"And in My Soul a Growing Sense of God"

Sara Messing Stern: A Hoosier Voice for Women's Suffrage and Model of Applied Jewish Faith

By Jill Weiss Simins, Historian, Indiana Historical Bureau, Division of the Indiana State Library

Reformer, suffragist, and writer Sara Messing Stern was determined to improve her community and the lives of her less fortunate neighbors first in Indianapolis and then Terre Haute, driven in large part by her strong Jewish faith. Like many upper and middle-class women of the Progressive Era, Stern had the time, means, and education needed to work for philanthropic aide and municipal reform. She also recognized that to make lasting change, women, who were leading these important efforts, needed real political power. They needed the vote.

Stern developed the political savvy and organizational skills that made her a boon to the Indiana suffrage movement through her experience in women's clubs, including the National Council of Jewish Women and the Indiana General Federation of Women's Clubs. By the time she became an officer of the Woman's Franchise League (WFL), one of two leading Indiana suffrage organizations, she was well-versed in politics. She also faced some degree of prejudice in these organizations dominated by Protestant, Methodist, and Quaker women and imbued with Christian language and ideas. Unthwarted, and seemingly unwilling to be pulled into some of the uglier intra-organizational political maneuvering, Stern responded not in mean-spirited letters like some of her peers, but in her poetry. In verse, Stern expressed her faith in God and pride in her Jewish identity.

A new generation of vibrant suffragists had revived the Indiana women's suffrage movement by 1911 after a period of relative inactivity, in part by being more inclusive of Black, immigrant, working class, and Jewish women.¹ In this way, the suffrage movement in Indiana diverged somewhat from the national movement, which tended to be more exclusionary.² Stern would have been the only Jewish woman in the room at some meetings, but she was accepted as a leader by the WFL which came to rely on her expertise in finance and garnering press attention. Stern applied her skill and effort to the final push for the vote.

Sara was born to German Jewish immigrants Rica (née Naphtali) and Rabbi Meyer Messing (who was himself an advocate of progressive reform and a supporter of women's rights) in Indianapolis in 1879.³ Sara attended Short Ridge High School where a schoolmate remembered her sticking up for a peer being bullied over her father's beliefs.⁴ As the daughter of a prominent rabbi in a city where only two to three

¹ Anita Morgan, We Must Be Fearless: The Woman Suffrage Movement in Indiana (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2020), 1-13, 101-03, 112-14; 117-18; 127.

² Ibid

³ 1880 United States Federal Census, Indianapolis, Marion County, Indiana, Enumeration District: 116, Roll: 295, Page: 317B, accessed AncestryLibrary.com; Sara Messing Stern, "Sara's Column," Jewish Post (Indianapolis), February 19, 1943, 7, accessed Hoosier State Chronicles; "Chapter 5: Rabbi Mayer Messing," in To 120 Years! A Social History of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation (1856-1976), eds. Ethel and David (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, 1979), 37-47.

⁴ Laurel Thayer, "Indiana Women," *Indianapolis Sun*, February 11, 1912, Grace Julian Clarke Women's Clubs and Suffrage Scrapbook, 1912-1914, accessed Indiana State Library Digital Collections.

percent of the population was Jewish, Sara understood being labelled as different.⁵ Most notably, this anecdote shows that her desire to help those in need was present even at this early age.

In 1906, Sara married Leon Stern, an auditor for an Indianapolis coal company (and later the treasurer and then sales manager for a gas company). While she took her husband's surname "Stern," she also kept her maiden name "Messing," maintaining a link to the Messing ancestral line of prominent rabbis as well as her individual identity. While newspapers sometimes referred to her as "Mrs. Leon Stern," primary sources show that within the organizations where she held power, she was usually listed as "Sara Messing Stern."

Stern first made her mark in Indianapolis through philanthropy. Unlike other middle- or upper-class women, Stern was not content to just join charitable organizations or contribute money. Instead, she took a hands-on approach, meeting the poor in their homes to see where they needed help. She was especially concerned with the welfare of women and children. She advocated for reforming child labor laws and tenement housing. In 1910, she presided over an event designed to bring attention to the Fairview Settlement, which maintained several cottages for families in need of housing. She served as a probation officer, aiding juvenile offenders and guiding them back to a productive path. She believed in second chances and recognized that the poor faced great obstacles. She stated in 1912, I have found in dealing with people who have sinned that we are too quick to judge by what we see done, rather than the things overcome.

Stern visited schools and homes to read poems and stories to children, some of which she wrote herself. Some of these poems were expressions of her Jewish faith, phrased with universally-accessible nature imagery – an approach she would take throughout her life. For example, in her poem "Regeneration," which was included in a book of poems and stories for children by Indiana authors, Stern wrote:

A golden green just lurking in the sod,

2

⁵ Bureau of Jewish Social Research, "Statistics of Jewish," in *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 22 (1920-1921), 369-73, accessed Hillel.org; H. S. Linfield, *Jewish Population in the United States, 1927,* 107, 111, 187, Berman Jewish Policy Archive, Stanford, https://www.bjpa.org/bjpa.

⁶ Leon Stern and Sara Messing, June 20, 1906, Marion County, Indiana, FHL Film Number: 413542, Indiana, U.S., Select Marriages Index, 1748-1993, accessed AncestryLibrary.com; *1910 United States Census*, Indianapolis, Marion County, Indiana, Roll: T624_368, Page: 1A, Enumeration District: 0146, FHL microfilm: 1374381, AncestryLibrary.com; *1920 United States Census*, Terre Haute, Ward 2, Vigo County, Indiana, Roll: T625_468, Page: 5B, Enumeration District: 125, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920. (NARA microfilm publication T625, 2076 rolls), Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29, National Archives, accessed AncestryLibrary.com; *1930 United States Census*, Terre Haute, Vigo County, Indiana, Page: *1A*, Enumeration District: *0005*, FHL microfilm: *2340369*, Fifteenth Census of the United States, National Archives and Records Administration, accessed AncestryLibrary.com.

