South Dakota Women Stake a Claim:
A quarter of a century ago, no one in South Dakota had heard the terms "women's liberation," "displaced homemaker," "battered wife," "consciousness raising," or "Ms." Legislative bodies—Congress, state legislatures, county and city commissions—were bastions of male domination. Private clubs, Jaycees, Rotary, and Kiwanis excluded women. Few female students enrolled in engineering, science, agriculture, medicine, or law at the universities, and the business school discouraged female applicants. A woman in the clergy was a rarity. Women were paid less than men—the average figure was about fifty-nine cents for the male dollar—in banks, businesses, schools, colleges, and even as lifeguards at local swimming pools. Few girls participated in high school athletics. Women were just beginning to use the pill as a method of birth control, and abortion was illegal. Most women expected to devote their lives to keeping house and rearing children, even if, by choice or necessity, they worked for wages outside the home. Most women expected—or at least hoped—to be supported by a male breadwinner in return for devotion to domesticity.

Yet, in 1964, a new day had already dawned for American women, and its light would eventually penetrate South Dakota to change the lives of women here. Today, twenty-five years later, the evidence of this gentle revolution is apparent everywhere. Most women today, including mothers of small children, work for...
wages outside the home. Most young women expect to pursue some kind of career in addition to managing a family, and they hope men will share in household tasks and child care. Women maintain a strong foothold in the South Dakota State Legislature, on county and city commissions, even as mayors. The Board of Regents recently named a woman as president of the University of South Dakota. Women of all ages have flocked into colleges and universities, even in engineering, agriculture, medicine, and law. In 1975, when enrollment of women in colleges had already begun to rise, only 43.9 percent of the total student population in public and private colleges was women; in 1988, women comprised 55.8 percent of the population. In 1975, women made up 16.7 percent of the medical school enrollment and 19 percent of law school; in 1988, the number of women in medical school had jumped to 29.5 percent; in law school, to 41.8 percent. Women with masters degrees in business administration have entered the corporate world, and, largely through the courts, women have broken down the barriers to business and service clubs. High school girls not only compete in athletics but win college scholarships in such sports as basketball and track. Birth control devices are widely available, and abortions, although sometimes difficult to obtain, are safe and legal.

In actual control, this is still a man’s world. Men dominate the power structure—in government, financial institutions, education, business, and industry. Yet, in the last twenty-five years, South Dakota women have staked their claim in it. Like other American women, they will not easily surrender the territory they have won. Indeed, most women work constantly to expand their small holdings for an even larger share of American public and professional life. They do not intend to repeat the mistake of the women suffragists who believed they had won it all with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. For almost two generations, until the 1960s, the feminist movement was largely dormant until women once again became aware of the inequities and injustices of sex discrimination and of the oppression of women.

Three events heralded the rebirth of feminist ideology and action. The first in 1962 was President John F. Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women, which focused national attention on women’s issues and provided a platform for public discussion

and recommendations for action. Many states, including South Dakota, established similar commissions in succeeding years. This agency would prove invaluable in creating a community of feminist leaders to provide a clearing house for women's issues, a sponsor of public education and consciousness raising, and a platform for advocacy of equality for women.

The second event was the most explosive—the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. The book demolished the myth of the happy suburban housewife/mother. Friedan described the "problem that had no name"—the restless, bored frustration of educated, middle-class women who were tired of domesticity and hungered for challenges that used their talents and energies. The sensational best seller struck a responsive chord in millions of women across the country. I understood the women she wrote about very well—I was one of them. I had joined "the flight to the home" in the fifties, living in a ranch-style house, chauffeuring the children to dentist, music lessons, Sunday School, and Little League in a station wagon, happily married but discon-
tent and dissatisfied. I felt both joyful and guilty when I returned to teaching while my children were still quite young. Betty Friedan assured me I was neither isolated nor abnormal—many women shared my feelings and experience.

The third event, in 1964, was the passage of the Civil Rights Act, which included the word ‘sex’ in Title VII dealing with employment. For the first time, sex, like race and religion, would not legally be a qualification for a job. Though the amendment passed the House of Representatives with laughter and jokes (the occasion was called Ladies’ Day) and its sponsors hoped to defeat the entire Civil Rights Bill through ridicule, an unlikely coalition of feminists, southern white conservatives, and an administration anxious to pass the bill quickly succeeded in making Title VII law. Suddenly, women could demand equality of opportunity with the power of the federal government behind them.

