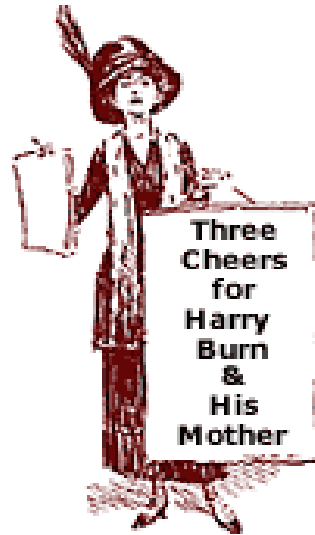


**“Don’t forget to be a Good Boy”:
Harry T. Burn’s letter from Mom and the Ratification of the 19th Amendment in Tennessee**



Harry T. Burn



On a hot and muggy summer morning in the month of August 1920, a young 24 year-old Republican lawmaker from Niota (McMinn County), in the southern valley of East Tennessee, changed his “Nay” vote to an “Aye” during a critical final ballot to decide the fate on ratification of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution. Burn’s momentous decision to vote in favor of woman suffrage not only secured the elusive victory that suffragists had sought since the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 but also secured a place for both Burn and his widowed mother, Febb Ensminger Burn, in American history as they delivered Tennessee as the “Perfect 36” state to ratify the 19th Amendment.

On Friday, August 18, the Tennessee House deliberated a joint resolution for ratification of the 19th Amendment that had recently passed in the state Senate. Several legislators rose from their desks to deliver impassionate speeches that merely recounted the age-old arguments waged by “suffs” (suffragists) and “antis” (anti-suffragists) for and against woman suffrage. After a lengthy debate, House Speaker Seth Walker, a proclaimed “anti,” boldly proclaimed, “The hour has come. The battle has been fought and won, and I move . . . that the motion to concur in the Senate action goes where it belongs—to the table.”

A deaf silence blanketed the chamber as the motion was put forth on the House floor to table the amendment—tantamount to its death as the bill would be held over until the next legislative session convened after the fall elections. In the midst of the excitement, no one could discern the inner turmoil that waged within Harry Burn’s mind. Sitting in his chair in the third row to the right of the rostrum, Burn adorned a red rose (the symbol of the antis) on his jacket lapel. His constituents back home in McMinn County were bitterly divided—an ever-increasing majority of public opinion in the county was turning against woman suffrage. He also faced re-

election in the upcoming fall election and a deciding vote either way might cost him the votes needed to secure his seat in the next session of the General Assembly. Therefore, Burn was content to vote in favor of tabling the amendment. When the House clerk reached his name, the seventh on the list of 96 in attendance, Burn voted with the antis to table the amendment. “I had voted to table the amendment,” he later explained, “not in opposition but in hopes that it would come up again at the next session.” The vote was 48 to 48. Speaker Wallace demanded a recount. Again, the vote was deadlocked at 48 to 48. Therefore, the amendment remained alive on the House floor.

Speaker Wallace then moved to reconsider the original motion—a vote on the 19th Amendment. Now Burn was faced with a decision he had hoped he would not have to confront as the deciding vote on whether or not the 19th Amendment became the law of the land. Unbeknownst to his fellow colleagues, Burn carried a letter from his mother in his breast pocket that admonished him to vote in favor of the amendment.



Febb Ensminger Burn

Burn’s mother, a strong-willed widow of a farmer covered the woman suffrage debate from their Niota home when not milking cows, churning butter, cleaning and mending for her family, by reading four newspapers and a dozen magazines that she subscribed to. Febb Burn would later tell a reporter, “Suffrage has interested me for years. I like the suffrage militants as well as the others.” But after having read a barrage of bitter “anti” speeches published in the papers and realizing that her son’s constituents in McMinn County were fiercely in opposition to woman suffrage, Mrs. Burn maintained that she felt compelled to force the issue. “I sat down on [my] little chair on the front porch and penned a few lines to my son.”

In fact, Febb Burn wrote more than a few lines in regards to supporting ratification, which were interspersed among other family matters, in a seven-page letter to Harry.

“Dear Son, ... Hurray and vote for Suffrage and don’t keep them in doubt. I noticed Chandlers’ speech, it was very bitter. I’ve been waiting to see how you stood but have not seen anything yet.... Don’t forget to be a god boy and help Mrs. Catt with her “Rats.” Is she the one that put rat in ratification, Ha! No more from mama this time. With lots of love, Mama.”

Burn had read and re-read the words from his mother that he had just received and he hoped that he would not have to take a definitive stand on the measure until after the election. In fact, Burn had earlier told a prominent suffragist lobbyist that his vote would never hurt their cause, which led many to believe he was in fact a supporter of woman suffrage, but a legislator conflicted by the will of his constituents. Despite his pledge to the suffragist, Burn did not believe he would ever have to take a definitive stand on the issue at this point in time. Nevertheless, when the “antis” made a move to kill the bill by calling for a vote on the amendment itself, Burn faced a moral dilemma—to vote against the amendment and remain faithful to his “anti” constituents in light of his upcoming re-election campaign or remain faithful to the wishes of his mother.

