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My word: Women have Harry Burn to thank

By Ann Hellmuth

August 26, 2010 "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on the account of sex." So states the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which, after decades of struggle, finally became law on Aug. 26, 1920.

As some of us raise our glasses tonight to mark the 90th anniversary of this hard-fought-for achievement, I wonder how many will remember to say thanks to Harry T. Burn of Tennessee. Very few, I suspect. For the story of Harry Burn and his mom, Febb, has faded into the mists of history.

Harry was a 24-year-old freshman lawmaker in 1920 when the final push began to ratify the 19th Amendment. Thirty-five of the 48 states had voted to amend the Constitution. Thirty-six were needed for passage. It is hard to believe today that men could feel so passionately against allowing women to vote, but they did. Eight states, including Georgia and Alabama, rejected ratification; two governors — Connecticut and Vermont — refused to allow their legislatures to even consider the proposal. So it was up to Florida, North Carolina and Tennessee to take action.

Suffrage supporters targeted Tennessee.

(It was good they didn't pick Florida. The Sunshine State didn't get around to symbolically ratifying the amendment until 1969, approving it without the signature of then-Gov. Claude Kirk.)

Enter Harry. The Tennessee Senate overwhelmingly approved the amendment. But House Speaker Seth Walker was opposed to suffrage. The first vote ended in a tie, 48 to 48. Walker called for another vote, and that is when the state's youngest legislator made history. Harry, who had previously voted to table ratification, changed his vote. The tally was 49 to 48.

Washington was notified of the vote, and on Aug. 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution became law.

What made Harry change his mind? It was, he told reporters, a letter from his mother. He had it in his pocket when he voted.

"Dear Son: Hurrah, and vote for suffrage! Don't keep them in doubt. I noticed some of the speeches against. They were bitter. I have been watching to see how you stood, but have not noticed anything yet. Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt [Carrie

Chapman Catt, women's suffrage leader and founder of the League of Women Voters] put the 'rat' in ratification. Your Mother."

Fifty-five words that helped make history.

Today, more than half of the electorate are women, and since 1980, more women have voted than men. In Orange County, 316,416 women were registered to vote on July 31 compared with 271,493 men. (The sex of 22,623 voters was unknown.)

So, here's to you, Harry Burn.....

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