



Mrs. Catt, Meet Lacy Jernigan

By Sarah Byrn Rickman

OCTOBER 5, 1893

“You don’t know anything, do you.” Lacy Jernigan swallowed the urge to stick her tongue out at her best friend, Becky Wilson.

As she spoke, Lacy’s sun-browned hands folded and unfolded the piece of paper on which she had written THE welcoming speech. Half a bottle of her mother’s ink and several discarded pieces of her mother’s costly ledger paper had gone into creating the words to welcome women’s suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt to the little mining town of Pilotsville, Colorado.

“I know lots,” Becky said. “Besides, what kinda woman goes ‘round making speeches? Mama says it’s not right for women to speak in public. It’s not ladylike.”

Lacy took a deep breath and tried to calm the butterflies in her stomach. She twisted a lock of her long brown hair around her index finger. “Miz Catt’s gonna help the women of Colorado get the vote.”

“Well lah-dee-dah. Who wants to vote anyhow?” Becky smirked, tossed her head, and adjusted her sunbonnet. They sat on the edge of Becky’s father’s buckboard, leaning against the bales of straw, feet dangling.

Lacy shot back, “I do, so’s when I grow up I can choose who I want to be president and governor and mayor and all.”

“Mama says women got no business thinkin’ ‘bout such things. It taxes our brains. My daddy takes care of all that stuff and he takes care of my mama and me and my lil’ brother. Mama says she doesn’t need to vote and she doesn’t care who the pres-i-dent is cause he’s just some old fool back East.”

“Becky! Women have brains. We’re perfectly capable of thinking and acting and voting! But men got it in their heads that women need takin’ care of. But my mama says that men don’t always do like they say they’re gonna.”

“That’s cause your daddy walked out on your mama.”

The last statement smacked of “there, I told you so.” Lacy felt a hot flush creeping up her neck and cheeks as something stirred deep down inside her. She balled her fists. “My daddy went to San Francisco to find a better job. He’s comin’ back for Mama and me.”

Becky snorted. “Mama says she’ll believe it when she sees it.”

Lacy’s father, a bookkeeper by trade, had brought his family west from Ohio three years earlier when he learned of the latest Colorado silver boom. He tried mining and was successful enough to buy the rooming house where their family now lived and took in boarders. But when she first overheard her parents arguing, Lacy learned that her father hated mining. He wanted out of that deep hole in the ground where he labored day after day. Last spring, after one particularly bad blowup, her father left.

“I’m cut out for better things, Lacy.” His black coat smelled of tobacco and whiskey and the wool scratched her cheek as he hugged her before he boarded the westbound train. The glitter of San Francisco drew him like a moth to flame. “I’ll be back for you and your mother someday.”

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Lacy’s mother now ran the rooming house by herself, taking in as many boarders as she had rooms for. Lacy told her mother she would quit school, stay home and help, but her mother absolutely forbade it. “I never finished school,” Mrs. Jernigan said, “but you, Lacy, are going to have the opportunities I didn’t. I can manage this house.”

And she was doing exactly that.

Becky’s father ran the livery stable and farmed a small plot of land a half mile from town. Mrs. Wilson put on airs like she was one of those belles in her native South Carolina and spoke with a pronounced drawl and heightened language—out of place among the plain-speaking westerners of Pilotsville.

Lacy liked it when Mr. Wilson came to town Saturdays to get supplies at the general store. Becky always rode in with him and they stopped to pick up Lacy. While Mr. Wilson visited with the other men in the store, the two girls liked

to hang out at the piece goods counter and listen to the gossip of the townswomen who came in to buy their calico and thread.

But today was different. Mrs. Catt's coming on the noon train had created a stir and it appeared the whole town planned to turn out for her speech. Pilotsville didn't get many visitors, particularly a woman traveling alone and who, according to the Pilotsville Weekly Gazette, planned to talk about women's suffrage.

Today, when Becky and her father stopped to pick up Lacy, their destination was not the general store, but the railroad station. Mr. Wilson parked the buckboard next to the platform recently erected beside the single iron track that ran through town. He climbed down and hitched the horses to the hitching post.

"You girls can sit here and watch while this suffrage woman from back East makes a spectacle of herself," he said. "I won't be gone long."

Mr. Wilson nodded to the stationmaster. "Keep an eye on my girls, here, would you, Nate? They're here to see that crazy Miz Catt who's coming to town. I wanted to give 'em a front row seat. I'll be back in time to see all the hoopla for myself."



Lacy and Becky shared everything, from playing dolls when they were younger to a recent exploration of an abandoned mine shaft, and to telling each other their deep, most guarded secrets—like how kissin' boys was fun. That, they both had learned during an impromptu game of spin the bottle behind the woodshed during recess last spring. Both got to kiss sixteen-year-old Josh Coulter before Miss Benson, their teacher, discovered the game and broke it up.

