



JOSEPHINE CORLISS PRESTON

EDUCATOR, SUFFRAGIST, POLITICIAN

1: THE TEENAGE TEACHER

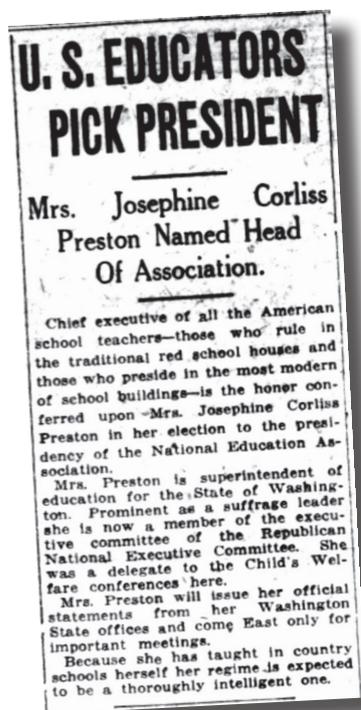
Two little girls snuggled together in front of the fireplace, books on their laps. It was the winter of 1880—and well below zero outside the farmhouse on the prairie not far from Fargo. Josephine “Josie” Corliss, who was 7, loved to read even more than did her big sister, Myrtia. Both liked to play school. Josephine said she always knew what she wanted to be when she grew up: A teacher.

By the time she was 14 the tall, precocious girl was helping first graders learn their ABCs. In 1891, having taught full time for nearly two years, she was a fully certified, 18-year-old teacher in Otter Tail County, Minnesota, with high marks from the superintendent’s examiners. A pot-belly stove took the edge off bitterly cold days outside the rough-hewn schoolhouses north of Fergus Falls, the county seat. Locals still quip that the only thing that stopped the cold north wind back then was a barbed-wire fence. Boarding with farm families, Josie Corliss slept in more than one attic. She was “so lonesome” that she resolved to improve the lives of rural teachers if she ever got a chance.

She got her chance in Walla Walla, Washington, an influential agricultural city that practically doubled in size to 20,000 in the first decade of the 20th century. And she made the most of it.

In 1912, two years after Washington women won the right to vote, 39-year-old Josephine Corliss Preston was elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction, the direct beneficiary of a suffrage movement propelled by thousands of resourceful female campaigners. She prevailed in a tricky four-way race by out-campaigning her opponents, including two other women. Support from women’s clubs was decisive in her victory.

Washington’s first female statewide elected official was idealistic, disarmingly bright and politically nimble—simultaneously puritanical and progressive; a proto-feminist divorcee who sang in the church choir. In 16 years as state school superintendent she effected 55 new laws “with alacrity, clarity and confidence,” as one historian puts it, creating a modern school system. Early on she emerged as



one of America's most influential educators. There was speculation she might become the first female member of a presidential cabinet as Secretary of Education.

In 1919 Preston was elected president of the 52,000-member National Education Association, which then included principals and superintendents as well as teachers. Six-thousand delegates attended the national convention in Milwaukee. She also led the Council of State Superintendents and Commissioners of Education and was elected a vice chairman of the new Women's Division of the Republican National Committee.

During the 1919-1920 votes-for-women campaign that saw Washington emerge as the penultimate state to ratify the 19th Amendment, Preston and national suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt became close friends. Unsurprising, for they had much in common. Catt had been a 14-year-old teacher in Iowa, and both belonged to the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Preston arranged the 1919 luncheon in Olympia where Catt rallied Washington women to round up pledges

of support from male lawmakers when Governor Louis F. Hart balked at calling a special session to ratify the suffrage amendment. Catt ended her address by calling for the formation of a league of women voters.

The governor ended up signing into law the cornerstone of Preston's legislative agenda that year: "An act to prevent discrimination in the payment of salaries between male and female teachers in the public schools of this state."

On Preston's watch, state per-pupil funding increased, kindergartens were established and vocational education classes incorporated in the secondary school curriculum. She improved teacher pay and retirement benefits—though not nearly as much as she had hoped—and promoted higher standards for teacher certification.

Remembering the cold nights when she graded papers in a barn, Preston helped rural communities build cottages for teachers, emphasizing that better housing would also attract competent men to a female-dominated profession. The superintendent preached the importance of school attendance, lengthened the school year, instituted hot-lunch programs, improved pupil transportation, consolidated districts to improve curriculum and promoted Parent-Teacher Associations. Preston was also an early proponent of junior high schools and two-year community colleges. In 1913, the year she took office in Olympia, 2,512 students graduated from high schools around the state. In 1928, the year she left office, 21,587 received diplomas.

It was Preston who mandated a Washington State History course for sixth graders.

Chin up, posture perfect, Josephine Corliss Preston exuded confidence. She wore frameless spectacles that amplified her striking eyes. Reporters covering a national NEA convention observed that when anyone asked which lady Mrs. Preston was, delegates advised them to just look for the woman in the jaunty wide-brimmed hat trimmed in red.

Preston was also an exacting workaholic. "People who offended her were quick to realize her wrath," Gary Gordon Rude wrote in a thoughtful 1985 doctoral thesis on Preston's educational leadership. Subordinates who saw her as high-handed called her "The Duchess," at least behind her back. When several resigned in two separate public huffs during her first term, the strong-willed superintendent calmly told reporters, Good riddance! They were readily replaceable. It took a manufactured mini-scandal to finally defeat her after she crossed Governor Roland H. Hartley, a mercurial conservative with retrograde ideas about school funding.

Preston's Laura Ingalls Wilder girlhood helps explain how she became the remarkable woman she was.

FERGUS FALLS IS A RIVERFRONT TOWN in west central Minnesota adjacent to the Dakotas. In 1873, when Josephine Corliss was born, it had around 1,500 citizens and was on the cusp of incorporation. Her father, John Wesley Corliss, uncles, aunts and grandparents had left Vermont in the 1850s, lured by the chance to acquire up to 160 acres of government-owned land for as little as \$1.25 an acre. The 1862 Homestead Act encouraged even more Western migration.

Josephine was named in honor of her mother, Josephine Kinney, a member of another pioneer family in Otter Tail County. "Josie" to her family and childhood friends, the little girl who loved to read grew up hearing tales of covered wagon caravans, Indian uprisings and Civil War battles. The Corlisses ranked among Minnesota's leading citizens. They are well remembered there to this day.

Ebenezer E. Corliss, Josie's uncle, served with distinction in the Union army for three years during the Civil War, as did her father, who suffered a "terrible" leg wound that never fully healed. "Uncle Eb" survived a bullet to the back of his head, convalesced and re-enlisted. The Corliss men were "big in stature" and "possessed great resolution and force of will." While serving in the Minnesota Legislature, E.E. Corliss engineered a bill that designated Fergus Falls as the county seat and served on the Republican State Central Committee. Elected county attorney, E.E. cultivated 320 acres of farmland on the side. A third Corliss brother, Josie's Uncle William, was Otter Tail County's superintendent of schools and clerk of the district court before his untimely death at 28 in 1871.

Josie and Myrtia Corliss were home-schooled in early childhood while their father managed his farms in and around Otter Tail County and studied law. Following his brothers "into town" in 1880, John W. Corliss purchased 80 acres



Josephine, second from left, with her parents and siblings in 1887, the year she became a teenage teacher in rural Minnesota. *Otter Tail County Historical Society.*

of real estate, built a handsome house, joined his brother's law practice and was initiated into the Masonic Lodge. John Jr. was born in 1881. The Corliss brothers, their wives and children were mainstays of the Congregational Church. The family's "home training" prized patriotism, "self-reliance, truthfulness and the inculcation of a helpful spirit."

Josie completed high school by 16. She was teaching in a rural school on the plains north of Fergus Falls in the fall of 1889 when her world turned upside down.

John W. Corliss spent a long day visiting one of his farms 30 miles north of town. Too tired to head home, he checked into a hotel. The next morning, he was discovered dead in his bed at 52. Vexed with "heart disease" and relentless pain from his Civil War wound, he had ignored his doctor's warnings to "shun all excitement" and "keep away from his business and other cares." The funeral procession "was one of the longest that has ever been seen in this city, a silent and suggestive testimony

of the esteem and respect in which Mr. Corliss was held by this community,” Otter Tail County newspapers reported.

JOSIE’S GRIEVING MOTHER, only 37, decided to head farther west, perhaps because her nephew, Charles W. Corliss, was making a name for himself as a lawyer in Seattle. With Myrtia and 8-year-old John Jr. in tow, the widowed Mrs. Corliss became a matron at the Umatilla Indian Boarding School near Pendleton, Oregon. Josie, 16, stayed behind and enrolled at Carleton College’s Academy, a prep school at Northfield, Minnesota, near the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-Saint Paul. Founded in 1866 by the Congregational Church, Carleton College was theologically conservative and academically rigorous. She studied Greek and Latin for a year and departed as “Josephine,” a more grown-up name.

In the summer of 1891 she was teaching alongside her aunt at another rural school on the plains when her mother returned to Fergus Falls for a visit, regaling old friends with the beauty and mild climate of the Northwest. “She wishes her daughter to return with her,” the *Fergus Falls Daily Journal* noted.

That fall, Josephine boarded a train for her new life. She secured a \$30-per-month teaching position in Waitsburg, a picturesque farm town nestled in the rolling hills of Walla Walla County. The railroad had arrived 10 years earlier, connecting wheat farmers and the local flour mill to far-flung markets. Miss Corliss was a popular, “conscientious” elementary school teacher who organized spelling bees and often met with parents. She attended teacher’s institutes and enrolled in correspondence courses in pursuit of the four-year degree she coveted throughout her career.

2: ON HER OWN

Josephine met a handsome young man soon after arriving in Waitsburg. And not just any young man. Herbert P. “Bert” Preston was the oldest son of W.G. Preston, co-owner of the town’s landmark five-story flour mill. “If he will but follow in the footsteps of his father, he will be one of the best men the country affords,” the *Waitsburg Times* wrote when the pair were married in 1893, hailing the bride as “a lovely and lovable young lady of good accomplishments.” Josephine had just turned 20; Bert was still 19. The new Mrs. Preston—judging from comments in Walla Walla County’s newspapers—was readily granted a waiver from the era’s widespread belief that married women should be housewives. Her admiring father-in-law was also the leading benefactor of Waitsburg’s public schools.

Unfortunately, it appears the young couple’s marriage was in trouble by the time they moved to Walla Walla around 1897. Bert was overseeing the Preston Grocery Company. Josephine was teaching at the city’s Baker School. In 1899, Bert



The faculty of Walla Walla’s Baker School—including the janitor—around the turn of the century, with Josephine Corliss Preston third from right. *Whitman College Archives*

filed for divorce, charging that Josephine had “disregarded the solemnity of their vows” and “abandoned him willfully and without cause” to live “separately and apart.” The Preston family’s stature may have been the reason the news was not reported by the county’s newspapers. Other divorce filings certainly were, especially ones featuring titillating allegations.

The divorce was quietly granted in 1901 in Walla Walla Superior Court. Bert and Josephine had no children. Did he object to her insistence on advancing her teaching career, believing a woman’s place was in the home? By taking the dramatic step of moving out, Josephine obviously objected to their home life. Bert Preston would marry again—the very next year; Josephine remained single. She would be “Mrs. Josephine Corliss Preston” for the remainder of her very public life, with no scandal accruing to her name in an era when divorce was the subject of tongue-clucking, especially when a wife was the defendant. Josephine appears in all written accounts as a virtuous, church-going woman, rapidly advancing in her career.*

ON FEBRUARY 1, 1904, Josephine Corliss Preston, now 30, was appointed deputy county superintendent of schools by the Walla Walla County commissioners at a salary of \$75 per month. Newspaper accounts made it clear the “prominent teacher” with “many friends” was being groomed by the Republican Party to succeed the two-term incumbent, who endorsed her appointment. “It is said that no such opportunity to honor fair womanhood had ever been given here,” newspapers reported.

Her new job and growing interest in Republican politics added to a daunting schedule. While taking evening and Saturday-morning classes in English, philosophy and history at Whitman College, she earned a “life diploma” Washington state teaching credential and began writing articles about educational practices. She was active in the Order of the Eastern Star, a Masonic group, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the Walla Walla Art Club. She taught Sunday School, wrote children’s songs and was interested in birds. She also enlisted in the campaign to secure for Washington women the right to vote.

It was a long time coming.

