

Queen for a Session

IOWA'S FIRST LEGISLATIVE CLERK

by LOUISE R. NOUN

When members of the 13th General Assembly arrived in Des Moines in January, 1870, they found several women among the contenders for clerical positions in the hitherto all-male legislature. Mrs. Mary A. Stright of Council Bluffs, the estranged foster daughter of Amelia and Dexter Bloomer, and Miss Mary E. Spencer of Clinton, the daughter of State Representative Benjamin Spencer were candidates for clerks in the House. Two other women were seeking positions as paper folders.¹

In the Republican caucus which met on January 10, Miss Spencer emerged as the only successful woman candidate. She was nominated by acclamation for the position of Engrossing Clerk in the House.² At the formal organization of the Legislature the following day, Mr. Rogers, (Rep.) of Clinton County presented Miss Spencer's name. Referring to the fact that the Kansas and Wisconsin Legislatures had elected women as engrossing clerks,³ he said that "the State of Iowa, firmly attached as she is to the Car of Progress, cannot afford to be behind her sister states in the rights of woman."⁴ Miss Spencer was unanimously elected because the fourteen Democrats in the House joined the Republicans in voting for her. However, John Irish of Johnson County, the Democratic leader, asked for a return of this gallantry when he subsequently presented the name of Miss Bettie Borchers of Fremont County for assistant postmaster. Mr. Irish said he "hoped that the progress of the State would not be stopped by the refusal to appoint another lady to office." Mr. Cutts, (Rep.) of Mahaska County, questioned whether or not the election of a lady was a progressive step. "In any event," he said, "my fealty to party exceeds my gallantry."

¹ *Daily State Register* (Des Moines), January 9, 1870.

² Aldrich Scrapbook, Clipping from *Des Moines Capitol*, Feb. 13, 1897.

³ *Revolution*, January 20, 1870.

⁴ *Des Moines Bulletin*, Legislative Supplement, 1870.

He proposed to vote for the man selected by the Republican caucus "at the risk of being considered a slight obstacle in the way of progress."

Mr. Irish reminded the Republicans that he had been present at their caucus the previous day, and that when Miss Spencer's name was proposed it was "said by the chairman and understood by the members, that when there was a lady in the case it at once became a question of gallantry and not one of politics." It was for this reason that she had been chosen. "The minority of the House," Mr. Irish continued, "have recognized that doctrine; they have abandoned their fealty to party by voting for that lady and now they are only asking a return of that favor."

One member asked to have Miss Borchers presented for the House to view. Mr. Irish replied that the Democrats had voted for Miss Spencer "sight unseen." At the conclusion of this repartee, the vote was taken and Miss Borchers, as could be expected, was defeated, but 10 Republicans, including Mr. Rogers, the sponsor of Miss Spencer, were gallant enough to break party lines and cast their ballots for her.

Miss Spencer's personal charms, no doubt, gave her some advantage over rival women candidates for Legislative positions. The *Register*⁵ reported her to be one of the "queens of hearts" at the reception for the Legislature given in late January by Mr. and Mrs. B. F. Allen at Terrace Hill. The paper stated that Miss Spencer "monopolized the attention of three of the bachelors of the House, two of whom looked disconsolate when the fair clerk departed under the escort of a third."

As the pioneer woman employee of the Legislature, Miss Spencer attracted attention all during the session. On January 20, the *Chicago Evening Journal* carried an item about her which stated that she was a "young lady of pleasing manners and good education." She was reported to be "an excellent pen woman" and to have already shown herself competent for the position. It was also noted that she would receive the same compensation that a competent man would have received.

In early March, Charles Aldrich, Chief Clerk of the House,

⁵ *Daily State Register* (Des Moines), January 29, 1870.

after discussion with legislative leaders, determined that it was not only legal, but fitting to send Miss Spencer to the Senate with one of his messages.⁶ This, it seems, was a daring decision. When Miss Spencer made her first appearance on the Senate floor to report a House bill, the Senators rose to their feet and remained standing while the message was read and upon conclusion they applauded. The *Des Moines Register*⁷ commented that this "first official act performed by a woman in the Iowa Senate" marked a new era in the legislation of the state.

During the remainder of the session, Miss Spencer delivered several other messages to the Senate, the most memorable being the House Resolution in favor of woman suffrage. Newspapers all over the State noted this incident.

In his speech at the concluding ceremony following the session, Mr. Cotton, Speaker of the House, said that one of the memorable events of the session had been the choice of Miss Spencer as an officer of the House. "For the first time," he stated, "an Iowa legislative body has made public recognition of the right of woman to occupy any position for which she may be competent." Members of the House presented Miss Spencer with a twenty-piece engraved silver tea set. It consisted of a card basket, fruit knife, pickle glass, cream pourer, molasses cup, six butter dishes, six salt cellars and a tea set of five pieces, and bore the following inscription, "Mary E. Spencer, Engrossing Clerk, from members of Iowa H.R., April 1870."⁸ Fred O'Donnell, a Democratic bachelor from Dubuque made the presentation and Miss Spencer received it with "demure grace."¹⁰ She confessed "that she had come to the office with almost doubting heart, thinking there might be a mutual unfitness with a lady as incumbent." However, she said her fears were soon dispelled and she would treasure her memories of this experience among the happiest of her life. Members of the House cheered Miss Spencer at the conclusion of this little speech, and so ended the reign of Iowa's first lady legislative clerk.

⁶ Aldrich Scrapbook, *Ibid.*

⁷ *Daily State Register* (Des Moines), March 9, 1870.

⁸ *Keokuk Gate City*, March 31, 1870.

⁹ *Chicago Evening Journal*, April 19, 1870.

¹⁰ *Daily State Register* (Des Moines), April 14, 1870.

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