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## Cultivating Solidarity: Leonora O'Reilly, Working-Class Women, and Middle-Class Allies in the American Woman Suffrage Movement

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**Cultivating Solidarity:  
Leonora O'Reilly, Working-Class Women, and Middle-Class Allies in the American  
Woman Suffrage Movement**

Jacklyn Collens

Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College,  
May 2016.



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## Abstract

This thesis examines the process of forming strategic activist alliances, and the complications of maintaining them, by looking at the life of Leonora O'Reilly, a progressive era labor organizer and suffragist. It traces the development of O'Reilly's understanding of the need for alliances, which began with her early years as a young factory worker coming of age in the midst of the New York City labor movement in late nineteenth-century. The thesis then follows O'Reilly into adulthood, as she turned her attention to the American woman suffrage movement and was met with the task of finding new allies while maintaining her commitment to bettering conditions for working women. It explores in depth her relationships to three individuals in particular: her mother Winifred O'Reilly, Harriot Stanton Blatch, and Rose Schneiderman. Analyzing these relationships highlights the various accomplishments and shortcomings that came with the decision to work across class lines with middle-class women. At the same time, this method also displays both the agency and challenges Leonora O'Reilly and her fellow working women experienced when they chose to instead work amongst themselves, in spite of varying generational and ethnic identities.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Priscilla Murolo for providing me with endless new knowledge and inspiration throughout this process. There are truly no words to explain how grateful and privileged I feel to have had the opportunity to work under the guidance of such a dedicated historian and human being.

I would also like to thank Lyde Sizer, who approaches the work of her students with a sharp eye and genuine interest. Your critiques, questions, and encouragement have been invaluable in the creation of this work.

I am extremely grateful to the Women's Equal Pay Network for their generous support, which allowed me to expand the scope of my research, and ultimately my understanding of this subject, far beyond what would have been otherwise possible.

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Thank you to my mother for teaching me about the meaning of autonomy, and for encouraging me to come here in spite of all my fears. Thank you to Scott for supporting me, whether from two feet or two thousand miles away.

Finally, I would like to thank Leonora O'Reilly, whose steadfast commitment to the people and movements around her have left me in awe. I hope that I have presented this small fraction of her life in a way that captures even a glimpse of her truth.



## Introduction

The American woman suffrage movement requires little introduction. The timeline conventionally assigned to this movement, beginning in 1848 with the meeting of Seneca Falls and ending in 1920 with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, is studied and taught with such frequency that it has developed into a sort of master narrative. This is ironic, as women's historians often attempt to dispel master narratives. Many scholars and students of women's history now recognize that white, middle- and upper-class women were not the movement's sole organizers and participants.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this thesis is to add to the current scholarship on the role that class relations played in woman suffrage. In particular, I examine the career of Leonora O'Reilly, and how the diverse alliances she forged throughout her life demonstrate both the opportunities and struggles faced by working women when they sought to create spaces for themselves within the suffrage movement.

Leonora O'Reilly was born in New York City in 1870, and spent several years traversing Manhattan's Upper and Lower East Side before settling into a home in Brooklyn, where she eventually passed away in 1927. A majority of her fifty-seven years of life were dedicated to the American labor movement. O'Reilly's father, an Irish immigrant, died when she was only a year old, and her mother Winifred often struggled to care for herself and her daughter financially. Leonora was forced to enter the work force at the age of eleven, and was quickly swept up into the burgeoning world of labor activism and organizations. Her dedication to workers' rights spanned from her entry into

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<sup>1</sup> See Ellen Carol DuBois, "Considering the State of U.S. Women's History," in *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15 no. 1, Spring 2003, 155-158; Eileen Boris, "Race and Politics in U.S. Women's History," in *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 11 no. 3, Autumn 1999, 204-206.



the Knights of Labor at sixteen, to her role in organizing the short-lived Working Women's Society, and later her active participation in the Women's Trade Union League.<sup>2</sup> Her commitments would eventually stretch far beyond the confines of the labor movement, however. O'Reilly was a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and later in life she would go on to participate in the anti-war efforts during World War I. Alongside all of her other commitments, at the beginning of the twentieth century, she became increasingly active in the suffrage movement. Her involvement in campaigning for the vote was especially frequent from around 1910 through 1915. Although O'Reilly had long recognized the benefits of forging cross-class alliances with middle- and upper-class women in the context of the labor movement, and carried that strategy into her suffrage work, her ideas about women's need for the vote stemmed from very different experiences than those of her genteel allies. In this thesis, I trace the roots of Leonora O'Reilly's involvement in the suffrage movement back to her earlier years in the labor movement in order to determine how her proclivity for alliance-building was shaped by that milieu, as well as how her identity as a worker framed her experiences with other suffrage movement leaders.

In doing so, I hope to forge a better understanding of how class status affected the way women approached the suffrage movement, and how it helped and hindered women's attempts to work together across class lines. Through this thesis I endeavor to answer a number of questions. How did earlier experiences with the labor movement, organizations such as the Knights of Labor, the Working Women's Society, the Social Reform Club, and the Women's Trade Union League, shape Leonora O'Reilly's views of

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<sup>2</sup> Lara Vapnek, *Breadwinners: Working Women & Economic Independence, 1865-1920*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009) 66-69.

and decision to enter into the suffrage movement? How did her work across class lines in the labor movement affect the strategies she deployed while working for suffrage? Did working women view the need for suffrage differently than middle- and upper-class women? I believe that by studying the life of this woman, scholars can learn a great deal about the ways that working class women at the turn of the century viewed and participated in the fight for woman suffrage.

This thesis contributes to the very broad historiography of the American suffrage movement. Much of what has been written on this topic has been based on, or written in reaction to, the multivolume *History of Woman Suffrage* (1881-1922), compiled in large part by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.<sup>3</sup> As a project begun by these two, the history is told from the point of view of their National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), and its pages are filled almost entirely with white middle- and upper-class women. It has for this reason contributed to the belief that American feminism is and has been a movement aimed only at improving the lot of such women. Books such as Ellen Carol DuBois's *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869* (1977) have looked to this work as a key source in constructing the history of suffrage as it is has been commonly understood.<sup>4</sup>

Some historians, on the other hand, have responded to this master narrative with revisionist histories of the suffrage movement. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* (1998) chronicles the extensive history of black women involved in the suffrage movement, pointing to black women's

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 4 vols, (New York: Source Book Press, 1881-1922).

<sup>4</sup> Carol Ellen DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

clubs, periodicals, and church publications as oft-ignored sites of mobilization for suffrage.<sup>5</sup> Lisa Tetrault's *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898* (2014) breaks down the history laid out by Stanton and Anthony, suggesting that the entire timeline of the suffrage movement, as it is remembered today, was carefully and intentionally curated by the leaders of the NWSA.<sup>6</sup> Corrine M. McConnaughy, in the fifth chapter of her book, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment* (2013), looks at the way that the connections between race and suffrage played out in state politics in Louisiana and New Mexico. She suggests that white woman suffragists' failure to reach out to create coalitions with women of color in these states held them back significantly in their fight for voting rights.<sup>7</sup> My thesis contributes to these revisionist histories by applying a class analysis to the movement.

Although I have crafted it as a contribution to historiography on woman suffrage, this thesis has also been significantly informed by work in the field of women's labor history. In *Breadwinners: Working Class Women and Economic Independence, 1865-1920* (2009), Lara Vapnek pays considerable attention to Leonora O'Reilly's work, in what is to date one of the most extensive published studies of her life.<sup>8</sup> In the fifth chapter, "Democracy Is Only An Aspiration," Vapnek addresses O'Reilly's work in the suffrage movement. While Vapnek's discussion of O'Reilly's work for woman suffrage is extremely valuable, this subject merits further exploration. By focusing specifically on

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<sup>5</sup> Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Corrine McConnaughy, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Lara Vapnek, *Breadwinners: Working Women & Economic Independence, 1865-1920*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

Leonora O'Reilly's key alliances, we can gain new insight into working women's involvement in and understanding of the suffrage movement.

It will come as no surprise that the Leonora O'Reilly Papers are one of the most significant collections of primary sources used in this thesis.<sup>9</sup> Her papers, which are found in the Papers of the Women's Trade Union League and its Principal Leaders, include O'Reilly's diaries, speeches, correspondence, and organizational papers. O'Reilly was not always a prolific writer when it came to her diaries. There were periods during which she wrote every day, and others spanning several months during which she did not write at all. Her entries do not feature the lengthy, confessional style of writing often associated with diaries today. Most often, they are brief outlines of her activities, such as organizational meetings she attended, individuals she visited with, or updates on progress made with strikes going on at the time. For this reason, one of the most significant benefits of reading her diaries is that they offer an understanding of what a typical day in her life was often like. Her correspondence and other materials found among her papers provide important supplemental material as well.

In order to fill in the gaps of the Leonora O'Reilly Papers, I look to other primary sources for help. I supplement her personal papers with connected individual and organizational papers to aid in my research. Those belonging to leaders of the Women's Trade Union League, such as Margaret Dreier Robins and Rose Schneiderman, are particularly relevant. The papers of those Leonora O'Reilly worked with throughout her life, including Pauline Newman Annie Ware Winsor Allen, and Harriot Stanton Blatch, provide insight into the shaping of her worldview. Looking at the sources related to these

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<sup>9</sup> Leonora O'Reilly Papers, Papers of the Women's Trade Union League and its Principal Leaders, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

people and organizations with which Leonora O'Reilly was involved, but which might not refer directly to her or her work, helps still to create a better overall understanding of her milieu.

