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FROM RED DIRT TO RED STATE:

OKLAHOMA AND THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT, 1972-1982

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FROM RED DIRT TO RED STATE:
OKLAHOMA AND THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT, 1972-1982

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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Abstract

This thesis details the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) debate in Oklahoma from 1972 to 1982. It is a multifaceted story of how both local and national factors, race, religion, family ties, gender norms, politics, and feminism played out in a state bombarded by the Christian Right in the mid and late 1970s. Most importantly, the fight to ratify the ERA in the state was about the politics of perception. Oklahoma feminists were not just debating the ERA, they were fighting to define womanhood and the rights that should go along with it. The end of the ERA in 1982 marked the political transformation of Oklahoma from a blue state to one of overwhelmingly conservative and red for the first time in the state's history.

Chapter One: Introduction

Pioneer Women and Politics

Section 1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

Section 3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.

-Full text of the Equal Rights
Amendment

In 2008, something profound happened in Oklahoma. For the first time since Richard Nixon's victory in 1972, a Republican nominee for president, John McCain, had won all seventy-seven counties. Being the only state in the 2008 election to accomplish such a feat, many news outlets labeled Oklahoma the reddest state in the country.

Although outsiders made a small fuss about the all-red delegates, many Oklahoma natives did not find this turnout surprising. University of Oklahoma political science professor Keith Gaddie did not seem too surprised either when asked to comment on the event by *The Economist*. He stated, "Oklahoman conservatism is now a

mixture of nativism, nationalism and evangelicalism.”¹ In the 2012 presidential election, Oklahoma would again go all red.² A few journalists, like Aaron Blake of the *Washington Post*, blamed the eight-year Republican stronghold on a disdain for President Barack Obama rather than an overly conservative ideology in the area.³ This interpretation, however, ignored the last forty years of Oklahoma history. A conservative attitude rooted in Christian values and state’s rights had been growing in the Oklahoma for decades. Those unfamiliar with the state before the 1970s would be surprised to learn that the Oklahoma had once been a Democratic stronghold all the way back to its territorial days in the 1890s.

The political events in 2008 and 2012 beg the question: How did Oklahoma go from a moderate blue to an all-red state? To answer that question, we must return to the 1970s; a pivotal decade for the state and the nation. The debate over the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), from 1972 to 1982, I argue, was a turning point in Oklahoma’s political history. The rise of the New Right coupled with the state’s unique history of populism, traditional gender roles, and large Christian population all contributed to the downfall of the amendment and, for the first time in history, a red Oklahoma. In 1972, though, few saw this coming.

In “From Red Dirt to Red State,” I argue that the fight to ratify the ERA in Oklahoma, led by local feminists and legislators from 1972 to 1982, was predicted to be an easy win because of the foothold of the Democratic party in the state and the national

¹ “Whose the Reddest of them All? Wyoming, Idaho, and Utah, but Oklahoma is the One to Watch,” *The Economist*, December 9, 2010.

² Chris Casteel, “Romney Captures All Seventy-Seven Counties in Oklahoma,” *Daily Oklahoman*, November 6, 2012.

³ Aaron Blake, “Why is Oklahoma So Anti-Obama?,” *Washington Post*, March 7, 2012.

attention Oklahoma pro-ERA supporters gained through their activism early on. The rise of the New Right, the interference of national groups, and fracturing of women's organizations eventually foiled this plan. Ultimately, I conclude that the ERA debate helped motivate or at least shaped a political shift in Oklahoma from a moderate blue state to one that was overwhelmingly conservative and Republican. I also redefine Oklahoma's role in the ERA movement and how its residents redefined the radical/moderate binary feminists and liberal organizations are often thrown into. Oklahoma feminists were much more complicated than these two terms.

The Equal Rights Amendment debate in Oklahoma is important because its must engage numerous historiographies, including Oklahoma history, western history, studies of second-wave feminism, and postwar political movements more broadly. Most obviously, this work aims to fill a gap in Oklahoma's modern history. A majority of academic works about Oklahoma focus on popular stories of the frontier: Indian Removal, land runs, and pioneer settlers. The Dust Bowl is seemingly the state's only twentieth-century milestone. Similarly, when it comes to works on Oklahoma women, the strong pioneer lady is one of the only archetypes to be found. The writers of these great histories of Oklahoma, like Danny Goble, W. David Baird, Edward Everett Dale, and Angie Debo, have all illuminated the unique and often painful past of the state, but there is much work to be done on the post-World War II years of the sooner state. I hope that my work can begin to fill this void and prompt more historical interest and questions about twentieth-century Oklahoma women and their political behavior.⁴

⁴ Danney Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma: The Making of a New Kind of State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); Marjorie Barton, *Leaning on a Legacy: The WPA in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 2008); Edward Everett Dale, *A History of Oklahoma* (New York: Row,

As of yet, western women's historians have done much on western variants of feminism. There has been great work recently on twentieth-century conservative women. For example, Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors* and Michelle M. Nickerson's *Mothers of Conservatism* both lay out important histories of the rise of the New Right in California, with Nickerson looking at conservative women activists particularly. McGirr argues that the New Right was a highly successful but misunderstood conservative coalition that is often overshadowed by the liberal movements of the late 1950s and 1960s. This success is owed largely to grassroots activism in California and the greater West (McGirr looks specifically at Orange County) and this region's specific combination of a postwar thriving economy, social conservatism, and populism.⁵ Nickerson's *Mothers of Conservatism* attempts to focus on both place and women's political work within the New Right's mobilization in California. She details how the 20th century conservative movement in the U.S. began, largely focusing on what she calls "housewife populism" in 1950s Southern California.⁶ My work builds upon this growing movement by analyzing how the conservative, pro-family movement was able to mobilize in Oklahoma so quickly. The ERA played a large role in uniting men and women against more liberal politics in Oklahoma, and the already established and thriving Christian Right provided the nation-wide organization they needed to succeed.

Peterson, and Co., 1939); Edward Everett Dale, *The Indians of the Southwest: A Century of Development Under the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949); W. David Baird and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008); Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run : The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940); Angie Debo, *Prairie City: The Story of an American Community* (Tulsa, OK: Council Oak Books, 1985); Angie Debo, *A History of the Indians of the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970).

⁵ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3-10.

⁶ Michelle M. Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism* (Princeton University Press, 2012), xiv.

My work, as well, also adds to the growing scholarship of western feminism in its many forms.

So why aren't there more works on feminists on the Plains and in the West more generally? If history truly is written by the victors, perhaps this can explain the relative quiet in the field when it comes to western women supportive of the ERA; the amendment did fail, after all. Despite this loss, the stories of western feminists, one important group of "new western women," as Susan Armitage calls them, most be told.⁷ Virginia Scharff argues for the importance of these missing studies, stating that we need more histories of women in the West to "help explain the persistence of people hardly visible to history, people who are supposed to remain silent or disappear."⁸ By putting Oklahoma feminists at the center of their own history and understanding them on their own terms, I am able to redefine these western women and complicate their pious pioneer image.

⁷ Susan Armitage, "Through Women's Eyes: A New View of the West" in *The Women's West*, ed. Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 11. For a sample of new western women's history, see Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards on the Texas Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007); Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came the Corn Mother Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); Pablo Mitchell, *Coyote Nation: Sexuality, Race, and Conquest in Modernizing New Mexico, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Cathleen D. Cahill, *Federal Fathers & Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 2011); Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800-1860* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

⁸ Virginia Scharff, *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2-3.

Some Oklahoma historians, most importantly Linda Williams Reese, Patricia Loughlin, Davis D. Joyce, and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, have begun to rethink the history of the state's women. Although many of their works are actually anthologies rather than monographs, they all challenge the nineteenth-century, politically conservative, and male centered works that dominate the field.⁹ Dunbar-Ortiz's *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie* and *Outlaw Woman: A Memoir of the War Years, 1960-1975*, which both detail the author's personal journey to feminism in Oklahoma, were particularly influential to me on a personal level as well professionally, as I set out to tell a story of Oklahoma women as liberal and, sometimes, radical feminists. Still, these works are largely collections of articles or biographies of influential women.¹⁰ There are virtually no academic works that look at the everyday lives of postwar Oklahoma women, or how those women transformed the state in regards to its approaches to race, gender, class, religion, and politics. By using the ERA as a lens in which to view Oklahoma, my work was able to touch on each of these important changes in the late 1960s and 1970s.

When writing and researching "From Red Dirt to Red State," I used the few other works on local and state-based ERA movements as guides. First, Ruth Murray Brown's *For a "Christian America"* contained valuable information on Oklahoma ERA activists as well as those from surrounding states. Although her primary focus was on women opposed to the amendment, her oral histories were extremely useful for

⁹ Davis D. Joyce, ed., *Alternative Oklahoma: Contrarian Views of the Sooner State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007); Davis D. Joyce, ed., "An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before": *Alternative Views of Oklahoma History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994); Linda Williams Reese and Patricia Loughlin, *Main Street Oklahoma: Stories of Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997) and *Outlaw Woman: A Memoir of the War Years, 1960-1975* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

understanding the views of the pro-family, New Right members against the ERA.¹¹ My research was also highly motivated by Judith Ezekiel's *Feminism in the Heartland*, Donald G. Matthews and Jane Sherron De Hart's *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of the ERA*, and Martha Sontag Bradley's *Pedestals and Podiums*.¹² These works chronicle local ERA activists and their strategies in Ohio, North Carolina, and Utah, respectively. All four of these works come to the conclusion that pro-ERA feminists were extremely dynamic; they had much more dividing them (religion, race, class) than they had uniting their organizations. These differences, along with the rise of conservatism, eventually bungled any chance the amendment had of passing, and my work adds to this scholarship. While Ezekiel and Bradley's work on Utah do a good job of analyzing place as an influential factor in twentieth-century feminism, Matthews and De Hart downplay region to tell a more widespread and national story. I argue that local cultural norms (race, class, gender, religion, politics) all impact social movements in some way, whether a study is based in the West or an Eastern city like New York or Boston. The local culture of Oklahoma and its relation to the West and the South play a large role in this study, as they shape all Oklahoma feminists in some way.

“From Red Dirt to Red State” follows the Equal Rights Amendment debate in Oklahoma from the time of the amendment's passage in the U.S. Congress in 1972 to the ERA's deadline in June 1982. Chapter Two provides an overview of Oklahoma

¹¹ Ruth Murray Brown, *For a "Christian America": A History of the Religious Right* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002).

¹² Judith Ezekiel, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Dayton: Ohio State University, 2002); Donald G. Matthews and Jane Sherron De Hart, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of the ERA: A State and the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Martha Sontag Bradley, *Pedestals and Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority, and Equal Rights* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005).

politics and argues that the state was deeply devoted to the Democratic Party until the 1970s. After establishing the state's lifelong devotion to blue initiatives, I argue that supporters of the ERA in Oklahoma were extremely confident that the amendment would pass in their state. Several factors led to this assumption, including the top state leaders and the Democratic Party itself supporting the amendment's passage, the numerous pro-ERA organizations that formed across Oklahoma early on, and the real need for reform when it came to the outdated and sexist laws still on the state books. Those in favor of the ERA organized under the Oklahoma Women's Political Caucus, OK-ERA, and local National Organization for Women chapters. They also had two leading state representatives in the House, Hannah Atkins and Cleta Deatherage, as well as grassroots leader Wanda Jo Peltier championing their cause at the capitol.

In the third chapter, I turn to the activists themselves in Oklahoma. The men and women that supported the ERA enjoyed a comfortable majority over conservatives against it during the first few years, but in 1975 this changed. New Right leader Phyllis Schlafly injected herself into the debates and brought strength to the anti-ERA movement. In Oklahoma, the passage of the amendment depended on whether Oklahoma viewed the amendment as simple legal equality or a tool of radical feminism. Schlafly used the media to portray the ERA as a "women's libber" East Coast issue connected to anti-Christian and anti-family values. At least in Oklahoma, I argue that this was simply not true. A large majority of ERA supporters were church members and had children, many of whom attended ERA events with their parents. Relying largely on oral history interviews, I contend that these activists subscribed to an Oklahoma style of feminism that intertwined religion and social justice activism. Pro-ERA women

differed on many issues, including gay rights, abortion, and even political affiliations at times, but they united under the idea that women deserved equal rights under the law and fought back to portray the ERA as a mainstream and locally beneficial issue.

In Chapter Four, I examine how the local debates within Oklahoma changed in the late 1970s as the state entered the national spotlight. The National Women's Conference, incoming national NOW leaders, and celebrities and politicians, all of whom were supposed to be promoting the ERA, actually hurt the amendment in Oklahoma. I argue that this national attention in Oklahoma derailed the mainstream and locally positive image that prominent ERA activists like Hannah Atkins and Cleta Deatherage had fought so hard to maintain. The continued negative publicity that portrayed ERA supporters as radical combined with these national setbacks and the slow pace of legislators in the state also caused a few younger activists to embrace more vocal, women's liberation style forms of protest, adding a new strand to Oklahoma.

Despite being the only unratified state in the nation with a supportive governor, president pro-tempore, and house speaker, the Equal Rights Amendment did not pass in Oklahoma. In the conclusion (Chapter Five), I analyze the various reasons citizens and politicians have put forth as to why the amendment failed in a state with such a liberal past. Ultimately, I argue that the power of the New Right was too much for ERA activists to overcome. Conservatives had a single, unified leader in Phyllis Schlafly and a powerful and impressive web of national organizations to back them up. Oklahoma was fertile ground for the socially conservative and libertarian values of the New Right. By the end of the ERA debates in 1982 the state had undergone a political transformation like nothing it had experienced before. For those who experienced that

political revolution, it was probably no surprise that Oklahoma became the “reddest state in the nation.”

Chapter Two:

Cracks in the Foundation, 1972-1975

“The legislators were warned...the battle for equal rights has just begun.”

-John Greiner, *Daily Oklahoman*

On March 22, 1972, a curious thing happened in the United States Congress. For fifty years the same amendment to the constitution had been introduced, and for fifty years it had been turned away and dubbed unnecessary. On this cold winter morning, though, something changed. By this time, over a decade of political protest had passed, and women’s liberation was just beginning to stand alone outside of the greater civil rights and leftist organizations. Federal laws outlawed discrimination based on race, national origin, or religion, so why not gender? The American people were finally ready for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), or so legislators thought.

Within hours of its passage, the ERA had already made its way to the individual states for ratification. The Oklahoma Senate was one of the first state legislative bodies to approve of the amendment, giving the ERA a voice vote of “yea” that very same day. In the first month, fourteen states achieved ratification. By the end of the year, that

number had risen to thirty. Needing a total of thirty-eight states to amend the Constitution, the situation looked hopeful.¹³

After the easy voice approval in the Oklahoma Senate, there was little reason to believe that the ERA would have any trouble in the state. In this chapter, I argue that between 1972 and 1975, Oklahoma ERA supporters organized statewide and prepared for an easy victory. Those in favor of the amendment were extremely optimistic, and for good reason. First, Oklahoma, like many Southern and Western states in the 1970s, held a tradition of strong loyalty to the Democratic Party. Although the ERA held bipartisan support, the Democratic Party seemed more strongly committed to reform. Second, Oklahoma's outdated and sexist laws still in the state statutes gave ERA supporters ample proof that not only did Oklahoma need this amendment in order to fix these sexist laws, the state needed a blanket constitutional amendment that would force legislators to address them all, and in a timely manner. These laws led Oklahomans to quickly organize into strong lobbying groups, including the Oklahoma Women's Political Caucus which would eventually become the fastest growing women's caucus in the nation. Lastly, Oklahoma ERA supporters had powerful women on their team inside and outside of the capitol, like Hannah Atkins, Wanda Jo Peltier, and Clela Deatherage, as well as two of the highest-ranking state officials, Governor David Hall and Speaker of the House Dan Draper. Both men endorsed the amendment publically and encouraged Oklahoma legislators to do the same.¹⁴ Despite all of the signs, the Oklahoma House of Representatives became the first legislative body in the nation to

¹³ Nick Thimmesch, "Supporters to Blame for ERA's Woes," *Daily Oklahoman*, June 6, 1978.

¹⁴ Junetta Davis, "Similarities Seen in Past and Present Women's Amendment Action," *Norman Transcript*, January 16, 1973.

vote the ERA down, stating the amendment needed more research before they could approve it.¹⁵ This defeat did not break the hopeful spirit of ERA supporters, though. With seven years to prove their case, and to a legislature dominated by their fellow party members and even a few ERA organizers, this defeat merely sparked the beginning of the Equal Rights Amendment battle in Oklahoma.¹⁶

In 1972, many Oklahomans assumed that the Democratic Party and its pro-ERA platform would be supported in the state, and for good reason. Oklahoma had been under the control of the Democratic Party since statehood in 1907.¹⁷ Historian Danney Goble argues that in that year Oklahoma ratified “a modern Progressive constitution,” one highly influenced by both Progressive politicians of the time, including President Theodore Roosevelt, and the state’s large population of farmers and laborers.¹⁸ Oklahoma had a large number of Populists and even held the largest state Socialist party in the nation until World War I.¹⁹ The common Populist and Socialist idea of putting “public interest” before those of corporations and big businesses would influence the

¹⁵ “Opponents Celebrate ERA Demise,” *Tulsa Tribune*, July 11, 1982.

¹⁶ Only one other scholarly work has been done on the ERA in Oklahoma, a University of Oklahoma dissertation filed in 2010. The author, Jana Vogt, emphasizes the conservative opposition to the ERA movement and its relationship to the conservative movement nationwide. Jana Vogt, “Oklahoma and the ERA: Rousing a Red State, 1972-1982,” PhD dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 2010; Jana Vogt Catignani, “Conservative Oklahoma Women United: The Crusade to Defeat the ERA,” in *Main Street Oklahoma: Stories of Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Linda W. Reese and Patricia Loughlin (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 221-238.

¹⁷ Samuel A. Kirkpatrick, David R. Morgan, and Thomas G. Kielhorn, *The Oklahoma Voter: Politics, Elections, and Parties in the Sooner State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 3-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5; Danney Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma: The Making of a New Kind of State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), x; Kirkpatrick, *The Oklahoma Voter*.

¹⁹ Howard L. Meredith, “A History of the Socialist Party in Oklahoma” (PhD dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1970), 217; Kirkpatrick, *The Oklahoma Voter*, 5.

spirit and political atmosphere of the state for decades to come.²⁰ This relationship between Oklahomans and the Democratic Party would only be strengthened by the Great Depression as the New Deal intensified Oklahomans' commitment to the public interest.²¹ The influence of the Democratic Party and the state's welcoming of government intervention in the past kept ERA supporters optimistic, but Oklahoma's history of social reform, or lack thereof, also raised new questions.

Although those in favor of the ERA were depending on the state's progressive roots and Democratic majority, there was still an issue. Oklahoma was politically and economically progressive, but did not have a strong history of social progress for all. When it came to ideas of race and gender, Oklahoma sided more heavily with the South in the twentieth century than, although many historians now associate the state with other more progressive regions of the country such as the Midwest and the West. Most of the state's population approved of Jim Crow laws, imposing school and public segregation, as well Ku Klux Klan activity and African American voter intimidation, right along with the state's progressive tax, antitrust, and direct democracy laws. As for women's rights, the state did grant women suffrage before the 19th Amendment in 1920, although only by two years. Many Oklahoma leaders suggested women's suffrage be added to the state's constitution in 1907, but it failed because of fears that it would "unsex" women, that it was too socialist, or that it would cause "the destruction of the

²⁰ Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma*, 214. See also Nigel Anthony Sellers, *Oil, Wheat & Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World in Oklahoma, 1905-1930* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); Worth Robert Miller, *Oklahoma Populism: A History of the People's Party in the Oklahoma Territory* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

²¹ For more on Oklahoma and the Great Depression, see Marjorie Barton, *Leaning on a Legacy: The WPA in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 2008); Dan Morgan, *Rising in the West: The True Story of an "Okie" Family from the Great Depression to the Reagan Years* (New York: Knopf Press, 1992); Timothy Egan, *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

home.” Thus, women were only allowed to vote in school board elections between 1907 and 1917. Even Oklahoma’s most famous early female leaders, Kate Barnard and Alice Mary Robertson, were social conservatives and against women voting in state and national elections. Seventy years later, these same gender stereotypes and fears would return to the state during the ERA debates.²²

Outside of Oklahoma’s complicated relationship with gendered and racial reform, another more recent roadblock faced supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment: the growing appeal of the Republican Party in the state. Despite its label as a blue state, Oklahoma was fairly conservative in its voting patterns and state laws, or at least middle of the road. Beginning in the 1950s, Oklahoma slowly began to align more with the national Republican Party, especially when it came to presidential races. In the 1977 book *The Oklahoma Voter*, political scientists Samuel A. Kirkpatrick, David R. Morgan, and Thomas G. Kielhorn argued, “thousands of Oklahoma Democrats are actually ‘behaviorally independent’ or ‘behaviorally Republican’ in their voting patterns, although they continue to call themselves Democrats out of tradition.”²³ A major factor influencing this slow shift from a more liberal identity to a conservative one was religion. The rise in political interest of fundamentalist Christians in the state and around the country during the late 1970s and 1980s became a grassroots movement that would eventually rally around the Republican Party and oppose the Equal Rights Amendment.²⁴ According to Kirkpatrick, Morgan, and Kielhorn, thirty-two percent of

²² Ibid., 200-1; For more on early Oklahoma women, see Linda Williams Reese, *Women of Oklahoma, 1890-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

²³ Kirkpatrick, *The Oklahoma Voter*, 107.

