



JESSICA M. WEIS
1901—1963

“Judy” Weis was Rochester’s first Congresswoman. She served as a representative from 1959 to 1963. She began her work in Republican party affairs in the 1930’s, serving successively as a local fund-raiser and campaigner, then as a county committeewoman, and finally as a member of the state executive committee. In the ‘40s she began attending national conventions and seconded Thomas Dewey’s nomination in 1948. Though her career in Congress was tragically cut short by illness, she was well respected in national circles. She served for a time on the new House Committee on Space and Aeronautics. Once, she refused her \$600 “stationery allowance,” arguing that Congressional expenses were becoming bloated.

Judy Weis, Congresswoman

In the early 1930’s Jessica (McCullough) Weis (1901-1963) was the prototype of the attractive young society matron active in community betterment. Through a growing involvement in politics, the years 1958 through 1962 found her Rochester’s first Congresswoman. As was said of her at the time, “She showed women how to get out and pitch for good housekeeping in government.”

The daughter of a Buffalo steel company president, Judy, as she was always called, went to Rochester in 1921 as the bride of one of its prominent businessmen, Charles W. Weis, Jr. Two years later she helped found the exclusive Chatterbox Club. Besides bringing up three children, she was president of Genesee Hospital’s Women’s Board and active in many other civic affairs.

Her work for the Republican Party began with fund raising and campaigning for others on the county level. Then in 1935 she was appointed vice chairman of the Monroe County Republican Finance Committee. Her first experience at a Republican National Convention was in 1936 as an alternate delegate, and she went as a delegate to every subsequent Convention the rest of her life. Supporting Alf Landon in his race against Franklin D. Roosevelt, she organized motor caravans, which toured the county.

The next year she was appointed vice chairman of the County Republican organization, a job she held for the next sixteen years. Concurrently she founded and served as president of the County Federation of Women’s Republican Clubs, continuing until 1953. In the 1940 presidential campaign, Judy supported Frank Gannett of Rochester in his unsuccessful candidacy for nomination.





Organizational ability coupled with a sincere liking for people next promoted Judy Weis to the position of president of the National Federation of Women's Republican Clubs, a job that required thousands of miles of travel across the country. In 1943, she progressed to the role of national committeewoman from New York, the state party's highest honor.

National prominence came to this hard worker when as manager of the presidential campaign of 1948, she seconded the nomination of Gov. Thomas F. Dewey. When it came her turn to speak, the convention had worn on until two o'clock in the morning and, though she had labored long over her address, Judy read only the concluding page. Next morning delegates referred to her gratefully as "the lady who threw away her speech." She later admitted that, while she usually had "a good philosophy about things," Dewey's losing that election was one of the greatest disappointments she ever had to swallow. Two national conventions later Mrs. Weis became the first woman to head its program planning committee. It was 1958, the year after her husband's death, her children grown, when Judy Weis set out to go to the House of Representatives from the thirty-sixth Congressional district, the post vacated by Kenneth Keating, who had been nominated as a senator. She was at first opposed in nomination by Frank S. Horton, but he stepped aside to avoid a split in the party, and she gained a seat in the House where she was one of fourteen women. Congresswomen were enough of a novelty at the time that she made "news" and reportedly "raised eyebrows" by entering the House chamber wearing velvet rose-embroidered slippers. High praise for that era was a fellow politician's appraisal, "You can talk to her like a man." Thomas F. Dewey paid her this quaint compliment: "She has championed the cause of women in politics, which is good, and has managed to do so without being a man-hater or a bore, which is even better."

In her campaign for reelection, Judy was asked if attacks from her opponents bothered her. Her good-humored reply was, "Before I got into politics, I knew that people talked about me behind my back, but then I didn't have to read in the newspapers what they said!" She said that the press had not and should not have been gentle with her because she was a woman, adding, "I have fought a good fight for what I consider an outstanding office."

Reelected 'handily,' she was named to the House Committee on Space and Aeronautics, the first woman to serve on any Congressional committee related to outer space. In general, she was a Conservative, opposing centralized and enlarged power of the federal government. Once she refused her \$600 stationery allowance in the belief that Congressional expenses were getting out of hand.





It was a hard blow for Judy, having learned that she had cancer, and a shock to her associates when she had to announce that she would not run for a third term. She called it a difficult decision, saying, "I shall be eternally grateful for the years I have been privileged to serve in the House of Representatives. I'm pretty gregarious and shall miss my colleagues. I've enjoyed the excitement and stimulus of a very interesting life with no two days alike."

Her appraisal of the role of a woman in politics was that she must work twice as hard, be twice as smart and twice as effective as a man before he will admit she works half as hard, is half as smart or is half as effective." Her general advice to women interested in government: "A woman has to have a certain maturity to be most successful. A young woman usually has a family and her children to think about first. While young, she can still get some experience along the way. And in this difficult man's world, that's very useful. . . . It's still a man's world. There should be more women in politics. There aren't women at the top echelon." If opportunities for women have improved since 1962, it is partly because Judy Weis ceased being a conventional housewife in the 1930's.

SOURCES

Rochester Public Library Local History collection newspaper clippings folder

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