Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton: The Formative Years

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by

Margaret E. Tighe

Thesis Director

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

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Colleagues for fifty years in their struggle on behalf of voting rights for American women, a mutual interest in the equality of females was virtually all that Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had in common. However, the two feminists managed to forge a friendship that spanned half a century and thrived in spite of their dissimilarities, and culminated in Anthony's anguished observance upon Stanton's demise that "it seems impossible— that the voice is hushed— that I have longed to hear for 50 years— it is all at sea... what a world it is— it goes right on and on— no matter who lives or who dies!" (5)

Friendships lasting throughout five decades are few and far between, particularly if the participants are as busy and preoccupied as were Anthony and Stanton, whose zeal for reform took them from country to country, across oceans and continents, and preempted practically every other aspect of their lives. (2,4,8) The strength of the bond between these pioneers for woman's rights is attested to by the
letters that traveled with regularity from one to the other, the scheduling of intermittent visits, no matter how brief, and the ability of the two women to overcome their very different backgrounds and lifestyles in such a manner that they were able to "speak candidly, to readily share of myself with every certainty of a favorable response and a sympathetic acknowledgment," according to Stanton. (8)

Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were, as is readily apparent, social forces with few equals throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (6,9,10,18) However, their lives as feminists and radicals have been described and recorded to the degree that there is little more to say on the subject, thus, this chronicle shall focus not on Anthony and Stanton in their roles as influential women and reformers, but on the young Anthony and Stanton— the people they were prior to their respective introductions to politics.

Born on February 15, 1820, Susan Brownell Anthony was the second child of Daniel and Lucy Read Anthony. (5) Possessors of a turbulent relationship— thanks to community disapproval regarding Quaker Daniel's marriage to Baptist Lucy,
despite their having grown up peacefully, side by side, in the religious harmony of Adams, Massachusetts, where many faiths thrived—Anthony's parents were nonetheless able to provide a secure, loving, and disciplined setting for the raising of their seven children. (2) Lucy willingly embraced the Quaker lifestyle for the sake of her husband and children, though she labored to the end of her days under the sect's disapproving scrutiny and accompanying denial of her ability to properly instill the appropriate degree of morality in her offspring. (2,5)

Susan was an unexceptional child, exhibiting no characteristic that could be said to foreshadow her future life as a pathbreaker and leader. She wasn't the firstborn of the family; nor was she the particular favorite or "pet" of either her father or her mother. (14) The life of a female in the nineteenth century didn't distress Susan throughout her childhood as it was to in her adult years—she adopted no tomboyish behaviors, nor did she declare any irritation with being a girl, although the future feminist did enjoy such "masculine" pursuits as outdoor play and nature study. (2,5) In short, Susan's early years were characterized by their very uneventfullness.
Although Susan's formative years were peaceful and ordinary, the overall mood of the country in which she lived was not. Following the Revolutionary War, married women had begun to experience a gradual diminishment in the already limited number of freedoms they possessed. Accustomed to her husband's absence during the years of fighting, the American woman had learned to manage her farm and to conduct essential family business with independence and autonomy. It was a rude awakening to many such self-reliant women to find that the oft-prayed-for peace came with a price: namely, the surrendering of their small sphere of authority in the face of more and more restrictive laws regarding their rights as citizens. In fact, America circa 1800 regarded women as the legal property of their husbands or fathers under essentially the same conditions that had bound serfs to their lords during the period of English feudalism of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. By disenfranchising the women who had so staunchly tended the homes and businesses of their soldier-husbands, the Post-Revolutionary republic laid much of the groundwork for the future Woman's Rights Movement.
to later recall her years of observing the mill girls as her first realization that marriage and its accompanying dependence on the earning power of a man paled beside the independence and self-reliance of the working woman with her set hours and steady income. (5)

Fortunately for Susan, Daniel Anthony had a Quaker's respect for education with no restriction with regard to sex. His daughters received the same lessons as did their brothers, and Daniel exerted as much energy in his search for female seminaries as he did for male academies. His efforts paid off in the form of Deborah Moulson's Female Seminary in Hamilton, Pennsylvania, where Susan spent a homesick year being instructed in "the principles of Humility, Morality, and love of Virtue," as well as arithmetic, algebra, literature, chemistry, philosophy, physiology, and bookkeeping. A competent pupil, Susan nonetheless cared more for letters from home than for her studies, and eagerly awaited her release from the seminary in order to return home. (2,5,14,19)

Susan left Deborah Moulson's school in 1838, when Daniel Anthony's business succumbed to the
recession of the time, and sought a position as a teacher—a not uncommon pursuit for a young, unmarried woman of the era, and a job which she half-heartedly fulfilled until summoned home to continue her education there. Soon, however, Susan's instruction was again interrupted by her father's further business failure, and Susan noted, "I shall probably never attend school again... all the advancement which we will hereafter make must be by our own exertion and desire to gain useful knowledge." (2,5) The stage was set for her eventual emergence as "a most uncommon representative of the common woman." (18)

There was but one more decision to make that would establish Susan B. Anthony as the independent woman she was to become: that of marriage. For a brief period in her Adolescence, the future feminist had enjoyed dating and attending parties of the sort available to a Quaker teenager, but an interest in marriage for its own sake declined to develop, and few young men in Susan's sphere were able to live up to her intellect or her standards. (2) Although the conscious and deliberate choice of a single life was a function of Susan's later life and work, she laid the groundwork for the decision early in
her youth by refusing to accept an unequal relationship with any man, though she had suitors like other attractive young women of her time. (5) The die was cast: Susan B. Anthony, sparsely educated, home-loving, soft-spoken product of the Quaker heritage, required but an introduction to politics to assume the role of one of America's foremost feminists. (19)

