

Zerelda Gray Wallace

By Elizabeth Bowling

“Votes for Women!” As Election Day draws near, candidates for the presidency hold debates and rallies in an attempt to win votes of people both male and female. Almost a century ago, however, the women of Indiana and the rest of America did not have that privilege. In fact, if it weren’t for brave women like Zerelda Gray Wallace, a suffragette and temperance leader of Indiana, women still might not have the vote.

Zerelda Wallace was born on August 6, 1817, in Bourbon County, Kentucky, to John H. Sanders and Polly C. Gray Sanders. Her father believed that girls should receive the same amount of learning as boys, and as a result, she attended boarding school in Versailles, Kentucky, from 1828 to 1830, at which time her family moved from Kentucky to Indianapolis. She was an avid reader during her childhood and showed an interest in medicine.

At age 19, Zerelda Gray Sanders married David Wallace on December 25th, 1836, becoming stepmother to his three sons from a previous marriage. In 1837, her husband was elected governor of Indiana, making her the sixth first lady of Indiana from 1837 to 1840. Tragically, in 1859 her husband David died, leaving her penniless with young children still at home. She would not accept help from relatives, however. Showing the resourcefulness and strong will that would make her a leader in the suffrage and temperance movements, she took in boarders to make ends meet.

Wallace was described as being “shy” and “having little personal ambition,” with little interest in becoming involved in public life. However, she was an active member of Disciples of Christ, the first Christian Church in Indianapolis, being a charter member and later serving as a

deaconess. By the 1880s, she was “shy” no longer. Taking a bold stand on the temperance issue, she refused to take communion unless grape juice was substituted for unfermented wine. As a result, her church became the first to change to grape juice.

Wallace’s stand against communion wine was only the beginning of her long fight for change. On March 3, 1874, she helped organize the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and was elected the first president. She also attended the national conference. On January 21, 1875, Wallace testified before the Indiana General Assembly, presenting 21,050 signatures on temperance petitions. When her efforts were greeted with open contempt for both her cause and her gender, a suffragette was born. She realized that women would have no real voice in government until they gained the right to vote. After the speech, Wallace apparently shook the hand of a rude senator and said, “You are against our cause; but I am grateful to you, because today you have made me a woman suffragist.”

Wallace threw herself into suffrage with all the energy and fight that she had brought to temperance. In April 1878, Wallace helped form the Equal Suffrage Society of Indianapolis and served as its first president until the Society merged with the National Women’s Suffrage Association in 1887. On January 23, 1880, Wallace and several others testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary on Women’s Right to Vote. In her speech, she said, “You must admit that in popular government the ballot is the most potent means of all moral and social reforms.”

In 1881 Wallace and many others lobbied the Indiana General Assembly for an amendment to the State Constitution that would give women the right to vote. In 1887 Wallace founded an Indiana branch of the National Women’s Suffrage Association, was elected vice

president of the national Association, and was a featured speaker at the 1886 and 1887 Conventions of National Woman's Suffrage.

Zerelda Gray Wallace died on March 19, 1901, but her legacy lives on. Over the course of her lifetime, she helped found and lead three organizations, testified before the government, worked with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and spoke at gatherings across the nation, including two national conventions. In 1930, the League of Women Voters chose Wallace to represent Indiana in their National Hall of Fame, installing a bronze plaque at their headquarters in Washington D.C. in recognition of her efforts for women's suffrage. In 1980, the Indiana Academy elected her a member posthumously, and an Indiana State Historical Marker was dedicated to her on June 13, 2004. In the words of her famous stepson, author General Lew Wallace, she was, "Mother Wallace, the sweet-tongued apostle of temperance and reform."