

The Life of Florence Fifer Bohrer: Illinois' First Woman Senator

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The year was 1924, a Presidential election year. This was the first year women nationwide were given full voting rights. In 1913, the women of Illinois had won the right to vote in city and presidential elections, but were not allowed to vote on the state level. With the passing of the 19th Amendment in 1920, all states were required to give women full voting privileges. The women of Illinois were very dissatisfied with the way the state government was being handled. It was their feeling that better leadership was needed in Springfield and that it was time for a woman to be placed in a leadership position. The name recommended and supported by the women of Illinois was Florence Fifer Bohrer.

Florence Fifer was born January 24, 1877, into a political family in Bloomington, Illinois. Her father was a prominent lawyer serving as the State's Attorney for McLean County. She was the youngest of three children born to Gertrude and Joseph Fifer. The oldest child died in infancy, leaving Florence and a brother, Herman, who was two years older. When she was three, her father was elected to the state senate where he served for seven years. The family lived on McLean Street facing the East side of Franklin Park. The park was surrounded by a high board fence requiring entrance to be gained by climbing a stile.¹ The fence was necessary to keep out livestock that roamed the area. Florence remembers playing in the park and the Civil War monument given to honor those in the Union army who had given their lives in the service of their cause. To keep the children from playing on the monument, it was surrounded by an iron picket fence. The picket fence, at times, seemed to fascinate the children and they would try to climb over it. In doing so, their skirts would become caught and there they would hang, screaming, until someone came to get them down. They did play on the four Civil War cannons, which were mounted on their carriages, at each of the four corners of the monument.²

In the early days of her childhood, life in Bloomington was simple. Despite the magnificence of the homes in that area, there was no running water or bathrooms. Baths were usually taken on Wednesday and Saturday evenings in wash tubs placed in the kitchen. The unpaved streets were lit at night by gas lights on tall poles. Each evening at sundown, the gas lighter came with a torch to light them. Transportation came from funny little street cars pulled by tiny mules. In cold weather, the bed of the car was filled with straw to keep the feet of those riding in them warm.³ She has described herself as being plump and large for her age and a rather shy, quiet child with brown hair worn in bangs and braids. This description does not seem to fit the girl who, along with her playmate, would jump up and down on the back platform of the street car, sometimes lifting the mules off their hind legs. On these days, when they were in a jumping mood, the driver would often invite them to sit in the front with him and help drive the wagon. Florence and her friend liked to help collect tickets on the street car. If someone gave them a nickel instead of a ticket, they would keep the nickel and deposit one of their tickets. In this way they earned spending money. Another project they had for earning money was to catch and sell salamanders.⁴

As a child, Florence recalls how her father would come home ill from a trial that had been exhaustive, needing to spend time resting in bed. He had been shot through one lung while serving in the Civil War and suffered from this injury for the remainder of his life. Her mother was also in poor health and at these times, their Grandmother Lewis would stay with the children and care for them. Florence's Grandfather would take not only Florence and her brother, but their friends in a gig to his farm south of town for the day. There he made swings and found countless ways of showing the children a good time.⁵ The Fifers felt that the summer climate in Illinois was responsible for their first child's death. When school was out in the spring, Florence and Herman would be sent north to spend the summer in Marquette on Lake Superior and on a lake close to Rhinelander, Wisconsin. Their summer activities included learning to sail boats by tacking a sheet to a pole on the canoe and visiting an Indian reservation where they learned about the Indian's culture.⁶

Mr. and Mrs. Fifer belonged to a Home Circle group that was a gathering of their friends at homes to dance and play cards. The children would amuse themselves by leaning over the banister and drop a hankie on the heads of the dancers. Sometimes, if they thought someone deserved special attention, they would tie a small rock in the corner of the hankie before dropping it.⁷

Florence Fifer Bohrer once commented,

I have often wondered how my brother Herman and I would have fared in the household of parents other than our own in the early 1880s. Joseph and Gertrude Fifer were a good fifty years ahead of their time in their attitude toward their children. We were allowed complete freedom to develop according to our own personalities.⁸

