



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown in the above left photo from the Lycoming County Historical Society, is Louise Larzelere Chatham. Above right is the Jo-Jane Lodge — the home of Louise and Newton Chatham at Chatham Maples along Lycoming Creek.

Louise Larzelere Chatham: The first woman lawyer in Lycoming County

Williamsport Women



by MARY SIEMINSKI

Louise Larzelere (Mrs. Newton C.) Chatham and Rebecca Johnson (Mrs. Charles) Lose addressed the Oct. 1911 Lycoming County Fair in Hughesville on feminist political issues. Chatham, who was the first female candidate for the Williamsport School Board, spoke on "Parent-Teacher Associations." Lose's topic was "What the Farmer's Wife Should Know About Suffrage."

Although Chatham lost her bid for a seat on the school board, both of these women remained active in the women's suffrage movement. Chatham served as chair of both the city and the county women's suffrage committee. After the 19th amendment passed in 1920, she became a founding member of the new League of Women Voters. A quarter of a century later, Chatham became the first woman lawyer in Lycoming County.

Louise Larzelere was born in Doylestown, on Feb. 12, 1872, the daughter of Henry B. and Josephine (James) Larzelere. Chatham had an older brother, Linford, and a younger sister, Claudine. Her father was a mechanical engineer. The family moved to Muncy, and then to Williamsport in 1890, where he held several positions relating to the lumber industry. She graduated from Muncy High School at the top of her class in 1888.

"From her early youth it was the desire of Mrs. Chatham to study law but she was unable to take up that profession after her graduation from high school," according to Col. Thomas Lloyd in his "History of Lycoming County, Pennsylvania (1926)." Her first profession was musician — a career that lasted for 35 years. She became the organist for the Muncy Presbyterian Church just after high school, and once the family settled in Williamsport, she directed the boys' choirs at both Christ Episcopal Church and St. Paul's Lutheran Church.

Marriage

On June 24, 1897, 25-year-old Louise married Newton C. Chatham. The Gazette and Bulletin reported: "The nuptials of Miss Louise Mann Larzelere and Newton Carothers Chatham were celebrated in Christ Episcopal church at high noon yesterday, in the presence of a large and fashionable audience. The vested choir preceded the bridal party up the aisle singing the wedding march from Lohengrin ... The choir sang unusually sweetly, for the bride was their director ... The bride ... wore a gown of white silk with duchess lace and a train veil ... The ceremony was performed by the Rev. Edward Henry Eckel ... An elaborate wedding breakfast was immediately served at the home of the bride's parents, 225 Maynard street, and Mr. and Mrs. Chatham left for an extended tour of the Great Lakes. They will reside at 931 Vine street."

Newton was the son of Walter and Jennie (Carothers) Chatham, originally from Lock Haven. Newton held a variety of positions, including for a period of time being a co-owner of Otto, Chatham, and Dean, Booksellers, of 13 W. Third Street. The store, which continues today as Otto Bookstore, sold books, stationery, wallpaper and window shades. Louise and Newton Chatham had two children: Clyde, born in 1900, and Newton, born in 1915.

In addition to being a musician, Louise was active in women's organizations in Williamsport, especially groups devoted to education, civic affairs, and women's issues. She was the organizer and first president of the local chapter of the Home and School League, an organization of persons interested in the education of children and the community. She was a member of the Delphian Society, which promoted the education of women.

She served the county as a member of the board of the Mothers' Assistance Fund, and from 1924 to 1927 she was on the State Welfare Commission. Her appointment would have overlapped that of Isabella Fairfax, the subject of November's Williamsport Women column.

She was a member of the Clio Club and the Business and Professional Women's Club. A founder, along with Henrietta Baldys Lyon, of the Civic Club, she also was a founding member of the Woman's Club of Williamsport in 1924 and of the Republican Women's Organization. Another first was her election as the first female vice-president of the Republican County Committee.

WHY THE WOMEN ASK TO BE REPRESENTED BY A WOMAN ON THE SCHOOL BOARD.

1. Out of the 140 teachers of Williamsport 120 are women.
2. About one-half of the pupils are girls.
3. And even the boys have mothers.
4. The school board of Williamsport has never had a woman member. Yet the constitution of Pennsylvania, adopted in 1873, provided that women may be elected to any position relating to the management of the public schools.
5. Women have served successfully and usefully on school boards in various Pennsylvania cities and in many cities in other states.
6. A woman, just because she is a woman, has a contribution to make to the solution of school problems which men cannot make.
7. Would you not feel that your child would have the best possible care and attention if the men of the board had the help of a woman on the board to whom the women teachers and the children could go with their difficulties?
8. These reasons are not political and the women are appealing to every voter.
9. Would it not be a credit to the manhood of Williamsport if Mrs. Chatham, a mother and the only woman named, should be elected a member of the school board.

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Shown in this photo from the Lycoming County Women's History Collection, is a campaign brochure for Louise Chatham's bid for a seat on the Williamsport School Board in 1911.

As a member of the Civic Club, she was responsible for raising the funds to establish Memorial Park and advocated for the first female probation officers in Lycoming County and the first female member of the Williamsport police department. Alta Solley Seitzer was appointed to the police department in 1925 and served until her death at 64 in 1934.

Law school

When Louise was in her 40s, she began studying for the Pennsylvania preliminary examinations. After qualifying to enter law school by successfully passing these examinations, held in Philadelphia, she enrolled in Boston University Law School. The unique story of an "older woman" in law school made headlines not only in Williamsport and Boston, but also across the nation. The March 20, 1920 Boston Herald headlined its story "Mother of Two to Study Law; Mrs. Chatham now able to realize ambition of early years."

At the time Louise began law school, her son Clyde was in his fourth year of a five-year course in engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in nearby Cambridge. Her son Newton enrolled in high school in Boston.

Louise graduated magna cum laude in her class of 250 students. After being admitted to the Bar in Massachusetts in 1923, she returned to Lycoming County, where she was admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar in 1924, when she was 51. She set up an office at 39 W. Fourth St., specializing in practice before the Domestic Relations and Orphans' Court, which heard matters involving wills, estates and protection of minors. Chatham was licensed to practice before the Supreme Courts of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.

Chatham Maples

In the early 1900s, the Chathams started developing land they owned along Lycoming Creek, in an area they called Chatham Maples. In addition to building a beautiful home for themselves, they sold lots and built houses for others. In the 1920s, they moved full-time from 326 Centre St. to their new home, later called Jo-Jane Lodge. The house still stands and the Chatham Park apartments are nearby.

Louise attributed her success in life to persistence and the determination to do her best in all work that she undertook. She also credited her husband's interest in and support of her professional career, as well as her musical and club work.

Newton died in 1933. Louise died five years later, at her home. Her funeral was held at Covenant Central Presbyterian Church, where she had been president of the Women's Auxiliary. She and her husband are buried in Wildwood Cemetery.

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