

“Our Foremothers” Speech

By Emily Hoppin, July 4th 1915

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Yolo County, California



(Transcribed from a copy of her handwritten speech)

“For over a hundred years, on this anniversary of our nation’s birth, men have written and poets have sung of our fore fathers. Today, for the first time in the history of – well – I will not say our nation, but will say of Yolo County, you are to hear not only of your forefathers but your foremothers, and I wish I had the eloquent tongue to tell of them.

No doubt many of you have vivid recollections of one of these in connection with a slipper. We give a great deal of credit to the immortal George for his truthfulness in regard to the cherry tree and the hatchet but very likely he would not have been so truthful if there had not loomed up before his mental vision the picture of his mother’s knee – himself and the slipper.

Neither do I today expect to give a small meed of praise to these fore mothers of ours – but I would try to win for them some of the gratitude we give our forefathers.

Often women are the leaders and organizers of great enterprises. Our own country owes its discovery to the masterful mind of a woman.

One of the bolder campaigns of our civil war was planned by a woman.

In the history of this beautiful state of ours where the pioneers of '49 were enduring their hardships – the women were by their side and endured with them the hardships and lessons of the plains. One of the grandest ages of English history was the long reign of Elizabeth.

Women have however been content with no praise at all, or the praise such as the old pioneer settler out west gave to his wife when an old grizzly bear came into his cabin one day.

Perhaps you recall the man's scream to his frau.
There's a bear in the kitchen as big as a cow.
And how she advised him to murder him then.
And how his reply was, Yes! Betty, I will if you'll first venture in.
So Betty leaped up and a poker she seized.
While her man shut the door and outside he squeezed
And then you remember, she laid on the blows.
While her man, through the keyhole kept shouting with din,
Well done, my brave Betty. Now hit him again.
So with rapping and poking, poor Betty alone
at last laid old Bruin as dead as a stone.
Then when the brave man saw the bear was no more,
he ventured to poke himself in at the door.
And off to the neighbors he hastened to tell,
all the wonderful things –that morning befell.
And he published the wonderful story afar,
How "Me and my Betty we just slaughtered that bar."

Now my dear friends there is nothing personal in this story – nothing that is applicable to you – for you have never said to us in regard to taking hold of work. Yes! Darling we will, if you'll first venture in. We all know how energetic you men of Yolo County are, and how anxious you are that our county shall be well governed.

How glad you are to give due praise to women today, we who are proud to stand beside you and tell of the grand women of the past. 'Tis like stirring living embers when one calls to mind "all the aching and the quakings of the times that tried men's souls."

Go back with me nearly three hundred years. 'Tis mid winter. The bleak wind whistles off the Atlantic. 'Tis an eager and nipping air." A little band of 102 people – among them 21 women stand on the rocky shores of their new home. Dusky faces peer at them from the shadows. All is strange and new.

Soon the bass voices of the men mingle with the soprano of the women and treble of the children in a hymn of praise to Him who has led them past the dangers of the deep. The days go by. Hunger and cold are no strangers to the band. Houses made of logs, their homes. Rear the group of houses stands a building hexagonal in shape made of massive squared logs firmly united by an ingenious combination of their ends. In this citadel are two rooms of long narrow loop holes. This is the block house of the people used in times of danger from the Indians. The privations and dangers are shared alike by both the men and women, and the women stand by the men's sides in attacks from Indians, helping load the clumsy muskets, and both are equally fearless. Often the stillness of the night is broken by the war whoop. Often the settlers are besieged in their block houses and the firebrand or famine often pave the way for the tomahawk. One instance can be mentioned from many of women's heroism.

The settlers are undergoing a siege in one of their block houses. Starvation stares them in the face or death from the Indians, unless help comes from a neighboring settlement. The men have talked over the plans for getting help and one by one they have been rejected – so they resolve to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

Then in among them slips gentle Prudence Palgrave. I will go, she says. Quietly she answers their objections. In the darkness she leaves the shelter of the block house and through the terrible peril carries word of her friend's danger to the neighbors and they are saved. I could tell you other instances of our foremother's courage how in toil and hardship and danger the foundation of our nations is laid.

Years pass. The red men have gone from the Eastern colonies. Comfortable houses are seen instead of the log cabins. Villages and towns and thrifty farms have taken the place of the wilderness. But mutterings of a discontent are beginning to be heard. Soon the mutterings grow louder and the discontent has spread over the colonies and has grown into open revolt.