⁷ Grace Julian Clarke Correspondence and Papers, 1915 July-September, Indiana State Library Digital Collections, accessed Indiana Memory. For example, on the letterhead of the Terre Haute Woman's Franchise League, for which Stern served as Secretary, she is listed as "Mrs. Sara Messing Stern."

⁸ Thayer, "Indiana Women."

⁹ "All in Readiness for Fairview Meet," *Indianapolis Star*, July 1, 1910, 3, accessed Newspapers.com

¹⁰ The Butterfly 5 (January -February, 1911), 13, accessed HathiTrust; "Indianapolis, Ind.," American Israelite (Cincinnati), December 14, 1911, 2, accessed Newspapers.com.

¹¹ Thayer, "Indiana Women."

A breeze-blown seed out-bursting from the pod,

A sun-kissed bud awakening with a nod,

And in my soul a growing sense of God. 12

By 1911, she served as the director of the Nathan Morris House, a settlement house managed by the Jewish Federation of Indianapolis and initiated a lucrative stamp-selling fundraiser for the Red Cross in 1912.¹³ She worked with the Charity Organization Society, coordinating the work of the city's various philanthropic groups, and as the vice-president of the Needle Work Guild of America which provided clothing to hospitals and settlement homes. 14 Her passion for serving the poor came through in her poetry. She wrote:

Seek out the weeping ones and dry their tears.

The sick, the halt, the sinner and the blind,

Oh, pity them and love them and be kind. 15

Stern also served as superintendent of the Religious Sunday School, which was managed by the local section of the National Council of Jewish Women. ¹⁶ It was as a Council representative that Stern attended a 1909 reception for the firebrand suffragist Grace Julian Clarke who had been recently elected president of the Indiana Federation of Clubs. 17 Stern and Clarke would continue to cross paths through club and charitable work over the next few years. In fact, a deepening friendship with Clarke may have brought Stern into more active suffrage work. While Stern had almost certainly joined at least a year earlier, by 1912, she was active in the Women's Franchise League (WFL), working for women's suffrage. 18

In 1911, Stern and her husband moved to Terre Haute, but the move did not prevent Stern from engaging in women's rights work at a state level. 19 Instead, she increased her influence through the Federation of Clubs and the WFL over the next several years. She also served as an officer of the Terre Haute section of the National Council of Jewish Women and as the group's representative to the other statewide women's organizations.²⁰ By 1912, Stern was one of several directors of the WFL and spoke on the organization's behalf around the state, often joining other prominent suffragists such as Clarke

¹² Sara Messing Stern, "Regeneration," in *Indiana Authors: A Representative Collection for Young People*, edited by Minnie Olcott Williams (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1916), 231, accessed HathiTrust.

¹³ Thayer, "Indiana Women;" The Butterfly, 13; "Council of Jewish Women," American Israelite (Cincinnati), December 12, 1912, 3, accessed Newspapers.com.

¹⁴ "City News in Brief," Indianapolis Star, November 9, 1911, 6, accessed Newspapers.com; "Indianapolis, Ind.," American Israelite (Cincinnati), December 14, 1911, 2, accessed Newspapers.com.

¹⁵ Sara Messing Stern, "The Greater Creed," *The Butterfly* 5 (October-November, 1911), 89, accessed HathiTrust. ¹⁶ "Indianapolis, Ind.," 2.

¹⁷ "Reception for Mrs. Clarke," *Indianapolis Star*, December 4, 1909, Grace Julian Clarke Women's Clubs and Suffrage Scrapbook, 1891, 1902-1911, Indiana State Library Digital Collections.

¹⁸ "Suffrage Worker Coming," Indianapolis Star, February 11, 1912, 45, accessed Newspapers.com; Thayer,

[&]quot;Indiana Women;" "The Suffrage Luncheon," Fort Wayne News, October 24, 1912, 1, accessed Newspapers.com. ¹⁹ "Indianapolis, Ind.," 2. The American Israelite, a widely circulating Cincinnati newspaper, noted the relocation because of Sara's extensive charitable work.

²⁰ "Council of Jewish Women," American Israelite (Cincinnati), December 12, 1912, 3, accessed Newspapers.com; "Indiana Federation of Clubs," Indianapolis News, October 10, 1914, 27, accessed Newspapers.com.

and Eugenie Nicholson (wife of the popular author Meredith Nicholson).²¹ Stern also served as the treasurer of the Indiana Federation of Clubs, an important position for an outspoken suffragist.²² The large and influential Federation, which was an umbrella organization for a myriad of women's clubs, had not yet taken a stance on the suffrage issue. Stern and other suffragists who held leadership positions were able to educate their colleagues and advocate for the vote from inside the organization. For example, in October 1912, when the Federation of Clubs held their annual meeting in Fort Wayne, the WFL held a "suffrage luncheon" at the same hotel as the meeting, providing an opportunity for Federation members to learn about issues surrounding the vote.²³ Clarke and Stern both gave toasts. Clarke's speech was a straightforward one about lessons from her recent work campaigning for suffrage. Stern responded in jest with a mock anti-suffrage toast titled "I Do Not Need the Vote," intended to show the absurdity of the opposition's position, especially when that position was assumed by a woman who would only benefit from increased civic rights.²⁴

Also in 1912, Stern wrote the WFL board about "the manner of procedure" for "an organization among the colored women of the city." The WFL board responded that "all women must be interested [in suffrage] regardless of race," but offered Stern no direction on how to proceed. According to historian Anita Morgan, it is unclear from the minutes if any further action was taken to include Black women more directly in the Terre Haute section. The manner of procedure" for "an organization among the colored procedure" for "an organization" for "an organiz

²¹ "The Suffrage Luncheon," 1; "Federation to Consider Equal Suffrage To-Day," Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette, October 25, 1912, 1, accessed Newspapers.com.

²² Grace Julian Clarke, "Woman's Clubs," *Indianapolis Star*, November 8, 1912, Grace Julian Clarke Women's Clubs and Suffrage Scrapbook, 1912-1914, Indiana State Library Digital Collections; Grace Julian Clark, no title, *Indianapolis Star*, December 12, 1912, Grace Julian Clarke Women's Clubs and Suffrage Scrapbook, 1912-1914, Indiana State Library Digital Collections.

