

# The First Women in Lebanon County Politics

By Commissioner Jo Ellen Litz, March 2005

Lebanon County Commissioners Rose Marie Swanger, Ed Arnold, and Bill Carpenter formed the Lebanon County Women's Commission on March 20, 2003. Their mission is to assist women in achieving economic self-sufficiency in order to improve their status in the community. As it strives to implement its vision and mission, the Lebanon County Commission for women serves as a link between the Lebanon County Commissioners and women's organizations whose shared goal is that of enhancing the status of women in our community. On June 12, 2003, commissioners made the first appointments to the commission: Josie Ames, Marianne Bartley, Lori Brandt, Mary Burchik, Carol Checket, Joyce Dissinger, Harriet Faren, Representative Mauree Gingrich, Cindy Heisey, Bridget Hoffman, Barbara Kauffman, Susan Funk Klarsch, Donna Eberly-Lehman, Donna Moyer, Karin Right-Nolan, Jenny Murphy Shifflet, Dawn Shultz, Kathy Snavelly, Pam Tricamo, Kathy Verna, and Brigadier General Jessica Wright.

It was 1920 when the nineteenth amendment gave women the right to vote. Who do you think was the first woman to hold office in Lebanon County? What motivated her and other women firsts to run for office in Lebanon County?

Throughout the United States, women in higher office seemed to follow their husbands in instances where they passed away while holding office. But here in Lebanon County, things were different. Maybe it was because of our strong farming background, where men and women worked side by side from sunrise to sunset, that men could see the strength of women and consider them partners, equals, who also kept the books and paid the bills. We thank and lift up our men who had the self-confidence and ability to support their spouses in the political realm.

Rather than keeping you in suspense, we'll move to the first woman elected to office in Lebanon County. There are a few people still living who can remember **Sally McKinney Hartman** who was the **Recorder of Deeds** for 24 years. Sally took office in **1936** and left office in 1967. That was only sixteen years after women gained the right to vote. Sally died in 1987 at age 93. Paul (Punch) Krause, married Sally's stepdaughter, Mary Hartman. He said that Sally was a Kohr from Greenpoint. Raymond Hartman, her step-son, was visiting Punch, and offered the following:

"Sally's husband was Raymond, an Assistant Postmaster. She was active in the Republican Party. Sally was a great lady who did everything for everybody. Everyone respected her, including the people who worked for her. She loved that courthouse. Her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday party was held at the Friendship Fire Company. Everyone attended, including Congressman Walker."

Raymond recommended that I call John Walter who Sally considered "one of her boys." Judge Walter said that Sally was, "one of the most gracious office-

holders that I have ever known, very efficient as the Recorder of Deeds. I first met her in 1953. I wanted to get into politics, but I didn't know what I was going to do. I went to Philadelphia and got sworn in to Naval OCS, or I would have been drafted. When I came back, my Dad said, "work at the cottage in the mornings, and in the afternoon go see Haps Krause, our family lawyer. So, I did. One of the first things I learned was how to search real estate titles. It failed going through the Recorder of Deeds office. So Haps took me over to the courthouse and introduced me to Sally Hartman. Ray Hartman, Sally's husband, was my Dad's foreman at the post office (Dad was postmaster from 1934-54). Dad liked Ray a lot. When I came back from the Navy and went into law school, in 1959, over the summer, I worked for Krause again, and spent a lot of time searching titles in the Recorder of Deeds office. Sally was a great politician, but she also made everybody feel great when they went into her office. She insisted that you take care of the lawyers and treat them with respect. Her girls always did. We did a lot of kidding because she was a republican and I was a democrat. She just was a great gal. She was not afraid to walk up to somebody and talk to him or her. She was earnestly interested in other people. It wasn't a political thing. She had a great sense of human nature. She would talk to you confidentially or generally. She was one of the neatest people I ever knew, not just as a woman, but also as a person. She always wanted to know how you were doing. She was always the lead vote getter, because people really loved her, and she loved people."

