I refer to my grandmother as a “silent suffragette.” Like many other women in the early 1900s, she was an independent thinker but had difficulty publicly acting on that independence.

In those days, women did not have their own bank accounts. Nor did they have their names on the deed to their home. Finances were controlled by the “man of the house,” and in her case, she did not have any idea how the money was spent.

My grandmother was the youngest of 10 children and the only one who was given the opportunity to attend college. At that time, it was considered extraordinary. After college, she started work at a hospital for the mentally ill and wanted to continue her education and get a nursing degree.
However, by this time she had met and married my grandfather, who did not have the same degree of education, and he did not want her to be in a more “prestigious” position than he could attain. She acquiesced.

She was very talented and intelligent. She could discuss any subject, whether it was government, academics, public affairs, etc. She was an avid reader and stayed on top of the issues of the day.

While pregnant with my mother, she found her husband with another woman. She wanted a divorce but was advised against it. She was told that she would have to leave the marriage without any money, even though she had contributed financially toward her home. Her name was not on the deed.

She would have to show how she could provide or care for the child while she was working or if she could afford to pay someone to help. Her husband could claim that she was an unfit mother. With this devastating news, she decided that she would stay. They lived in separate rooms, sometimes going days without talking to one another.

I loved my grandparents but found the relationship sad. I used to think that my grandmother’s life, talent and education had been wasted.

Now, I realize how important she was to the children that she raised because of all of the wonderful attributes she conveyed — her talents, wisdom, knowledge, patience, kindness and love for life. And for me, her passion for women’s rights.

In recent years, I asked her why she stayed in that marriage. That is when we started talking about other women’s issues, like the right to vote, equal pay for equal work, the right to own property and the right to make decisions about our bodies and health.

If you’ve ever read the history of suffrage and what women dealt with in simply trying to get the right to vote, it’s appalling. They were jailed, force-fed and put into asylums.

When Lincoln freed the slaves, ironically, the legislature was asked a hypothetical question of whether they would consider giving women the right to vote or free the slaves. They laughed and howled. It was a ridiculous hypothesis. The slaves would be freed. There was not the slightest chance of women ever being considered qualified for such a thing. Wow!

The Women’s Movement started in 1848. Not until 1920, after the ratification of the 19th Amendment, were women given their right to vote. We cannot truly appreciate how far we’ve come without knowing where we’ve been. It is important not to get complacent. Know your government representatives, understand the issues facing women in business today, get involved at a community level and don’t forget to vote!