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February 26, 2014

THIS WEEK: **Legislators Welcome Famed English
Suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst**

BACKGROUND:

The Thirty-fourth General Assembly convened January 9 and adjourned April 12, 1911, a 94-day session. The Senate had 16 Democratic members and 34 Republican members. In the House of Representatives there were 70 Republican members and 38 Democratic members for a total of 158 legislators. Beryl Carroll was Iowa's Governor having been inaugurated January 14, 1909, at the age of 48. Iowa's population at the 1910 federal census was 2,224,771. Iowa's population had declined more than 7,000 from the 1900 federal census.

**Legislators Welcome Famed English
Suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst**

Representative William Goodykoontz of Boone County offered the following concurrent resolution, asked unanimous consent for immediate consideration, and moved its adoption:

CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

Be it Resolved by the House, the Senate concurring:

That inasmuch as Miss Sylvia Pankhurst of England will be in the city of Des Moines tomorrow, February 1st, that she be invited to address the Joint Convention just after the Senatorial ballot is taken.

Motion prevailed, and Resolution was adopted.

Estelle Sylvia Pankhurst was born in Manchester, England, May 5, 1882. She and her mother, Emmeline Pankhurst, and sister, Christabel, campaigned for the suffrage movement in the United Kingdom. All three women worked full-time for the Women's Social and Political



Estelle Sylvia Pankhurst



**Representative
William Goodykoontz**

Union (WPSU). In 1910, Sylvia Pankhurst wrote a history of the movement, started by her mother, called *The Suffragette*, and followed her mother to the United States for a lecture tour.

There is no Iowa Legislative Journal record of Sylvia Pankhurst's remarks to the Iowa Legislature on February 1, 1911, but from the book *A Brit Among the Hawkeyes* written by Richard, Lord Acton is an account of Sylvia's visit to Iowa.

A portion of that account is as follows:

The English suffragette knew nothing of this invitation. Travelling by sleeper car from Kansas City, she alighted at the Union Station in Des Moines about 8:00 A.M. on February 1st with a terrible cold and a vast number of bundles. "I must hurry and take that Boone Train," she said to a reporter. "You will help me, won't you?"

The reporter told Pankhurst she was to address the joint session at the Statehouse. "I never believe reporters," she said. "I must get that train to Boone."

However, members of the local suffragist committee convinced Pankhurst that she was, indeed, to speak to the legislature. She was whisked by cab to the Chamberlain Hotel, and a woman osteopath attended to her cold.

When, at noon, Sylvia Pankhurst walked down the aisle of a crowded House of Representatives, she was greeted by a burst of applause, started by woman suffragists and taken up by the male legislators. She began her speech nervously, but as she came to talk about the English suffrage movement, her confidence increased.

Pankhurst expressed her gratitude for the privilege of addressing the Iowa legislature, at a time when women's attempts to talk to English legislators resulted in their being imprisoned. She told how a procession of women had tried to present a petition to Parliament and was stopped by an army of mounted policemen. After a seven-hour struggle, she and many other women were arrested. She described the miseries of prison and how some of her friends had been force-fed by having tubes thrust down their throats.

As a result of their years of campaigning, Pankhurst was convinced Parliament soon would give women the vote. (It took longer than she thought. In 1918, eight and one-half million British women were enfranchised on an age and property qualification; in 1928, the vote was finally extended to women on the same basis as men.)

The English suffragette then turned to America. "Women here are taxed without representation . . . which is unamerican. They are forced to stand trial in courts without a voice in the government and direction of those courts." Women were an increasing part of the work force and should be entitled to take part in shaping industrial and social legislation.



"Your women will press forward and demand the vote much as we have had to do in England," Pankhurst prophesied. "They are determined. They cannot be checked. Do not press them to militancy."

She declared that women's lives were too empty. "We give our women too little to do; all we ask of her is to see that the dinner is well cooked and the washing

comes home properly from the laundry." Giving women political rights would not, however, break up the home. "Great ideas and great ideals never brought dissent into any home."



Pankhurst ended her speech with a prediction:

"Your women in Iowa will be more grateful in time for the franchise than for any other boon that you can grant them."

Many years later, Sylvia Pankhurst wrote in an autobiographical book, *The Suffragette Movement*, of her visit to Des Moines and her deep feeling of responsibility at having to address the Iowa legislature. She modestly summed up the episode:

"The women assured me I had helped them."

Note: First a Socialist, eventually becoming a Communist, Sylvia broke ties with her mother and sister. She spent the later years of her life in Ethiopia. She died September 27, 1960.