According to Flash Light, "she was a fixture in the Court House."

Donna Lutz is the only other woman to hold the office of Recorder of Deeds.

Next came **Naomi M. Pope** who was elected in **1953** as the Clerk of Orphans Court. A republican, she served one term in office. According to the 1/3/55 Salary Board minutes, Naomi moved that the salary of her deputy, Miss Emma Haak, be fixed at \$2415 per annum, but the motion failed a second and was declared out of order. Today, it is common practice for an elected official to move the salaries of his or her staff. While Frederick S. Frantz did serve as treasurer from 1957-1959, it is also interesting to see the mentoring for the position that transpired from Naomi to Emma through Edith Grumbine until the office was abolished in 1983.

Then, in **1967-1972 and 1976-1988**, **Jean Gohn**, was the first woman to be elected to and serve on the **Lebanon School Board**. She had a Bachelor of Arts degree from Ohio Western University; was vice chair and member of the Lebanon County Housing Authority; vice chair and member of Lebanon County Redevelopment Authority for six years; and had 10 years of teaching experience in York, Allegheny, and Lebanon Counties. Firsts in other school districts included: **1971 Cornwall Lebanon SD, Alma Wise; 1975 Northern Lebanon SD, Fern Harman;** and **1979 Annville Cleona SD, Eleanor Witmeyer.**

Another woman, **Catherine Coyle**, became our first elected **District Justice** in **1969**. She took office January 1970, and served for 20 years. When she

decided to run, she went to the Democratic Committee meeting. Keeping in mind that she ended up liking him, that meeting was her first encounter with John Anspach. He said, "Lady why don't you pack up your bags and go home? You won't win. You're just a housewife." I was ready to tell him to go to hell. He was not cordial, but I decided to stay. John W. Coyle, my husband, was in advertising (his accounts included Haak Brothers and Witners Department Store in Reading), so he helped develop a message and strategy. I had five kids, and we all went door-to-door. I made phone calls from morning until night. On election night, my older kids made the rounds to the precincts, and tallied all of my votes, and the others. I ran against Bruce Stoner who was a Republican. I won by seven votes, we thought. The next day it was in the paper that I lost by five votes. Janet Fortna was the voter registrar. My husband, being a bull-headed Irishman, asked for a recount. They said no. We went to a commissioner's meeting. He talked Dutch to them. Jim Reilly, my cousin, was running for council. My husband approached him too. A count followed, and it was determined that I won by seven votes. Then, Republicans asked for another recount. It was done, and I still won by seven votes. The whole time that I served, I had a big "7" framed in my office behind my desk on the wall. After all of this time, there wasn't anyone who I put in jail that I would be afraid to talk to today. If an inmate had a family, from part of my wages, I took care of their family anonymously. One day, a former inmate knocked on my door at home. I invited him in. Fifteen years prior, I had left him go home for Easter, and he remembered that. He brought me Tom Brokov's book, The Lost Generation, in appreciation for what I did for him. That meant so much to me.

Other women served as district justices at the same time as Catherine, but they were appointed Justices of the Peace--by Party nomination and confirmed by the president judge. In 1970, Lucy DiNunzio, Mary Spannuth, and JoAnn Shultz were grandfathered into the system, and did not have to run for district justice right away. Additionally, Hazel Swisher, Betty Ann Smith, and Christine Heck were elected District Justices. Now the justices are known as district judges.

From **1978-1985** both **Betty Eiceman** and **Dr. Betts Shultz**, who graduated from the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, served as our first City Councilwomen. In **1988**, **Betty Eiceman** moved up to become the City of Lebanon's first woman to serve as **mayor**. According to Betty, "Running for office was the easy part. Betts and I proved ourselves working on Council. The reception from everyone was good. There were a few people that didn't want to accept that a woman was Mayor, especially on the telephone. Some people would say that they didn't want to talk to the secretary. On the whole, the employees and community accepted it. It was not an easy job, but it was enjoyable. It feels the same way to be a woman mayor as it does to be a male mayor. There was a job that had to get done, male or female. Although, sometimes it felt as if you had to work twice as hard. There were many challenges to be met. Eiceman is a graduate of Lebanon high School." While **Jacqueline Parker** is the only other woman to serve as Lebanon's mayor,

according to Flash Light, **Sue Leffler** ran for mayor prior to Eiceman, but lost by a few votes.

