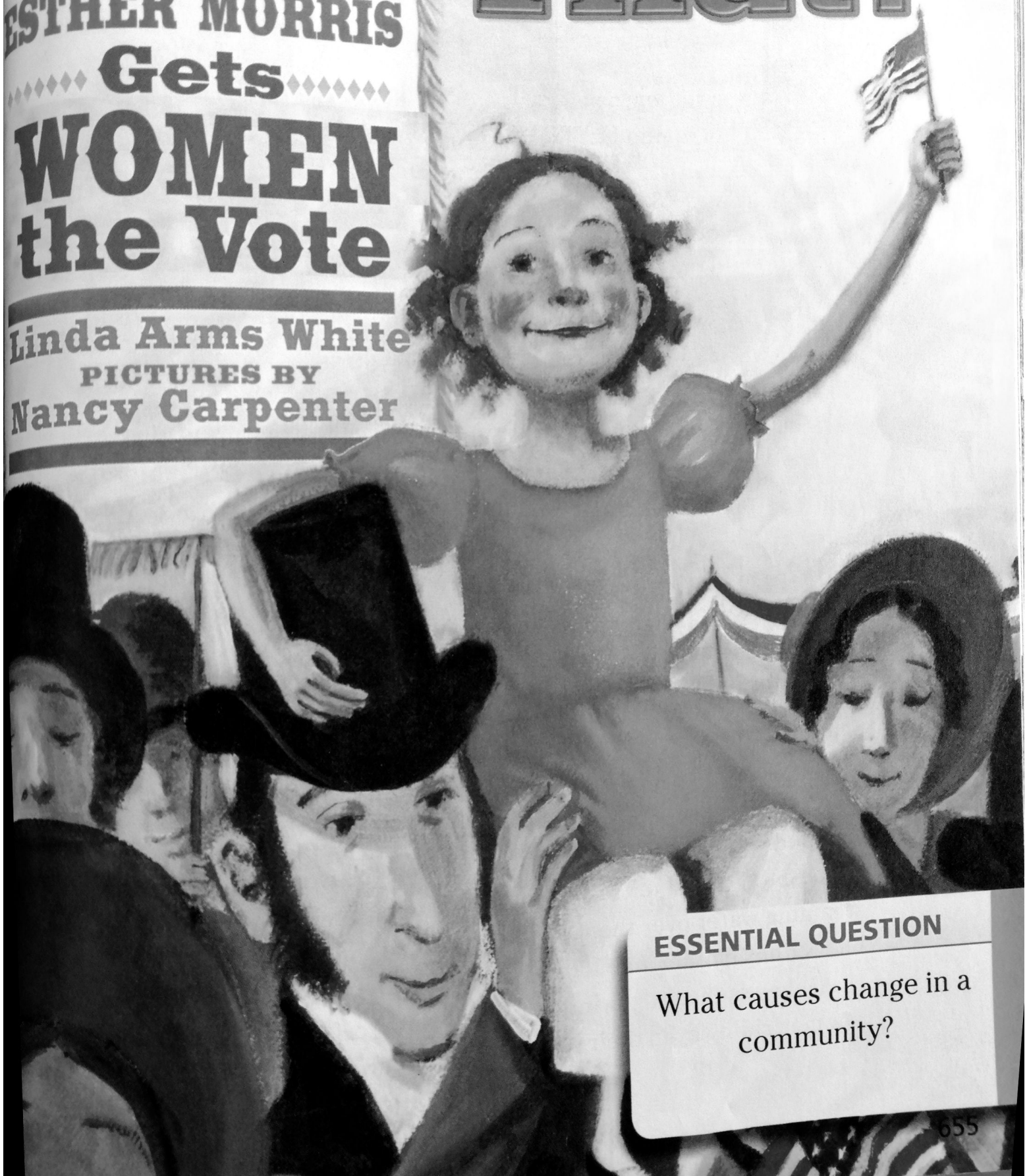


I Could Do That!

ESTHER MORRIS
♦♦♦♦ Gets ♦♦♦♦
WOMEN
the Vote

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ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What causes change in a community?



In 1820, six-year-old Esther McQuigg studied her mother making tea. “I could do that,” she said.

“Make tea?” asked Mama. “The older girls do that.”

“But I want to learn,” said Esther, and she did. She pumped water into the kettle and set it on the woodstove to boil. She scooped tea leaves into the teapot, then poured steaming water over them. Esther strained the tea into cups, one for her mother, one for herself.

As they sat near the window of their New York house, Esther saw men riding by in their best suits, some carrying flags.

"Where are those men going, Mama?" asked Esther.

"They are going to vote for the next president of the United States," Mama said.

"Will Papa vote?"

"Yes, Papa always votes."

"Will you vote, Mama?"

"No, dear, only men can vote."

When Esther was eight, she watched her mother sew a fine seam. The needle pulled thread in and out, in and out, tracking tiny, even stitches across the fabric. Esther felt her hands mimicking her mother's. "I could do that," she said. And she did.

She made clothes for her doll from scraps, and when her stitches became neat and straight, she sewed a shirt for Papa.

When Esther was eleven, her mother died, and for the first time she saw her father cry. He gathered his eleven children together. "I don't know what we'll do without your mama," he said. "I'm depending on each of you to be brave and to take care of one another." Esther, eighth of the eleven, cried, too. But then she said, "I can do that, Papa." And she did.

When Esther was nineteen, six feet tall, and on her own, she earned a living making dresses with leg-of-mutton sleeves for society ladies.

When the ladies wanted hats to match the dresses, Esther designed and made those, too. Soon, she thought of opening a millinery shop.



"You are much too young to run a business," she was told.
"I don't see why" was Esther's reply, and with that, she opened a hat shop in Owego, New York.