Here I employ a research method historian Sherry J. Katz describes as “researching around our subjects.”<sup>10</sup> This is the process of looking for sources that are relevant to our subjects, even if they at first do not seem to be directly related. This approach to primary research shifts the perspective of study away from the subject; rather than looking directly at Leonora O'Reilly, I attempt to look through her eyes at the world around her. Studying a wide variety of sources in this way helps me to form a clearer understanding of what would have caused an individual such as O'Reilly to engage in the various organizations, movements, and events that she did. After all, my goal is not simply to tell the story of Leonora O'Reilly's life. Instead, it is to use her lived experiences as a means of better understanding those of a larger group of working women in the Progressive Era.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first looks at O'Reilly's early life and demonstrates how her relationship with her mother, Winifred O'Reilly, created within her a lasting desire to forge alliances. The second chapter explores her earliest work in the suffrage movement, focusing on her relationship with Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women. Here, I examine the ways that class differences affected working women's involvement with mainstream suffrage leaders. In the third chapter I discuss Leonora O'Reilly's involvement in forming the Wage Earner's

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<sup>10</sup> Sherry J. Katz, “Excavating Women in Progressive-Era California,” in *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010) 90.

Suffrage League, and how her decision to work with Rose Schneiderman and other working women created new opportunities and challenges in the struggle for the vote.

The first chapter covers a larger portion of O'Reilly's life than the others, beginning with her early involvement in the American labor movement and organizations. I look at the first individuals and groups she came in contact with that helped shape her worldview. The most significant of these relationships was the one she had with her mother. I establish their relationship as not only one built upon a familial bond, but also one between two working women. I also examine her introduction to the Knights of Labor, where she became well acquainted with labor leaders such as Jean Baptiste Hubert and Victor Drury. Moreover, I attempt to construct an image of her surroundings as a young factory worker and how her experiences as such likely affected her beliefs about the necessity of woman suffrage. After all, regardless of what she was doing at any point in her life, Leonora O'Reilly always viewed herself first and foremost as a working woman, and surely it would have been her experiences as a working woman above all else that informed her decision to fight for suffrage.

The second chapter delves into O'Reilly's earliest years of involvement in the suffrage movement, and her decision to work with Harriot Stanton Blatch, the daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and founder of the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women. The ELSSW is especially important to understanding the experiences of working women because it was built around the active participation of women across class lines. In this space, working women and allies came together with a shared sense of purpose. However, women like Blatch, who attempted to reach out to workers and draw them into the movement, were not always able to turn ideals into action, and tensions

caused by class differences proliferated. A discussion of O'Reilly's early experiences with the issue of suffrage and the involvement of allies in these organizations is important to understanding her decision to form the separate Wage Earner's Suffrage League in 1911.

The final chapter looks at the Wage Earner's Suffrage League, focusing specifically on the organization's structure and how this was influenced by the past experiences of two of its founders, Leonora O'Reilly and Rose Schneiderman. Although the WESL was a short-lived organization, its brief history illuminates the perceptions of O'Reilly and others like her regarding the suffrage movement. This chapter also explores Leonora O'Reilly's relationship to Rose Schneiderman, another well-known working woman who campaigned for suffrage. Schneiderman, like O'Reilly, was active in both the WTUL and ELSSW, and the two came together to form this new organization having had very similar introductions to suffragist politics strategies. O'Reilly's involvement with Schneiderman is important for a number of reasons. Comparing it to her relationship with allies such as Harriot Stanton Blatch elucidates how working class women interacted differently with these women than with one another. The differences between O'Reilly and Schneiderman are also instructive. Leonora O'Reilly was born in New York City, and grew up strongly connected to her Irish heritage. Rose Schneiderman, a Polish immigrant, came to the New York with her family at a young age, and recalled that her earliest memories were "of living in a crowded street among the East Side Jews, for we also are Jews."<sup>11</sup> Juxtaposing O'Reilly's work across class lines

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<sup>11</sup> Rose Schneiderman, "A Cap Maker's Story," *The Independent*, LVIII, no. 2943, April 27, 1905.

with her collaborations with other working women from varied ethnic backgrounds demonstrates the strengths and challenges of these two dissimilar tactics.

Leonora O'Reilly's activist career stretched across multiple decades and social movements. Whether acting within the labor movement or suffrage movement, she always maintained her commitment to addressing the concerns of working women. O'Reilly's own strong identification with the working class, coupled with her willingness to collaborate with middle- and upper-class women, offers a unique perspective from which to better understand the role that class played in the American woman suffrage movement. Established suffrage leaders like Harriot Stanton Blatch brought to the table wealth, public recognition, and connections that offered working women new venues of expression and activism. At the same time, wealthier allies could not always offer the same level of solidarity and understanding that workers, even those from divergent backgrounds, could offer one another. Using a variety of sources related to both labor and suffrage, the thesis found here examines Leonora O'Reilly's life as a means of explaining what factors drew working women into the suffrage movement, as well as what methods they chose to use or to avoid in their struggle to obtain the vote.



## Chapter 1

### Mother Mine

“My mother: How egotistical that sounds, but you are mine and no one else’s.”<sup>1</sup>

So began a letter that Leonora wrote to Winifred O’Reilly, in late July 1897. At the time Leonora was staying in Hadley, Massachusetts, at the family home of Father James Otis Sargent Huntington, an Episcopal priest and member of the Knights of Labor whom she had first met just over a decade earlier. That year, she was able to quit factory work with the support of friends such as Lillian Wald and Louise Perkins, allowing her to open an experimental, albeit short-lived, cooperative shirtwaist sewing room and store in Wald’s Henry Street Settlement.<sup>2</sup>

O’Reilly’s time in Massachusetts in the summer of 1897 seems to have been one of the rare periods of her life during which she allowed herself much leisure. She stayed in Hadley for the better part of the month of July and from there traveled by train to Annisquam, where she spent part of her days sitting on giant rocks overlooking Cape Ann and taking in the views of “the sea, the ships, the great white hills, the sand dunes, and last of all the people,” as she reported in a letter to her mother.<sup>3</sup> During her travels away from New York City that summer, she wrote to Winifred nearly every day, describing her activities in detail and asking for the same in return. “Tell me all about yourself when you write,” she implored in one letter, “What time you go to bed? What

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from Leonora O’Reilly to Winifred O’Reilly, July 30, 1897, Leonora O’Reilly Papers, Papers of the Women’s Trade Union League and its Principal Leaders, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from Louise Perkins to Leonora O’Reilly, June 22, 1897, Leonora O’Reilly Papers. Letter from Louise Perkins to Lillian Wald, August 16, 1897, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from Leonora O’Reilly to Winifred O’Reilly, August 1, 1897, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

time you get up? Whether you are busy at the store? Whether you go visiting to the settlement very often? Whether they come visiting you.... And every other possible and impossible thing that has occurred in my absence?”<sup>4</sup> Readers of these letters will quickly realize that, even when they were separated for a brief period, Leonora was determined to make sure that she and her mother remained a part of each other’s daily lives.

Leonora always wrote to her mother with the most profound fondness and attention, referring to her most often as, “Mother mine,” and sharing with her details of the scenery surrounding her, the people she met, and conversations she had. Such closeness between a mother and daughter might seem perfectly commonplace. Yet much about the relationship between Leonora and Winifred O’Reilly was special. Winifred raised and provided for her daughter on her own; Leonora’s father passed away when she was just a year old. The pair formed a bond that held them tightly together. Aside from a few brief periods of separation, they lived under the same roof up until the day that Leonora passed away in 1927. Indeed, it would be difficult to fully comprehend Leonora O’Reilly’s outlook on life, and especially her penchant for building strong relationships and alliances, without first understanding how she was shaped by her mother’s influence.

Unlike her daughter, Winifred O’Reilly did not leave behind her own cache of papers with which historians might study her life. She is, however, an almost constant presence in Leonora’s papers; many letters to her mother are found within the Leonora O’Reilly collection, and Winifred is mentioned and inquired about with great frequency

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from Leonora O’Reilly to Winifred O’Reilly, July 27, 1897, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

by friends and casual correspondents alike.<sup>5</sup> One of the documents most revealing about Winifred’s early life is a biographical sketch, “Mrs. Winifred O’Reilly: A Veteran Worker,” by Alice Henry, found in a 1911 issue of *Life and Labor*, the journal of the National Women’s Trade Union League. The piece seems to be based upon an interview with Mrs. O’Reilly, as recollections in her own words are frequently inserted.

