

## Quick, Timely Reads

*Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*

### Helen Schluraff: State's First Female County Commissioner Led by Example as she Broke Barriers

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October 2020

#### ELECTED WOMEN

*Following is the second in a series of articles about women elected leaders from Erie County written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Judith Lynch. Jefferson Vice President Ben Speggen will host an online interview with Dr. Lynch at noon each Wednesday in October featuring the leaders.*

Helen Stone Schluraff was indeed a remarkable woman from any perspective. Her obituary in the Pennsylvania County Commissioners Association journal noted that Schluraff “broke plenty of ground throughout her life. Counted among the highlights is the distinction of being Pennsylvania’s first woman commissioner and the (County Commissioners) Association’s first female president.”

Schluraff was born March 6, 1884, in Fairview. Her father was an agent for farmers, helping them sell their produce, and she also served as postmaster. The family came from strong Scottish Presbyterian stock. She graduated from Erie High School and then attended and graduated from Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, in 1906. During her academic life, particularly at Wilson College, Schluraff was intensely interested in athletics and coached a hockey team. She was tall and statuesque in appearance and daily exercise was part of her regimen. Her appearance and soft manner commanded respect throughout her



life.

In 1904, shortly after graduating from college, Helen Stone married Verne Schluraff in her family home in Fairview. Verne ran a floral business established by his parents on seven acres in the Fairview area. "The land had a half dozen greenhouses, large fields of flowers and fruit trees, a lily pond fed by a cascading waterfall, and an arbor with benches and a floral trellis," according to one history. Verne took the flowers and plants to his shop in Erie, where he sold them to the public. By 1915, the Schluraffs had two children but the marriage was a difficult one and ended in separation and then divorce.

Verne Schluraff left the flower business and the children in Helen's competent hands and went to Chicago, where he started a similar flower business and remarried. For Helen, the task of running the farm and floral business while raising two children was hard, but she tackled it knowing that failure was not an option. The business grew as she concentrated on supplying flowers for weddings and other occasions (Freeman 1990, 48).

Every morning, six days a week, Schluraff drove her station wagon, loaded with fresh flowers from the greenhouses, to the retail store in downtown Erie. Three and a half miles away. She remained at her desk from opening time until the store closed at 6:00 o'clock. ... Within a few years it was the second largest shop in Erie and the only one run by a woman. (Freeman 1990, 48).



As a successful businesswoman, Helen knew that the more significant her community profile was, the better her business would be. Her passion for independence took her to the Suffragette movement as she became a charter member of Zonta International of Erie and for several years served as its president. Helen also joined the League of Women Voters becoming the League's first president, leading and organizing Erie's effort to register women to vote. In

addition, she became a leader among a group of working women who met each day at the YWCA for lunch. This group organized and received a charter as the Business and Professional Women's Club of Erie. Schluraff served as its president and held office in the state and national organization of the Business and Professional Women's Club.

In all of these groups, Schluraff encouraged the members to register to vote and then to vote. She was a Republican and was soon recognized in the Erie County Republican Party as a leader and organizer and one who could bring hundreds of women into the Republican ranks. When the stock market crashed in 1929 and the political tide turned to the Democrats, Schluraff was seen as a pillar of public support for the Republican Party and its candidates. The Republican Party recognized that her many contacts, her standing in the community, and the leadership positions that she held would make her a good candidate. Party leaders asked her to run for County Commissioner.

Although several women in Erie County had been elected to countywide offices, those offices were seen as primarily clerical, a job that women,

stereotypically could potentially do well. The County Commissioner Office was quite different. It was called a directive office responsible for accomplishing various tasks. Perhaps a better description would be that the county commissioner's job was the top policymaking office in county government. No woman in Pennsylvania had held such a position.



Undaunted, Schluraff accepted the offer of the Republican Party to be a candidate and ran in 1931 in the early years of the Great Depression. Schluraff was elected to that office and became the first woman in Pennsylvania to hold the office of County Commissioner. Schluraff's many years of working through women's organizations had paid a rich dividend. She not only won the election of 1931, but also the next two succeeding elections: 1935 and 1939. It is fair to say that without the women's vote she never would have prevailed. In addition, her long allegiance to the Republican Party brought her additional political cachet. Schluraff was referred to as Erie County's "Mrs. Republican." She served on the state Republican Council and as president of the Pennsylvania's Republican Women. In addition, she was vice chairwoman of the Erie County Republican Committee and vice president of the State Republican Committee.