²³ "The Suffrage Luncheon," 1, 5; "Federation to Consider Equal Suffrage To-Day," Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette, October 25, 1912, 1, Newspapers.com.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Morgan, *We Must Be Fearless*, 117. Morgan cites a June 22, 1912 meeting recorded in the Woman's Franchise League of Indiana Minute Book, League of Women Voters Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

²⁷ Ibid. The Equal Suffrage Association was more proactive than the WFL in working with Black branches of its organization



Caption: Indianapolis Star, January 25, 1913, 9, accessed Newspapers.com.

Stern often travelled from Terre Haute to Indianapolis for WFL and Federation events, as well as to directly lobby members of the Indiana General Assembly for suffrage and labor causes. In January 1913, the *Indianapolis Star* reported: "Mrs. Leon Stern of Terre Haute, formerly of Indianapolis, is one of the prominent Indiana club women who are exerting much influence at the present session of the Legislature." Thursday evening she was one of the speakers in the discussion of the eight-hour working bill and she is also interested in the suffrage measure and other bills concerning the welfare of women." Stern returned to the capital the following month as "the chief speaker" at a large WFL "suffrage tea." By this point, Stern's influence was widespread and it was not uncommon for her to attend or help organize events featuring prominent politicians and nationally-known leaders, such as Indiana Governor Samuel Ralston or former Vice-President Charles Fairbanks. Stern organized a large lecture at the Claypool Hotel in Indianapolis, the location where the Federation and the WFL also held their large meetings, in late February 1913. The event featured the influential Rabbi Stephen Wise speaking on "spiritual patriotism or civic religion," that is, viewing one's civic responsibilities in a manner as sacred and important as their religious faith — a point most suffragists would have understood as they crusaded for their rights.

**Total Terre Haute, former Vice President Federation events, as well as to a suffragists would have understood as they crusaded for their rights.

**Total Terre Haute, former Vice President Federation events, as well as to a suffragists would have understood as they crusaded for their rights.

**Total Terre Haute, former Vice President Federation events, as well as to a suffragist for the present federation events for the present federation events.

**Total Terre Haute, former Vice President Federation events for the present federation events for the present federation events for the pres

While Indiana suffragists were making some progress toward legislation that would give women partial or full suffrage, they faced an infuriating catch-22. They could not influence lawmakers who did not want to give them the vote because they were not voters. Suffrage workers realized that if they couldn't directly influence their congressmen, they needed to change public opinion on a grander scale. If the reformers could tip the prevailing sentiment toward suffrage rights for women, lawmakers would feel the pressure of their constituents and vote accordingly. Hoosier suffragists approached the public through demonstrations, parades, and the occasional publicity stunt designed to attract press attention. In March 1913, the General Assembly rejected several suffrage resolutions, while 500 suffragists silently protested the rejection of their enfranchisement.³² In the wake of these failures, press coverage became even more important. So when the WFL chose Stern as head of their press committee that April, they gave her a major responsibility.³³ By the end of the year, she was also a WFL vice president and a member of its "speakers' bureau."³⁴

⁻

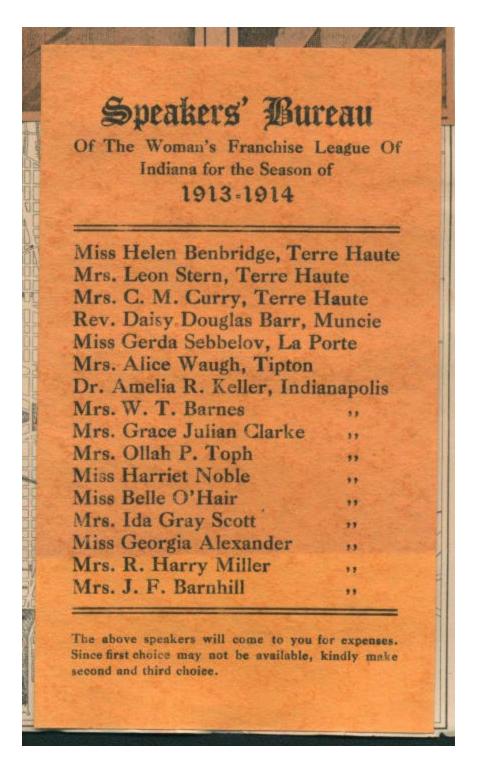
²⁸ "Club Woman Interested in Lawmaking," *Indianapolis Star*, January 25, 1913, 9, accessed Newspapers.com.

³⁰ "Hostess at recent Equal Suffrage Tea," *Indianapolis Star*, February 14, 1913, 9, accessed Newspapers.com.

³¹ "Rabbi Wise Declares Civic Reform is Religious Cause," *Indianapolis Star*, February 24, 1913, 3, accessed Newspapers.com; "Franchise League Notes," *Palladium-Item* [Richmond, IN], April 29, 1913, 7, accessed Newspapers.com. Former Vice President Charles W. Fairbanks introduced Rabbi Wise at the February 1913 event. In April 1913, Stern helped organize a WFL event were Governor Samuel Ralston delivered the welcome address. ³² Jill Weiss Simins, "A Silent Roar: Indiana Suffragists' 1913 March to the Statehouse," Indiana History Blog, June 17, 2020, accessed blog.history.IN.gov.

³³ "Franchise League Notes," *Palladium-Item* (Richmond) April 29, 1913, 7, accessed Newspapers.com.

³⁴ Mrs. G. M. Henderson, "Indiana Women's Franchise League Completes Year of Great Activity," *Indianapolis Star*, December 31, 1913, 31, accessed Newspapers.com; Morgan, *We Must Be Fearless*, 124.



Caption: Grace Julian Clarke Women's Clubs and Suffrage Scrapbook, 1912-1914, accessed Indiana State Library Digital Collections.