Winifred Rooney O’Reilly was most likely born some time in 1841. She spent the earliest years of her life in County Sligo, in the midst of Ireland’s Great Famine; she described her first memories as “seeing people lying dead by the roadside—dead of sheer starvation.”<sup>6</sup> Winifred’s parents, like many other Irish families at the time, made the decision to leave Sligo at the height of the famine in 1847, the year now remembered as “Black ’47.”<sup>7</sup>

Winifred’s father, Theodore Rooney, grew ill soon upon the family’s arrival on the other side of the Atlantic, likely having contracted some sort of sickness during their trip. He died while in the hospital, leaving his wife and young daughter alone. Once in New York, the family’s economic hardship forced Winifred to go to work at a young age. She began as a domestic worker, caring for children in various households before entering into garment work. While her daughter is the better-known working woman and

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<sup>5</sup> In December 1897, Louise Perkins wrote to Leonora offering to help with the cost of giving Winifred a holiday, “And don’t you think it would be wise to give her a week or ten days holiday to get her well-rested? I’ll go halves with you, or wholes. She is too valuable to us all,” Louise Perkins to Leonora O’Reilly, December 21, 1897, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

<sup>6</sup> Alice Henry, “Mrs. Winifred O’Reilly: A Veteran Worker,” *Life and Labor*, v. 1 (1911), 132.

<sup>7</sup> “In popular tradition ‘Black ‘47’ is remembered as the height of the hunger and distress. It was in 1847 that the famine was at its worst in Ireland. Apart from high levels of mortality and disease, other indicators of social distress were reflected in soaring crime rates, evictions and emigration,” Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland*, (London: Pluto Press, 1997) 92.

labor activist of the two, Winifred's recollections of her experiences as a young garment worker are illuminating. Her memories are significant to the depiction of her daughter's life, as they no doubt played a significant role in shaping Winifred's ideas about the labor movement—ideas that she would eventually pass along to a young Leonora.

In the *Life and Labor* article, Winifred recalls her earliest years performing garment work, explaining, "It was all hand sewing in those days... Of course, you know there were only a few workers in any shop in those days, and when a girl had learned her business she knew how to make the whole garment, so when I learned to make sleeves, though I was just a little girl, I learned to make the whole sleeve, not just sew one seam or lay one fold."<sup>8</sup> By the time Leonora joined her mother in the garment industry, this method of production had all but disappeared. Garment work became far more monotonous, with each worker assigned to a single step in the process, machine sewing the same one piece on every article that was placed before her, day in and day out.<sup>9</sup>

The type of work that required one to learn how to create an entire item of clothing was beneficial to workers like Winifred. It allowed her to hone the skills of her trade in a way that those engaged in just a step of the process would not have been able to do. This would come in handy at times when she struggled to care for herself and her daughter, as it enabled her to make their clothes, rather than buy them. Later, it would give her the tools to share her knowledge of the industry with Leonora when it was time for her to take up work in the same area.

After sharing her experiences of learning to sew entire garments by hand, Mrs.

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<sup>8</sup> Henry, "Mrs. Winifred O'Reilly," 133.

<sup>9</sup> Kessler-Harris, Alice, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 78.

O'Reilly recalls the introduction of the sewing machine. She describes having to beg her mother for the money she needed in order to pay to learn to use one. Although the family struggled financially, there would have been little in the way of options other than to spend the money in order to learn to operate this new contraption. Soon enough, its introduction would render the process of hand-sewing that Winifred had learned early on all but obsolete in the garment industry.

Winifred clearly knew what it meant to work, but it is not likely that she was involved in any sort of organized labor movement or group during her early working years. Instead, it seems probable that her first introduction to the American labor movement may have come during a period when she was in fact not working in the garment industry, after she married her husband. If sources that can illuminate Winifred's life are sparse, there are even fewer to be found pertaining to Leonora's father, John. A New York City marriage record from 1867 identifies the union of a John O'Reilly and Winifred Rooney.<sup>10</sup> Neither one of these names was uncommon at the time, especially among New York City's large Irish immigrant populations, so it is difficult to verify whether or not the individuals on the certificate are the same John O'Reilly and Winifred Rooney discussed here. The date of the union fits fairly well into the timeline of their lives, however. Winifred would have been around twenty-six years old at the time of their marriage. She gave birth to their daughter just a few years later in 1870.

Winifred described her husband as "a printer, and a good union man at that." She explained that she "used to hear him and his mates talk about good hours and better wages and holding to one another and it was all mighty interesting. But that only lasted a

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<sup>10</sup> New York, New York, Marriage certificate no. 2563 (1867), O'Reilly-Rooney, Ancestry.com, accessed April 29, 2016, <http://ancestry.com>.

little while, when he was taken away and I was back in the shops again with my little girl to keep, too.”<sup>11</sup> As a printer, John O’Reilly likely belonged to the National Typographical Union, the same organization whose members accused Susan B. Anthony of being “a determined enemy of labor,” and demanded her removal from the annual meeting of the National Labor Union in 1869.<sup>12</sup> Despite the brevity of their marriage before her husband’s passing, Mrs. O’Reilly’s mention of him here suggests that his memory had a lasting effect on her and, through her, on their daughter as well.

Winifred certainly seems to have gained some knowledge regarding unions and workers’ rights from her husband. Perhaps he also taught her more broadly about the need to have allies, not only in work but also in the rest of life. The notion of “holding to one another” certainly resonated with Winifred and her daughter long after John O’Reilly passed away. The pair stuck together and supported one another unequivocally over the course of their lives.

John O’Reilly’s death pushed Winifred back into the work force, placing in her hands all of the responsibility for caring for their infant daughter. She quickly became the main object of the little girl’s attention and affection. Leonora’s early devotion to her mother is hinted at in Alice Henry’s depiction of their evenings spent together at home:

Baby Leonora was in the daytime looked after by a neighbor, but in the evenings she had to have her little say in helping her mother, and she occasionally got her clothes or her tiny finger sewed up in the machine, which rather delayed work for that night. Then there came a time when Mrs. O’Reilly tried living out. She went as cook in a doctor’s household, taking the child with her. But again it was Leonora that was the difficulty. She wasn’t happy, and after two months or so another little home was got together and

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<sup>11</sup> Henry, “Mrs. Winifred O’Reilly,” 133-134.

<sup>12</sup> John Walsh, quoted in *New York World*, August 17, 1869, as quoted in Diane Balsler, *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Feminism and Labor in Modern Times*, (Boston: South End Press, 1987), 74.

never afterwards broken up.<sup>13</sup>

The passage creates a bittersweet image of a toddler Leonora teetering around her mother who, while having left her station in the factory for the day, sews at home well into the night. The young girl looks on in fascination at the sewing machine before her, its needle driven up and down in a steady rhythm, producing endless trails of stitching across the fabric. It's easy to see how such a fascinating sight could have led the clothing or fingers of a curious child to wind up in the wrong place. Despite these early blunders, little Leonora would master the machine soon enough; she formally joined her mother in the garment industry at age eleven.

Their work kept the pair together. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, many financially strained parents were forced to place their children in orphanages. In fact, a majority of the children living in orphanages at the time were not orphans at all, but had one or even two living parents. These parents generally maintained fairly stable working-class households until some unfortunate event or another threw the family into particularly desperate circumstances.<sup>14</sup> The death of Winifred's husband was just the sort of misfortune that might have prompted her to send her daughter into an orphanage. The fact that this did not happen speaks volumes about the amount of work Mrs. O'Reilly performed on her own before her daughter was old enough to contribute to the household income. Still, it was not long before Leonora reciprocated these efforts; her entry into the workforce lightened her mother's load while ensuring that the pair was able to remain together under one roof.

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<sup>13</sup> Henry, "Mrs. Winifred O'Reilly," 136.

<sup>14</sup> Jessie B. Ramey, *Child Care in Black and White: Working Parents and the History of Orphanages*, (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2013), 45.

Beginning work in a collar factory at the age of eleven meant that Leonora O'Reilly had to leave public school, forgoing furthering her formal education in order to begin her education through labor.<sup>15</sup> For Winifred, this meant that the daughter with whom she shared her home was also a sister working woman, with whom she could share experiences and ideas. Mrs. O'Reilly began bringing her daughter with her to meetings at Cooper Union on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Cooper Union, founded in 1859, was an institution built around the idea of providing education to all those willing to receive it. Along with offering full-time students a place to learn about the arts and sciences at no charge, the building provided a meeting space for groups supporting a wide range of causes, from abolitionism to woman suffrage and labor organizing. In 1860 it was the place where a relatively unknown Abraham Lincoln gave the speech he would later credit with paving his way to the presidency.<sup>16</sup>

Attending Cooper Union in the early 1880s, Winifred and Leonora O'Reilly would have encountered a plethora of opinions and worldviews. They may have sat in on a February 1881 meeting of the National Anti-Monopoly League, or attended free Saturday night courses on any number of topics, from "the Reform of the Civil Service" to "Brain and Sleep."<sup>17</sup> A young Leonora might have been present for a mass labor meeting held there in June of 1881, over which Victor Drury, a labor radical and veteran

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<sup>15</sup> Lara Vapnek, *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence 1865-1920*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 68.

<sup>16</sup> For more on this event and the historical significance of Cooper Union see John A. Corry, *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech that Made Him President*, (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> "The Railroad Monopoly: A Movement to Check the Growing Evil," *The New York Times*, February 22, 1881. "Patronage in Our Politics: Mr. George William Curtis' Exposition of the Ills it Causes," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1881. "City and Suburban News: New York," *The New York Times*, February 26, 1881.



of the failed French Revolution of 1848, presided.<sup>18</sup> Though she would have had no way of knowing it at the time, Drury was one of the many individuals she would later meet and look to for guidance within the labor movement. Perhaps Leonora and her mother witnessed the mass meeting of Irish immigrants and their children that took place there on May 12, 1882. The demonstration, described in the *New York Times* as “one of the largest ever held in that building,” was convened in reaction to the assassination of the Chief Secretary and Under Secretary of Ireland, Lord Frederick Cavendish and Thomas Henry Burke.<sup>19</sup> William R. Grace, New York City’s first Irish-American mayor, chaired the meeting.