For most of the sixties, action was fragmented and hesitant—certainly little was in evidence in South Dakota. The nation was absorbed in the civil rights movement, Vietnam War protests, rebellions, and changing lifestyles of the baby boom generation. Women’s voices were heard infrequently above the din. Yet two important actions took place that set the course for the feminist movement in the seventies. Dissatisfied with the inaction of the Third National Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women, some women met in a rump session in a Washington hotel room in 1966 to found the National Organization for Women (NOW). Modeled on the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), NOW would work through courts and legislative bodies to achieve women’s rights. Its members were primarily white, educated, and middle class, and by the 1970s South Dakota had chapters in Sioux Falls, Pierre, Vermillion, Rapid City, Aberdeen, and Brookings. Younger, more radical women members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were also dissatisfied, this time with the male leadership of SDS. In 1967, they walked out of a meeting and launched “women’s liberation.” They advocated not just equal rights for women but a more fundamental change in male/female relationships: communal day care, dissemination of birth control, easily available abortions, equal sharing of housework, cooperation rather than competition. They saw a relationship between capitalism and the patriarchy—what

they called a "macho" society. Their ideas would eventually permeate South Dakota.

By 1970, the new feminist movement had captured media attention. Television, the press, and periodicals documented the profound changes occurring in women's hearts, minds, and lives. South Dakota provided a responsive audience. Although we had participated in early actions only from the sidelines, quietly and privately we began to think, to question, to discuss with each other our feelings, ideas, and experiences as women. Like other women scholars, I began to read American women writers with a heightened consciousness and a thrilling sense of discovery: Anne Bradstreet, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Emily Dickinson, among others. I incorporated their work into my literature courses. I also explored our feminist heritage in the work of early feminists—Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Fuller, Susan B. Anthony. Ignored by standard histories, these incredible women charted the course and fought the first battles in the gentle revolution that Stanton maintained would be the greatest revolution in the history of the species. Like other feminist scholars, I also reexamined Scripture, theology, and the church from a feminist perspective.

Some women explored their personal lives: relationships with husbands, employers, children, men; relationships with mothers, daughters, sisters, other women; attitudes toward housework and politics. "Consciousness-raising," becoming aware of the inequities and injustices that cause a poor self-image or that frustrate one's own self-development, played a large role in the twentieth-century woman's movement. Many a "libber" expressed her first sense of outrage at the treatment of women while she was sitting in a living room or around a kitchen table talking with other women. By the middle of the decade, this phase of the movement took on more formal organization in the establishment of women's centers.

The first one in South Dakota was organized in Brookings in the United Ministries Center in 1974, largely through the efforts of Margaret Denton, who remained its guiding spirit for many years. Another followed at Sioux Falls College, with attempts being made in Aberdeen and Rapid City. Such places often provided personal counseling as well as conferences, seminars, and workshops on issues important to women—rape, health care, divorce, employment, educational opportunities, day care. They provided "asser-

tiveness training' and "support groups" for women in transition to independence or new life patterns. They provided advocacy for many women ignored by the system—the "nontraditional student," the "displaced homemaker," the "battered wife." All of these—women who go back to college after marriage and children; older women who have lost a husband through death or divorce, have no particular job skills, and are too young for social security; and women subjected to physical and psychological abuse by their husbands—to some extent, were brought to public attention through women's centers and the woman's movement.

Other women concluded that they were ready for a larger piece of political action. Women ran successfully for school boards (I did in 1970), for the state legislature, for city and county commissions. In the course of the next decade, a number of women demonstrated leadership that would have some lasting impact on South Dakota politics: Mary A. McClure, Frances S. ("Peg") Lamont, Doris P. Miner, Loila Hunking, Linda Lea Miller Viken, Debra R. Anderson, and Mary K. Wagner, among others. These women broke through the "old boys' club" that had dominated state government since its inception and manifested a capacity to lead in shaping policy. Other women took managerial positions in administration—Marcia Donnan was the first as secretary of the Department of Manpower Affairs in 1974, but she was certainly not the last.

_During the 1970s, women began to run for school boards and win, as this photograph of the executive board of the Associated School Boards of South Dakota illustrates._
In the 1980s, Judith Meierhenry was both secretary of education and cultural affairs and secretary of labor before being appointed circuit court judge. Such women worked within party and governmental structures, sometimes championing feminist causes and sometimes simply bringing a woman's point of view to issues before the legislature. Not all were feminists, and on some women's issues they disagreed completely.

Yet the feminist thrust was strong throughout the seventies. The chief agency for focusing issues and generating discussion and action was the South Dakota Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Established first in 1963 by executive order, it was a large, unfunded, consultative body until 1973, when an appointed commission of twelve members from both parties became statutory by act of the legislature. A small budget to cover the expense of quarterly meetings and to provide some educational outreach was also approved. Ann Thompson chaired the group through its first year, but Lorraine Collins provided its chief leadership from 1975 to 1979 during its most active period. By that time, the commission had a large enough budget to fund an executive secretary, first Margaret Flemmer and then Joyce Quarnstrom, in an office in Pierre.

