Wisconsin Biographies

Belle Case La Follette
Ballots and Bloomers

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Glossary

advisor (n): a person who helps others by giving them advice about what they should do

ballot (n): something you put your vote on; can be a piece of paper or on a computer

biography (n): the history or story of someone’s life; can be written into a book

bloomers (n): loose-fitting pants

corset (n): a tight undergarment worn to make the waist and hips look smaller

equal rights (n): the same treatment for all people

rally (n): an event where people meet to show support for a cause

suffrage (n): the right to vote

university (n): a school of higher education, usually after high school

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**INTRODUCTION**

**Ballots** are tools people use for voting. **Bloomers** are loose-fitting pants women used to wear.

How are ballots and bloomers related? Belle Case La Follette could tell you how.

Belle Case La Follette was a political activist who fought for people’s **equal rights**. She led the fight to get women the right to vote. She spoke out against war and laws that treated others unfairly. Belle was also the first woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School.

Belle worked hard for women’s suffrage and equal rights. *How have Belle’s actions influenced your life?*

Belle Case La Follette died on August 18, 1931. She was a brave woman who fought for peace and equal rights. Belle played an active role in the women’s suffrage movement, and worked hard to teach people the importance of treating others fairly and with respect.
Bob died in 1925. After his death, the U.S. Senate wanted Belle to take his job. Belle did not want it. She could have been the first female U.S. senator. Instead, her son Bob, Jr. took his father’s spot in the Senate. Belle was one of his best advisors.

Belle also continued to work for equal rights through her active role in the Woman’s Peace Party (now called Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom). She was also a member of organizations like the National Council for the Prevention of War. The goal of these organizations was to promote peace.

Belle continued to write as well. She began to write a biography with her daughter Fola about Bob. Belle also continued to serve as an editor for La Follette Weekly Magazine, which later changed its name to The Progressive.
Belle often helped her grandmother. She did jobs such as sewing, cleaning, and cooking. Belle not only worked hard at home, but at school too. She loved school and always tried to do her best. Belle went to school for 12 years and missed only one day when she got the measles! She would walk a total of four miles to and from school, but it did not bother her because, like her grandmother, she believed in the importance of education.

Belle’s parents also felt education was important. In the 1800s, girls usually stayed home to help on the farm and in the house. However, Belle’s parents wanted more for their daughter.

When Belle was 16, she began college at the University of Wisconsin in Madison (UW-Madison). She was a top student and studied a lot.

Belle wanted equal rights for women. She was very active in the women’s suffrage movement.

**Women’s Suffrage Movement**

Suffrage means the right to vote. In the 1800s, only men were allowed to vote. People such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Henry Blackwell worked hard to teach others why it was fair for women to be able to vote. They did not think women should be treated differently from men. Their hard work paid off. In 1920, the 19th Amendment of the US Constitution gave women the right to vote.

Belle not only believed in women’s right to vote, but also in peace. She helped organize a group called the Women’s Peace Party in 1915. This group had meetings, rallies and parades to help teach others about living peacefully and treating others fairly. Because of brave women like Belle, women finally earned the right to vote in 1920.
Belle and Bob both believed in equal rights for all people, including women and people of color. Together, Belle and Bob worked hard to spread the message that all people are equal.

During a speech in 1913, Belle quoted Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address when she said, “This Nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the Earth.” Belle then asked, “Are women not people, too?” This made all the people applaud loudly, even the men.

Corset
A corset is a tight-fitting undergarment that women wore to make their waist and hips look smaller. Do you think it was comfortable wearing a corset? Belle did not think so. She often wore loose fitting clothing.

However, not everyone was as serious as Belle at the university. A boy named Bob was in Belle’s classes. He was a class clown and very silly. Belle fell in love with Bob.

Both Belle and Bob graduated in 1879. Belle moved to Spring Green, Wisconsin to teach high school, and Bob stayed in Madison to study law at the university. He became a lawyer on February 5, 1880, and began his long political career.
FAMILY LIFE

Belle married Bob on December 31, 1881. A year later, their daughter Fola was born. Belle loved being a mother, but she still wanted more.

She often helped Bob do research for his court cases, which made her interested in law. In 1883, she began taking law classes. After two years of hard work, she became the first woman to earn a law degree from the University of Wisconsin Law School! Bob was very proud of his wife. He even called her the “brainiest member of the family.”

While Belle was attending law school, Bob began running for different political offices. He became a United States (U.S.) Congressman in 1883, the governor of Wisconsin in 1900, and a U.S. Senator in 1905. During each of his campaigns, Belle helped Bob write his speeches. Very few people knew Belle was helping Bob. In later years, Bob became famous for his role in the Progressive Movement, but few knew of Belle’s influences on his ideas and speeches.

The La Follette family continued to grow. Together, Belle and Bob had three more children – Robert Jr., Philip, and Mary. The family kept busy in Madison, Wisconsin. Belle and Bob even began writing their own magazine in 1909 called La Follette’s Weekly Magazine. Belle wrote about things such as the benefits of exercise for women, women’s clothing, and women’s rights.

When Belle graduated from college in 1879, 10,411 men and 2,485 women earned their bachelor’s degrees in the U.S.