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**THE VOTE AND LONE STAR WOMEN: MINNIE FISHER CUNNINGHAM  
AND THE TEXAS EQUAL SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION**

by John Carroll Eudy

In 1900 the Galveston hurricane devastated the city and provided the impulse for municipal government improvement which soon swept the nation in the form of the city commission. Minnie Fisher Cunningham began her career of political reform in the aftermath of that storm as an advocate of modern health and sanitary facilities for the city. For the next fifty years the lady from East Texas spared little in her quest for change.

Born and raised in New Waverly, Walker County, Minnie Fisher's mother Sallie Abercrombie Fisher educated her daughter at home. Mrs. Cunningham's father, Captain Horatio White Fisher, a one-time Confederate Cavalry officer and a member of the Texas Legislature, gave his daughter her decisiveness and her interest in politics.<sup>1</sup> Captain Fisher, as Mrs. Cunningham's unpublished biography of her mother relates, was building a home for his bride-to-be in 1860 when he learned that Fort Sumter had been fired upon. Dropping his tools about him and postponing his marriage, Captain Fisher quickly recruited the carpenters in his employ and led them off to fight for the Confederacy.<sup>2</sup> His daughter exhibited a similar charisma and organizational ability as she quickly won a state-wide reputation as a resourceful reformer.

Minnie Fish, as her friends called her, married Beverly Jean Cunningham in 1902. Theirs was a childless marriage, and to occupy her time Mrs. Cunningham became involved in several civic clubs, the most important of which was the Galveston Equal Suffrage Association. In 1910 Mrs. Cunningham was elected President of the Galveston organization and had been called upon by Miss Annette Finnigan, President of the Texas Equal Suffrage Association, to tour the state in a speaking campaign for the cause of women's suffrage.<sup>3</sup> Easily recognized by her red hair which turned to a peppery gray over the years, Minnie Fish combined her soft beauty with hardnosed politics to win statewide attention as an important suffragist. One admirer remembered that as she campaigned "she looked like a wren. [but] she behaved like a hawk."<sup>4</sup>

Impressed by Minnie Fish's vigor and determination, Miss Finnigan, whose own health was failing, recommended in 1915 that Mrs. Cunningham become President of the Texas Equal Suffrage Association. Mrs. Cunningham served as the chief executive of the state organization for four terms, during which time she developed a lifelong friendship with Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt, President of the National American Suffrage Association.<sup>5</sup> Their letters reflect a depth of political insight which gave them both courage to pursue women's suffrage in the state and national legislatures.<sup>6</sup> Unlike other groups which sought the vote for women, the organizations directed by Mrs. Catt and Mrs. Cunningham rejected bizarre and unorthodox methods of gaining attention for the cause of suffrage. They chose to work within the bounds of established political practices to win their goals of state and national suffrage.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Cunningham's first campaign to win the vote for Texas women came in

1915, when, as the chairman of the state congressional committee, she attempted to influence the state legislators to vote for an equal suffrage amendment to the Texas Constitution.<sup>8</sup> Aided by Representative Charles Metcalf who carried the suffrage fight to the floor of the House of Representatives, the Texas Equal Suffrage Association fought a losing battle. The issue came within three votes of obtaining the necessary two-thirds majority to amend the constitution.<sup>9</sup> This narrow defeat encouraged the members of the association to re-group and continue the fight for equal suffrage. Mrs. Cunningham had learned much in the 1915 struggle as she walked the halls of the capitol seeking votes for her suffrage measure. Preparing for the future, Mrs. Cunningham began an indexed card file on the legislators, noting those who favored women's suffrage and devising ways by which she could influence those who opposed the issue.<sup>10</sup>

Minnie Fish, while waiting for a more receptive legislature, led the members of the Texas Equal Suffrage Association into other fields of reform. As she reported to Mrs. Catt in an annual report for 1917, she led the fight to clean up the immoral conditions around the military training camps located in Texas. Calling a meeting of interested women for June 5, 1917, in San Antonio, Mrs. Cunningham described the dangers of the gambling, prostitution, and drunkenness which threatened the young men who were given military training in the state. From this gathering emerged the Texas Woman's Anti-Vice Committee led by Mrs. Ella Pomeroy, a friend of Mrs. Cunningham and a district chairman of the suffrage association.<sup>11</sup> A 1918 war department document issued by the Commission on Training Camp Activities entitled "Section on Women and Girls" details the success of the white zone campaign in Texas.<sup>12</sup> The report described the immediate effect the Anti-Vice committees had in Houston, El Paso, Fort Worth, and San Antonio as they patrolled the red light districts and the strings of road houses on the outskirts of these cities, constantly bringing to the attention of lax city officials the glaring discrepancies between city ordinances and the enforcement of those ordinances.