Despite her community standing, serving as an Erie County Commissioner was a considerable challenge for a fiscally conservative businesswoman, particularly during the height of the Depression. In the 12 years she served as commissioner, Schluraff paid strict attention to the fiscal affairs of county government. Holding the line on taxes was her chief intent and her fiscal conservatism became her public persona. Author Sabina Freeman, in her account of Helen Stone Schluraff in *Twice Around the Township, Fairview History Retold*, describes how even small details were subject to Helen's examination:

Even the little things came under her scrutiny. When the county needed new mop handles, she had the vote to purchase them deferred until she could find a source that would supply them free (Freeman, 1990, 49).

One of Schluraff's greatest accomplishments as commissioner was the building of Erie County Tuberculosis Hospital on West Gore Road, which opened in 1937. It was a time before the TB vaccine and before antibiotics. Tuberculosis was

rampant throughout Erie County and the state was urging counties to build specialized hospitals that could remove TB carriers from the general population. Although the state would pay for most of the on-going costs of the hospitals, the counties were responsible for the construction and maintenance of the buildings. Along with the other two commissioners, Schluraff tackled this problem. The TB Association in Erie County purchased the property, gave it to Erie County and the county paid for the construction of the hospital. This was accomplished without a bond issue and without an increase in taxes. It is shown here in 2019 after the county announced in that it might be demolished.

Astoundingly, during her 12 years of public service as commissioner, Schluraff continued to raise her two children and operate her flower business. This juggling act is aptly described in a September 1932 issue of the Erie Daily Times, which reported that early in the month County Commissioner Schluraff would be attending a florist convention in Toronto, Canada, and then on her return would be going to the commissioner's convention in Bradford, Pa. (Freeman, 1990, 49).

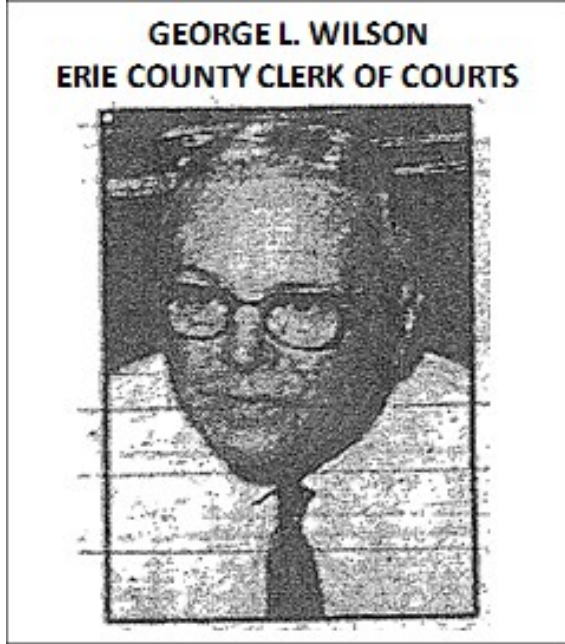


*Erie county Tuberculosis Hospital*

Helen Stone Schluraff's life and indomitable spirit were truly incredible. She was a local leader of renown, a heroine for women and men, and a role model for those who today celebrate her life and try to follow in her footsteps. She left county government at the end of 1943, losing her last election to Thomas H. Schaper, also a Republican.

YEAR	NAME	OFFICE
1932-1944	Helen Schluraff	County Commissioner
1944-1948	Evelyn Wilson	Clerk of Courts
1956-1964	Sarah McQuitty	Register of Wills

In the 1943 election, Evelyn Wilson, who had been appointed Clerk of Courts in 1942, was elected to the position. As Schluraff left her position of County Commissioner, Wilson assumed her new role as the elected Clerk of Courts. Her path to elective office highlights the inferior position that women often held in the male-dominated political and domestic society.