The House clerk proceeded to call the roll for the third time, this time, a vote to decide the fate of the 19th Amendment in Tennessee. When the clerk called his name, Burn voted “Aye.” His vote came so quickly, so unexpectedly, that many in the galleries and on the House floor were caught off guard. Several thought that the young Republican freshman had innocently become confused by the prior two votes and meant to vote “Nay” instead of “Aye.” Indeed, Burn had made no mistake. He had cast his ballot for woman suffrage, and thus, cast the key ballot in the 49-47 vote that made the 19th Amendment the supreme law of the land.



*Key votes for woman suffrage include Harry Burn (back center, standing on the steps next to the Civil War cannon) and Banks P. Turner (far left) and Thomas Simpson (front center). Sue Shelton White, a prominent militant suffragist, stands far right.
Courtesy of the National Woman’s Party Collection, The Sewall-Belmont House and Museum, Washington, D.C.*

“Antis” in the galleries and on the House floor began shouting absurdities at Burn. Josephine Pearson, the most vocal Tennessee anti-suffragist labeled Burn a “traitor to manhood’s honor.” “Anti” supporting newspapers reported that Joe Hanover, a Jewish immigrant legislator targeted by the anti-suffragists for his ardent defense of woman suffrage, had paid Burn \$10,000 to change his vote. He was also accused of accepting a bribe from Governor Robert’s personal secretary. The charges of bribery did not stick to the East Tennessean. Unfazed by the intimidation tactics, Burn responded to the anti-attacks on his integrity and honor by inserting a personal statement in the *House Journal*, explaining his decision to cast his vote for the suffragists based on morality, justice, his mother, and the glory of the Republican party:

I desire to resent in the name of honesty and justice the veiled intimidation and accusation regarding my vote on the Suffrage Amendment as indicated in certain statements, and it is my sincere belief that those responsible for their existence know that there is not a scintilla of truth in them. I want to state that I changed my vote in favor of ratification first because I believe in full suffrage as a right; second, I believe we had a moral and legal right to ratify; third, I knew that a mother’s advice is always safest for a boy to follow and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification; fourth, I appreciated the fact that an opportunity such as seldom comes to a mortal man to free seventeen million women from political slavery was mine; fifth, I desired that my party in both State and nation might say that it was a republican from the East mountains of Tennessee, the purest Anglo-Saxon section in the world, who made national woman suffrage possible at this date, not for personal glory but for the glory of his party.

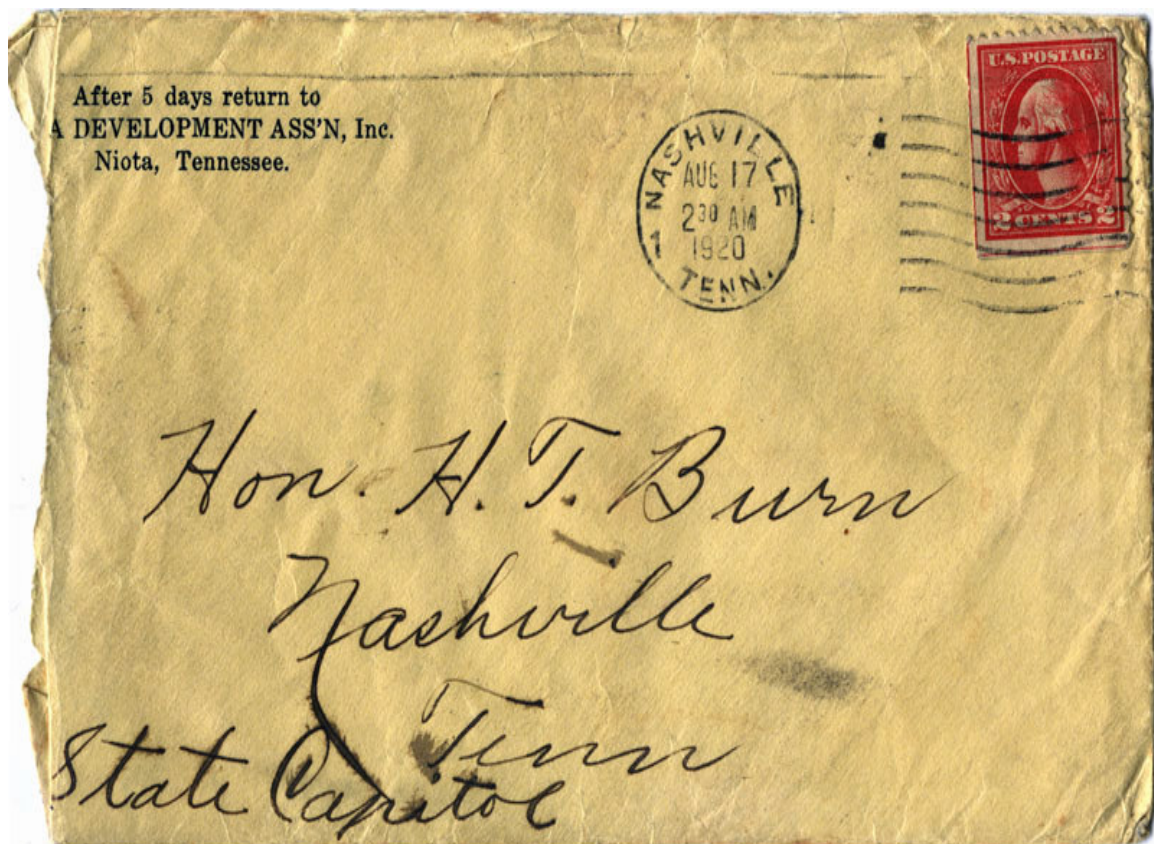
With the state of suffrage nerves already running at a fever pitch, they reached a further boiling point when Harry Burn was reported as having left the capital. The clerks at the hotel that Burn was registered at said he had left but they had no idea of his current whereabouts. The pro-suffrage forces throughout Tennessee feared that he may have deserted, or worse, been kidnapped. Not long thereafter Burn’s name appeared on the register book of another Nashville hotel where he had relocated to escape anti-attacks and public scrutiny.