As he spoke, Grace was met with emotional reactions from his audience; he condemned the murders, which had been carried out by members of the Irish National Invincibles, saying, “It was not the friends but the enemies of Ireland who did the deed.”<sup>20</sup> At the same time, however, he asserted the need for Irish self-government. “Let Irishmen stand firm,” he said, “Let Irish rights be asserted still... and men of New York, you whose hearts go out in such strong sympathy to suffering Ireland, I have no doubt that in your day self-government shall come to Ireland.”<sup>21</sup> Whether or not the O’Reillys attended this particular meeting and witnessed such powerful rhetoric cannot be known for sure, but Leonora would have been twelve years old at the time, and Winifred may well have felt compelled to bring her daughter to a meeting pertaining to events in Ireland. Several rows near the front of the speaker’s stand were in fact reserved for

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<sup>18</sup> “Current Events,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 23, 1881.

<sup>19</sup> “The Irish Assassinations: Mass-Meeting of Irishmen in Cooper Institute,” *The New York Times*, May 13, 1882.

<sup>20</sup> “The Irish Assassinations.”

<sup>21</sup> “The Irish Assassinations.”

female attendees, and Winifred and Leonora could have easily filled a pair of those seats.<sup>22</sup>

Such meetings may have helped to shape Leonora's identity as an Irish-American woman, but there is less uncertainty regarding whether or not attending meetings related to labor organizing shaped her identity as a worker. By mid-1886 she had taken one of her first major steps towards dedicating her life to the labor movement by seeking out membership in the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor. Her entry into this organization did not come about through the influence of her mother. Instead, Leonora gained access to the Knights through a family friend, Jean-Baptiste Hubert, a revolutionary-minded French anarchist who had made his home in New York.<sup>23</sup>

Hubert's letters to Leonora during this period portray Winifred as ever-present in her daughter's life. Before he went forward with proposing Leonora for membership in the Knights, he advised her to "Consult your mama, your pulse, and your pocketbook."<sup>24</sup> Hubert, who most often referred to himself as "Uncle B," expressed fondness for Winifred and praised her hard work in another letter written shortly after Leonora joined the Order.<sup>25</sup> He wrote, "She is good and very hard-working. She knows from practical experience what it is to labor for to make other people rich. Be good and kind to her at all

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<sup>22</sup> "The Irish Assassinations."

<sup>23</sup> Vapnek, *Breadwinners*, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Jean Baptiste Hubert to Leonora O'Reilly, March 3, 1886, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

<sup>25</sup> In her book *Breadwinners*, Lara Vapnek suggests that it would have been likely that Leonora and her mother were members of Local 2234 of the Knights of Labor. However, several letters written by Jean Baptiste Hubert make reference to Leonora attending meetings of Local Assembly 1563. Vapnek, *Breadwinners*, 182. Letter from Jean Baptiste Hubert to Leonora O'Reilly, April 19, 1886. Letter from Jean Baptiste Hubert to Leonora O'Reilly, April 29, 1886. Letter from Jean Baptiste Hubert to Leonora O'Reilly, May 2, 1886.

time [sic]. She has done all she could for to bring you up and I know you are not ungrateful.”<sup>26</sup> These letters, from an author who clearly knew both Leonora and Winifred well, reveal a great deal about the dynamic between the two.

Winifred comes across as an exceptionally caring, and perhaps at times anxious, matriarch. Writing on April 19, 1886, Uncle B expressed surprise that Leonora, having arrived home late on a previous night, did not receive a scolding for doing so. In another, undated letter, he made a joke of Winifred’s penchant for worry, saying, “Give my love to Mamma and tell her that I will bring you home late this evening or next morning! and that she must not put her head at the window watching for your coming. She might catch cold.”<sup>27</sup> Despite this apparent tendency to fuss over her daughter’s whereabouts and wait up for her at night, Winifred also seems to have found some time for her own outings. Hubert would from time to time inquire to Leonora about her mother’s whereabouts when he had not seen her for a stretch of time. On May 2, 1886, he asked, “Was Mamma fretting about you? Was she on a larking excursion or was she in the arms of Morpheus?”<sup>28</sup> Following the aforementioned evening when Leonora escaped a scolding from her mother, Hubert asked, “Was she not at home that night to receive you?... I am astonished to think that she should have gone Friday evening and said nothing to you

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<sup>26</sup> Letter from Jean Baptiste Hubert to Leonora O’Reilly, April 19, 1886, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Jean Baptiste Hubert to Leonora O’Reilly, undated, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

<sup>28</sup> Whether or not Winifred O’Reilly formed any romantic relationships after her husband passed away is unknown. Hubert inquired in another letter to Leonora as to whether or not her mother had any ideas about getting married. Letter from Jean Baptiste Hubert to Leonora O’Reilly, May 2, 1886, Leonora O’Reilly Papers. Letter from Jean Baptiste Hubert to Leonora O’Reilly, April 19, 1886, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

about it.”<sup>29</sup> Letters such as these provide only brief, vague views into the private world of Winfred O’Reilly. If the correspondence lacks detail, however, it makes one thing perfectly clear: Leonora O’Reilly was central to her mother’s world, and Winifred to her daughter’s.

Hubert’s letters also reveal that Winifred was not the only early ideological influence on Leonora; he and others served this purpose, as well. Hubert praised her awareness of working-class struggle, and promised that her involvement with the Knights of Labor would affect her work for the rest of her life. He also encouraged her frequently to expand her circle of friends and acquaintances, both in and out of the Order. On several occasions, Hubert introduced her to other individuals who would also take on mentoring roles in her life, such as Victor Drury. Uncle B wrote to Leonora that he wanted Drury and her other new acquaintances to “push you in the Labor movement and send you to ‘the school of instruction.’ They know what I mean by that.”<sup>30</sup> Comments such as this indicate that Hubert was actively cultivating for her a place within the Knights and the larger labor movement by way of these strategic introductions.

In addition to introducing her to other labor leaders, Hubert also pushed Leonora to get into the habit of taking up correspondence with people other than himself, promising that this would provide “a source of gratification to you in years to come.”<sup>31</sup> Events would bear out Uncle B’s wisdom in this matter. Leonora did in fact go on to correspond with a wide range of people, and doing so played a crucial role in helping her

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<sup>29</sup> Letter from Jean Baptiste Hubert to Leonora O’Reilly, April 19, 1886, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Jean Baptiste Huber to Leonora O’Reilly, December 1, 1886, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Jean Baptiste Hubert to Leonora O’Reilly, April 29, 1886, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

to find and secure allies in her later work. The individuals she met as a teenager active in the Knights of Labor and the Working Women's Society<sup>32</sup>, and in her twenties, as a member of the Social Reform Club<sup>33</sup>, and the settlement movement in New York City, clearly had a lasting impact on her. Just about everything she did, from her earliest days in the Knights, she did with the goal of improving the lives of working people.<sup>34</sup> This would remain true even as she grew increasingly active in the woman suffrage movement in the early twentieth century.

Of all her formative allies and mentors, however, no one was more important than Winifred. She introduced Leonora to the workers' experience and was the first person to open her mind to the ideas of the American labor movement. Winifred was her first ally, and the closeness between the two and their dependence on one another never waned. Their relationship certainly prepared Leonora in many other ways for the work she would go on to do in the suffrage movement, especially when it came time for her to find additional allies. Winifred taught her daughter the benefits of unity between working

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<sup>32</sup> The Working Women's Society, an offshoot of New York's Central Labor Union, was established in 1886 to discuss and improve the conditions under which women in New York City labored. The organization would have given Leonora some of her earliest impressions of what it meant to collaborate with a group of working class women. Vapnek, *Breadwinners*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> Just as she had been at Cooper Union, Leonora was exposed to a wide range of issues and ideas through the Social Reform Club, where she interacted with notable individuals such as Annie Ware Winsor Allen, an educator, and Edward King, a leader of the Central Labor Union. Meetings of the Social Reform Club were dedicated to an array of topics, from "Labor in the Philippines," to "The Operation of Street Railways." Reports on the meetings of the Social Reform Club can be found in the Annie Ware Winsor Allen Papers, box 9, folder 92 and 95, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>34</sup> In 1913, Leonora O'Reilly wrote a letter to fellow labor activist Pauline Newman, in which she shared, to the extent that she was "able to reveal them," the pledge and teachings of the Knights of Labor. Letter from Leonora O'Reilly to Pauline Newman, May 29, 1913, Pauline Newman Papers, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, box 5 folder 80.

women, and steered her towards spaces, from Cooper Union to the Knights of Labor, where she could develop an understanding of labor struggles, and meet others who were eager to share experiences, ideas, and struggles with her.

On one of her first days in Annisquam in the summer of 1897, Leonora wrote to her mother, musing over the life lessons that each person must learn, and what she described as the “tools” that an individual gained from them:

Too bad the tools cannot be kept perfectly clean from the tarnish and rust of prejudice and superstition. Perhaps mother mine you and I may begin a work which will some day bear its fruit in large minds and greater possibilities which will eventually clear away the tarnish and rust?<sup>35</sup>

Here, Leonora expressed a feeling of optimism that would come in handy in the years to come, as she continued her work in the labor movement, and also expanded her focus to include woman suffrage. She was ready and willing to push ahead with her attempts to rid the world around her of “prejudice and superstition,” and she intended to do so with her mother by her side.

