

'And Ain't I a Woman?'

The road to female suffrage was tough, but so was Sojourner Truth. An American story.

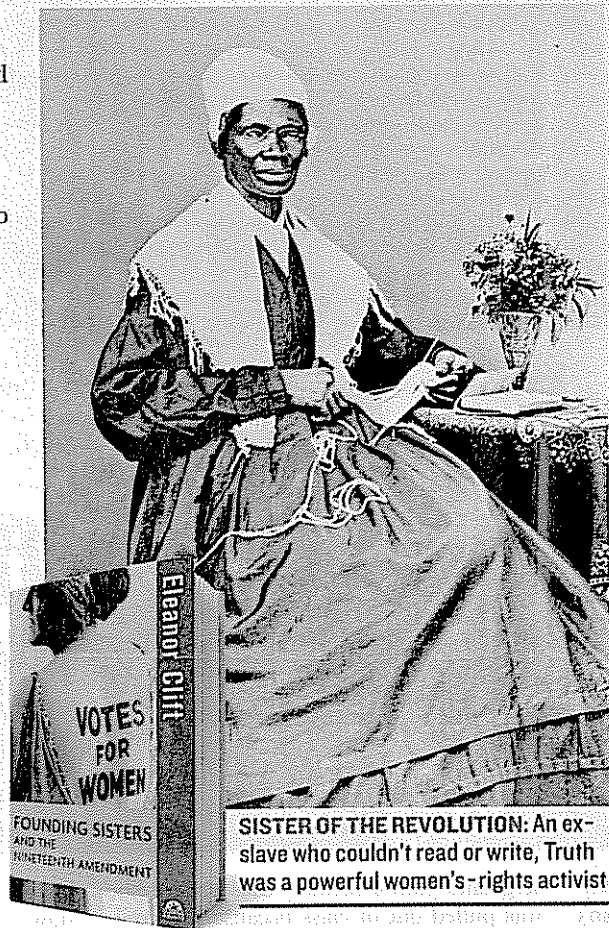
BY ELEANOR CLIFT

A FORMER SLAVE NAMED Sojourner Truth electrified a woman's-rights convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, striding to the front of the crowd through a raucous band of clergymen who were determined to disrupt the meeting. More than six feet tall and built like a halfback with huge muscles from working in the fields, Truth ridiculed the argument that women were too delicate to survive outside the protection of the home and should be shielded from public life. "The man over there says women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over puddles, or gives me the best place—and ain't I a woman?" She flexed her arm to show her strength and said, "I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most of 'em sold into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me—and ain't I a woman?"

Truth reminded the clergymen that Jesus was the product of God and a woman; man had nothing to do with it. By the time she finished, even some of the clergymen were applauding. The fight for suffrage had all the twists and turns of a modern thriller, and the story sheds light on how reform, slowly but surely, happens in America: painfully, often with difficult compromises, driven by both powerful personalities and the sacrifices of ordinary, often unsung people.

Truth was born a slave named Isabella in the 1790s in New York and escaped in the 1820s. She gained legal freedom under an 1817 New York statute that freed slaves under 40 in the year 1827. Truth had no permanent address and supported herself as a live-in domestic. When she traveled, she stayed with leaders of the woman's movement, including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton. Though she could neither read nor write, she was unmatched as a storyteller. Dressed in red, white, and blue, she transfixed audiences with her presence and her spellbinding oratory.

The moral responsibility to speak out against the evils of slavery prompted more women, white and black, to enter public life. Together they drove the reform movement. Skin color didn't matter in the context of fighting slavery. A February 1844 antislavery fair



SISTER OF THE REVOLUTION: An ex-slave who couldn't read or write, Truth was a powerful women's-rights activist

organized by women to raise money for the cause attracted women with bedrock New England names whose parents fought in the American Revolution. As they sold their homemade jams and jellies, the women shared their discontent; they were denied the right to vote, while all sorts of other people, from drunken laborers to untutored immigrants, were welcomed at voting places. Where was the morality in that? Many had come to the unhappy realization that the conditions that limited them as women weren't that different from what slaves experienced.

There was racial conflict as the movement divided over whether to support the extension of the vote to Negroes after slavery was ended. A deal made with President Lincoln to push for woman's suffrage at the conclusion of the Civil War collapsed when Lincoln was assassinated. The early suffragists were abolitionists, but their frustration at being excluded from the vote while uneducated blacks were granted suffrage led them to accommodate racist views in an effort to win southern political support. The waves of new immigrants coming into the country were equally problematical for the suffrag-

ists. Anti-Irish, anti-Catholic, and anti-foreign attitudes took hold as the country industrialized and millions of people arrived each year from cultures considered alien. Most of the men arriving by the boatload were never going to be allies; they held conservative views of women and were deeply distrustful of the suffragists. An 1853 convention on women's rights in New York attracted women from eleven states and as far away as England and Germany. A number of men had infiltrated the proceedings and did their best to disrupt the speakers, shouting insults and making loud hissing noises. Male speakers, including the noted abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, were treated with the same disrespect as the women orators. The event would be recorded in feminist history as "the Mob Convention."

It took Sojourner Truth to put the protestors in their place. "Some of you have got the spirit of a goose, and some have got the spirit of a snake." She spat out the sibilant words, commiserating with her tormentors that they had to endure seeing a colored woman tell them about women's rights. "We'll have our rights," she declared. "You may hiss as much as you like, but it is coming."

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