



“A parade of women promoting women’s suffrage on Broadway and 4th Street, looking north, sometime before 1920.” Or already franchised women engaged in political activism?

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THE HISTORIAN'S EYE

This year women across the United States have celebrated the ratification on August 26, 1920, of the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the right to vote. California women had enjoyed that right since 1911. The first election in which Los Angeles women could exercise this right was a mayoral election on December 5, 1911, when they turned out in huge numbers.

The acquisition of the Security Pacific National Bank collection of historical photos of Southern California anchored the formation of the Los Angeles Public Library's magnificent historical photograph holdings. But the bank's images were undated and their subject descriptions scanty. The first mystery about this photograph is its description of a suffragist event; the second is the date.

Certainly, the pictured parade saw a large number of women marchers wearing white and passing the Security National Bank then located on the northeast corner of Broadway and Fourth streets in Los Angeles. The date has to be later than February 14, 1912, when Arizona was admitted to the union as the forty-eighth state as the flag in the image has six even rows of stars. It has to be between mid-spring and mid-fall from the straw hats worn by male spectators. That would rule out a Suffragist get-out-the-vote demonstration just before a December election.

Newspaper accounts of Los Angeles parades featuring contingents of marching women find a small-scale march of Suffragettes in September 1911 en route to a meeting at Temple Auditorium (not on Broadway), and parades in September 1912 and June 1913 with routes that did not pass Broadway and Fourth. An April 10, 1917, "Great Parade for Red Cross," with an undefined route, ended at Central Park (today's Pershing Square). These women wore the white uniforms of Red Cross nurses, but they were led by a woman on horseback represented as the "Spirit of Mercy," not by flag-bearing men. And these women wore "headdresses that can be made in 5 minutes," not the small formed hats in our photo. Another Red Cross parade on May 18, 1918, again with an unspecified route, featured prominent Red Cross symbols and was led by a smaller phalanx of women marchers.

So, who were the women in the photograph and what was their cause? On June 14, 1916, a mighty Preparedness Day parade marched southward on Broadway from First to Twelfth. The *Los Angeles Times* estimated that 10,000 women were among the 69,000 participants and that the number of spectators approached 200,000. (The numbers were likely stretched for this *Times*-supported cause.) The *Times* photograph taken from about Third and Broadway shows the same bunting on the buildings, apparently the same flag bearers leading the women, with the same variety of skirt lengths and the same small hats. The accompanying articles identified the majority as “attired in Red Cross nurse costumes,” joined by “shop girls, stenographers, business and professional women, and wives of veterans and service men” and described the crowd’s response:

As fair faces became distinguished in the great blur of white, and daintily-shod feet twinkled in and out of immaculate skirts, patriotism reached a climax and applause rippled and spread. Men waved their hats and women their handkerchiefs.

These 1916 women were not merely fair faces with dainty feet. They were women demonstrating their political activism in favor of a preparedness position that President Wilson and Congress were slow to endorse during the First World War, then in its second year. The U.S. finally entered the war in April 1917, under-prepared.