

Bloomington's Fifer Bohrer first state Senator

As thoughts this month turn to newly elected leaders assuming office, it's a fitting time to look back at the groundbreaking legacy forged by Florence Fifer Bohrer of Bloomington, the first woman to serve in the Illinois State Senate.

It was 92 years ago this weekend, Jan. 7, 1925, that Bohrer first took a seat in the Senate chamber at the Illinois State Capitol.

As a community leader in the Twin Cities and state legislator in Springfield, she carried herself with grace and dignity, shunned the spotlight and treated political friends and foes alike with respect. She was an ardent believer in small "r" republican virtues and values, and approached public policy with a serious, studious bent.

In other words, Florence Fifer Bohrer represented a startling contrast to our present-day confluence of reality TV celebrityhood and mean-spirited, dumbed-down, Twitter-fueled politics.

Bohrer was the first woman in the Illinois Senate, but not the first state legislator. That honor goes to Lottie Holman O'Neill, a Republican state representative from Downers Grove first elected in 1922. O'Neill's and then Bohrer's elections followed passage, in 1920, of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution making women's suffrage the law of the land.

Bohrer was no stranger to politics, as she was 11 years old when her father, Joseph W. "Private Joe" Fifer, was elected Republican governor of Illinois. That was 1888, and for the next four years she lived in the Executive Mansion in Springfield, famously teaching her black pony to walk up the mansion's front porch steps.

Florence Fifer was later educated at a progressive Unitarian boarding school in Wisconsin and eventually married local boy and attorney Jacob Bohrer.

As with many whipsmart women at the time who faced economic, social, legal and political barriers of a patriarchal society, Bohrer first directed her energies toward local issues involving education, public health and welfare. Long before she contemplated running for office, for instance, played an instrumental role in the success of the McLean County Anti-Tuberculosis Society and the opening of Fairview Sanitarium.

"While woman's first duty is to care for her own children and her home," Bohrer once said, "intelligent woman accepted long since the fact that to be a good mother and homemaker, she must push out the walls of her home to include the community."

On Jan. 24, 1924, her 47th birthday, a group of local women stunned Bohrer with the proposition that she run for public office. Although “the whole idea seemed preposterous,” Bohrer recalled in her memoirs, she eventually came around, especially when faced with unanimous declarations of support from the many women’s organizations, clubs and societies in McLean County.

She defeated the Republican incumbent in the primary and her Democratic challenger in the general election, along the way receiving key support from the Florence Fifer Bohrer Club, an energetic group of Republican and Democratic women.

On the morning of Jan. 7, 1925, some 60 of these women traveled to Springfield aboard a special train chartered by the Illinois Republican Women’s Club, joining likeminded supporters from Chicago and Joliet. Similar contingents of politically active women arrived in the state capital from Decatur, Peoria and elsewhere.

After two years as the only woman in the Illinois General Assembly, Lottie Holman O’Neill was now joined by not only Bohrer, but two newly elected state representatives, Rena Elrod and Katherine Hancock Goode, both of Chicago. At the time, there were 204 members of the General Assembly (153 representatives and 51 senators), meaning women comprised less than 2 percent of the seats in the state legislature.

On that historic afternoon, Bohrer took her seat to much applause from the Senate floor and gallery. “Not only was Sen. Bohrer the center of interest for the Bloomington delegation,” noted *The Pantagraph*, “but she was the center of attraction for innumerable reporters, who hovered about her all during the session, and the remainder of the day, and of the photographer after photographer who vied for the best view of the smiling figure in blue.”

After all the excitement at the State Capitol, the Illinois Republican Women’s Club honored the four female legislators with an evening banquet at the Leland Hotel in downtown Springfield.

“Women have not come into politics to represent a new interest in the political field, but rather to add their voices to the groups which already exist in our social and economic life,” Bohrer said that night. “And so we take our places in the legislature not as women but as citizens of our great commonwealth, citizens chosen by the men and women of our districts to represent all interests in a fair and impartial manner.”

Reelected in 1928, Bohrer had a productive eight-year tenure in the Senate, earning a reputation as an advocate for state charitable institutions and helping to overhaul child welfare laws.

During her first term, Bohrer had the pleasure to introduce the bill making “Illinois” the official state song. Today, the Prairie State may be sagging under the weight of seemingly intractable problems relating to finances and poor governance, but at least it can claim one of the more beautiful and moving state songs in the nation (seriously, give it a listen on YouTube!)

Florence Fifer Bohrer had plenty of legislative disappointments as well. She once introduced a bill requiring fathers, upon proof of paternity, to support children born out of wedlock. “But, this is still a man’s world, and a man’s legislature,” she told a gathering of the Illinois State Bar Association in 1931. “After a faithful canvass of the situation I could find no vote but my own in favor of this measure, and it was promptly withdrawn.”

She ran for a third term, but was buried in the Democratic landslide of 1932.

In 2016, 16 of 59 state senators and 42 of 118 state representatives in Illinois were women. Although that made the Land of Lincoln sixth highest among all states in the percentage of women in state legislatures (32.8 percent), there’s still a ways to go before approaching anything resembling gender parity.

The Fifer family home still stands on the east side of Bloomington’s Franklin Park, at the corner of McLean and Walnut streets. Look for the two Illinois State Historical Society (ISHS) markers—one for Gov. Fifer and the other for Sen. Bohrer.

During the September 2005 dedication of the Florence Fifer Bohrer marker, ISHS Executive Director William Furry paid tribute to the state’s first woman senator by singing a lovely solo rendition of “Illinois.”