Esther started attending abolitionist meetings at her church. But a throng of people who believed in the right to own slaves threatened to stop the meetings even if they had to tear down the Baptist church where they were held.

"You can't do that," Esther said. "I'll stop anyone who tries."

ESTHER'S HATS



When Esther was twenty-eight, she married Artemus Slack and, a few years later, had a son they called Archy.

But when Artemus died in an accident, Esther made a big decision. "I'm moving to Illinois," she told her friends. "I'll claim the land Artemus owned there and raise our son."

"You can't do that!" her friends cried. "Illinois is the very edge of civilization. It's full of dangerous people and wild animals."

"Yes," she said, "I can." And that was that.

In Illinois, she fought long and hard to claim Artemus's land, but was **denied** her inheritance because she was female. So Esther opened another hat shop.

Esther met and married John Morris, a merchant and immigrant from Poland, and in 1851 she gave birth to twin boys, Edward and Robert.

But John had a hard time making a living. So while Esther raised the children, cooked the meals, and washed the clothes, she helped earn the money, too.

When Esther was forty-six, she went with John to the presidential election **polls** and watched through the window while he voted.

"You know," she told him when he came out, "I could do that."

"**Politics** is the business of men, my dear," he said.

"Humph," said Esther. "It's our country, too."

When war broke out between the Northern and Southern states, Esther was proud that Archy joined the victorious fight of the North to end slavery. Soon after, an **amendment** to the Constitution granted African American men all rights of citizenship, including the right to vote.

When Esther heard Susan B. Anthony speaking out about women's rights, Esther began to hope that someday women might vote, too.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

Conclusions and Generalizations

What does Esther think of the place of women in the world? How do you know?

In 1869, when Esther was fifty-five, she and her eighteen-year-old sons moved to the newly formed Wyoming Territory, where John and Archy, who'd gone there the year before, waited.

Esther and the boys traveled by train across miles of prairie, then by stage over rocky hills to South Pass City, a dusty, hurriedly built town where gold had been found. Most of the two thousand people who lived there were rowdy young men.

The Morrises moved their belongings into a small log cabin, and South Pass City became home. John tried his hand at another business.

Archy bought a printing press and started a newspaper.

Esther opened another hat shop.

But with six men to every woman, there was always a need for someone to nurse the sick and wounded, sew clothes, help deliver babies, and give motherly advice to the few young women in town. "I could do that," Esther said.

And she did.





One day, Esther read a proclamation tacked to a wall: ALL MALE CITIZENS 21 AND OLDER ARE CALLED TO VOTE IN THE FIRST TERRITORIAL ELECTIONS. Esther looked around at the **disorderly** young men.

“It’s time I did that,” she said.

When Esther’s sons watched her march toward home, they knew it was more likely that things were about to change than that things would stay the same.

Esther invited the two men running for the territorial **legislature** to her house to speak to the citizens. Then she sent out invitations to the most influential people in the territory: “Come for tea, and talk to the **candidates**.”

She scrubbed her tiny home from top to bottom, washed the curtains, and ironed her best dress.

When the candidates and guests arrived, Esther served them tea. “One thing I like about Wyoming,” she said, “is how everyone is important. It takes all of us to run the town, women as well as men.”

“Yes,” her guests agreed.

“And it’s a place where people aren’t afraid to try new things.”

Her guests agreed again.

Esther smiled. She turned to the candidates. "Then, would you, if elected, introduce a bill in the legislature that would allow women to vote?"

Suddenly, in that tiny room full of people, not a sound was heard.

Finally, Colonel William Bright spoke. "Mrs. Morris, my wife would like to vote, too. She is **intelligent** and well educated. Truth be told, she would be a more **informed** voter than I. If I am elected, I will introduce that bill."

Not wanting to be outdone, the other candidate, Herman Nickerson, also agreed.

Applause broke out in that tiny cabin, and Esther dropped to her chair. "Thank you," she said.

People warned her that once the bill was introduced, the men of the legislature would have to **approve** it. And the governor would have to sign it. This had never happened anywhere. Why did she think it could happen here?

But Esther had seen that things that were not likely to happen, happened every day. She wrote letters and visited legislators to make sure this bill would happen, too.

And it did. On December 10, 1869, Governor John Campbell signed this bill into law! **WYOMING WOMEN GOT THE VOTE!**





ANALYZE THE TEXT

Domain-Specific Vocabulary What words related to government and citizenship are on pages 662–663? What do they mean?

Women across the country rejoiced for the women of Wyoming.

But some people didn't like it. Only eight days later, Judge James Stillman, the county's justice of the peace, turned in his resignation. He refused to administer justice in a place where women helped make the laws.

Word went out that a new justice of the peace was needed.

Esther's boys turned to her.

"Mama, you could do that," they said.

And so she applied.

Archy, then clerk of the court, proudly swore his mother in, making Judge Esther Morris the first woman in the country to hold public office.

But Judge Stillman refused to turn over the official court docket to Esther.

“Never mind,” she said. “Archy, will you please go to the Mercantile and buy me a ledger? I’ll start my own docket.”

And, of course, she did.

On September 6, 1870, one year after her tea party, Judge Esther Morris put on her best dress and walked with her husband, John, and her sons down the dusty street to the polling place. She would be one of a thousand Wyoming women voting that day, the first ever given that right permanently by any governing body in the United States.

As they walked, John, who still didn’t think women should vote, tried to coach her on which candidates and issues to vote for.

Esther held up her hand.

“I can do this,” she said.

And she did.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

Cause and Effect What events led to Esther Morris becoming the first woman in the country to hold public office? What details from the text tell you this?