²⁴ Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 108-110, 214, 271. Historically, fundamentalists were a sect of

Oklahomans polled in 1971 claimed to be members of a fundamentalist Christian church (of which almost half identified as Southern Baptist), making Oklahoma the third largest fundamentalist state in the nation behind Mississippi and Alabama, and by less than three percent.²⁵ The state's membership in the Bible Belt would prove crucial in the coming years as the ERA was portrayed by its opponents as immoral, anti-Christian, and anti-family. Fundamentalist Christians in Oklahoma would come to make up a majority of those opposed to the ERA.²⁶

Regardless of growing conservative trends, Oklahoma's Republican Party saw only small growth from the 1950s through the 1970s. The Democratic Party remained largely unshakable in the Sooner State at the local level, but continued to grow in its support for Republican presidential nominees throughout the 1960s and 1970s. As the Democratic Party evolved from the party of Jim Crow to one of more racially progressive ideologies, its support in Oklahoma became complicated.²⁷ In the 1960s a minority of Oklahoma Democrats, still strong in their support of populism and racial separation, were not quite ready to jump on the progressive wagon of their national

conservative Christians who interpreted the bible literally and did not accept modern or progressive interpretations of the holy text. Evangelicals are Christians whose goal is to spread the gospel. They became very politically active in the 1950s and beyond with the rise of the New Right. Fundamentalists can also be evangelical. For more on these terms and their fluidity, see Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 32-34; Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2011), 121, 348-9.

²⁵ Kirkpatrick, *The Oklahoma Voter*, 29-30.

²⁶ Ruth Murray Brown, *For a "Christian America": A History of the Religious Right* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 8-10, 15-25.

²⁷ For more on the complicated transformation of the Democratic Party and its loss of working class whites in the 1970s, see Jefferson Cowie, *"Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010); Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Kevin Michael Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Post-War Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

counterparts but still felt a loyalty to the Democratic Party and its tradition in their state. Still, this was a minority of Oklahoma Democrats.²⁸ This shifting of party lines of both the Democrats and Republicans did not alarm ERA supporters too much, as the amendment was still on the national platform of both parties. The more recent development of a civil rights movement in Oklahoma and the hope it provided interested proponents of equal rights more than the small but growing influence of the Republican Party.

Despite the political turmoil of the sixties sparked by racial injustice, most Oklahomans in 1972 looked past their history of segregation and found hope for reform and the ERA in the state's unique racial history of Native American settlement, pioneers from both the North and the South, and the state's numerous all-black communities.²⁹ The civil rights movement in Oklahoma sparked monumental change for people of color in the state. First, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, the state had made impressive strides to end segregation. Although the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 was one of the most destructive of the twentieth century in terms of deaths and property destruction, African Americans continued to forge successful and important paths in the state, especially in the realm of education.³⁰ The end of segregation in the state's public

²⁸ Kirkpatrick, *The Oklahoma Voter*, 3-4, 9-10, 95-6.

²⁹ See W. David Baird and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008). As of 1970, 89% of Oklahomans were white, while the African American population came in at only 6.7%. Of these, over 50% of whites supported the Democratic Party, as well as 69% of the African American population. Native Americans made up of 4.2% of the total population and seemed to be split evenly between the Democratic and Republican parties. Overall, from 1970 to 1976 the amount of Oklahomans registered as Democrats fluctuated between 74-76.7%. Kirkpatrick, *The Oklahoma Voter*, 17-8, 43-4, 101.

³⁰ For more on the Tulsa Race Riot, see Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Tim Madigan, *The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001); Chris M. Messer,

schools began with Ada Lois Sipuel's 1946 challenge of the University of Oklahoma Law School's denial of her application. Her lawyers successfully argued that "separate but equal" was not being adequately upheld when comparing the resources, professors, and student experience of Oklahoma's all-black college, Langston University, to those at the University of Oklahoma. After the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, Oklahoma legislators began integrating elementary and secondary public schools the following year.³¹

In public accommodations, too, black Oklahomans pushed for racial progress. Two years before the famous Greensboro sit-in, history teacher and NAACP youth leader Clara Luper orchestrated a sit-in of her own. Targeting Oklahoma City, which housed the largest African American population in the state, Luper and her NAACP students staged a sit-in at the Katz Drug Store, a popular lunch bar that forced blacks to eat their meals in the alley outside. In her autobiography Luper discusses the difficulty of making this big step and wondered, "Are we ready to behold the walls? All the way the way downtown, I wondered if we were really ready for a non-violent war."³² Although they faced harassment and racial slurs, the children returned to the lunch counter for several days until finally succeeding in changing not only the Oklahoma City's Katz Drug Store public accommodations policy, but also those of its chains

Tulsa Race Riot of 1921: Determining Its Causes and Its Framing (Stillwater: Oklahoma State University, 2013).

³¹ Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *The Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 49-54; Ada Lois Sepuel Fisher and Danney Goble, *A Matter of Black and White: The Autobiography of Ada Lois Sepuel Fisher* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996); George Lynn Cross, *Blacks in White Colleges: Oklahoma's Landmark Cases* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975); Louis S. Robbins, *The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown: Civil Rights, Censorship, and the American Library* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).

³² Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls* (Oklahoma City: Jim Wire, 1979), 7.

across the country.³³ After Katz, Luper and the NAACP Youth division in Oklahoma moved on to integrate other public spaces.

The sweeping progress towards racial equality only continued, and inspired many future Equal Rights Amendment supporters in the state. Perhaps improvement for women was also possible. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the redistricting of highly populated African American districts, four black legislators were elected to the Oklahoma House in 1964. Four years later, Hannah Atkins, the first African American woman elected to the Oklahoma House of Representatives, followed. Atkins was unique to her earlier male counterparts because she ran on a platform of supporting people of color and the Equal Rights Amendment. Proving her support for the amendment, she became the first member of the House to sponsor and present the ERA.³⁴ Atkins would go on to have a long and successful political career in Oklahoma as a staunch social justice leader. In the words of Ms. Luper, “the visible walls are crumbling.”³⁵ Decades of racial and social injustices in the state were finally coming to the surface, forcing the public and politicians alike to acknowledge Oklahoma’s discrepancies.

Atkins’ first campaign made history. When she first moved to Oklahoma in 1951, the state was still highly segregated. Atkins and her family were only allowed to visit public parks on Thursdays and were barred from most restaurants and shops. While her husband worked to build up his medical practice, many of his colleagues protested

³³ Ibid., 7-15; Franklin, *The Blacks in Oklahoma*, 54-57; Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Journey Toward: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

³⁴ Kay M. Teall, *Black History in Oklahoma: A Resource Book* (Oklahoma City Public Schools, 1971), 228-231.

³⁵ Luper, *Behold the Walls*, iv.

his admittance to the City Medical Society. Hannah Atkins herself, with a graduate degree, struggled to find an employer who would hire her. When their son, Edmond, applied to Casady High School in 1954, he was denied admittance based on the color of his skin. Although the *Brown* decision was already in effect, Casady was a private Episcopalian school, and thus not covered by the ruling. Atkins and her husband had been dedicated Episcopalians their whole lives and even attended Episcopalian colleges. Despite the segregated city that had first “welcomed” Atkins and her family, Hannah found a job in the state capital, first as a law librarian, and served Oklahoma City for the next three decades.³⁶

Atkins credited her first campaign victory to her investment in the black neighborhoods of Oklahoma City. She argued that many of the “big money” politicians before her rarely utilized African Americans as potential voters. To solicit support, Atkins campaigned door-to-door in all of her constituents’ communities and set up voter registration booths in black communities and churches. As a politician dedicated to truly representing the people, she also refused campaign donations over \$100 dollars as a statement against big business and the purchase of public servants. Despite accusations by her all-male opponents as only being only a “tea-sipping lady,” Atkins was elected and sworn-in as an official Oklahoma state representative in 1968, a position she would utilize to serve the community for the next twelve years.³⁷ Often called a “yellow-dog Democrat,” a political dig by her conservative counterparts, Atkins set out from the beginning to end discrimination against women and minorities

³⁶ Hannah Atkins to Attorney General Robert Henry, April 11, 1988, folder 1, box 1, Hannah Diggs Atkins Collection, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma (hereafter Atkins Collection-OSU).

³⁷ Interview with Hannah Atkins, by Tanya Finchum, June 22, 2007, Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

in the state.³⁸ During her first year as a legislator, one member of the house flashed her a picture of a few KKK members in hoods and replied, “that is me...I just wanted you to know what I think of you being here.”³⁹ Although his actions deeply disturbed her, Atkins did not let the man intimidate her. Only four years later, she would be the first legislator to introduce the ERA for ratification in the Oklahoma State House.⁴⁰

Because of recent racial progress and the continuing power of the Democratic Party, Oklahomans supportive of the ERA had many reasons to be hopeful. The state held an overwhelming majority of Democrats, some of whom were working towards racial equality in schools, businesses, and politics. This, combined with the growing strength of women’s liberation movements across the country, led many to be confident in the amendment. As the momentum of the Equal Rights Amendment grew across the country, so did spirits of those in favor of change in Oklahoma. But it was not just the sweeping support the ERA held in those first two years that pro-ERA Oklahomans were relying on to get the amendment passed. Many supporters argued that the outdated and sexist laws alone in Oklahoma should be enough to convince legislators that change was desperately needed.⁴¹

While ERA supporters in Oklahoma looked to the Democratic-controlled state capitol with confidence, many others worked to convince legislators and the public of the amendment’s value. They argued that Oklahoma’s women needed the amendment.

Three federal laws existed in 1972 to protect women’s employment rights: the Equal

³⁸ A “yellow-dog democrat” is a derogatory nickname often given by conservative Republicans to Democrats who often vote strictly on party lines. The name comes from the joke that Democrats would rather vote for a yellow dog rather than a Republican.

³⁹ Atkins to Attorney General Henry, April 11, 1988.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Dimensions in Citizenship III: The Equal Rights Amendment” in *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past*, ed. Linda Kerber and Sherron De Hart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 542-3.

Pay Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Executive Order 11246.⁴² Despite these laws, in Oklahoma, sex discrimination continued through hiring discrimination, unequal pay, marriage laws, and college and secondary school admittance and treatment.⁴³ Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed sex along with race discrimination, sexism cases were not taken as seriously as those of race. Even if the Civil Rights Act of 1964's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission agreed to hear a sex discrimination case, the extremely overloaded board often took years to hand down a decision. Punishment in Oklahoma for violating the Equal Pay Act was only a misdemeanor and fine between twenty-five and one hundred dollars, creating little incentive for employers to pay women an equal wage.⁴⁴ There was also a certain amount of vulnerability in state and federal laws. Unlike a constitutional amendment, which is designed to be difficult to both amend and repeal, any law mandating legal equality on the basis of sex could be repealed with a state or federal bodied vote. For women to gain a constitutional guarantee of their rights, they would have to overcome the weight of over three hundred years of traditional gender norms based largely on their anatomy. Historian Nancy F. Cott argues that even after 1964, "women's reproductive and childbearing roles counted heavily in keeping sex

⁴² As stated by the U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission: "The Equal Pay Act, which is part of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, as amended (FLSA), and which is administered and enforced by the EEOC, prohibits sex-based wage discrimination between men and women in the same establishment who perform jobs that require substantially equal skill, effort and responsibility under similar working conditions." Also, Title VII of the Civil Rights' Act reads as follows: "Title VII prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin." Executive Order 112246, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965, extends the Equal Pay Act to include government contractors.

⁴³ "Effects of the ERA on OK Laws," *League of Women Voters of OK Newsletter*, November 12, 1973, folder 10, box 52, Equal Rights Amendment Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (hereafter the ERA Collection).

⁴⁴ Kathy Callahan, "Researcher Finds Status of Women in the State 'Troubling,'" *Tulsa Tribune*, August 16, 1978.

differentiation alive in the law.”⁴⁵ The number of women as sole providers of their children was also increasing nationwide, adding to the urgency of the ERA.⁴⁶

Outside of the loss of employment opportunities (either through sexist hiring practices or lack of equal education opportunities for women), marriage laws in Oklahoma considered women dependents of their husbands, giving a man control over his wife’s children, place of residence, and body. Most important to reformers in the state was the Head of Household statute, a law older than the state itself. Passed in 1890 during the territorial days and then added to the official state statutes in 1910, it read: “The husband is the head of the family. He may chose any reasonable place or mode of living and the wife must conform thereto.”⁴⁷ Because of its gendered nature and assumption of male control within the marriage and the family, the Head of Household statute became a target of those arguing in favor of the ERA. Again, Cott writes, “The marital model in which the individuality and citizenship of the wife disappeared into her husband’s legal persona had to go, logically, once women gained the vote in 1920. Yet marital unity was rewritten economically in the provider/dependent model, a pairing in which the husband carried more weight.”⁴⁸ A woman from Ardmore, Oklahoma explained her experience in Oklahoma and her support for the ERA to her local paper in 1975, stating, “because there is no single law or constitutional amendment requiring courts to treat men and women as equals before the law, women find themselves in a

⁴⁵ Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 205.

⁴⁶ Sue Sloop, “Women’s Dream Delayed” *Tulsa Tribune*, September 15, 1978.

⁴⁷ Head of Household, Oklahoma State §32-2 (1910). Repealed by law, 1988, HB 1193, c. 17, § 1, emerg. eff. March 16, 1988.

⁴⁸ Cott, *Public Vows*, 157.

strange quandary when they go to court.”⁴⁹ In Oklahoma, which lagged behind in this area compared to other states, marriage inequality played out most strongly in matters of inheritance, social security, and credit. Unless specified in a will, the death of the husband would result in the wife splitting the estate with her children as equal dependents, as well as paying an inheritance tax on top of that.⁵⁰ If a woman chose to be homemaker or, like many women in Oklahoma, worked alongside her husband on their farm or ranch, she would have no right to social security or retirement funds, leaving her dependent on her husband and vulnerable in the case of his death or divorce. Additionally, laws against domestic violence and spousal rape were virtually unheard of in the 1970s, even if the couple was separated or in the process of getting a divorce. Obtaining credit or loans without a man co-signing was also an issue for women across the country, especially single mothers, who often lacked wages large enough to establish credit in their own right. Essentially, women in Oklahoma continued to be considered dependents of their husbands in the eyes of the state. While all American women would have benefitted from the ERA, Oklahoma women belonged to one of the states that had the most to gain. According to Cott, in the 1970s “the zone of domestic privacy had to be opened up,” and women were essentially encouraging the state to take an interest in making the traditionally private sphere within the jurisdiction of the public, essentially arguing that the private was political.⁵¹

Wanda Jo Peltier, like Hannah Atkins, also supported the ERA when it was up for ratification in 1972, most importantly because of her experience with sexism and

⁴⁹ “ERA Explained By Area Woman,” *The Daily Ardmoreite*, January 21, 1975.

⁵⁰ “Women Advocate the ERA Bill from Both Viewpoints,” *Daily Oklahoman*, October 23, 1981.

⁵¹ Cott, *Public Vows*, 210.

marriage law in the state. Essentially, Peltier became involved in the movement after she learned of the unequal treatment of wives in Oklahoma in 1960. At the age of twenty-nine she was a stay-at-home mother of two when her husband, a Baptist preacher, died unexpectedly. Had she not urged him write up a will years earlier, there is a good chance she would have lost her home and farm. After deciding to go back to school to support her family, Peltier realized that her service as a mother held no monetary value in the eyes of the state. She found herself without any marketable skills and few options in the “real world.”⁵²

After receiving her master’s degree in English, Peltier took a tenure-track position at Oklahoma Baptist University. After years of being passed over for tenure by men with less experience and the same degree, Peltier realized she was being discriminated against based on her sex. She filed a class-action lawsuit with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in April of 1973, and the ruling landed in Peltier’s favor. Nonetheless, she would have to spend thousands of dollars taking Oklahoma Baptist University to court in order to receive compensation. On top of that, the EEOC had already taken four years to rule on her case because it was so bogged down with reports of sexual discrimination in the workplace from across the country.⁵³

Because of her years of experience in dealing with sex discrimination, Peltier immediately jumped in to the debate over the ERA in Oklahoma. Peltier went straight to the Oklahoma State Capital to share her story and support. Because the state lacked total gender equality, a fact that had caused Peltier to fight now two legal battles, she

⁵² “Complaint charges OBU with Sex Discrimination,” *Daily Oklahoman*, March 14, 1973.

⁵³ “OBU Accused of Sex Bias,” *Oklahoma Journal*, April 1973.

assumed legislators just needed the ERA explained to them from a woman's point of view.

Outside of the real need for the Equal Rights Amendment for women, many Oklahoma supporters and organizations also highlighted the benefits equality would mean for men as well. Women in Oklahoma consciously promoted the idea of gender inclusion and the benefits equality would create for everyone, possibly to dispel any "man hating" stereotype that might be promoted by those opposed to the ERA.

Oklahoma ERA activist and journalist Junetta Davis argued in the *Norman Transcript* that men, too, were often denied their spouses' benefits in the event of death. She also touched on the few protective labor laws still in existence that benefitted women over men in the workplace, including earlier retirement.⁵⁴ The Oklahoma chapter of the League of Women Voters also argued for the benefits mandated gender equality could bring to men in the workplace as well as their personal lives. The state of Oklahoma protected women from rape, abduction, forced marriage, and violence (although only when the perpetrator was not her husband), but had little to say about sexual violence against men. By also focusing on the benefits for men, supporters of the ERA argued early on that both women and men would have to work together in order to secure the amendment's passage in their state.⁵⁵

Establishing the necessity of the Equal Rights Amendment based on outdated Oklahoma laws was one thing, but winning ratification in the state and the nation was another. Alice Paul's National Woman's Party, a suffrage association, wrote and

⁵⁴ Junetta Davis, "Similarities Seen in Past, Present Women's Amendment Action," *Norman Transcript*, January 16, 1975.

⁵⁵ "Effects of the ERA on OK Laws" *League of Women Voters of OK Newsletter*, November 12, 1973, folder 10, box 52, ERA Collection.

promoted the first and only Equal Rights Amendment, introducing it to Congress on December 10, 1923.⁵⁶ But for the next fifty years, the ERA would hold a long and complicated history with legislators, feminists, and working class women alike. The amendment's largest hurdle had always been protective legislation, and whether or not repealing special labor laws for women was actually more helpful or hurtful in the long run. By the 1960s, though, protective legislation directed at women seemed unnecessary and actually a hindrance to many women. Although introduced to Congress every year since its conception, 1972 was the first year both houses of Congress expressed majority support for the amendment.

Substantial support for the amendment came in the late 1960s when women's organizations and labor unions found a new ally: the Democratic Party. When the National Organization for Women (NOW) first organized in 1966, members remained unsure if they should support the ERA as many liberal and leftist activists were still against it. By 1967, though, NOW firmly stood behind the amendment as a necessity for American women, dubbing protective labor legislation outdated and a tool used for workplace discrimination based on sex. After NOW's support of the ERA, the unions with the largest female membership, the American Federation of Labor and the United

⁵⁶ Susan D. Becker, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment: American Feminism Between the Wars* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 18-9; Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 124. For more works on women's suffrage and its connection to the ERA, see Eleanor Flexnor, *Century of Struggle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (New York: Doubleday, 1971); Kristi Andersen, *After Suffrage: Women in Partisan and Electoral Politics Before the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Christine Lunardini, *Alice Paul: Equality for Women* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013); Jad Adams, *Women and the Vote: A World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Trisha Franzen, *Anna Howard Shaw: The Work of Woman Suffrage* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Lisa Terault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

Automotive Workers, soon followed.⁵⁷ With such institutional support and the support of most of the American population, it seemed the amendment would finally pass.⁵⁸ Legislators had no problem backing a resolution with such widespread support. Both the national Democratic and Republican Parties endorsed the ERA in 1972. President Richard Nixon claimed his support for the amendment and subsequent presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter followed suit.⁵⁹ At the end of the 1960s, after a decade of protest and progress, reforming outdated and gendered laws seemed reasonable. If at least thirty-eight state legislatures could gain majority support, the ERA would become the 27th amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Originally, the ERA was given a deadline of March 22, 1979, but this was eventually extended to June 30, 1982.⁶⁰

The first Oklahoma House vote on the ERA was unexpectedly controversial due to an intervention from an interested outsider. A month earlier, in February 1972, the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* featured an article titled “What’s Wrong with the Equal Rights Amendment?” to the homes of conservative Oklahoma subscribers. After her syndication success on several Republican and religious radio shows, Phyllis Schlafly began a monthly newsletter in 1967.⁶¹ Schlafly was a successful author and lawyer who was heavily involved in the thriving New Right and its relationship with the Republican Party. Schlafly’s article assured its readers that the passage of the ERA would

⁵⁷ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 66-69.

⁵⁸ Jerry Searbrough, “Poll Shows Growing Support for Rights Amendment,” *Daily Oklahoman*, December 19, 1974.

⁵⁹ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 232-4.

⁶⁰ For more on the ERA as a constitutional amendment and the legal interpretations of the debate, see Mary Francis Berry, *Why ERA Failed* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Janet K. Boles, *The Politics of the Equal Rights Amendment* (New York: Longman, 1979); Gilbert Y. Steiner, *Constitutional Inequality: The Political Fortunes of the Equal Rights Amendment* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1985).

⁶¹ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 4.

“absolutely and positively” make women subject to the draft, put single mothers at risk of losing custody of their children and child support, and force women into the workforce.⁶²

Ann Patterson, a local woman who would eventually lead the Oklahoma anti-ERA forces under Schlafly, read the article and immediately called her representative when she heard about the upcoming vote. In an interview with sociologist Ruth Murray Brown, Patterson explained her initial understanding of the ERA before Schlafly’s article: “We didn’t know anything about the amendment at all. In fact, I thought it was a good thing until I read Phyllis’ *Report*.”⁶³ Patterson passed out Schlafly’s article to legislators before the vote.⁶⁴ On March 29, the ERA failed in the House, 36 to 52, with Democratic Representative C.H. Spearman, Jr. stating that the amendment needed to be researched further before the House could approve it.⁶⁵ Still, ERA supporters remained positive; the gallery was filled with those in favor of the amendment while only five anti-ERA activists showed up.⁶⁶ Angered and unwilling to give up so soon, Representative Hannah Atkins blamed “frightened housewives” for the ERA’s defeat and vowed to pre-file another ERA resolution so that the ERA would be the first resolution considered in the next House session.⁶⁷ Needing a majority vote from the Oklahoma House, activists on both sides of the amendment immediately began organizing.

⁶² Phyllis Schlafly, “What’s Wrong with the Equal Rights Amendment?,” *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, February 1972.

