

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of March 10 – 16, 2019

Looking for “suffragettes”, women who were involved in the women’s suffrage movement of a century ago, I have come across the name of Tilda Omundson. In her lifetime, she fought for and gained the right to vote and to run for elected office here in Vernon County, and then she proceeded to do both.

How did Tilda prepare herself for this life of activism and service? Well, first she got an education. Tilda was born in Springville in 1875. In the late 1800’s, many students left school after 8th grade, but she went on to high school, graduating from Viroqua High in 1894. Years later, in her late 40’s, she furthered her education by taking a three-year course at the Palmer Chiropractic School in Davenport, IA, graduating in 1924.

Tilda also developed leadership skills. With her high school diploma in hand, she began a teaching career in the late 1890’s. First she taught for eight years in Westby, then she taught and served as principal in Stoddard, and finally she taught 3rd grade in Viroqua. For 30 years she also taught Sunday School at the Viroqua Congregational Church.

She gained other leadership skills from her work during World War I, when she served as a purchasing agent for the Vernon County Red Cross, and as a retail price reporter for the U.S. Food Administration. In addition, Tilda was active in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union at a time when many temperance women in Wisconsin were also working for their right to vote. She also was a member of the Viroqua Women’s Literary Club, again at a time when women’s clubs were advocating for suffrage.

And Tilda developed her business skills. After she left teaching, she began to work alongside her father in his general store on North Main Street in Viroqua. When he died in 1919, she continued to run Omundson’s Store on her own until selling it in 1921. Next she became a chiropractor, as mentioned above, and ran her own chiropractic business in Viroqua for about 30 years.

This wide variety of skills and experiences helped Tilda Omundson in her efforts to gain the right to vote and to run for office. In the early 20th century, she campaigned for women’s suffrage around the county along with Amy Gott, Fay Smith, Kate Goodell, and Lora Minshall of Viroqua. She also served as a director on the Viroqua school board from 1914 to 1920, but at that time, board members were elected by those who attended the annual school district meeting, and not by a vote of the citizenry.

Then in 1934, Tilda took a major step by running for mayor of Viroqua. She ran against three other candidates: Frank Chase, who had been mayor in 1910; Sam J. Sauer, who had been mayor since 1930; and August E. Smith, who had been mayor in the early 1920’s. Frank Chase won the election, and Tilda, the least experienced candidate, received the fewest votes of the four. Although she was unsuccessful, it was no doubt a useful experience.

Nearly 20 years later, she ran for office again, this time with better results. In 1953, she was elected to the Viroqua City Council as second ward alderman, the first female alderman in Viroqua’s history. She repeated her success in 1955 and 1957.

Tilda Omundson died a few years later, in December of 1962, and was buried in the Viroqua Cemetery. Surely she helped pave the way for local women serving in elected offices today.



Tilda Omundson, 1953



Votes for Women!
Karen Mischel as Tilda Omundson