From farm and stove and shop men gather into companies. Women with hearts too indignant for tears, buckle on the clumsy(?) swords help clean the old muskets and with cheering words bid the men good-bye. Weary years follow. All who are able to shoulder a musket have gone to the war.

The care of the farms besides the weaving of the cloth and the regular homework devolves on our foremothers. Uncomplainingly they do double work, living on the coarsest food, wearing the plainest clothes. Even the highest in the land are not exempt from the privations in 1775 when the first gun of the revolution was fired. John Adams wrote to his wife – *Fly to the woods with the children*. But the heroism of her Puritan ancestors kept her home and for 12 months she lived with her little children in daily and hourly danger of being butchered, doing without everything but the bare necessities, often without them. Once reduced to a diet of whortleberries and milk. Besides the dangers and

privations, the women endured with patience the great suspense during the long intervals of hearing from their husbands and brothers.

We who live in these days of railroads and telegraphs and books cannot realize the lonely days and nights of these women. Days and nights not only full of loveliness, but of danger for those on the frontier, but never a word of complaint or of fear comes from their lips.

During the stormy nights of winter and the equally dreaded nights of summer, the house full of women and children gather round the table or fireside not knowing what harm may come to them in the darkness, and the experience of one of our foremothers – Abigail Tempest – was no doubt the experience of others. Once with her brood of children around her, she kept a band of Indians and English at bay for hours. With her own hands she loaded the guns and with practiced eye and sure aim the old flintlock poured death into the enemy's ranks as surely as though it were in her husband's hands.

The years go by until finally the old liberty bell with its prophetic inscription written years before of "Proclaim Liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" rings out the joyous news to all the people. We are free and a nation. With smiles and tears the women of '76 welcome the loved ones home and though the rough hands and care lined faces tell of hardship and sorrow, their lips utter no words but those of joy that once more the living of the household are together again.

Years roll on. Our foremothers and our forefathers sleep the dreamless sleep. Peace and plenty are in our land of liberty. But again the sound of war is heard. Again the women of America, our grandmothers and our mothers are called upon to make sacrifices. Some of you can yet feel your mother's tears on your cheeks as she bade you go. The old Revolutionary spirit is not dead. The women of the north and their sisters of the south joyfully sacrifice their own comfort for their loved ones and what they think the good of their country.

Again the women tend the house and the farms and the shops to see the men go out to battle. Again, many women wear the coarse clothes and do without luxuries that the money may go to the soldiers in the way of clothing and luxuries for them. With throbbing hearts our mothers read the war news and the list of killed wounded and missing make many a life sad forever.

But the women are as heroic as the men and though they are not all on the battle field they are doing as brave work in their homes. Many indeed have left their homes and have followed the soldiers to the field where their loving words and tender touch soothe the last moments of many a poor fellow, who longs for the touch of his own beloved.

We can see such women as Clara Barton tending the fallen all day with her throat parched and face blackened by sulphurous smoke. We can see her having great fires built on the banks of the Rappahannock to warm the half-starved and frozen soldiers, while she had but

the shelter of a canvas between herself and the piercing winds. We can see her and others like her on the field at the second Bull Run working among the fallen, when the shoe and shell are falling like rain on the disordered ranks of the Union soldiers. No doubt there are some in this room who have seen the heroic self-sacrifice and courage of these women.

Those days are past.

The Blue and Gray beside each other sleep. No angry passions vex their dreamless rest. No battle echoes round their couches beat. And both alike are cradled on one breast. In all the beauty of summer's pomp with peace hovering over our nation's flag with plenty in our land – with no dread disease in our midst, we are gathered to do homage today to the men and women of the past and as you tell of the glories of our nation, as you tell of the brave deeds of our ancestors, and call to mind those dark hours of our nation's history, and the bravery of the men – call to mind also the women of thirty and fifty and one hundred and two hundred years ago.

Speak of their brave words, their true hearts, their noble deeds. Tell of their purity, their faith, their heroism, and let this fourth of July celebrate their deeds, as well as the deeds of our forefathers – and if between the living and the dead, is stretched, as some believe, a spirit wire, let it signal to them the words we speak today, and may their spirits – our guardian angels watch o'er our country and may the God of our fore fathers and mothers, who through the gloom and night has guided our people. Give to us their lofty courage and lead our steps toward justice, Peace and Right. May our devotion to our flag be as unswerving as theirs, our heroism be as lofty, our faith as strong, our lives as pure.”