Being her father's angel, she always had the feeling she could do exactly as she pleased. However, there was one rule her father insisted on: promptness. Only her mother was allowed to break this rule.⁹ This freedom has generated many stories of her childhood in a public atmosphere. In 1889, when Florence was eleven, her father was elected as governor for the State of Illinois. The night of the election a torchlight parade took place and ended in their front yard. After the crowd had gathered, Florence climbed out of her second floor bedroom window onto the porch roof to watch the festivities. Just as her father's speech got under way, she spied a schoolmate and called out to him in shrill voice asking why he had not been in school that day. If her father heard this exchange, he gave no sign and did not speak of it afterward. Years later, this incident was referred to by her family as "Florence's first public appearance in the field of politics."¹⁰

At the time, Florence was not happy about having to leave her friends in Bloomington. She wanted to celebrate her twelfth birthday in Bloomington with all her friends. Besides, she had six cats and did not want to leave them behind. When the move to Springfield took place, the cats went as members of the family. There they remained until one day, after Florence had been playing with a dog, she went to see the cat family that had increased in number. The mother cat, sensing the dog smell, attacked Florence. It was soon after this incident the cats found a new home.¹¹

When the Fifer family moved to Springfield, the streets were unpaved and all their possessions were carried in wheelbarrows from the train station to the Governor's Mansion. These four years were happy years, a joyous and carefree time. It was exciting to live in a house with bathrooms, furnace heat and many servants. It was a radical change from life in the little house on East Walnut Street in Bloomington.¹²

Though the mansion houses the governor to this day, it is not likely that the old house has ever seen such fun. The stories are endless – the spiral stairway in the governor's mansion impressed Florence greatly and she could hardly wait for an opportunity to slide down the banister. The first chance she had came the evening of the inaugural ball, a time children were expected to be upstairs. She and John Oglesby, son of the former governor, shocked the guests by sliding down the banister into the middle of the receiving line, causing the guests to scatter. Her new white dress gained a wide streak of dark gray straight down the front, while the banister grew lustrous from the polishing they gave it. Another story is about a pet alligator set in a roaster on the oven door one cold night found baked the next morning. Evidently, a kitchen worker saw the roaster on the door and thought it was to be baked.

Rather than going to classes, she preferred to ride her pony, Dixie,¹³ who had been given to her by her father after moving to Springfield. This was done mostly to keep her off his prized Kentucky saddle horse. Since her greatest desire was to become a circus performer, she spent most of her time training Dixie to do tricks. One that caused much concern with the guests at the mansion was to have the horse walk up the steps and into the front hall. When someone protested, Governor Fifer said, "Let her do it – if she can!" and then stood back to watch his daughter's accomplishment.¹⁴ She would do most anything to keep from going to school. One morning, after taking the cows to pasture, she and a school mate were stopped by a slow-moving train. They decided that since they were going to be late anyway they might as well take a train ride to the opposite end of town. Climbing on top of one of the cars they seated themselves and waved to all they saw. They were soon discovered

and told to get off before they "broke their fool necks."¹⁵ Florence and Herman attended public schools in Springfield. He was not only interested in his education but also a very good student. He could not understand why Florence was so indifferent in her attitude toward learning and became very disgusted with her attitude.¹⁶ To fill her day, she spent time in her father's office, curled up in a large chair unobserved by those around her. It was here she listened to her father and his personal friends and advisors, men like former Illinois governor Richard Oglesby, Milton Hay, David Davis, Jesse Fell, and General Gridley, discuss various political issues connected with running a state. She found their arguments regarding policy and other things far more interesting than preparing lessons for the next day. Perhaps it is in this setting that an interest in politics was born.¹⁷ Her class attendance was so infrequent the governor was finally asked to take her out of school.¹⁸

When she was fifteen, all her friends were preparing to go to boarding school. Not wanting to be left out, she thought that perhaps she, too, should go away to school. Her parents were elated with the apparent change in attitude and began immediately to select a school. It was decided that she should go East to Dana Hall at Wellesley, Massachusetts. Then began the task of selecting a new wardrobe to be taken with her. The summer was filled with parties, dances and farewells. Though Florence enjoy these festivities she had no intention of getting an education. She fully expected her life to continue as usual except perhaps having even more freedom by being away from home. At the last minute, her mother heard about Hillside, a Unitarian school in Spring Green, Wisconsin. After some discussion, it was decided that she and her mother should go and see what it was like with the understanding that if she did not like the school she would still have enough time to go East and be with her friends.¹⁹ Along with the school there was a farm and a home. The school was of the progressive style and used the teachings of John Dewey.