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<sup>35</sup> Letter from Leonora O’Reilly to Winifred O’Reilly, August 2, 1897, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

## Chapter 2

### Mrs. Blatch

In the two decades following her entry into the Knights of Labor, Leonora O'Reilly more than lived up to her Uncle B's hopes and expectations for her. Her commitment to the labor movement only strengthened, and her circle of friends and correspondents grew dramatically. By 1906 she already felt inclined to write in a diary entry, "Some day I'll lock my letter box and throw the key away, then perhaps I may get time to dream and hold my tongue."<sup>1</sup> Between 1886 and 1907, Leonora was active in a wide variety of organizations and institutions, including the Working Woman's Society, the Social Reform Club, and the Henry Street Settlement. In 1902 she began teaching at the Manhattan Trade School for Girls, a vocational school that aimed to prepare girls for work in skilled trades.<sup>2</sup> She taught classes in machine sewing, but the school also offered a variety of other courses, including pasting and gluing, dressmaking, and millinery.<sup>3</sup> Teaching allowed Leonora to do for the girls at the school what her mother had once done for her, arming them with skills that would enhance their earnings and sense of self-worth.

Another organization she became involved with during this period, which would play a significant role in her life throughout the remainder of her activist career, was the Women's Trade Union League. The WTUL was built on a foundation of cross-class alliances between working women and upper class "allies," as they were known among

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<sup>1</sup> Leonora O'Reilly, diary entry, January 23, 1906, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

<sup>2</sup> "Manhattan Trade School for Girls," DVD, *Treasures III: Social Issues in American Film, 1900-1934*, National Film Preservation Foundation, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Priscilla Murolo, *The Common Ground of Womanhood: Class, Gender, and Working Girls' Clubs, 1884-1928*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 111.

the League's members. Although Leonora had known and worked with women across class lines in the past, it was within the Women's Trade Union League that she met some of her most important allies. This was in the period leading up to 1907 when Leonora emerged as a suffragist, so it is no surprise that one ally with whom she would find common cause within the WTUL was Harriot Stanton Blatch.

Blatch, the daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was never a stranger to the concept of woman suffrage. She was born in 1856 in Seneca Falls, New York. Having been raised by one of the most prominent leaders of the American suffrage movement, she never needed to be convinced that the vote was something worth fighting for. When it came to the role of working women and labor in the suffrage movement, however, Blatch did deviate somewhat from her mother's views. Elizabeth Cady Stanton had, at one time, sought to create alliances between the labor and woman suffrage movements. In the mid-1860s Stanton, along with Susan B. Anthony and their cohort, turned their attentions to the National Labor Union.<sup>4</sup> The Working Women's Association, formed as a result of this budding relationship, was a precursor to organizations that were founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to bring together women from different class backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

Stanton's brief attempt at bringing working women into the suffrage movement, however, was stymied by her inability to understand working class people's potential and desire for agency. In an 1868 speech, she called for "the freedom of the laborer," while

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<sup>4</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 118-127.

<sup>5</sup> Diane Balser describes the Working Woman's Association as "the first working woman's feminist organization in the United States." Diane Balser, *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Feminism and Labor in Modern Times*, (Boston: South End Press, 1987), 65.



simultaneously describing the “dense fog of poverty, ignorance, and superstition” that afflicted such individuals.<sup>6</sup> This condescension played directly into the failures of the Working Women’s Association, in which disagreements arose with regard to the level of priority that the organization ought to give to the suffrage cause. Middle-class members like Stanton and Anthony felt that suffrage should be the primary goal of the WWA, while the working women involved were skeptical of the real level of power the vote could offer them in the workplace, and instead wished to focus on cooperative action.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, the Working Women’s Association’s membership became predominantly middle class. As this middle-class membership grew even more uninterested in the concerns and issues directly affecting laborers, and instead opted to focus on suffrage, working-class women either drifted away from the organization or were pushed out.<sup>8</sup>

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s contempt for members of the working class was expressed again decades later, in an 1894 issue of the suffragist organ *The Woman’s Journal*, in which she and her daughter put forth sharply differing opinions of the need for educational qualifications for suffrage. Stanton suggested that educated women such as herself “have a right to call a halt on any further enfranchisement of the ignorant masses, until the better element in society is fully recognized in the government. Our rulers... have it in their power to extend the suffrage to the best class, on an educational

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “On Labor.”

<sup>7</sup> The women typesetters active in the Working Women’s Association formed their own cooperative, the Women’s Typographical Union, in 1968. Their successful organization prompted the National Typographical Union’s shift towards including women in its organizing, *Feminism and Suffrage*, 134, 142.

<sup>8</sup> DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage*, 151-153. Balser, *Sisterhood and Solidarity*, 73.

qualification.”<sup>9</sup> Working women, who were almost never educated beyond grammar school, were clearly not of the “best class.” Harriot Stanton Blatch expressed an opposing view. In the same issue of *The Woman’s Journal* she issued a scathing critique of her mother’s writings on the subject. She wrote:

Because you overlook the fact that the conditions of the poor are so much harder than yours or mine, you are led to argue that “the ignorant classes do not need the suffrage more than the enlightened, but just the reverse.” Every working man needs the suffrage more than I do, but there is another who needs it more than he does, just because conditions are more galling, and that is the working woman.<sup>10</sup>

It was with this broader understanding of the need for suffrage that Blatch entered the Women’s Trade Union League. There she met working women such as Leonora O’Reilly, with whom she would soon join in fighting for suffrage, turning her words from *The Woman’s Journal* into actions. As O’Reilly became more active in the movement herself, it surely seemed like a natural choice to join forces with someone such as Blatch, who had both strong ties to the work and a demonstrated understanding of working women’s need for the vote.

The year 1907, in which Harriot Stanton Blatch founded the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women, was one filled with many commitments for thirty-seven-year-old Leonora O’Reilly. Along with the Women’s Trade Union League, she was still active in the Manhattan Trade School for Girls, as she had been since 1902, although it appears that by this time she was no longer teaching at the school. Instead she seems to have taken on an administrative role, proposing annual budgets and corresponding with

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Educated Suffrage Again,” *The Woman’s Journal*, No. 51, December 22, 1894.

<sup>10</sup> Harriot Stanton Blatch, “An Open Letter to Mrs. Stanton,” *The Woman’s Journal*, No. 51, December 22, 1894.

teachers to secure the details of their courses.<sup>11</sup> She also displayed a growing interest in socialism; O'Reilly corresponded frequently at this time with Elizabeth Thomas, a member of the Social-Democratic party in Milwaukee, to whom she appears to have sent monthly contributions.<sup>12</sup> On a more personal level, 1907 was a significant year for O'Reilly, as it was the one during which she adopted an infant daughter named Alice. The details of the adoption are hard to come by. The process of adopting became increasingly regulated in the United States throughout the twentieth century. However, the near absence of official records related to the life of Alice O'Reilly suggests that the arrangement through which she came to live with Leonora and Winifred was an informal one.<sup>13</sup>

One of the first mentions of the event is found in a letter from Elizabeth Thomas to Leonora, in which Thomas wrote, "My, but didn't it take my breath away when I learned that your mother and you adopted a real live human baby? I don't know whether I most admire you or envy you....On the whole, I think most of all I envy her. How can she help but grow up a grand woman, full of noble thoughts and deeds?"<sup>14</sup> Tragically, Alice would not live to fulfill Thomas's vision of her. The young girl passed away in

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<sup>11</sup> Letter from Leonora O'Reilly to Mary Schenk Woolman, May 1907, Leonora O'Reilly Papers; letter from Leonora O'Reilly to Elsie Treuhaft, July 9, 1908, Leonora O'Reilly Papers; letter from Elsie Treuhaft to Leonora O'Reilly, July 28, 1908, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Elizabeth Thomas to Leonora O'Reilly, February 14, 1907, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

<sup>13</sup> Alice is listed alongside Leonora and Winifred O'Reilly in a 1910 federal census record. There is very little other record of her life, outside of the Leonora O'Reilly Papers. 1910 U.S. Census, Kings County, New York, population schedule, Brooklyn, p. 211, dwelling 125, family 170, Winifred, Leonora, and Alice O'Reilly; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed April 29, 2016, <http://ancestry.com>.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Elizabeth Thomas to Leonora O'Reilly, February 14, 1907, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

1911 around the age of four. The morning after her passing, Leonora wrote in her diary: “The most beautiful sunrise I ever saw- the very essence of Little Alice’s sweet, clean, beautiful, happy nature shining over all the earth.”<sup>15</sup> Lack of an official death record leaves the exact cause of the young girl’s death unascertainable. In January of 1910, Arthur Brisbane wrote to Leonora saying, “I hope the baby will prove not to have measles, but merely a rash due to proletarian enthusiasm over an approaching victory for her sex,” but no later letters or diary entries confirm or deny the presence of such a diagnosis.<sup>16</sup> Although Alice’s health may have temporarily improved, by the end of that year she was ill again, and remained so until she passed away in late January of 1911.<sup>17</sup> In 1907, however, the thought of a baby Alice growing up into a woman perhaps gave Leonora a new motivation for throwing herself wholeheartedly into the suffrage movement.