As a member of the commission from 1973 to 1979, I remember the heady excitement of gathering with other women from across the state to discuss issues, exchange ideas, and plan strategy. Meetings were intense and exhausting—there seemed to be so much to do and so little time and money to do it. But as had been apparent in the past, a community of women can be powerful and exhilarating. We became the clearing house for problems affecting women's lives that demanded action—day care for children, sex-role stereotyping in the public schools, job discrimination, difficulties in getting credit, rape, teenage mothers, battered women, displaced homemakers, inheritance laws, nontraditional students. Underlying all of these was the imperative to arouse the consciousness and the conscience of the male power structure over the inequities women face in South Dakota.

We worked tirelessly to that end. We sponsored conferences on many issues: "Room at the Top" in Sioux Falls in 1974, which dealt with upward mobility for women in business and industry; "Unlocking Our Potential" in Rapid City in 1975, which encouraged women's self-development; "A Woman's Place is in the World" in Pierre in 1975, which promoted women's involvement in local and tribal government. We held some of our quarterly meetings around the state to enable more women to attend—Yankton, Aberdeen,
Chaired by Lorraine Collins (left), the Commission on the Status of Women held meetings and conferences across South Dakota throughout the 1970s. Commissioners Rose Bordeaux and Loila Hunking are also pictured.

Sioux Falls, Eagle Butte, the Black Hills. We published a newsletter that reported not only our own activities but gave information on women’s center activities, other conferences, and matters in education or government pertinent to women. We arranged for the writing and dissemination of “Did You Know” newspaper columns for state dailies and weeklies, giving brief bits of information on employment, on legislative issues relating to women, and on women in the work place, in history, in public life. We supplied information on obtaining credit, on books for children that were not sex-stereotyped, on coping with the loss of a husband through death or divorce. In 1979, in conjunction with the Association of Christian Churches, we held a series of workshops for clergy around the state called “Church Response to Women” to raise clerical consciousness regarding problems the contemporary woman faces.
In the middle of this activity, we discovered our past. Of all the actions undertaken by the Commission on the Status of Women, the reclaiming of our heritage has seemed to me to be the most significant and long-lasting. The legislature voted CSW a special grant of fifty thousand dollars to recognize South Dakota women, both as an International Women's Year (1977) project and as a part of the nation's bicentennial celebration (1976). What a treasure! We applied the same energy and enthusiasm to recovering South Dakota women's history and writings that scholars elsewhere had applied to national women's studies. Materials hitherto unavailable began to flow forth to enrich our knowledge of ourselves and our heritage.

We reprinted Dorinda Riessen Reed's pioneer research effort, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in South Dakota*, discovering that both Susan B. Anthony and Anna Howard Shaw had stumped the state for suffrage in 1890.5 With the help of Kathy Marshall of the

5. Reed's book was originally published in 1958 as Report No. 41 of the Governmental Research Bureau, University of South Dakota, Vermillion.
South Dakota Department of Social Services, we created a slide show based on the book. Titled "Women are People," it was available on request to groups around the state. Through the efforts of commission members Eunice Larrabee and Rose Bordeaux, we sponsored another slide/tape show entitled "Lakota Winyan," describing American Indian women in South Dakota. Jane Nau- man wrote the script and provided many of the pictures. Particularly valuable in revealing the rich literary resources of our past was *South Dakota Women, 1850-1919: A Bibliography*, compiled and annotated by Nancy Tystad Koupal and distributed without charge by CSW.

Other researchers and scholars were at work as well. Sally Roesch Wagner became an authority on the life and work of Matilda Joslyn Gage, national suffrage leader, whose grown children migrated to Dakota Territory in the 1880s and who frequently visited them in Aberdeen. Through the NOW chapter in Aberdeen, Wagner published *The Declaration of Rights of Women: 1876*, based on Gage's papers of the women's demonstration at the nation's centennial celebration in Philadelphia. The Modern Language Association project "Teaching Women's Literature from a Regional Perspective" included South Dakota when I served on the national committee and directed student research and my own study on some of the women writers Koupal had uncovered. Added impetus was given to scholarship on women when both the University of South Dakota and South Dakota State University instituted women's studies minors with appropriate courses by the end of the decade.