The main building was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, a nephew of the founders, Ellen and Jane Lloyd-Jones. They were sisters of a well-known Unitarian minister, Jenkin Lloyd-Jones, pastor of the All Souls Church in Chicago, Illinois. Florence disliked

Wright because of the way he treated his aunts. She thought him to be egotistical and over-bearing.²⁰ Aunt Jane and Aunt Nell, as the teachers were called, were concerned about the "whole child" at a time long before most other educators had heard of the term. In this respect, Hillside was well suited for Florence.²¹ It was there she gained some of her liberal views. One semester she had a Negro girl as a roommate. They became close friends and it was this encounter that later stimulated her campaign to lighten the load for the underprivileged. While a student at the school, she met Senator Robert LaFollette when he talked with the students about his Progressive Movement.²² Each morning at the breakfast table, Aunt Jane or Aunt Nell would ask Florence if she had been to see Tower Hill or ridden the spotted pony or been to Table Rock. She would be eager to go do the suggested activity but each time they would say, "After school is out this afternoon." It took her four weeks of not going to class before she realized that she was having a very stupid time by not participating in classes. Finally, one morning, she stepped in with a group and went along to school. Aunt Nell told her they were reading *Snow Bound* and asked if she would like to join them. She went along and after that never missed a class.²³ In later years, she said, "I was outrageously spoiled and those beloved women had the understanding and patience needed to change the direction of my thinking."²⁴

After graduating from Hillside in 1895, Florence returned to Bloomington to spend the summer. Her parents gave a coming out party that was attended by her friends in Bloomington and from Springfield. The summer was filled with a whirl of dances and house parties, leaving little time for anything else. She was provided with many party dresses, but after wearing a uniform at Hillside, she wasn't particularly interested in clothing. The uniform consisted of a short skirt with leather leggings and Eton jacket. These she continued to use for daytime wear and was able to talk her mother and her best friend into trying out the new style. This caused quite a bit of amusement and controversy over their boldness. A local publication, *The Evening Bulletin* said, "The reporter had been horrified to see two fatted calves strolling up main street!"²⁵

While living in Springfield, she had been given singing lessons. This was something that she enjoyed very much and had continued singing at churches, funerals, the Amateur Musical Club, and for fun. Because of her talent and interest in music, it was decided she should go to Chicago and study music for the next two years. There were also several of her friends who attended the University of Chicago. They spent the winter attending parties and dances in between their studies. It was not long after her coming out party that some of her friends began to announce their engagements and she was asked to be bridesmaid. It was also during this time she met the man she was to marry; a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Williams College, named Jacob Bohrer. They were very different but also enjoyed some of the same things. Jacob, more familiarly known as Jake, was a literary student, reading Greek for amusement, and he loved philosophy. Jake was teaching Latin, Greek and German at Illinois State Normal University and, at the same time studying law at Illinois Wesleyan in Bloomington. They both enjoyed the great orchestras and singers of the day. They also enjoyed being out of doors, hiking along the Mackinaw and Illinois Rivers during the changing seasons.²⁶ After Jake graduated from law school, he entered law practice with his father-in-law. He was elected to the Board of Supervisors of McLean County.²⁷ On Thursday, May 5, 1898, they were married in a home ceremony.

"Shortly after 8 o'clock the soft strains of Mendelssohn's beautiful wedding march were heard, played by Ashton's full orchestra. Miss Fifer was attired in a beautiful gown of mousseline de sole over cream satin and wore a bunch of marguerites in her hair. Miss Kerrick wore a pretty gown of white satin. Mr. Bohrer and best man, Mr. Franklin, were attired in the conventional black. The ceremony was short and simple, but very impressive. A sumptuous wedding supper was served by Mrs. Cooper, and Ashton's orchestra played during the evening."²⁸

Following the wedding, the 150 guests, seated at small tables upstairs and down, were served baked ham, scalloped oysters, and chicken salad, with ice cream in the form of cupids. When it came time for dessert, it had disappeared. Wesleyan students had taken it

as a prank and the caterers had to do a quick substitution. When informed about her engagement, Florence's father made her promise to live at home. It was there she and Jake set up housekeeping, making it their home until 1905. Soon after their marriage, former governor Fifer was appointed to the Interstate Commerce Commission and he and his wife moved to Washington, D.C.²⁹