Leonora O’Reilly and Harriot Stanton Blatch may have first met as early as November 1902, at a memorial meeting in honor of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The meeting convened at the Presbyterian Building in New York City, under the auspices of the New York Equal Suffrage League. Both women were reported to have spoken.<sup>18</sup> O’Reilly’s participation in this meeting is somewhat curious; although her first known public speech on behalf of woman suffrage was given in 1899, her commitment to the

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<sup>15</sup> Leonora O’Reilly, diary entry, January 20, 1911, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Arthur Brisbane to Leonora O’Reilly, January 26, 1910, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Alice Scott to Leonora O’Reilly, December 28, 1910, Leonora O’Reilly Papers. Letter from Louise Perkins to Leonora O’Reilly, January 18, 1911, Leonora O’Reilly Papers. Letter from Mary Dreier to Leonora O’Reilly, January 19, 1911, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

<sup>18</sup> “Tributes to Mrs. Stanton: William Lloyd Garrison and Others Speak—Miss Helen Gardener Absent,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 1902.

movement did not intensify until almost a decade later, and there is little to suggest that she had any direct connection to Stanton.<sup>19</sup> While it cannot be determined what exactly brought her to speak at a meeting dedicated to the memory of one of the country's most prominent suffragists, it is certainly possible that Leonora's presence there was grounds enough for Blatch to approach her a few years later as a potential ally when in 1907 she formed the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women, later renamed the Women's Political Union.

The founding of the Equality League was described in the organization's annual report for 1908-1909. The League was made up of members of "various clubs, trade unions, working women's and girls' organizations," who had found themselves discussing woman suffrage more and more frequently at meetings.<sup>20</sup> The overarching goal of the organization was to bring working-class women into the suffrage movement, and connect them with professional women. The report suggests that the League's organizers realized that "the enthusiasm in the suffrage movement in the future would come from the industrial woman, and what she most needed was to be brought in contact, not with leisure women, but with women who, like herself, were out in the world facing life just as men do, and earning their own living."<sup>21</sup> The language found here, and throughout the report, reveals important aspects of the makeup and focus of the Equality League of Self Supporting Women that would factor into whether or not working class women such as O'Reilly would remain a part of the organization in the future.

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<sup>19</sup> Vapnek, *Breadwinners*, 129.

<sup>20</sup> Harriot Stanton Blatch, *The Equality League of Self Supporting Women Report for the Year 1908-1909*, 1909, 5, Harriot Stanton Blatch Papers.

<sup>21</sup> Blatch, *The Equality League*, 5.

The report was written by Harriot Stanton Blatch, and seems to represent the perspective of genteel members of the organization. The words “we” and “us” are used frequently, as when Blatch explains that the realization of the importance of industrial women’s place in the future of the suffrage movement “was gradually borne in upon us.”<sup>22</sup> This statement suggests that the impetus for industrial women’s involvement in the suffrage movement did not come from them, but from their middle-class counterparts. The fact that working women like Leonora O’Reilly had already made the connection between labor struggles and the need for enfranchisement some years before the ELSSW was formed indicates that they were in fact very much willing and able to make a space for themselves in the movement.

This instance of middle-class members of the League speaking on behalf of the working women they sought to appeal to does not appear to have been an isolated event in the organization’s history. On February 6, 1907, the New York State Senate and Assembly held a meeting of their Joint Judiciary Committee at which the subject of woman suffrage was discussed. Two working-class women, members of the Equality League for Self Supporting Women, spoke before the Committee. Blatch reported on the meeting in a pamphlet published by the League, and described the event as “the first time women of the industrial class had appeared before a legislative committee at Albany to plead their own cause.”<sup>23</sup> The two women, Mary Duffy and Clara Silver, spoke of a variety of frustrations faced by women industrial workers without the ballot. Mary Duffy stressed the importance of trade unions in providing protection to working women

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<sup>22</sup> Blatch, *The Equality League*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Harriot Stanton Blatch, ed., *Two Speeches By Industrial Women*, 1, Harriot Stanton Blatch Papers.

without the vote, and criticized the anti-suffrage woman who testified to ask legislators “to save her from the cares of citizenship and leave her free to carry on her charity and philanthropy.”<sup>24</sup> This plea highlighted the ways in which anti-suffragists’ needs and experiences differed from those of the workers who had come to demand the vote. Duffy asked, “Charity for whom? Why such as me! But, gentlemen, we don’t want charity, we want justice.”<sup>25</sup> This sentiment drew a stark contrast between the arguments of the anti-suffragists, who saw citizenship as a burden, and the working women who viewed it as a necessity.

Later, Clara Silver recalled growing up in Birmingham, England. She claimed that the women there were able to participate in politics to a much greater extent than those in the United States, and used their political participation as a defense against the argument that women would be unable to manage a home and participate in politics simultaneously. According to Blatch’s pamphlet, by the time the two women had finished speaking, they had greatly affected both the members of the Joint Judiciary Committee and the anti-suffragists in attendance.<sup>26</sup>

The purpose of the pamphlet was to present the voice of these two working women, yet it did so through the narration of Harriot Stanton Blatch. While the piece

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<sup>24</sup> Blatch, *Two Speeches By Industrial Women*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Blatch, *Two Speeches by Industrial Women*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> New York newspapers reporting on the event painted a very different picture of the hearing. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported that “At the close of the day, it was evident from the bored look of the committee that the suffragists had not convinced them of the error of their ways.” An article in the *Post Standard* suggested that women in New York who sought suffrage were in the minority, and that “this proportion has not materially increased in forty years, and in view of that fact and of the dignified yet spirited opposition of the women who oppose, no legislature is warranted in consenting to the request of the suffragists.” “Against Woman Suffrage: Legislators Hear Arguments Pro and Con and Will Probably Decide Against It,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 7, 1907; “A Forty Year War,” *The Post Standard*, February 7, 1907.

praised the two women in question for their persuasive speaking abilities, it also reads with an air of condescension. Blatch wrote, “Here for the first time a simple working girl was standing before a body of law-makers to tell them of the realities of her life.”<sup>27</sup>

These words, while written by someone working alongside these women, did them a disservice by positioning them as “simple” and inferior to the “body” before which they spoke.<sup>28</sup> Blatch went on to say, “An impressive silence held the Senate chamber, a silence vibrating with profound respect and sympathetic interest.... One could feel the unspoken demand on every side for more of this direct touch on the facts of every-day life.”<sup>29</sup> Although those listening to Duffy and Silver are described as seeming to have “profound respect” for the two speakers, the pamphlet’s stress on the audience’s sympathy and “demand” for more of the details of the lives of these women portrays the pair as spectacles that offered observers a sense of the hardships of “simple working girls.”

Leonora O’Reilly’s involvement in the Equality League of Self Supporting Women decreased quickly when the organization shifted its primary focus after just a few years of existence. *The Referendum Policy of the Women’s Political Union*, which appears to have been published in 1914 or 1915, presents a timeline of the organization’s activities.<sup>30</sup> The entries detailing the work performed in its first few years portray the ways that the group was organized so as to be accessible to working women, by doing

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<sup>27</sup> Blatch, *Two Speeches by Industrial Women*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase “working girl” also carried a sense of condescension all its own. Identifying oneself as a working woman, as Leonora O’Reilly had done years earlier in the Working Women’s Society, allowed these workers to assert their independence and demand to be taken seriously. Vapnek, *Breadwinners*, 71.

<sup>29</sup> Blatch, *Two Speeches by Industrial Women*, 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> Women’s Political Union, *The Referendum Policy of the Women’s Political Union*, 1915, Harriot Stanton Blatch Papers.



away with annual dues and sending speakers out to trade union meetings. In later years, activities shifted dramatically towards appealing directly to lawmakers. There were no later mentions of appeals to working women but instead, the rhetoric began to sound much more like that of other mainstream suffrage organizations like the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

While Leonora O'Reilly had started out as the first vice-president of the ELSSW, and was named as a member of the executive board on the list of officers for the 1909-1910 year, her involvement dwindled soon afterwards.<sup>31</sup> That O'Reilly shifted away from direct participation in and association with the organization around the same time that its name was changed to the Women's Political Union was no coincidence. The name change, according to Blatch's daughter, Nora Blatch de Forest, was implemented in 1910, because "We didn't want the aristocracy—the snobbery, if you will—of self-support. We wanted to be absolutely democratic. So we decided not to discriminate against the leisure classes. We needed the other kind of women for achieving our purposes."<sup>32</sup> The prospect that the snobbery and aristocracy within the woman suffrage movement came from its members who either chose or were required to work to support themselves financially is nothing short of ludicrous. The extent to which the trajectory of Blatch's suffrage organization matched up with that of her mother's Working Woman's Association from decades earlier is ironic, and must have been disappointing to Leonora O'Reilly. Though she does not say so explicitly in letters or diary entries around this time, this sort of attitude must have repelled her from the organization.

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<sup>31</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois, *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 95. Blatch, *The Equality League*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Isabel Brush, "Woman's Political Union 5,000 Strong," December 29, 1912, Harriot Stanton Blatch Papers.