In **1994**, **Rose Marie Cunningham** became the first woman of color to serve on City Council. **Sandy Meluskey** currently serves on City Council, and in a mother/daughter first, **Maria-Meluskey Dissinger** also serves on the Lebanon City School Board (2003). At this time, they are both serving the community.

Beginning in September 1960, **Lois Bomberger** worked as a clerk in the treasurer's office, and was eventually promoted to deputy treasurer. After Treasurer Irvin Gordon passed away while hunting, she was appointed by the governor to serve as our **County Treasurer** in **1983**, then was elected to the position twice, and served through July 1989. She graduated from Lebanon High School in 1946. The first time she ran for office, George Ross, a realtor, challenged Bomberger, but she won handily in the primary (5945 to 2814). Lois worked every day in the office and did all of the bank statements. Overseeing a staff of three, she enjoyed working with the people. She thoroughly enjoyed her job. Dianne Rhoads and Sallie Neuin followed Lois in office.

**Rose Marie Swanger** served as Lebanon's first woman **County Commissioner** from **1984-2003**. A graduate of South Lebanon High School, she attended Thompson Institute in Harrisburg and completed several courses in management at Lebanon Valley College. She was employed by the City of Lebanon for eighteen (18) years. In 1984 she left her job as City Clerk – Personnel Officer to become the first woman to serve as Lebanon County Commissioner. At alternating times, she served both as Chairman of the Commissioners and Chairman of the Prison Board. Locally, Rose Marie served on the boards of the South-central Employment Corporation (SEC); the South Central Assembly for Effective Governance (the Assembly), where she held the office of Treasurer; United Way of Lebanon County, where she was Chairman of the Agency Relations Committee; the Lebanon County Victim/Witness Program; the Victim and Witness Advocacy (VAWA) Task Force; and the PROBE (Potential Re-employment Opportunities in Business and Education) Board. She is an active member of Kiwanis of Lebanon and served as President. On the state level, she was active with the County Commissioners' Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) where she served on the Courts and Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committees, the Pennsylvania State CASSP (Child and Adolescent Service Systems Program) Board, and the Advisory Committee for the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) Program). In 1996, Jo Ellen Litz became the next woman to serve as a county commissioner.

In 1987, **Diann Shultz** became the first woman elected to the office of **Jury Commissioner**. Two other women, **Henrietta Steiner** and **Donna Lutz** also served in this position.

**Prothonotary, Anita Haulman**, served from **11/3/1988-3/29/2002**. Prior to taking office, Anita was first deputy for Prothonotary Corwin Erdman. Anita was a graduate of Lebanon High School. Her first deputy, Lisa Arnold, succeeded her in office.

**Joyce Yingst**, was elected as **City Controller**. She graduated from Myerstown High School, and was formerly associated with her husband in his business, Aldus Yingst Construction. Yingst also served as treasurer in different organizations.

**Deirdre Eshleman (1999-2003)**. As **district attorney**, Deirdre supervises more than 30 people, and is responsible for prosecuting more than 2000 adult and 400 juvenile criminal cases each year. In addition, her office administers more than 15 different criminal justice programs covering specialized prosecutions, diversionary programs, specialized investigations and victim assistance programs. The County of Lebanon funds the office. The office has applied for and receives Federal/ State monetary grants to assist in funding programs.

In **2002**, **Dawn Resanovich**, became the County's first woman Register of Wills. Prior to taking office, Dawn worked for the County for 21 years.