*George L. Wilson*



*Evelyn Wilson*

Evelyn Wilson was the wife of George Wilson, the candidate who beat Ethel Davis in the election of 1939 and was thus elected Erie County Clerk of Courts. According to his obituary, Wilson served 35 years as Clerk of Courts. This was truly not the case.

Yes, George Wilson was elected Clerk of Courts in 1939, but was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1942. At that time, he legally could continue to hold his position of Clerk of Courts while serving in the armed forces, but to do so would make him ineligible for a commission. When Pennsylvania Governor Arthur James indicated his commitment to the appointment of Wilson's wife, Evelyn, to the office of Clerk of Courts, George Wilson agreed to resign his position and thereby become eligible for a commission. Evelyn Wilson had many years of experience in various positions in the courthouse. She had worked in the Sheriff's Office and, as her husband's assistant, was knowledgeable about the operations of the office of Clerk of Courts.

In December 1942, George Wilson left for military training. In January 1943, Evelyn Wilson was appointed Erie County Clerk of Courts by Governor James. Wilson officially resigned his office shortly thereafter and was given a commission in the U.S. Army.

Knowing her appointed term was to expire at the end of the year, in December 1943, Evelyn Wilson announced that she would be running for the office of Clerk of Courts in 1943. Both she and her husband had been very active in the Republican Party and it appears they had the party's support for her

**REPUBLICAN AD**  
*Erie Dispatch Herald 11/1/43*

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*for*  
**POST WAR**

*Elect These Capable and Experienced Candidates. They Are Pledged to Give You Progressive and Economical Government.*

CLAUDE T. RENO ..... Judge of Superior Court

*For Good Government*

**VOTE**

**Republican**

**TOMORROW**  
Polls Open  
7 A. M.  
to  
8 P. M.

**Erie County Republican Committee**  
NANCIE J. BOWEN, Chairman


nomination. Evelyn Wilson, backed by the Erie County Republican Committee, was unopposed in her election bid and was sworn in as the duly elected Clerk of Courts in January 1944, a term of office that would end January 1, 1948. Her election made Wilson one of the first women in Erie County to be elected to a countywide office.

Meanwhile, George Wilson was commissioned a machine gunner and served in the Army's 102nd Infantry Division. On September 12, 1944, Wilson was sent to Europe, where he served until October 28, 1945. He returned to Erie in November 1945 and it appears that he again assumed the duties of Clerk of Courts, although his wife had been elected to that office. Her term was to expire in 1947 and in that year, George was again elected Clerk of Courts.

**GEORGE WILSON OBITUARY**  
"He served as Erie County Clerk of Courts for 35 years"

**George L. Wilson**  
Former Erie County clerk of courts

George L. Wilson, 85, 2828 Elmwood Ave., formerly of 1424 Pearce Park, died Monday, July 6, 1992, at Hamot Medical Center.  
He was born in Erie on March 29, 1907, a son of the late Lauchlan and Johanna Maher Wilson.



He attended the University of Alabama and Westminster College, and was a machine gunner in the 102nd Infantry Division of the U.S. Army during World War II. He served as Erie County clerk of courts for 35 years, and also served as Republican Party chairman for several years.

Mr. Wilson was a very active member of American Legion Post No. 11, a member of Perry Lodge No. 392 F. & A.M., Scottish Rite Bodies, Valley of Erie, Zeta Zeta Temple Shrine, the Erie Maennerchor and the Danish Club.

He was preceded in death by his wife, Evelyn Palmer Wilson; and two sisters, Mildred Wilson Machines and Jean E. Wilson.

Survivors include one brother, James Wilson of Erie; one cousin, John H. Wilson of Erie; and several other cousins.

Friends may call at the Donald C. Burton Funeral Home, 602 W. 10th St. on Wednesday from noon until the time of a service at 2 p.m. with the Rev. Lewis M. Evans officiating.

Burial will be at Laurel Hill Cemetery.

Memorials may be made to the charity of one's choice.

Strangely, George Wilson's obituary indicates that "He served as Erie County Clerk of Courts for 35 years" (Erie Times News, 7.8.92).

The obituary of Evelyn Wilson, who died several months before her husband, cites that she served as an "employee of the Clerk of Courts office" (Erie Times News, 1.5.92). The Wilsons had no children.