The WFL continued their work lobbying for a constitutional convention to amend the state's governing document to include women's suffrage, pushing for a federal amendment, and attracting more supporters to their cause and membership, including "the club woman, the laboring woman, the

professional woman, the society woman, [and] the woman interested along educational lines."³⁵ In May 1914, the WFL attracted press attention from the *Indianapolis News* for "an outdoor demonstration for suffrage" and for their creative staging of the event. ³⁶ Answering the call of "Rally, suffragists!" WFL members and leaders met at the organization's headquarters on the northeast corner of Pennsylvania and Washington, not far from the capitol building.³⁷ The WFL officers, including Stern and other notable suffragists such as Dr. Amelia Keller, climbed into automobiles decorated in the yellow suffrage colors. When a bugler sounded at noon, they led a parade of activists to Market Street near the Circle – a spectacle designed to attract attention. When they arrived at their destination, they sang suffrage songs, spoke to the assembled crowd, and read the "Woman's Declaration of Independence," asserting "that all men *and women* are created equal."³⁸

³⁵ Henderson, 31.

³⁶ "Suffragists to Hold and Outdoor Meeting," *Indianapolis News*, May 1, 1914, 28, accessed Newspapers.com.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid.; Arlene Balkansky, "American Women's Declaration of Independence: Newspaper coverage, 1848," Library of Congress Blog, July 11, 2019, accessed https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2019/07/american-womens-declaration-newspaper-coverage-1848/.

The "Woman's Declaration of Independence" was originally called the "Declaration of Sentiments" when it was created at the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls. The WFL leaders were likely reading a modified and updated version.



Caption: Indianapolis Star, June 6, 1912, 5, accessed Newspapers.com.

The suffrage automobile parade had been an effective WFL tactic since 1912. The suffragists would decorate cars with "Votes for Women" banners and drive through the streets of cities and small towns distributing suffrage flyers. Where they found crowds, they would climb on top of the cars, using them as "speaking platforms for impromptu street meetings," according to historian Anita Morgan. In some places, women were so inspired by what they heard, they formed new WFL branches "on the spot." Stern soon brought the automobile tour home to Terre Haute.

As she continued serving as an officer of the Federation of Clubs, a representative of the Terre Haute section of the National Council of Jewish Women, and as a busy speaker and officer for the WFL, Stern also served as secretary of the Terre Haute Equal Franchise League by spring 1914. At a large League

³⁹ Morgan, "Taking it to the Streets: Hoosier Women's Suffrage Automobile Tour," Indiana History Blog, July 8, 2019, accessed blog.history.IN.gov.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

meeting attended by 254 women from Indiana and Illinois, Stern presented the organization's resolutions which included support for a federal suffrage amendment. It was an eventful day. Terre Haute Mayor Dunn Roberts, who opposed women's suffrage, "accosted one of the members in the corridor" demanding that he be given a platform in the meeting stating that the suffragists should "hear the truth one time." Unsurprisingly, the women declined to hear his version of "the truth." Nonetheless, it was becoming clearer to Indiana suffragists each year that their only hope for the vote was an amendment to the U.S. Constitution as opposed to action by the Indiana General Assembly. In 1915, Stern organized an automobile tour for the Terre Haute section of the WFL, delivering prosuffrage speeches and literature to audiences in and around the city. In nearby Prairieton, the local women were moved to organize their own small WFL chapter. 42

Women gathered about the voting place of the Indiana Federation of Woman's Clubs today with all the interest that marks similar gatherings of men at national elections. They waited in long lines for chances to enter the room in the Claypool hotel where their ballots for federation officers were being recorded. This

Caption: Indianapolis News, October 28, 1915, 20, accessed Newspapers.com.

picture was taken on the roof of the hotel where the lines of voters extended from the Palm room which contained the ballot boxes.

The leaders of these women's organizations were shrewd politicians. They had formed their lobbying groups, penned legislation introduced in the General Assembly, changed the minds of important leaders such as Governor Ralston, and largely tipped the scales of public opinion in favor of suffrage. As with male legislators, the women's politics sometimes got ugly. While disparaging comments and mud slinging was considered just a part of campaigning for men, when women engaged in the same traditional, if unseemly, tactics, they were labelled as catty. The infighting surrounding the 1915 campaign for the Indiana General Federation of Women's Clubs presidency was brutal, not because the women were especially petty, but because they were political actors vying for power in a large, influential organization. ⁴³ Despite her best efforts, even Stern was drawn into the fray. Notably, some of

⁴¹ "Roberts Given Chill at Suffrage Session," *Indianapolis Star*, May 3, 1914, 59, accessed Newspapers.com.

⁴² "Franchise League Notes," Indianapolis Star, August 15, 1915, 33, accessed Newspapers.com.

⁴³ For an overview of the 1915 campaign for the presidency of the Federation see: Jackie Swihart, "A Petty Affair: Grace Julian Clarke and the 1915 Campaign for the Indiana General Federation of Women's Clubs Presidency,

the damage inflicted on her character may have been more the result of latent antisemitism in some of her colleagues rather than any action or position that she took herself.

As Terre Haute clubwomen Lenore Hanna Cox and Stella Stimson clashed in the fight for the Federation, Grace Julian Clarke was often in the middle of the battle and was the recipient of many letters showing support for or opposition to the candidates. Clarke supported Cox for the presidency and worked hard to back her candidacy and oppose Stimson. Clarke's main complaint about Stimson was that she felt Stimson's temperance work interfered with her suffrage advocacy, potentially driving away supporters who did not believe in Prohibition. ⁴⁴ In August, for reasons unknown, Stimson wrote Clarke suggesting Stern as Federation president. ⁴⁵ Since Stimson herself was vying for the office, this seems to be some sort of political chess move – perhaps positioning herself as uninterested in order not to seem overly ambitious. Stimson's letter had a negative impact on Stern's reputation amongst her Federation colleagues. It made Clarke worry that Stern was another potential obstacle to Cox's presidency. As word got out, some Federation members suspected Stern to be Stimson's "spy" at closed meetings and wanted to exclude Stern from the Federation and the Terre Haute WFL. ⁴⁶ Unfortunately, some of this suspicion seems to have been tinged with antisemitism.

Stern was never interested in the Federation presidency. In fact, she told a colleague that she "absolutely would not have it if it were handed to her on a platter." Her résumé shows that she was more interested in philanthropy and women's rights than club politics. And yet, Cox and another Terre Haute clubwoman, Helen C. Benbridge, attacked Stern in letters to Clarke. Benbridge wrote an especially hateful letter.