Both girls were fourteen. Lacy, already worried about her budding bosom, tried to round her shoulders to diminish it—particularly around boys. Becky, shorter than Lacy by three inches, had no bust, not a curve. Every month now, Lacy had to endure an indignity her mother called "the curse" and the mess and discomfort that went with it. She hadn't told Becky about that. Nor had she mentioned the strange feelings she couldn't explain—like when she kissed Josh.

"Why d'you s'pose her train's late?" Becky said, interrupting Lacy's wandering thoughts. "Maybe she's not comin'."

Lacy shook her head. "She's comin'."

"What makes you so sure?"

"She's got to."

Lacy had read every book Miss Benson could lay her hands on about the history and governing of the United States. Everything Lacy read told her that women were

citizens and should have the vote. But not all the women in town supported women voting. Women like Mrs. Wilson campaigned against it as "unladylike" and "unseemingly."

Observing the various stances taken on suffrage in Pilotsville, Lacy recorded them in her diary. Of the members of the W.C.T.U.—the Woman's Christian Temperance Union—she wrote:

These women are FOR woman suffrage because they think women with the vote can shut down Colorado's saloons. Their leader, Mrs. Johnson, says, "We will convince our wayward men to give up demon rum and return to the bosom of their families."

Of her own family on the subject of woman suffrage, Lacy wrote:

Daddy used to tell me, "Women got more sense than men about a lot of things." Mama's for suffrage, but she never stands up for her beliefs when the subject comes up at meals and all the boarders are talking. They're kinda split on the issue too. Mr. Johansen, Mr. Weatherby, Mr. Stiles, and Mr. Carlson are for it, but Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Harris are dead set against women voting.

The church, Lacy observed, looked askance at woman suffrage.

Last Sunday at the Methodist Church, Rev. Jones pounded his pulpit and shouted, "We face the day when Eve will once more tempt Adam and that is the day we will be one step closer to the Devil and his fiery world of brimstone. Woman's place is with her babes and at the side of her loving husband!"

He really made me angry. Then I heard all these "Amens" from the men of the congregation, and a few women too. What about the women who don't have husbands, like Miss Benson or the widow Roberts, or those fancy women who work at the saloon? Who takes care of them?

Earlier that year, Lacy had discovered journalism. With years of writing secret thoughts in her diary and loving the process of putting the words down into meaningful sentences, she decided that she wanted to be a newspaper reporter when she grew up. Miss Benson suggested she talk to Mr. Andrews, the editor of the Pilotsville Weekly Gazette. Lacy did just that, and she managed to wangle a few weekly column inches from him, which she filled with school news and other doings of the youth of Pilotsville.

In September, not long after the new term at school began, Miss Benson asked Lacy to stay after school. She shared a letter she had received.

"It's from Ellis Meredith, that Rocky Mountain News reporter I met in Denver last summer. She's leading Colorado's fight for women's suffrage. She even wrote to

Susan B. Anthony and asked her to come lend her support to the cause.

"Listen to what Miss Anthony wrote back.

'Dear Miss Meredith: I'm getting a little too old to make such an arduous journey, so I'm sending a dynamic young suffragist, Carrie Chapman Catt, to see to it that the women of Colorado win the vote.'

Miss Benson looked Lacy in the eye, "Mrs. Catt's coming here to Pilotsville early in October, and I want you to give the welcoming speech."

With that began weeks of alternating agony and ecstasy for Lacy. Draft after draft of her speech went in the wastebasket.

"Lacy, you're wasting my paper," her mother said. "And the inkwell is nearly dry. You're not writing the Gettysburg Address. All you have to say is 'Welcome to Pilotsville, Mrs. Catt.'"

"But, Mama, it's so much more important than that. I have to let her know that I support her. That most of the women here support her—and a lot of the men too."

"Then just say so, Lacy, don't embellish. The people are coming to hear her, not you."

"But Mama, it's so important to make a good showing. I can't let you, Miss Benson, and the other women down. And I want Becky and the other girls to realize that they can do more than quilt and sew. That they can think and have opinions, too, and hopefully, vote when they're old enough."

The morning of Mrs. Catt's arrival, Lacy's nerves got the best of her and her stomach rebelled. "Mama, what am I gonna do? I won't be able to give the welcomin' speech," she said as her insides heaved and she ran for the chamber pot a second time.

But her mother's hot herbal tea and two pieces of dry toast settled her stomach and gave her strength if not courage. That, her mother told her, had to come from within.

Now, seated on the back of Mr. Wilson's buckboard, Lacy and Becky had a front row view of the goings-on when the indomitable Mrs. Catt hit town.