⁶³ Brown, “For a “Christian America,” 29.

⁶⁴ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 217-8.

⁶⁵ David Craighead, “Rep. Atkins Vows to Make Rights Campaign Issue,” *Oklahoma Journal*, March 30, 1972.

⁶⁶ Kaye Teall, “First Anniversary,” *Oklahoma Observer*, July 25, 1973.

⁶⁷ Craighead, “Rep. Atkins Vows”; John Greiner, “Rep. Atkins Serves Notice on Equal Rights Foes,” *Daily Oklahoman*, March 30, 1972.

During the first three years after the failed House vote, ERA supporters mobilized. By 1975, pro-ERA activists in Oklahoma had organized statewide. Coming from various and already established women's organizations, churches, and professional groups, women and men alike formed into numerous lobbying and support groups. The two most powerful local ERA groups were OK-ERA and the Oklahoma Women's Political Caucus (OKWPC). OK-ERA was co-chaired by Edna Mae Phelps and Dorothy Stanislaus (with Governor David Boren and former Governor Henry Bellmon as honorary co-chairs). OK-ERA was an umbrella organization that united over fifty local groups (mostly those formed for women specifically) such as the Oklahoma League of Women Voters, Common Cause, and the American Civil Liberties Union who supported the passage of the ERA.⁶⁸ Activist Penny Williams recalled being asked to join OK-ERA, stating, "When I said I'd be on the state committee, I thought it would be a snap. David Boren and Henry Bellmon co-chairing the committee? Come on."⁶⁹ Because of the large number of allies involved, OK-ERA remained the most powerful lobbying organization for ratification up until 1980. OKWPC was co-founded by important women's rights activist Cleta Deatherage, Representative Hannah Atkins, and Native America activist and then wife of an Oklahoma senator LaDonna Harris in 1971, was an offshoot of the Oklahoma Coalition for Equal Rights.⁷⁰ The OKWPC was involved in several projects aimed at assisting

⁶⁸ Meeting notes, 1971, OKWPC, folder 4, box 1, Hannah Diggs Atkins Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (hereafter Atkins Collection-OK Historical Society).

⁶⁹ Interview with Penny Williams, by John Erling, April 11, 2012, *Voices of Oklahoma* oral history series, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Accessed March 12, 2016.

⁷⁰ Warren Vieth, "Starting Over," *Oklahoma Monthly*, March 1976.

Oklahoma women more broadly, but would become larger and much more focused on the ERA later in the decade.

As a student at the University of Oklahoma, Clela Deatherage followed the early stages of the ERA debate closely and motivated the student council and other university groups to send their support to legislators. She was later asked to serve on the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women for her dedicated work in helping homemakers left without financial support.

After graduating from law school in 1975, Deatherage decided to run for the Oklahoma House of Representative of her home city of Norman in District 44. Her close interest in women's issues and support of the Equal Rights Amendment led the twenty-five year old Democrat to fight for change by becoming a legislator herself. Only eight months after passing the bar, Deatherage was sworn in as an official state legislator, and she made the ERA a top priority.⁷¹

Outside of the OKWPC and OK-ERA, there were also local National Organization for Women (NOW) chapters in the state, but they initially enjoyed less success than other state-based organizations. Many Oklahomans remained skeptical of national organizations, as they were often associated with "radical" feminism on the East and West Coasts. Historian Alice Echols defines radical feminism as "a political movement dedicated to opposing the sex-class system," something that, in the opinion of many radical feminists, could only be achieved outside of the political system;

⁷¹ Ibid.

equality in a broken system was pointless.⁷² Echols's definition and how self-identified radical feminists themselves defined their cause is much different than the meaning conservatives were giving to the term radical. Schlafly and anti-ERA supporters used this loaded term to discredit ERA supporters. Calling a person radical in the 1970s was often about linking someone with Leftist groups. NOW was a mainstream and liberal feminist organization that embraced equality through the current political system. By supporting a constitutional amendment to evoke change, NOW reinforced their moderate policy of working within the state. Although NOW chapters in Oklahoma City and Shawnee began to grow after 1972, a stigma among conservative Oklahomans still existed. According to activist Junetta Davis, the Oklahoma NOW chapter was not, in her opinion, radical but more "outspoken" than more popular groups like the OKWPC. Their association with radical feminism apparently came from some members' choice of dress that included jeans and sometimes no bras.⁷³ Still, countless archival and personal collections of activists show photographs of NOW and other women's organization members dressed professionally in mostly slacks and blouses. ERA supporters lobbied often at the state capitol, and they were extremely aware of the importance of presentation. Activist Wanda Jo Peltier described one of these experiences: "We thought if we looked good, if we smelled good, if we made sense, it was a done deal. Well, about all we got at first were pats on the head. That is, until we organized."⁷⁴ Bras or no bras, the mere accusation of such a look invoked backlash from

⁷² Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 6. See also Jacqueline Rhodes, *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency: From Manifesto to Modern* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

⁷³ Junetta Davis, "Breaking the Bonds," *Oklahoma Monthly*, n.d., folder 26, box 37, ERA Collection.

conservatives because of what it represented: gendered difference and freedom from patriarchal restraints. Whether it really was the youthful clothing of some or their challenging ideas to the status quo in the state, some locals feared membership to a powerful national organization like NOW might lead to interference or influence from outsiders. The accusation of NOW's allegedly radical activity seems to be rooted more in a comparison to the ideas of traditional femininity and gender roles in the state rather than any real extremist or militant agenda.

A majority of Oklahomans felt more comfortable creating their own organizations with their own established identity that was, more or less, in their control. National feminist organizations often received questionable publicity, and this was something many Oklahoma women were well aware of by the early 1970s. In a 1971 newspaper article the OKWPC stated that their purpose was “to elevate the status of all women by working through the legal channels,” and was sure to include that they were “neither passive, nor excessively radical” and wanted to unite those from both parties. Being labeled “radical” in Oklahoma invoked an un-American image that pro-ERA women in the state were highly aware of throughout the debate.⁷⁵ In the coming years, as the battle for the Equal Rights Amendment heated up, the accusation of gender equality as “radical” was used often by those opposed to the amendment through sensationalized chaos that they argued the amendment would create. To Schlafly and Oklahoma conservatives, the term “radical” was used to describe the non-traditional rights and positions within society that women would legally gain access to with ERA.

⁷⁵ “Monks’ Quiz Request Upsets Rights Group,” *Oklahoma City Times*, March 5, 1981; Interview with Wanda Jo Peltier Stapleton, by author, February 29, 2016, Oklahoma City, OK.

It was a way to express the negative changes that these conservatives believed were sure to occur if women in the United States became equal to men.

With the original passage of the Equal Rights Amendment by Congress in 1972, the states had a seven-year deadline for ratification. The first time the Oklahoma House voted on the ERA it was defeated 52-43. The second time the amendment was voted on the following year, it was defeated again by 53-43. In 1975 things looked extremely hopeful, but the House still lacked a two-thirds majority at 51-45 with a “large number of House members undecided on the issue.”⁷⁶

After a disappointing first three years, it became clear to many ERA supporters that this was not going to be the easy fight politicians had predicted. Lobbying, organization, and educational pamphlets were not spurring the necessary support in the Oklahoma legislature. Fearful of making a rash decision, legislators decided to put off the Equal Rights Amendment in order to observe how other states were handling the issue. The large, seven-year window for passage and the small but growing opposition to the amendment also aided in Oklahoma’s decision to take things more slowly. OK-ERA and the OKWPC quickly decided that campaigning for pro-ERA candidates in the upcoming 1976 and 1978 elections was the best option for ratification as the 1979 deadline approached.⁷⁷

Although the Equal Rights Amendment held a long and complicated history well before it ever reached Oklahoma legislators, the amendment’s most important

⁷⁶ Richard Tapscott, “Top salons offering ERA bills,” *Tulsa Tribune*, January 23, 1979.

⁷⁷ Will Sentell, “Bills die early deaths,” *Tulsa Tribune*, February 17, 1978.

chapter was just beginning. Achieving ratification through Congress in 1972 was a major feat in itself and almost fifty years exactly in the making. At seventy-seven years old, Alice Paul lived to see the ERA sent off to the states, but the battle was not over yet; a three-fourths majority approval was still needed for equal rights to become the 27th amendment in the U.S. Constitution.

Despite its complex background, passage of the ERA remained promising during those first five years from 1972 to 1975. Within the first year, thirty state legislators had already approved the amendment, meaning the amendment had only eight more states to go. Support from federal politicians and a majority of the public, as well as the Democratic Party created a sense of hope for the ERA in Oklahoma as well. First, Oklahoma was overwhelmingly blue in state and local politics. Although Oklahoma as a whole voted more conservatively than the more progressive national Democratic Party in the 1960s and early 1970s, the state held a seventy-year tradition of party loyalty that seemed unwavering. Second, the ERA had a large following of national and local organizations within the state. By 1975, the Oklahoma Women's Political Caucus, the American Bar Association, Church Women United, the American Association of University Women, and many others expressed their support for the amendment to legislators and the public. Lastly, the passage of the ERA seemed extremely plausible in the state because of the immediate actions of Oklahoma men and women.

Hannah Atkins, Wanda Jo Peltier, and Clela Deatherage all fought for the ERA because many Oklahoma women had a real interest in its passage. Sexism through outdated marriage laws, social security, inheritance, unequal pay, domestic abuse,

spousal rape, and lack of benefits for housewives and farm wives all needed to be addressed in the state of Oklahoma, and a blanket amendment outlawing sex discrimination would address many or all of these issues. Although many women looked hopefully to their legislators who supported the ERA, a new and growing political revolution was about to transform Oklahoma politics: New Right conservatism. The ERA would soon undergo an impressive rebranding within the media at the hands of these grassroots evangelicals who would completely change the image of the ERA's supporters and, in turn, both their optimism and tactics within the state.



Figure 2.1. Cleta Deatherage. Courtesy of the *Daily Oklahoman*



Figure 2.2. Wanda Jo Peltier. Courtesy of the *Daily Oklahoman*.



Figure 2.3. Hannah Atkins. Courtesy of the *Daily Oklahoman*.

Chapter Three:

The Fight to Create a Facade:

Religion, Family, and the Politics of Perception, 1975-1977

“ERA means abortion funding, means homosexual privileges, means whatever else”

- Phyllis Schlafly

By 1975, those in favor of the Equal Right Amendment in Oklahoma had organized statewide through the Oklahoma Women’s Political Caucus, local NOW groups, and OK-ERA. These organizations did not come together suddenly to support the ERA, but grew from already established social justice groups that advocated for the rights of women, children, the elderly, and even female inmates in the state. The men and women who came from these various social justice groups also continued their activism along with the ERA, which could be distracting at times from the amendment, but began to shape a kind of Oklahoma feminism in the state. These Oklahoma feminists were important for several reasons. First, they used grassroots tactics like campaigning door-to-door for local elections, participating in literature drops, and recruiting new members from across the state through cold calls and ERA coffees. Second, Oklahoma feminists were not monolithic when it came to stances on religion, abortion, gay rights, families, or political affiliations. For example, both Hannah Atkins

and Wanda Jo Peltier were active church members throughout their entire lives, but both also shared information with each other on abortion rights. Although not much is known about Clela Deatherage's thoughts on religion, she did insist multiple times in interviews that the ERA and abortion rights were separate issues, and eventually took a stance against gay marriage in the 1990s. These pro-ERA activists continued to dominate the ERA debate and the amendment's public perception until 1977.

Opposition to the ERA had also begun to organize in Oklahoma, largely through the efforts of Phyllis Schlafly and her groups Eagle Forum and STOP ERA. Uniting with the growing New Right to protect Christian and family values, this nationwide coalition of ERA opponents brought conservative women into Oklahoma's political sphere. Firmly established in the state by 1977, Schlafly and her anti-ERA activists changed the perception of the amendment for many Oklahomans. Using the multifaceted religious and political beliefs of the pro-ERA women in the state, those against the amendment portrayed the ERA as a gateway to extend gay and abortion rights. Schlafly and her supporters also used the dissatisfaction many Oklahomans felt with the Democratic Party to discredit the amendment. As the fear of "women libbers" increased, those in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment insisted that the amendment was mainstream and moderate. In this chapter I argue that feminism in Oklahoma was not just about the ERA, but about expanding social justice throughout the state using grassroots tactics. These local feminists were also highly influenced and encouraged by their churches. Through their varying stances on abortion, women's rights, and Christian values, Oklahoma feminists would defy not just the opposition's idea of what a pro-ERA woman stood for, but their fellow ERA supporters from other states as well.

By 1975, Oklahoma feminists were on the rise. OK-ERA was now the most powerful coalition of pro-ERA organizations in Oklahoma, operating statewide. The group consisted of over forty clubs and a governing board of eight elected officials from the leading supportive groups: the American Association of University Women (AAUW), Business and Professional Women (BPW), Oklahoma Women's Political Caucus (OKWPC), Church Women United (CWU), League of Women Voters (LWV), Jewish Women's Council (JWC), American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).⁷⁸ OK-ERA was a bipartisan group co-chaired by National Democratic Committee woman Edna Mae Phelps and former National Republican Committee woman Dorothy Stanislaus. Honorary co-chairs included Republican Senator and former Republican Governor Henry Bellmon and then Democratic Governor David Boren. Advisors for the organization included Oklahoma City's Hannah Atkins and Tulsa pro-ERA organizer Penny Williams.⁷⁹ The largest concentrations of ERA supporters were in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Norman, and Bartlesville. For their monthly meetings, OK-ERA members would meet in Stroud, Oklahoma, the halfway point between Tulsa and Oklahoma City. OK-ERA was a self-proclaimed grassroots organization that made "education and the continued use of political pressure" its main

⁷⁸ Interview with Penny Williams, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, April 8, 2010, Red Dirt Women and Power Oral History Project, Women's and Gender Studies Department, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma (hereafter Red Dirt Women Oral History Project); Interview with Holly Childs, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, March 13, 2009, Red Dirt Woman Oral History Project.

⁷⁹ OK-ERA Newsletter, October 25, 1976, folder 19, box 11, Hannah Diggs Atkins Collection, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma (hereafter Atkins Collection-OSU).

goals going into the 1976 election season. Lobbying, educating the public, campaigning for pro-ERA legislators, and even running some of their own members for the house were just a few of OK-ERA's tactics.⁸⁰

Not only were the campaign strategies of ERA activists highly focused on the grassroots, their tactics to increase support, education, and membership were as well. Organizers for OK-ERA, OKWPC, and local NOW members were almost all volunteers, using their own funds to organize supporters and new pro-ERA groups in smaller towns all over the state. To drum up and organize support, pro-ERA forces knocked on doors, made cold calls, lobbied legislators, and distributed ERA literature provided by the OKWPC and ACLU at grocery stores and shopping malls.⁸¹ One of Wanda Jo Peltier's favorite tactics was going door-to door in the district of a legislator who claimed his constituents did not support the ERA. She would have those in favor sign postcards stating their support and mail them to the legislator every day until she ran out of cards.⁸² In order to connect new and old supporters, OKWPC member began printing *The Oklahoma New Woman*, a "feminist monthly for the movement," in March 1976, although the name would later change to *Sister Advocate*.⁸³

While those in Oklahoma City focused their efforts on legislators in the state capitol and recruiting members around the metro, organizers in Tulsa and Bartlesville worked on enlisting new supporters in the more rural areas of the state. OK-ERA member Charlotte Bailey was the group's media liaison, and was responsible for press

⁸⁰ OK-ERA Newsletter, n.d., folder 19, box 1, Equal Rights Amendment Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (hereafter ERA Collection).

⁸¹ Randy Splaingard, "ERA Camp Leaders Plan Alan Alda's Return to State," *Daily Oklahoman*, January 1, 1982.

⁸² Interview with Wanda Jo Peltier Stapleton, by the author, February 29, 2016, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁸³ Junetta Davis, "The Shakers and Movers," *Oklahoma Monthly*, March 1976.

releases and acquiring free radio and television spots for ERA advertisements.⁸⁴

Leading Bartlesville recruiters Holly Childs and Harriet Guthrie worked as a team, looking for women to start local ERA groups in the more rural Southern and Eastern areas of the state. Each week they would pick a new area on the map to visit, and then ask Tulsa OK-ERA leader Penny Williams for any leads on supporters. If they had no leads, Childs would sometimes resort to recruitment at the town cemetery. There, the two would look for reoccurring last names or prominent markers that might lead them to a town founder or bigwig in the area. Once they had obtained a few names, they would turn to the local phone book and make cold calls. Childs and Guthrie also began what they called “ERA Coffees” in which they would invite local women (usually those already members of the League of Women Voters) to have coffee and discuss the Equal Rights Amendment in hopes of convincing these local women to start their own OKWPC or OK-ERA chapter.⁸⁵ The pair even got first female principle Chief of the Cherokee Nation Wilma Mankiller to attend a few of their meetings and offer her support for the amendment.⁸⁶

Wanda Jo Peltier jumped at the chance to continue the campaign to elect pro-ERA legislators. She already had a reputation as a dedicated lobbyist and savvy researcher when it came to legislators’ voting records, so she was no stranger to the state capitol. Peltier had now lost two husbands, each time having to fight for her right to couple’s property and pensions. She truly believed that the only way the sexist laws

⁸⁴ Interview with Charlotte Bailey, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, April 4, 2010, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

⁸⁵ Interview with Harriet Guthrie, by Julie Stidolph, April 17, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

⁸⁶ Childs interview.

in Oklahoma could be fixed was through a federal constitutional amendment. With her kids fully grown and no husband, Peltier dedicated most of her time to meeting with legislators or her numerous political organizations including OKWPC, the Shawnee NOW chapter, and the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women. When at the capitol, she could often be found in Hannah Atkins's office. Throughout her lobbying and campaigning for pro-ERA legislators Peltier fully embraced the term feminist, and her pro-choice and pro-church view began to exemplify a broad style of Oklahoma feminism that had ties to the ERA and other social justice causes as well.⁸⁷

While utilizing grassroots strategies like literature drops and door-to-door activism, those in the Oklahoma City area made the state capitol their number one priority. To get the amendment passed, supporters needed to elect legislators who they could trust. During the 1976 and 1980 state house and senate campaigns, many OK-ERA, OKWPC, and NOW members elected their fellow ERA supporters to office to increase the number of "yea" votes for the amendment and also increased the small number of female representatives in the state. In 1976, Cleta Deatherage and Janice Drieling both ran in their districts for a seat in the House, but only Deatherage won, largely because of the strong ERA support in her district of Norman.⁸⁸ Wanda Jo Peltier also ran in 1976, but for state Senate. She did not win, but would have better luck running for the Oklahoma House of Representatives exactly twenty years later.⁸⁹ In 1980, ERA advocates tried their luck again and nominated Ann Savage and Penny

⁸⁷ Interview with Pat Rigler, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, November 6, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

⁸⁸ Interview with Janice Drieling, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, April 17, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

⁸⁹ Junetta Davis, "Oklahoma Women in Politics," *Oklahoma Observer*, December 10, 1978.

Williams for state Representative and state Senate respectively; only Williams secured a seat.⁹⁰ With the election of Williams and five others, the number of women elected to the Oklahoma Congress had doubled from six to twelve by 1981.⁹¹ In addition to successfully electing pro-ERA leaders to the state legislature, Oklahomans for the ERA raised funds for those running for re-election that promised their “yea” vote on the amendment. With their “hope in Cleta,” as Janice Drieling put it, the men and women working towards the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment were still hopeful.⁹² It seemed their biggest obstacle was convincing the last two or three swing voters who always prevented the House and Senate from passing the amendment.

Highly influenced by Hannah Atkins and her reputation as a social justice advocate, Cleta Deatherage began her eight-year career as an Oklahoma House of Representatives member in 1976 with a clear plan. Supported by the pro-ERA groups and their connections, Deatherage made it obvious she would strongly advocate for an increase in education funding along with the needs of women. Although a registered Democrat, she gained a reputation as a fiscal conservative with a knack for cutting spending and waste. Two powerful fellow state representatives took Deatherage under their wings: Hannah Atkins and Speaker of the House Dan Draper.

Naturally, Atkins saw twenty-six-year-old Deatherage as an ally for women’s rights as well as a student who could use an experienced mentor. The two women had met each other several times in passing, as they had both worked for the promotion of the ERA in the years before, but Deatherage’s first years in the state capital truly

⁹⁰ Williams interview.

⁹¹ Warren Vieth, “Starting Over,” *Oklahoma Monthly*, February 1981.

⁹² Drieling interview.

cemented their friendship.⁹³ Deatherage's most surprising and most powerful ally in the Oklahoma legislature, however, was Dan Draper. Deatherage was also a natural ally for Draper, as he was possibly the staunchest ERA supporter in the House beside Atkins. Draper was Speaker of the House position, and also chair of the House Appropriations and Budget Committee.⁹⁴ Deatherage quickly latched on to Draper and was highly influenced by his advice. It seemed he was prepping the young woman for his position in the future.⁹⁵

With two seasoned legislators supporting her, Deatherage continued to campaign on behalf of the ERA. She quickly became the new face of the movement in Oklahoma, as Atkins began to prepare for retirement from the House. Her young face and matter-of-fact arguments attracted attention from many undecided constituents. Her greatest attribute in gaining support and fame, though, was her conservative appeal. Although she was a Democrat and completely supported the ERA, Deatherage understood that the amendment held a different meaning to her fellow Oklahoman feminists than it did to many national supporters like NOW and other, more liberal feminists. Deatherage was a no-nonsense politician and lawyer who interpreted the ERA in strict terms: equal rights under the law regardless of gender. Since the establishment of the legality of abortion through *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, some on both sides of the ERA debate were associating equal rights with abortion rights. Later on, these same forces would also link the ERA with gay rights. No matter what side of the

⁹³ Interview with Hannah Atkins, by Tanya Finchum, June 22, 2007, Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

⁹⁴ Richard Tapscott, "Top solons offering ERA bills," *Tulsa Tribune*, January 23, 1979.