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was born on November 12, 1815, to Daniel and Margaret Livingston Stanton, a wealthy, prominent couple in Johnstown, New York. Their seventh of eleven children, Elizabeth was the middle daughter of five in a family that shrank with seeming regularity, due to the deaths of six of her siblings—brothers all. (11) Daniel Cady, an austere intellectual who was acknowledged by his peers to be a brilliant judge, withdrew further and further into his law practice as a result of the loss of all six of his sons, and lavished the remainder of his attention on his sons-in-law and grandsons. Elizabeth's mother reacted in a similar fashion to her sons' deaths, retreating eventually into ill health and inactivity and surrendering the responsibility for her remaining children to the servants and her eldest daughter, Tryphena. (4,11)
Tryphena and her husband, Edward Bayard, readily accepted their roles as substitute parents to the Cady girls, and took pains to provide the children with all their requirements. Elizabeth, however, proved to be a difficult example of young womanhood. In response to the demise of her only brother to reach adulthood, Elizabeth resolved to be "manly" in all that she did, interpreting the word to mean "learned and courageous." (11,17,21,22) Her subsequent actions, and the reactions of adults important to her, were to alter the course of her life. (18)

Unlike Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth was an exceptional scholar and an avid pupil of Greek, mathematics, chess, philosophy, the equestrian arts, and debating. As a result, Judge Cady began to take an interest in his middle daughter. However, his encouragement of her academic progress waned as Elizabeth matured and continued to embrace the all-too-masculine trait of intellectualism. Such inappropriate behavior for a young woman led to Judge Cady's refusal to send Elizabeth to college, although he did permit her to attend the Troy Female Seminary for the brief period
of five months when she was fifteen, then the additional span of two years after a respite at home. (11,18,21,22)

Like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth disliked the seminary life. (2,11) The curriculum chosen for her studies focused on Religious and Moral Instruction, although Elizabeth also studied algebra, Greek, music, logic, botany, writing, geometry, modern history, criticism, arithmetic, chemistry, French, and psychology. Particularly repugnant to young Elizabeth were the diet—centering around corned beef, liver, and bread pudding—and the lack of young men. (17,20,21,22) Good food and masculine companionship had already found a place in Elizabeth's heart, where they were to remain for the rest of her life. (22) Food and men aside, however, Elizabeth was discouraged by the inconsistency inherent in her education: while she was well-drilled in academics and fully expected to excel at them, the praise which she thrived on was reserved by her parents and instructors for those pursuits that befit a young woman as cast in the traditional mold. (4,11,12,17,21)

Upon graduating from the Troy Female
Seminary, Elizabeth settled back into life at her parents' home. (17) Her typical upperclass girlhood is a marked contrast to Susan B. Anthony's young life of solitude and poverty—while Susan was enduring the shame and reduced circumstances that resulted from her father's business failures, Elizabeth was revelling in the "high life" of a wealthy young woman. (5,22) Although she continued to debate heatedly and read omnivorously, Elizabeth showed few signs of the ardent feminist she was to become. (22)

Life was little more than a never-ending round of parties to Elizabeth following her education's completion. She enjoyed playing the "belle" to the hilt and loved to talk, play practical jokes, and dance. (17) Elizabeth's favorite pursuits at this point provide even further grounds for the dissimilarity between her and Susan B. Anthony, the latter of whom spent much of her spare, adolescent time in the writing of melancholy poetry. (5) The next phase of Elizabeth's life was to illustrate how very different the two feminists' futures were to be in every sense save for that of their cause-in-common of Woman's Rights.
Unlike Susan B. Anthony's purely unintentional segue into the life of a single woman, Elizabeth made the conscious decision to pursue matrimony prior to deciding upon any particular mate. (21,22) In fact, it didn't occur to her that spinsterhood was even a viable option for a young woman of her position, and she—like many of her peers—had plans to marry and produce children as a matter of course. (22) With this in mind, it seems as though the final factor logically preventing the development and persistence of a friendship between Susan and Elizabeth had fallen into place, for the latter did marry and raise children, and the former remained single and childless her entire life. (3,4,5,8,11,14,17,19)

Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton met on a March evening in 1851, while the former was accompanying Amelia Bloomer to a temperance meeting and the latter was returning home from an anti-slavery rally. (11) Though the two exchanged only cursory greetings on that occasion, Stanton remembered later that "I liked her (Anthony) thoroughly." (5) Stanton followed up their chance introduction by including Susan in a meeting of several educators and activists in various causes to discuss plans for the opening of
a coeducational college. While at the meeting, Susan and Elizabeth discovered a mutual attraction that was to become the framework upon which their legendary friendship was built. Inexplicable even to themselves, this relationship—intense, enduring, and loyal—was to perplex those coming into contact with it for years to come. (4,5,8)

Here ends the account of the formative years of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one a spinster, one a wife and mother, one raised in an atmosphere of poverty and restraint, the other in wealth and grandeur; both staunch defenders of a notion that brought them both fame and notoriety in a time when women were encouraged to seek neither. (2,5,6,9,10,13,15,22) Equaled only by their very dissimilarity was the degree to which their friendship flourished, adding an unexpected and very humane chapter to the story of two of the most influential and intriguing women that the world has known.
ENDNOTES/BIBLIOGRAPHY