The state legislature had placed a referendum on the November ballot to give the women of Colorado the vote. For some time now, signs had been popping up around town proclaiming, "Vote for Woman Suffrage."

Now, as the crowd grew, more signs appeared. The W.C.T.U. ladies brought their banner with the message, "We Support Woman Suffrage and the Banishment of Demon Rum!"

Lacy had written in her diary the night before:

If the women of Pilotsville really want the vote, they ought

not to be telling their men that they're gonna vote to forever ban alcohol from the town and close the saloons. Most of the men I know like their daily ration. Some women too. So why fly in the face of such a reality. I will never understand grown-ups.

Also present at the station now were a large number of "Free Silver" signs, most of them in the hands of men. Ever since the stock market crash back in June, an economic depression had swept the country and silver mining towns like Pilotsville were struggling. From the unrest had arisen the belief, followed by an organized movement, that allowing unlimited coinage of silver would relieve that problem.

The cobalt-blue sky of Colorado autumn held only a hint of the ravages of winter to come. The shimmering aspen trees had given up their summer coat of dusty green in favor of burnished gold and when the wind blew, the leaves shook gently—as if the sound would forestall the death-like sleep of winter. Still, a few more leaves drifted to the ground with each stirring.

They waited. No whistle pierced the mountain hush. No train rattled around the bend. The autumn sun moved to the west of Highpoint Ridge. The noon train bearing Mrs. Catt was running late.

Finally, movement down the tracks to the east brought a cheer from the waiting crowd. But instead of a rising column of smoke from a great coal-fired steam engine, there came instead a small railroad handcar.

Lacy peered into the distance. Two people rode the improbable vehicle, coming downhill out of the mountains to the east. As it drew nearer, she could see one of them, a man, pumping furiously on the handle that made the car move along the rails. A woman sat in the middle holding on tight to the platform with one hand and to her hat with the other.

As the handcar took the big curve leading into town, it lurched, shifted, and for a heart-stopping second hung only on two wheels. The woman leaned in the direction of the faltering wheels and let go of her hat in order to grab the side of the platform for safety. Her hat blew off at that moment and sailed away into a stand of quaking aspen trees.

A few minutes later, a breathless Carrie Chapman Catt stood on the platform next to the siding of the Pilotsville Railroad Station, trying to repair the travel damage to her hairdo before addressing the restless crowd.

Lacy fingered the paper she held folded in her hand. Her stomach threatened to lurch again. She put her hand to her mouth and swallowed hard, willing the waves of nausea to go away. As she took a deep breath, another fear surfaced. What if her voice deserted her just as she began to speak? What if the sun blinded her and she couldn't read what she

had written? What if . . . ?

Miss Benson shook hands with Mrs. Catt and said a few quiet words to her while the crowd noises grew louder in anticipation.

"Speech!"

Miss Benson turned and beckoned to Lacy.

Heart in her throat, Lacy hopped off the back of the buckboard. Becky gave her hand a squeeze. Lacy forgot about hiding her bosom, squared her shoulders like her mother had taught her, lifted her chin, set her eyes on the platform, and walked purposefully to the steps that led up to Miss Benson, Mrs. Catt, and her chance to do her bit for the women of Colorado.

The steps were rickety and steep and as her right foot reached the next to top one, Lacy stepped on the hem of her dress. She fought to keep her balance but sprawled forward at the feet of Mrs. Catt and Miss Benson and the town's mayor, Mr. Sullivan, who stood with them on the platform.

Her breath wouldn't come. Hot tears stung her eyes. She wanted to crawl in a hole and die. Gasping, she lay in plain view of Becky, Mr. Wilson, her mother—who had assured her she would be there—and all those townspeople.

I can't cry.

Mr. Sullivan bent down and helped her to her feet. She saw the distress on Miss Benson's face, but it was Mrs. Catt's eyes that caught and held hers. As Lacy would write that night in her diary, the woman's piercing blue eyes contained all the understanding and strength that Lacy could ever have wanted to see in another human being. Eyes that said—"Come girl, that's only the first tumble you'll take in life. But you'll always get up, brush off trouble, and go on."

Lacy took a deep breath. Mrs. Catt extended her hand. Lacy reached out to shake it and found the grip to be as strong and sure as a man's—a hand neither rough and callused nor the soft, pliant hand of a lady of leisure. Lacy wondered if, somewhere along the way, Mrs. Catt had scrubbed clothes on a washboard, rolled out pastry, or sewed a quilt.

She looked Mrs. Catt square in the eye over their clasped hands and felt the power. The shaking of her legs ceased, her heartbeat slowed, and her breathing returned to normal.

