

March 9, 2015

Women quietly do extraordinary things every day. To help shed light on the resilience and strength of Hoosier women and celebrate their accomplishments and contributions to history we are releasing an article every day in the month of March. These articles showcase how women have moved Indiana and our country forward and who inspire others to do great things in their own lives.

Women in Indiana have an important role to play. You can make a difference by:

- Learning more about the issues affecting women in Indiana.
- Voicing your opinion on issues important to you
- Serving as an advocate for women
- Mentoring another woman
- Join ICW's mailing list or social media outlets to be notified of upcoming events, programs and resources available to women

Go to www.in.gov/icw to learn more about the Indiana Commission for Women and their current initiatives.

Sources:

Biographic Directory of the US House of Representatives

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Lake Station, Indiana, Historical Society

(<http://libraryschool.libguidescms.com/content.php?id=328048&sid=2685970>)

Wabash Valley Profiles

(<http://visions.indstate.edu:8888/cdm/ref/collection/vchs/id/300>)

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Women's History Month 2015

Telling 31 stories in 31 days this March.

Virginia Jenckes (1878-1975)

The first woman from Indiana to be elected to the United States Congress was Virginia Ellis (Somes) Jenckes, a Terre Haute native. Jenckes' entry into politics began in 1926 when her concern about flooded farmland led her to organize the Wabash-Maumee Improvement Association, where she served as secretary. During her tenure there, she spearheaded an effort to bring about navigability of the river corridor from Lake Erie to the Gulf of Mexico. In 1928, she was named secretary of the National Rivers and Harbors Congress, which gave her more political prominence.

Serving three terms as U.S. Representative of Indiana District 6, her first congressional campaign was in 1932 where Jenckes campaigned heavily around the district, while being chauffeured by her teen-age daughter, Virginia. That year, Indiana's legislative districts had recently undergone redistricting. Jenckes' new district ran along the Wabash from Vigo County up to Warren County, and was populated mostly by farmers. During that campaign, she gave over two hundred speeches in nearly every township in district. Shortly before the election, she said:

I campaigned in my own auto and planned my own speeches. If I'm elected, I'll continue to be my own boss.

Her efforts allowed her to upset incumbent, Fred Purnell, a 16-year Republican Representative from Attica, to win the seat. During her first term, she distinguished herself quickly, successfully obtaining an \$18 million appropriation for the Wabash River Basin. She was re-elected in 1934, winning the election by only 383 votes, and again in 1936, after her daughter tragically succumbed to tuberculosis just weeks before the election.

In 1937, she made her first trip to Europe to represent the United States (along with three male U.S. Senators) at the annual conference of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Paris, France, where she became the first woman ever to be appointed as a delegate. The mission of the Inter-Parliamentary Union is to promote world-wide parliamentary dialogue and to work towards peace and cooperation among people for the firm establishment of representative democracy.

Upon returning from the conference, she expressed concern about the thriving building programs in Germany and urged the U.S. to demand repayment from European countries for loans made during World War I. After losing her reelection campaign in 1938, Jenckes remained in Washington to work for the American Red Cross and was involved in the nation's first blood bank. She again received national attention when she assisted five priests escape Hungary during the 1956 Hungarian uprising and served as a liaison between Hungarian Freedom Fighters and the American government. After reaching the age of ninety, she returned to Indiana in 1969. She later died in 1975 at the age of ninety-seven.