

Frances Webb Oldham

Willing and more than able

“Can you realize that (suffrage) is big work and our plans cannot be perfected without the cooperation from all women interested in the world’s progress. Join the four million women who will have the privilege to vote for our next president.”

These are the words of Frances Webb Oldham, who spoke in an “able and gracious way,” it seemed, whenever it was asked of her.

Frances Webb was born to Abram and Cornelia (Leversey) Webb in Coldwater, but spent her childhood in a little village in Kent County, Casnovia. She was the second in a line of six children: Grace, Frances, Walter, William, Arthur and Alice Webb. Her father was a farmer and he and her mother stayed in Casnovia for the rest of their lives. It is not clear how she came to Petoskey, but did so as a young lady.

Meanwhile, James Oldham had moved to Petoskey in 1885 to establish his harness and leather business on Lake Street. The couple married on Dec. 23, 1896 and made their home at 115 State St.

In 1897, their first son, Eugene was born, followed by another, Arthur, in 1902. A few



In this 1902 photo courtesy of Karla Buckmaster, Frances is holding her son, Arthur.

years later, the couple’s little family was complete with the addition of a daughter, Ione.

In 1906, the first evidence of Frances’ involvement outside of the home shows in a



These photos of Frances (on the right in the left photo) are courtesy of Karla Buckmaster, who is a cousin of the family.

newspaper artifice where the Emerson Club was to meet at her home. This club merged with the newly formed Assembly Study Club (which used to be called The Monday Club), later that year.

Frances also appeared in the news often as a hostess and leader of the Women's Home Mission Society of the Parr Memorial Baptist Church, the Home Missionary Society, the Ladies Aid Society and was acting secretary for the Baptist Aid Society. By 1912, she was elected secretary of the United Societies of the Baptist Ladies.

It was in this year, in the month of May, that Frances was part of a small group of ladies, led by Mrs. Elkerton, to "get the campaign

started in Petoskey." From the *Petoskey Evening News*, "The equal suffrage tea advertised for Friday afternoon was given on State Street, and what it lacked in number, it made up with in enthusiasm. ... all talked freely and with animation after the program, which was optimistic and education on matters pertaining to votes for women.

"Articles by Mesdames Oldham, Merrill and Lindell were all impressively read. No one need say women don't know enough to vote when they read so well.

"Table decorations were yellow crepe paper a foot wide ... Votes for Women napkins, small yellow bows which ladies pinned on their waists. Yellow food predominated, and the tables were beautiful."

That fall, a meeting of the Women's Christian Temperance Union met at the Oldham residence which, according to the paper "will be full of up-to-date interest." The hot topics of politics at that time, local option and woman suffrage, were also prominent in the WCTU.

In March of 1913, a gathering of 25 ladies, including Frances, met to discuss a coming local option campaign. The ladies effected an organization of a local option league and elected Frances chairman.

A year later, after playing hostess several times throughout the year for the Assembly Study Club, Frances was elected its secretary. The theme of the most recent meeting had been a lively debate: "Resolved. That Woman Suffrage is Desirable?" The suffrage committee of the Petoskey Federation of Woman's Clubs (FWC) was invited to be an audience.

In June, Frances won the seat of chairman for the playground committee under the Petoskey FWC. The Klise family had donated five lots and plans were discussed at the Oldham residence on how to improve the property for local children.

On June 23, 1914, the Fourth Ward suffrage club, of which Frances was a part, met with other wards to "wake up and fall into line with other localities where thinking women are so deeply in earnest in working for the ballot." After this lively meeting where each lady gave a reason why she wanted to vote, with a prize for the best one, Frances had charge of the refreshments.

Throughout that fall, several more meetings were held in anticipation of the vote on suffrage in November. The activity culminated on Nov. 2, when Mrs. James T. Blair of Hills-

dale, gave a lecture at the Methodist church. Immediately following this well-attended talk, a county suffrage club was organized: the Emmet County Equal Suffrage association. The women of the federation elected Frances as this new club's secretary.

One year later, Frances was one of four women to be sent to the 30th annual convention of Michigan Equal Suffrage association Nov. 11-12, 1915, in Saginaw.

Upon her return, Frances slipped back to hosting church and Assembly Study Club events. She had also, in the past year, shown marked activity as acting chairman of the Red Cross committee under the federation. From the Dec. 11, 1914, *Petoskey Evening News*, "Mrs. James Oldham, chairman of the Red Cross committee, is doing admirable work with the Red Cross Christmas seals which she has placed on sale at many business places in Petoskey and neighboring towns. Proceeds will be used exclusively in the US in the warfare against tuberculosis."

National suffragists had called upon local suffragists to celebrate Feb. 15, 1916, as Susan B. Anthony Day. The women of Petoskey answered this call as the newspaper stated in a headline: "Susan Anthony tea a success: Many club women attend suffrage tea to plan future work." The tea was hosted by Mrs. Rosenthal and Mrs. Goldstein, and Frances took part in the program: "Mrs. James Oldham, in her able, gracious way, gave a resume of the suffrage work done in Emmet County, bringing out how the Petoskey federation felt the need of getting into the rank and file of state work. Mrs. Oldham said 'Can you realize that this is big work and our plans cannot be perfected without the cooperation from all women interested in



the world's progress. Join the four million women who will have the privilege to vote for our next president.”

That spring, Frances was chosen by the Emmet County Equal Suffrage to be one of a few delegates to the Chicago convention which was held June 7-9, 1916.

After this trip, Frances remained active in the Assembly Study Club and also in the fight against tuberculosis through the sale of Christmas seals. She hosted the annual meeting of the Emmet County Equal Suffrage on March 2, 1917, at her home.

The rest of that year, however, attention was diverted away from suffrage events and turned to war. Frances' son, Eugene, enlisted at the end of April. Frances represented the Fourth Ward of the city in

OLDHAM, Mrs. Frances

Funeral services for Mrs. Frances Webb Oldham, 81, who died at the Petoskey Convalescent home Saturday evening, were held Tuesday from Stone's Funeral Home.

Born June 26, 1866, at Coldwater, Mrs. Oldham moved to Casnovia when four months old. She came to Petoskey when a young girl and has lived here for over 50 years.

She was a charter member of the Order of Eastern Star, and a member of the Women's Relief corps and the Presbyterian church.

Surviving are two sons, Arthur and Eugene, of Chicago; one daughter, Mrs. Ione Tallon, of Chicago; two brother, William and Arthur Webb, of Muskegon; two sisters, Mrs. Alice Heaton and Mrs. Grace Haley, of Muskegon; and four grandchildren.

pinning badges of honor on young men who registered for war later that spring.

Assembly Study Club appeared to be a favorite of Frances, for she continued to host its meetings after the suffrage for Michigan women was granted in the fall of 1918. She also later became a member of the Women's Relief Corps and, according to her obituary, was a charter member of the Order of the Eastern Star.

Frances died in Petoskey on Feb. 14, 1948 at the age of 81.