"I'm so pleased to meet you, my dear," Mrs. Catt said. "Miss Benson tells me you are going to do wonderful things with your life. And if I have anything to do with it, voting will be just the beginning."

Lacy, aglow now, threw her shoulders back a second time,

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"Mrs. Catt has taken on the cause of women's suffrage under the tutelage of Miss Susan B. Anthony and is in Colorado to help our state become the first to grant suffrage to women by popular vote. Pilotville welcomes you, Mrs. Catt, and wishes you Godspeed on your journey and your quest—which is also our quest—the vote for the women of Colorado!"

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turned to the crowd and, never looking at the paper she still clutched in her hand, began to speak.

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Lacy delivered the final words with her right hand thrust triumphantly in the air.

Applause was punctuated by some whistles. Then Lacy stepped back to stand beside Miss Benson while Mrs. Catt began to speak. Her train, she said, broke down in the last town necessitating the perilous journey to Pilotville by railroad handcar—"That, as you see, has left me breathless and hatless."

With that, a tall boy stepped forward, bowed, and presented her with her hat. With a jolt of pleasure, Lacy recognized Josh Coulter. He must have run back along the tracks and retrieved it. Mrs. Catt smiled and thanked him.

The man who had piloted the handcar spoke up and reminded his passenger that she wouldn't have made it at all "without a man."

Everyone, including Mrs. Catt, laughed.

"I have a voice like a foghorn and can be heard in out of door settings," Mrs. Catt announced to the waiting crowd. And as she spoke, Lacy watched the faces of the townspeople and how this woman caught and held their attention.

Mrs. Catt concluded with, "The strength of the country lies in men and women working side by side and that means women need the vote. Men of Colorado, make your women as free as you would make your silver free."

As a roar of approval went up, a steam whistle pierced the autumn air. All eyes turned as the Denver and Rio Grande

engine, the rest of the cars trailing, came chugging 'round the bend.

"Glory be, it looks like they fixed it," Mrs. Catt said. "I don't have to risk death in the name of women's suffrage to get to the next town."

When the train ground to a halt and the conductor stepped down to assist her, Mrs. Catt and Miss Benson walked toward him. Then Mrs. Catt stopped, turned, looked back at Lacy, and called to her. Lacy hurried forward. When she reached the two women, Mrs. Catt took both of Lacy's hands in hers.

"My dear, if you are someday in New York City, look me up. The women's suffrage movement has a long arduous task ahead of it. The fight has only just begun. We can use a young woman with gumption and a good head on her shoulders. Miss Benson, see that she keeps her eyes on the stars. We need her."

Then Mrs. Catt turned and took the arm offered by the waiting conductor. Lacy, entranced by this awe-inspiring woman, watched her climb aboard the train.

When Lacy turned back, she was surprised to find Josh Coulter standing by Miss Benson. He was looking at her, and he was smiling. "You gave a great speech, Lacy," he said, and gave her a quick salute.

Lacy, sensing a warm glow deep inside, thanked Josh and Miss Benson.

That night, as she wrote in her diary, Lacy had time to relive the incredible day. And she renewed her vow to leave Pilotsville someday and go to Denver and the newspaper there and—eventually—to New York City where she would most certainly call on Carrie Chapman Catt.

But what, she thought fleetingly, should she do about Josh?

Epilogue

November 7, 1893

Women's suffrage was approved by Colorado voters on November 7, 1893. The vote was 35,798 to 29,461, a majority of 6,337 for suffrage. Of the twenty-nine counties Catt had visited, only three voted against suffrage.

Endnotes

Jacqueline Van Voris, *Carrie Chapman Catt, A Public Life* (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1987), 35-37.

Source for two pieces in this story. One: Mrs. Catt was stranded without transportation to the next mountain town, Pilotsville. A section hand with the railroad work crew offered to take her there on a railroad handcar. It was downhill all the way, he told her, and she said "yes." According to the footnote in Van Voris's book, the car took a sharp curve and momentarily balanced on two wheels, then righted itself.

Mrs. Catt learned that the Colorado mining unions believed in equal right for women—in other words they believed in a woman's right to vote. Hearing this, she said: "I believe we never have recognized the influence of the labor organizations in this direction half so kindly and graciously as they have recognized us."

Mrs. Catt said of herself after the Colorado campaign that she "felt like a frog that fell into a milk pail, then struggled until it had churned 'a fine pot of butter,' and climbed out."

AUTHOR

Sarah Byrn Rickman



Books about the WASP, the women who flew in World War II, are author Sarah Byrn Rickman's forte. She just published her twelfth. Five are upbeat biographies for today's young women ages 11-15. Her entry for The LAURA Short Fiction Contest, ***Mrs. Catt, Meet Lacy Jernigan***, reflects her Colorado roots.