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Excerpt –

The Perfect 36: Tennessee Delivers Woman Suffrage

. . . in August, 1920, when Tennessee's all-male, all-white, mostly good-ol' boy legislature met for three weeks in special session to defend, denounce, cuss, discuss, and finally to ratify--with a majority of but a single vote--the so-called Susan B. Anthony Amendment. This action, in effect, marked the moment of enfranchisement for one-half the adult population of the United States, because Tennessee (which was immediately proclaimed "The Perfect 36" by commentators and cartoonists of the day) thereby became the pivotal 36th state needed to complete ratification by three-quarters of the then 48 states. It also marked the climax of 72 years of ceaseless campaigning by four generations of American women activists. Seasoned veterans of the suffragist struggle said this last battle--Armageddon in Nashville--was the toughest ever. Such it may well have been, since among the things the suffragists and their supporters had to contend with en route to victory were threats, bribes, lawsuits, cajolery, dirty tricks, injunctions, tapped telephones, rumors of kidnappings and double-crossings, fugitive quorums and other parliamentary shenanigans, not to mention overwrought propaganda leaflets distributed by flag-waving, rose-bedecked, anti-suffrage Southern ladies, and free-flowing Tennessee-brewed Jack Daniel's whiskey dispensed 24 hours a day from the liquor lobby's "Hospitality Suite" on the eighth floor of Nashville's Hermitage Hotel. Yet, with all of that, the decisive drama that unfolded during those hectic days in Tennessee that summer must be counted as one of democracy's finer triumphs. Which is, as a matter of fact, pretty much the way the suffragists themselves saw it. The most undeviating of American idealists, these persevering right-to-vote crusaders at both the national and the home-grown Tennessee level, had become by 1920, as skilled at the art of the possible as any politicians this nation has ever produced. Even though they themselves did not yet have the vote to use as leverage to reward legislators who supported their cause or to punish those who did not, they triumphed. The suffragists won with luck, pluck, and the help of their true-blue menfolk, because they knew, by long experience, that the American system could be made to work. How they made it work in Nashville, for themselves and for generations of women to come, was the story recreated by "The Perfect 36" exhibit at the University of Memphis, mounted in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the enactment of woman suffrage in the summer of 1995. It is also the story documented in *The Perfect 36: Tennessee Delivers Woman Suffrage*.