Bohrer had become a member of the History and Art Club in 1895 but had not been very active in the organization. After her mother and father moved to Washington, D.C., she took a more active part. She was also part of the group that started the Bloomington Country Club in 1896. In the early days of its existence, locally the game of golf was played on the campus of Illinois State Normal University with tin cans sunk in the ground for holes. With her musical background, Bohrer was a devoted member of the Amateur Musical Club. She worked very hard in bringing famous artists to Bloomington to perform.³⁰

On March 30, 1899, their first child was born. He was named Joseph Fifer after his grandfather. His birth took place in the Bohrer/Fifer home where he lived until he was six. At this time Governor Fifer built a new house on Franklin Square. The old house was moved to an adjoining lot on Walnut Street, just around the corner from its original location. On Herman's wedding day, the Bohrer's moved into the old house now located on Walnut Street. In 1901, two years after Joe's birth, a sister came into the family. She was named Gertrude Ann and became her father's pride and joy.³¹ The children had a nurse to care for them, a housekeeper named Gusta and doting grandparents to watch over them, leaving Bohrer with free time. She sometimes got the feeling that she was not needed, even to the point of feeling incompetent to care for the children. Because of this, she tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. She loved to sew and made all the children's clothing. She was also there for any emergency that might arise. This freedom allowed her to take a more active interest in community affairs.³²

Bohrer's idea of a woman's duty was to care for her home and children. She said that in accepting this fact she must "push out the walls of her home to include the community." The wise mother

would do whatever necessary to see that good ordinances and laws were adopted to provide a safe environment in which her children may live. As her children were growing up, she became aware that a closer understanding was needed between the home and school. It was this idea that led to the forming of the first Mother's Club, which eventually became the national Parent-Teacher Organization.³³ In 1910, she entered the political arena by promoting the need for a tuberculosis sanitarium. When Gertrude became ill and was diagnosed as having tuberculosis, it wasn't long before other children in her school also became ill with the disease. Within a few months, the teacher had contracted the disease that caused her death.

Bohrer was very concerned about the situation and felt something needed to be done. She, along with Colonel Smith, Dr. Mammon, Mr. Ed O'Connell and Mr. Hasbrouch, formed the McLean County Tuberculosis Association. In order to educate the public, they rented a tent, taking it to various locations and explained to the people how important physical examinations were to the detection of tuberculosis and various ways of preventing the disease. They then took a trained nurse to the country schools to weigh and measure children. It was found that more than fifty percent were underweight because of the lack of proper food. The farm women were feeding milk to the hogs and chickens while their children drank tea and coffee. The Home Bureau, when asked for help in providing adequate food, responded by forming a hot lunch program for the rural schools. An educational program was also implemented to help the farm women learn how important it was to feed milk and eggs to their children. Bohrer and her committee saw a need for a sanitarium in the area if the disease was to be properly treated. In order for the county to build such a facility, a law was needed that would allow the county to tax itself to support the project. Mr. O'Connell, an attorney, was sent to Springfield where he had a bill introduced. It became known as the Glacken Law and was passed in the 1913 session. The referendum was adopted and the county sanitarium board was appointed. Bohrer served as secretary of the board. The facility, named Fairview, was two years in the building being formally opened on August 17, 1919.³⁴

More than 2,000 attended the dedication ceremony. Dedicatory speeches were given by Col. Smith, Mr. Martens, and Dr. Palmer. In his remarks, Mr. Martens gave much credit to Bohrer for the success of the building, for she gave a large amount of her time to its consideration. At the conclusion of Dr. Palmer's address, Bohrer was surprised by the unveiling of a bronze tablet furnished by the McLean County Anti-Tuberculosis Society. It was given in recognition of her dedicated service to the establishment of the sanitarium and the people it would serve. Following the unveiling, she was presented with a bouquet. Bohrer was quite taken by surprise but responded briefly and feelingly to the testimonial and thanked all who had any part in its preparation.³⁵ The knowledge of free care to anyone, rich or poor, was a great source of satisfaction to her. She served on Fairview's board until 1927, when she became interested in other activities.³⁶

Mrs. Bohrer's work for the creation and management of the sanitarium had brought her into contact with members of the Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Company; Association of Commerce; churches and their pastors; members of the legislature and County Board of Supervisors; members of the Bar and the McLean County Medical Society; and associated charities. The amount of time she spent campaigning in the county to assure the passage of the referendum was well spent as it ratified by an overwhelming vote. This was Bohrer's first experience at lobbying, and it proved to be very successful.³⁷