⁹⁵ Interview with Cleta Deatherage, by Tanya Finchum, June 21, 2007, Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

debate they fell on, Deatherage saw them as misinterpreting what the ERA stood for and constituting a real threat to its passage in Oklahoma. By her second term as an Oklahoma Representative, Deatherage had gained national attention for her ERA views and support as the state became a leading and much needed contender for ratification.

Worried that her increased political power might lead Deatherage away from her ERA focus, OK-ERA and OKCWPC kept in close contact with their legislator. They liked the national pro-ERA publicity she provided for the state, but they were concerned that Deatherage's motivations were changing. Deatherage made it clear to ERA supporters that she must look out for her own political career, as well as those of her fellow legislators. By early 1978 it became obvious that the ERA would not garner enough state votes for ratification. Three states short of the requisite number in August of 1978, the U.S. Congress agreed to extend the ratification deadline for another three years. Now that the ERA movement had been given new life, Oklahoma became one of four states targeted as the easiest wins for the amendment. Attracting more attention from both national pro and anti-ERA groups, the local supporters looked to Deatherage with both hope and uneasiness.⁹⁶

While ERA supporters were organizing around the state and within the capitol, state Representative Hannah Atkins decided to address the sexism in the state head on. Although she remained loyal to the amendment, Atkins, like many Oklahoma feminists, had an expansive notion of social justice that exceeded the ERA. Women in Oklahoma needed immediate help. Impatient with the pace of the Oklahoma legislators and hoping to prove to them just how essential the ERA was to the state, Atkins began researching.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Within a few months of the House voting the amendment down, Atkins put her past experience as a law librarian to use, compiling a comprehensive list of every mention of sex on the state books. After finding almost thirty sexist statutes, Atkins began to focus on the laws that disturbed her most, including the legal sex discrimination of state employees and public schools.⁹⁷ The first bill Atkins proposed and passed was one that forbade sex discrimination in state agencies, most notably in employment of pages in the House.⁹⁸ She also co-authored House Bill 1487 with Cleta Deatherage which prohibited sex discrimination in public schools, and also pushed through a separate bill that required re-districting of public schools every ten years in order to make them “more representative of the black community” which resulted in the election of the first black school board member.⁹⁹

Although Atkins successfully passed her bills mandating gender equality in state agencies and schools, she was not so lucky when it came to the prosecution of spousal rape in Oklahoma. Atkins presented a bill making spousal rape against the law and a separate bill addressing domestic violence and a woman’s right to prosecute her husband if he was deemed “violent.” Both bills died in the House. In a public speech in May 1978 titled “Close Encounters of the Domestic Kind,” Atkins stated, “I intend to bring them [the spousal rape and violence bills] both back, and back, and back until they are passed. There is a case pending now in which a husband has been charged in the gang rape of his wife because he assisted two other men. We will see if the charges

⁹⁷ Memorandum, “State Legislative Council, Legal Service Division,” December 12, 1972, folder 19, box 4, Atkins Collection-Stillwater.

⁹⁸ Ginger Hutton, “Views of a Black Woman Politician,” *Arizona Republic*, July 8, 1972.

⁹⁹ HB1487, folder 1, box 3, Hannah Atkins Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (hereafter Atkins Collection-OK Historical Society); Ibid.

stick.”¹⁰⁰ Hoping to make some kind of head way on legalizing spousal rape prosecution, Atkins authored a new bill which “provided that a person could be a convicted of the rape of a spouse if the act was corroborated by an eye witness.” Even with this limiting clause to the law, the House still voted the bill down. During the discussion on the floor an unnamed lawmaker argued that, “in a marriage contract, sexual intercourse is just a part of the deal.”¹⁰¹ Despite her best efforts, the majority of legislators in Oklahoma did not take spousal rape as a serious or punishable offense because of their more traditional views of marriage and gender roles.

Despite the numerous setbacks, Atkins succeeded in the passage of thirteen bills addressing sex discrimination in the state while still actively campaigning for the Equal Rights Amendment in the House.¹⁰² On January 27, 1975, the University of Oklahoma declared the day “Hannah Atkins Day” in honor of her hard work for women, people of color, the elderly, and children in the state. She had told the crowd she was confident the Equal Rights Amendment would win over the necessary thirty-eight states before the 1982 deadline. She concluded her speech saying, “All that I have done is what each one of you who is committed to the cause of human dignity and equality has done. Can we think of another name for this day which could embody the spirit of all the women and men and young and old persons?” Atkins remained one of the ERA’s biggest

¹⁰⁰ Hannah Atkins, “Close Encounters of the Domestic Kind,” speech, Oklahoma Health and Welfare Association, May 4, 1978, folder 14, box 11, Atkins Collection- OK Historical Society.

¹⁰¹ “House Derails Measure on Rape of Wife,” *Daily Oklahoman*, March 3, 1977.

¹⁰² Warren Vieth, “Starting Over,” *Oklahoma Monthly*, February 1981.

supporters in the state and continued to inspire her fellow OKWPC, NOW, and OK-ERA members throughout the amendment's life in the state.¹⁰³

Along with lobbying and campaigning, Peltier, like Atkins, also worked on many state-based and grassroots programs to help better the lives of Oklahoma women outside of the ERA. One of her first social justice projects was establishing rape crisis centers for women who were victims of sexual abuse. After being nominated to the Governors' Commission on the Status of Women, Peltier also helped women in Oklahoma penitentiaries gain equal access to work and recreational facilities afforded to their male counterparts.¹⁰⁴ One of Peltier's proudest moments was when she partnered with the State of Oklahoma's Department of Education to create a program assisting what she called "displaced homemakers." As a homemaker once herself, who had to brave the job market with little work experience, Peltier wrote a guide and curriculum for teaching stay-at-home moms how to get back on their feet in the event of the death or divorce of their husbands. Peltier saw logic and education as the ERA movement's strongest tools and she promoted the positive changes the ERA would create for Oklahoma's homemakers and farm wives.¹⁰⁵ To show support and that she meant business, Peltier and other members of the OKWPC were known to attend court hearings of local women going through divorce, child support settlements, or employment discrimination suits.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Hannah Atkins, "Speech on Hannah Atkins Day," University of Oklahoma, January 27, 1975, folder 14, box 11, Atkins Collection- OK Historical Society.

¹⁰⁴ Junetta Davis, "Breaking the Bonds," *Oklahoma Monthly*, folder 26, box 37, ERA Collection.

¹⁰⁵ Wanda Jo Peltier, *Displaced Homemakers: Vo-Tech Workshop Guide*, 1978. Given to the author by Peltier.

¹⁰⁶ Rigler interview.

With united grassroots organizations like OK-ERA and the OKWPC and dedicated activists and legislators on its side, politicians and citizens alike were confident that the ERA would gain approval in Oklahoma before the 1982 deadline. Another contributing factor to this continued confidence was the lack of organized opposition in the state. The ERA would not become a partisan issue until Ronald Reagan rescinded its Republican support when he became president in 1980. Before this, the ERA “was a staple of both parties’ presidential platforms,” including those of Jimmy Carter, and almost every governor, including Oklahoma’s David Boren (1975-1979) and George Nigh (1979-1987).¹⁰⁷ It was not until the mid-1970s that the ERA became largely associated with radical feminism and “gender neutral” fears and began to lose strength. After the United States Supreme Court ruled abortion legal in *Roe v. Wade*, conservatives and religious fundamentalists began to unify against one common enemy: the ERA.¹⁰⁸

While grassroots organizers for the ERA multiplied in Oklahoma, those against the amendment were beginning to connect with their own, very powerful grassroots movement: the New Right.¹⁰⁹ Sociologist Ruth Murray Brown argues “the anti-ERA organizations, which became the nucleus of the pro-family movement, was born the weekend after the ERA’s defeat in Oklahoma.”¹¹⁰ Although attributing the New Right’s birth to 1972 and in Oklahoma specifically is largely an overstatement, the ERA did

¹⁰⁷ Rick Perlson, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 520-1.

¹⁰⁸ Ashlyn K. Kuersten, *Women and the Law* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 40.

¹⁰⁹ For more on the rise of the New Right, see Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New Right* (Princeton, Princeton University, 2001); Michelle Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2012); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

¹¹⁰ Ruth Murray Brown, *For A “Christian America:” A History of the Religious Right* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 30.

play a large role in uniting conservatives in Oklahoma and, in turn, mobilizing the New Right. Historian Rick Perlstein writes, “For many Middle Americans it [the ERA] was the most horrifying development imaginable—the one thread that, once pulled, might unweave the fabric of civilization itself.”¹¹¹ Moving from her focus of anti-communism to the moral corruption of the United States, Phyllis Schlafly became the matriarch of the grassroots conservative movement against the amendment.¹¹²

In the early 1960s, Schlafly became well known in Republican circles for her book on then presidential candidate Barry Goldwater titled *A Choice Not an Echo*.¹¹³ Ironically, Goldwater tried to distance himself from Schlafly’s far-right conservative ideals during his campaign, and she was largely considered an extremist until the mid-1970s. Historian Daniel Critchlow argues that, after the Watergate scandal that lasted from 1972-1975, the Republican Party rebranded itself from one of big business and elites to the party of the average white American citizen, an image that Schlafly skillfully utilized.¹¹⁴

After publishing her article “What’s Wrong With the ERA?” and seeing its relative success in slowing the ERA’s progress in Oklahoma, Schlafly organized a new conservative organization she called STOP ERA (Stop Taking Our Privileges) in September of 1972.¹¹⁵ Although Oklahoma natives like Ann Patterson began their own groups, including Women for Responsible Legislation, Schlafly quickly absorbed these

¹¹¹ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 520-1.

¹¹² Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 62.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 109-10.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 132-3, 143, 214.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 217-8.

local pockets of opposition under one organization with one leader and one focus.¹¹⁶ By November of 1975, the anti-ERA activists were fully united to fight the amendment in Oklahoma with Schlafly's second organization: Eagle Forum. Branded as the "alternative to women's liberation," Eagle Forum and STOP ERA worked in tandem to rouse mostly middle-class housewives and conservative Christian fundamentalists to protect their way of life and the morality of their children.¹¹⁷ Although the anti-ERA movement would eventually join the New Right and involve itself with a range of issues, in the 1970s and early 1980s it had one extremely focused goal: to kill the ERA.

The real difference between those for the ERA and those against it was a very old issue that had plagued the women's movement since the 1920s. The question of whether women are fundamentally the same or different from men is really what split the women of the 1970s. Most feminists believed that women were capable of the same activities as men, and that it was society that created and designated sex roles that continued to constrain women. Those against the ERA thought that men and women were different beings completely, and that biology rendered women more suited for motherly roles and housework.¹¹⁸ In order to defend their way of life as homemakers, ERA opponents in Oklahoma organized under OK STOP ERA. As the most powerful anti-ERA group in the state, it attracted support from other groups including Women Who Want to Be Women, the Farm Bureau, and most importantly the Eagle Forum. OK STOP ERA owed much of its fame to Schlafly and her conservative and national Eagle

¹¹⁶ Interview with Shirley Hilbert-Price, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, May 6, 2010, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

¹¹⁷ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 221.

¹¹⁸ For more on same v. difference debate see Nancy F. Cott's *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 138-142.

Forum members and subscribers. Schlafly used her public persona as a “conservative author, newspaper columnist, attorney, U.S. Senator, and self-professed housewife” to a husband and six children to give authority to her cause, although many of those who opposed her questioned how she justified being a working mother when her organization STOP ERA and Eagle Forum promoted motherhood as the primary role of women. During the 1970s Schlafly went on multiple speaking tours, several of which landed her in Oklahoma, where she urged women to stay in the home where God wanted them.¹¹⁹ With ERA opposition growing throughout the nation, Schlafly ruled her anti-ERA organizations almost like a dictator. She was the only official leader and face of the movement, making the pro-family program highly united, efficient, and successful.

Schlafly maintained the argument that women are fundamentally different from men. In her article “A Different View of Women’s Nature,” she argued that the difference between the sexes is biological. “Women are simply not the equal of men,” she stated after arguing that men are physically stronger and more competitive because of their increased sex drives.¹²⁰ Schlafly constantly accused those in support of the ERA of wanting to make the United States “gender free,” which she claimed would put an end to many institutions including single-sex schools, clubs, bathrooms, and prisons.¹²¹ She also maintained that “unsexing” the nation would force housewives into the workforce and eliminate the tradition of the man taking care of the his wife and

¹¹⁹ David Wilson, “ERA debaters play to Tulsa university audience,” *Tulsa Tribune*, October 26, 1979.

¹²⁰ Phyllis Schlafly, “A Different View of Women’s Nature,” in *Modern American Women: A Documentary History*, ed. Sarah Ware (Columbus, Ohio: McGraw Hill, 2001).

¹²¹ Phyllis Schlafly, “How ERA Would Change Federal Laws,” *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, November 1981.

family.¹²² In 1977, Schlafly told the *Houston Chronicle* that the Equal Rights Amendment would “take the wife out of the home and away from her family. The ERA proponents want to restructure us into a gender free society in which you are not free to make any distinctions between men and women.”¹²³ Schlafly viewed gender difference as a vital, God-made distinction within society. The world needed men and women to perform their ascribed roles in order to function. She also argued that this would lead women to discriminate against men and children, causing a dip in childbirth and increased numbers of abortions.¹²⁴

Because of Schlafly’s contentions about God and gender, how the ERA was interpreted biblically became extremely important to Oklahomans. Most opponents of the amendment disagreed with the constitutional equality of the sexes because they believed it went against God’s word. According to historian Darren Dochuk, evangelical Christians, those who “focus their attention on missions, evangelism, and any endeavor that gave priority to spiritual revival and personal salvation,” viewed the ERA as a direct attack against their religion and the morality of the nation.¹²⁵ These conservative Christians (largely Church of Christ, Baptist, and Methodist members) accounted for 43.3% of the Oklahoma population and 74% of the states’ anti-ERA protesters.¹²⁶ For the nation as a whole, 98% of those opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment claimed membership to a Christian church, compared to 31-48% of those

¹²² David Wilson, “ERA Debates Play to TU Audience,” *Tulsa Tribune*, October 26, 1977.

¹²³ Jim Barlow, “Conference Foes Pack Arena, Attack ERA and its Supporters,” *Houston Chronicle*, November 20, 1977.

¹²⁴ Schlafly, “Different View of Women’s Nature.”

¹²⁵ Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2011), 121, 348-9.

¹²⁶ Ruth Murray Brown, *For a Christian America*, 69-71.

in support of the ERA.¹²⁷ Political scientists Samuel A. Kirkpatrick David R. Morgan, and Thomas G. Kielhorn assert that thirty-two percent of Oklahomans polled in 1971 claimed membership to a fundamentalist Christian church (almost half identified as Southern Baptist), making Oklahoma the third largest fundamentalist state in the nation behind Mississippi and Alabama by less than three percent.¹²⁸ Living in the Bible Belt proved a crucial factor in the mid-1970s since the ERA came to be portrayed as immoral, anti-Christian, and anti-family by those against it. Evangelical Christians in Oklahoma would come to make up a majority of those opposed to the ERA but, unlike the stereotypes the New Right would advertise, many Oklahoma men and women who supported the ERA were church members as well.

A majority of the female anti-ERA activists had viewed politics as no place for a lady in the past, but the ERA debate brought them into the political realm. Overall, the ERA represented conservatives' fears of an anti-family, anti-God nation. Equal rights for women meant that women would no longer hold an elevated status, and respect from men would diminish. As *Tulsa Tribune* journalist Jeffery Hart wrote in 1980, "the New Right is a political 'phenomenon' focused more on cultural than political issues. They are defenders of a way of life that has merged with the new mass evangelical Christian to produce a new and powerful political force on the American scene."¹²⁹ Yet the political issue dividing women, the ERA, was based in cultural issues. The New Right supporters waged war against abortion, pornography, prostitution, homosexuality,

¹²⁷ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 221.

¹²⁸ Samuel A. Kirkpatrick, David R. Morgan, and Thomas G. Kielhorn, *The Oklahoma Voter: Politics, Elections, and Parties in the Sooner State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 29-30.

¹²⁹ Jeffery Hart, "Two big stories benefit Reagan," *Tulsa Tribune*, July 31, 1980.

school textbooks, and busing; somehow, in Oklahoma, anti-ERA activists convinced many that the ERA was the wellspring of all of these sins.

By 1977, the anti-ERA activists in Oklahoma were both highly organized and focused, and began to successfully transform the perception of the ERA from moderate and popular to radical and unnecessary. Under the guidance of Schlafly herself, STOP ERA men and women in the state began organizing large bus trips to the capitol through their churches to protest the ERA and lobby legislators. Schlafly was meticulous in her leadership skills and tactics, and she understood the importance of appearance. The training workshops Schlafly ran, in which she taught women how to dress, what colors to wear, what and how much makeup to put on, how to approach legislators, and how to handle criticism were all a testament to the importance of perception. “Above all,” historian Donald Critchlow writes, “Schlafly emphasized the importance of conducting oneself as a lady.”¹³⁰ Schlafly recognized early on the importance of presentation and the power of the media over public perception. She understood the importance of conveying passive, feminine charm when it came to influencing legislators as well. Many of those who Schlafly trained were highly passionate about stopping the amendment, and confrontation began to increase between parties on both sides. When supporters and opponents of the ERA showed up for a televised debate or radio show, OKWPC member Debbie Blaiser said situations would sometimes become physical. “They would pinch and poke us,” Blaiser stated in an interview conducted in 2009. “I was in such shock. They would look at us and say ‘That’s not how we do things here.’ But I lived here, too!” She also tells of a time when she was riding her bike back from a

¹³⁰ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 224.

rally at the capitol and was egged by some men yelling about feminists.¹³¹ Those against the ERA in Oklahoma truly believed the amendment was a part of a much larger, national liberal agenda that supporters in the state had been naively drawn into. To these conservative evangelical Christians, the ERA was un-Oklahoman and unwarranted.

Those in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment in Oklahoma quickly became aware of the impact that STOP ERA and Eagle Forum members were having on the state. By the late 1970s, the ERA and those who supported it were equated with “anti-Christian” and “anti-family” values. For backers of the amendment in Oklahoma, this simply was not true. Almost every man and woman ERA supporter interviewed by the University of Oklahoma’s Women’s and Gender Studies Department from 2009-2010 claimed a religious affiliation. Compared to the 31-48% of religious ERA supporters on a national level, the numbers of religious Oklahoma supporters were significantly higher. Also, a large majority of those who participated in interviews had children at the time of the debates, with some even bringing their children along to ERA rallies and events. To counter this stereotype of being against families and religion, many Oklahoma feminists proudly declared their Christianity, dedication to motherhood, and even got their churches and pastors involved in ERA activism.

From the beginning, OK-ERA, OKWPC, and NOW members in Oklahoma held numerous religious affiliations that included Episcopalian, Baptist, Jewish, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Mormon. The most notable religious supporters were Baptist minister Gene Garrison of Oklahoma City, Catholic nun and professor Dr. Marie Lueke, and

¹³¹ Interview with Debbie Blaiser, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, April 13, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

University of Tulsa Law School Dean Frank Reed, a lifelong Mormon.¹³² Many churches around the state, including Church of the Servant in Oklahoma City, University United Methodist Church in Norman, and All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa also graciously allowed local ERA organizations to use their grounds for activist meetings, ERA prayers, or meet ups after rallies.¹³³ Most notable were the ERA prayer vigils held every year at the state capitol by the Oklahoma Religious Committee for ERA (OKRCERA). This organization was “an interfaith coalition of major religious groups proposing a national effort to demonstrate widespread religious support” and maintained affiliations with over thirty denominations. Led by Reverend Dianna Moore, the Sunday, November 15, 1980 rally attracted more than five hundred participants in a candlelit prayer for passage of the ERA and legal justice for women.¹³⁴

Two female ERA leaders also found a way to demonstrate their faith while volunteering their time towards the passage of the amendment in Oklahoma. Mary McAnnaly was the director of the Women’s Center for Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry. She also worked for OK-ERA part-time while training to become a minister.¹³⁵ Mattie Morgan, who also lived in Tulsa, was the spokesperson for the United Methodist Church, and an outspoken defender of the ERA in the state. In an “Equal Rights Resolution” that Morgan oversaw, the Oklahoma United Methodist Church, which

¹³² Williams interview; “Who’s Who” *Oklahoma Monthly*, n.d., miscellaneous box 1, Wanda Jo Peltier Stapleton Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (hereafter Peltier Stapleton Collection).

¹³³ “Equal Rights Action,” *Oklahoma Coalition for Equal Rights Newsletter*, March 1976, folder 19, box 1, ERA Collection; “Meet Up in Tulsa,” *OK-ERA Newsletter*, November 1978, folder Oklahoma 2, box 32, Sarah Weddington’s Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

¹³⁴ “OKRCERA,” *OK-ERA Newsletter*, January 1979, folder 11, box 19, Atkins Collection- Stillwater; “Equal Time,” *OKWPC Newsletter*, November 1980, miscellaneous box 1, Peltier Stapleton Collection.

¹³⁵ Interview with Mary McAnnaly, by Julie Stidolph, November 11, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

“consisted of about 1200 laymen and ministers,” had “unanimously” adopted a church resolution supporting the Equal Rights Amendment. The resolution also stated:

Particularly significant about this adoption is that the delegates to this conference represented a definite cross-section of Oklahoma-persons of small, rural areas; delegates from liberal and conservative churches; ministers who serve in small parishes; ministers from the metropolitan areas.¹³⁶

In this resolution, the ministers emphasized the ERA’s support with Oklahomans from all different locales and political backgrounds. This was a conscious decision to portray the amendment as mainstream and well received by all kinds of Oklahomans, particularly men. By stating that “a majority of the delegates were men,” the ministers were purposely dispelling the impression of the ERA as not just a women’s only issue, but a men’s issue, too. After her success with the United Methodist Church’s leadership, Morgan moved on to coordinate all of the churches in the state that supported the ERA in 1977.¹³⁷

As far as her faith was concerned, both Hannah Atkins and her husband Charles were life long Episcopalians. Both even attended Episcopalian universities. As the charges against the Equal Rights Amendment became increasingly dramatic, portraying the measure as a violation of God’s idea of gender roles, Atkins created a new organization she named Interfaith Alliance. In her words, the group united Christians from all denominations in order to dispel the “misinformation of the so-called Religious Right.”¹³⁸ When giving a speech on the subject in 1975, Atkins calmly stated, “For

¹³⁶ “Oklahoma United Methodists Adopt Equal Rights Resolution” Department of Family Life Ministries, May 30, folder 10, box 19, Atkins Collection-Stillwater.