Stimson's tactic for beating Cox was to paint the latter as less "Christian," by which Stimson meant less moral, because Stimson was a prohibitionist while Cox did not believe the liquor issue was as important as the vote. In her campaigning then, Stimson claimed that Cox was not Christian. Benbridge took this as an opportunity to attack Stern, bending Stimson's words back to a more literal interpretation of what it meant to be Christian. Benbridge wrote, "If Mrs. S[timson] objects to Mrs. C[ox] because she is not a Christian why does Mrs. Stern strike her as a good candidate?" While Benbridge was certainly being somewhat sarcastic, the implication was that being Jewish should disqualify Stern from the presidency. It has just a shade of antisemitism, especially as Benbridge continued to write in a disparaging way about Stern's influence in the Terre Haute Jewish community.

Benbridge claimed that Stern was "furious" with Stimson "about several Jewish matters." Stimson was a Christian and an active leader of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, so why she was involved

Indiana History Blog, January 10, 2019, accessed https://blog.history.in.gov/a-petty-affair-grace-julian-clarke-and-the-1915-campaign-for-the-indiana-general-federation-of-womens-clubs-presidency/.

⁴⁴ Morgan, 131-32.

⁴⁵ Stella C. Stimson to Grace Julian Clarke, August 23, 1915, Grace Julian Clarke Papers and Correspondence, Indiana State Library, accessed Indiana Memory.

⁴⁶ Grace Julian Clarke to [Virginia C.] Meredith, August 30, 1915, Grace Julian Clarke Papers and Correspondence, Indiana State Library, accessed Indiana Memory; Lenore Hanna Cox to Grace Julian Clarke, November 4, 1915, Grace Julian Clarke Papers and Correspondence, Indiana State Library, accessed Indiana Memory.

⁴⁷ Helen C. Benbridge to Grace Julian Clarke, September 3, 1915, Grace Julian Clarke Papers and Correspondence, Indiana State Library, accessed Indiana Memory.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

in "Jewish matters" to the extent that she could anger Stern, a prominent Jewish leader, is unclear. Cox also wrote disparagingly about Stern, encouraging the baseless rumor that Stern was Stimson's spy and pushing to remove her from the WFL and Federation. Cox wrote that by including Stern in the Federation leadership, they would be creating "a Frankenstein" of an organization. ⁵⁰ This dehumanizing language is also telling of Cox's potential antisemitic feelings toward Stern. In another letter disparaging Stern and looking for Clarke's support to remove her from the Terre Haute branches of the Federation and WFL, Cox claimed that she (Cox) had the support of the National Council of Jewish Women, not Stern. ⁵¹ This was unlikely considering Stern was an officer of the Terre Haute Section of the Council while Cox was a Christian who attended an Episcopal church and thus not a Council member. However, the claim does show the necessity of securing support of an active community of Jewish women and perhaps the threat Cox felt Stern might pose to her leadership in Terre Haute. Cox did have to admit to Clarke that Stern had graciously supported a motion that Cox had made during a recent meeting. Cox, who saw only black and white, allies and opponents, could not see why Stern, whom she had labelled as her enemy, could possibly agree with her on an issue. Cox asked Clarke, "Is she really normal?" ⁵² Again, using "othering" language that divested Stern of some humanity.

It is worth noting that while Clarke worried about Stern's connection to Stimson in her private letters, Clarke did not descend into name calling like the others. Clarke often spoke positively of Stern in public, praising Stern's philanthropic work and calling her "able and efficient in whatever she undertakes." ⁵³ Clarke and Stern worked together successfully for many more years.

That any of these attacks were aimed more harshly at Stern because she was Jewish is to some degree speculation. Again, this was politics, and mudslinging was always part of the game. However, we can be certain that Stern did face antisemitism at various points in her career. According to historian Melissa R. Klapper, Jewish women had only recently, and only tepidly at that, been included in the suffrage movement. Meetings, resolutions, songs, and speeches were imbued with Christian rhetoric that could make Jewish women feel excluded. Rallies and conventions were often held on Friday evenings when observant Jewish women would have been prevented from attending or felt conflicted about participating. Some Jewish women were reluctant to work with Christian suffragists who used contact with Jews as an evangelizing opportunity. Section 15.

The antisemitism imbued in the women's suffrage movement was perhaps most clearly expressed through its leadership. Nationally prominent suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton published an article referring to Jews as "a useless portion of society." ⁵⁶ In her *Woman's Bible*, Stanton went on to blame the "backward" ideas espoused by Judaism for women's second-class status. ⁵⁷ Famed

⁵⁰ Lenore Hanna Cox to Grace Julian Clarke, October 21, 1915, Grace Julian Clarke Papers and Correspondence, Indiana State Library, accessed Indiana Memory.

⁵¹ Cox to Clarke, November 4, 1915.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Grace Julian Clarke, "Woman's Clubs," *Indianapolis Star*, November 8, 1912, Grace Julian Clarke Women's Clubs and Suffrage Scrapbook, 1912-1914, accessed Indiana State Library Digital Collections.

⁵⁴ Melissa R. Klapper, *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace: American Jewish Women's Activism 1890-1940* (New York and London: New York University Press), 31-34.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Claudie Setzer, "A Jewish Reading of *The Woman's Bible*," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27, No. 2 (Fall 2011), 71-84, accessed https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.27.2.71.

Methodist minister and suffrage orator Anna Howard Shaw blamed Jewish immigrants for failed suffrage campaigns and Quaker suffragist Alice Paul worked amicably with Jewish women in public, while privately expressing her "antagonism for Jews." According to Klapper, the antisemitism of their colleagues meant that Jewish women felt an "unease with their place" and "occupied an ambiguous position" within the larger suffrage movement. So whether or not, we interpret the hostility directed toward Stern by her fellow clubwomen as antisemitic, Stern would certainly have been familiar with the writings of the leaders of the women's movements and received the message that she was an outsider in a Christian space.