In 1915, she served as chairman of the Finance and Building Committee for the erection of a new Girls Industrial Home. It opened in 1917 and Florence remained on this and the Amateur Musical Club Board until 1930 when she retired to the honorary lists. During World War I, she devoted a large amount of time to the Red Cross, serving as chairman of the Home Service Committee. Duties of the committee included working with the families of men in the service; interviewing the men regarding their insurance and allotments; providing delivery of war babies and making funeral arrangements. Staff members also visited the wives and mothers, wrote and translated letters for those who did not know English.³⁸

In 1899, Bohrer and her family started going to Charlevoix, Michigan to spend their summers. In 1901, Governor Fifer bought property and had his daughter design a cottage. This was built over the winter and ready for occupancy the following summer.³⁹ It was here that she spent some of the happiest times of her life, and always looked forward to going to "the cottage."⁴⁰ After the children were grown, it was decided to sell the cottage. Bohrer was away at the time the sale was made, but upon returning home and seeing that Jake had kept only the old dutch oven, she sat down and cried. Already she missed the old days and the vacations taken there.⁴¹

In 1924, four years after women had been given the right to vote, Bohrer was approached by a group of friends urging her to run for the state senate. It was a country-wide feeling that women should have an opportunity to straighten out the political mess made by the men.⁴² She had the background, acquaintances, and more time than most women or even men candidates, which made her more than qualified to run for a state office. Her home was adequately cared for and her family raised.⁴³ On the evening of January 24, her birthday, Florence was summoned to the living room to greet callers. When she learned what they wanted, she thought the whole idea to be ridiculous and declined the invitation to run for the state senate. However, the women would not take "no" for an answer. They argued that because of all the volunteer work in which Florence had been involved, she was the most qualified woman they knew to become a senatorial candidate. She finally agreed to think about the nomination. She discussed the idea with her family and had their support, with the exception of her father and brother. Her father seemed to be very quiet about the idea and Herman who hated any form of public life had only one comment, "Oh, my God!" and then left the room. She came to her final decision with the help of her mother, who had instilled in her the belief that she could do any job she wanted to, and that whatever comes we always have the power to meet it. Jake, who was by her side with his support in any endeavor she undertook, also gave his approval to run for the office.⁴⁴

After deciding to run, Bohrer told the group she would do so only if all the women's organizations in the county would endorse

her. Rumor which had been circulating that she might run for the office⁴⁵ was confirmed on January 25, 1924, when her candidacy was announced. The platform on which she ran included progressive welfare work by the state, preventive rather than curative; restriction of Chicago's representation in the legislature under any new apportionment, maintaining a proper balance between Chicago and downstate; economy in government, to lessen taxation as much as was consistent with efficiency of administration; and law enforcement relative to the eighteenth amendment. She preferred to stand on her own merits and asked for the support of both men and women. She also insisted that there be no unkind spirit in the campaign.⁴⁶

Mrs. C. M. Forsyth, Sara, from Bohrer's Franklin School days, became her campaign manager. The women of the county, both Republican and Democratic, supporting her organized the "Florence Fifer Bohrer Club." The months before the April primary were spent traveling over dirt roads, in all kinds of weather, spending long hours to attend meetings. Being the first woman to campaign in the Twenty-Sixth District, she was somewhat of an oddity. Wherever she held a meeting, private homes, churches or town halls, there would be a good turnout. The result of all her campaigning efforts was the defeat of her opponent, Frank Hanson, the current Senator.⁴⁷

During the months before the fall elections her time was spent campaigning. She went into the fields and talked with the threshers. Sometimes they would invite her to a thresher dinner and she would make a point of attending. Patrick Grady, who had worked for her primary campaign, was her advisor and accompanied her on the summer campaigning trips. It was his policy to circulate among the crowd before she spoke to get a feeling of their ideas and to find out what they were saying. He would ask, "Who is that woman," or "Are you voting for that woman?" In this way he could report information to Bohrer that was very useful in learning what the public was saying about or against her. The platform for the fall elections differed somewhat from that announced in the primary election. It consisted of increased law enforcement, protection of the district's agricultural interests, good road construction, protection of Christian citizenship, and the reduction of taxes. The strongest campaign point

being her involvement in all movements of the community that worked for higher and better conditions for the entire area. Many of the farmers felt that because her family owned several farms she would be able to understand their needs. She had been interested in politics since her childhood, and had proven she had the ability for the position of State Senator.