SEATTLE PIONEER ARTHUR A. DENNY, who abhorred liquor and respected women, was the grandfather of the suffrage movement in Washington state. At the first meeting of the Territorial Assembly in 1854, Delegate Denny proposed that “all white females over the age of 18” be allowed to vote. The amendment was defeated by one vote. Fits and starts would follow over the next 56 years:

In 1857 women in Washington Territory apparently gained a voice in granting liquor licenses, according to suffrage historian Shanna Stevenson. Saloon

* In 1916, when Josephine’s former father-in-law died, he left her \$1,000, the equivalent of \$24,500 in inflation-adjusted dollars. Her annual salary that year as superintendent of public instruction was \$2,500. A house cost \$3,500; a car \$500.



Abigail Scott Duniway, *Library of Congress*

and gambling parlor interests were a powerful lobby against suffrage, warning that women were out to outlaw alcohol. Thousands certainly were.

In 1867, a territorial voting law declared that “all white American citizens twenty-one years of age” had the right to vote—a claim bolstered over the next three years by the 14th and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Washington women who tested the law at polling places over the next few years met with mixed results. When the Legislature enacted a progressive community property law, naysayers warned that women would next argue for liberalized divorce laws.

In 1871, famed suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Abigail Scott Duniway toured the Northwest, rallying women to the national campaign for equal rights. By then Washington women had secured the right to vote in local school district elections.

In 1878, two suffrage proposals failed at a territorial constitutional convention in Walla Walla, despite an impassioned address by Duniway. Speaking for the “silenced and unrepresented” women of the territory, she urged the delegates to be “the first in the grand galaxy of States to wheel majestically into her proper orbit in harmony with the Declaration of Independence.”

Northwest suffragists—led by church-based ladies aid societies and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union—redoubled their efforts to secure the vote. Opponents sneered that suffrage advocates were “an odd looking lot” of “short-haired women and long-haired men.” However, one rural editor wrote, “If they can reform politics ... then in God’s name let them vote.”

Victory—short-lived—came in 1883 when the Territorial Assembly accorded women the vote in all elections as well as the right to serve on juries. The lawmakers reiterated their intent three years later, clarifying that when they said “his” in the earlier statute they meant “her” as well. In the 1885 and 1886 elections, women “voted intelligently and well,” a suffrage historian wrote, adding:

In fact, it is on record that gamblers and thugs were driven out of the territory... as long as women held the power of the ballot in their hands. During that time they served on juries, filled certain suitable political positions and withal preserved their homes, gave parties, entertained their friends, got dinners for their husbands’ chums; in fact, exploded the pet theories of old-line conservatives who hold that when women vote the domestic fabric is rent and the home goes to pieces.

When the Territorial Supreme Court revoked suffrage in 1887, the Legislature

promptly re-enacted the law. Then things went to pieces. Male-privilege judicial activism was on full display a year later when the high court ruled that the federal government had intended to put “male” before “citizenship” in the Washington Territory Organic Act when establishing voter qualifications. In the typewritten decision signed by the judges, “male” is hand-written above the applicable text and marked with an insertion symbol. Olympia historian Gerry Alexander, a former chief justice of the Washington Supreme Court, shakes his head and smiles as he renders his verdict: “Judicial jujitsu.”

“The disqualification of women from voting weakened the cause of suffrage at the 1889 Washington State Constitutional Convention since women could not vote for electors to the conclave,” Shanna Stevenson notes. Edward Eldridge of Whatcom County, who had championed suffrage for decades, made an “eloquent and exhaustive” speech urging the delegates to remove “male” from the proposed section on voting rights. Citing the Declaration of Independence and the platforms of both political parties, Eldridge declared, “Give woman the right to vote and it opens the avenues to her of self support and independence. The more we exercise the mind the more intelligent we become, and participation in the government is one of the greatest means of exercising the mind.” The delegates listened intently “for one hour and 15 minutes,” then exercised their right to reject his motion.

The constitution was ratified at the polls a month before Washington joined the union as the 42nd state. A separate suffrage proposal was backed by only 31.5 percent of the voters, while 62 percent of the electorate rejected prohibition—saloon license fees being a major source of revenue for many counties and cities, including staid old Walla Walla. The editor of the *Walla Walla Union*, who had backed female suffrage, opposed prohibition, writing, “To attempt to absolutely and completely stop the manufacture and sale of whisky is as impossible as it would be to attempt to stop the Columbia flowing over the falls at the Cascades.”

On March 27, 1890, Governor Elisha P. Ferry signed into law a School Suffrage Act that once again granted women the right to vote in local school district elections, but not for county or state superintendents.

In 1897, the Washington State Legislature overwhelmingly approved a suffrage amendment that was signed by the governor and placed before the voters in the 1898 General Election. The proposed Article VI of the State Constitution was rejected by nearly 60 percent of the electorate. Women seeking the franchise fared far better with lawmakers than judges or the electorate—and not just in Washington. “Had state constitutions allowed legislatures to amend [constitutions] without a vote of the people, woman suffrage would have advanced far more rapidly than it did,” Richard J. Ellis wrote in his 2002 book on the initiative process in America, *Democratic Delusions*. “Between 1870 and 1900 ten suffrage amendments were passed by state legislatures and referred to the voters for approval. In only two cases (Colorado in 1893 and Idaho in 1896) did the voters accept the amendment.”

3: VOTE-BY-MALE ELECTIONS

When Josephine Corliss Preston declared her candidacy for county school superintendent in the summer of 1908, she and her sizable group of female supporters around Walla Walla County chafed at the reality they would have no say in the election. Nevertheless, Preston handily defeated R.E. Stafford, a Walla Walla grade-school principal who ran as a Democrat. Preston was the choice of nearly 57 percent of the male voters. Granted, it was a Republican county, but it was clear that the ladies were gaining momentum all across the state. *The Colfax Gazette*, noting that 17 of the 37 school superintendents elected that year were women, observed, “As Uncle Jasper would say, ‘The world do move.’”

U.S. Senator Moses E. Clapp, a former Fergus Falls lawyer who had been a close friend of Preston’s father, was emerging as one of the most outspoken suffragists in Congress. Preston saved a newspaper clipping that told of his activism. “The time is inevitable,” the Minnesota Republican predicted, “when the American people will confer upon American womanhood the only peaceable weapon known to free government for her own protection, for the protection of her property and the protection of her children, and that is the ballot.”



On Dec. 12, 1908, Preston heard the indefatigable, yet ladylike Tacoma suffragist Emma Smith DeVoe speak at the Whitman College Chapel. The *Walla Walla Evening Statesman’s* front-page write-up said the large crowd was “more than pleased” with DeVoe’s ability “to handle the subject in an intelligent and interesting manner,” adding:

Mrs. DeVoe, who is president of the Washington Equal Suffrage Association, is a woman who appeals to people, her simple, unassuming manner, free from that “mannishness” which many imagine to be inherent in all workers for equal suffrage, makes for her hosts of friends wherever she goes as a public speaker. Mrs. DeVoe is in the foremost ranks of women oratory, and the manner in which she handles her subject, producing statistics to support

her arguments, is most pleasing. She is strong in her statements regarding the present system of government, by which the men have absolute control. ... "There is nothing new in our campaign for equal suffrage," said Mrs. DeVoe. "Not a thing; it is simply a revival of the spirit which stirred our forefathers in precipitating the revolutionary war—taxation without representation."

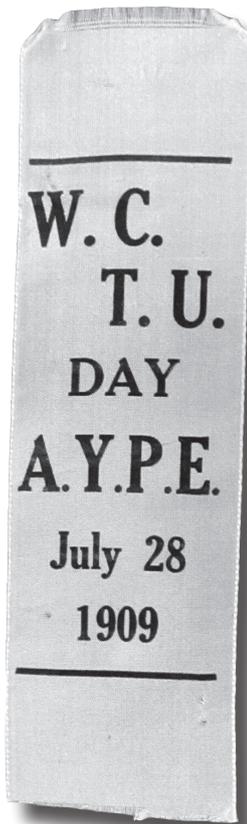
Those words resonated for Walla Walla County's first female school superintendent. The Corlisses were proud of their patriot ancestors. Preston became an enthusiastic "Votes for Women" campaigner.

Reflecting on the suffragists' gumption nearly a century later, political commentator Cokie Roberts said, "We had the right to vote as American citizens. We didn't have to be granted it by some bunch of guys."

In the summer of 1909, Preston attended the National American Woman Suffrage Association Convention in Seattle during the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, the state's first world's fair. It appears that Preston, busy with school activities, shrewdly steered clear of a nasty leadership feud that erupted between Emma Smith DeVoe and May Arkwright Hutton, a wealthy, flamboyant suffragist from Spokane.

The next year saw the equivalent of a political full-court press by Washington suffragists and their allies in the growing women's club movement as white, middle-class women in social and literary clubs seized the reform zeitgeist of the Progressive era. The support of a populist-progressive-farmer-labor coalition, notably the Grange and the Washington State Federation of Labor, would prove decisive in the campaign for an amendment to the Washington State Constitution. The Women's Christian Temperance Union was an unshakeable ally from the beginning. African Americans accounted for only 0.53 percent of the state's population in 1910 (6,000 residents, mostly men) but Tacoma boasted a remarkable black suffragist and NAACP activist in Nettie J. Asberry, a piano teacher with a doctorate in music. In 1878, she was the 13-year-old secretary of the Susan B. Anthony Club in Leavenworth, Kansas, having met the famed suffragist.

Emma Smith DeVoe also sought support from the state's substantial bloc of progressive women of Scandinavian descent. Posters, handbills, ribbons,





campaign buttons, get-out-the-vote rallies and countless club meetings and teas boosted enthusiasm for ratification of the amendment. DeVoe attended Woman's Days at county fairs in Walla Walla, Puyallup and Yakima "while her foot soldiers canvassed their voting precincts."

On November 8, 1910, the women of Washington won the right to vote—permanently. Nearly 64 percent of the electorate approved the amendment, with all 39 counties favoring ratification. "The stunningly decisive victory...is widely credited with reinvigorating the national movement," Shanna Stevenson wrote. "When

Washington joined her western sisters in 1910, it had been 14 years since a state had enacted irrevocable women's suffrage."*

On December 3, 1910, Mrs. Mary Wilson of Renton became the first woman in the state to cast a vote under the newly ratified amendment, according to *The Seattle Daily Times*, which accorded her a two-column photo and double-deck headline. She was "the first of more than 50 of the maids and matrons of Renton to appear to vote on the question of forming Renton Waterway District No. 2."

National suffrage would take another 10 years.

JOSEPHINE CORLISS PRESTON was re-elected county superintendent without opposition, as well as a state delegate to the 1910 convention of the National Federation of Women's Clubs. She enlisted in the National Council of Women Voters, a nonpartisan coalition organized by Emma Smith DeVoe.

Preston's statewide stature grew in 1911 when Governor Marion Hay, a former Eastern Washington businessman who styled himself as "a reformer on the right," appointed her to the State Board of Education.

The late Zola Burnap Irwin, an eastern Washington historian who taught at a reasonably well-equipped one-room school in Walla Walla County in the 1930s, was the beneficiary of Preston's lifelong concern for rural schools. Irwin wrote that Preston "was keenly interested in the quality of education in the rural areas of the county, aware that the city schools of Walla Walla drew the outstanding teachers, while the isolated county schools sometimes had to hire beginners or those who were inadequately prepared or teachers who were at best unprofessional."

Some male politicians harrumphed that the lady county superintendent was

* Some Washington women remained disenfranchised, including those who had lost their citizenship by marrying foreigners. That law was changed in 1922. Two years later, Congress finally granted citizenship to all Native Americans, though some states suppressed their ability to vote for decades more. A 1943 act sponsored by then-Congressman Warren G. Magnuson of Washington allowed naturalized citizenship to Chinese immigrants already residing in the U.S.—a nod to our World War II ally. But immigrant West Coast Japanese—sent to concentration camps during the war, together with their U.S.-born children—were denied voting rights until the federal McCarran-Walter Act of 1952.



Cassandra Messegee, a teacher in Walla Walla County, lived in this portable cookhouse until the community could provide better housing. *Teachers' Cottages in Washington*, 1915

headstrong. “It takes trouble to get things started sometimes,” Preston said. “We were in a rut, and nothing short of a good jolting would lift us out. ...I believe in working and fighting for that which appears to us to be the greatest good for the greatest number. I fight fairly, however, and I have never held a ‘grouch.’ ” Preston admired Emma Smith DeVoe’s advice that civility invariably carried the day: “Always be good natured and cheerful.” Sometimes, however, her temper got the best of her.

Preston always stopped at rural schools as she traveled through neighboring counties on her way to teacher institutes in Spokane and Pullman. The lonely young female teachers she met kindled memories of those sub-zero schooldays and bleak nights on the Minnesota prairie. Preston became the foremost advocate of a campaign to construct teachers’ cottages. Parsonages helped recruit good preachers; teachers needed “teacherages,” Preston said.