The Texas Equal Suffrage Association emerged from the White Zone Campaign with many new allies won over from organizations like the Federated Women's Clubs of Texas who had other major aims, but agreed to support the fight for women's suffrage. Mrs. Cunningham would need all of the support she garnered in the White Zone Campaign to win a crucial contest with suffrage's most adamant critic—Governor James Ferguson. Ferguson had publicly expressed his views on woman suffrage many times and when the impeachment proceedings against him arose in the House in 1917, Mrs. Cunningham hurried to Austin to join in the battle to drum him out of office. Mrs. Cunningham described the effect the Texas Equal Suffrage Association had on the effort to impeach Ferguson: "We came into the campaign just at the time when everybody was worn to a frazzle and feeling discouraged and beaten; and our interest and enthusiasm . . . put new life and vigor into the men who were working."<sup>13</sup>

The officers of the national suffrage committee anxiously awaited word that one of Texas' greatest enemies of suffrage had been impeached. Mrs. Cunningham so notified them on September 26, 1917, and elatedly informed Mrs. Catt that, "it has been a full six weeks since I have found any man with the temerity to look us in the eye and say he opposed women's voting in the face of the outrageous condition that has proven to prevail in our state government."<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Catt replied that the people of Texas had made the proper choice between the forces of "good government and the forces of crooked politics."<sup>15</sup> Mrs.

Cunningham agreed, but because much of the session of 1917 had been consumed with the impeachment proceedings, she advised Mrs. Catt that there was little hope of introducing suffrage legislation that year.

Ferguson blamed much of his political misery on the suffragists and in his paper the *Ferguson Forum* he attempted to torpedo the activities of the Texas Equal Suffrage Association. His influence, even though he was out of office, upset many Texas women who feared that he might regain the governor's office. Mrs. Catt assured these women that "the Ferguson Forum is a boomerang which can only strike a deadly blow at itself."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Mrs. Catt queried Mrs. Cunningham as to the legal particulars of the impeachment for she wished, if possible, to apply the process which unseated Ferguson in other states dominated by men reluctant to grant suffrage.

Nowhere in the nation were men more reluctant to grant suffrage to women as in the Deep South, and in the fight to create suffrage societies in that region of the country, Mrs. Catt called upon Mrs. Cunningham. Minnie Fish had a "hereditary" interest in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina—being a descendent of natives of those states.<sup>18</sup> The national organization deemed Mrs. Cunningham "The one to deal with the South. . . ." and sent her on speaking tours into the southern states.<sup>19</sup>

Minnie Fish approached the 1917 session of the Texas legislature determined to extract from it the most pragmatic franchise possible. She informed Mrs. Catt of her strategy: "In as-much-as our primary is the real election in Texas this is the big great thing we *can* get by legislative enactment. . . ."<sup>20</sup> Mrs. Cunningham realized after canvassing political opinion that she did not have enough "clout" to force passage of a proposed state constitutional amendment as had been proposed in 1915, but cleverly used the amendment in an educational campaign to poll the legislators and thereby discern their commitment to suffrage.<sup>21</sup> Minnie Fish revealed her plans to Mrs. Catt, outlining the use which she had made of the constitutional amendment, explaining, "it gave us a talking point without disclosing our real plans. . . ."<sup>22</sup>

The organized assault directed by Mrs. Cunningham and carried out by her associates on the legislators assembled for the 1917 session could be a case study of successful lobbying. A suffrage headquarters was opened on the main street of Austin near the capitol, and a luncheon was given in the city's largest hotel where the suffragists held a mock legislative conference, "in which the Suffrage Bill came up for the third reading and debate,— those against taking off [on] the style of our leading 'Antis' in the state."<sup>23</sup> Only the impeachment of Governor Ferguson could take precedent over the women's quest for suffrage. And all through the campaign to impeach Ferguson and afterwards when William P. Hobby had succeeded Ferguson to the office of governor, Mrs. Cunningham kept the pressure on both the legislators and Hobby. In order to force the new governor into calling a special session of the legislature, Minnie Fish deviously suggested that Mrs. Catt, "get a letter to him [Hobby] from President Wilson . . . It need *not* be a public letter, only if *we* may know it has been sent."<sup>24</sup>

