

Montana Episodes

My Years As Montana's First Woman State Senator

by Ellenore M. Bridenstine

Ellenore Bridenstine, the first woman elected to Montana's state Senate, represented Prairie County from 1945 to 1949. The wife of a physician in Terry, Bridenstine began her political career as a volunteer in Republican women's organizations and civic associations. Before running for office in 1944, she had been very active at the state and national levels of the Federation of Republican Women's Clubs and had been involved in war bond drives. Throughout her short political career, she spoke out forcefully and frequently in many forums, encouraging women to enter politics. She often asked Montana women, "Are We Part-Time Citizens?" She urged women to participate in local and state politics and to bring politics and political discussions into the home, because she believed that women could substantially improve the content and style of political discourse. "It is time," she once told an audience in Great Falls, "that mothers woke up to the fact that vitamins, minerals and plenty of sleep are not all that build fine children." The only cure for political ignorance, Bridenstine told the assembled women, "is political education which I firmly believe must come through the home." In the following, Ellenore Bridenstine reflects on her experiences as Montana's first woman state senator.

My interest in politics began in the early part of the century. At that time, I was too young to understand what it was all about, but I do recall the excitement in our home during the campaign of Theodore Roosevelt for the presidency in 1904. My parents were ardent Republicans, and I remember them discussing the pros and cons of the campaign. Mother could not vote at the time, but she was always interested in national affairs. She remained interested at one hundred years of age.

This early interest in politics came back in my life after the hectic years of marriage in the "flapper" period of the 1920s, the depression times of the 1930s, and the war years of the early 1940s. Living in Montana during the 1940s with my ten-year-old daughter and a housekeeper—my twin sons were off in the army—I was free to become part of the county Republican organization and a member of the Republican Women's Club, just then being organized in

Montana. My husband was the only physician in Prairie County and part-time surgeon for two railroads that ran through our town of Terry. As the doctor's wife, I was entitled to a pass on both railroads. Since we were volunteers and paid all our own political expenses at that time, I had an advantage when it came to election of officers of the Republican Women's Club and selection as precinct committeewoman. As vice-president of the state organization of the Republican Women's Club as well as precinct and state committeewoman from Prairie County, I got to know many of the political VIPs in Montana. I was appointed a member of the state platform committee in 1942 and helped push the adoption of a party rule requiring the county and state committees to have a woman as vice-chairman.

In 1944, I felt that I was ready to run for office locally. The GOP county committee in Prairie County was composed of two men—the town banker and the most

prosperous rancher—who made the decisions. The state senator in our county was quite elderly—a Democrat who had served many years in that office. It seemed that nobody on the GOP side was interested in the office. Many of my women friends felt that I was crazy to try for it. But I decided to try for it anyway just to see what would happen. The man holding the office had never campaigned, and I am sure that he felt he would not need to against a woman!

I mailed a letter to each of the 2,500 registered voters in the county including a note written by my husband to the effect that he was so busy taking care of the medical needs of all the people in Prairie County that there was no time for civic duties. He recommended that his wife carry on in the political field. I will always believe that his recommendation was what won the election for me.

There was no opposition in the primary election. The Republican organization did not try to find



All photographs courtesy of the author.

Ellenore Bridenstine with Howard J. Doggett (left) and Glen C. Kellogg

anyone to oppose me, because they did not believe it was possible for me to be elected anyway. To tell the truth, neither did I! I was so sure of being defeated that I went to bed early on election night, long before the votes could be counted—a long process at that time when the votes were counted by hand. In the morning, I was greatly surprised to find I had been elected to the Senate by six votes.

When the surprise wore off, I wondered what to do next. I had only the faintest idea of how the Senate was organized or how things might go in that place for a woman, because it had always been exclusively for men. My election

was quite a sensation for the media for a few days. All the names of the newly elected senators as well as the holdovers were published in the papers, along with the counties they represented. So I tried to memorize the names and counties of the men I would be working with, as well as the geographic location and economics of each county. I also learned which counties were urban and which were rural. So when I got to Helena in January, all I needed to do was fit the names with the faces. This preparation was very helpful to me during the 1945 session.

In the legislature that year the Senate majority was Republican, which meant that I was to be given a

committee chairmanship. This was a sad fact for the committee on committees to face! What were they to do with this woman? They knew that I was the wife of a doctor so they gave me the committee that was supposed to handle health matters. Unfortunately, that committee had always been called Sanitary Affairs and was the committee that got the bills “too hot to handle” to get cleaned up! I suspected also that the others assigned to this committee were the oldest and least active senators. I did not like the situation, but I knew that it would not do to object. However, I determined to try to change the name of my committee

to Public Health at the first opportunity. This I did in the 1947 session, when I had a little more experience in writing and passing bills. There were some objections to the change, which was unbelievable to me, but the bill did pass and the Public Health committee became more important for future senators.

I really felt sorry for some of my fellow senators, because they did not know how to handle working with a woman. It took the entire first session to convince them that I wanted to represent my county just as they wanted to represent theirs. Some of them were too polite, jumping to their feet whenever I approached them for advice, while some of them simply ignored me. A few committee chairmen failed to notify me of meetings when I was a member of their committee. Because Prairie County was one of the smaller rural ones, I was put on the agriculture committee and promptly ignored. I resented that and left no doubt about my feelings.