“As early as 1904, school administrators, women’s club members and other progressive reformers” around Washington had championed the idea, which sprang from Nebraska. Preston embraced it. Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers while ensuring their comfort—and the moral propriety of young female teachers—also was “of particular concern because of the large numbers of single men working nearby in the logging, mining, agricultural, or fishing industries. ... ”

A fledgling teacher named Cassandra Messegee visited Preston’s office at the Walla Walla Courthouse one day to lament she could find no place to stay within miles of her rural school. The school board member who formerly offered board and room to teachers, “had moved his family to the city so his children could attend

high school.” He was embarrassed, “and the teacher humiliated and discouraged.”

As they weighed options, Miss Messegee mentioned to the superintendent that there was “a crude little cook house” across the road from the school.

It had been used during harvest and brought in from the wheat fields at the end of summer. Would it be possible to move it to a site near the school house and use it? Mrs. Preston thought it could be done. ...

The canvas roof was left intact but the canvas sides were boarded up inside. Miss Messegee moved her furniture into the stopgap home and when school started she was ready, with her 12-year-old brother to keep her company. All went well until the first rain. All their belongings, clothing and beds were drenched. Not to be defeated, they dried their possessions and the teacher bought and applied some water-proof roofing, which solved the problem. The following September a new cottage was ready. ... Miss Messegee stayed for three years, longer than many rural teachers remained in a district. She left to continue her education.

Superintendent Preston’s innovations caught the attention of Spokane’s influential *Spokesman-Review* newspaper. It covered a “Know Your City Congress” that featured a children’s day attended by some 1,200 Walla Walla pupils. A local historian related the city’s history, and two ladies spoke on “What the city does for the children.” The children, “represented by Master Chauncey Minard and Misses Mazie Penrose and Ruth Martin,” outlined what the children believed they could do for their city. Miss Penrose’s father was Stephen B.L. Penrose, the activist president of Whitman College. The Yale Divinity School graduate, who would head the college for 40 years, spent a long afternoon chatting with the superintendent. He soon concluded that Josephine Corliss Preston was an educator with limitless possibilities.

Preston was delighted when the faculty at Whitman College granted her 48 hours of credits toward a bachelor’s degree, based on her studies at Carleton College, other course work, professional achievements and demonstrated skill in public speaking. Whitman would award her an honorary master’s degree in 1914 in recognition of her “distinguished work in the field of education.”

Preston became active in the Inland Empire Teachers’ Organization and the Good Roads movement. She visited Puget Sound several times a year. Her influential cousins, Charles and John Corliss—also Carleton College alumni—bolstered a growing network of admirers around the state. By 1912, Charles W. Corliss was a well-established Seattle attorney, a member of the Arctic Club and the Municipal League. He served as foreman of a King County grand jury that handed down 27

indictments for vice and graft in Seattle's controversial "restricted district," where prostitution and gambling had free reign. John H. Corliss, a physician, joined his brother in Seattle in the 1890s before purchasing a 160-acre ranch in the Puyallup Valley. He became a beloved doctor—the Puyallup Indians paid for his services in fish—and in 1900 helped organize the Western Washington Fair. Dr. Corliss headed the House Education Committee in the Washington Legislature during 1902 while also serving on the Sumner School Board. "An ardent supporter of public education," he helped boost Josephine's political career.

4: “WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN”

Henry B. Dewey, the state superintendent of public instruction, announced in the fall of 1911 that he would not seek re-election in 1912, opting instead to run for Congress. Preston immediately announced her candidacy for the \$2,500-a-year job. Stephen Penrose, a prominent early endorser, declared she had the experience, character and tact to serve the state with “wisdom, integrity and efficiency.” Well-connected male contenders for the job scoffed that she didn’t even have a college degree.

Albert S. Burrows, King County’s superintendent of schools, was elected president of the Washington Education Association at a lively convention in North Yakima at year’s end. Burrows’ victory was hailed in the press as a political boost for one of his friends: James M. Layhue, a steadfast Republican with a Fuller Brush mustache. Layhue was Superintendent Dewey’s assistant.

Preston appeared unfazed. She told reporters covering the convention that she had the support of 15 leading educators, including Frank Cooper, the Seattle school superintendent. Layhue retorted that 30 of the state’s 39 county superintendents were in his corner, along with 113 city superintendents and principals, as well as 21 college professors. Among them was the bright, yet judgmental Dr. Noah D. Showalter, the new president of the Washington State Normal School at Cheney.* Showalter sniffed at Preston’s skimpy academic credentials, never mind her years of practical experience. (Dr. Penrose would later note that she knew “vastly more about education than anybody on the faculty” at Whitman College.) Showalter would become Preston’s nemesis.

Preston rounded up more support when she headed a delegation of 16 Walla Walla women to the first meeting of the Women’s Good Roads Congress in Tacoma in January of 1912. The meeting drew club women and other activists from around the state, including Emma Smith DeVoe, as well as the State Grange master, the secretary of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce and the engineer for the State Highway Commission. Preston was the keynoter, emphasizing that good roads were crucial to good schools, especially in rural areas. She was staking out a leave-no-child-behind theme for her campaign for state superintendent. To keep moving forward

* Opened in 1890, the teacher-training school at Cheney was the forerunner of Eastern Washington University. Bellingham and Ellensburg were also granted Normal schools after statehood. “Cheney won the prize for Eastern Washington because its boosters had fought hard for it after losing the county seat to nearby Spokane in 1886,” according to Spokane historian Jim Kershner.

**FIRST WOMAN TO
RUN FOR OFFICE**

Mrs. Josephine Preston,
Pioneer Candidate for a
State Position.

Mrs. Josephine Corliss Preston of
Walla Walla has the distinction of be-
ing the first woman in Washington,
since the passage of the suffrage



Mrs. Josephine Corliss Preston.

amendment, to become a candidate for
state office.

Mrs. Preston is now superintendent
of schools in Walla Walla county and
seeks the republican nomination for
state superintendent of public instru-
ction, to succeed H. B. Dewey, who will
not be a candidate.

Mrs. Preston comes from an old and
well-known family of Walla Walla.
She has been a leader in educational
work in this state for many years.

America needed “the best teachers,” Preston said, adding that “it was far more important to select competent teachers for rural schools, where there necessarily can be but slight supervision, than in the city schools, where there is close supervision.”

THE RACE FOR THE REPUBLICAN NOMINATION for state superintendent of public instruction took a new twist in February of 1912. Men being men, politics appears to have trumped friendship because James Layhue dropped out of the race “in interest of harmony,” having discovered that his candidacy had generated “some antagonism” in “a certain part of the state” (transparently Seattle/King County) among supporters of a certain other candidate. Albert Burrows immediately announced his candidacy.

The fight between the King County school superintendent and the lady Republican from Eastern Washington “promises to be a pretty one,” *The Tacoma Daily Ledger* predicted, especially since Preston was asserting that “the head of the schools is one office which rightfully should be held by a woman.” Burrows’ supporters asserted she lacked the experience to oversee the state’s school system. Fast-growing King County, population already 300,000, coveted political dominance.

Two well-known Democrats entered the race: Mary A. Monroe of Spokane and Eldridge Wheeler of Montesano, the party’s 1908 nominee. Monroe for 20 years had been principal of Spokane’s Lincoln School, the largest elementary school in the Northwest. It had a thousand students and 23 teachers. She was active in the National Education

Association and an avid supporter of the Democrats’ presidential nominee, New Jersey Governor Woodrow Wilson. Monroe shared Josephine Corliss Preston’s commitment to promoting parent-teacher relations and boosting rural schools. Professor Wheeler, Montesano’s popular school superintendent, was a delegate to the 1912 Democratic National Convention and a future regent of the University of Washington.

The resurgent Socialists nominated Frances Cora Sylvester for Superintendent of Public Instruction. She was the niece of Olympia's founding father, Edmund Sylvester. The ardent 38-year-old Socialist had taught in Olympia schools for eight years. She was the party's nominee for state superintendent in 1904 and ran an impressive race for mayor of Olympia in 1911. Rallying their comrades to "fall in" and help "make short work of bloody capitalism," Sylvester and Anna A. Maley of Everett, the first woman to run for governor of Washington, waged an aggressive campaign of well-attended rallies for a ticket headed by the Socialists' charismatic presidential candidate, Eugene V. Debs. It was said that Sylvester, vowing to be "a workman for the people," held her own sharing a platform with Maley, a spellbinding lecturer. The Socialists and the more radical Industrial Workers of the World exemplified everything Josephine Corliss Preston and fellow conservatives viewed as inimical to "American values."

Some saw the race for state superintendent of public instruction as an historic "woman against woman" battle between Preston and Mary Monroe, "owing to the popularity of both women and their well-known accomplishments in the field of education." That was how *The Town Crier*, an influential Seattle magazine, put it. "This contest, it is safe to say, has done more than any one thing to bring out the feminine vote. So far, be it said to the credit of the women, the campaign has been carried out in a thoroughly clean and honorable manner. At both headquarters, the women speak in high terms of the rival candidate and say she is undoubtedly qualified—but on the other hand they can give you reasons why their own candidate has the advantage in experience."

Preston and Monroe were intent on ensuring they were perceived as not just Eastern Washington candidates. The Mary Monroe Club worked closely with the Women's Wilson-Marshall League while the Women's Republican Club of Washington, featuring "numerous well-known society and club women," enthusiastically backed Preston. The Socialists said Preston and Monroe were capitalist peas in a pod.

Everyone underestimated the strength of former president Theodore Roosevelt's new Progressive Party.

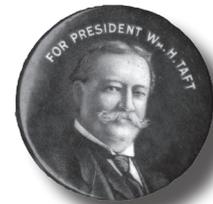
5: MIXED BLESSINGS

The impact of women's votes and women's voices was the wild card in the 1912 presidential election and on races up and down the ballot in Washington. There were 1.3 million women of voting age in the six states where women had won the right to vote—notably California, which enfranchised women in 1911, the year after Washington.

Theodore Roosevelt, hugely popular in Washington state, loomed larger than life in one of the most tumultuous national elections in U.S. history. In the midterm elections two years earlier, Democrats won 58 seats to gain control of the U.S. House for the first time since 1894. Roosevelt excoriated his erstwhile friend, President William Howard Taft, as a backsliding “fathead” with “the brains of a guinea pig.” Roosevelt was deeply aggrieved that Taft “had all but abandoned” his environmental policies, having dismissed his friend Gifford Pinchot as the nation's chief forester. When Roosevelt declared his hat was “in the ring” Republicans began choosing up sides. The Democrats nominated New Jersey Governor Woodrow Wilson, the former president of Princeton University.

Let's reimagine 1992 to put 1912 in a contemporary perspective: Suppose Ronald Reagan, outraged that George H.W. Bush had broken his no-new-taxes pledge, had formed a third party (à la H. Ross Perot) and ended up electing the Democrat, Bill Clinton?* In 1912, there was also a consequential fourth-party candidate, the Socialists' Eugene V. Debs.

James Chace, author of *1912, Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft & Debs, the Election That Changed the Country*, wrote: “Above all, the contest . . . over reform at home and later over American involvement abroad—recalls the great days of Jefferson and Hamilton, as the 1912 presidential campaign tackled the central question of America's exceptional destiny.”



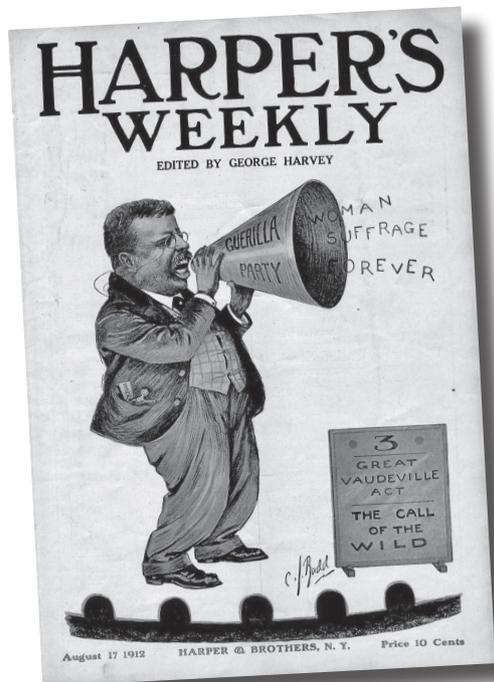
* Nitpickers will note that the 22nd Amendment, ratified in 1951, would have barred Reagan from seeking a third term.