For numerous reasons, and no doubt the suffrage question was one of them, Governor Hobby called a special session in 1918. In that year Lone Star women won the right to vote in Texas' primary elections. The bill passed the House by 84 to 34 and the Senate by 18 to 4. Mrs. Cunningham was thrilled to inform Mrs. Catt of the drama of the final vote and described the circumstances: "we rose to leave the gallery of the House . . . the men saw us . . . and gave us a perfect

ovation, cheering for some minutes . . . It was a surprising and greatly appreciated tribute to the work that the women have been doing."<sup>25</sup> Other legislation inspired by Mrs. Cunningham and her ladies also became law. The age of protection for young women was raised to eighteen, a statutory prohibition law, and zone laws were passed to protect the young men in Texas military camps, and a literacy test for all voters participating in primary elections was passed.<sup>26</sup>

The outstanding work Mrs. Cunningham had done in the fight for primary suffrage in Texas impressed the officers of the National American Suffrage Association. Mrs. Catt informed Mrs. Maude Wood Park, chairman of the Congressional Committee, that Minnie Fish "has a good story to tell of woman suffrage in operation . . ."<sup>27</sup> Together they determined that if Mrs. Cunningham would come to Washington, they would invite her to join the national organization as secretary to the Congressional Committee—a position which would place Mrs. Cunningham at the nexus of suffrage work when the Federal Amendment was introduced to the Congress of the United States.<sup>28</sup>

The only difficulty in the plan to invite Mrs. Cunningham to join Mrs. Park and Mrs. Catt was the inexperience of Mrs. Cunningham's lieutenants who would have to shepherd the federal amendment through the Texas legislature. Mrs. Cunningham optimistically wrote to Mrs. Finnigan, who had retired to New York, that "Texas would ratify without any trouble."<sup>29</sup> But, unfortunately, as Mrs. Catt predicted, the Texas workers made mistakes. Those Texas women, she stated, "started in on their campaign [for the federal amendment] so complacently . . . because they thought they knew so much more than anybody else."<sup>30</sup> Needless to say, they did not. Mrs. Cunningham was not discouraged, however, by the mistakes of her followers, for she had faith that they would succeed. She expressed the opinion that "it is a very good thing, that these women should get a bit of training in 'going it alone' while the men are still thinking that I am in charge and able to pounce upon them at any minute."<sup>31</sup> Yet up to the passage of the federal amendment Mrs. Cunningham found it necessary to divide her energies between her Washington duties and Texas. In 1919 she watched while the women she had trained reaped the publicity and thanks for the entire battle of suffrage in Texas when they had actually only fought in the final skirmishes.

Mrs. Cunningham was not dismayed by the turn of events which had taken her to Washington and away from the final victory of the Texas Equal Suffrage Association, for the victory had been won because of her hard work, sound advice, and determination. But in recounting the history of the Texas suffrage movement, she has appeared in a diminished role because of her dual state and national effort to win the suffrage battle. Other reasons for Mrs. Cunningham's modest appearance in the history of the Texas suffrage story concerns her personal wish to remain unrecognized. As she explained to Mrs. Jane Y. McCallum, the official historian of the Texas movement, she did not want to be memorialized because "it sounds like I am through when I think I am only beginning."<sup>32</sup> In addition, Mrs. Cunningham's dwindling financial resources and a troubled marriage necessitated that she devote her time, for awhile, to private matters.<sup>33</sup> Minnie Fish's active participation in Democratic politics, the New Deal, and liberal causes in Texas have also overshadowed her suffrage activities. Indeed, when the women of Texas and the United States won enfranchisement, Mrs. Cunningham had just begun her long fight for political reform.

Returning to Washington in 1920, she assumed the duties of executive secretary and organizer of the National League of Women Voters.<sup>34</sup> Three years later she was appointed the organization's vice-chairman of the "get-out-the-vote" committee. Due in no small part to her, women voted in large numbers in the first presidential election open to them by federal amendment.<sup>35</sup>

The Democratic Party realized that women would play an increasingly viable role in the nation's political life and what better person to lead women into the Democratic Party than Mrs. Cunningham. She was asked to manage the Women's National Democratic Club in 1923 and until 1927 conducted political schools for the nation's women in Washington.

