Belle Case La Follette
Ballots and Bloomers
Biography written by:

Becky Marburger
Educational Producer
Wisconsin Media Lab
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ................................. 2
Early Life .................................. 3
Education ................................. 4
Family Life ................................. 6
Fighting for Her Beliefs .................. 7
Conclusion ................................. 10

Glossary ................................. 12
“Behind every great man is a great woman.”

What does this statement mean to you?

This phrase was often used in the Women’s Rights Movement during the 1960s. It depicts American women’s struggle for equal rights including the rights to vote, attend college, and even wear pants.

Before this phrase became popular, there was a woman who stood not behind her man, but right beside him. That woman’s name was Belle Case La Follette.

Belle was a political activist who fought for equal rights for all people, including African Americans and children. She used her bravery and education to teach others about peace and to empower women. She wanted women to untie their corsets, pull on their bloomers, and cast their ballots. Belle was also the first woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School.
On April 21, 1859, Belle Case was born in a small cabin in Summit, Wisconsin. She was not born in a hospital, as is customary today, but rather at home. Hospitals were not as plentiful in the 1880s, and were usually only found in larger cities. People often had to travel a long distance to see a doctor. Riding a horse or walking were the most popular forms of transportation at this time, which sometimes made traveling challenging, especially for pregnant women.

At the age of three, Belle moved with her parents and older brother, Roy, to Baraboo, Wisconsin. Her parents, Anson and Mary, wanted to farm hops, which was a popular crop in the Baraboo region.

Anson’s parents also lived near Baraboo. Belle spent a lot of time with her grandmother, Lucetta Case, who proved to be very influential in Belle’s life. Lucetta believed in the importance of education and hard work, traits she passed on to Belle.
Belle spent a great deal of time working side by side with her grandmother, helping her with the sewing, cleaning, and cooking. Belle not only worked hard at home, but also in school. She loved school and always strove to do her best. In the 12 years that she attended the local one-room schoolhouse, she missed only one day due to getting the measles! Belle walked two miles to and from school, but it did not bother her because, like her grandmother, she believed in the importance of education.

Belle and her grandmother were not the only family members who felt education was important; her parents did too. During this time, girls usually stayed home to help on the farm and in the house, but Belle’s parents wanted something else for her. They allowed their daughter to attend college at age 16, which was very unusual for girls at this time.
Belle was accepted and enrolled at the **University** of Wisconsin at Madison (UW-Madison). She was a top student and took her studies very seriously. Not everyone at the university was as serious as Belle however. One particular class clown named Bob La Follette caught Belle’s eye, and in 1878, the two became engaged.

The pair began their careers after graduating from the university in 1879. Belle moved to Spring Green, Wisconsin to teach high school, and Bob remained in Madison to study law at the university. He became a lawyer on February 5, 1880. This date would mark the beginning of Bob’s long political career.
Family Life

Belle married Bob on December 31, 1881. The following year, their daughter Fola was born. Belle loved being a mother, but being the determined individual she was, she still wanted more.

Belle often helped Bob do research for his court cases, and she too soon became intrigued with law. This led her to enroll in law school in 1883. After two years of hard work, she became the first woman to earn a degree from the University of Wisconsin Law School! Bob was very proud of his wife, and often called her the “brainiest member of the family.”

![Bachelor's Degrees Earned in the U.S.](image)

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

While Belle was attending law school, Bob was elected to the United States (U.S.) Congress in 1883. He was elected two more times, and during each of his campaigns, Belle was right by his side. She helped him write his campaign speeches, including when he became the governor of Wisconsin (1900) and a U.S. Senator (1905). Bob was famous for his role in the Progressive Movement, but few knew of Belle’s influence on his ideas and speeches. She did not mind this, though. Belle liked to have her opinions heard, but she did not like to be in the spotlight.

Belle and Bob’s family continued to grow. Together, they had three more children: Robert Jr. (1895), Philip (1897), and Mary (1899). The six-person family kept busy in Madison, Wisconsin. Belle and Bob even began writing their own magazine in 1909 called *La Follette’s Weekly Magazine*. Belle actively wrote for the magazine, writing about things such as the benefits of exercise for women, women’s clothing, and women’s rights.
Belle and Bob believed in equal rights for all people, including women and people of color. Their magazine publications and Bob’s political career both reflected this. Together, they worked hard to spread the message about why they believed all people are equal.

In 1913, Belle overcame her shyness about public speaking and gave a speech before the U.S. Senate.

During her speech, Belle quoted Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address when she stated, “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 went on to say, “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.

Address when she stated, “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 went on to say, “Are women not people, too?” This made all the people applaud loudly, even the men.
Belle took a stand for women’s rights, and 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 believed in women’s right to vote, and in peace. She helped form a group called the Women’s Peace Party in 1915. This group held meetings, **rallies** and parades to help teach others about the importance of peace and treating others fairly. Because of brave people like Belle, women finally earned the right to vote in 1920. Ballots were now in the hands of both men and women.
Bob died while still in office in 1925. After his death, the U.S. Senate wanted Belle to take his seat. She could have been the first female U.S. senator, but she did not want the job. Instead, Bob, Jr. took his father’s place in the U.S. Senate. Belle was one of his best advisors.

Belle continued to work for equal rights through her active role in the Woman’s Peace Party (now called the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom). She also participated in groups such as the Women’s Committee for World Disarmament and the National Council for the Prevention of War, both of which strove to achieve peace.

Belle still wrote, as well. She began writing 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 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.
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
For additional resources, visit pbswisconsineducation.org