When stand-pat Republicans denied Roosevelt the 1912 GOP nomination, the former president bolted the convention and became the standard bearer of the new Progressive Party. Thumping his broad chest, Roosevelt boasted he felt as fit “as a bull moose.” The party now had its mascot. It already had considerable momentum in The Evergreen State. An eight-hour day for female workers had been passed by the Legislature in 1911, despite “vociferous protests” by laundry, hotel and retail store proprietors. “If girls were horses, you’d be more careful of their health,”

said the activist wife of a University of Washington professor. The average factory girl was being paid \$1.57 for a nine-hour day.

The Progressive Party platform declared that votes for women were “a matter of natural right alone.” Jane Addams, the renowned social worker from Chicago and “arguably the most famous woman in America,” entered their convention “waving a great banner inscribed with ‘Votes for Women’ . . . a Bull Moose badge on her breast.” A reporter for *The New York Times* was shocked by the delegates’ reaction when Roosevelt promised he would lead the fight for suffrage. “In most cases where men applaud the mention of woman suffrage, they do it with a grin,” the newsman observed. But at this convention “old men and young men alike got up on their chairs, yelled like wild Indians and waved anything available and portable.”

When Roosevelt declared, “We stand at



Teddy Roosevelt on the cover of *Harper's Weekly* during the 1912 campaign.

Armageddon, and we battle for the Lord!” the delegates broke into *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

Some suffragists blanched at the theatrics, maintaining that Addams had betrayed the movement’s nonpartisan stance and presented a false impression that Roosevelt was their new champion. As for “natural rights,” he had excluded African Americans from the Progressive platform, worried that a civil rights plank would cost him votes in the South.

ROOSEVELT CHOSE AS HIS RUNNING MATE California Governor Hiram Johnson. With California and Washington in play—11 and 7 electoral votes,



respectively—the electoral college vote women could effect more than doubled, suffrage historian Jo Freeman notes.*

Washington's population also had more than doubled—to 1.14 million—since 1900. Women accounted for approximately 43 percent of the state's population. Approximately 200,000 were now of voting age. And at least 85 percent—170,000—were expected to vote in the 1912 elections. From right to left on the political spectrum, they were highly motivated. That made many

men nervous.

Some, however, were dedicated “suffragents.” In New York City that November more than 500 men marched in a torchlight parade alongside 20,000 suffragists. National suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt described the Men's League for Women's Suffrage as “the thinking men of our country—the brains of our colleges, of commerce and literature.” All things considered, “a blessing to us.”

AS ROOSEVELT WHISTLE-STOPPED the West, wooing female voters to the delight of editorial cartoonists, Woodrow Wilson asserted suffrage was a state issue “not within the purview of a presidential candidate.” President Taft, a suffrage proponent during his college years, now worried that women were “too emotional.” When he addressed the national convention of the American Woman Suffrage Association in 1910 the portly president said, “If I could be sure that women as a class would exercise the franchise, I would be in favor of it. At present time there exists in my mind considerable doubt.”

Washington Governor Marion Hay, a Taft adherent, earlier had equivocated on suffrage. But

* The four pioneer suffrage states were Wyoming (1869), Utah (1870/96), Colorado (1893) and Idaho (1896).



Teddy Roosevelt in *Harper's Weekly*, E.W. Kemble cartoon

when the constitutional amendment was approved in 1910 Hay said the voters had “acted wisely.” His ambivalence would cost him crucial votes in a tight election. Dedicated “suffs” in Washington state represented a potentially pivotal voting bloc.

Roosevelt campaigned in Spokane the day before the September 10 primary, jabbing the air with his fists and flashing his trademark toothy smile. He ended the day with an address to an audience of 2,000 women. Asked about the Republican platform, Roosevelt quipped that he never discussed “dead folks.” He had a lot to say, however, about women voters. “The argument that participation in politics will take women from home is just as well grounded as it would be to say that men should not vote because it would take them from their business,” the former president said, adding that he had learned “a great deal” from Jane Addams. Women in the progressive Western states had already proven to be a force for better government, Roosevelt said. “I think I have the right to ask the women of Washington to stand by the Progressive Party. We need your help!”

PRESTON WAS TROUBLED by Taft’s lackluster campaign and conflicted about Roosevelt. During his presidency, she saw him as the embodiment of red-blooded American exceptionalism. She admired every tenet of his “Square Deal,” including antitrust laws to rein in “the malefactors of great wealth,” as Roosevelt put it. She favored the direct election of U.S. senators, the initiative and referendum and an end to child labor. She campaigned for equal pay and minimum wages—especially for women—and an 8-hour day. But she could not bring herself to follow Roosevelt out of the Republican Party. That appears to have been a good political decision, too.

She won the GOP nomination for superintendent of public instruction, nipping Albert Burrows by 2,365 votes. Preston’s superior ground game in the state’s rural counties—including a 1,600-vote margin in Walla Walla—offset the Seattleite’s 5,300-vote plurality in King County. In populous Spokane County Preston ran nearly even with Mary Monroe, who handily defeated Eldridge Wheeler for the Democratic nomination. Frances Sylvester advanced to the finals with 8.4 percent of the votes cast.

Now there was a new hat in the ring for superintendent of public instruction. The Progressive Party nominated Chancey E. Beach, the superintendent of schools in Olympia. An early Roosevelt supporter, Beach was the state director of the National Education Association. His wife was president of the state PTA and his father a noted economics professor at the University of Washington.

The Oregonian’s political correspondent, M.M. Mattison, reported that the “old-time prophets” were perplexed about the possible outcome of the elections in Washington state:

Nobody knows, to begin with, what the women’s vote,
which will be cast in a state election for the first time this year,

will amount to; nobody knows how the women as a voting factor feel about National and state politics, and nobody knows whether there is any likelihood of a last-minute switch in the women's vote.

In other words, as the old saying went, it was a woman's prerogative to change her mind. The Socialists had been making "remarkable gains," Mattison wrote.

But Washington has been a "three-to-one" Republican state and the Republican Party is so strong here that it could stand a big defection and still win. ...[T]he present unrest would not worry Republican politicians so much if men alone were voting, but the uncertain quantity of the women's vote upsets any calculation that is made.

That said, "it seems generally admitted that there is a strong undercurrent of sentiment among women voters in favor of Woodrow Wilson," the widely-read correspondent wrote, though with his prim Presbyterian face Wilson had all the charisma of a bill collector.

IN THE EIGHT-WEEK SPRINT to the general election, Preston benefited from the support of the Republican State Central Committee headed by Werner A. Rupp, editor and publisher of *The Aberdeen Daily World*, one of the state's leading Republican newspapers. Rupp was a protégé of Tacoma newspaperman Samuel A. Perkins, a GOP insider since the days of William McKinley. There was a Walla Walla connection, too: Rupp and his lawyer brother, Otto B. Rupp, were proud Whitman College graduates. The party chairman promised "a campaign of hustle" to defeat the Progressives. Privately, Rupp was worried about Hay. The governor received 48 percent of the vote in a crowded primary. He now faced a bumptious Bull Moose candidate, King County Sheriff Robert T. Hodge, and a well-known Tacoma Democrat, Ernest Lister.* Socialist Anna Maley received more votes in the primary than any of the seven Democrats. As elections go, this one was for the record books.

The Seattle Daily Times tweaked the Progressives for being "not especially gallant," finding it hard to square their profession of support for equal suffrage and equal rights with the fact that theirs was "the only party in the state to run a man for Superintendent of Public Instruction." *The Morning Olympian* wrote that Superintendent Beach was being subjected to a lot of "joshing" by his male friends for running "among a flock of the fair sex." However, the consensus was that "the female voters will have a chance to split their votes among three women, while the

* A former Populist, Lister received his party's nomination when the victor in the primary, Snohomish County Judge W.W. Black, was declared ineligible by the state Supreme Court because he was running for partisan office while on the bench.

lone man will have a clear field for those who insist upon voting for a man under any circumstances. The situation is one of the most unusual that has ever been brought about in political mix-ups of any state.”

On election eve, Chairman Rupp predicted the Bull Moose movement had collapsed. President Taft would carry the state “by a plurality of not less than 20,000,” he said, while Governor Hay and the entire Republican ticket would be elected by margins ranging from 30,000 to 40,000 votes.

It was a good thing Rupp was not a betting man.

ON NOVEMBER 5, 1912, Theodore Roosevelt was victorious in Washington, California and four other states. But he lost the presidency to Woodrow Wilson, who carried 40 states. President Taft collected only two. Together, Roosevelt and Taft received 1.3 million more votes than Wilson. So it’s likely their feud cost the Republicans the White House—and the Governor’s Mansion in Olympia. Democrat Ernest Lister defeated Governor Hay by 622 votes, with the Bull Moose candidate, Robert Hodge, the spoiler.*

Josephine Corliss Preston bucked the tide. In a tight four-way race, she was elected state superintendent of public instruction, defeating Chancey Beach, the Bull Moose candidate, by 10,360 votes. Democrat Mary Monroe finished third. Some 40,000 left-leaning voters (13.5 percent of the electorate) backed Socialist Frances Sylvester. Preston won 23 of the state’s 39 counties, finishing a close second to Beach in King and Thurston counties. Her strong showing in Walla Walla County—nearly 60 percent of the vote—helped offset Monroe’s sizable margin in Spokane.

“Women of all ages” packed the Walla Walla YMCA on election night, “cheering wildly whenever a report favorable to their candidate” was posted. One of their own was leading in a race to become the first female statewide elected official in Washington history. “The man who two years ago voted against woman suffrage, giving as his argument that most women really didn’t care to vote, had occasion to hunt a hiding place,” the *Walla Walla Union* observed. The county’s long-suffering Democrats, meantime, hooted and hollered as national returns forecast Wilson’s victory. “Many a staunch Republican who for years had walked in the paths of the righteous” despaired at Taft’s ignominious third-place showing, while “bleeding bull-moosers had salt rubbed into their wounds,” the newspaper said.

The consolation prize for the GOP in Washington state was substantial. Republicans easily maintained control of the Legislature and defeated Progressives to win six other statewide offices, though by margins far below their chairman’s rosy predictions. Progressives won 30 seats in the Washington State House and eight in the State Senate. Roosevelt’s insurgents also captured two at-large seats in Congress

* It was the closest gubernatorial election in Washington history until 2004 when Chris Gregoire defeated Dino Rossi by 133 votes. President Taft, meanwhile, finished a distant third in Washington state, barely 30,000 votes ahead of Eugene V. Debs, who received nearly a million votes nationwide.

and changed the face of Washington politics with two constitutional amendments. More than 70 percent of the electorate endorsed allowing voters to enact laws by initiative, reject legislative enactments by referendum and recall elected officials. The vote in Washington mirrored the nationwide enthusiasm for reform.

Women's votes clearly elected Josephine Corliss Preston and sent two women to the Legislature—Progressive Nena J. Croake of Tacoma, a physician who was vice president of the Washington Equal Suffrage Association, and Republican Frances C. Axtell, an energetic suffragist from Bellingham. Women's votes also likely elected Ernest Lister governor, "despite his lingering doubts" as to whether suffrage was a good thing.* The total vote for governor in 1912 was 318,359 compared to 176,141 four years earlier. The state's robust population growth alone would not account for the higher vote, former state archivist George W. Scott believes.

Tenacity, organization and her reputation as an innovative educator were the key ingredients in Josephine Corliss Preston's victory. She appealed to both male and female regular Republicans, with the enthusiastic backing of the Women's Republican Club, including society and club women from around the state who emphasized that women needed to make the most of their newly acquired franchise. Preston had appeared at hundreds of neighborhood and social club gatherings. Additionally, she was a stalwart of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, undeterred by the worries of some sister suffragists that the specter of shuttered saloons would create a male-voter backlash.

* Two years later, in 1914, 36 women were elected to public office in Washington state, including Annie Gaston, Thurston County's first female auditor. A staunch Republican, Gaston was a descendant of George Washington Bush, the mixed-race Tumwater pioneer who arrived in 1845.

6: MORE SALOONS—AND DEMOCRATS

Preston, unsurprisingly, was underwhelmed by Olympia. When she took office on January 13, 1913, the capital city’s population was 7,000—roughly a third the size of Walla Walla—at least when the Legislature wasn’t in session. To the disgust of the WCTU, the city had “more saloons (17) than doctors and dentists put together.” The sewers were primitive; rats everywhere. Preston’s office was in what we today call the “Old Capitol”—the Richardson Romanesque former Thurston County Courthouse in downtown Olympia. (The building is now occupied entirely by the offices of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.) Work was underway on the stately new Temple of Justice, the first building on a splendid new Capitol Campus being developed by a special commission.

