

Belle Sherwin:

TEACHING WOMEN TO VOTE—AND LEAD

By Shirley Wajda

Belle Sherwin led by teaching, and by doing so she taught women how to vote.

The eldest child of one of the founders of the paint manufacturer Sherwin-Williams Company, Belle Sherwin (1868–1955) could have easily enjoyed a life of leisure. Instead, she applied her education and talents to winning the American women's right to vote and working for their full citizenship rights. She did this through her leadership in the National American Woman's Suffrage League, which became the

National League of Women Voters after the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920. Sherwin grew up among Cleveland's "Millionaires' Row" set, but according to her schoolfriend Theodate Pope she "loathed the luxurious and empty existence of the excessively rich." After graduating from Wellesley College in 1890, she taught history at various girls' schools then studied at Oxford University. In 1899 Sherwin returned to Cleveland and devoted herself to social reform.

The welfare of Cleveland's poor and working classes was Sherwin's passion. At Alta House, a social settlement in

Cleveland's Little Italy, she established the Prentice Club for girls and organized English lessons. Another social settlement, the Goodrich House, was the headquarters of the Consumer's League of Ohio, founded in 1900. Under Sherwin's leadership the League campaigned to improve the working conditions of women

Belle Sherwin
in 1924.

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Belle Sherwin at the Woman Suffrage headquarters in Cleveland, 1912. Sherwin chaired the Cleveland Suffrage Association along with creating the Women's City Club.

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and children. As an active board member of the Visiting Nurses' Association, she campaigned city government to invest in nursing training and public health instruction, so that the health of those working in and living near the city's smoke-belching factories might be preserved. During World War I she was appointed chair of the Ohio Council of National Defense, where she led 60 women's organizations dedicated to the war effort.

Sherwin actively entered the women's suffrage movement in 1916. When several Cleveland women opened a militant chapter of the National Association Against Woman Suffrage, she helped create the Women's City Club as a forum for reasonable debate of civic issues. Along with her renowned organizing skills, Sherwin was a politically astute conciliator. That she could serve as president of the Women's City Club at the same time she chaired the Cleveland Suffrage Association testifies to her acumen.

In 1921 Sherwin served as vice-president of the National League of Women Voters and was elected as its president in 1924. She moved to Washington, D.C., to manage her many responsibilities. Her leadership style—what she called the “art of getting things done”—provided the blueprint for the League's organization and activities, including the educational programs and materials the League produced—from citizenship classes to the Voters Campaign Information Service, a weekly radio program featuring Sherwin's voice. She considered the League a constantly evolving university, an organization in which members were both students and teachers shaping the curriculum.

Called “Washington's wisest woman” when she stepped down from the League's presidency in 1934, Sherwin had not just taught American women how to vote. She had taught them how to lead. ♥