¹³⁷ Interview with Mattie Morgan, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, November 16, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

¹³⁸ Interview with Hannah Atkins, by Bill Moore, May 20, 2001, H2001.007.05, Oklahoma Historical Society Oral History Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

those who believe that inequality is decreed by God, all I can say suggest is that we pray that they see the light.”¹³⁹

When it came to the matter of family, a majority of the pro-ERA men and women in Oklahoma were parents. In fact, many of their children rallied the amendment right along with them. Bartlesville duo Holly Childs and Harriet Guthrie often brought Child’s three-year-old son, Bill, on their recruiting quests. Eventually, they put him to work at their ERA Coffees by reading to the spectators a mother-goose-like story of the top ten arguments made against women’s suffrage in the earlier part of the century. In a Victorian-style costume, Bill would read, “Women are too emotional. If women get the vote they will neglect their husbands and children and they’ll start smoking cigars...” According to Childs, these arguments against suffrage were “exactly the same kinds of arguments we were getting about the Equal Rights Amendment,” and she hoped participants would see the parallel as well.¹⁴⁰ Margaret Cox, an ERA supporter from Tulsa, often brought her pre-teen daughter to events including a large protest rally held at the capitol on June 6, 1982. Even 25 years after the amendment’s defeat, Cox proudly displayed a photograph of her daughter holding one of the banners in her living room.¹⁴¹ Marvin York, who was president pro tempore of the state Senate from 1980 to 1982, was a staunch supporter of the ERA because of the influence of his mother, wife, and teenage daughter. York’s daughter also often accompanied him to

¹³⁹ Hannah Atkins, “Speech on Atkins Day,” January 27, 1975, Norman, Oklahoma, folder 14, box 11, Atkins Collection-OK Historical Society.

¹⁴⁰ Childs interview.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Margaret Cox, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, May 23, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

ERA meetings and fundraisers.¹⁴² Most notable was Wanda Jo Peltier's toddler grandson, who often wore ERA t-shirts to his elementary school and attended a rally with Peltier and his mother (Peltier's daughter) in Chicago.¹⁴³

Hannah Atkins, too, held the multiple identities of ERA supporter, mother, and church member, something fairly common among Oklahoma feminists. During her first campaign Atkins' oldest son, Edmund, created a youth support group of junior high and high schools kids called "Hannah's Helpers." The boys and girls in the group would dress up in bright neon colors, hold signs, and sing cheers of support for Atkins. As her reputation in Oklahoma City as a staunch defender of children grew, so did Hannah's Helpers, with many of the young female participants earning internships in politics.¹⁴⁴ It was her children, two sons and one daughter, who largely inspired her fight to ratify the ERA in the state. Speaking to the OKWPC, she stated, "The time for sleeping beauties is passed. We cannot afford to sleep our lives away. We cannot afford to sleep our daughters' lives away. We cannot afford to sleep our futures away. So much is at stake."¹⁴⁵ Atkins understood not only the importance of equal rights in Oklahoma, but also the rare opportunity her generation had to pass the ERA and secure the rights of many generations of women to come.

Overall, many Oklahoma feminists used their families and religious beliefs to combat the propaganda of the anti-ERA forces and to portray the ERA as a mainstream, non-radical, and even conservative idea. Unfortunately, the perception of the ERA as a

¹⁴² Interview with Marvin York, by the author, January 28, 2016, Norman, Oklahoma.

¹⁴³ Interview with Wanda Jo Peltier Stapleton, by the author, February 29, 2016, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Hannah Atkins, by Carol Koss, n.d., folder 12, box 8, Hannah Diggs Atkins Collection-Stillwater.

¹⁴⁵ Hannah Atkins, "Atkins' speech to the OKWPC," November 5, 1972, folder 12, box 11, Atkins Collection-OK Historical Society.

part of a larger feminist project was bolstered by national ERA groups and leaders. It became more and more complicated for Oklahomans to support the ERA and maintain that abortion and gay rights were separate issues with figures like Bella Abzug and organizations including the ACLU and NOW ardently supporting these measures on equal but separate platforms. Unhappy with the association between the ERA and “libbers,” one Tulsa woman, Doris Plume, wrote to News Channel 6 about their recent coverage of the issue.

My concern is with T.V.’s coverage of the Equal Rights Amendment, when ‘ERA Supporters’ are equated with ‘Women Libbers.’ I feel this is a definite misunderstanding on the part of the media. There are millions of homemakers, and women who are head-of-households, who strongly support the Equal Rights Amendment. They do not consider themselves ‘Women Libbers.’ I am a homemaker who agrees with our President’s [Jimmy Carter] view that, in order to seek ‘human rights’ for the rest of the world, they must first be extended here to American women.”¹⁴⁶

While those opposed to the ERA became more and more successful in their use of the media to make the amendment seem too radical for Oklahoma, those in support of the ERA became frustrated with the anti-ERA groups and those who assumed the ERA was merely a tool of the liberal feminist agenda that included abortion and gay rights.

Although many feminists in Oklahoma were pro-choice, including Deatherage, Peltier, and Atkins, they viewed these as separate issues from the ERA and wanted to keep them that way if it meant an easier passage for the amendment. Despite most national ERA supporters arguing for equal rights, access to safe abortions, and increased rights for the gay community on separate platforms, these issues continued to be purposely collapsed by the opposition to discredit the amendment. Becoming frustrated with the

¹⁴⁶ Doris Plume (Mrs. John) to T.V. Channel 6 of Tulsa, Oklahoma, folder 19, box 1, ERA Collection.

conflation, many Oklahomans supporting the ERA felt they were being misrepresented by both sides of the debate for constitutional gender equality.

Oklahoma Representative Clela Deatherage also saw the need to be mainstream when it came to structuring ERA arguments. Deatherage had an interview or quote about the ERA featured in an Oklahoma paper almost every week in the late 1970s. She would calmly explain that the ERA would not create government oversight or “affect laws pertaining to biological differences or privacy.”¹⁴⁷ If passed, she argued, the Oklahoma laws that violated the ERA would be voted on and changed by its own state legislators such as herself. Deatherage was also quick to defend the ERA against association with abortion or gay rights. As far as the public was concerned, pro-ERA activists did not discuss abortion for fear that it would become even more associated with the ERA. Atkins also followed this rule, although she did correspond with Peltier on abortion rights in private.¹⁴⁸ Quoting National Woman’s Party president Elizabeth Chittick, Deatherage declared publically, “Until men can have an abortion, it has nothing to do with sex discrimination. ERA is to prevent discrimination between the sexes with equality under the law.”¹⁴⁹ By interpreting the amendment in a straightforward manner, Deatherage hoped to quell any question that the ERA represented more than its three short and plainly stated articles.

¹⁴⁷ “Several groups backing ERA, city reader says,” *The Norman Transcript*, nd, folder 10, box 52, ERA Collection.

¹⁴⁸ Wanda Jo Peltier to Hannah Atkins, November 9, 1981, folder 11, box 11, Atkins Collection-OK Historical Society.

¹⁴⁹ Malvina Stephenson, “Soothing Troubled Waters: ERA Aftermath,” *Tulsa Tribune*, April 4, 1982.

The meaning of the Equal Rights Amendment, what it proposed and what it would *do*, experienced a major shift in public perception from 1975 to 1977. Far from the early years of confidence that excited men and women all over the state who wanted gender equality under the law, activists now watched in disbelief as their identities were misinterpreted by those on both sides of the ERA debates. Schlafly and her STOP ERA organizers declared that an end to Christian America and the traditional nuclear family was approaching because of the ERA. On the opposite end of the debate, national groups like NOW and the ACLU had no problem maintaining public pro-choice, pro-gay, and pro-ERA platforms simultaneously.¹⁵⁰ A majority of Oklahoma ERA supporters found themselves fighting a losing battle. While many supporters could easily identify with STOP ERA members because of their similar religious backgrounds and dedication to their families, the two groups were obviously at odds over what constituted the legal, inalienable rights of women. Although Oklahoma feminists generally supported abortion rights, the leaders in the state made a point not to conflate the two issues because they understood how delicate the ERA was in the increasingly conservative state. As activist Penny Williams put it:

You want to just give them a jolt to make them look again because they think they've written you off, they've labeled you. You're a women's libber, you're a feminist, you're on the margins, you're at-you know, at an extreme end of some kind and you're not mainstream. Wrong. That was something that we were trying to do, was to show that the Equal Rights Amendment was just this mainstream American 'blah, blah, blah' to make it so boring. I remember one of the things I did was never call it the ERA, always call it the Equal Rights Amendment.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 225.

¹⁵¹ Williams interview.

As Williams as well as others understood, being labeled a “women’s libber” or radical could easily mean the end of the ERA movement in Oklahoma. Those in support of the amendment fought not just for the ERA to fit into the mainstream and conservative ideals of the state, they hoped to make women’s equality the new status quo. The hope and effort of both sides did not end here, though. The battle for Oklahoma was just heating up in late 1970s. The 1977 National Women’s Conference in Houston and the extension of the ERA’s deadline to June 30, 1982 would reinvigorate and accelerate, in some cases, the tensions between amendment supporters and the New Right. Because Oklahoma would be the only unratified state with a supportive governor, house speaker, and president pro tempore in the Senate, it became one of three main target states for national pro-ERA campaigns. In the early years, pinching, poking, and eggings were bad enough. In the years to come, these confrontations over the ERA grew to include stuffed rats, charges of communism, Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation probes, and even death threats.



Figure 3.1. Young girl at the OKWPC Rally at the University of Oklahoma, February 1980. Courtesy of the *Oklahoma Monthly*.

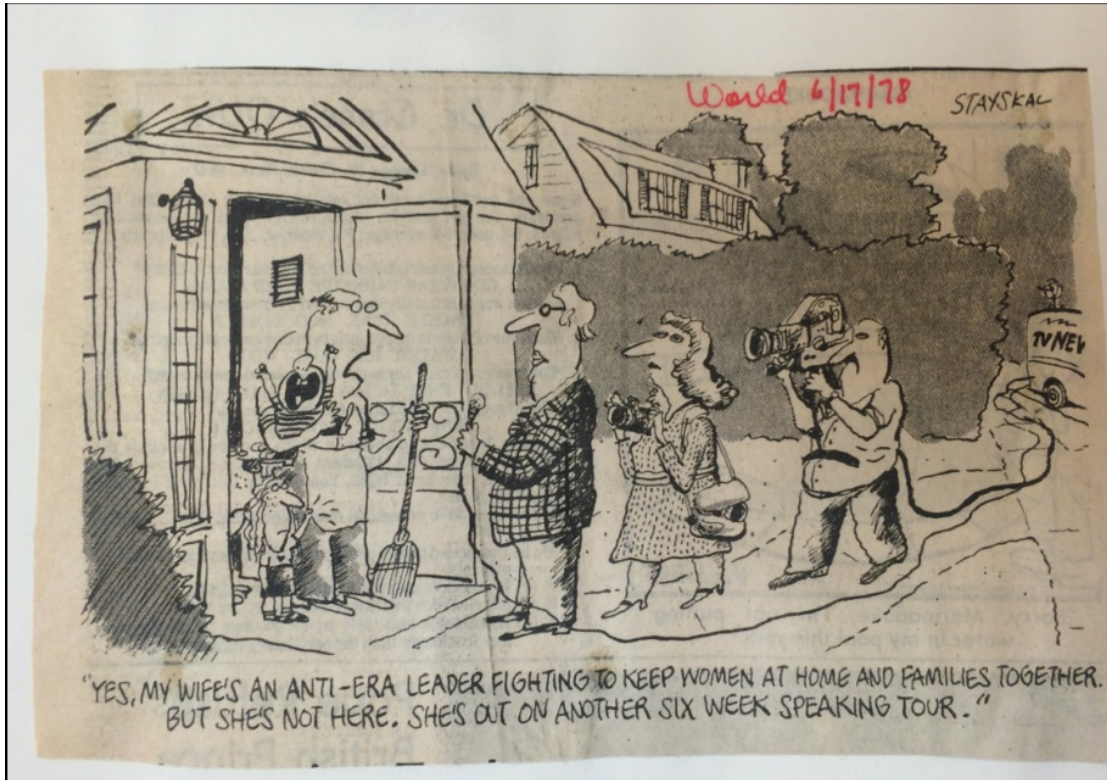


Figure 3.2. Political cartoon pointed at Phyllis Schlafly and other anti-ERA supporters that reads: “Yes, my wife’s an anti-ERA leader and fighting to keep women at home and families together. But she’s not here. She’s out on another six week speaking tour.” Courtesy of the *Tulsa World*.

Chapter Four:

Southern Hospitality:

Oklahoma Deals with National Attention, 1977-1982

“Mondale or Jesus himself wasn’t going to change their minds.”

-Marvin York

Since 1972, tensions between supporters and opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment had been slowly building. In those early years, activists on both sides of the amendment had debated each other indirectly; they held separate rallies and meetings, lobbied legislators one-on-one, and utilized grassroots campaigning techniques like literature drops. Phyllis Schlafly had participated in a few public debates, but no mass confrontations between the two groups in the state had occurred. Despite the lack of face-to-face discussion, there was still a divide between these women that went deeper than politics. While many Oklahoma feminists supported the amendment because they wanted to protect women from the sex discrimination that existed in the state’s laws, those opposed to the ERA worried the amendment was too extreme, unnecessary, and violated God’s word. Anti-ERA activists in Oklahoma continued to portray the amendment as radical and anti-Christian, and Oklahoma

feminists did not take those accusations lightly. These frustrations over religion, family, and women's rights would only intensify from 1977 to 1982.

As animosity over the ERA grew in Oklahoma, I argue that several national issues would force these opponents to face each other directly, further polarizing the two camps. The 1977 National Women's Conference was the first event that put activists on both sides of the ERA into physical contact with each other. Because Oklahoma was allotted a certain number of delegates to the conference, the opposing sides were forced to face each other and their issues during nominations. After this face off, the upcoming deadline and building frustration with the pro-family women led some Oklahoma feminists to become more confrontational and vocal about the amendment, prompting a small number of pro-ERA activists to embrace radical tactics aimed at the opposition during the last few years of the struggle. These women were also highly influenced by women's liberation groups around the country. Lastly, the interest of national NOW leaders and the ERA Countdown campaign in 1981 raised tensions in the state even higher. As Oklahoma became overwhelmed with pamphlets, radio and television advertisements, rallies, and newspaper articles about the ERA from both sides, the state became a local and national battleground at the most vital moment of the amendment debate. When all the dust settled and the outsiders went home in 1982, Oklahoma feminism and the political atmosphere in the state looked very different.

In 1975, the United Nations celebrated the International Year of the Woman with a conference in Mexico City dedicated to women's politics around the world. It was so successful, the UN declared the next ten years the International Decade for Women and encouraged every country to take part in bettering the lives of its female populations.¹⁵² The United States Congress responded by appropriating \$5 million dollars for its own National Women's Conference to be held in Houston, Texas in November of 1977.¹⁵³ President Gerald Ford wanted the conference to educate American citizens on the Equal Rights Amendment and hopefully give the measure the final push it needed as the clock ticked down on the ratification timeline. President Ford named Bella Abzug, a U.S. House Representative and long time women's and gay rights activist from New York, to oversee the conference.¹⁵⁴ Two thousand delegates were chosen from the fifty-six states and territories, but it was estimated that at least 18,000 more people would show up to observe or protest the conference; fifty charter buses arrived from Tennessee alone.¹⁵⁵ The biggest names in women's rights attended, including Rosalynn Carter, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, Betty Ford, Lady Bird Johnson, and of course important opponents like Phyllis Schlafly came, too.¹⁵⁶

Initially, pro-ERA activists viewed the national conference as an opportunity to revitalize the movement and gain more publicity and supporters, but it eventually

¹⁵² "History of the U.N. Decade for Women," *The UNESCO Courier*, November 1978.

¹⁵³ National Women's Conference Handbook, November 18-21, 1977, folder 5, box 12, Hannah Diggs Atkins Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

¹⁵⁴ For more on the life and political career of Bella Abzug, see Bella Abzug, *Gender Gap: Bella Abzug's Guide to Political Power for American Women* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984); Alan Howard Levy, *The Political Life of Bella Abzug, 1920-1976: Political Passions, Women's Rights, and Congressional Battles* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013).

¹⁵⁵ Jim Barlow, "Conference's foes pack arena, attack ERA and its supporters," *Houston Chronicle*, November 20, 1977.

¹⁵⁶ Peggy Simpson, "2,000 Women to Map Future in Houston," *Tulsa World*, November 11, 1977.

became a spectacle for the New Right, who used the more liberal resolutions put forth by the conference to link the ERA to radicalism. The first sign of trouble occurred in 1976, early on in the National Women's Conference process, when it was time to nominate and approve possible platforms and delegates from Oklahoma to the conference. Held in Stillwater, Oklahoma, the statewide delegate meeting lasted three days. The first two ended peacefully with the over 500 attendees agreeing to make the ERA a priority of the meeting. On the last day, when delegate nominations and resolutions were to be voted on, an estimated 1,300 (or by some accounts up to 2,000) people showed up and crammed into the Student Union at Oklahoma State University where the meeting was held. The newcomers, who were mostly evangelical Christians and STOP ERA members, had every right to participate because they were registered Oklahoma voters. Accompanied by a few men, the anti-ERA women watched their leaders attentively. When a resolution was up for a vote, the men would raise their hands, clothed in red gloves, and their women would vote accordingly. The newcomers to the meeting voted down almost every presented platform, and succeed in securing many of their own delegates to the national conference scheduled for the following year.¹⁵⁷ This meeting was to elect delegates to represent the needs and goals of Oklahoma women, and conservative anti-ERA activists wanted their voices to be heard as well.

The OK-ERA and OKWPC members in attendance were both dismayed and fearful of their safety with the arrival of the new guests. Although activists on both sides

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Janice Drieling, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, April 17, 2009, Red Dirt Women and Power Oral History Project, Women's and Gender Studies Department, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma (hereafter Red Dirt Women Oral History Project); Interview with Harriet Guthrie, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, April 17, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

of the ERA had met at television tapings or passed each other in the halls of the capitol, this was the first time the opposing sides were meeting directly over the issue that divided them. OK-ERA leader Ann Savage recalled the event: "...we could feel tension, the hate, it was nasty, it was frightening. And then, all of a sudden, we saw these big-bulky men were walking up and down the [aisles]. I remember I called Bob, my husband, and was like, 'Can you come up and be our protectors?'" Harriet Guthrie also had a similar experience at the meeting, stating, "I felt hated. I had never felt hated before." Many of the planned speakers became uneasy about giving their presentations to the new crowd. One unnamed woman confessed to Savage and the others that she was too afraid to give her speech, muttering, "I can't do it." Trying to mend the situation, Savage asked for volunteers to replace the woman, but the group fell silent. "No one was really saying anything about it and suddenly this woman stepped up and she said 'I'll do it,'" Savage recalls. The brave woman was Sister Mary Luebke.¹⁵⁸ In response to the disruption, two hundred pro-ERA men and women walked out, hoping to dismantle the meeting and any progress those against the amendment were making. In the end, all twenty-two chosen delegates for the national conference were anti-ERA representatives.¹⁵⁹ Janice Drieling, the nationally appointed delegate to the conference and head of the meeting, spent thirteen hours on the stage trying to manage the event.¹⁶⁰ Anti-ERA activists had managed to secure nominations in fourteen other states,

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Ann Savage, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, April 6, 2010, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

¹⁵⁹ Debbie Camp, "Delegates will 'speak out' at conference," *Tulsa World*, November 3, 1977.

¹⁶⁰ Guthrie interview.

including Ohio, Missouri, and Utah, through similar tactics to those used in Oklahoma.¹⁶¹

When the National Women's Conference convened in 1977, women opposed to the ERA made their presence known. Inside the conference they protested any support for the amendment and caused many men and women to walk out yet again. The delegates from Oklahoma in particular opposed almost every resolution proposed, including involvement with "battered women, child abuse, child care, education, rape, international affairs, and homemakers," stating the measures were too socialist.¹⁶² Instead, the Oklahoma delegates brought their own resolutions to the table that included opposition to gay rights, the rights of unmarried couples, access to contraceptives and abortion for minors. One called for the "recognition of homemaking as the most vital and rewarding career for women." Overall, anti-ERA delegates accounted for fifteen to twenty-five percent of the national delegates, successfully using the meeting to gain publicity for their cause and successfully derailing most discussions about the amendment.¹⁶³

As disputes came to a head inside the conference, protestors picketed, blew horns, and shouted "Immoral Women's Year!" outside of the arena. A few blocks away, Schlafly held her own conference, one she dubbed the "Pro-Family Rally," in the Houston Astros Arena. Schlafly's forces protested almost every measure the delegates debated, stating the only women being represented inside were "lesbians and

¹⁶¹ Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 245.

¹⁶² Susan Witt, "Sooner women say proposals 'too socialistic,'" *Tulsa Tribune*, February 21, 1977.

