

Abigail Scott Duniway (1834-1915)

By Jean M. Ward

Outspoken and often controversial, Abigail Scott Duniway is remembered as Oregon's "Mother of Equal Suffrage" and "the pioneer Woman Suffragist of the great Northwest." As lecturer, organizer, writer, and editor, Duniway devoted over forty years to the cause of women's rights.

In Idaho Territory in 1896, Duniway celebrated victory for woman suffrage. In Washington Territory, her early successes were overturned, although the State of Washington would give women the vote in 1910. In Oregon, which defeated woman suffrage more times than any other state, Duniway witnessed five losses—in 1884, 1900, 1906, 1908, and 1910—before Oregon women gained the ballot in 1912.

Encouraged by her mentor, Susan B. Anthony, Duniway attended national suffrage conventions and became one of five NWSA (National Woman Suffrage Association) vice-presidents-at-large. In 1890, she helped negotiate the merger of the NWSA and AWSA (American Woman Suffrage Association) as the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

Less remembered, perhaps, is Duniway's extensive written legacy, including her weekly human-rights newspaper, *The New Northwest*, which she edited and published in Portland for sixteen years (1871-1887); *The Coming Century*, her "Journal of Progress and Reform" (1891-1892); and *The Pacific Empire*, a Portland weekly she edited for three years (1895-1897). She also wrote an epic poem, *David and Anna Matson* (1876); an autobiography, *Path Breaking* (1914); and twenty-two novels, including *Captain Gray's Company* (1859), the first novel commercially published in Oregon and later revised as *From the West to the West* (1905).

Duniway's novels addressed women's rights, and most were serialized in *The New Northwest* and *The Pacific Empire*. Dedicated to the improvement of "woman's condition" and personally aware of the hardships women faced, Duniway opened the pages of *The New Northwest* to other Pacific Northwest women writers such as Frances Fuller Victor, Minnie Myrtle Miller, and Bethenia Owens-Adair.

Abigail Scott was born October 22, 1834, to John Tucker and Ann Roelofson Scott, in Tazewell County, Illinois, the third of twelve children. In 1852, the Scotts traveled to Oregon Territory with their nine surviving children, and seventeen-year-old Abigail was assigned the task of keeping a daily journal.

During her first year in Oregon, while teaching in Eola, Abigail met Benjamin C. Duniway. They were married in August 1853 and settled on Ben's donation claim in Clackamas County. They later moved to Yamhill County, but then lost both farms—one to fire and the other to flood and collection on promissory notes.

After Ben suffered permanent injury in a runaway-team accident in 1862, he could do only light work. At Lafayette and then Albany, Abigail became the primary breadwinner for the family, taking in boarders, teaching school, and running a millinery shop. In 1871, the Duniways moved to Portland with their five sons and daughter. *The New Northwest* became their family enterprise, with Ben assisting in business matters and older sons helping with printing.

"Writing always was our forte," Abigail Duniway announced in her first issue of *The New Northwest*. "If we had been a man," she added, "we'd have had an editor's position and handsome salary at twenty-one" At age thirty-six, she may have been thinking of her younger brother, Harvey Scott, then junior editor and later chief editor and part owner of the Oregonian.

Fully committed to her signature line, "Yours for Liberty," and guided by *The New Northwest* motto of "Free Speech, Free Press, Free People," Abigail Scott Duniway exposed and combated what she identified as social injustice. She discussed questions as diverse as the legal status of women, the treatment of the Chinese, policies related to American Indians, and the limits of Temperance and Prohibition.

Unlike Harvey, who graduated from Pacific University, Abigail was mainly self-taught and had less than a year of formal schooling in rural Illinois. Still, she was determined to make *The New*

Northwest a voice for human rights, particularly woman suffrage. To her great disappointment, beginning with the campaign of 1884, her brother Harvey's increasingly conservative position helped defeat equal suffrage in Oregon. The *Oregonian* did not actively support woman suffrage until the victory year of 1912, two years after Harvey's death.

Duniway was honored when Governor Oswald West asked her to write the Oregon Woman Suffrage Proclamation in 1912, but she did not live to see the Nineteenth Amendment grant suffrage to all women. On October 11, 1915, a few days before her eighty-first birthday, she died in a Portland hospital.

Abigail Scott Duniway's final Portland residence was at the Fordham Apartments, 742 SW Vista Ave. (formerly 170 Vista Ave.).

Sources

Kessler, Lauren. "A Siege of the Citadels: Search for a Public Forum for the Ideas of Oregon Woman Suffrage." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 84 (Summer 1983).

Moynihan, Ruth Barnes. *Rebel for Rights, Abigail Scott Duniway*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

Ward, Jean M., and Elaine A. Maveety. *Yours for Liberty: Selections from Abigail Scott Duniway's Suffrage Newspaper*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2000.

The Oregon Encyclopedia

https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/abigail_scott_duniway/