

Edith DeWitt: Groundbreaker in state government and politics

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

"Mrs. Edith DeWitt First of Sex to Seek Internal Affairs Post" was a headline in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on March 25, 1938. DeWitt was then Pennsylvania's Deputy Secretary of Welfare and vice chair of the Democratic State Committee. This Lycoming County woman was the only female on the slate of candidates for statewide office. In her campaign speech, she assailed "boss rule," but she was defeated by Thomas A. Logue.

DeWitt played an exceptionally active role in local and state politics, the Democratic Party and state government. She was a delegate to the national presidential nominating conventions in 1924 and 1936 and was deputy state treasurer under Governor George Earle.

Suffragist

Dewitt got her start in politics in the campaign for women's suffrage in Lycoming County during the



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EDITH B. DeWITT

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE

For the office of PROTHONOTARY

Primary Election, September 15th, 1931

PHOTO PROVIDED

A flyer from the 1931 campaign of Edith B. DeWitt for Lycoming County prothonotary from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society.

1910s, when women were actively pursuing voting rights. Their work culminated in the ratification of the 19th amendment on Aug. 18, 1920. At that time, she was known as Mrs. Robert Fleming Allen and lived in South Williamsport.



DeWITT

Born Edith Glenn Bennington in 1878 in Maryland, she was the youngest of 11 children of the Rev. Samuel D. and Eliza Paige Bennington. The Rev. Bennington was a minister in the Baltimore Circuit of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and he served multiple churches in Maryland, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. He was assigned to Lycoming County in 1873 and

1874.

She grew up in the rural towns of Flintstone (in Allegheny County, Maryland) and Springfield (in Hampshire County, West Virginia). Because she was a "sickly" child, she was kept at home and basically home-schooled. In 1952, she gave a talk about those experiences, "Reminiscences of a Circuit Rider's Daughter," at the Muncy Historical Society, according to "Now and Then," vol. 10. In her talk, she said that staying home gave her "ample time for my favorite pastime, getting to know people." This became an asset in her political career.

The Rev. Bennington died in West Virginia in 1892, when Edith

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was 14. She then came to Williamsport, where her older brother Raymond was living.

WHS Class of 1896

In 1896, Edith graduated from Williamsport High School, where she had been an editor of the literary magazine, Cherry and White. After completing a two-year course at the former Mansfield Normal School, now Mansfield University, she returned to Williamsport. She taught mathematics and history at Williamsport High School and joined the exclusive Clio Club. The Williamsport Sun-Gazette listed her as one of the attendees at the Cotillion Club dance held at the Lycoming Opera House in April 1900. Among the young men present was Robert Fleming Allen, and in June their engagement was announced. Robert was a Lafayette College graduate and a lawyer in Williamsport. His family had been among the early settlers of Lycoming County.

Edith Bennington and Robert Fleming Allen were married on Nov. 14, 1901. They had three children: Robert Porter, born in 1905; John, in 1907; and Eliza, in 1914. Eliza was not yet born when Edith was the main speaker at a meeting of the newly formed Equal Suffrage Committee of Williamsport. She went on to chair the Lycoming County committee and was present in April 1915

at the opening of campaign headquarters at 341 William St., referred to rather snidely in a Aug. 24, 1962 Sun-Gazette article as the "campaign henhouse." In 1916, she was state treasurer of the Pennsylvania Women's Suffrage Association.

After Robert Fleming Allen died suddenly on May 24, 1924, Edith withdrew from politics for several years.

In 1927, at the age of 49, she married Renshaw Crawford DeWitt, a musician, music teacher and World War I veteran. He was 33 and the son of the Rev. Alexander DeWitt, the rector of St. James Episcopal Church, Muncy.

Energizing

women voters

In 1931, Edith DeWitt ran for prothonotary. At the time, she was chair of the Lycoming County Democratic Women's Club and vice chair of the Democratic State Committee. In the latter role, she was credited for "coordinating the work of the women's organizations in the 1934 campaign that swept the party into power for the first time in 40 years," according to the Altoona Tribune, June 18, 1936, when George Earle was elected governor.

Edith was heavily involved in state government during the Earle administration and after, and the DeWitts lived in Harrisburg from 1938-45. When they returned to Lycoming County, they

CIO's Ticket Is Complete With Woman

Mrs. Edith DeWitt First Of Sex to Seek Internal Affairs Post.

HARRISBURG, March 24.—(AP)—

Mrs. Edith De Witt, deputy secretary of welfare and vice chairman of the Democratic state committee, tonight became the first woman in the history of Pennsylvania to seek the office of secretary of internal affairs.

PHOTO PROVIDED

Announcement of the candidacy of Edith DeWitt for the Pennsylvania Secretary of Internal Affairs from the Pittsburg Post-Gazette March 23, 2935.

lived at 209 S. Washington St., Muncy. Edith remained active as a leader and speaker in the community. In her campaign for secretary of internal affairs in 1938, she had said, "If I am elected, I will do a man-sized job." Although not elected in that campaign, she did do a "man-sized job" and served the citizens of Pennsylvania well.

DeWitt died in Muncy on July 11, 1962 at the age of 84. Her husband died in December of the same year. They are

buried in Muncy Cemetery.

For a history of the local suffrage movement, see Sieminski's "The fight for women's suffrage in Lycoming County," Williamsport Sun-Gazette on May 11, 2014.

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