We also know Stern faced antisemitism because she wrote about it in her own words. In 1911, Stern published her poem "The Greater Creed" in *The Butterfly*, a magazine concerned with Progressive Era reform, politics, and culture. 60 Stern's poem had three main points. First, she expressed the completeness Jews felt in worshipping one God, explaining to a Christian reader that Jews did not feel the need for "a mediator." 61 However, her goal was not to be divisive, as she paid respect to the equality of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, noting that they were God's children. Her second goal in "The Greater Creed," was to argue that while some people worshipped Allah, some Christ, and some "Reason," one's chosen belief system mattered less than one's actions. 62 She explained that it was work on behalf of one's fellow man, not creeds, that made one holy. She wrote, "Fling afar your doctrine. Cast aside your fears." 63 Her final and most powerful message was that all people of faith should unite to serve those in need. She concluded:

Seek out the weeping ones and dry their tears.

The sick, the halt, the sinner and the blind,

Oh, pity them and love them and be kind.

For after all, the helpful human deed

By Christian, Turk or Jew to one in need

Can bring more souls to God than all man's creed. 64

While Stern pushed back against the dominance of Christian culture at the start of the poem, she did so gently and immediately moved on to her main point: creed doesn't matter as much as serving one's neighbors in need.

But by 1917, Stern had extensively revised this poem, doubling the stanzas, and drastically changing its tone. While she closed the poem, renamed "The Jew to the Gentile," with the same eighteen lines that made up "The Greater Creed," she added thirty additional lines to the beginning. 65 In these new stanzas

⁵⁸ Klapper, 33-34.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 34

⁶⁰ Sara Messing Stern, "The Greater Creed," The Butterfly 5 (October -November, 1911), 89, accessed HathiTrust.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid. Here Stern uses "halt" to refer to persons with severe mobility issues.

⁶⁵ Sara Messing Stern, "The Jew to the Gentile," in *Standard Book of Jewish Verse*, compiled by Joseph Friedlander, edited by George Alexander Kohut (New York: Dodd, Mean, and Company, 1917), 584, accessed HathiTrust.

she boldly confronted the antisemitism she faced in the world around her. First, she addressed the condemnation she felt Christians delivered to Jews for not believing in the divinity of Jesus. Quoting a fictional priest, she wrote:

The priest bent angry gaze upon the Jew,
"What base ingratitude. Shame, shame that you
Who love the Father, should deny His Son.
Christ, Jesus, is Divine, with God is one."66

Still speaking in the voice of the judgmental priest character, she continued on the same theme: "Oh, stiff-necked race/ Forever shall the glory of God's face / Be turned from you." She then shifted her focus to what she perceived as a hypocritical characteristic of Christianity, that is, violently persecuting those who did not share Christian beliefs. She wrote from the perspective of a Jew responding to the condemnation of the priest, stating that Christianity had forced belief in the divinity of Christ on the world "with rack and sword." In this voice, she confronted the persecuting priest with one more accusatory stanza:

Your sins are legion. Oh, the awful moan

Of babes and mothers, maids and men and youth

Who died because they dared refuse the truth

You claimed. For these things how can you atone,

How ease your burdened conscience, how forget

The needless misery you caused?69

In her next few lines, she explored the theme of Jewish forgiveness. She wrote:

And yet

Although you maimed us with the scourge and flame

And tortured and reviled us 'in His name';

We reach out arms in friendliness to you

And plead for peace.⁷⁰

After this stanza, Stern then repeated the lines of the 1911 version of the poem, which were focused on the importance of acting on behalf of the poor and needy as opposed to arguing over religious creed. So, what had changed between the uplifting lines of the 1911 work and the castigating revision of 1917? We can only assume that she came into greater contact and conflict with antisemitic language or ideas, perhaps even in the context of women's rights movements.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Despite the opposition of members of the Federation or any other potential antisemitic incidents she may have faced, Stern seems to have been able to rise above the political backstabbing and continue to serve as a leader withing the Federation. ⁷¹ She also became the treasurer of the National Council of Jewish women (the national organization, not just the Terre Haute section). ⁷² She even found time to lead a local Vigo County organization dedicated to studying and protecting birds. ⁷³

^{71 &}quot;To Discuss Plans for the Biennial," *Indianapolis News*, January 14, 1916, 14, accessed Hoosier State Chronicles; Indiana Federation of Clubs, "Officers of the Indiana Federation of Clubs," *Official Report of Twenty-Seventh Annual Convention*, October 31 - November 3, 1916, 6, 8, accessed HathiTrust.

⁷² Council of Jewish Women, "National Officers, 1917-1920," *Official Report of the Eighth Triennial Convention*, November 5-9, 1917, 4, accessed HathiTrust; "Council of Jewish Women," *American Israelite*, December 6, 1917, P1, accessed Newspapers.com.

⁷³ Indiana Federation of Clubs, "Officers of the Indiana Federation of Clubs," Official Report of Twenty-Seventh Annual Convention, October 31 - November 3, 1916, 106, accessed HathiTrust; "Club, Social and Other Phases of Women's Life in City and State," Indianapolis News, October 14, 1916, 18, accessed Newspapers.com; "Indiana Federation of Clubs," Indianapolis News, February 17, 1917, 18, accessed Newspapers.com.



Caption: *Indianapolis News*, July 7, 1917, 16, accessed Hoosier State Chronicles.

When the United States entered World War One in 1917, Stern balanced her suffrage work with war work. As the leader of the Women's Army Against Waste, Stern organized a campaign to reduce food waste through limiting meat and wheat products, canning, and meal planning for schools and households. He also applied the organizational and fundraising skills she had developed through club and suffrage work to sell Liberty Bonds. In less than one week in November 1917, the Terre Haute section of the National Council of Jewish Women raised \$53,000 worth of Liberty Bonds. While Indiana suffragists dedicated themselves to war work such as this, they did not let the war impede their progress for the vote. American men were going to fight to preserve democracy abroad, they were going to do work to expand democracy at home. Stern continued to attend suffrage conferences, rallies, and demonstrations at the Indiana State House.