One particular instance of frustration for her came in early 1911. A letter written by the secretary of the Women's Political Union in February of that year on behalf of Harriot Stanton Blatch encouraged Leonora to travel to Albany to meet her and speak on the working woman's need for enfranchisement. At the bottom of the letter, O'Reilly made a note of her experience upon arriving in Albany, writing, "When I got there, they didn't know whether they could give me any time at all or not—As if I had asked for any—Well—We have still far to travel before people understand the significance of labor movements."<sup>33</sup> Another letter written to O'Reilly from the editor of *The American Suffragette* congratulated her on her "good work in Albany," suggesting that there was in fact time for her to speak there after all.<sup>34</sup> Still, it is not difficult to understand why O'Reilly would have moved away from the organization, as it clearly no longer gave priority to the needs and experiences of working-class women.

The relationship between Leonora O'Reilly and Harriot Stanton Blatch did not entirely evaporate upon O'Reilly's departure from the Women's Political Union. In May of 1911, just a few months after her disappointing experience in Albany, O'Reilly participated in New York's second annual suffrage parade, which was organized by Blatch and the Women's Political Union. Blatch wrote to O'Reilly in late March, in the hope that she would urge other working women to participate in the parade as well.<sup>35</sup> As suggested by Leonora's continued connection to Blatch, she was rarely hasty in cutting ties with allies. She understood the power and organizing abilities of the mainstream

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<sup>33</sup> Letter to Leonora O'Reilly from the Secretary of the Women's Political Union, February 18, 1911, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

<sup>34</sup> Letter to Leonora O'Reilly, February 25, 1911, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Harriot Stanton Blatch to Leonora O'Reilly, March 20, 1911, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

suffrage movement. At the same time, her decision to break with the Women's Political Union suggests that she was uninterested in doing suffrage work that did not seek to appeal to or understand the needs of working women.

### Chapter 3

#### Roschen Dear Roschen

A sister working woman with whom Leonora O'Reilly established an especially close alliance was Rose Schneiderman. The pair followed nearly parallel paths as they navigated their ways through the suffrage movement. Both came to know Harriot Stanton Blatch through their involvement in the Women's Trade Union League, and both worked alongside her in the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women. By 1911 the two apparently also shared frustrations with Blatch's group, for they joined together that year to form the Wage Earner's Suffrage League.

Since both were working women, the alliance between Leonora O'Reilly and Rose Schneiderman might seem more instinctive than strategic, but in fact there were significant differences between them. Unlike O'Reilly, who was born in the United States, Rose Schneiderman, twelve years her junior, was born in Poland and came to the United States with her parents and siblings while still a young child. Like O'Reilly and her mother, she and her family struggled financially. Rose's father passed away when she was about ten years old, and although she at first cared for her younger siblings while her mother worked to support them, the children were all eventually sent off to live with relatives or in an orphanage for some time. After about a year, Rose's mother was able to take her out of the orphanage and bring her home, at which time she was able to return to public school.

In her autobiography, Rose recalled enjoying school and advancing quickly, although it was not long before new financial strains threatened to end her education. "Toward the end of that last term the situation at home made me worry about being able

to continue,” she wrote. “I remember writing a composition about how much I loved school and wanted to continue. I must have been hoping that someone would find out about the situation and lend a helping hand.”<sup>1</sup> Although she did not mention sending her writing to any specific potential benefactor, such an act would not have been uncommon at the time. Letter-writing was a method used by New York City’s working poor to appeal to the wealthy for assistance. Lillian Wald, the founder of the Henry Street Settlement where Leonora O’Reilly worked in the late 1890s, was a frequent recipient of such letters.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately for young Rose, the composition proved unsuccessful; her mother lost her job making fur capes soon after and Rose was forced to leave school and enter the workforce.<sup>3</sup>

While Leonora O’Reilly had started her career as a working woman in a collar factory, Rose Schneiderman initially worked as a cash girl in a series of department stores, until she moved on to factory work as a cap maker. Her first experiences with the labor movement came while she was working in this industry, when she and a few other female cap makers approached the National Board of the United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers about organizing.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, she went on to join other organizations focused on organizing workers, such as the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union. She also found her way into groups that reached out to working women, like the Women’s Trade Union League. Schneiderman valued coming together with other women workers. She wrote, “The girls and women by their meetings and discussions come to understand

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<sup>1</sup> Rose Schneiderman, *All for One*, (New York: Paul S. Erikson, Inc., 1967), 34.

<sup>2</sup> David Huyssen, *Progressive Inequality: Rich and Poor in New York, 1890-1920*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 105-113.

<sup>3</sup> Schneiderman, *All for One*, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Schneiderman, “A Cap Maker’s Story.”

and sympathize with each other, and more and more easily they act together.”<sup>5</sup> It was likely with this sense of optimism and appreciation for collaborating with other working class women that Rose came to form the Wage Earner’s Suffrage League alongside Leonora O’Reilly in 1911.

The Wage Earner’s Suffrage league put forth a platform that was vastly different from that of the Equality League, and focused to a greater extent on workers’ need for the vote. While the ELSSW had regarded professional women and industrial women as essentially the same, the Wage Earner’s Suffrage League insisted that the latter have the ultimate say in organizational decision-making. While middle-class allies and professional women could be members, they played lesser roles in the WESL than in the ELSSW and Women’s Trade Union League.

Leonora took hand-written notes on the earliest meetings of the Wage Earners’ Suffrage League; they provide a detailed look into the sentiments expressed by the meetings’ participants. Notes from one gathering held on November 13, 1911, explain that, “After a lively discussion of who is who and what is what in the working women’s world it was agreed by a majority vote that the League should try to reach all women who work for a living or live on wages. The League moreover would work to build up its membership amongst those who work in factories & shops.”<sup>6</sup> At the same meeting, those present agreed to get together on Monday nights for dinner and talk about possible methods of moving forward with their mission of advocating for votes for working women like themselves. A few weeks later, O’Reilly outlined several issues for

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<sup>5</sup> Schneiderman, “A Cap Maker’s Story.”

<sup>6</sup> Wage Earner’s Suffrage League meeting notes, October 30, 1911, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

discussion in the organization's publications. These included child labor, shorter workdays, and equal pay for equal work.<sup>7</sup> The organizers attending these early meetings consistently drew on this method of focusing on issues that spoke to the experiences of the working-class as the WESL continued to take shape.

A draft of the WESL's constitution is similarly revealing. It listed the organization's three key goals as "to urge working women to understand the necessity for the vote; to agitate for the vote; and to study how to use the vote when it has been acquired."<sup>8</sup> Organizers for the Wage Earner's Suffrage League approached these goals in a manner that zeroed in on working women. As working women themselves, they had a firm understanding of why others like them needed the vote, and well-developed ideas as to how they could use the vote to better working conditions. The draft constitution also laid out guidelines for the two types of membership that the League would offer. The first type, called active membership, was granted to members of labor organizations and workers from factories and other workplaces "where a trade organisation [sic] might be possible."<sup>9</sup> The second type, associate membership, was granted to those who did not fit the criteria for active membership but were willing to work for the League. This appears to be the form of membership designated for those whom the Women's Trade Union League called "allies." Associate members were held to a high level of commitment and their membership came with significant restrictions. They did not have voting powers within the organization, as voting was reserved for active members, and if they were absent from two meetings without excuse, they lost their membership. Everything, from

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<sup>7</sup> Wage Earner's Suffrage League meeting notes, November 15, 1911, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

<sup>8</sup> Draft of constitution of the Wage Earner's Suffrage League, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Draft, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

the membership guidelines to the literature put out by the League, emphasized working women's central role within the WESL.

A flier, approved at the meeting of November 13, demonstrates the types of arguments put forth by the Wage Earners Suffrage League, clearly illustrating whom it intended to mobilize. The flier posed a series of questions to its reader about working and living conditions she faced, such as, "Why are you paid less than a man?" and "Why are your hours so long?" as well as "Why do you pay the most rent for the worst houses?" Then came a single answer: "Because you are a woman and have no vote." And, finally, this declaration: "Women who want better conditions MUST vote."<sup>10</sup> This direct address to working women went far beyond any rhetoric put forth by suffrage groups the WESL's organizers had previously been involved with. From the very start, the WESL made clear whose conditions it sought to improve and whom it wished to recruit as members; in both cases, the focus was on working women.

The most famous action carried out by the Wage Earners' Suffrage League was a giant rally held on April 22, 1912, at Cooper Union, the same place where Leonora had attended meetings with her mother as a child. Seven women, all garment workers, spoke before the large crowd, which was primarily made up of workers. Each speaker responded directly to a claim put forth by a New York State Senator or Assemblyman opposed to woman suffrage. Leonora O'Reilly and Rose Schneiderman were both among those who delivered these counterarguments.

The senator to whom Schneiderman responded had been quoted as saying, "Get women into the arena of politics with its alliances and distressing contests—the delicacy

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<sup>10</sup> "Why?" poster, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.



is gone, the charm is gone, and you emasculate [sic] women.”<sup>11</sup> Schneiderman bristled at the suggestion that having the right to vote would do anything to rid women of their charm and delicacy. She suggested that perhaps this senator did not in fact consider working women to be women at all. “Surely these women won’t lose any more of their beauty and charm by putting a ballot in a ballot box once a year than they are likely to lose standing in foundries or laundries all year round,” she argued.<sup>12</sup> Schneiderman, who stood four feet and nine inches tall, poked fun at the suggestion that having the vote would somehow make women more masculine. “What does all this talk about becoming mannish signify?” she asked. “I wonder if it will add to my height when I get the vote. I might work for it all the harder if it did.”<sup>13</sup> Jokes aside, Schneiderman suggested that the real reason senators and assemblymen opposed giving women the vote was a well-founded fear that women would use the ballot wisely to hold their representatives accountable. She urged everyone, from working women to politicians, to stand on the right side of history and support woman suffrage.