There was an air of excitement as nearly 2,000 guests, including Superintendent Preston, descended on the not-yet-finished Temple for Governor Lister’s Inaugural Ball. “There were more Democrats than the capital city had ever seen,” an Olympia historian reported.

Governor Lister, a hard worker, proved to be a progressive reformer “willing to spend money and innovate,” George W. Scott notes in his 2012 book *Governors of Washington*. “His transparent sincerity often persuaded the Republican legislature.” During the 1913 session it produced a minimum wage bill for women and children that he promptly signed into law. Preston was impressed, redoubling her efforts to seek additional state support for schools, especially the “poor and needy” rural districts.



The old State Capitol, which then, as now, housed the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Out front in Sylvester Park stands a statue of Governor John R. Rogers, architect of the landmark “Barefoot School Boy Law,” the 1895 act to fund public schools. *State Library Collection, Washington State Archives*

As she settled in and began squinting at ledgers, Preston determined there were 238,663 school children in the state. The local school districts employed a total of 8,459 teachers at an average annual salary of \$772.67. Total expenditures for state schools amounted to \$9.1 million in 1913, for an average cost per pupil of \$53.22. That's the equivalent of \$1,344 per pupil in today's dollars.

Preston discovered that being superintendent of public instruction meant she was also president of the State Board of Education, CEO of the State Board for Vocational Education, chairman of both the State Library Commission and the Agricultural and Rural Life Commission, president of the State Teachers' Retirement Fund and a member of the Archives Commission. She was also a member of the Voting Machine Commission and the State Humane Bureau, which had "oversight" of "delinquent and deficient children" and of "insane and feeble-minded persons." Her staff in 1913 consisted of a secretary and a chief deputy. She added three more employees early on. When she left office in 1929, the Department of Education had grown to 23, though 11 of those employees were clerks or stenographers. The annual operating budget for the superintendent's office had grown from \$13,357 in 1913 to \$102,400.*

One of Preston's first acts was to step up her campaign to promote construction of cottages for rural teachers. Washington's attorney general had ruled in 1912 that school districts could not use public funds to build teacher cottages. Preston persuaded the 1913 Legislature to pass a law allowing the practice. *Sunset Magazine* took note of her success, writing that her goal was to give every teacher "a comfortable place to live, a clean bed to sleep in, wholesome food to eat, and a quiet, warm room where she may work undisturbed." The districts that furnished a cottage never go "a-begging" for the "A-number 1" teachers, the magazine reported.

By 1915, there were 108 teachers' cottages around the state, from Pend Oreille



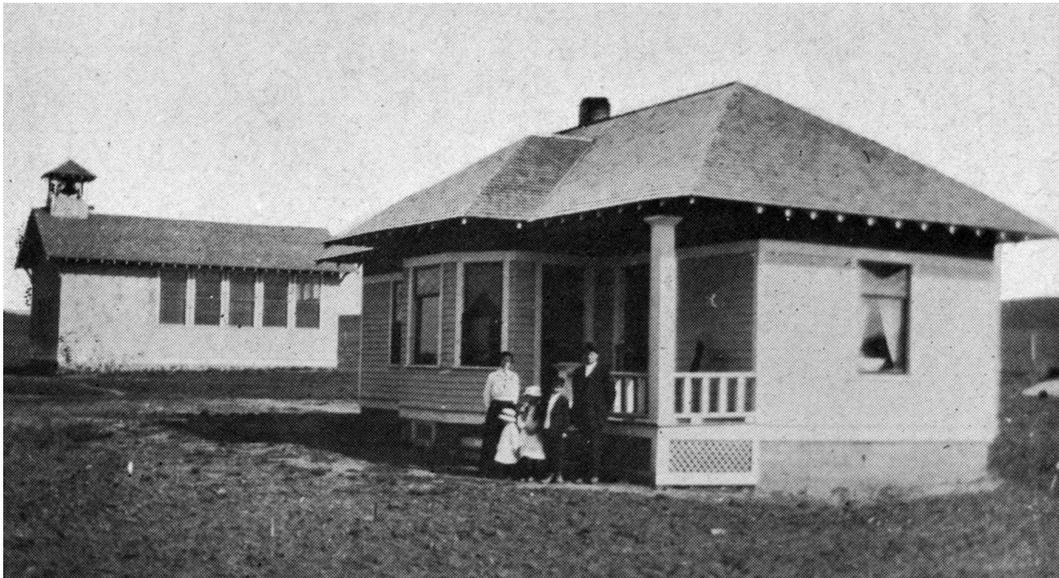
MRS. JOSEPHINE PRESTON
Superintendent of Public Instruction

Washington State Historical Society

* For the 2017-18 school year, Washington public school teachers on average earned \$55,693, with beginning teachers earning \$44,240. Defining "average" is inherently complicated. Teacher pay varies widely based on experience, advanced degrees, contracts for extra duties such as coaching, and size of the district. The cost per pupil in 2017-18 was \$12,834.89, according to OSPI. The total statewide full-time equivalent student enrollment was 1,112,719.23. There were 65,619 certificated teachers and 73,046 total certificated instructional staff. For the 2020 state fiscal year, \$11,090,000 is allocated for the operation and expenses of the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, which has approximately 400 employees.

County along the Idaho border to Humptulips in north Grays Harbor County at the doorstep of the Olympic National Forest. Nine years later, there were more than 400 cottages. Some were still in use as late as the 1950s. Jane Sandberg, whose husband was in a tuberculosis hospital, moved into the teacher's cottage at Humptulips with her two children in 1938 when she was hired to teach in the community's two-room school. In 2019, her daughter, 92-year-old Vicki Fenton, was living in Hoquiam. "The cottage was a blessing for the whole family—even for my dad, who couldn't be there, to know we were safe and happy," she said.

Though Preston was deeply concerned for the comfort and security of young women teaching in the vicinity of logging camps and canneries, she also urged county superintendents to "give a man with a wife and children first chance" at newly built cottages. One man with 15 years of experience as a teacher and rural school principal wrote Preston a letter of appreciation. His wife had "often remarked that a cottage should be built for the teacher, the same as for a minister." As he contemplated a job offer from the Snoqualmie School District, "I nearly fainted with surprise when I was told that a cottage was built near the school for the use of the principal! My wife's prayers were answered, and here we are." A young woman who taught at a school near Mount Vernon wrote: "This is my fourth year here, and I must acknowledge that the cottage has been the greatest factor in my staying so long." A bulletin issued by Preston's office—she kept the state printer busy with publications—included architectural plans and cost estimates, together with tips on planting fruit trees, vegetable and decorative gardens.



Preston said that by building this cottage near Edwall in Lincoln County the school district was able to retain its male teacher, J. Frank Hall, shown with his family. *Teachers Cottages in Washington*



The cottages were part of Preston's plan to make wider use of school buildings as "community centers," also authorized by the 1913 Legislature. Why should a schoolhouse sit idle every evening and on weekends? It should be a continuing education and social center for families, including adults of all ages, she said. "A good evening lecture, a lively spelling bee, a community sing, a literary program or any other neighborhood event that may take place at the schoolhouse is materially educating." Her essays on wider use of school buildings attracted national attention.

When the National Education Association met in St. Paul in the summer of 1914, Preston was elected vice president. She renewed old Minnesota acquaintances and moderated a panel on her plans to introduce new vocational and industrial training programs to lower the alarming dropout rate. It was a bitter disappointment when 81 percent of Washington voters rejected a 1914 referendum on the creation of a better retirement fund for the state's educators. Preston regrouped, as usual.

IN HER ROLE AS STATE SUPERINTENDENT and increasing involvement with the NEA, Preston was an enthusiastic advocate for Parent-Teacher Associations. PTAs' power for good "is inestimable," she wrote. "Home and school are equal agencies in the education of the child. Neither can work

effectively in ignorance of the other or at cross purposes with the other."

In Preston's era, teachers "generally served at the whim and mercy of local school boards," with no unions to defend their rights or arbitrate disputes. They often wrote directly to her to plead their cases. Constrained by statutes governing her office, she rarely intervened except to "cite laws and steps necessary for solution." There were occasions, however, when she came to the defense of competent teachers who had run afoul of meddlesome parents or arbitrary administrators. Preston counseled compassion when she felt discipline had been too harsh. Lord help the teacher, however, who arrived at work with alcohol on his breath or frequented bars. (Her scrapbook contains no reports on any female teacher tempted by alcohol.) In 1914, Preston advised the superintendent in Benton County: "It is your duty ... to revoke the certificate of any teacher you know is using liquor." She was WCTU through and through.

That year, to Preston's enormous satisfaction, imbibers' worst fears came true: 52.6 percent of Washington voters approved an initiative mandating prohibition. The law took effect on January 1, 1916, four years before the 18th Amendment enacted prohibition nationwide. Washington was ahead of the curve once again, though the "noble experiment," fraught with hypocrisies, would prove short-lived. Preston mourned the day in 1933 when alcoholic beverages became legal again.

PRESTON, UNQUESTIONABLY, was a Protestant moralist and something of an enigma if we judge her by today's standards. In the suffrage movement—where the WCTU, Grangers and sophisticated university-educated club women found common cause—Preston forged friendships with liberal-minded women. What they all had in common was their passion for equal rights.

Most of her friends and associates were mothers. Preston's lifelong vocation was maternal. She could have invented the phrase "No child left behind." The inequities in public-school education could move her to tears. Her work with the State Humane Bureau often took her to the school for delinquent girls at Grand Mound near Centralia. "The 20th century is demanding a new ideal in education, which cries for an equal opportunity for every child," Preston said in a 1914 address to the National Education Association. She "endeared herself to multitudes of parents and children," one national report said, by sending hand-written letters of congratulations to every child in the state who completed the eighth grade—nearly 10,000 in 1920. "Each letter carries a direct appeal to the student to stay in school."

Her former grade-school pupils fondly remembered Preston as a kindly teacher who made learning fun with story times and spelling bees. High schoolers—footloose in any era—likely viewed her as strait-laced, though her attitudes on the management of adolescent behavior were not unusual for her era. She warned against allowing teen dances in school houses, acknowledging, "If to say that young people should not dance would mean that they would not dance, it would be different. ... the only way for us to do something is to attempt to control it." Dancing and alcohol often went hand in hand, she cautioned.

7: “OFFICIOUS ADVISERS”

Preston’s penchant for “being very exacting in her demands on her employees” prompted headlines in the *Morning Olympian* in 1915. When Preston fired her deputy superintendent “on account of incompetency,” his assistant demanded to be put in charge. Preston called for his resignation on the spot. Her secretary and another office worker quit, too. They had found themselves “out of sympathy” with the policies and methods of her administration, as one put it. Two replacements were named within a day. The “rumpus” quickly blew over. If anyone advised her to lighten up, it fell on deaf ears.

A walkout the following year sparked considerably more front-page fireworks, it being an election year. While Preston was out of town attending a meeting, Deputy Superintendent Mary A. Bryan resigned, together with a young stenographer. They charged Preston with “abuse of women subordinates and extravagance.” Mrs. Bryan, a 15-year employee of the office, was the widow of former state superintendent R.B. Bryan.

She declared that in all a dozen employees had quit since Preston took office three years earlier. Preston was “entirely unfit” for high office, Mrs. Bryan told the capital press corps, and her re-election would be “a public calamity and genuine disaster to the educational interests of the state.”

The seven remaining staffers issued a blistering statement in defense of Preston, emphasizing they were doing so without her knowledge, as she had not yet returned from her trip. The staff had received “nothing but the most courteous and considerate treatment at all times,” they wrote, and Preston’s only expectation was that “a day’s work be given in return for a day’s pay.” By making “malicious and willfully misleading” statements to the press, the disgruntled pair had “repaid kindness and courteous treatment by disloyalty and treachery,” the seven said. “The self-elimination of this disloyal faction is a source of intense satisfaction to the present office force.”



Library of Congress

Preston issued a forceful three-page “Official Statement” that was reprinted widely. She had appointed Mrs. Bryan as her deputy a year earlier when she expressed regret and contrition over playing a role in the first “disloyal conspiracy,” Preston said. “The fact that she was a widow making her way, and that she had a dependent father past eighty years old, made me willing to forgive [her] indiscretion.” Preston said the affair reeked of politics. But her constitutional responsibilities were “too great to dwell long” on the petulance of “disgruntled former appointees” who lacked commitment to the cause. Preston said her candidacy for a second term was steeped in the conviction that “there has never been a time in the history of the development of public-school education when the wisdom of the expenditure of the state’s school money is of so great importance.”

