

Would You Have Been a 'Suffragette?'

When you think of “suffragettes,” what comes to mind? The musical geek in me immediately starts humming along with Mrs. Banks from the classic movie *Mary Poppins* as she marches and sings:

“Cast off the shackles of yesterday! Shoulder to shoulder into the fray! Our daughters’ daughters will adore us, and they’ll sing in grateful chorus: ‘Well done! Well done, sister suffragettes!’”

It’s hard to believe it’s been only 95 years since American women won the right to vote. My grandmother was born in 1918, two years before American women were first allowed to vote.

We lost my sweet grandmother recently, at the age of 97. As I was looking through old family photos, wishing we hadn’t lost that “greatest generation” wisdom and insight she brought to our family, I noticed something.

Among the photos was a four-generation picture of me as a baby, with my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. It hit me that these were the only female members of my family who had been able to take part in an American election.

Before my great-grandmother, no woman in my family ever had the chance to vote. And my family settled in William Penn’s Quaker colony in 1684. Wow.

The story of the women’s suffrage movement in Great Britain is told in the movie *Suffragette*, which opened in U.S. theaters Oct. 23. A *New York Times* review notes: “The specific battle it chronicles—for the right of women to vote—was won, in Britain and the United States, a long time ago.”

But was it really a long time ago? I guess that's a matter of opinion. The United States is only 239 years old. That means that for 144 of those years, women did not have the right to vote in America. We've come a long way, but in a short amount of time.

My grandmother taught me a lot of lessons, but one that stands out more than others is: "Always be thankful for what you have. Don't take anything or anyone for granted."

The movie *Suffragette* gives us a great reminder of that lesson. With beautiful cinematography and meticulous attention to documented facts, *Suffragette* tells a story that reaches across generations, time periods, and social classes. It speaks to the age-old problem of challenging the limits and dictates of the status quo in pursuit of God-given liberties.

From the authentic, antique costumes and sets to the accuracy of the chain of historic events, director Sarah Gavron and writer Abi Morgan bring the struggles of hardworking British women in the early 1900s to our eyes in this blunt yet accurate portrayal. They show the bitter reality of what our great-grandparents faced, from working conditions to societal expectations to political debates.

In an interview with me for *The Daily Signal*, Gavron notes that women are taking their mothers, sisters, daughters, and nieces to see the film. Multiple generations are watching it together, and the reactions have been exactly what the director's team had hoped.

Gavron adds:

"We're hearing women say, 'I will never forget to vote again. After seeing how much those women suffered and endured, it would be wrong not to exercise my right to vote.'"

My grandmother's lesson—"Be thankful for what you have"—echoes again in my mind. Yet the movie does much more. It reminds us

that winning the right to vote was just the beginning.

The inspiration and initial idea for the film came to Gavron about 10 years ago. She lived with the leaders of the suffragist movement in books and documents for six years of preparation, yet chose as the heroine of her story a representative of the everyday working woman who made sacrifices far greater than many who led the movement.

Gavron and Morgan select a poor laundry worker, a shop keeper, and others who are just trying to survive in a hostile, limiting society. The characters are moved to more action by the inspiring words and personal sacrifices of Emmeline Pankhurst (Meryl Streep), the historic suffrage leader.

Encouragement comes from such leaders of the movement, but *Suffragette* focuses on the foot soldiers—those whose names were never recorded, but sacrificed just as much to ensure their daughters and descendants someday would have a voice in their government.

Women make up a huge percentage of the production team, eager to be a part of the historic project.

Streep wore the shoes from her popular 1985 film, *Out of Africa*. Carrey Mulligan gives a stirring lead performance as laundry worker Maud. Helena Bonham Carter (great-granddaughter of Prime Minister H.H. Asquith, who opposed the suffragists) made personal amends on set with Helen Pankhurst, great-granddaughter of the real Emmeline Pankhurst.

Gavron says she is open to doing a film about the American suffragists. The production team, she says, wants viewers to remember the history.

“But,” Gavron adds, “there’s still much to address today. It’s not limited to any time period. We can’t give up.”

Much like the purposefully unfinished Women’s Suffrage

Memorial in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol, *Suffragette* leaves a bittersweet ending for us to ponder. It's a reminder that each generation has its challenges, and the work of safeguarding liberty is never done.

Today, women have a voice in every level of government. But what have we done with the opportunity given to us through so much sacrifice and struggle? Do we still have the spirit of the suffragettes? Would we have joined them in their sacrifice? Are we willing to be stepping stones for our daughters and granddaughters?

May we be worthy of their sacrifice and seek to use our liberty to make a difference for the next generation.