider margin. And Police Judge Mary Frances Groundwater defeated her opponent with 112 to 45 votes.

Thus an era of "the cleanest administration Cottonwood Falls had ever had up to that time" was ushered in. Mayor Morgan and her council were well respected. Accounts of their activity in the Chase County Ledger described 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, Kansas and is a fifth-generation native of the Flint Hills. She is the director of the Kansas Studies Institute at Johnson County Community College.

The State of Kansas, through the Governor's Office, has maintained a long-standing relationship with Symphony in the Flint Hills. This includes the Governor serving as honorary chair of the Signature Event since its inception.