As we go about our daily lives, not many of us think about the rights and privileges that we enjoy as American women of the 21st century. Legal rights did not exist for women when the colonists first came over from European countries; in fact, at that time, women existed in a condition referred to as "civil death." By July 1848, when the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York (today the home of the National Women's Hall of Fame), women could not vote, married women could not own property, women didn't have access to education, and women could not be awarded custody of their children in the case of a divorce. These issues were called "grievances" (and with other concerns) were spelled out in the document delivered at that convention, The Declaration of Sentiments.

Many women fought long and hard to win these rights. Arguably, the three most important rights that women in the U.S. have today are the right to vote, the right to own property, and the right to control our own reproduction. In this month's column, we profile three women whose legacies endure: lecturer **Ernestine Rose**, suffragist **Carrie Chapman Catt**, and reproductive rights activist **Margaret Sanger**.

An emigrant from a Russian-controlled area of Poland, reformer and feminist **Ernestine Rose** began work on legislation granting married women property rights in 1840 in New York State. Working with Pauline Wright (later Davis) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, she circulated petitions and spoke for the bill before a legislative committee in Albany, New York. The bill did not pass both houses until 1848, but even then, did not include some of the desired provisions. These took until 1860 to achieve.

For over twenty years, she campaigned tirelessly for women's rights. This was at a

Ernestine Rose

time when women did not speak out in public. Some referred to this behavior as scandalous and there were attempts made to stop her fiery speeches. Between 1850 and 1870, she lectured in more than twenty states, addressed legislative bodies, and attended most national and state women's rights conventions. In 1850, she introduced a resolution at the first national women's rights convention in Worcester, Massachusetts calling for "political, legal, and social equality with man." In 1854, she and Susan B. Anthony spent the spring speaking all around the Washington, D.C. area for the cause of women's rights. Rose said she was a rebel from age five; she refused to accept the inferiority of women.

In 1900, when **Carrie Chapman Catt** became the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, the fight for women's right to vote had already been going on for 52 years! Although she resigned from the presidency in 1904 to care for her ill husband, by late 1915, she was again its president. She conceived the strategy called the "Winning Plan"; this opened a massive drive for a constitutional amendment to provide national women's suffrage, which was helped out immensely by a $1 million bequest. In 1919, both Houses of Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment, which still needed to be ratified.

In 1920, Tennessee became the final state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment – by one vote! The swing vote came from Republican Harry Burn, who was 24 years old. In his breast pocket, he carried a letter from his mother which read in part, Hurray and vote for Suffrage and don't keep them in doubt. I noticed Chandlers' speech, it was very bitter. I've been waiting to see how you stood but have not seen anything yet…. Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt with her "Rats." Is she the one that put rat in ratification, Ha! After a 72-year fight, women finally had won the right to vote.

Carrie Chapman Catt

While American women achieved the right

to vote in 1920, their citizenship was still vested in a father or husband until 1934. Up until then, a woman would lose her citizenship if she married a man from another country. It seems surprising now to know that until what is very recently in our country's history, gender could preclude U.S. citizenship. If a woman had children in a foreign country with a non-American husband, her children would not be U.S. citizens because a woman could not transfer her citizenship to her children.

Another woman whose legacy is significant is **Margaret Sanger**. In 1800, the U.S. had the highest birthrate in the world: 7.04 per woman. In 1916, when Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in New York City, women were still dealing with unwanted, unplanned births and many were dying from illegal and self-induced abortions.

Sanger worked as a nurse on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. As she responded to her patients' requests for information about venereal disease, birth control, and sex education, she found herself thwarted by the Comstock Act. This law deemed materials about contraception and venereal disease immoral. It prevented mailing such materials and frequently prevented them from printing. Sanger set out to remove the stigma of obscenity from contraception and to establish a nationwide system of advice centers where women could get reliable information about birth control.

Her New York clinic served 468 women in ten days before it was shut down by the police, who arrested her. Her trial and imprisonment made her a national figure. She then determined that clinics could be opened with a doctor on staff; this removed the legal prohibitions on dispensing medical advice. She also led the fight to defeat the Comstock Act and was successful in 1936. That made possible the 1937 recognition by the American Medical Association of contraception as a legitimate medical service. Today, the organization that she founded has evolved into Planned Parenthood.

The legacy of these women's rights activists is visible daily. As you think about the battles these women fought and the rights that we have today because of these women, ask yourself: What will your legacy be?

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