



Roberta West Nicholson

*Indianapolis,
Indiana*
(1903 – 1987)

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Despite being a tenacious public servant, Roberta West Nicholson struggled to escape the shadow of her father-in-law, author Meredith Nicholson, and to be associated with reform rather than her appearance.

The Ohio native was born in 1903. She met her husband, Meredith Nicholson Jr., and moved to Indiana in 1926. In 1931, she engaged in her first real reform work when birth control activist Margaret Sanger convinced Nicholson to establish a Planned Parenthood center in Indianapolis. Thus began Nicholson's 18 years as a family planning and social hygiene advocate. She also served as president of the Children's Bureau and board member of the Child Welfare League.

In 1933, Governor McNutt appointed her to the Liquor Control Advisory Board and she worked to repeal

prohibition at the state constitutional convention. Her qualifications made her a natural choice for public office and she became the only woman to serve in the 1935-1936 legislature, where she faced sexism and criticism for being a working mother. Rep. Nicholson's breach of promise bill, dubbed the "Anti-Heart Balm Bill" or "Gold-Diggers Bill," made waves across Indiana and the country. The bill outlawed women from suing men who broke their promise to wed. Nicholson felt that deriving monetary gain from emotional pain went against feminist principles and that if a man did the same he would be condemned. The bill passed and inspired similar legislation in other states.

At the conclusion of Nicholson's term, the country was still gripped by the Great Depression. She hoped to ease this struggle as Director of Women's and Professional Work for the WPA. One of Nicholson's tasks involved instructing seamstresses to turn out garments for victims of the 1937 Ohio River Flood. During World War II, she worked to provide black troops in Indianapolis with recreational facilities previously denied to them. In 1952, the tireless reformer moved to Brown County, where she passed away in 1987.



MRS. ROBERTA W. NICHOLSON.

Photo Courtesy: The Indianapolis Star, January 16, 2013