¹⁶³ Debbie Camp, "Delegates will 'speak out' at conference," *Tulsa World*, November 3, 1977; Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 245.

libbers.”¹⁶⁴ The socially conservative conference called for “the defeat of the ERA and a return to God, family, and country.” One reporter described the scene as militant, stating, “they thunderously shouted ‘Yes!’ to resolutions calling for a constitutional amendment against abortion, defeat of the ERA, a ban on federally-funded child care centers, and laws which would allow homosexuals to teach in schools.” The protest conference attendees also compared the government childcare centers to Hitler youth camps.¹⁶⁵

Even after the National Women’s Conference and the Pro-Family Rally, Oklahoma anti-ERA activists continued to use the conference to discredit the amendment and “women’s libbers.” An Oklahoma pro-family delegate from the conference, Grace Haigler, collected what she called “artifacts” from the conference to show Oklahomans exactly what the ERA represented and how their \$5 million in tax dollars was spent. The presentation of these artifacts was simply called “the display.” The so-called proof of the gay agenda and socialism actually came from the vendors outside of the conference and were not in fact promotional materials or resolutions from the actual conference itself. All paying vendors were allowed to set up their own booths with merchandise around the arena, of which less than 10% were affiliated with lesbian or Marxist-inspired groups. Despite the display’s willful distortion and misrepresentation, it was informally set up in the lobby of the Oklahoma State Capital in January of 1978 for the public to view. It was also mounted just in time for the opening state legislative session. Those who flocked to see the “display” were outraged. Pro-ERA women from Oklahoma charged that it did not represent the conference at all,

¹⁶⁴ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 245.

¹⁶⁵ “ERA foes will continue battle,” *Tulsa Tribune*, February 21, 1977.

and that the items had to have been bought in some kind of sex shop.¹⁶⁶ Either way, the damage was done and the people of Oklahoma were left wondering if the ERA represented what its supporters were telling them. In one dramatic article, *Daily Oklahoman* journalist Nick Thimmesch wrote, after seeing the “display”:

NOW and other militant women’s ‘liberation’ groups somehow thought that the ERA movement should also include militancy on behalf of abortion-on-demand, special rights for lesbians, and even “sexual independence” demonstrations featuring stimulated lovemaking between lesbians and exhibits of dildos and other apparatus a female can use alone.¹⁶⁷

In Oklahoma, the ERA opponents capitalized on the fear that feminists were mostly lesbians or sexual deviants looking to expand their abortion rights. The pro-family’s display was so successful in Oklahoma, Phyllis Schlafly had it travel around the country. When shown to Kentucky legislators who had already voted to ratify the ERA in their state, they asked to rescind their vote three days later.¹⁶⁸ By 1982, the display had grown to over sixty sheets of poster board and had travelled to more than thirty states.¹⁶⁹

Despite the opposition, the National Women’s Conference did succeed in passing a few progressive resolutions to deliver to then President Jimmy Carter. The Reproductive Freedom Resolution suggested abortion coverage by private insurance and federal funds, more family planning and sex education in public schools, government funded childcare, and an end to involuntary sterilization. The conference was also truly a breakthrough for gay rights in the nation, as the delegates also put forth

¹⁶⁶ Ruth Murray Brown, *For a “Christian America:” A History of the Religious Right* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 118.

¹⁶⁷ Nick Thimmesch, “Supporters to Blame for ERA’s Woes,” *Daily Oklahoman*, June 6, 1978.

¹⁶⁸ “Woman’s Meet Materials to Be Displayed Here,” *Tulsa World*, June 18, 1978.

¹⁶⁹ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 248.

the Sexual Preference Resolution which advocated for an end to discrimination based on sex and sexual orientation and the end to all state laws prohibiting sex between same sex consenting adults. Many historians argue that these ideas and resolutions were either too far removed from the more liberal politics of the 1960s or too far ahead of their time to gain real traction with the American public. Supporters of the New Right fundamentally disagreed with the Equal Rights Amendment and the idea that women needed a constitutional amendment mandating legal equality among sexes.¹⁷⁰ As one self-proclaimed “foe” of the conference told the *Tulsa Tribune*, “This will make us more determined to become involved in political campaigns across the state and nation now,” after being encouraged by Schlafly to return home and “have their own battles.”¹⁷¹

After the National Women’s Conference of 1977 and the damage done by “the display” the following year, Oklahomans in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment remained hopeful as they still had a number of powerful national supporters on their side. President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, were both staunch proponents of the amendment and had been instrumental in getting the ERA’s deadline extended. President Carter had also recently appointed ERA supporter Sarah Weddington, the attorney who successfully defended the abortion rights of Jane Roe (whose real name was Norma L. McCorvey) in *Roe v. Wade* (1973), as his special assistant on women’s issues.¹⁷² At the state level, Oklahoma had two famous women supporting the ERA: Wilma Mankiller, the first female principle Chief of the Cherokee Nation, and famous

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 246-7.

¹⁷¹ “ERA Foes Will Continue Battle,” *Tulsa Tribune*, February 21, 1977.

¹⁷² “ERA is ‘In the Air,’” *The Oklahoma Eagle*, November 16, 1978.

Oklahoma historian Angie Debo.¹⁷³ Most importantly, Oklahoma remained the only unratified state in the nation with a supportive governor, house speaker, and president pro tempore serving in its capitol. It was not the national figures that would influence Oklahomans, many local supporters argued, but those who were for the ERA right there in the state.

Wanda Jo Peltier's grassroots organizing also gave many Oklahoma ERA supporters hope. In 1980, Peltier became chairwoman of the OKWPC, a position to which she dedicated herself. The ERA deadline had just been extended until 1982, meaning both sides of the debate were preparing for the final countdown. During her four years of leadership, Peltier expanded the organization at a phenomenal rate. In 1982 alone the OKWPC raised over \$16,000 to aid the ERA fight, logged in five thousand campaign hours, and built the OKWPC into the third largest state organization of its kind, measured on a per capita basis.¹⁷⁴ As president of the now most powerful pro-ERA group in the state, Peltier's would utilize this power by pressuring Oklahoma leaders to take a stand for the ERA.

In July of 1981, Peltier attended the tenth annual National Women's Political Caucus Convention in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The goal of the conference was to come up with a strategy that would grab the attention of states that had yet to ratify the ERA. The delegates had less than one year before the amendment would expire. Coincidentally, the National Governors' Conference, held a few months later, would meet in an unratified state: Oklahoma. The delegates of the NWPC decided to contact all the

¹⁷³ Angie Debo to the Office of the Head Librarian, n.d., folder 19, box 6, Equal Rights Amendment Collection.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Wanda Jo Peltier, interview by Tanya Finchum, May 16, 2007, Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

governors from the thirty-five ratified states and urge them to boycott the National Governors' Conference in support of the ERA and to pressure Oklahoma legislators to change their votes.¹⁷⁵ When the national leaders called the motion to a vote, Peltier did not give her support. She knew the measure would come off as bullying, radical, and highly influenced by pro-ERA forces outside of the state (which would not be well received by Oklahomans). Despite her protests, the delegates voted in favor of the measure and Peltier decided to support her organization and write the letters.¹⁷⁶

Peltier's letters to the governors were met with mixed responses. Most of them explained that the ERA was near and dear to their hearts, but punishing Oklahoma was not the answer. Others saw the boycott as absurd; after all, the governor did not get a say in how his or her state legislators voted. One article in the *U.S. News and World Report* stated that a few governors were feeling "reluctant to commit themselves to attending" because their wives did not appreciate that the meeting was to be held "in a state that refused to ratify the ERA."¹⁷⁷ In the end, none of the lobbied governors boycotted the meeting and Peltier had to deal with a very angry Governor, George Nigh of Oklahoma.

Unfortunately, influence from national organizations and outsiders like Peltier had feared earlier continued to be unavoidable. The National Organization for Women was the largest national group to set up shop in the state in order to gain approval for the ERA. NOW grew exponentially in the late 1960s and early 1970s with chapters across the nation, and continued to thrive as the women's liberation movement took off. As for

¹⁷⁵ "Peltier Reveals Strategy," *Daily Oklahoman*, July 14, 1981.

¹⁷⁶ "ERA groups split on governors' meeting," *Tulsa Tribune*, April, 13, 1982.

¹⁷⁷ "Several governors are reluctant to commit," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 3, 1982.

the Equal Rights Amendment, NOW had always supported its passage and made it the group's top priority after 1972. With the ERA's deadline approaching and still three states short, NOW decided to spend their last year working on what they called the ERA Countdown Campaign. The organization sent representatives, resources, and funds to the four unratified states they thought stood the best chance of ratifying the ERA: Oklahoma, Florida, Illinois, and North Carolina.¹⁷⁸ National president of NOW, Eleanor Smeal, thought their assistance in these states would finally give the ERA the backing and support it needed. NOW opened ERA Countdown Campaign offices in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, and Norman, each with its own out-of-state leader and "field coordinators." Even the nominated leader for the entire state of Oklahoma, Ruth Adams, was brought in from Indiana.¹⁷⁹ The *Daily Oklahoman* reported the Norman ERA Countdown Campaign office would honor Hannah Atkins on its opening day November 24, 1981; this, at least, was something local and out-of-state ERA supporters could get behind, but this unity would not last long.¹⁸⁰

Because Oklahoma feminists had worked hard to portray the ERA as a mainstream initiative that was beneficial to the state, some local groups including the OKWPC and OK-ERA had mixed feelings about NOW and the national attention it received. Religious coordinator Mattie Morgan was on the fence about the newcomers, as she did remember some resentment between the state and national groups, but only over money. Wanda Jo Peltier was informed that NOW would be taking over the lobbying of legislators from the major metropolitan areas of Oklahoma, while her local

¹⁷⁸ Clay F. Richards, "ERA could survive if...?," *Tulsa Tribune*, January 27, 1979.

¹⁷⁹ "ERA Office Open; Challenge Issued," *Oklahoma City Times*, November 30, 1981.

¹⁸⁰ "Equal Rights Amendment Plot Strategy," *Daily Oklahoman*, November 24, 1981.

group could work on the rural representatives less likely to flip on the issue. Many of the local group members had been volunteering their time and effort for years, and resented outsiders with little experience in the area receiving compensation for their time.¹⁸¹ Harriet Guthrie held similar feelings when NOW set up shop in the state: “They had money and resources and didn’t understand Oklahoma at all, but at that point I don’t think any of us understood Oklahoma.”¹⁸² Many pro-ERA activists were beginning to realize how conservative the state had become since the beginning of the debates in 1972.

In October of 1981, NOW began a “media blitz” throughout the state, buying radio and television advertisements to promote the ERA.¹⁸³ They also paid celebrities to come into Oklahoma and endorse the amendment. Actor Alan Alda held a speaking tour across seven Oklahoma cities, and singer/actress Mary Kay Place held an ERA rally at the University of Tulsa. But as Peltier had warned the year before during the governor boycott discussion, Oklahomans did not respond well to promoters from outside of the state. One woman wrote to the *Tulsa Tribune* angry at the spotlight NOW had put on Oklahoma; she argued that the state could make up its own mind and worried that her fellow citizens were not “thinking for themselves.”¹⁸⁴ Many locals saw NOW as trying to throw money at the amendment and did not like celebrities and other national leaders being brought in to influence their opinions.

¹⁸¹ Interview with Mattie Morgan, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, November 16, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

¹⁸² Guthrie interview.

¹⁸³ “OK Targeted for Extensive Media Blitz for ERA,” *Oklahoma Times*, October 10, 1981.

¹⁸⁴ “Letters to the Editor,” *Tulsa Tribune*, January 15, 1982.

Overall, NOW spent an estimated \$200,000 on the ERA Countdown Campaign in the four targeted states, with little to show for it.¹⁸⁵ The national groups also continued to exclude local leaders like Peltier from meetings and strategizing. Peltier was conveniently left off guest lists for conferences, and when she would show up and try to work with national leaders, she was ignored. With such marginalization, Peltier and the OKCPC lost its statewide influence and the local, mainstream appeal the organizations had worked so hard for.¹⁸⁶

Cleta Deatherage had similar feelings to Peltier when it came to national influence and Oklahoma. As the June 30, 1982 deadline approached, Deatherage insisted that she and other Oklahoma ERA supporters were not on the same page as NOW and other national leaders of the movement when it came to interests outside of the amendment itself. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter invited Governor George Nigh and other Oklahoma legislative leaders, including Deatherage, to the White House to discuss the ERA battle in their state. During the visit with the Oklahoma leaders, Carter suggested visiting the state as a way to influence more legislators to support the ERA. Insisting that it would only make things worse, Deatherage asked that President Carter not address the people of Oklahoma, arguing that the President and his administration did not know enough about the ERA and its issues in Oklahoma, and would therefore only anger the locals.¹⁸⁷

This was not the first time Deatherage had distanced herself and the state from national organizations. In June of 1978, after the National Women's Conference had

¹⁸⁵ Associated Press, "ERA Forces Organizing," *Daily Oklahoman*, December 1, 1981.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Wanda Jo Peltier Stapleton, by the author, February 29, 2016, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

¹⁸⁷ Mike Flanagan, "Carter to Offer Aid to State ERA Push," *Tulsa World*, January 24, 1979.

come to a close, Carter decided to create a presidential advisory committee on women. Carter asked Bella Abzug, the 1977 conference organizer, to co-chair the committee along with a more conservative partner to get a full range of opinions. Cletha Deatherage, the state representative from Oklahoma, was his first choice. Shockingly, Deatherage turned the President down, stating that Abzug was “not a representative of the majority of America’s women” and that she was setting the women’s movement back by “embracing gay rights, which is not a mainstream issue.” ERA opponents in the state were already conflating these very issues to discredit the amendment. Deatherage argued that putting gay rights and abortion alongside the ERA would seriously hurt the effort in Oklahoma.¹⁸⁸

Although Deatherage’s colleague and friend Oklahoma Senator Marvin York confirmed that at the time she was privately pro-choice, Deatherage did have a point when it came to the abortion issue’s potential to undermine the ERA.¹⁸⁹ Historian Donald Critchlow writes, “the abortion issue was especially divisive, as many ERA leaders tried to separate reproductive rights from the ERA. On the other hand, leaders in NOW and some local American Civil Liberty Union lawyers tried to further reproductive rights by bringing suit under state ERA laws.”¹⁹⁰ Many ERA supporters initially hoped that the amendment would strengthen abortion rights, but quickly changed their tunes when it seemed as though this association might prevent the ERA from passing. In a letter to then President Ronald Reagan in 1980, Schlafly herself encouraged him to “make the ERA distasteful to the ERAers and Democrats by locking

¹⁸⁸ Peggy Durham, “Bella Abzug...a Great Legislator,” *Sister Advocate*, May 1978.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Marvin York, by the author, January 28, 2016, Norman, Oklahoma.

¹⁹⁰ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 225.

it into other constitutional amendments, especially Right-to-Life.”¹⁹¹ While campaigning in Oklahoma in 1981 and 1982, national President of NOW Eleanor Smeal did not comment on abortion, but instead accused STOP ERA members of a “smear campaign” for running advertisements that “claimed ERA supporters favored such other causes as humanism, socialism, and homosexuality.”¹⁹² The connection that ERA opponents made early on between abortion rights and the amendment was only strengthened by the ambivalence of liberals to act on the charge until it was too late.

While Deatherage thought her decision to not be a part of the National Advisory Committee would help the ERA in Oklahoma, she suffered backlash from national and local ERA supporters. Many Oklahoma organizations understood her position, but saw the great advantage being a co-chairman could have brought to the state and its more moderate movement. Peltier’s OKWPC was especially disappointed in the missed opportunity of the National Advisory Committee for Women. At this point, it seemed the twenty-eight-year-old Deatherage placed the growing conservative ideology of the state ahead of women’s issues. The political atmosphere in the state was becoming increasingly hostile to liberals, and as an Oklahoma politician, she viewed this as her best move.¹⁹³

In 1980, the ERA faced another setback at the hands of national politics when Carter lost his bid for reelection to Ronald Reagan. Running on conservative platform and gaining the support of the New Right, Reagan became the first president since

¹⁹¹ Phyllis Schlafly to Ronald Reagan, “Memorandum,” White House Staff and Office Files, Edwin Messe Collection, folder ERA, box 0A9449, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives, Simi Valley, California.

¹⁹² John Greiner, “ERA Rejected Again in the Senate,” *Daily Oklahoman*, January 20, 1982.

¹⁹³ Richard Tapscott and Will Sentell, “ERA and Oklahoma,” *Tulsa Tribune*, June 13, 1978.

World War II to drop the Equal Rights Amendment from his agenda. As a close friend and ally of Schlafly, Reagan also worried a constitutional amendment for gender equality under the law could have unwanted repercussions. Instead, he adopted what he called the “50 States Project” in October of 1980, whose goal was to “identify and change laws at the state level which discriminated against women.”¹⁹⁴ To show his good faith to women, President Reagan also appointed several women to his cabinet and the first female Supreme Court Justice, Sandra Day O’Connor. Of course, Schlafly was not shy about disagreeing with Reagan on women’s equality, stating, “I think it’s nice to have a woman on the Supreme Court. It’s obvious that she got the job because she’s a woman.”¹⁹⁵ Schlafly was also not completely satisfied with President Reagan’s stances on women’s employment and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. She boldly testified to the Senate Labor and Human Resources Commission against the EEOC’s guidelines on sexual harassment in 1981, proclaiming, “men seldom make passes at virtuous women.”¹⁹⁶ Despite her criticisms, President Reagan respected Schlafly, and his popular conservative politics only strengthened the anti-ERA leaders’ influence within the Republican Party.

By 1981, national face-offs had filled supporters and opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment in Oklahoma with animosity towards each other. The June 30, 1982 deadline to approve the ERA was fast approaching, and local pro-ERA women were butting heads with both Schlafly’s STOP ERA and Eagle Forum members and also

¹⁹⁴ Ronald Reagan, “Memorandum, October 1981,” White House Staff and Offices, Elizabeth Dole Collection, folder ERA 3, box 26, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives, Simi Valley, California.

¹⁹⁵ Randy Ellis, “Opponent of ERA Finds Mixed Reception,” *Daily Oklahoman*, October 17, 1982.

¹⁹⁶ Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 277.

some of the national NOW coordinators. In the first few years of the lobbying wars at the capitol, Oklahomans in favor of the ERA were cast by the New Right as radical and un-American. Now, under the Presidency of Reagan, Schlafly was attacking the very femininity and virtues of women's rights advocates asking for equal pay and equal protection under the law. To defend their identities as human beings first, and then women and mothers, ERA supporters in Oklahoma created many different outlets of which to channel their frustrations.

Frustrated with anti-ERA activists controlling the perception of the amendment, many ERA supporters began to push back. One of the tactics used early on by pro-family women in Oklahoma was to bake breads, cookies, and other treats and distribute them at the state capitol. Not wanting to come off as unladylike by lobbying legislators directly, they would set up big tables with anti-ERA signs along with their goodies, and the strategy was fairly successful. To counter this, pro-ERA women also began delivering baked goods and pies during the last few years of the campaign. According to Mattie Morgan, the women mimicked STOP ERA's big tables of food, only their signs read, "Baked By Liberated Women." During the 1981 and 1982 legislative terms, many ERA supporters also pinned white flowers to the lapels of legislators for the amendment (white and green were the colors of those for the ERA, similar to the suffragists, while the antis always wore red).¹⁹⁷ As the lively competition of baked goods between the factions became more noticeable, Wanda Jo Peltier challenged the pro-family women who called themselves the Housewives League to a bake-off.

Although none of the members would join Peltier, she did have several other volunteers

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Becky Patton, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, March 9, 2010, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project; Mattie interview.

including one man from Oklahoma City. Peltier won, and was awarded an Equal Rights Amendment apron.¹⁹⁸ In another sarcastic jab back at the opposition for accusing pro-ERA women of being unladylike, the OKWPC held a fashion show fundraiser in the Governor's Mansion in 1978. Modeling high-end clothing from Ruth Meyers, a prominent dress shop in downtown Oklahoma City, the organization attracted an impressive crowd of men and women. Above the catwalk hung a banner that read, "Current Trends in Fashion and the Law."¹⁹⁹ Not only were these grassroots campaign techniques good for public support, they also gave ERA supporters a chance to reclaim their femininity from their opponents.

While these earlier lobbying tactics were based mostly in challenging the conservative's view of womanhood, a new, more radical sect of Oklahoma feminism emerged in 1982. Highly influenced by women's liberation groups and often conducted by college-aged women, their protests veered away from the mainstream image many Oklahoma feminists like Hannah Atkins and Cleta Deatherage had fought so hard to create. The idea of dressing the part of a lady inspired OKWPC and OK-ERA members Jackie Kinney and Cynthia Hoyle to start a new kind of protest, something they called a "guerilla theater group." Inspired by other chapters around the country, Ladies Against Women (LAW) became an outlet for many ERA activists' frustrations with the pace of politics in the state and also a sarcastic, entertaining way to respond to the conservatives who still felt the need to tell women how to dress, when to speak, and the importance of

¹⁹⁸ Peltier interview, February 29, 2016, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

¹⁹⁹ Interview with Penny Williams, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, April 8, 2010, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

a male escort.²⁰⁰ Donning white gloves, dresses, pillbox hats, lace hankies, and the Reverend Feelwell as their leader and overseer, the fifteen or so members of LAW would perform skits for different organizations around the state and also picket at the capitol and other public events. In an interview from 2009, Hoyle elaborated on LAW, stating, “All of us were very involved and dedicated in our professional volunteerism or jobs, but we needed something else, and a part of it, I think, was a sense of celebration of the ERA, because it was getting very hard to be happy, positive, and joyous about it when people were being very negative and ugly.”²⁰¹ The activists who made up LAW were looking for an outlet to express their frustrations, fearing that the battle over the ERA was all but over in Oklahoma.

Making their public debut on March 30, 1982 during President Ronald Reagan’s visit to the state capitol, LAW members Lee Agnew, Debbie Blasiar, Lonnie Colder-Agnew, Cynthia Hoyle, Mary Katherine Long, Linda Terrell, and Susan Wood, who were all college students at the University of Oklahoma, held signs that stated, “I’d Rather Be Ironing,” “Truly Needy Women Should Get Married,” “Protect Fathers From Child Support,” and “59 Cents is Just Too Much!” The properly dressed ladies and the Reverend also chanted and sang to onlookers, “Social Security, what’s that for? We’ll get by scrubbing the floor!” Many spectators and even members of the press could not decide if the women were being serious or not, so the Reverend Feelwell decided to up the ante. He ended the demonstration by silencing the women and stating:

²⁰⁰ Interview with Debbie Blasiar, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, April 13, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

²⁰¹ Cynthia Hoyle in Ladies Against Women Interview, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, June 27, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

The rally for Ladies Against Women was funded and sponsored by several local and national groups, including the National Association for the Advancement of Rich White Straight Men, the Vulture Forum, Mothers for World Domination, League to Protect Separate Bathrooms, Bedtime for Bonzo Anti-Evolution League, Voice of the Unconceived, and Future Fetuses of America.²⁰²

These direct and inflammatory affronts upset many conservative Oklahomans, while others found the protestors either humorous or confusing. Either way, these performances did little to promote the amendment.