The anti-attacks on Burn did not cease following the momentous vote. His enemies poured into McMinn County during Burn’s fall re-election campaign. “People from all over the country went into my county,” he recalled. “They held indignation meetings, passed resolutions.... When I went home for a weekend I would generally keep a bodyguard around so that no one would attack me.” His political enemies even accosted his mother at their farm when he was away from home. They urged her to disavow her “infamous” letter, but she remained steadfast. In the end, Burn managed to survive and win re-election to a second term; however, Tennessee’s Democratic Governor Albert H. Roberts, a Johnny-come-lately supporter to the suffragist camp, did not fare so well, suffering defeat to Republican Alfred A. Taylor.

Years later, Burn proudly reflected on his deciding vote: “I had always believed that women had an inherent right to vote. It was a logical attitude from my standpoint. My mother was a college woman, a student of national and international affairs who took an interest in all public issues. She could not vote. Yet the tenant farmers on our farm, some of whom were

illiterate, could vote. On that roll call, confronted with the fact that I was going to go on record for time and eternity on the merits of the question, I had to vote for ratification.”

The Harry T. Burn Letter



Harry T. Burn Papers, C. M. McClung Historical Collection

Dear Son,

I wish you were home too. We have had nothing but rain since you left. meeting still in progress, Otho and I haven't been a single time

Uncle Bill and Mrs. Bushnell came over this P.M., stayed about an hour they were in the Ford. We haven't had the car out since you left, and if this rainy weather does not lift up, I fear we will

have to stay at home the
rest of the summer.
The Rockwood crowd is
going to White Cliff Labor
Day. Will you be home
by then. Hurrah and
vote for suffrage and
don't keep them in
doubt. I noticed Chandlers
speech it was very
bittles. I've been watching
to see how you stood
but have not seen
any thing yet.

Mr. Orvick
the mill man bought
the Charlie Water badger
house Uncle Ben the
farm. I do not know
the prices they paid
you know. I ask does
not like to be interrogated.

You will tire of what
I am writing, but I
haven't anything else
to write about.

Jack went to Athens
on Monday after
you left. I said your
majority was 140
pretty good for a
fellow that had
made a "dog and
Road" law.

But I do hope you are
still in the notion of
not making the race
this fall. I hope you see
enough of politicians to
know it is not one of
the greatest things to
be one. What day
ye? &?

Do not know whether it
was a successful sale
or not, I only know it
was rainy. Mr Waterbarger's
little boy got his arm
broken that day.

Everything is
getting in readiness for
the wedding. Mintie
was real sick yesterday
but was better this morning.
I am uneasy about her &
she has been complaining
all summer. Talked to
Sadie yesterday. She expressed
her regrets about you
not going to be here.
We are invited down to
the home after the
wedding. They are sending
cards only to friends &
away.

Give my regards to
Mrs. Britton, and tell
him I have no fears
about you now, for I
think you are in
safe hands. Am glad
you like the change
I should think it
would be quicker, and
you could study better
or are you doing any
serious thinking? I
thought every day last
week I'd write you
but just kept putting
it off. We are all as
usual. Ohio is beginning

to fix for school. She
wants you here to
go with her.

Write mother every
time you have a
chance, for I am always
looking for a letter
when you are away.
Don't forget to be a
good boy, and help
Mrs. "Thomas Call"
with her "Rats".

Is she the one that
put rat in ratification?
Ha! no more from
Mama. This time
with lots of love
Mama.

Harry, If you have an
opportunity, get me
the music, for me
"Humoresque".
EB

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