Upon the death of her husband of 25 years in 1927, a saddened Minnie Fish returned to Texas. Encouraged by her friends to get out and make use of her invaluable political experience, Mrs. Cunningham became in 1928 the first woman to seek a senatorial seat from Texas. Running in the primaries against the popular and colorful Tom Connally, Minnie Fish stumped the state in a second-hand open touring car from which she boldly and vigorously supported prohibition, tariff reform, farm relief, tax reduction, and an adequate flood-control program. Defeated in a landslide vote for Connally, Minnie Fish had the satisfaction of directing the campaign to important issues which might have been otherwise ignored.<sup>36</sup>

Family responsibilities dictated that Minnie Fish seek employment after the race, and she joined the Agricultural Extension Service at Texas A & M College where she remained until 1939. Mrs. Cunningham had no children of her own, but by her account acquired over 1,000 grandchildren to compensate for her childless marriage. College regulations prohibited the cadets from inviting dates to the campus unless the young ladies could be properly chaperoned by an approved hostess. Minnie Fish became surrogate mother to hundreds of young girls who traveled to A & M to visit their college beaux. As Mrs. Cunningham later recalled, her house took on the appearance of a barracks with cots stacked in every available space. Long after her departure from the school, and particularly during World War II, Minnie Fish corresponded with her "sons," encouraging them to always do the best with their lives and talents.

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and other Washington friends welcomed Minnie Fish to Washington in 1939 where she served in the Woman's Division of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Returning to Texas in 1943 she quickly became embroiled in state politics by attempting to draft A. Frank Dobie, a professor at the University of Texas and a leading state liberal, for governor. When he failed to answer the draft, Minnie Fish declared for the office. "If Dobie runs," she publicly vowed, "I am supporting him, if he does not run I am running myself." True to her pledge and determined that Stevenson should not win by default, Minnie Fish entered what was to be her last contest for public office, only to lose again by an overwhelming margin, 696,586 to 48,039.<sup>37</sup>

Minnie Fish returned to her home, Fisher Farms in New Waverly, but from there she sallied out to attack the conservative political leaders who dominated Texas politics in the 1950s. Her pungent criticism led many to comment that the best man in Texas politics was a woman. She supported Adlai Stevenson in the presidential campaign of 1952 as well as the liberal Democrat, Senator Ralph Yarborough.<sup>38</sup>

Four years before her death in 1964, her unrelenting faith in liberal causes led her to establish a Kennedy-Johnson campaign headquarters in New Waverly

in order to bring speakers from over the state to speak in behalf of the national ticket. President-elect John F. Kennedy acknowledged his debt to the aging crusader and in a personal note of thanks added, "We now have the opportunity of continuing to work together for our country's welfare during the next four years."<sup>39</sup>

Minnie Fisher Cunningham's lifelong dedication to reform and the advancement of what she deemed "right principles" placed a heavy burden not only upon her time and energy, but also upon her financial well-being. In order to pay for her political activity, she found it necessary to sell parts of Fisher Farms until it eventually dwindled away from an original 1,200 to less than 500 acres. During her last years, moreover, visitors found her cooking over an open fire or hauling well water to the house because she could not afford the luxuries of modern plumbing and appliances.<sup>40</sup> A group of friends, learning of her plight, arranged for her home to be furnished with the necessary comforts, but the spirit which had sustained her during better days refused to be blighted by the poverty of her old age.<sup>41</sup> Not long before her death, a group came to Minnie Fish to request her aid in a fight for legislative reform. After hearing their request, she told them she must reply like the old farmer whom her father once asked to support a school in New Waverly. "If you'll take corn, I'm in." Her father took the corn—"what," asked Minnie Fish, "do I have equivalent to corn that you can use?"<sup>42</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Manuscript of the "Life of Sallie Abercrombie Fisher" written by her daughter Minnie Fisher Cunningham, undated, Minnie Fisher Cunningham Papers (Private Collection of Mrs. Elizabeth Hill McCoy of New Waverly, Texas). Hereafter cited as Cunningham Papers, McCoy Collection. Copies of the McCoy Collection were given to the author in 1970.

<sup>2</sup>"Life of Sallie Abercrombie Fisher," Cunningham Papers, McCoy Collection.

<sup>3</sup>"Program and minutes of the 12th Anniversary of the passage of the Texas Suffrage Amendment, March 26, 1930," Cunningham Papers, McCoy Collection.

<sup>4</sup>Washington, *Evening Star*, December 11, 1964.

<sup>5</sup>The Catt-Cunningham correspondence is found in three major collections: the Minnie Fisher Cunningham Papers at the University of Houston, the Carrie Chapman Catt Papers at the Library of Congress, and the Maude Wood Park Papers at Ratcliff College.