Yet another arena of activity was the Human Rights Commission under its director Mary Lynn Myers. Complaints brought before it included sex discrimination cases and were duly investigated, heard, and resolved, with or without going to court. A notable case was the Little League issue brought by the parents of two girls in Rapid City who were denied the right to play Little League ball, although the teams used city fields. While the case was decided too late to be meaningful for the young women involved, it did successfully open up Little League Baseball to girls. Other cases involved unequal opportunities for athletics in the public schools and the inequities in financial support for Girls' State and Boys' State. These issues caused great local controversy because they affected areas so dear to the hearts of many people.

However, all of these actions, contentious though they might have been, were like side shows compared to the struggle fought out in the center ring. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) became the key issue for feminists in the seventies. First submitted to Congress in 1923, the amendment was bottled up in the judiciary committee for years until pressure from the revived feminist movement of the sixties forced it to a vote. The Senate overwhelmingly approved it in March 1972, and it went to the states for ratification. South Dakota ratified the measure in February of 1973, the twenty-fourth state to do so, apparently with little opposition. Grace Mickelson was the only woman member of the South Dakota Senate at the time.

7. The Equal Rights Amendment reads:
   1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.
   2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.
   3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.
Opposition to the ERA surfaced quickly, especially after the United States Supreme Court decision on abortion in *Roe v. Wade* in January 1973. The two issues were linked in the minds of many—feminists usually supported both the Supreme Court decision on abortion and the ERA. Most opponents saw both issues as threatening to the family, degrading motherhood, and advocating sexual hedonism. By the middle of the decade, opposition in South Dakota was well organized and vocal. Ruth Karim, director of Right to Life, and later Kitty Werthmann became the best-known spokespersons against the ERA, although Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum and Stop ERA drive also penetrated South Dakota to rally opposing voices. A particularly notable event in the argument was a debate in Huron in March 1977 between Phyllis Schlafly and Mary Lynn Myers. The audience was decidedly feminist in sympathy, but it was clear that anti-ERA forces were gathering strength to put pressure on the legislature.

The climax for the feminists in the decade of the seventies was the International Women’s Year (IWY) Conference, called by President Jimmy Carter for Houston, Texas, in 1977. By this time, the battle lines were sharply drawn, both nationally and locally. The first skirmishes were fought in the state meetings. In South Dakota, the theme of the state conference in Mitchell was “Celebrate South Dakota Women and Speak out!” Nearly four hundred women, a cross-section of South Dakotans, gathered to elect delegates to Houston and to debate resolutions. Farm women and city women, teenagers and a woman in her eighties, homemakers and career women, American Indians and whites, pro- and anti-ERA women—all attended. The celebration included a pageant featuring eight historic South Dakota women, including Marie Dorion, Calamity Jane, Caroline Ingalls, and Annie D. Tallent. South Dakota songwriter Susan Osborn sang her own compositions at the event. Noted *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman was keynote speaker, while Loila Hunking and Lorraine Collins chaired the IWY Planning Committee, and Mary Lynn Myers chaired the meeting. Although antifeminists spoke forcefully for their positions, they were outnumbered by the feminists, who approved thirty-four resolutions, including one advocating ratification of ERA. A largely feminist delegation went to Houston from South Dakota, although they appeared far too middle aged and middle

A pageant featuring eight historical Dakota women was one of the highlights of the 1977 state International Women's Year meeting. Here, Kathryn Tystad (left) portrays Elizabeth Custer, while LuEtt Hanson plays the role of Mary C. Collins.
class to be very radical. All but one (a nun) were or had been married, and they could boast a total of twenty-eight children among them.

The Houston International Women's Year Conference was the triumph of feminism in the seventies. Over two thousand women of all ages, sizes, shapes, and colors celebrated their sense of community, their growing confidence, their common purpose, their feeling of solidarity—the fruits of years of struggle in the new woman's movement. Some delegations were strongly antifeminist, but they were a decided minority. Delegates approved the feminist list of resolutions, including the most controversial: ratification of the ERA, support for reproductive freedom, and protection of civil rights of homosexuals. We returned to South Dakota on waves of elation over our victory—and exhausted.

Victory was short-lived. The great swing of American opinion to the right was already in evidence, and conservative Christian churches, Mormons, and Catholics united solidly against ERA and the right to abortion. The budget of the Commission on the Status of Women was cut in 1977—a foreshadowing of defeats to follow. Its newsletter was abolished and some projects dropped, although we continued some activities such as visiting correctional facilities to investigate conditions of incarcerated women. With the election of Governor Bill Janklow in 1978 and the conservatives that surged into power with him, the ERA was doomed. In February of 1979, the legislature succeeded in rescinding the ERA. Feminists—including allies from such traditional women's organizations as the American Association of University Women, League of Women Voters, and Business and Professional Women—fought hard to save it, but to no avail. The Commission on the Status of Women was also under attack, but it squeaked through the session intact with a small budget. However, in July, Governor Janklow replaced outgoing members with Ruth Karim, Ann Lemon, and Marie Halvorson, who had opposed the ERA and who had testified for abolishing the commission. As an effective voice for the rights of women, the Commission on the Status of Women was dead.