As the suffrage movement headed into its final stretch, Stern made an important contribution to the final push for the vote through the Legislative Council of Indiana Women, a statewide organization dedicated to lobbying the General Assembly. Clarke had organized the Council in 1914 to "present a united front to the legislature," according to historian Anita Morgan. 78 While the various women's organizations differed on many suffrage-related issues, the Legislative Council would push only for legislation previously agreed upon by all parties, ensuring that the groups would not be working to contrary goals. Morgan explains that "legislative proposals had to have a two-thirds majority vote for the committee for active lobbying to begin – a majority vote was not enough."79 Once the Council agreed to back an issue, the group that proposed action supplied the lobbyist. According to historian Jennifer M. Kalvaitis, "As many as 80,000 Hoosier women voiced their opinions to determine which issues the Legislative Council should lobby for in any given year."80 By the time the General Assembly convened in January 1917 for the seventieth session, the Council was a united, organized, and focused force that demanded to be heard. During that session, they lobbied for several suffrage bills: the Woman's Suffrage Act which was a partial suffrage bill, the Beardsley Amendment, would strike the word "male" as criteria to vote from the state constitution, and the Constitutional Convention Bill which would call for a special convention to add universal suffrage to the Indiana Constitution where it could never be overturned.81

The financial burden of lobbying the General Assembly, organizing the disparate women's groups, hosting meetings, and circulating educational material was immense. Starting in 1916, the Council also began maintaining an office inside the State House. According to the *Indianapolis News*, "The granting of a room in the statehouse to women is an unusual procedure . . . but it was of a tremendous advantage to the women to have Room 75 on the assembly floor." ⁸² The office was staffed by "three young college

⁷⁴ "Terre Haute Women Plan Drive on Waste," *Indianapolis News*, July 7, 1917, 16, accessed Hoosier State Chronicles.

⁷⁵ "Terre Haute C. J. W. Raises \$53,000," *American Israelite* (Cincinnati), November, 1, 1917, 5, accessed Newspapers.com.

⁷⁶ Morgan, 180.

⁷⁷ "Suffrage Hearing Draws Big Crowd," *Indianapolis News*, February 14, 1917, 2, accessed Newspapers.com.

⁷⁸ Morgan, 127-28.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 128.

⁸⁰ Jennifer M. Kalvaitis, *Indianapolis Women Working for the Right to Vote: The Forgotten Drama of 1917*, Master's Thesis, submitted May 2013, Department of History, Indiana University, accessed <u>ScholarWorks.IUPUI.edu</u>.
⁸¹ Morgan, 150-51.

^{82 &}quot;Suffragists of State to Hold Love Feast," Indianapolis News, February 24, 1917, 17, accessed Newspapers.com

women" from respected schools.⁸³ The Council looked to Stern's financial expertise to meet the challenges posed by these costly initiatives. The *News* reported on Stern's role in creating a fund for the Council:

The idea of financing such a gigantic work was an appalling one, and one that the women faced in trepidation. Many a story of how a woman made a sacrifice to give to this fund has been told, but with Mrs. Sara Messing Stern, of Terre Haute, as chairman of the finance committee, the necessary funds have been supplied. She asked the membership for 10 centers per capita.⁸⁴

Thus, through Stern's simple plan and steady management, the Council became a powerful voice for suffrage. And largely through the efforts of the Council, all three bills introduced in the 1917 session of the General Assembly passed.

The Beardsley Amendment, however, would have to be passed again in the 1919 legislative session because it would alter the constitution and then put to a statewide referendum. Of course, when it went to the people to vote on women's suffrage, only men would be voting. Meanwhile, anti-suffrage forces attacked the other two bills. Ultimately, the Constitutional Convention bill and then the Woman's Suffrage Act were defeated in the courts. 85 Nonetheless, these successes showed that women's suffrage was near, and the Council had become "tremendous in power." 86

At the same time, the proposed federal suffrage amendment was gaining traction. In June 1919, the U.S. Congress passed the 19th Amendment to the Constitution and sent it to the states for ratification. Suffragists called on Indiana Governor James P. Goodrich to call a special session of the General Assembly to ratify the amendment. While he delayed, waiting to see what other states would do, the WFL delivered petitions signed by 86,000 Hoosiers showing the popular demand for the session. Finally, the governor gave in to the pressure and called the session.⁸⁷

On January 16, 1920, Indiana ratified the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution. The vote was 43 to 3 in the Senate and 93 to 0 in the House. 88 Hundreds of women wearing yellow flowers packed the galleries and distributed information on the work that remained to be done to secure the vote. Sarah Messing Stern was among the "women who saw the culmination of a struggle in which they were pioneers." The following day, Governor Goodrich signed the ratification resolution surrounded by the "prominent suffrage workers of the state." A photograph on the front page of the *Indianapolis Star*, shows Sara Messing Stern among them, looking on approvingly. As she stood in the governor's office, she saw her life's work for women's suffrage achieved. And when Tennessee ratified the 19th Amendment on August 18, 1920, universal suffrage became law.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Morgan, 160-63, 189.

⁸⁶ "Suffragists of State to Hold Love Feast," 17.

⁸⁷ Morgan, 197-98.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 199

^{89 &}quot;Scores of Women Attend Session," Indianapolis News, January 16, 1920, 1, accessed Newspapers.com.

⁹⁰ "Governor Goodrich Signs Ratifying Resolution," *Indianapolis Star*, January 17, 1920, 1, accessed Newspapers.com.

⁹¹ Ibid.

GOVERNOR GOODRICH SIGNS RATIFYING RESOLUTION.



Governor Goodrich late in the afternoon signed the resolution rati- Sara Lauter of Indianapolis, Mrs. Richard Edwards of Peru, Miss Helen Mrs. A. H. Beardsley of Elkhart, Mrs. G. C. Markle of Winchester, Mrs.

fying the suffrage amendment to the Federal constitution. The cere- Benbridge of Terro Haute, president of the Woman's Franchise League mony was witnessed by several prominent suffrage workers of the of Indiana; Mrs. Frank J. Campbell of Terre Haute, Mrs. C. A. Butler, state. The Governor used ten pens in signing the document and these secretary of the woman's division of the Republican state committee; were presented to the women as tokens of the occasion. Those in the Mrs. Sue E. Kroge of Terre Haute, Mrs. E. F. White of Indianapolis, picture, besides Governor Goodrich, are Mrs. Harry Bucklin of Brazil, Mrs. Sara Messing Stern of Terre Haute, Miss Eldena Lauter of Indianapolis, and Miss Mae Helmer of Terre Haute. Miss Benbridge, the Horace C. Stilwell of Anderson, Mrs. Frank Kimmell of Anderson, Miss president of the state league, is standing at the Governor's left.