During the summer months time was spent with different women's organizations in the district. Bohrer hosted a meeting of the Bloomington Professional Women's Club where they discussed the place of women in the business world. She attended a memorial dinner for Dr. C.M. Noble, former president of Fairview and spoke at the fifth anniversary of Fairview's opening. She spoke to an Old People's Association of McLean County gathering, and a group of women from Ford and McLean County held at Miller Park. Florence was a speaker at a meeting with the Women and College Girls at Illinois Wesleyan stressing the fact women have an obligation to see that laws are made giving every child the opportunity to grow up in a proper environment. She said that men and women must work together and not against each other when they enter active political life.⁴⁸ Through all this Jake was by her side offering encouragement or assistance with his legal knowledge. She found the experience of campaigning to be very interesting as she had the opportunity to meet and talk with all kinds of people.

Election night came and she and Jake were with friends at the Bloomington Country Club. The news came that she had won the election with a two to one margin. When they left to return home, they stopped by to break the news to her parents. Even though it was after midnight, her parents were still waiting up to hear the results. As she and Jake left to go to their house, they had just reached the back door when she heard her father saying to her mother, "I declare, my dear, and I didn't think she was worth educating!"⁴⁹

The first official appearance as Senator came on December 13th. A luncheon in Chicago was given by Senator Barbour and Senator James McMurray for all the new Senators. It was a time for the new Senator to meet the men she would come to know as her colleagues. Before leaving for Springfield, her father gave her this

advice, "Never forget that the welfare of the state is more important than the welfare of your political party." In typical brotherly fashion, Herman said, "Keep your mouth shut so people won't find out how little you know!"

The day arrived to be seated in the senate. Sixty members of the Florence Fifer Bohrer Club from Bloomington, along with some four hundred other women from Chicago arrived in Springfield to attend this historic moment. They were joined by some two hundred women from downstate who had traveled by car to Springfield. The gavel sounded. The announcement was made that Florence Fifer Bohrer, first woman Senator from Illinois, would be escorted to her seat by Mrs. C.M. Forsyth and Mrs. Willis Harwood. The surprise of the day for Bohrer was to find her father in attendance. She did not know he or any of the members of her family would be attending. But, there in the balcony was her mother, Jake, Joe, Gertrude and her brother, Herman. Twice during the opening session, Bohrer was given special recognition. She was appointed on the committee to inform the Governor the Senate was organized and offered the resolution establishing a rule of the floor. That evening, a banquet was given for the newly elected Senator and three women members of the House of Representatives. The Bloomington delegation had brought with them four songs that had been written for Bohrer. The songs were presented with such enthusiasm and sincerity no one saw anything humorous about them, especially Florence.⁵⁰

During the first term of the senate, Bohrer served on many committees, including: Chairman of the Committee to Visit Charitable Institutions; Agriculture and Livestock; Appropriations; Charitable, Penal, and Reformatory Institutions; Civil Service; Corporations and Industrial Affairs; County and Township Organization; Drainage; Education; Efficiency and Economy; Fees and Salaries; Judiciary; Parks, Boulevards, and Playgrounds; Public Health, Hygiene, and Sanitation; Reapportionment; Roads, Highways, and Bridges; State Universities and State Normal Schools.⁵¹

One of the first bills introduced by Senator Bohrer was the Dance Hall Bill. This was to fulfill a campaign promise to the women of Randolph, Illinois. The bill provided for counties to restrict the oper-

ation of dance halls. It gave the County Board of Supervisors the power to issue or revoke licenses of roadhouses and dance halls outside municipal corporations. It also required children under the age of sixteen to be escorted by parents or guardians. There was some opposition from the well organized Chicago syndicate but in the end, it became law.

A second bill was Senate Bill 280, which opened the way for a state park system in Illinois. It gave the Department of Public Works and Buildings care, control, supervision, and management of all state parks.⁵² It was signed into law in May, 1925. It was her hope that in fifteen or twenty years, this state park system would be as large and beautiful as those of other states. A third bill made "Illinois" the official state song. Senator Bohrer had been very reluctant to sponsor this bill feeling it was such an insignificant subject to consider. However, at midnight on June 20, 1925, the House took a few minutes to celebrate its passage. Bohrer was escorted to the House where the entire membership broke into song, despite the long hours spent working that day.⁵³