During the bleak, inhospitable eighties of the Ronald Reagan and Janklow administrations, feminists took different tacks. Not that

they returned to domesticity. Far from it. They continued to enter the work force, educational institutions, politics, and government. They pushed for advancement in business and industry and demanded equity in academia. Female airline pilots, surgeons, police officers were no longer a novelty. In fact, by the end of the eighties, many of the controversial feminist issues of the seventies had been adopted by younger conservative men and women. Day care became a respectable national issue. Economists recognized that women were essential to the labor force, that business and industry could no longer survive without them. The wage-earning mother became the norm. Battered wives were a national scandal and teenage mothers a national crisis. Women’s issues became national issues.

Scholarship in women’s issues has continued to flourish in the eighties. The University of South Dakota holds an annual women’s conference in the spring to highlight the research and creative production of women scholars and the results of study of women’s lives and history. Augustana College has also sponsored symposia, particularly on women’s literature in the Great Plains, and South Dakota Committee on the Humanities public programming and research grants have featured women’s issues.

Women themselves found some new ways to work. In South Dakota, women who discovered the benefits of joining forces to gain some power organized the South Dakota Advocacy Network for women. Working on the National Plan of Action that the Houston convention had adopted and having ties to many women’s organizations, the new group worked for issues of concern to women before the legislature. In some respects, this organization continues the work of the Commission on the Status of Women, although the network’s purpose is more political. The Women’s Political Caucus in Sioux Falls inaugurated an annual event of recognizing “foremothers”—a means of providing some distinction for women’s work.

Women devoted their energies to specific issues. Shelters for battered wives and children have been established in twenty-five communities across the state. Most include some sort of women’s center as well, but Brookings and Sioux Falls maintain separate entities. The shelters have flourished as recognized community agencies, providing counseling, support, assistance, protection, and referrals to families torn apart by domestic violence. They have also provided both education and advocacy on this painful issue. Much of what was considered radical twenty years ago has become acceptable in recent years.
Finally, we have begun to address the "gender" issue, values associated with women's traditional roles as caretakers and nurturers. Many feminists do not want to lose those values as the price of achieving equality. They want the values themselves to have an equal representation in society: cooperation rather than competition, negotiation rather than armed aggression, schools and playgrounds rather than armaments, health and welfare rather than profits, shared abundance rather than have and have nots, and, above all, care for women and children, who make up so many of the poor. The problems do not seem quite as simple as they did twenty years ago, but they are every bit as challenging.

As both a participant in and a student of the woman's movement in South Dakota for the past twenty-five years, I find it impossible to make any final judgment of it. Even though women have many more freedoms and opportunities than they had a quarter of a century ago, we do not yet have genuine equality, either as persons or in values. Has the work, the effort put forth in the struggle for women's rights been worth it? To that I can answer


By 1988, women comprised 55.8 percent of the total student population in South Dakota colleges as they continued to work toward greater equity in business, industry, and academia.
a resounding "yes!" Quite apart from its successes or failures, the work has been rewarding in and of itself. Both the sense of community I have had with some of South Dakota's remarkable women and the knowledge I have gained about them, past and present, in my study make the pain, the disappointment, the weariness of the struggle insignificant. Like the women of Lake Woebecon, South Dakota women are strong. In the last quarter century, they have staked a claim in the power structure. Perhaps in the next hundred years, they can share the territory equally with men.
Copyright of South Dakota History is the property of South Dakota State Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder’s express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

All illustrations in this issue are property of the South Dakota State Historical Society except for those on the following pages: pp. 457, 471, 556–57, from South Dakota Tourism, Pierre; p. 476 (top), from Thomas Daschle, United States Senate, Washington, D.C.; p. 506 (top), from Siouxland Heritage Museums, Sioux Falls; p. 507 (bottom), from Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, Sioux Falls; pp. 536–37 (top), from Ed Smyth/Ralston Purina Company, St. Louis, Mo.; p. 537 (top, inset), from Timber Lake Topic, Timber Lake; pp. 541, 554, from University of South Dakota Public Information Office, Vermillion; p. 544, from Associated School Boards of South Dakota, Pierre; p. 551, from Nancy Tystad Koupal, Pierre; p. 561, from Madge Turner Mickelson, Sioux Falls.