Preston had learned early in her career that not only did men resent forceful female leadership, some women did too. The *North Yakima Republic* put it this way: “The main trouble with Mrs. Josephine Preston, state superintendent, is that although a woman, she has refused to be guided by any number of self-constituted officious advisers who have come forward to help her handle her job. As a result, she will have plenty of opposition in the primaries. She probably ought to be re-nominated.”

After her first year in office, Preston told an admirer that “the best men” in education in the state had helped her win election. But “a few of the second grade of men in the state stated that if a woman was elected, a man could never again hope to hold this office.”

Whenever Preston lost her temper—usually over errors regarded as egregious or perceived disrespect—the staff made itself scarce. Few, however, faulted her work ethic or concern for children. Loyalists remembered her kindnesses—summertime picnics on Puget Sound for employees and their families—and dry sense of humor. An Oregon educator heading to Olympia for a meeting joked that the brewery at Tumwater was conveniently nearby. “Try to forget” about that, she advised. And in a letter to a contemporary with a full plate, her opener was, “Knowing that you have very little to do...”

PRESTON HAD TOO MUCH TO DO and a burning desire to do it all. She was active in the WCTU and the Olympia Council of Women Voters, which was active in the push for national suffrage. In the middle of the 1916 campaign, Preston came down with pneumonia in Bellingham but refused to be hospitalized. In addition to her work with the National Education Association and travels around the state to host teachers’ institutes and dedicate new schools, she was addressing club women and PTA groups and working with the Daughters of the American Revolution to promote the flag salute.

Preston was soon on the road again. She was one of seven division leaders of the first World Conference on Education. The National Thrift Association appointed

her to its panel of judges to review school children's essay contest entries. (She was surprised and delighted to discover Henry Ford was a fellow judge.) She visited New York to attend a reception in honor of Charles Evans Hughes, the 1916 GOP nominee for president, and became a member of the Women's National Committee of the Hughes Alliance. The event was at the Long Island estate of socialite artist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Preston's relatives read all about it when Otter Tail County newspapers proudly printed the story. She also met and became an admirer of the brilliant new president of the University of Washington, Henry Suzzallo, whose forte was educational sociology. A national survey by the New York-based Russell Sage Foundation found that Washington ranked first in "efficiency" of public-school spending, as well as number one for per-capita spending on education, largely due to the number of new school buildings being erected to deal with escalating enrollment.*

THE PREDICTION THAT PRESTON would have plenty of opposition in 1916 came true in a hurry. Merritt E. Durham, King County's superintendent of schools, launched an aggressive statewide campaign for the Republican nomination. If elected, he promised to do three things that were already hallmarks of the Preston administration at OSPI: Improve rural schools, boost vocational training and promote better relations with county and local superintendents. Ruth C. Hoffman, a veteran teacher at the State Normal School in Ellensburg, also filed as a Republican. Her platform was that the office ought to be nonpartisan. The fourth Republican in the race had a wonderful Dickensian name: DeFore Cramblitt. He was the 26-year-old principal of a Centralia elementary school. The lone Democrat in the race was the last territorial superintendent of public instruction, John H. Morgan. He had headed the math department at the Ellensburg teachers' college for 23 years.

Preston prevailed in the hotly contested primary, collecting 30 percent of the vote. The elderly Professor Morgan, crippled in a stagecoach accident in 1888, was unopposed for the Democratic nomination, collecting only about 7 percent of the vote.

In November of 1916, Preston easily won a second term, with nearly 55 percent of the vote. Her detractors were temporarily flummoxed. She was newly energized.

THE 1917 LEGISLATURE gave Preston the first victory of her second term, authorizing state-funded kindergartens. The State Federation of Women's Clubs was a staunch ally as Preston pushed for hot lunches and expanded school bus routes.

* When Preston arrived in Cathlamet for the dedication of its new school building, she met an exceptional teacher, Maude Kimball Butler, Wahkiakum County's first female school superintendent. Maude Kimball Butler would become an assistant state superintendent on Preston's staff. Her precocious daughter, Julia, was destined to become Washington's second female member of Congress.

She intensified her efforts to elevate the state to the first rank of teacher certification standards. Beginning in 1917, candidates for a teaching certificate were required to have a high school diploma and at least nine weeks of training at a teacher college. A decade later, as she was leaving office, the minimum standard was two years of training at one of the teachers' colleges. "From 1913 to 1924, teachers with diplomas and certificates from the state's five institutions of higher learning increased from 563 to 5,000," an NEA study said.

In 1919, Josephine and her mother moved into a handsome Craftsman-style house in the South Capitol Neighborhood, an easy walk to downtown shops and the Capitol.

8: MANDATORY ALLEGIANCE

The U.S. entered World War I in the spring of 1917 after Germany escalated its U-boat attacks on shipping in war-zone waters. Preston, like most Americans, was outraged by the mounting casualties on American vessels but prayed that “Divine Providence” would intervene. When President Wilson asked for a declaration of war, famously telling Congress “the world must be made safe for democracy,” Preston wrote that he had italicized “the fundamental issue” at stake: Halting Germany’s designs on “feudalistic world-dominion.”

While Wilson emphasized “we have no quarrel with the German people,” home-front patriotic fervor rose to incendiary levels, with a government-funded propaganda bureau fanning the flames. One military enlistment poster depicted the enemy as a barbaric “Hun,” another as a “mad brute” gorilla invading the U.S. after laying waste to Europe. Americans of German ancestry—2.3 million had immigrated between 1881 and 1910—tried to lay low or emphasize their loyalty amid growing public paranoia about sabotage and subversion. “100% Americanism” became the litmus test of patriotism. Sauerkraut became “liberty cabbage”; Berlin, Iowa, changed its name to Lincoln; libraries canceled their subscriptions to German-language newspapers.

Superintendent Preston, who was named to the NEA’s wartime Emergency Educational Commission, compiled and issued “A Patriotic Bulletin” to inspire school boards, educators and schoolchildren to help “crush down the evil attempt at world-wide autocracy.” From her earliest days as a teacher, Preston believed the public schools had to instill patriotism. The bulletin featured Governor Ernest Lister’s proclamation exhorting every Washingtonian to do his or her part to promote victory, as well as the words to *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*; Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address; a primer on flag etiquette and detailed instructions for an obligatory “School Flag Salute.” Preston wrote:

At a given hour in the morning, the pupils are assembled and in their places in the school. A signal is given by the teacher. Every pupil rises in his place, while the flag is being brought forward from the door to the stand [by] the teacher. Every pupil gives the flag the military salute. . . .

While thus standing, all the pupils repeat together, slowly and distinctly, the following pledge: “I pledge allegiance to my flag

and to the republic for which it stands. One nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

At the words “to my flag,” each one extends the right hand, palm to the front, toward the flag until the end of the pledge affirmation. Then all hands drop to the side. The pupils, still standing, may sing together in unison the song “America.”*

Preston’s office worked with the Washington State Council of Defense—headed by Dr. Suzzallo—and the Washington Federation of Women’s Clubs to promote patriotism and rally the home front to help win the war. Preston happily enlisted the state’s schoolchildren in campaigns to sell “Liberty Loan” bonds. Responding to a letter from a patriotic grade-school girl, Preston urged the child to save 25 cents and buy a war bond stamp to help her country during “this great war crisis.”

The Woman’s Work Committee of the State Council of Defense—dubbed the “Minute Women”—had Preston’s enthusiastic support, especially when it targeted teachers with “pro-German inclinations” and the radical Industrial Workers of the World. Preston viewed the “Wobblies” as home-grown Bolsheviks intent on fomenting strikes to disrupt the war and, ultimately, destroy democracy. Preston passionately believed it was the duty of educators—from the teacher at the smallest rural school to the largest public university—to inculcate students with the meaning of “Americanism.” Socialist teachers and slippery “infidels” were a threat to American values, Preston wrote. She was not anti-immigrant, however. Far from it. Where you were born didn’t matter so long as you were committed to becoming an American in thought, word and deed. Likely drawing on her mother’s experiences at the Umatilla Indian Boarding School, Preston also understood that ruthless forced assimilation did great harm to the self-esteem and cultural heritage of Native American children. When a county superintendent asked whether Indian children should be attending the regular public schools in his jurisdiction, Preston replied, “I feel it is your duty to provide a school for those children.”

Preston’s hard-nosed patriotism made headlines when the Thurston County Council of Defense accused an Olympia grade school teacher of making seditious remarks at school during a Liberty Bond event. Dismissed by the school board, Charles R. Carr asked Preston to intervene. She presided over a packed hearing in the State Senate chambers, an assistant attorney general at her side. Carr admitted

* The original Pledge of Allegiance, first published in 1892, was likely the handiwork of Frances Bellamy, a Baptist minister. Six years later, during the Spanish American War, New York became the first state to mandate that school children recite the pledge each morning. Encouraged by the DAR and other patriotic groups, many states adopted the practice. Placing one’s hand over heart while reciting the pledge replaced the outstretched arm “Bellamy salute” in 1942 because the Nazis used a similar gesture to “Heil” Hitler. *The Pledge of Allegiance* was revised in 1923 to change “my flag” to “the flag of the United States of America.” In 1954, during the Cold War, “under God” was added.



Bain News Service, Library of Congress

to being a pacifist, but said he had forgotten ever having said he would not lift a finger to help the government win an “unholy, unrighteous” war. “But if I did make such a statement ... I must have meant that I would not raise a finger to help kill a man.” Since then, however, he had changed his mind and now believed in killing Germans, “although I would not like to kill them myself.” The defendant called 16 school children, ranging in age from 8 to 10, as character witnesses. Their testimony was not reported, but “after they were sworn in” they took turns sitting in the lieutenant governor’s big chair and “grinned down on the proceedings the rest of the morning.” It must have been the best field trip of the school year.

Preston weighed the testimony for several days before revoking Carr’s teaching certificate for “unprofessional conduct ... detrimental to the interests of the government.” A few months later, she revoked the teaching certificate of an Island County teacher who expressed contempt for the

Red Cross and refused to require his students to salute the flag or recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

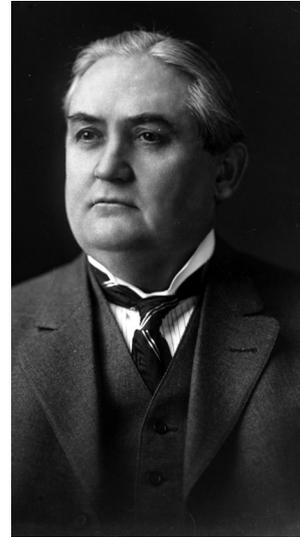
Today, Preston’s hyper-patriotism may sound as radical as the radicals’ disdain for the “malignant capitalism oppressing working-class wage-slaves.” Praised by editorial writers around the state, her views were mainstream. The Bolshevik Revolution, anarchist bombings and labor unrest fanned the flames of nationalism. Woodrow Wilson ordered his attorney general “not to let this country see Red.” The administration conducted wholesale roundups of radical unionists, suspected anarchists and “seditionists.” Eugene Debs, the Socialist who had won six percent of the presidential vote in 1912, was sent to prison for denouncing the war as the handiwork of the “master class.”

9: NAGGING BECAME NECESSARY

On February 14, 1919, Lieutenant Governor Louis F. Hart, a centrist Republican, signed into law House Bill No. 20, which made it unlawful for school boards to pay women teachers less than men. The female teachers at Seattle's high schools played a key role in the campaign for the bill, Preston's top legislative goal during her first six years as state superintendent. "If the task is performed as well by a woman as a man, the pay should be the same," she said.

Governor Lister, a liberal Democrat, would have signed it too. Suffering from heart failure and kidney disease, he was a dying man, succumbing four months later on the day before his 49th birthday. Preston and the governor had had their political differences. She wanted him to be tougher on the Wobblies. Yet he was also a longtime member of the Good Templars, an international temperance society, and unquestionably earnest.

Preston's largely successful 1919 omnibus package of school legislation also promoted vocational education and school district consolidation. It liberalized bond issue rules, boosted the salaries of county school superintendents and strengthened the teaching of patriotism and "American ideals." A one-year course in American history and government became a high school graduation requirement.