Senator Bohrer did not take her responsibilities lightly. As chair of the Public Welfare Committee, she spent weekends visiting the various welfare institutions around the state. She visited the School for the Deaf and the School for the Blind located in Jacksonville. These were her first contacts with deaf and blind children and she was very impressed at how independent and free they were in getting around.⁵⁴ She visited the southern hospital for the insane in Anna. It was here she was surprised to find furniture from her room when she was a child in the Governor's Mansion.⁵⁵ When she visited the state hospital in Moline, she received a real surprise. Arriving late one evening, she asked for the administrator or his wife. The Senator was informed that neither were present and wouldn't be back until late. She was tired and hungry after the long drive and knowing no hotel reservations had been made, chose to stay at the hospital. She told the receptionist, "I am Senator Bohrer and have driven up from Springfield to visit the hospital." She asked for something to eat and for a place to spend the night. She was

given a searching look then escorted by two attendants first to the kitchen where she was given something to eat then to a large, clean room. When the door closed and the key turned, she knew she had been mistaken for an insane person! The next morning, at breakfast with the administrators, she finally convinced them it had been an interesting and humorous situation. This came about because the receptionist had reported to the doctor, "You know we have had patients who thought they were Abraham Lincoln or Jesus Christ, but we never had a WOMAN who thought she was a Senator!"⁵⁶ The family always thought that the confusion might have come about because of the similarities between the name Bohrer and that of the well-known senator from Idaho, William E. Borah.⁵⁷

Senator Bohrer was re-elected for a second four year term, again with a two to one lead over her opponent. She introduced a bill providing for the appointment of a committee to study the Child Welfare Laws. This group was known as the Chandler Committee. Twenty bills to broaden provisions of the mother's pension, organize county units for administration of public welfare, provide adequate adoption laws, and to institute amendments to the Juvenile Court Act were presented to the 1931 Legislature. One of the measures introduced was the illegitimacy bill. This bill provided that after paternity had been determined, the father would be as responsible for the care and education of his illegitimate child as he was for his natural child. When Senator Bohrer presented this to the senate, she realized that in spite of trying to be careful in her wording all the men present seemed to think she thought they had all fathered illegitimate children.⁵⁸

Senator Bohrer did not sit quietly in the senate. She worked on bills that required political insight and in some way challenged the way things were. She exhibited a boldness and ability in legislative matters that are seldom found in newly elected senators. During her first term she had voted for the Civil Service regulation in Illinois government and for the establishment of the Public Welfare Bureau in Cook County.⁵⁹

Another measure coming from the Chandler Committee was the Midwife Bill. Studies conducted by two trained nurses revealed

the lack of proper attention for many women during childbirth, both in immigrant districts of large cities and in the southern portion of the state. The nurses toured the state in an old car, one dressed to represent an expectant mother, and would ask where they might find a midwife. Thinking the person was near delivery a name and location would be given. In this way a list of three hundred midwives, supplemented with their pictures, was obtained. This information then led to Senator Bohrer's introduction of the Midwife Bill which provided for training under supervision of qualified doctors and be licensed by the state. Because of the opposition of the medical profession, the bill was not voted into law,⁶⁰ even though few doctors chose to settle in the rural southern counties.⁶¹ The Prisoner Bill, providing a solution to many crime problems in Illinois, was signed into law by the Fifty-sixth General Assembly. She sponsored a bill allowing for the payment of real estate property tax in two equal semi-annual installments. The Payroll Bill, also sponsored by Senator Bohrer, became law. It was introduced to curb payroll scandals and election frauds. This bill provided for the State Auditor to compile a list of all state employees during the previous calendar year. This list, including the name, address, position and total salary for the year, was to be kept on file in the Auditor's office.

Not all of her proposals were successful, such as those concerning social welfare legislation or the restriction of Cook County's representation in the legislature. The bill died in committee and was not voted on in the General Assembly. Other disappointments included the Osteopath's Bill, which she voted for, but did not pass. The measure made the provision for the Osteopaths to have their own Board of Examiners. However, her bill concerning the handling of prisoners was adopted. It provided that, upon conviction, felons be given into the custody of the Department of Public Welfare. Many of Senator Bohrer's legislative proposals were concerned with social welfare work. The majority of Senator Bohrer's proposals were constructed to meet serious problems the state faced from 1928 through 1932. As a whole, her bills were accepted by the General Assembly and signed into law by the governor.⁶² Other bills presented gave

authority to the Department of Public Welfare to place children from state institutions in family boarding homes and an act for a permanent commission to care for all handicapped children in Illinois.⁶³