Caption: Indianapolis Star, January 17, 1920, 1, accessed Newspapers.com.

Stern continued to serve as an officer and then director of the National Council of Jewish Women. 92 She served on the Committee for the First American Birth Control Conference held in New York City in 1921.93 She was active in the Women's Press Club, an organization that put authors and journalists into "a closer fellowship of social and intellectual intercourse," and by 1927 she was president of the club.94 While Stern and her husband moved to Chicago in the early 1930s, she remained invested in her Terre Haute and Indianapolis communities. 95 By 1943, she was writing a regular column for the (Indianapolis) Jewish Post. 96 "Sara's Column" was a mix of Stern's personal views, stories, and reminiscences with announcements for upcoming events and happenings in the Jewish community, including births,

^{92 &}quot;Council of Jewish Women," American Jewish Year Book 5681, Vol.22 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1920) 302, accessed HathiTrust; "Heads Indiana Club," Jewish Woman 7, No. 2 (April 1927): 40, accessed

^{93 &}quot;Birth Control, What It Is, How It Works, What It Will Do: The Proceedings of the First American Birth Control Conference," November 11, 12, 1921 (New York: Birth Control Review, 1921), 11, accessed Archive.org. 94 "Society," Indianapolis Star, February 12, 1919, 7, accessed Newspapers.com; "Officers Are Elected," Indianapolis News, February 11, 1919, 16, accessed Newspapers.com; "Indiana Women Elect Officers," Editor and Publisher 52, No. 1, June 19, 1919, 44, accessed HathiTrust; "Club President," Indianapolis Star, February 9, 1927, 4, accessed Newspapers.com.

^{95 &}quot;Mrs. Sara Stern Will Speak Here," Indianapolis Star, November 1, 1936, 47, accessed Newspapers.com. ⁹⁶ Sara Messing Stern, "Sara's Column," *Jewish Post* [Indianapolis], February 19, 1943, 7, accessed Hoosier State Chronicles.

marriages, deaths, temple services, and even gossip. Stern also commented on war news, delivered information about casualties and enlistments of local men, and reported on war work undertaken by women.⁹⁷

Stern began working for civil rights for African Americans starting in 1949. She served as a member of a planning committee for an institute on civil rights sponsored by the Indianapolis section of the National Council of Jewish Women that included speakers from the NAACP and the American Council of Race Relations, among others. Stern served as the chairman of the Interfaith and Interracial Committee of the Indianapolis Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women.

⁹⁷ Sara Messing Stern, "Sara's Column" *Jewish Post* [Indianapolis], April 2, 1943, 2, accessed Hoosier State Chronicles. More examples of "Sara's Column" can be found by searching the *Jewish Post* in Hoosier State Chronicles, a freely accessible newspaper database hosted by the Indiana State Library.

⁹⁸ "Council of Jewish Women Section to Sponsor Institute on Civil Rights; Speakers Announced," *Indianapolis Star,* January 23, 1949, 35, accessed Newspapers.com

⁹⁹ "Mrs. Alfred Wolfenstein Names Council of Jewish Women Chairmen," *Jewish Post* [Indianapolis], June 24, 1949, 15, accessed Hoosier State Chronicles.



Caption: Indianapolis Star, November 1, 1936, 47, accessed Newspapers.com.

After many years as a widow (Leon Stern had died in 1934) Sara remarried George Harding in 1951. ¹⁰⁰ While they made their life in Connecticut, she often returned to Indiana to visit friends and family and the *Jewish Post* continued to report on her civic work and legacy. ¹⁰¹ In 1972, Sara Messing Harding

¹⁰⁰ "Daily Vital Statistics: Marriage Licenses," *Indianapolis News*, May 25, 1951, 35, accessed Newspapers.com ¹⁰¹ Emma Kominers, "Have You Heard?" *Jewish Post* [Indianapolis], April 8, 1955, 2, accessed Hoosier State Chronicles.

died. ¹⁰² She was only one of a large army of women fighting for full citizenship rights for women, yet she made an impact on Indiana history. She felt called to serve God by serving those less fortunate and left a legacy of improving her communities in Indianapolis and Terre Haute. She overcame many obstacles, including the inherent antisemitism of Progressive Era women's movements. She became a political actor on a national stage and a voice for reform, calling out from atop an automobile in a suffrage parade or through her newspaper columns. Through her work and struggle, she maintained her Jewish faith, expressed beautifully and humbly through her verses. In fact, she published a poem called "Faith" in 1910 that gives us a glimpse into her understanding of God through nature metaphors. ¹⁰³ Stern countered the idea that Judaism is only an ancient religion, arguing in verse that God's love, law, and will are expressed daily all around us, if we just take a quiet minute to look. It seems fitting for a woman who expressed herself so eloquently though the written word to have the last word here. In her poem "Faith," Sarah Messing Stern wrote:

Faith fans its flame of hope with growing things,

And gaining courage to seek God, finds wings.

The birds, the blossoms and the blades of grass

That smile contentment to us we pass,

Deep thoughts of a Divinity instill

And tell us of His love, His law, His will.

Not only through the lore of the ancient world

Is wisdom's banner to mankind unfurled

All miracle and mystery of creed

Must lowly bend before a single seed!¹⁰⁴

Jill Weiss Simins is a historian at the Indiana Historical Bureau, Division of the Indiana State Library. She also currently serves as the Vice-President of the History Committee for the Indiana Jewish Historical Society. She and her husband, Russell Simins, live in Irvington and are members of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation.

22

¹⁰² "Sarah M. Harding," State File # 07982, Connecticut Death Index, 1949-2012, accessed AncestryLibrary.com.

¹⁰³ Sara Messing Stern, "Faith," *The Butterfly* 4, No. 11 (November 1910), 118, accessed HathiTrust.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.