Governor Hart, *Washington State Archives*

THE DEATH OF THE GOVERNOR was followed by high drama in Olympia in the winter of 1919-1920. On November 5, 1919, when Maine ratified the proposed 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the measure granting women the right to vote was still 17 states short of victory. Suffragists were prodding the new governor to call a special session of the Legislature to ratify the amendment. Carrie Chapman Catt, the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and her friend Josephine Corliss Preston visited the Governor's Office. "From all accounts," it was a cordial meeting, but neither the governor nor the ladies revealed its outcome. Catt counseled patience. "I am married and I know you can't reach a man by nagging," she told a luncheon arranged by Preston. It attracted more than 40

prominent Olympia women, including First Lady Ella Hart, who was seated next to Catt and Preston. “Get out and work, all of you women, and first create a demand for the special session so that it won’t embarrass the governor to call it,” Catt said, adding:

For years we have quoted the west and pointed out what you people have done. It was our chief stock in trade. We expected all the western states to rise up in unison and call special sessions to ratify the national suffrage amendment. But this is the sad, cruel part of the story. The only state to have a special session in the west so far is Kansas.

Catt said the “wets”—mostly men opposed to prohibition—were mobilizing in Washington to halt the amendment’s progress. She sounded a call to arms:

What we want you women to do is to secure the pledges of all the legislators in this state that they will meet for one day and ratify the national suffrage amendment and then adjourn.

The second message that I have to bring to you is the future that the suffrage women are now peeping into and which we want all women to join in. It is to set up a league of women voters which would call for such things as the abolition of illiteracy, to have a nation where everyone reads, speaks and writes the English language and has love and honor for the American flag. We want to put a new aim in politics and to install something there that has been sadly lacking. So, remember first, we want you to work for this national liberation of women and second to take part in our big national program.

Afterward, Catt was “gladsomely greeted” by a cluster of influential male legislators. The ladies believed they had the votes. Getting them cast was another story.

AS 1920 DAWNED, the conspiracy-sniffing *Morning Olympian* reported that there was a “secret compact” between Governor Hart and Secretary of State Ithamar M. Howell to stave off a special session. The state was “already carrying an overdraft of \$888,000 in the general fund and the need for economy in the use of public funds is absolute,” the governor told reporters after a meeting with the state treasurer.

Hart was preparing for a long train trip to Washington, D.C., to promote irrigation projects. Howell would be the acting governor. If Hart encountered Carrie Chapman Catt back East, sources told the paper he would say “the whole thing” was up to the secretary of state. And if Howell was nagged by Emma Smith DeVoe, he

would say that a special session was beyond his “temporary executive capacity.”

Catt was not amused. In an open letter to the people of Washington the suffrage leader intimated that some members of the Legislature were also making it difficult for the governor to call a special session, “their argument being that Washington ought to wait until ratification is publicly assured in 35 other states.” Catt said The Evergreen State needed to lead the way once again: “Washington, the first of the coast states to give suffrage to its own women, surely will lead the way again this time for the women of the nation.”

Stopping in Spokane on his way east, the governor held a news conference at the Davenport Hotel. Judging from a house-to-house survey of women “of all classes” by a friend in Tacoma, Hart said he believed the thinking women of the state opposed a special session. His amateur pollster chum found that only “one out of 100” backed the idea. And why should he place the state “in a position of blame” if national women’s suffrage ultimately failed to secure enough states for ratification?

Preston helped Catt turn up the heat. “Washington is one of the leading states in progressive, forward-looking movements,” Preston said. “Whatever Washington does is regarded by other states as of the greatest importance.”

The governor surrendered, calling a special session to convene on March 22. Hart declared that the session should be limited to the “Susan B. Anthony Amendment” and emergency funds for the state’s colleges, their enrollment capacities overwhelmed by discharged doughboys.

Since the Legislature normally convened only in odd-numbered years, Preston jumped at the chance to secure more funds for the common schools. She was presiding over a meeting of the National Education Association in New York when a telegram arrived with the news of the special session. She immediately issued a call to all of the state’s superintendents and high school principals to assemble in Olympia on the first day of the session. “Horried” at the prospect of public-school officials descending on Olympia to corral their legislators, Governor Hart “fired off a plaintive telegram to Chicago,” one stop on Preston’s train trip home. He begged her to defer the conference by a week and help hold the work of the Legislature “within reasonable bounds.” Nothing doing, Preston wired back. There was a crisis in education, “and I am sure you will join me in presenting the needs of our schools to the honorable body in their true light.”

Hours after she arrived back in Olympia, Preston and the chairman of the teachers’ committee met with the governor and legislative leaders. The governor said the public school situation wasn’t an emergency. Nonsense, the superintendent said. The only difference between the college enrollment crisis and the plight of the underfunded public schools was that public school teachers hadn’t threatened to join UW professors in a mass walkout. Furthermore, “teachers were leaving the classrooms in droves, unable to subsist on the average public-school teacher’s pay of \$900 a year... compared to the \$3,000 to \$5,000 sinecures of the university instructors.”

WHEN THE LEGISLATURE CONVENED, State Representative Frances E. Haskell, a Republican from Pierce County who had lobbied the First Lady to lean on her husband, escorted Emma Smith DeVoe to the House dais. Haskell, one of only two women in the 139-member Legislature, proceeded to introduce the ratification resolution with a soaring admonition that the woman's hour was at hand. "The women of our grandmothers' time lived in a very small and narrow sphere," Haskell said, "but civilization has advanced by leaps and bounds in the last quarter of a century." Now the lawmakers could:



Suffragist Emma Smith DeVoe, left, and State Representative Frances Haskell, right, lobbied First Lady Ella Hart to prod her husband to call a special session. *Library of Congress and Washington State Archives*

...prove to the world the greatness of our Evergreen state, which is not determined by the number of acres that it contains, nor by the number of its population, but by the character of its men and women who today are extending to all the women of America the privilege of the ballot. ...

The suffrage amendment was duly ratified by unanimous votes in both the House and Senate.

Preston was jubilant, but soon left the packed galleries to buttonhole legislators. Her school relief package was next on the agenda. A key funding bill had failed during the regular session. An old friend—Senator Oliver Cornwell of Walla Walla County—was an important ally as chairman of the Senate Committee on Education. Late that night, the Senate passed Preston's "20-10" law, which doubled state aid to local school districts to \$20 per pupil but left the counties' contribution at \$10 per pupil. The House concurred. Preston had "worked it through most cleverly," newspapers reported. The lawmakers were working overtime with no per diem, so a lot happened in a hurry. Funds were also appropriated to shore up the colleges for the rest of the biennium. A committee was appointed to study the common school crisis. Preston was pleased with the increase in state aid but believed "true equalization could never be achieved through a general distribution system." In a practical compromise, she would advocate an equalization fund aimed at rural grade schools.

Tennessee put the suffrage amendment over the top on August 18, 1920, after a young lawmaker who had been opposed to votes for women changed his vote at the urging of his mother.

PRESTON BECAME A CHARTER MEMBER of the National League of Women Voters when it was formally organized in Chicago on February 14, 1920. Carrie Chapman Catt summed up the league's goal:

The League of Women Voters is not to dissolve any present organization but to unite all existing organizations of women who believe in its principles. It is not to lure women from partisanship but to combine them in an effort for legislation which will protect coming movements, which we cannot even foretell, from suffering the untoward conditions which have hindered for so long the coming of equal suffrage. Are the women of the United States big enough to see their opportunity?

In her bid for a third term in the fall of 1920 Preston faced opposition from three other women who saw an opportunity. They were: Elizabeth Jones of Everett, a fellow Republican who shared her disdain for radicals; Catherine Montgomery of Bellingham, a Democrat active in the suffrage movement, and Alfa S. Ventzke of the newly formidable Farmer-Labor Party. Ventzke, a former North Dakota teacher, was the wife of an Okanogan farmer. Governor Hart, still smarting over being outmaneuvered by Preston in the run-up to the special session, was said to be a backstage supporter of Jones, a former Snohomish County school superintendent.

Preston was a large, immaculately groomed woman. The capital press corps portrayed her as a blend of gumption and grace—always good for a good quote. The *Olympia Daily Recorder* observed that wise men steered clear of “woman warfare.” It predicted “fireworks” during the campaign. “If anything or anybody stands in the way of what Mrs. Preston considers the best educational policy for the state, that object or individual is scheduled for a remarkably busy experience with all sorts of vicissitudes.” The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* said “no other Western woman” was better known in national educational circles.

After easily outpolling Jones for the GOP nomination, Preston won reelection with 58 percent of the vote. The Farmer-Labor lady was the runner-up.*

For Preston, winning a fourth term in 1924 was easier yet. Chancey E. Beach, the Bull Moose candidate from 1912, was back in the GOP fold, his apostasy

* The Farmer-Labor Party, backed by the Grange, the Federation of Labor and the Socialist Party, “appeared suddenly as a new political force” in Washington’s 1920 elections. Its candidates outpolled Democrats in statewide races and in many other contests. It was the best showing by the party anywhere in America outside Minnesota, where Preston was born and raised.

apparently not forgotten. Preston trounced him in the primary, carrying 38 of the state's 39 counties. In November, she received 62.5 percent of the vote.

For the 1923-24 school year, the chief statistician of the U.S. Bureau of Education ranked Washington first in the nation based on a 10-point scale that graded states on school attendance, the length of the school year, high school graduation, teacher certification, educators' salaries and per-pupil expenditures.



Josephine Corliss Preston
CANDIDATE FOR RE-ELECTION
Superintendent of Public Instruction
Republican Primary, Sept. 9th, 1924

I have a deep and abiding interest in the children of this state, and in building a school system that makes our boys and girls worthy American Citizens.

(Over)

DURING MRS. PRESTON'S TERM OF OFFICE THE FOLLOWING HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED:

1. State support of common schools raised from \$10 to \$20 for each census child.
2. Teachers' qualifications increased from a low minimum to one of the highest west of the Mississippi River.
3. Teachers' average annual salaries increased from \$773 to \$1396.
4. Annual elementary school enrollment increased from 202,499 to 247,635.
5. Annual high school enrollment increased from 27,494 to 58,440, ranking Washington second in the United States in high school development.
6. Annual number of eighth grade graduates increased from 9,867 to 17,053.
7. Annual number of high school graduates increased from 2,675 to 7,738.
8. Vocational education established and 24,595 students given specific training in their respective wage earning occupations and chosen vocations.
9. Living conditions of teachers improved. 447 teachers' cottages built.
10. Reorganization of pioneer districts has steadily taken place through consolidation of school districts into natural neighborhood or community unit districts providing rural high school advantages near home.

CITIZENSHIP.

The following laws dealing with Citizenship and Patriotic Observance have been passed:
Requiring American History and Government as a prerequisite for high school graduation; requiring school directors and teachers to be American citizens; providing penalty for not teaching patriotism; requiring Flag Salute in all schools; providing penalty for failure of school boards to replace Flag when tattered, torn or faded; requiring the observance of Temperance and Good Citizenship Day and the observance of Armistice Day.

Vote to re-elect JOSEPHINE CORLISS PRESTON, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and continue the above progressive school program.

(Over)

10: A MARKED WOMAN

Preston's landslide victory in 1924 was no portent of her choppy final four years as superintendent of public instruction. She disliked the new governor. And the feeling was mutual. Roland H. Hartley, a squirrely conservative with "hard blue eyes," embraced antediluvian ideas about public education. It could not have helped that Preston was at least three inches taller and fast on her feet. She was on Hartley's enemies list from day one. It was a long list, too. The controversial former Everett mayor became Washington's 10th governor in his third try after narrowly outpolling nine other Republicans in the primary. It is the consensus of Northwest historians that by comparison the polarizing Dixy Lee Ray was a veritable Lincoln.

Refusing to name a representative to the 1925 National Child Welfare Conference, Governor Hartley maintained that the common schools of the early 1890s were superior to "modern" education, even though the state had contributed nothing to their support. He fumed that on Preston's watch the total state budget for teacher salaries was now \$16.6 million.* The return on that investment was sadly lacking, Hartley said:

Can we wonder why our children go wrong? Petted, pampered, educated at the expense of the state, robbed of self-reliance and independence, we send them forth as weaklings to take up the rugged path of life for themselves.

When he vetoed an old-age pension act approved by the Legislature, Hartley declared:

The embryo citizen we start out...coddled and prepared for a life of ease in a playhouse (public school) maintained at public expense, and then we build an alms-house in which to receive him when he has failed.

Hartley railed against Preston's "extravagant" demands for higher pay for teachers and fairer funding for rural schools. Moreover, she was an admirer of Dr. Suzzallo, the visionary president of the University of Washington. In Hartley's eyes the cosmopolitan university was an incubator of socialism. The governor was egged on by Ernest Holland, the president of Washington State College, who resented

* In the 12 years since Preston took office, school enrollment was up 30 percent to 329,888. The state's 11,377 teachers, on average, were paid \$1,459 per year.

that Suzzallo was being paid \$18,000 a year, nearly double what he was earning. Further, State Representative Duncan Dunn of Yakima, who had managed the governor's 1924 campaign, was a WSC regent.