While it took a while for a woman from Lebanon County to serve at the State level, the **101<sup>st</sup> PA House Representative** is currently **Mauree Gingrich (2003-2006)**. She is a former president of Palmyra Borough Council where she served for twelve years. As a businesswoman, she also owned Mature Market Concepts, a qualitative market research company specializing in senior consumer behavior. Gingrich worked for over 20 years in healthcare and the long term care industry. Her education includes Lebanon Catholic High School and PA College of Medical Arts (formerly Harrisburg Institute of Medical Arts).

While not elected, **Brigadier General Jessica Wright** is Pennsylvania's first woman Adjutant General and commander of the Pennsylvania National Guard. Her responsibilities include command, control and supervision of all Air and Army National guard units in PA, the Scotland school for Veterans' Children, six state-owned veterans' homes and programs for Pennsylvania's 1.3 million veterans. General Wright was also the first female maneuver brigade commander in the Army, and the first female aviator in the Army National Guard. Governor Rendell appointed Wright as the Adjutant General

Another first is **PA Lt. Governor, Catherine Baker Knoll**, who took office January 2003, and became the first woman to occupy the Lt. Governor's mansion at Fort Indiantown Gap, Lebanon County. Knoll presides over the

Senate, but can only vote to break ties. She chairs the Board of Pardons, and would succeed Governor Rendell, should he be unable to serve. She is a former State Treasurer 1989-1997 and former schoolteacher and businesswoman. Her education includes a Bachelors and Masters Degrees, Duquesne University; attended Harvard University Kennedy School of Government; and Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania.

In Lebanon, there are still firsts for women to aspire to: Controller, Coroner, Sheriff, Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, Representative of the 102<sup>nd</sup> PA House Seat, Senator in the 48<sup>th</sup> PA Senatorial seat, US Congressman, and US Senator.

In municipal leadership, boroughs elected significantly more women than townships. While these records were harder to research, it appears that in **1973** in Palmyra Borough, **Ruth S. Baldwin** became the first woman member of a **borough council**. She served through 1977. However, the woman to serve the longest tenure, twenty-six years, is **Myerstown Borough's Gloria Ebling (1979-present)**. A graduate of Myerstown High School, Gloria owns Ebling's Meat Market. She is a member of Myerstown Women's Club. She said, "I was on the planning commission when Walter Whitmoyer approached me to sit on Borough Council. After some thought, I said yes, I would consider it. Two months later, I was appointed, and I've been running ever since. Being the first woman on council, serving with all those men, I had to learn how to make myself heard. During a roll call vote, a fellow councilman said, "I know you're correct, but I can't vote with you." He voted with the men." "I enjoy doing things for the people of Myerstown. I enjoy talking to them even though sometimes they think things are wrong. It rolls off your shoulders." Fifteen other women are known to have served on borough councils. Only six women are known to have served as township supervisors. Back in **1980**, the first woman elected to the **West Lebanon** Township board of supervisors was **Virginia Reed**. She served as a township commissioner for 18 years. A lifelong resident of West Lebanon, she passed away July 12, 2004. William, her husband, had a plumbing business, and Virginia was his bookkeeper. They had one daughter, Janet, who served in the US Navy. According to Bernice Mease, secretary, "Virginia was a very good commissioner. I always say, ask a woman, and she'll get it finished. She was active, and did not sit back. Upon retirement, she received an engraved watch that was presented by board president, Lenny Hoffman. A newspaper article says, "I made a lot of friends.... Everybody is super dooper," Virginia said." Virginia retired for health reasons. In West Lebanon Township, Virginia was followed by **Luann Horn** and **Rosemarie Fuhrman**. In 2004, three other townships elected their first women supervisors: Bethel elected **Beverly Martel**, North Lebanon elected **Dawn Hawkins**, and Annville elected **Joann Zimmerman**.

As women further their education, hone their leadership skills, and make decisions on how their income is spent, just as women comprise about fifty

percent of the voting public, qualified women will no doubt hold fifty percent of elected offices.

(Admittedly, there were many other women firsts in offices such as auditor and tax collector, but researching these offices was beyond the scope of this article.)