I became vice-chairman of the education committee, probably because I had been a teacher at one time. It seemed that this committee was in a constant hassle about the budgets of the university units, which I could not understand. So I promised myself that I would attend the university sometime in the future to find out. In 1948, I registered at the University of Montana in Missoula, earned two degrees, but never did understand the financial affairs.

One of the first bills assigned to Sanitary Affairs was one that would require all places serving food to have restrooms available. When my committee met to consider this bill, I was surprised to find several union members there as well as some members of the powerful railroad lobby. When the discussion started, I realized that the problem was the refusal of the railroads to put new restrooms in the depot restaurants, since there already were adequate restrooms in the building. So the conflict was between two lobbies. After giving both sides a fair hearing, my committee again met to decide what to do with the bill. Personally, I could see no good reason why this bill should be passed, but I tried not to influence the others. They voted unanimously to send the bill in with a "do not



pass" report. I was learning fast, but not fast enough!

My first attempt to introduce a bill came next. It was a pair of bills requiring premarital and prenatal blood tests. Other states bordering Montana had such laws or similar waiting periods before marriage. My two bills were sent to the Judiciary committee, which was made up of lawyers, to consider the bill's legality and constitutionality. After consideration, this committee sent

in a report that the prenatal bill should be passed and the premarital bill should not be passed. I could not understand why one would be legal and the other not. Then I found that the clerks in the border counties often made lots of money marrying couples from other states who came into Montana because they could be married without waiting. The pressure by letter, phone, and telegram from these border counties was very heavy on the committee



Bridenstine sitting in the Senate of Montana's Twenty-Ninth Legislative Assembly in 1945

and on me. As a result, the prenatal bill passed easily but the premarital bill did not. In the 1947 session, I introduced essentially the same bill requiring a blood test before marriage, and this time it passed both the Senate and House in spite of a repeat "do not pass" report from the committee.

In 1940, much of the political power that the Anaconda Company and its subsidiary, The Montana Power Company, had held during

the 1920s and 1930s had faded, although they still maintained an entertainment room in the Placer Hotel. At that time, the railroad lobby was dominant, along with the farm and labor unions. There was also a large gambling lobby, which was much interested in making Montana into another Nevada. This group put out a news sheet each week, which we called "The Pink Sheet." The gambling lobby was angry with me because of my voting

record against their interests, so in the "Pink Sheet" they printed: "Prairie County should have sent an old hen with a nest of fertile eggs to the Senate." I thought nothing of it, but my fellow senators thought it a fine joke. The next morning, when I arrived at my desk, there was a lovely nest with three eggs in it. Not being familiar with their penchant to play jokes on each other, I was a bit confused. After thinking about it for a few minutes and noticing that



Ellenore Bridenstine in about 1988

many of the House members were in the balcony watching with interest, I realized that how I handled the joke would "make or break" my relations in the legislature. When the session opened, I asked permission to speak and made a very involved and complicated speech in the mode of a debate on fertile versus infertile eggs. This made the watchers break out in laughter. The gambling lobby never called me an old hen or anything else again.

Governor Sam Ford had just been elected for his second term when I came to Helena for my first term. He was always friendly and helpful to me and seemed to welcome women to the legislature. I am eighty-six years old, so it has been many years since those days in the Senate and I cannot remember the names or faces of many of the senators I worked with, but some stand out in my memory. J. Hugo Aronson, then also serving his first term in the Senate, had served several terms in the House and was very helpful to me. Once when he was trying to pass a bill, he came to me and asked me to help him speak, because he had difficulty with the English language. I was aware of his background but admired him a lot. I

told him I would help in any way I could, but I did not believe that he needed my help. Another senator I remember with pleasure was Dave Manning. A Democrat in a Republican Senate, he was considered one of the most fair and intelligent members and was often called on to serve on conference committees with House members.

At that time, there were no districts so each county had one senator, which made me feel as important as the senator from Yellowstone or Cascade counties. Most of us lived in the Placer Hotel for the sixty-day session, and that was where most of the action took place after hours. By 1947, I seemed to be accepted and was included in the "smoke-filled" rooms. We were paid the sum of ten dollars a day for the sixty days, and nothing at all if we were held over. For the 1947 session, I had my daughter with me and we lived in the Placer. There was not enough money to pay for the two of us, so my husband had to pay our hotel bill at the end.

By the summer of 1948, we had moved to Missoula where my husband had set up his medical practice. My twin sons, back from army service, were attending the university and my daughter was in

high school in Missoula. Although I was not well-known in Missoula County, I did file for the House in 1948 but was defeated in the primary election by Missoula native Bess Reed. My defeat was ironic, because I was so interested in getting women to run for political office that I had talked Bess Reed into running.

Some of the members of the state party organization spoke to me about running for lieutenant governor that year. It was flattering, but impossible. Some of the media in the state got hold of that, and it caused quite a flurry for a short time. I guess it meant that I had done a good job in the legislature. My experience there had been exciting and educational, and I remember the Montana political scene with fondness.

We left Montana in 1967 for retirement in Arizona. My husband died in 1971, and I went back to Montana and lived in Helena for several years before moving to Florida to be with my mother who was very old (ninety-nine at the time). She died in 1981 at the age of 105 years. I continue to live in the Penney Retirement Community and will probably live here for the rest of my life.