Hartley introduced a measure in 1925 that produced "audible gasps of amazement" from the Legislature, Northwest historian David M. Buerge wrote in a 1987 essay. Claiming his plan would increase efficiency and economy in the state's higher education system, Hartley proposed:

...to abolish the boards of regents of the UW, Washington State College, and the Normal schools, to abolish the state Board of Education, and to pass a constitutional amendment abolishing the office of state superintendent of schools. He would replace these with a single superboard made up of his appointees, who would manage the budgets of all state educational institutions from kindergarten to graduate school. ...

The proposal was met with outrage from educators as well as legislators. It was quickly tabled. It split the Republican Party, but its public support would not evaporate. In a revolt actively supported by the university, the legislature voted to increase funding for higher education. Hartley vetoed the bill; the veto was overridden. In this massive repudiation, Hartley believed he saw Suzzallo's fine hand.

A year later, Governor Hartley secured Suzzallo's dismissal after replacing two of the president's supporters on the university's Board of Regents. One was Werner A. Rupp of Aberdeen, who had helped Preston win election in 1912. Another friend, Ruth Karr McKee of Kelso, the university's first female regent and



In 1926, *The Seattle Times* skewered Governor Hartley as a pint-size tyrant. Tom Thurlbly/*Seattle Daily Times*

a prominent club woman, resigned on the spot when the new Hartley majority fired Suzzallo. That night, 3,000 students marched to Suzzallo's home on campus, chanting "Suzzallo for governor!" Mrs. Suzzallo and Mrs. McKee joined him on the porch. "I deeply appreciate your coming here tonight," he said. "I have devoted my life to the upbuilding of the university, and I want you to devote your lives to it. Don't do anything now that will reflect discredit on your alma mater."

A citizens committee, outraged over the "ruthless exercise of executive power," drafted a recall indictment charging the governor with malfeasance, misfeasance and violation of his oath of office. They alleged he had removed regents and trustees on baseless charges and was seeking to destroy the Legislature's independence by appointing his cronies to state jobs "carrying large salaries and emoluments." Hartley shrugged it all off. Education remained in his crosshairs. When he vetoed a 1927 bill designed to equalize state support to struggling rural districts, Preston issued a stinging rebuke. She reminded the governor that the state constitution stipulated it was "the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders. ..." Noting that the bill had passed the Legislature by a vote of more than four to one, Preston said that with the stroke of a pen the governor had denied 40,000 children a better education. "The purpose of the bill was to give further state support to our poor and needy school districts, thus strengthening the principle of equal educational opportunity, as initiated by the Barefoot School Boy Law, to which our state has been committed for a third of a century," the superintendent said. The Washington Education Association might well have draped in black the statue of Governor John R. Rogers in front of the Old Capitol. The populist from Puyallup was the architect of the landmark 1895 act to fund public schools.*

EARLY IN 1928, Noah D. Showalter, a member of the State Board of Education, announced he would oppose Preston for the Republican nomination if she sought a fifth term. Showalter, 59, was an associate of King County Superintendent Albert Burrows, still bitter over his loss to Preston in the 1912 GOP primary. The pair had long been critical of her administration. But they were no fans of Governor Hartley. In 1926, the seldom-smiling Showalter resigned as head of the teachers' college at Cheney to protest the governor's directive to its trustees to withhold expenditure of \$26,000 appropriated by the Legislature. Showalter was still "expected to be the beneficiary of the Hartley forces' three-year war" against Preston, *The Seattle Daily Times* said.

Preston declared she would run on her record of "integrity, efficiency and economy" while overseeing "a state school system recognized nationally" as a leader

* Engraved at the base of the statue in Sylvester Park is a quotation that sums up Governor Rogers' Populist credo: "I would make it impossible for the covetous and avaricious to utterly impoverish the poor. The rich can take care of themselves."

in promoting educational excellence in “both city and country schools”—a record she said her political opponents had “sought in vain to discredit...through devious methods.” Preston had recently enhanced her staff by appointing Elizabeth Russum, Idaho’s former superintendent of public instruction, to oversee elementary-school education, particularly in rural areas.

Showalter, a widely respected educator, appears to have walked a tightrope during the campaign. Clearly “out of sympathy” with the governor’s policies, Showalter was viewed by Hartley as by far the lesser of two evils. He would benefit from the Hartley machine’s support, including allegations Preston branded dirty tricks.

A few weeks before the primary, rumors began circulating in solidly Republican Lewis County that Preston was in opposition to the junior college movement. Centralia College, founded in 1925, was the state’s second community college; others were being planned for Skagit Valley, Yakima and Grays Harbor. In a campaign stop at Centralia, Lewis County’s largest city, Preston emphasized she was an early proponent of community colleges. Her position was that before the movement gained more steam “a definite plan for financing these institutions should be legalized by the Legislature” because common school funds could not be diverted to support higher education. Preston also faced renewed criticism over alleged political bias in educational materials. During the 1924 campaign, opponents revealed she had received a total of \$150 over the course of six years for “incidental expenses” in connection with vetting a series of pamphlets about the state’s industries. A private-industry group supplied some of the information distributed in schools. Preston said it was only after the issue generated “political attacks” in the previous campaign that she learned some of the information was viewed by public power supporters as “thinly veiled propaganda for private ownership of public utilities.” Other pamphlets made the case for public power, she said, dismissing the furor as “ridiculous.”

The Seattle Daily Times, the state’s largest newspaper, endorsed Preston’s reelection in a front-page editorial:

Ever since Mrs. Preston took up the duties and heavy responsibilities of her department, she has been periodically opposed by men educators. They have sought to belittle her achievements and to decry her effectiveness, but without appreciable result. . . . The fine record made by Mrs. Preston is apparent to everybody. It would be a serious mistake to interrupt her work. Mrs. Preston deserves another term. She should be nominated and re-elected.

Nevertheless, public power advocates joined the Hartley/Showalter forces. Badly outspent and dogged by negative publicity, Preston was trounced by Showalter,

who captured 62 percent of the 1928 Primary Election vote. There being no other candidates, Showalter was all but elected then and there. The Showalter campaign spent \$3,812—80 percent of which was donated by a committee. Preston raised and spent \$720. Running on her record wasn't nearly enough.

A few weeks later in Washington, D.C., Preston addressed the Federal Trade Commission, which was conducting hearings on the power industry. Though it had “already exonerated her of any suggestion of impropriety,” she asked for the chance to testify about her conduct in connection with the pamphlets. She categorically denied accepting payments from power companies or public utilities. Published inferences that she had been summoned to appear before the commission were “contemptible, as has been the whole political campaign against her,” *The Times* said in another blast at Governor Hartley.

At the end of her testimony, there was a tidbit that might have been payback: Preston said the pamphlet had been approved by the president of one of the State Normal Schools. If that was a dig at Dr. Showalter, he had no comment. Nor did research turn up evidence it was he who reviewed the pamphlet.*



State Superintendent Noah D. Showalter. *Washington State Archives*

PRESTON MADE HER OFFICE AVAILABLE to her successor to expedite the transition. And on January 17, 1929, as Showalter took office, she turned in a final report on her 16 years as superintendent of public instruction. She pointed to higher teacher salaries; the landmark act mandating equal pay for male and female teachers; a teacher retirement fund; modernized curriculum; music and vocational programs. And, dear to her heart, dramatically better rural schools. Preston italicized the finding that Washington was now one of the top five states for teacher certification standards.

Incorrigible as ever, Governor Hartley ordered the state printer to omit from Preston's biennial report a four-page introduction that mentioned his vetoes of bills to improve the public schools, including the 1925 measure to assist handicapped students, and the 1927 funding equalization measure to aid needy rural districts.

* Governor Hartley was re-elected. But most of his other enemies were, too. When the Depression hit, Hartley took a broadax to the state budget. It was a singular “pleasure” for him to see the UW regents cut \$1 million from the budget, allegedly “without reducing in any way the efficiency of the institution.” Hartley's detractors cheered his defeat in the 1932 primary, one of the preliminary events to a national Democratic landslide that swept Herbert Hoover out and Franklin D. Roosevelt in. Superintendent Showalter was one of the few Republicans to survive the backlash. His only general election opponent in 1932 was the Farmer-Labor Party's Alfa S. Ventzke.

Newspapers around the state took note of Preston's official goodbye:

After having been identified with educational work for the last 36 years in Washington, as a classroom teacher, a county superintendent of schools and superintendent of public instruction, it would be impossible for me to discontinue my activities in the educational field. After taking a much-needed rest, I shall devote the greater part of my time to writing and speaking on educational subjects. My heart will ever be in the upbuilding of the State of Washington ...and I am deeply appreciative of the opportunity the people have given me for public service.



George Washington University

She was 55 years old. Education had been her passion from the day she was drafted at 14 to help teach the younger children of Otter Tail County.

As she left office, the Associated Press reported that the federal Department of Education once again rated Washington's schools best in the nation.

11: BELLE'S BALL

Always frugal, Preston had enough savings and retirement income to support herself and assist her mother. They moved to the summer cottage, “Memory Lodge,” purchased years earlier at Burton, a serene waterfront settlement on Vashon Island in Puget Sound. When Mrs. Corliss returned from an extended stay in California in 1929, her daughters had a Christmas surprise: They had added a new wing to make her more comfortable.

Preston joined the Daughters of the American Revolution and the local chapter of the League of Women Voters.* She spent a semester at Columbia University in 1930, and was in demand for several years as a speaker and consultant—addressing the American Association of University Women in New York and attending National Education Association conferences as a life-member past president. Increasingly, however, she stayed close to home, nursing her bedridden mother, who died at 80 during the winter of 1933.

Later that year, *The Seattle Times*' influential society columnist, Virginia Boren, spotted Preston in the crowd at a women's literary luncheon in the posh Georgian Room of the Olympic Hotel. Despite the hard times “there were many exquisite orchids quivering on luxurious furs,” Boren wrote, demonstrating her mastery of the genre. Publishing companies were once again buying books, another “good barometer of improved conditions” under Franklin D. Roosevelt. Preston was greeted warmly by old friends—Seattle club women who had rallied to her campaign in 1912. “She tells us there's a writer's club over on the island,” Boren wrote.

BY 1937, Preston was back in the classroom, teaching in Maple Valley in rural King County and often filling in as school principal. Her career had come full circle.

When her old friend, State Representative Belle Reeves, an ebullient Democrat from Chelan County, was appointed Secretary of State in 1938, Preston had her last major public hurrah. The first woman elected to statewide office in Washington was the toastmistress at a gala reception and banquet honoring the second. Nearly 500 men and women from all over the state converged on the Hotel Olympian.

Preston, looking well in a dark blue dress with a silver-sequined collar, was seated next to tuxedoed Governor Clarence Martin at the head table. The governor said

* Preston was the regent of the DAR's Elizabeth Bixby Chapter on Vashon Island from 1950-52. Her Patriot ancestor was Timothy Emerson of Methuen, Massachusetts, who served as a private in 1777-78.



Josephine Corliss Preston, at left with Governor Clarence Martin, as the toastmistress at a 1939 banquet honoring the new Secretary of State, Belle Reeves, right. *The Morning Olympian*

of Secretary Reeves, “No hall in the state is large enough to hold those who wish her well.” Bertha Knight Landes, the first female mayor of Seattle, was there, together with State Senators Pearl Wanamaker, Mary Farquharson, Lulu Haddon, Kathryn Malstrom, Nellie Tucker and an array of other elected officials, including the chief justice. Future congresswoman Julia Butler of Cathlamet, who would soon announce her candidacy for the State Legislature, was there, her mother Maude having been one of Preston’s deputies.

Preston’s “clever” remarks were noted in all the write-ups. Like a seasoned teacher managing a classroom, she kept the speeches

short. But she allowed herself a point of privilege: Glancing around the room, she observed that the women of Washington had come a long way.

It was a long way from Fergus Falls, too.

Josephine Corliss Preston died of cancer at 85 on December 10, 1958, in a Renton hospital. Undaunted by the diagnosis, she had attended the National Education Association convention in Cleveland a few months earlier. *The Seattle Times*, her champion 30 years earlier, relegated her obituary to Page 45. The story didn’t even note that her victory in 1912 was a first for a woman. Too many had forgotten she was unquestionably the architect of Washington’s modern school system and a formidable politician who believed that every child—and every vote—counted.*

John C. Hughes
Legacy Washington

* Preston bequeathed her assets to Carleton College in Minnesota, Whitman College and her nieces and nephews. She is buried at Mountain View Memorial Park in Lakewood, Washington.

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