Belle Case La Follette

Ballots and Bloomers
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Ballots are what people use to vote. Bloomers are loose-fitting pants women used to wear.

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

Belle Case La Follette wanted all people to have equal rights. She helped women get the right to vote. She also spoke out against war and laws that treated African Americans unfairly.

Belle Case La Follette (1885)
Early Life

On April 21, 1859, Belle Case was born in a small cabin in Summit, Wisconsin. She was not born in a hospital. In the 1850s, most people had to either walk or ride horses. Getting to a hospital would take a long time.

When Belle was three years old, she moved with her family to Baraboo, Wisconsin. Her parents were farmers.

Her grandparents also lived near Baraboo. Belle spent a lot of time with her grandmother. She taught Belle that school and hard work were important.
Belle helped her grandmother at home. She could sew, clean, and cook. Belle also worked hard at school. She loved school. In 12 years, Belle missed only one day when she got sick!

Belle’s parents also thought school was important. When Belle was 16, she began college at the University of Wisconsin in Madison (UW-Madison). Not many girls went to college in the 1800s. They stayed home and helped on the farm and in the house.

Women were first allowed to attend the University of Wisconsin in 1863.
Belle was a good student and got good grades. There was a boy named Bob in Belle’s classes. He was very silly. Belle fell in love with Bob.

Belle and Bob finished college in 1879. Belle began to teach high school. Bob became a lawyer.
Belle and Bob got married on December 31, 1881. They had a daughter named Fola in 1882. Belle loved being a mother, but she wanted to go to law school.

Belle began taking law classes in 1883. She studied a lot, and became the first woman to finish school at the University of Wisconsin Law School!

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

Bob was elected to the government many times. He became a United States (U.S.) Congressman (1883), Wisconsin’s governor (1900), and a U.S. Senator (1905). Many people did not know that Belle helped Bob get elected. She gave him ideas and helped him write his speeches. But Belle did not want to be elected herself.

The La Follette family grew and grew. Belle and Bob had three more children. Their names were Robert Jr., Philip, and Mary. In 1909, Belle and Bob started writing their own magazine called *La Follette’s Weekly Magazine.*
At this time, women were not allowed to vote in the United States. Belle often wrote about why women should be able to vote.

On April 26, 1913, she gave a speech to the U.S. Senate in Washington, D.C. about why women should have the right to vote. This was a brave thing to do. Women were finally given the right to vote in 1920.

**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.
Belle also believed in peace and equal rights for all people. She helped start a group called the Women’s Peace Party in 1915. This group held meetings, rallies, and parades to try to stop wars. Belle even wrote letters to the President asking him to change the laws to give all people equal rights.

**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.
Bob died in 1925. The U.S. Senate wanted Belle to take Bob’s place as senator. She could have been the first female U.S. senator, but she did not want the job. So her son Bob, Jr. took his father’s place. Belle helped her son and was one of his best advisors.

Belle wrote a biography about her husband with her daughter Fola. Belle kept writing for the magazine she and Bob began. She also kept working for equal rights.
Belle worked hard for women’s suffrage and equal rights. How have Belle’s actions influenced your life?

Belle died on August 18, 1931. She is remembered as a leader in the women’s suffrage movement. Belle was a brave woman who worked hard for peace and equal rights.
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