One aspect of the Cooper Union rally that underscored the potential value of allies from outside the working class was the presence of women from the Collegiate Equal Suffrage League of New York, which had helped the WESL organize this event. Participants from the CESL wore caps and gowns and acted as ushers.<sup>14</sup> Leonora O’Reilly did not let their role go unnoticed. “This meeting tonight represents a dream of

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<sup>11</sup> “Senators vs. Working Women: Miss Rose Schneiderman, Cap Maker, Replies to New York Senator on Delicacy and Charm of Women,” *Wage Earner’s Suffrage League*, 4, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

<sup>12</sup> “Senators vs. Working Women: Miss Rose Schneiderman,” 5.

<sup>13</sup> “Senators vs. Working Women: Miss Rose Schneiderman,” 9.

<sup>14</sup> “Suffrage Demanded By Working Women: College Graduates Play Hostess to Feminine Toilers at Cooper Union Rally,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1912.

my life come true,” she explained.

Women who have had education in colleges have come here tonight to act as ushers for workingwomen. Take it home and dream about it tonight—women who have had opportunities and privileges are waking up to their responsibilities to those who have less. The colleges have filled this hall tonight with the new doctrine—we are here to serve.<sup>15</sup>

Over the course of this one evening, women of the Collegiate Equal Suffrage League did what Harriot Stanton Blatch and other middle- and upper-class allies from the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women had not. They held the doors open, stepped aside, and let working women walk through and speak for themselves.

Despite the size and positive reception<sup>16</sup> of the Cooper Union meeting, the records in O’Reilly’s papers suggest that, if the Wager Earner’s Suffrage League lasted long after this event, it did so informally. That is not to say, however, that O’Reilly and Schneiderman stopped advocating votes for women. Both remained consistently active in the suffrage movement in the following years. Leonora was on the receiving end of a near constant stream of requests to speak at events organized by suffrage groups across the country.<sup>17</sup> Rose, too, seemed to stay busy within the suffrage movement, so much so that it may have played a part in her losing an election within the Women’s Trade Union League.

In 1914 the Women’s Trade Union League was in need of a new president, and members chose between Schneiderman and Melinda Scott, a English-born hat trimmer.

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<sup>15</sup> “Suffrage Demanded By Working Women,” *The New York Times*.

<sup>16</sup> The speeches given by the women at this meeting were so well-received that they were reprinted and made available for order for twenty cents. Vapnek, *Breadwinners*, 150.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Anna M. Orme to Leonora O’Reilly, December 3, 1911, Leonora O’Reilly Papers. Letter from Jane Campbell to Leonora O’Reilly, April 11, 1912, Leonora O’Reilly Papers. Letter from Edith Hooker to Leonora O’Reilly, April 18, 1912, Leonora O’Reilly Papers.

Scott won the election by four votes, and Pauline Newman wrote to Rose shortly after to express her frustration and skepticism with the results. Newman suggested that the votes had been cast along class and ethnic lines, with allies voting for Scott and working women, in particular younger immigrant working women, voting for Schneiderman.<sup>18</sup> In the same letter, however, Newman also alluded to the possibility that Rose's active dedication to woman suffrage may have influenced some members' decisions to vote against her. She explained having heard of some women telling other voters that Schneiderman cared more about the suffrage cause than trade unionism. At the same time, she believed that some women voted against her because they were concerned that, were Rose to become president, she would have to set aside her suffrage work.<sup>19</sup> The election was no doubt a disappointment for Rose, and at the end of the year she resigned from her duties in the WTUL, though her break with the organization would be only temporary.

Around this same time, Leonora O'Reilly also began to turn her attention elsewhere, most notably towards the anti-war and Irish independence movements. O'Reilly attended the International Women's Peace Congress at the Hague in 1915, and maintained her opposition to World War I throughout its duration.<sup>20</sup> She and Schneiderman stayed in touch, regardless of their changing obligations.

In letters, O'Reilly often addressed her friend affectionately by the name Roschen, but also called her Rose Dear, and on at least one occasion "Rosie Rosey Rosey

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<sup>18</sup> Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters: Feminism, Unionism, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), 117.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Pauline Newman to Rose Schneiderman, 1914, Pauline Newman Papers.

<sup>20</sup> "The war, the horrible bloody war, and the later battle for Irish Independence has burnt some facts into the marrow." Letter from Leonora O'Reilly to Rose Schneiderman, January 12, 1922, Rose Schneiderman Papers.

Bud.”<sup>21</sup> She wrote to Rose as late as 1926, at a time when her own health, as well as her mother’s, had weakened significantly, causing her to withdraw from public life. Yet even from a place of relative solitude, she could not help but express her thoughts about the goings on in the world. After lamenting briefly affairs in the United States, as well as England and Italy, she ended the letter by saying, “Once a preacher always a preacher—forgive and love old Leonora just a wee bit longer. Come when you can.”<sup>22</sup> This admission of a tendency to preach represents a moment of keen self-awareness for O’Reilly. Throughout her life, she had gained respect and acclaim for her ability to make strong, successful appeals to any audience. It may have been that at this particular moment, an aging Leonora wondered if this ability ever turned into lecturing within the context of her close friendships. If this was the case, it does not seem to have bothered Rose much. Though the suffrage organization they formed together may not have lasted more than a few years, their relationship endured.

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<sup>21</sup> Letter from Leonora O’Reilly to Rose Schneiderman, July 22, 1912, Rose Schneiderman Papers.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Leonora O’Reilly to Rose Schneiderman, May 7, 1926, Rose Schneiderman Papers.

## Conclusion

As early as 1914, Leonora O'Reilly's activities and commitments lessened due to her weakening health, although she continued for a few more years to work on and off for the WTUL, the suffrage movement, and the other causes she aligned herself with later in life. By the end of the decade, she had also taken on the responsibility of looking after an aging Victor Drury. Winifred, too, would soon require her daughter's attention as she slipped into old age; it was her mother's needs that would finally force Leonora to withdraw from public life completely.<sup>1</sup> The faithful daughter refused to place her mother in anyone else's care, and entertained all of her senescent delusions, escorting her on subway trips around the city with no clear destination. In 1926, she ended a letter to Pauline Newman by writing, "I must to Mother now. She is fast closing every window in the house... in preparation to our daily trip in search of her mother—gone these fifty years."<sup>2</sup>

It was Leonora and not her mother who would pass away first, however. She died of a heart attack on April 3, 1927, at fifty-seven years old. Letters written after her death to Mary Dreier of the WTUL by Arthur Brisbane, the noted newspaper editor with whom O'Reilly corresponded frequently, suggest that he had been helping the family pay their mortgage for several years. He offered to continue doing so for as long as Winifred remained in the home.<sup>3</sup> It appears that the decision was made to allow Winifred to stay; their Brooklyn address is listed as her residence in the 1930 federal

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<sup>1</sup> Edward T. James, "Leonora O'Reilly," Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Leonora O'Reilly to Pauline Newman, July 24, 1924, Pauline Newman Papers.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Arthur Brisbane to Mary Dreier, May 27, 1927, Leonora O'Reilly Papers.

census, and at that point she was living there with a nurse, Elizabeth Keefe.<sup>4</sup> That Leonora's friends took care to ensure her mother's comfort in her remaining years is a testament to their love and respect for the pair.

Leonora O'Reilly sought mutual respect in all of her relationships, and this can be seen in the actions she took in building and maintaining alliances throughout her life. It was from her mother that she first learned the benefits of working for a common cause and having others to lean on, and this knowledge carried over into her work for the suffrage movement in the early twentieth century. Working with Harriot Stanton Blatch in the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women, she sought out connections with women across class lines that she felt were sympathetic to the plight of the working class. Though she was wise not to sever ties completely, when it seemed that her needs were no longer being met, she was not afraid to look elsewhere for support. Doing so meant instead drawing on connections with other working women, which allowed for a greater sense of unity of purpose, though such consensus was not enough to keep the Wage Earners Suffrage League alive.

Examining Leonora O'Reilly's relationships with various allies reveals a great deal about the experiences of working women in the American suffrage movement, but it can also lend insight to current activists attempting to forge their own alliances. Throughout much of her work in the labor movement and suffrage movement, O'Reilly did not shy away from working with people who did not share her background and priorities. Even as she moved away from Blatch's Equality League, she maintained

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<sup>4</sup> 1930 U.S. Census, Kings County, New York, population schedule, Brooklyn, dwelling 229, family 365, Winifred O'Reilly and Elizabeth Keefe; digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed April 19, 2016, <http://ancestry.com>.

relationships with other suffrage organizations and their leaders. She no doubt realized that doing so opened her eyes to new perspectives, while also giving her access to a greater number and variety of platforms on which to argue for her causes. At the same time, Leonora was also steadfast and unwilling to compromise on her message. Whether working in the Wage Earner's Suffrage League, or the countless other suffrage organizations she later interacted with, her commitment to bettering the lives of working women remained the same.

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