TOLEDO TRENDSETTER:

PAULINE PERLMUTTER STEINEM

By Sandra Gurvis

Pauline Perlmutter Steinem and her famous granddaughter Gloria Steinem are linked by genetics and their dedication to women's causes. The ways in which they balanced their personal lives with the quest for equality, however, are a microcosm of how women's rights have evolved over the years. Gloria rose through the ranks, first as a writer then as a political influencer, marrying later in life at age 66. Husband, home, and children remained a priority for Pauline, who at 18 wed businessman Joseph Steinem, then lived in Toledo after emigrating from Germany in 1887. She had four sons, including Gloria's father Leo.

The first woman in Toledo to hold an elected position, to the school board in 1904, Pauline was, by all accounts, a "balabusta"—the Yiddish expression for the housewife who does it all—but her reach extended far beyond her front door. Raised in what Gloria describes as "the liberal spirit of Reform Judaism [that] helped her achieve a higher education than was usual" for the time, Pauline received a teacher's diploma and became a follower of Theosophy, a nonsectarian movement that emphasized social justice and moral accountability.

She set conditions for her marriage, during an era when women had practically no rights: "First, that he would send her home every few years to visit her family, and second, that he would sell the small brewery . . . the source of his livelihood," writes Gloria, who was five years old when her grandmother died. Along with being a vegetarian, Pauline "was so opposed to alcohol that only paste vanilla went into her cooking . . . even though she cooked meat for her sons and tolerated wine for others."

Pauline's first foray into her newly adopted city was with the Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society, where she quickly assumed a leadership role. She soon also became active in the community, particularly in Toledo Mayor Samuel Milton Jones's "Golden Rule Mother's Club." The mayor, an advocate of women's suffrage, suggested that Steinem run for the school board. Her creation of a successful vacation school as well as being the head of six women's organizations made her the natural choice among Toledo's large community of forward-thinking women, who since 1894 had been allowed to both vote and run for the school board.

Some of her adversaries were downright hostile, including police who demanded that women campaigners remove political banners from a local park. On Election Day, "To frighten women out of the 'unnatural' act of voting, gangs of men and boys surrounded the polls, and indulged in what we would now call sexual harassment," writes Gloria. But along with holding "pink teas" in the homes of supporters and other large community-wide rallies attended by ministers and other civic leaders prior to the election, Pauline made sure that "the ladies went to the booths in pairs, in platoons, and in flocks," Elaine Anderson writes in *Women in Ohio History*. She won in nearly all the precincts, garnering some 16,018 votes, with a campaign cost of only $126.02.

In 1908 she became president of the Ohio Woman Suffrage Association. In 1911 she campaigned throughout Ohio, garnering pro-suffrage delegates to include an amendment allowing women the right to vote in Ohio's 1912 constitutional convention. When that failed, she and thousands of other suffragists converged on Washington, D.C., the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration as president. As did granddaughter Gloria, who over 100 years later, spoke before hundreds of thousands of pink-hatted supporters at the Women's March on Washington on January 21, 2017.

By the 1920s, Pauline began to retire from public life. Two decades of nonstop, unpaid community work had taken their toll, no doubt exacerbated by the death of her son Clarence, who passed away during the influenza epidemic of 1918. After her husband died, she spent her $500 monthly pension rescuing relatives from Nazi Germany prior to WWII. No one should have been surprised. As Pauline herself put it, "It follows that men and women are the same in essence, differentiated only by the outer garments, the bodies they temporarily wear, and that therefore they have certain duties and certain responsibilities shared by all human beings alike."

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