<sup>6</sup>The Catt-Correspondence covers a thirty year period.

<sup>7</sup>The National Women's Party and the Congressional Union were both criticized in the Catt-Cunningham correspondence.

<sup>8</sup>"Program and minutes of the 12th Anniversary." Cunningham Papers, McCoy Collection.

<sup>9</sup>Typescript of Alexander Caswell Ellis' participation in the Texas Suffrage fight by Mrs. Minnie Fisher Cunningham, 1953. Cunningham Papers. McCoy Collection.

<sup>10</sup>Partial copy of the indexed card file in the Minnie Fisher Cunningham Papers (University of Houston Library, Houston). Hereafter cited as Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>11</sup>"Report of the Texas Woman's Anti-Vice Committee, June 20, 1917," Mrs. Percy W. Pennybacker Papers (University of Texas Library, Austin). Hereafter cited as Pennybacker Papers, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>12</sup>"Section on Women and Girls," War Department Commission on Training Camp Activities: A Summary of Reports of the Field Staff, 1918. Pennybacker Papers, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>13</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Carrie Chapman Catt, undated, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>14</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Carrie Chapman Catt, September 26, 1917, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>15</sup>Carrie Chapman Catt to Minnie Fisher Cunningham, May 12, 1919, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>16</sup>Carrie Chapman Catt to Mrs. J. J. Hardin, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>17</sup>Carrie Chapman Catt to Minnie Fisher Cunningham, October, 1919, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>18</sup>Carrie Chapman Catt to Minnie Fisher Cunningham, October 6, 1919, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>19</sup>Carrie Chapman Catt to Minnie Fisher Cunningham, July 10, 1919, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>20</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Carrie Chapman Catt, February 12, 1917, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>21</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Carrie Chapman Catt, February 12, 1917, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>22</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Carrie Chapman Catt, February 12, 1917, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>23</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Carrie Chapman Catt, April 9, 1917, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>24</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Carrie Chapman Catt, January 25, 1918, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>25</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Carrie Chapman Catt, March 25, 1918, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>26</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Carrie Chapman Catt, March 25, 1918, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>27</sup>Carrie Chapman Catt to Maude Wood Park, 1918, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, Box 7, (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress). Hereafter cited as Catt Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>28</sup>Carrie Chapman Catt to Maude Wood Park, August 10, 1943, Catt Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>29</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Miss Annette Finnigan, December 12, 1918, Cunningham Papers, Box 22, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>30</sup>Carrie Chapman Catt to Maude Wood Park, March 1, 1919, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, Box 7, Catt Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>31</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Carrie Chapman Catt, January 4, 1919, Cunningham Papers, Box 22, Cunningham Papers, Houston.

<sup>32</sup>"Program and minutes of the 12th Anniversary," Cunningham Papers, McCoy Collection.

<sup>33</sup>Interview with Mrs. Elizabeth Hill McCoy, January 18, 1972.

<sup>34</sup>"Memorial Tribute to Mrs. Minnie Fisher Cunningham A Great American, December 9, 1964," Cunningham Papers, McCoy Collection.

<sup>35</sup>"Vita note" prepared by Mrs. Cunningham while editor of the Texas Extension Service Farm News, undated, Cunningham Papers, McCoy Collection.

<sup>36</sup>*Washington Post*, February 9, 1928; Campaign Platform, undated, Pennybacker Papers, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>37</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to J. Frank Dobie, April 4, 1944; Minnie Fisher Cunningham to George A. Butler, Chairman of the Texas State Democratic Executive Committee, Cunningham Papers, McCoy Collection; Official Vote Tabulation Certificate, July 22, 1944, Pennybacker Papers, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>38</sup>"Synopsis of the Life of Minnie Fisher Cunningham of Fisher Farms, New Waverly, Texas, Cattle Brand FF for Fisher Farms," Cunningham Papers, McCoy Collection.

<sup>39</sup>John F. Kennedy to Minnie Fisher Cunningham, January 19, 1961, Cunningham Papers, McCoy Collection.

<sup>40</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to Mrs. Mary H. Ellis, January 23, 1957, Pennybacker Papers, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>41</sup>Mrs. Cunningham established a roadside garden stand to supplement her earnings from her pecan orchards and tended a small herd of cattle without assistance until she could no longer walk.

<sup>42</sup>Minnie Fisher Cunningham to the Texas Democratic Woman's State Committee, March 4, 1958, Cunningham Papers, McCoy Collection.