

Pioneers at the polls

Spokane playwright honors two Washington women who helped win women the right to vote 100 years ago

By [Rebecca Nappi](#) The Spokesman-Review

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Colin Mulvany photo

From left, writers and actors Claire Rudolf Murphy, Sandra Hosking and Penny Lucas collaborated on “That Woman & Big Noise,” a play about May Arkwright Hutton and Emma Smith DeVoe, who fought for a woman’s right to vote in Washington state. Suffrage was granted in 1910.

In Tuesday’s primary election in Spokane County, nearly two-thirds of registered voters didn’t vote. Did the women among them not vote because voting would be so hard they might cry? Or because voting might turn them into bad mothers?

Nonsense. But 100 years ago, those were mainstream arguments against giving women the vote.

Two Washington state women, May Arkwright Hutton and Emma Smith DeVoe, refused to accept the bogus excuses. They were prime movers behind the effort that won women in Washington the right to vote in 1910 – 10 years before the 19th Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution. (Idaho women, by the way, got voting privileges in 1896.)

In honor of the 100th anniversary of Washington suffrage, Spokane playwright Sandra Hosking wrote "That Woman & Big Noise: The Fight for Women's Suffrage in Washington State."

Claire Rudolf Murphy, writer and actor, plays Hutton. Penny Lucas, a community theater actor, plays DeVoe.

The play, originally intended for school children, is finding a receptive audience with adults, too. It combines history and soap opera; Hutton and DeVoe couldn't stand each other.

"They were not perfect," says Rudolf Murphy. "May and Emma had all the insecurities and flaws of anybody, but they still made it happen."

Here's a look at Washington's two famous suffragists and the women retelling their story 100 years later.

•*May Arkwright Hutton:*

She was born in Ohio in 1860 and raised by a blind grandfather who ignited her activism by taking her to town hall meetings. She grew up an independent woman, found her way to the Northwest, and opened a boarding house where she met and eventually married her soul mate, Levi Hutton. They settled in Idaho's Silver Valley.

Hutton never rode a high horse; she was kind to poor women and to the town's prostitutes.

The Huttons invested in mines. In the play, based on letters and historical documents, May Hutton says: "We hit it big! Silver ore raining down like ash."

The Huttons used their good fortune for the common good, long before it was trendy.

Hutton was heavysset, childless. She swore. She drank. She smoked cigars. DeVoe was appalled by her behavior.

In the play, when the two lobby the Legislature in Olympia, DeVoe chides Hutton for hanging her bloomers out the hotel window.

She retorts: "I paid for the hotel room, didn't I? That includes the window."

Hutton also describes her suffrage strategy as a "still hunt. Quietly, resolutely cornering our prey. We invite ourselves into their dens and parlor by parlor win them over."

She lived to see a successful "hunt." Washington approved women's voting rights Nov. 8, 1910.

•*Claire Rudolf Murphy:*

She is much thinner than May, and yet she channels Hutton's huge presence when she dons her period costume.

Rudolf Murphy, 58, majored in American history at Santa Clara University. A few years ago, she pored over her history notes and discovered that they contained nothing about women's suffrage.

"I was appalled by that, and I still am," she says.

The author of more than 15 books for children and young adults, Rudolf Murphy worked on a voting rights book proposal for five years. Publishers deemed it "too wonky."

Then she realized the centennial of the women's vote in Washington was approaching in 2010. So she approached Hosking: Would she write a play to help teach young people about suffrage?

Hosking readily agreed. Rudolf Murphy and another writer, Emalee Gruss Gillis, provided Hosking with historical research and other material.

The women did the dress rehearsal for the 35-minute play at the Waterford retirement community for Rudolf Murphy's 90-year-old mother and her friends. The play is interactive, and audience members shouted out slogans, waved placards and belted out "America the Beautiful."

The women saw then that the play could be a cross-generational hit, thanks to the fascinating main characters.

"She got her feelings hurt," Rudolf Murphy says of Hutton. "She wanted to be accepted, but she wanted to do her own thing – the smoking, the swearing – all the things proper women like Emma didn't do.

"It took a brave woman to hang out with May."

•Emma Smith DeVoe:

Proper in dress and appearance, Emma Smith DeVoe of Tacoma loved loud rallies, parades and public speeches.

She didn't like Hutton's parlor hunts. She didn't like Hutton at all. She called her "That Woman."

And Hutton called DeVoe "Big Noise" – mocking her fondness for suffrage rallies.

DeVoe carried a jealousy toward Hutton. The Huttons had money; the DeVoes had social standing, but little money. DeVoe earned a salary through the National Suffrage Association, which Hutton believed was a conflict of interest with DeVoe's position as president of the Washington Equal Suffrage Association.

When DeVoe was 8, she heard Susan B. Anthony speak out for women's voting rights. Unlike Hutton, DeVoe lived to see Anthony's vision become a national reality when the 19th Amendment was enacted into law Aug. 26, 1920.

DeVoe later wrote a political column for a newspaper in Tacoma and was elected to the National Women's Hall of Fame in 2000. An honor never bestowed on her rival, Hutton.

•Penny Lucas:

When Lucas puts on her early 1900s costume, she embodies DeVoe. Both women share a gentle-but-firm manner. Both believe in hard work.

Lucas, 59, is secretary at two companies, Inland Empire Tours and Cutler Counseling, and she's hand-chime choir director at Hamblen Park Presbyterian Church. Plus, she's a familiar talent to community theater-goers in Spokane and Coeur d'Alene.

Lucas' grandmother, Ruth Greenlee, was an Oregon suffragist.

"My grandma didn't go to high school," Lucas explains. "My sister came across a speech she'd read at a rally. It wasn't anything awe-inspiring, but for grandma with an eighth-grade education to be participating ... I've dedicated my performance to her."

•Sandra Hosking:

At 40, Hosking is the youngest of the women involved in the play. She didn't experience the women's lib movement directly, but her activism was inspired by the women in her family.

"My mother's mother was a brilliant mathematician in the 1930s. She wanted to study engineering, but they didn't let her because she was a woman," Hosking says. "She still tells that story. She's turning 90.

"Ever since I was a child, I took that story with me and I said, 'No one is ever going to tell me tell me what I can or cannot do.' "

And so Hosking does a lot. She's co-playwright in residence at Spokane Civic Theatre and her works have been performed internationally. She's also editor of Inland NW Homes & Lifestyles magazine.

Rudolf Murphy is thrilled by the reaction to Hosking's play.

"I've looked out at the girls in school audiences and their eyes get big," Rudolf Murphy says.

"Afterward they say, 'You mean women couldn't vote before?'"

"Our play is one way to say to kids and adults: 'We owe these women a great deal.' "