After creating publicity at the capitol, members of Ladies Against Women ventured out to other events in Oklahoma City and Norman that they felt needed some of their humor when it came to women's rights. Once at a Norman carnival put on by the Lion's Club, a few members of LAW noticed a fair game called the Titty Buster. Mary Katherine Long described the scene: "...it was pictures of women's heads over cardboard cut-outs of their chests, covered in t-shirts and balloons for breasts, and you won a prize by throwing a dart and popping the women's breasts." The outrageousness of the game combined with recent reports of a serial rapist in Norman caused Long, Debbie Blasiar, and Paul Young to gather protesters around the game. When asked to leave, the women started a sit-in at the carnival that eventually led to them being threatened with arrest and being escorted off of the property. After going to the papers, the Lion's Club eventually apologized.²⁰³

LAW created another scene at the 1982 Miss University of Oklahoma Pageant. The members were outraged by the unequal scholarship opportunities available to male

²⁰² "Ladies Show 'Love' for Reagan," *Oklahoma Free Press*, March 30, 1982; "'Ladies Against Women' Satire ERA Opposition with Hankies, Gloves," *Arkansas Gazette*, June 6, 1982; Hoyle interview.

²⁰³ Mary Katherine Long in Ladies Against Women Interview, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, June 27, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

and female students, particularly due to athletics, and the degrading acts including parading around in a swimsuit that the scholarship pageant required. Inspired the feminist protest at the 1968 Miss America Pageant, Long tried to compete in the event as Bella Pure, Miss USDA Prime Perennial Beauty Contestant. In a frightening turn of events, some fraternity members in the audience became upset with the LAW protestors and tried to force them out.²⁰⁴

Unfortunately, this was not the only time the women faced unhappy and vocal spectators. While protesting Phyllis Schlafly's visit to the University of Oklahoma, a few LAW members reported being followed to their cars by angry men and women who wrote down their license plate numbers and even tried to follow them home. A few of the members also found out years later that the Oklahoma Bureau of Investigations was tapping their phones. And it was not just pro-family conservatives and Schlafly followers who disapproved of their behavior.

The out-of-staters from NOW and Representative Cleta Deatherage also did not like the publicity and message Ladies Against Women was creating. Because most pro-ERA groups were trying to appeal to the increasingly conservative state and fight accusations of radicalism, they worried LAW would undermine their progress. Working for NOW during the ERA Countdown Campaign, Cynthia Hoyle had this to say about her experience: "The NOW people started putting restrictions on us. They wanted to approve all of the organizations and activities that I participated in outside of work." After nine months, Hoyle quit her work with NOW when the restrictions became too

²⁰⁴ Giff Palmer, "Beauty Queen Uses Winnings for Education," *Daily Oklahoman*, March 1, 1983; Mary Katherine Long and Linda Terrell in Ladies Against Women Interview, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, June 27, 2009, Red Dirt Oral History Project.

excessive. “I think the lesson I carried away from all of this was that I don’t like extremists.”²⁰⁵ Although she was referring to extremists on both sides of the ERA debate, Hoyle and Ladies Against Women used far more extreme tactics than NOW members in Oklahoma ever did.

There were also other ERA supporters in Oklahoma who became so fed up with charges of radicalism that they turned to more radical tactics. John Monks, a state representative from Muskogee, was perhaps the most notorious anti-ERA legislator in the capitol.²⁰⁶ He was also known to keep an American flag in his desk and a recording of the national anthem in case anyone speaking sounded radical or communist. After throwing both Mattie Morgan and Wanda Jo Peltier out of his office and accusing them of being communists, some of the women decided to take a jab back at him. Calling themselves Radical American Feminists or RAF (according to Peltier, you have to growl when you say RAF to fit the “intimidating” description) to remain anonymous and to also play up the stereotype he had given those in favor of the ERA, the group sent Monks a “stuffed toy rat with a yellow stripe down its back.” Enraged by their actions, Monks demanded that the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation find the members of RAF as they might be dangerous to him and the public. When it came to light that the investigation would be paid for out of taxpayers’ pockets, Monks eventually dropped the idea.²⁰⁷ Another legislator, Senator John Young of Sapulpa, attracted the attention of ERA supporters when he gave a passionate speech against the

²⁰⁵ Randy Ellis, “Opponent Finds Mixed Reception at University,” *Daily Oklahoman*, October 17, 1982; Hoyle interview.

²⁰⁶ Lee Hockstader, “Okl. Initiative Tackles Tradition,” *Washington Post*, November 2, 2012.

²⁰⁷ “Monks’ Quiz Request Upsets Rights Group,” *Oklahoma City Times*, March 5, 1981; Wanda Jo Peltier Stapleton, February 29, 2016, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

amendment, stating, “I’m not against the ERA because I hate women. I’m against the ERA because I love women!” In retaliation, some of the ERA supporters, including Pat Rigler, sent a singing playboy bunny to Young’s office since he “loved women so much.” According to Rigler, the stunt made the news all the way down in Dallas, Texas.²⁰⁸

Even as pro-ERA activists experienced further marginalization, they continued to hold out hope. First, according to the *Daily Oklahoman*, “two independent polls showed a majority of Oklahomans with opinions on the ERA favor its passage.” The paper reported that of the four hundred citizens polled, over forty-four percent wanted the amendment to pass in the state, while almost thirty-eight percent of the sample did not want the ERA to be approved. Seventeen percent answered that they were “uncertain” or did not wish to answer.²⁰⁹ Second, Oklahoman ERA advocates had captured the attention of the new president pro tempore of the Senate, Marvin York.

By 1981, York had served in the Oklahoma House and then the Senate for a total of thirteen years. He was a close ally of Cleta Deatherage, Dan Draper, and, most importantly, Hannah Atkins. When interviewed in 2016, York could not say enough about Atkins. “She was a classy lady. She took a lot of heat from the black community for focusing on women’s rights, but she was above all of that.” After focusing his first year as the leader of the state senate on housecleaning issues, York decided that 1981 was the year for what he called a “political philosophical” reform. He stated, “We

²⁰⁸ Interview with Pat Rigler, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, November 6, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

²⁰⁹ Paul Scott Malone, “Poll Gives ERA Slight Edge,” *Daily Oklahoman*, January 14, 1982; Randy Slaingard, “ERA Camp Leaders Plan Alan Alda’s Return to the State,” *Daily Oklahoman*, January 16, 1982.

needed to do something that was actually really important and could benefit the state and the country as well. I had in my mind that the Equal Rights Amendment was what I was talking about.” According to York, he had wanted to do something to reform the sexist laws in Oklahoma since the 1970s when he watched his widowed mother fight in probate court for the rights to her own farm. York’s wife, a surgical nurse, and his teenage daughter had also inspired him to throw his political weight behind the ERA.²¹⁰

Because the Oklahoma House had not voted on the ERA since 1975, House Speaker Dan Draper publicly announced that the ERA would not be brought up again in the House unless the Senate passed it first. Although York had been secretly lobbying for “yea” votes for the past six months, he did not announce his advocacy for the Equal Rights Amendment in the media until December 2, 1981, a month before the new legislative session was to begin. This, according to York, was when all hell broke loose.²¹¹

With the word out about this new ERA champion in the Senate, NOW’s ERA Countdown Campaign, STOP ERA, and even former vice president Walter Mondale rushed to the state. There were rumors that if Oklahoma approved the amendment, Missouri and Florida would follow suit, upping the total number of supportive states to the minimum of thirty-eight needed to add an amendment to the constitution.²¹²

Television and radio advertisements on both sides of the issue increased. Activists immediately reinvigorated their campaigns. At the capitol, which welcomed back its members on the first Tuesday of 1982, legislators became caught in the crossfire

²¹⁰ York interview, January 28, 2016, Norman, Oklahoma.

²¹¹ John Greiner, “Senate Leader Launches Push for ERA Approval,” *Daily Oklahoman*, December 2, 1981.

²¹² Rigler interview.

between activist. Quoting from an article he had written back in 1979, reporter Chuck Ervin noted, “Legislative offices and corridors in the capital have turned into battlegrounds on several occasions by pro and anti-ERA factions, who have fought bitterly over the controversial issue.”²¹³

At home, York disconnected his phone in order to stop its constant ringing by harassers. “They called me a lot of things: baby killer, sinner. They even questioned my masculinity... These fundamentalists and Republicans were never for it [the ERA]. They thought women had been given the vote and that was enough.” York’s wife also began receiving calls. At work, other senators criticized him for allowing out-of-state money to influence his vote and the people of Oklahoma. The out-of-state money did not bother York because, according to him, both sides of the debate had used help from outsiders for sometime.²¹⁴ ERA supporters were finally realizing that this could no longer be argued as a local issue separate from out-of-state interests; the whole nation was watching Oklahoma and waiting for the state’s legislators to make a decision.

For Oklahoma ERA activists, York seemed to reenergize their movement after losing so much ground to their opponents. Although Hannah Atkins retired from her position as a representative in 1980 when her husband suddenly fell ill, she was still very involved with the ERA campaign through the OKWPC. On December 6, 1981, just days after York’s public announcement of his intention to pass the amendment, the Oklahoma Women’s Political Caucus held a statewide convention at the University of Oklahoma for the first time since 1975. Wanda Jo Peltier organized the convention and

²¹³ Chuck Ervin, “Carter Invites Nigh, Solons to Discuss ERA Ratification,” *Tulsa Tribune*, January 1, 1979.

²¹⁴ York interview, January 28, 2016, Norman, Oklahoma.

Atkins was named the keynote speaker. There she had some striking words to say to her fellow activists as she, too, began to promote more radical tactics. To a crowd of young and old, of men and women, Atkins stated, “I believe we must be militant. We can’t just rock back and sip tea... The gentle approach is not working.”²¹⁵ Peltier, too, had rejuvenated hopes in the amendment’s passage. In a letter to Atkins she wrote, “Hannah, I really believe we are going to get it this time. There is really a lot of grassroots support. We are going door to door in twelve towns/cities. Problem, of course, is a handful of legislators who are really going to get it if they don’t change their ways.”²¹⁶ Not even a death threat left on her answering machine at home that year was going to stop Peltier from continuing her activism for the Equal Rights Amendment. About the threat she stated, “I was terrified when I would come home at night after that because I lived alone at the time. My sweetheart made me carry a gun just in case.”²¹⁷

It was true that only a few senators stood in the way of the Equal Rights Amendment’s approval in Oklahoma. By the end of December, York had gathered twenty-two “yea” votes; two additional Senators reluctantly agreed to vote for the ERA only if it looked as though the amendment would have the twenty-five necessary votes for passage. By this time, the state capitol was filled with tension. Screaming matches were breaking out in the rotunda between activists on both sides, and national NOW president Eleanor Smeal was practically camped out in York’s office to get all of the updates. With the opening legislative session beginning on January 5th, York decided that neither the state nor its legislators could endure this battle any longer. “We had

²¹⁵ Warren Vieth, “Starting Over,” *Oklahoma Monthly*, February 1981.

²¹⁶ Wanda Jo Peltier to Hannah Atkins, November 9, 1981, folder 11, box 11, Hannah Atkins Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

²¹⁷ Peltier Stapleton interview, February 29, 2016, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

other things to worry about like the state budget to write!” York exclaimed. He decided to raise the ERA, Senate Resolution 24, for a vote on that first day in hopes of calming down the situation and resolving it once and for all.²¹⁸

Because raising the ERA resolution this early was so unexpected, many key leaders on both sides of the debate were not present in the spectator’s gallery like they had been in the past. With president pro tempore York commanding the floor, the state senators made their decisions. The vote ended in 22 yeas and 27 nays for Senate Resolution 24, with one senator recanting his nay vote after the fact. On paper, the Equal Rights Amendment was three votes short. York had two swing voters willing to change their votes if he could find a third, and he immediately filed a Motion to Reconsider, which gave him until January 19th to re-present the resolution on the senate floor.

Although shaken by the defeat, those in support of the ERA were not giving up just yet. That very evening, OK-ERA, OKWPC, and NOW all teamed up for a rally in front of the capitol.²¹⁹ NOW continued its ERA Countdown Campaign advertisements, and the OKWPC reached out to other National Women’s Political Caucus members for contacts and advice. Former vice president Walter Mondale made his way to Oklahoma where he held personal meetings with every state senator who voted against the ERA. He also held a private meeting with OKWPC members. York did not feel too optimistic

²¹⁸ Interview with Marvin York, by Dr. Martha Skeeters, April 1, 2010, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

²¹⁹ Ann Savage, OK-ERA Newsletter, January 7, 1982, folder 1, box 3, Equal Rights Amendment Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

about the upcoming revote, stating, “Mondale or Jesus himself wasn’t going to change their minds.”²²⁰

Cleta Deatherage was also not too optimistic about the chances of the ERA passing in the state itself or in three others by the June 30, 1982 deadline. After its failure in the Senate, many activists for the ERA were urging Deatherage and her ally Dan Draper to bring the amendment to a vote in the House. The now seasoned legislator simply refused; she did not see the point of bringing something up for a vote in the House when the Senate had not successfully passed it. Deatherage also stressed the importance of her and her colleagues’ political careers and avoiding unnecessary hot button issues.²²¹

When January 19, 1982 came, the legislative gallery was packed with green, red, and white t-shirts. When York took the floor, his Motion to Reconsider was approved. The vote remained the same as it was just a few weeks earlier: 21-27. Cheers and cries sounded through the gallery from excitement and disbelief on both sides. In clear sight of the senate floor, a few women dropped a large banner from the capital spectator gallery. In the pro-ERA colors of green and white, it proclaimed, “Equality Denied, 1982” along with a picture of the Pioneer Woman Statue, a beloved Oklahoma landmark in Ponca City, Oklahoma. The capitol police soon removed the banner holders as hundreds of women began shouting, “ERA Won’t Go Away!”²²² Mattie Morgan

²²⁰ York interview, January 28, 2016, Norman, Oklahoma.

²²¹ Cleta Deatherage, “Transcript Recording of the February 18, 1982 Democratic Women’s Club of Cleveland County’s meeting,” Transcript composed by Lou Allen, February 20, 1982, Miscellaneous box, Wanda Jo Peltier Stapleton Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

²²² John Greiner, “ERA Rejected Again in the Senate,” *Daily Oklahoman*, January 20, 1982; Eddie Collins, April 9, 2009, Red Dirt Women Oral History Project.

watched as a woman in tears dropped the white rose she clutched in her hand onto the floor.²²³

The Equal Rights Amendment would never again be heard in either Oklahoma legislative body. With its failure twice in the Senate, the issue was virtually dead. ERA supporters once again urged Cleta Deatherage, their ally since 1976, to bring the amendment up for a vote, but she refused. In shocking turn of events, Republican Helen Arnold of Tulsa, not ERA allies Deatherage or Dan Draper, introduced the amendment as House Bill 1034 the following day. HB1034 was tabled in the Appropriations and Budget Committee, the very committee Deatherage chaired.²²⁴

Predictably, Oklahoma activists for the ERA were both angry and disappointed. Many blamed national groups and outsiders from both sides, Schlafly's followers and NOW leaders, for linking the Equal Rights Amendment to some radical "women's libber" agenda (i.e. abortion and gay rights). Those from the OKWPC, including Peltier, also blamed their local allies, especially Deatherage, for backing down when they needed her most.

A few weeks before the June 30, 1982 deadline, a combined 35,000 ERA supporters marched on the state capitals of the big four: Oklahoma, Illinois, Florida, and North Carolina. Governor Bob Graham and his wife led the Florida march, while the Illinois protesters chained themselves to the Senate doors. In Oklahoma, Wanda Jo Peltier marched with over 10,000 ERA supporters.²²⁵ On June 6, 1982, the last ERA rally was held at the Oklahoma state capitol. Donning an "ERA Won't Go Away" sash,

²²³ Morgan interview.

²²⁴ John Greiner, "ERA Rejected Again in Senate," *Daily Oklahoman*, January 20, 1982.

²²⁵ "Marchers back ERA in 4 states," *Tulsa Tribune*, April 7, 1982.

Peltier gave an impassioned speech in which she asked Governor George Nigh to call a special legislative session so that the amendment could be voted on one last time. The Governor remained silent. During the ten-year battle, the ERA was submitted to the Oklahoma legislature sixteen times with the closest tally only three votes short of approval.²²⁶

Although Oklahoma activists for the ERA tried to portray the amendment as both mainstream and based in local needs and not outside interests, influence from national organizations, politicians, and leaders like NOW and Bella Abzug became unavoidable. Instead of strengthening support for the ERA, the National Women's Conference created publicity for the New Right and gave anti-ERA activists in Oklahoma more ammunition to portray Oklahoma feminists as anti-family, radical, and immoral. Because Oklahoma was one of four states targeted as the easiest wins for the ERA by NOW, the state was thrown into the national spotlight in 1981. Annoyed with the advertisements, celebrity rallies, and national leaders like Walter Mondale trying to sway Oklahoma legislators, many locals became turned off by the amendment and just wanted the issue to go away. Even Oklahoma feminists themselves became disillusioned with the mainstream tactics of legislative leaders, involvement of NOW members from other states, and the negative image assigned to them by Schlafly and other anti-ERA activists. Some women, like Wanda Jo Peltier, decided to sarcastically embrace the term "radical." Others, this time a younger generation of feminists,

²²⁶ Randy Ellis, "ERA Activists Rally for Special Legislative Session," *Daily Oklahoman*, June 7, 1982.

embraced radical tactics more sincerely. The members of LAW defied not only the mainstream Oklahoma feminist idea that one could be both pro-church and pro-choice, but were also too radical for NOW leaders in the state as well.

Influence from outsiders came not just through the National Women's Conference, NOW, and pro-family activists like Phyllis Schlafly. With the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980, it became clear to many Oklahoma pro-ERA activists that national politics were changing the state as well. The Democratic Oklahoma these feminists had once put so much faith into had slowly drifted to the right. Oklahoma housed one of the highest concentrations of fundamentalists and evangelical Christians in the country, making it highly susceptible to New Right ideals. The outsiders that ERA activists in the state thought they were fighting off were actually new Republican Oklahomans. The mass movement to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in Oklahoma would be the state's last major liberal initiative and a reminder of the state's long progressive tradition, but also its new rightward turn.

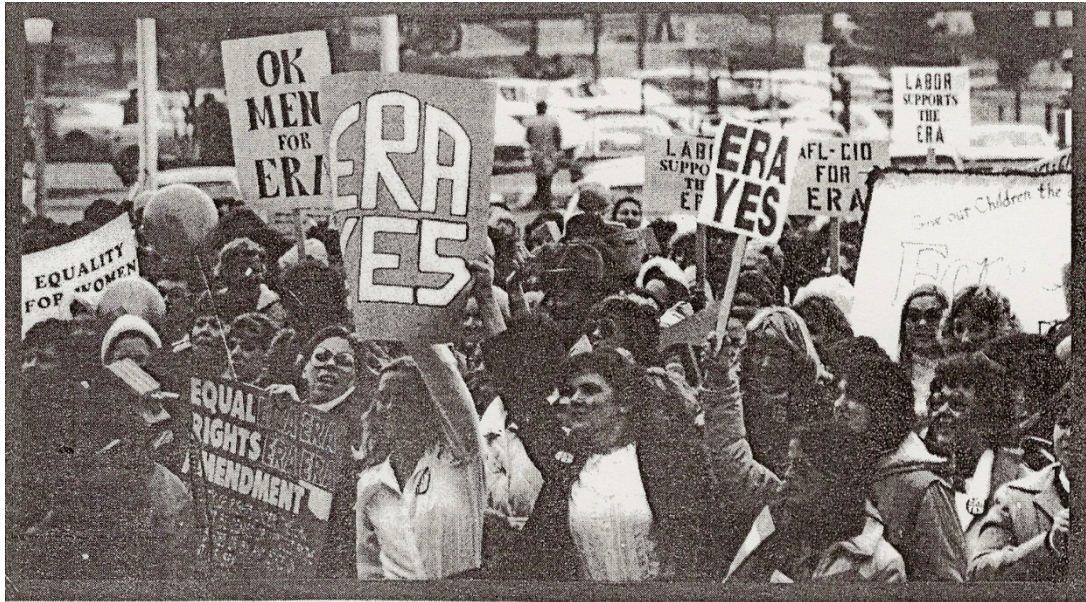


Figure 4.1. ERA rally at the Oklahoma State Capitol. Courtesy of the *Daily Oklahoman*.



Figure 4.2. ERA march in downtown Oklahoma City. Courtesy of the *Daily Oklahoman*.



Figure 4.3. Ladies Against Women picketers outside of the Oklahoma State Capitol protesting President Ronald Reagan in March of 1982. Courtesy of the Oklahoma State Historical Society.



Figure 4.4. Another shot of the Ladies Against Women group picketing President Ronald Reagan outside of the Oklahoma State Capitol in March 1982. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Pioneer Women of the Twentieth-Century

After 1982, it seems as though everyone had an opinion as to why the Equal Rights Amendment failed in Oklahoma. Only two months after the amendment's deadline, ERA activist and Oklahoma feminist Junetta Davis published her thoughts in the *Oklahoma Gazette*. According to Davis, there was much blame to go around, but she especially targeted the state's leaders. She challenged the actions of Speaker of the House Dan Draper and Cleta Deatherage for failing to push the amendment through in the House. Davis also scrutinized the actions of President pro-tempore of the Senate Marvin York, arguing that while he was hustling for votes around the capitol he failed to sway all of the members of his own "key leadership team." The weight of most of her blame, though, fell on Governor George Nigh. "Oklahoma had been seen as the most likely to break the ERA logjam because its leaders were supporters...Nigh gave lip service, but did not raise a finger to help the ratification effort, even though he was inundated with mail and telephone calls."²²⁷ Many activists, like Davis, were still angry with the Governor for failing to call a special legislative session to reconsider the ERA. Still, almost every pro-ERA activist in the state had something to say about Cleta Deatherage.

