Equal Rights

Seems downright amazing but in the years just following the Civil War, two activist groups determined to get women the right to vote, went toe-to-toe for reasons that, today, seem as lightweight as their skirmishing. The National Women’s Suffrage Association (NWSA) actually opposed the passing of the 15th amendment to the U. S. Constitution (prohibiting states from denying male citizens the right to vote, thus admitting African-American men). The NWSA was not the least bit racist. The grounds for their opposition was that admitting the newly-freed slaves to vote seemed wrong if women of all races weren’t given the same right.

On the other hand, the American Women’s Suffrage Association (AWSA) supported the passage of the 15th amendment, arguing that even if women did not gain enfranchisement at this particular time, excluding African-American men from gaining their freedom would perpetuate injustice and be, quite simply, flat-out wrong.

‘Twas a fierce rivalry, as political battles are, even though both organizations laid claim to the same mission—to gain a woman’s right to vote—in the land of the free and the home of the brave. The battle was waged about how.

We tend to think of change coming to rural areas like our own only when winds blow hard from either coast. In this case, however, it’s simply not true. When the two warring women’s groups
pulled themselves back together, it was here, in Nebraska, in 1890, at the bidding of locals who had, for the most part, kept themselves above fracas.

Erasmus Correll, who edited the *Hebron Journal*, and his wife—together the two of them created the greatly successful *Western Women’s Journal*—were tireless voices for the women’s suffrage, writing extensively themselves and bringing suffrage notables to the rural heartland, women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who gave speeches to packed houses in small towns.

Mr. Correll was rewarded by the AWSA for his pioneering work by being chosen as its President in 1881. He was indefatigable. "It affords me much pleasure to thankfully accept the position and its duties,” he said in accepting the position, “and divide the honor among the earnest men and women who are. . .seeking the highest political welfare of humanity." Correll noted that "Having devoted my life to the cause of Equal Rights, no labor will be avoided.” Presumably, none was.

Just a year later, and in Omaha, the warring factions signed a peace accord to combine forces in the quest for women’s suffrage. **Local folks** played peacemakers and, at the same time, roused the newly combined army for battle.

Hard as it is to believe, getting women the vote was almost impossible, even here, despite the activism. One of the most prominent advocates in Nebraska told his daughter in a private letter that the fight for women’s rights was no cakewalk. “Between ourselves--there is no more hope for carrying woman suffrage in Nebraska than of the millennium coming next year,” he told her. “. . .We don’t want to discourage the workers, . . .but don't publish my predictions.”
And it wouldn’t be a short war. Thirty-five years would have to pass before Nebraska passed women’s suffrage in 1917, Iowa and South Dakota in 1919, with the passage of the 19th amendment.

Great power in that crusade began here, not far away, in rural America. Why? One reason might well be the difficult lives homesteaders went through to establish house and home. Man or woman, husband or wife—no one sat on their laurels. If a living were to be made, a claim to be improved, a life to be lived—if a loving home in the middle of endless open land were to be created, responsibilities had to be shared, equally. Equally.

Male and female created He them.