In 1932, Senator Bohrer became a candidate for a third time. It was felt by the county Republican Committee that she would not have any trouble being re-elected. However, they failed to understand the mood of the country and its dissatisfaction with what had happened under Republican control. Also, there were personal problems that affected her ability to campaign. Shortly after her second election, Jake who had been such a great help, died. Mrs. Fifer became ill and died only four weeks before the election thus hindering the ability to campaign. The Florence Fifer Bohrer Club had worked just as diligently for this campaign as they had in the past but because of the trend against Republicans, the area party was not able to survive. Senator Bohrer was defeated.⁶⁴

Not one to be knocked down by defeat, she returned to her home in Bloomington to take up the reins of new interests. In the height of the Depression, she took the uncompensated chairmanship of the McLean County Emergency Relief Office. She worked with people who had lost their savings due to the Depression, were jobless or ill. It was her responsibility to see that some 15,000 in the county were given assistance.⁶⁵ Through her leadership, the Florence Fifer Bohrer Club was converted into a League of Women Voters organization. She served as president for one year and was elected to the National League Board in 1936. She toured her district covering four states, organizing new chapters of the League and visiting established ones.⁶⁶

Mrs. Bohrer died at the age of 83. There are so many more things to be said about her many accomplishments. She was truly a remarkable woman in her knowledge and skills. Because of her service to the citizens of Illinois, this state is truly a better place to live.

Notes

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- 2 Illinois State Archives, Illinois State University, Florence Fifer Bohrer Papers. Notes for Franklin Park Speech.
- 3 Illinois State Archives, Illinois State University, Florence Fifer Bohrer Papers. Notes on her thoughts after the landslide vote of '32.
- 4 Sealock, Book II, *Memoirs*, 1, 3.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 5, 7.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 1-2.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 12 Florence Fifer Bohrer Papers. Notes on her thoughts after the landslide vote of '32.
- 13 Margo Mendoza, *What's In a Name*, Florence Fifer Bohrer Collection, Archives, McLean County Historical Society, 1.
- 14 Sealock, Book II, *Memoirs*, 15.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 16 Mrs. Florence Fifer Rust Bloomer, Bloomington, IL, Interview, November 6, 1998.
- 17 Richard Edward Dunn, "Florence Fifer Bohrer: A Case Study in Politics," Master of Science in Social Science Thesis, Illinois State University, 1966, 59.
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- 19 Sealock, *Memoirs*, 32, 33.
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- 22 "Mrs. Bohrer, State's First Woman Senator, Dies at 83," *Daily Pantagraph*, 20 July 1960, A3, Microfilm, Milner Library, Illinois State University.
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- 25 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book II, 77
- 26 Sealock, Book I, 67-69.
- 27 Dunn, *Florence Fifer Bohrer*, 61.
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- 29 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book I, 70.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 32 Mendoza, *What's In A Name*, 3.

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3, Microfilm, Milner Library, Illinois State University.
- 36 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book I, 86.
- 37 Dunn, *Florence Fifer Bohrer*, 62.
- 38 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book I, 86, 87.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 94.
- 40 Bloomer, Interview
- 41 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book II, 113, 114.
- 42 Dugan and Whitehurst, *Women of Action*, 5.
- 43 Dunn, "Florence Fifer Bohrer," 63.
- 44 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book II, 122-124.
- 45 "Mrs. Bohrer May Run for State Senator," *Daily Pantagraph*, 23 January, 1924
- 46 "Mrs. Bohrer To Be A Candidate," *Daily Pantagraph*, 25, January 1924
- 47 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book I, 125.
- 48 Dunn, "Florence Fifer Bohrer," 82-84.
- 49 Bloomer, Interview.
- 50 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book I, 127-130.
- 51 Dunn, "Florence Fifer Bohrer," 89.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 53 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book I, 140.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 136.
- 55 Bloomer, Interview.
- 56 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book I, 136.
- 57 Bloomer, Interview.
- 58 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book I, 142.
- 59 Dunn, "Florence Fifer Bohrer," 121.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 129-130.
- 61 Sealock, "Memoirs," Book I, 143.
- 62 Dunn, "Florence Fifer Bohrer," *passim*."
- 63 Dugan and Whitehurst, *Women of Action*, 6.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 192
- 65 Dunn, "Florence Fifer Bohrer," 200.
- 66 Sealock, "Memoirs", Book I, 145-153