²²⁷ Junetta Davis, "What Killed the ERA? Vital Commitment Just Wasn't There," *Oklahoma Gazette*, August 1982.

“You know she betrayed us, right?” This was the reaction I received when asking Wanda Jo Peltier, now Stapleton, about her thoughts on Deatherage.²²⁸ This opinion is not unusual. ERA activists Pat Rigler, Shirley Hilbert-Price, Holly Childs, and numerous others interviewed by the Women’s and Gender Studies Department at the University of Oklahoma in the late 2000s also had similar remarks about Deatherage that they wanted to add to the record. To these grassroots women who worked tirelessly on the ground to get the amendment passed, their frustrations are understandable. Still, Deatherage had little reason to raise the now controversial amendment to another vote when it had failed once again in the Oklahoma Senate.

Despite her fallout with many Oklahoma feminists, Deatherage’s strategy of portraying the ERA as mainstream and distanced from other liberal stances like abortion and gay rights was a good move that should have been replicated by other states and organizations, according to several political analysts and historians after the fact. Douglas Johnson, a journalist for *American Politics*, criticized pro-ERA organizations for linking themselves to the ACLU and thus these highly contested issues. “With friends like the ACLU, the ERA did not need enemies,” he argued, because the organization’s strong pro-choice view contributed to the amendment’s downfall.²²⁹ Others, like historian Donald Critchlow criticize pro-ERA organizations NOW and ERAmerica for not agreeing on a more mainstream presentation altogether. While he portrays ERAmerica as more focused on the legislative process, he argues that NOW “actually hurt lobbying efforts by their radical demeanor and appearance and their open

²²⁸ Wanda Jo Peltier Stapleton, February 29, 2016, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

²²⁹ Douglas Johnson, “With Friends Like the ACLU, the ERA Didn’t Need Enemies,” *Americana Politics*, May 1987.

hostility to the older white male politicians who dominated state legislatures in the 1970s” as well as their strong supportive platforms on pro-choice and gay rights issues.²³⁰ Although NOW members were definitely not the radical ERA activists in Oklahoma, there was a disconnect between NOW national leaders and other organizations in the state, as argued in chapter three.

Senator Marvin York believes the reason why his campaign to ratify the ERA in Oklahoma was unsuccessful was due mainly to the overwhelming negative publicity the amendment received. Although this was largely due to the incredibly pointed tactics of Schlafly and local pro-family activists, the state’s most popular newspaper, the *Daily Oklahoman*, also contributed to this success. York stated, “...the *Daily Oklahoman* out of Oklahoma City was run by an arch conservative by the name of E. K. Gaylord. His newspaper was so powerful, and still is, that it set the agenda for all the other smaller papers.”²³¹

I argue that the failure of the ERA in Oklahoma was most likely a combination of all of these oversights. There was more that Governor Nigh and other leaders like Cleta Deatherage and Marvin York probably could have done, but one must also take into consideration the changing political environment that these men and women were trying to traverse, and also the massive undertaking that adding an amendment to the U.S. Constitution is.

The ERA largely failed because of the mobilization of the New Right and their successful rebranding of women’s rights in Oklahoma and around the country. Those

²³⁰ Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 227-8.

²³¹ Interview with Marvin York, by the author, January 28, 2016, Norman, Oklahoma.

opposed to the amendment had a powerful and growing conservative movement behind them, while activists who supported the ERA found the Democratic Party and even liberal leaders of the 1960s losing their prominence in politics. Most importantly, pro-ERA activists did not have their own Phyllis Schlafly. Not only did they lack a vocal leader, ERA supporters also did not have a single, unified organization to stand behind or set precedent for a cohesive strategy. Those who supported the ERA, especially in Oklahoma, had more distinctions amongst themselves and more distractions. Ruth Murray Brown argues that the ERA failed in the sooner state because most of its supporters had more responsibilities. Many Oklahoma feminists worked outside of the home and were also involved in various social justice projects that divided their time as ERA activists.²³² Unlike the New Right supporters, who were fairly monolithic in their evangelical beliefs, the men and women who supported equal rights had to deal with stabilizing a movement full of different religious and political beliefs outside of the amendment. By 1982, the political winds of change had swept through Oklahoma, and it was conservatives who controlled and defined the Equal Rights Amendment debate. As Schlafly put it, “The defeat of the ERA is the greatest victory for women’s rights since the suffrage movement.”²³³ It was this dynamic leader who ultimately controlled the image of the ERA, convincing Oklahoma lawmakers and leaders, who were once supportive, to walk away from equal rights.

²³² Junetta Davis, “What Killed the ERA? Vital Commitment Just Wasn’t There,” *Oklahoma Gazette*, August 1982.

²³³ David Wilson, “ERA Debaters Play to TV Audiences,” *Tulsa Tribune*, October 26, 1979.

Because of its symbolism, several historians have analyzed the Pioneer Women statue located outside of the Pioneer Woman Museum in Ponca City, Oklahoma. Standing thirty feet tall, the work is of a woman dressed in traditional pioneer garb holding a bible in one arm and her child's hand in the other. Some historians, like Linda Williams Reese, have praised the statue for its portrayal of the true Oklahoma woman as incredibly strong while still maintaining a sense of femininity and motherhood.²³⁴ Others, like Jana Vogt, look more analytically at what the statue is promoting, which is essentially a conservative image of Oklahoma women as the keepers of both motherhood and morality.²³⁵ Although historians of western women, like Susan Armitage, have argued for newer scholarship to break free of this reoccurring female archetype because of its simplification of women, I still see utility in this image for those hoping to appreciate the modern Oklahoma woman. After coming to a deeper understanding of the Equal Rights Amendment debate in Oklahoma and the women who fought so hard for it, I contend that Oklahoma feminists are a continued legacy of the beloved pioneer woman. Many Oklahoma feminists were devoted to both their religious faith and families, like the pioneer woman, and also blazed new trails of what women could achieve and also demand of their government. The ERA debate came and went, but the positive changes these supporters made for other women and children in their state before and after the 1970s still lives on. Even the ERA supporters in Oklahoma themselves embraced the symbolism of the pioneer woman statue, using it

²³⁴ Linda Williams Reese, *Women of Oklahoma, 1890-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

²³⁵ Jana Vogt, 2010. "Oklahoma and the ERA: Rousing a Red State, 1972-1982," PhD dissertation, University of Oklahoma; Jana Vogt Catignani, "Conservative Oklahoma Women United: The Crusade to Defeat the ERA," in *Main Street Oklahoma: Stories of Twentieth-Century America* ed. Linda W. Reese and Patricia Loughlin et al. (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 221-238.

on political t-shirts, pamphlets, and pro-ERA banners. Many Oklahoma feminists saw a part of themselves in this traditional woman despite the comparatively radical gender changes they were promoting. The most concrete proof of this is the incident that occurred in the early hours of May 19, 1982. ERA supporters including Debbie Blaiser, Shirley Hilbert-Price, and Eddie Collins snuck onto the museum's grounds and draped chains around the statue in hopes of getting legislators' attention, as the amendment had only days left for ratification. The next day, a press release stated that the Pioneer Woman was chained, "to let Oklahomans and the Oklahoma Legislature know that they cannot sit back and leave women in the bondage of inequality."²³⁶ As I opened this work with an inquiry of the pioneer woman in various historiographies, now I will also close with a few modern ones.

Although her battle for the Equal Rights Amendment in Oklahoma came to a close in 1982, Wanda Jo Peltier still had some fight left in her. In 1986, she decided to run for the Oklahoma House of Representatives seat of District 93. For over a month straight, Peltier walked door-to-door shaking hands with her constituents and passing out voter registration cards along with her famous "Wanda Jo's Hot Hominy" recipe. After winning the election, she remained a Congresswoman for ten years, working for women and education rights until 1996 when Peltier decided she needed a break. Her greatest accomplishment, when asked in 2016, was finally getting the notorious Head of Household statute off of the Oklahoma books in 1984. Peltier, along with female African American Representative Freddy Williams, finally succeeded in getting

²³⁶ "ERA pair chains statue," *Daily Oklahoman*, May 20, 1982; Interview with Eddie Collins, by Julie Stidolph, April 9, 2009, Red Dirt Women and Power Oral History Project, Women's and Gender Studies Department, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma; Interview with Debbie Blaiser, April 13, 2009, Red Dirt Women and Power.

Oklahoma legislators to agree that “women and men are equal partners on the job and in the home.”²³⁷ She claims much of her political inspiration came from Betty Friedan and her founding and vision for the National Women’s Political Caucus, the organization Peltier had dedicated so much of her time to. When asked what political advice she would give women today, she stated, “Life is short, and we just go around once-and you know our first grade reader said, ‘Run Dick Run.’ I’d say, ‘Run Jane Run.’ You’ll always regret it if you don’t.”²³⁸

Hannah Atkins went on to have a long and successful political career even after her retirement from the Oklahoma House. In 1980, she was chosen by President Jimmy Carter to serve as a delegate at the upcoming United Nations Assembly. By the end of 1987, Atkins was the head of the Department of Human Services and had served three terms as a Democratic National Committeewoman. Under Governor Henry Bellmon in 1988, Atkins became the highest ranked woman in Oklahoma while serving as both the Secretary of State and secretary of Social Services, where she could once again serve women, children, and the elderly. Despite serving under a Republican governor and an increasingly conservative state, Atkins never waived from her feminist roots.

“Although being black is my first priority, I realized a long time ago that you can’t separate being black and being a woman. Feminism means both to me. What it finally

²³⁷ Interview Wanda Jo Peltier Stapleton, by the author, February 29, 2016, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

²³⁸ Interview with Wanda Jo Peltier, by Tanya Finchum, May 16, 2007, Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project, Oklahoma State University (hereafter Women of the Oklahoma Legislature).

boils down to is liberating *people*.²³⁹ Atkins passed away in 2010, and her legacy is honored through her membership in the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame.

Cleta Deatherage remained in the Oklahoma House of Representatives until 1984, when she backed out of the election at the last minute. After retiring, Deatherage went on to become a partner at Foley & Lardner, a law firm in Washington, D.C., and continued working as a campaign aid. Then, after divorcing her husband when he came out as gay, Deatherage became a staunch opponent of gay rights and board member of the American Conservative Union. Whether influenced by her time as a Congresswoman or by life experiences, Deatherage changed her political affiliation from the Democratic Party to Republican. She now is now a lobbyist for legislation maintaining term limits as well as the National Rifle Association. Her political career almost mirrors that of the state of Oklahoma: an ambitious Democrat pressured by the Equal Rights Amendment debate and forever transformed by the power of grassroots conservatism.²⁴⁰

As for the ERA itself, in 2001 it was reintroduced to Congress by members of both the Democratic and Republican Party. The resolution proposed locking in the thirty-five states that had previously approved the amendment from 1972-1979, and offering the remaining unratified states a chance to change their position. The same resolution was introduced again in September 2014. Although legislators agreed to hold

²³⁹ "Who's Who of Legislative Women," *Ms. Magazine*, March 1973, 85; "Atkins Appointment Angers State GOP Leaders, Activists," *The McCarville/Gray Report*, September 1987, folder 5, box 1, Hannah Diggs Atkins Collection.

²⁴⁰ Interview with Cleta Deatherage, by Tanya Finchum, June 21, 2007, Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project; "Meet Cleta Mitchell," *The Atlantic*, April 4, 2003; "Ms. Cleta Mitchell," *Republican National Lawyers Association*, RNLA.org; "Cleta Mitchell: Board Member," *NRA On the Record*, NRAontherecord.org.

hearings on the ERA, the resolution never passed. The ERA continues to be brought up in every legislative session, just as it has been since 1923.²⁴¹

²⁴¹ Ashlyn K. Kuersten, *Women and the Law* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 40.

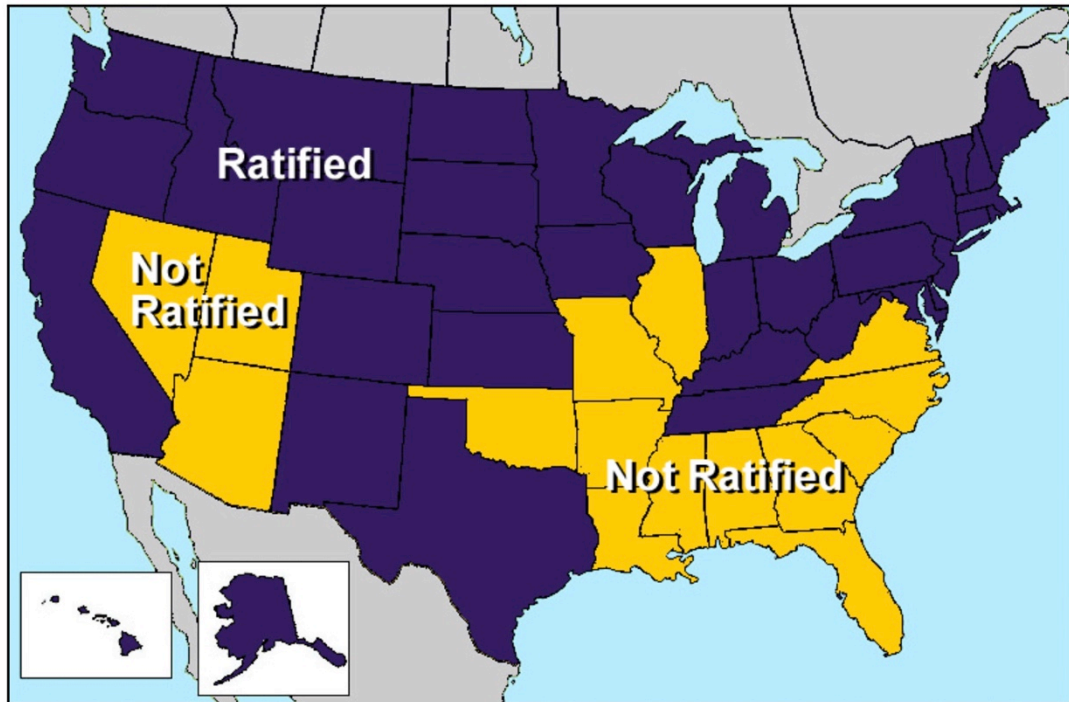


Figure 5.1. The final tally of ratified and unratified states for the Equal Rights Amendment as of June 30, 1982. Courtesy of the Equal Rights Amendment Association (<http://www.equalrightsamendment.org>)

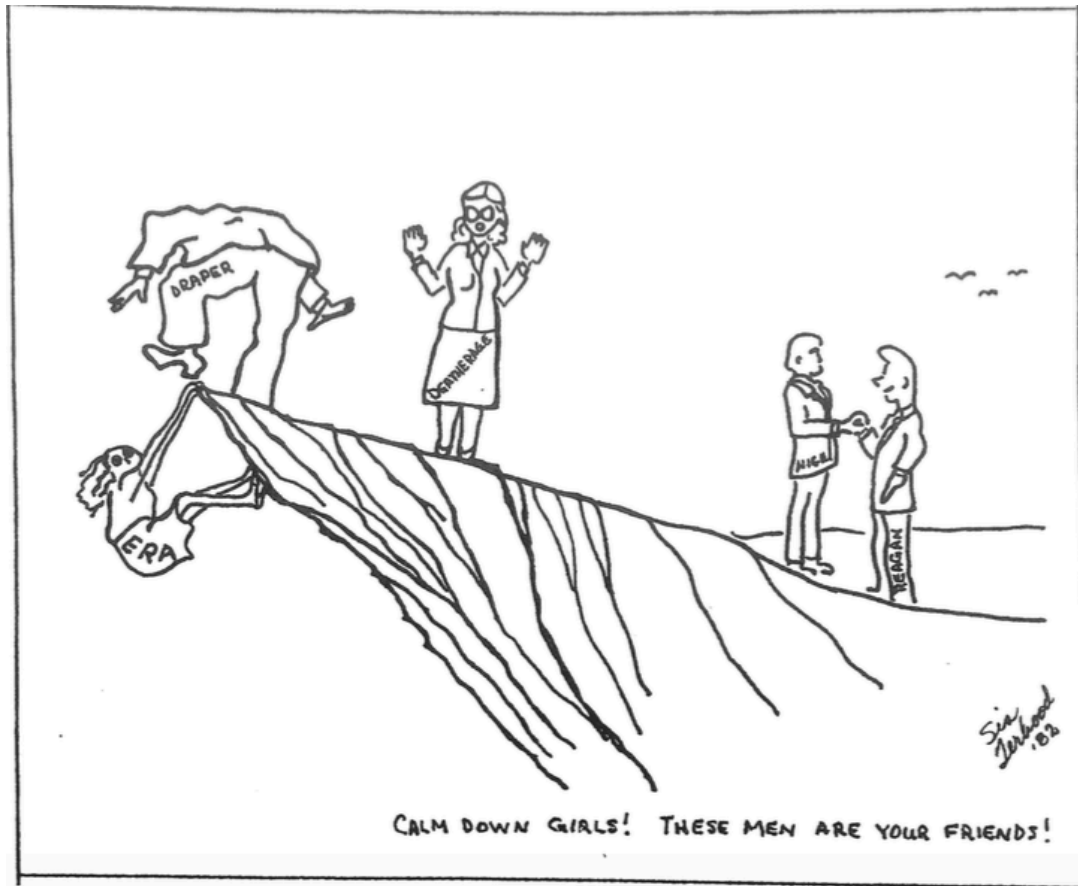


Figure 5.2. Political cartoon depicting the frustration many Oklahoma feminists felt with Oklahoma leaders Cleta Deatherage, Dan Draper, and George Nigh after the ERA failed. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

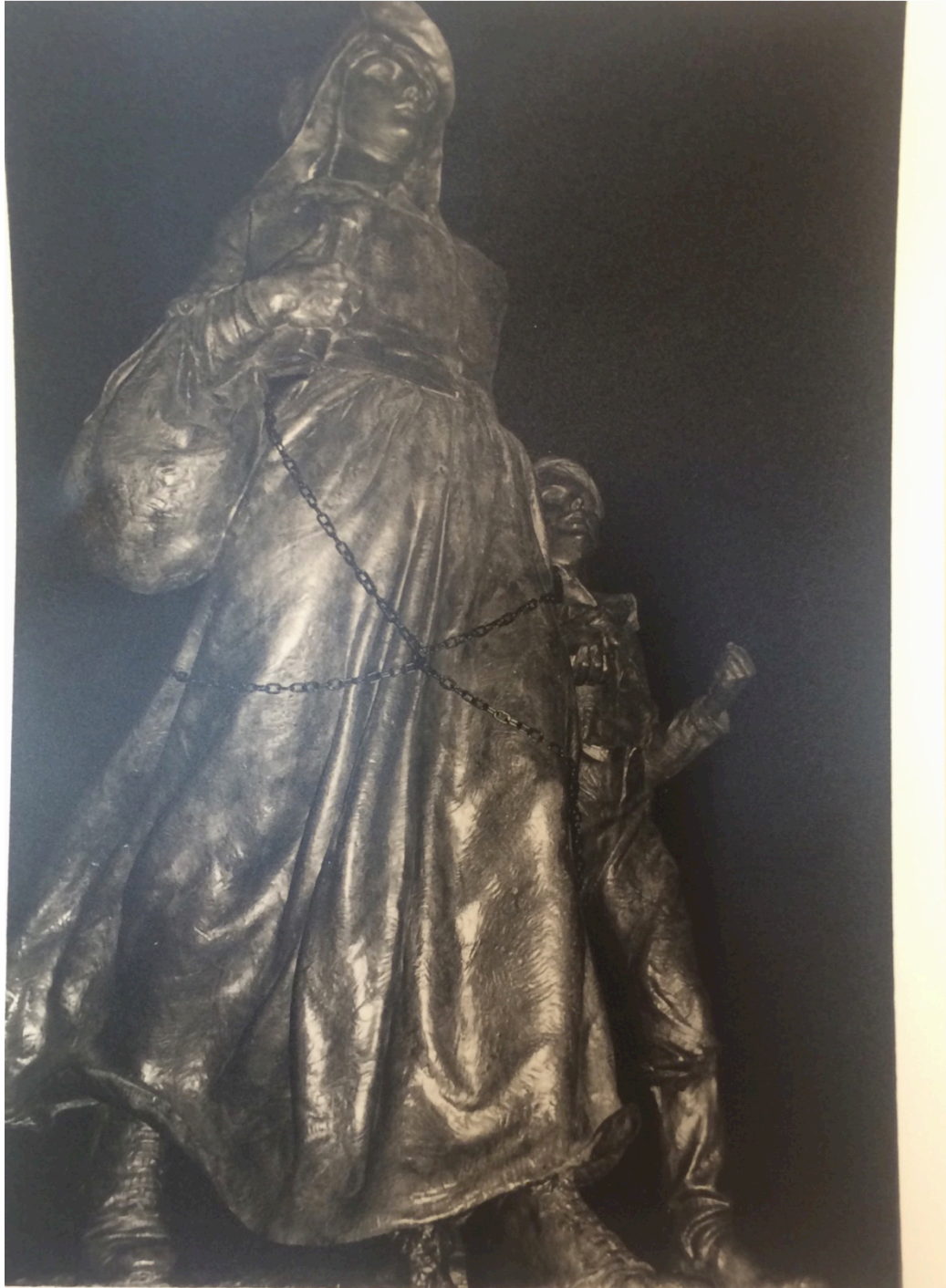


Figure 5.3. The Pioneer Woman Statute in Ponce City after it was chained by pro-ERA activists. Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

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