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Tattered Tidbits: Alpine Historical Society

AMERICA'S MARCH TOWARD DEMOCRACY

As *The Alpine Sun* hit the presses this week, the people of the United States of America will have once again had the opportunity to elect a new President. The right to vote will have been given to those fortunate enough to live in our great nation. That right is not a new concept. Aristotle said, c. 340 B.C., "If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost."

When this country announced its independence from Britain, voting rights were based on specific criteria. Only Caucasian males, over the age of 21 who belonged to the Protestant religion were given this right. That's hard to imagine today. In 1787, states were given the power to set voting mandates—most, however, were still favorable to white males who owned property. By 1830 many states had dropped religion and property ownership as requirements for voting and political parties were beginning to develop.

As early as 1869, observers of American politics declared that the distant ideal of universal suffrage defined democracy itself. The 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, passed in 1868 and 1870, respectively, recognized African Americans as citizens with the right to vote and prohibited any state or local government from denying that right.

In 1902, the Great Register of San Diego County, California, Alpine Precinct, lists sixty registered voters—all males. In 1911, the eyes of the nation were on California when male voters flocked to the polls to approve women's right to vote by a wide margin in a statewide referendum. California was the sixth and largest state to approve women's suffrage. Alpine was impacted—in the election of 1912, the Great Register shows eighty-one registered voters, thirty-one of them were female. In contrast, the San Diego County Registrar of Voters reports 9,221 registered voters living in zip code 91901 in 2008. How our community has grown! The names listed on the old registers are very familiar to those who have studied Alpine's history: Albee, Athearn, Beaty, Brabazon, Castro, Emery, Foss, Love, Pennoyer, Snow, Stephenson and Walker, to name a few, all appear year after year. In 1911 and subsequent years, the names of both the husband and the wife began appearing on the precinct registers.

It was not until 1920 that women across the nation were given the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment; however, Native Americans still did not have this right. In 1940 Congress recognized Native Americans as citizens; but, unbelievably, it was 1947 before all states granted this group of Americans the right to vote. Since that time several other actions have been taken to ensure the right to vote is granted to all citizens. The 24th Amendment, passed in 1964, declared that no person should be denied the right to vote because they cannot pay a "poll tax," in 1965 an amendment to the Voting Rights Act banned the use of literacy tests, poll taxes and other obstacles which had been designed to keep some individuals from voting. In 1971 the voting age was lowered to 18 with the passage of the 26th Amendment.

As Thomas Paine declared more than 200 years ago, "The right to vote for representatives is the primary right by which other rights are protected." Instead of a pure democracy, our American founders settled on a republican form of government that put considerable power in the hands of average citizens to choose suitable representatives to serve their interests in government. The preamble to the Constitution enumerates several guiding principles, including the duty to "secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity." One of the best ways to protect our

liberty is to exercise our constitutional right to vote. How truly blessed are we to live in this great land.

I'll close with a statement by Abraham Lincoln, made in 1858, that I feel properly defines what should drive the political process in the mind of every politician: "I have never had a feeling, politically, that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." What progress we've made--we are truly America, the beautiful!

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