The Pennsylvania Manuals of 1943 to 1945 indicate that Evelyn, not George, was the elected Clerk of Courts. The 1941 and 1947 Pennsylvania Manuals list George Wilson as Erie County Clerk of Courts (PA Manual 1941 & 1947).

By 1947 there were no women serving in county elective positions. That remained the situation until 1955 when Sarah M. McQuitty was appointed clerk of the Orphans Court by Judge Orin Waite. Sarah McQuitty was raised on a farm in the North East area and was educated in the North East public schools.

After her appointment in 1955, McQuitty decided to run for the office of Register of Wills. She was elected in November 1955 and took office as Erie County's elected Register of Wills in 1956. She successfully ran for a second term in 1959 and served until 1964.

**EVELYN WILSON OBITUARY**  
*Erie Times News, 1/5/92*

**Evelyn B. Wilson**  
Former Clerk of Courts employee

Evelyn B. Wilson, 72, 1424 Pearce Park, died Saturday, Jan. 4, 1992, Hamot Medical Center.  
She was born at Lake City on March 10, 1919.

She was a graduate of Rice Avenue High School and had been emp at the Erie County Clerk of Courts Office.

Survivors include her husband, George Wilson; one brother, Wilbu Palmer of Springfield; three nieces; and one nephew.

Friends may call at the Donald C. Burton Funeral Home, 602 W. 10th St. Tuesday from noon to 2 p.m., at which time a service will be held with Lewis M. Evans of First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant officiating.

Burial will be at Laurel Hill Cemetery.

Memorials may be made to the organization of one's choice.

McQuitty's success probably was primarily due to her long activity in the Republican Party. In addition to being a member of the Republican State Committee, she was a member of the Millcreek Council of Republican Women and Vice Chairwoman of the North East, Harborcreek, and Greenfield section of the Erie County Republican Committee. She was also a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution (Carney, *Highlights of Erie Politics*, 150).

The 1960s was a tumultuous time in American history. It was a time of civil rights advocacy and the pursuit of minority and women's rights. Betty Friedan wrote the *Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Just as the 1920s organizations pushed women into the public square, the 1960s and organizations, such as the National Organization of Women, raised the national consciousness to the dearth of women elected officials and the need to change that.

The next monograph will highlight the avalanche of women who, in the aftermath of this 1960s movement, sought and won elective positions in Erie County and the city of Erie during the 1970s and 1980s.

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Sources: Erie Daily Times, Erie Times News,

Photos:

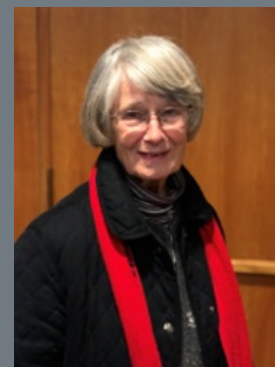
Vote for Women: <https://www.si.edu/spotlight/votes-for-women>

Helen Schluraff: <https://fairviewhistory.org/women-in-history-day/>

Erie Times News, Erie Dispatch Herald,

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Judy Lynch, Ph.D., is a Scholar in Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society. She was named the Jefferson's Decadean Scholar in 2018. She continues to serve on the Jefferson's Board of Trustees and was its first chairwoman. From 2004 to 2017, she served as Associate Professor of Political Science and History at Mercyhurst University. From 2002 to 2004, Dr. Lynch taught at Allegheny College and was part of the Civic Engagement Institute. Prior, she worked as an analyst for the CIA and served for 20 years as Erie County Executive. She received her Doctorate With Distinction in Political Science in 2001 from the University of Pittsburgh and her M.A. in Social Studies from Gannon University. Her undergraduate degree, a B.A. in History and Political Science, is from George Washington University.*



## In Case You Missed It

[Mediated America Part Two: Who Was Marshall McLuhan & What Did He Say?](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence, Dr. Andrew Roth.

[The Goosewood A Land Deal that Profoundly Changed Erie's West Bayfront](#) written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

[Mysticism, Politics Are Central to Great American Hymns](#) written by founder of Brock Institute for Mega Issues, Rev. Charles Brock.



