

When Women Were Knights

When the Knights of Labor was formed in 1878, the delegates took what was then a very advanced step. The preamble to their constitution pledged, "To secure for both sexes equal pay for equal work." (A goal as yet to be achieved.) The Knights decided that all its activities would be the same for men and women, and that they might be in the same or separate union locals, as might seem best.

To appreciate the forward thinking of the Knights under the leadership of John Powderly, bear in mind that of the 30, or so, trade unions at the time, only the printers and cigar makers permitted female membership. Women workers responded all over the land. By 1886, when the Knights were at their peak, about 50,000 were women, around ten percent of the total. The first female assembly to be chartered was among Philadelphia shoemakers. The second was in Chicago and Elizabeth Roger was the Master Workman.

There were big strikes, too. On February 20, 1885, some 700 female Knights walked out of a Yonkers, N.Y. carpet mill after some had been fired for joining the organization. Soon all 2,500 women employees were out on strike. The Trade Unions of New York City came to their support. When the police jailed three women for "walking on the street," over 2,000 New Yorkers attended a great rally to honor the arrested women.

Women also rose in the leadership of the Knights. In Chicago, Elizabeth Rogers served for a period as Master Workman of the District Assembly, presiding over its 600 delegates representing 40,000 Knights. Among the Assemblies in Chicago identifiable as female or mixed, were the Clerks; Sewing Girls; Mattress Makers; Cloak Makers; Tailors; Coat Makers; Shoe Machine Hands; Waiters; and Dressmakers. Elizabeth Morgan was another woman leader. As the Knights began to fade in the wake of the tragic fiasco of Haymarket in 1886, Elizabeth Morgan reorganized her following as Federal Local 2703 of the AFL. Among its members were clerks, typists, candy makers, book binders, and dressmakers. Then, Morgan launched a vigorous membership campaign. Soon, she had organized twenty-two different AFL trade unions of women. Among them were the women watch makers of Elgin.