

JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

'Ma' Jeffs: A Real Cop (1917-1951)

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Editor's note: In honor of Women's History Month, the Jefferson spotlight turns to the story of Elizabeth Jeffs, an Erie native who made a historic difference for her community. This remembrance is based on Jeffs' scrapbook collection of local newspaper clippings, letters, and reports during her police career a century ago. It was preserved by Moira Holihan Veiga, her great-granddaughter, who remembers her fondly. Author Jack Veiga is a retired university professor.



Prologue

Mrs. Elizabeth L. Jeffs was born in Erie, Pennsylvania in 1876 of Irish immigrants Michael and Margaret Leonard. She worked for almost 20 years as a domestic nurse, until she was officially sworn-in as the city and state's first policewoman on Dec. 28, 1916, at the age of 40.

Officer Jeffs was nicknamed "Ma" or sometimes "Mother" by her fellow police officers. Historically, she was one of a handful of policewomen in the United States. However, the local Erie Women's Club and the press often referred to her as a "matron." Since 1845, police matrons were women, assigned to various duties such as staffing women's prisons, visiting women in prison, meter maids, and aides. They were considered part-time workers and were paid significantly less than policemen. According to Lois Higgins, author of "Historical Background of Policewomen's Service," "women were simply known as 'workers' or 'operatives' rather than police officers." Unlike Jeffs, matrons were not sworn-in as officers of the law.

For her swearing-in ceremony Jeffs handcrafted and wore a blue suit that resembled the color of a policeman's uniform. While on duty, she preferred to dress like an ordinary citizen to be less conspicuous to her "prey." As needed,

she carried a .22 caliber pistol in her vest pocket, that was given to her by the police chief and did not display her badge unless necessary. During her career, Ma Jeffs' achievements challenged the matron stereotype, but it was not until 1972 that employment law made it illegal for police departments to discriminate based on gender. Despite this law, a 2021 New Jersey ordinance adopted a police-matrons program describing the women as "auxiliary" and their duties to provide "assistance for regularly sworn officers in the handling of female prisoners." [These matrons] "Are not authorized to carry, use or have in their possession any weapon of any type and are not required to wear a uniform of any type, which would identify them as a police officer."

Jeffs, a working wife and mother, raised three daughters, two of whom predeceased her; Helen, in 1917, at the age of 20, died unexpectedly from melancholia after confinement for over two years in the Warren Asylum, a mental institution often referred to as "North Warren," and Nellie who died a year later of pneumonia at home. In 1920, Jeffs was widowed when her husband Joseph passed away, leaving Blanche her only remaining child.

To put Jeffs' career in historical context, she was on the police force for three years before women earned the right to vote in 1920. In 1917, she experienced the country entering World War I, and then in 1918, as that war ended, she saw the horrors of a flu pandemic that raged until 1919. A year later, Prohibition began, and Officer Jeffs had to cope with speakeasies, prostitutes, and those who ran houses of ill repute. In 1929, the Great Depression devastated the country, with massive joblessness and starvation finally ending in 1933, the same year prohibition ended. In December 1941, the U.S. entered World War II, which ended in 1945.

In 1949, the FBI reported that: "Active 73-year-old Ma Jeffs is believed to be the oldest policewoman in perhaps the entire nation." The report praised her for 32 years of "outstanding service," and noted her extensive work with "city, state, and federal officers in the area." She retired two years later after 34 years of service at age 75. (The average length of service for her predecessors was about 12 years.)

A Challenging Beginning

Before the final vote to approve Jeffs' appointment, the city's finance director argued that "there is not enough business in Erie or room enough in the City Hall for such an office." The mayor, Miles Kitts, retorted that in his opinion, "a policewoman is necessary for Erie as women are frequently brought into police headquarters. It is a delicate proposition for an officer to 'frisk' a woman. In the past, an officer had to take a woman into a room and search her when the occasion demanded such action. The policewoman will not need special quarters at City Hall. She will have a telephone installed at her home, which she will pay

for herself, and will be subject to the call of the chief. I appointed Mrs. Jeffs as police matron principally because of her qualifications as a domestic nurse.”

Thirty-six hours after Mrs. Jeffs was sworn in, she made her first arrest. The headline read: “Policewoman Jeffs Makes First Arrest a La Regular.” The man Jeffs arrested was well known to police and considered a “hard shell” along the bayfront. She first spotted him outside her parlor window, doing his drunken best to entertain a growing crowd. After she called the station to request a police wagon, she went outside. “Acting quicker than most regular patrolmen would under similar circumstances,” she apprehended the 46-year-old male, charging him with intoxication and disorderly conduct. He had made the unfortunate mistake of performing on a well-lit street corner directly in front of Jeffs’ house. She held him until the police wagon arrived and told fellow officers that she “enjoyed” it. The man, too befuddled to talk about his experience, insisted “that was no ordinary woman who arrested him.” “I gave *me self* up,” he said. “No woman could arrest me, no, sir, it couldn’t be done.” He may not have noticed that Mrs. Jeffs, described as a “well-built woman,” was very capable of doing her job. (Jeffs’ family pictures suggest that she was a sturdy woman, with broad shoulders who was about 5-feet-8.)

A few days after Jeffs’ first arrest, the Women’s Club of Erie announced that their approval for hiring Mrs. Jeffs “has been withheld.” Although the club had no official vote in the hiring decision, they had advocated for years for a police matron whose duties it should be: “to act as a motherly friend and protector of the women and young girls taken into custody. And to throw around the unhappy or miserable woman the cloak of protection that only a woman can offer a woman.” The club did not want another police officer to arrest drunks and would not “endorse this appointment, or thank the mayor for making it, until it has made a complete investigation to determine if Mrs. Jeffs is fitted for duties of the office.”

Some club members objected to Jeffs’ arrest of mere males, while others objected to where she lived. One member said, “We did not want a policewoman that must go out and arrest drunken men on the streets.” Another said, “Why when I heard she came from Short Street, I became sick to my stomach.” Short Street was in a lower-income section of the city. Once these comments were published, “a veritable storm of indignation” followed. The residents of Short Street “were up in arms over the club’s degrading slur” and demanded to know who made these comments to no avail. A resident said, “I was surprised that a woman of that organization would go out of her way to insult over fifty of Erie’s most respectable families residing on that street.” The club was forced to issue a statement: “It severely censures any member of the club for so doing and we sincerely regret that any unguarded remark of an individual should have been construed as a reflection upon any locality of the city or the character of Mrs. Jeffs.” Notably, Jeffs didn’t live on Short Street but lived just a block away.

The club had promised that once the investigation was over, it would “apologize to the good folks of Short Street.” But the press reported the club’s “Amende Honourable” never happened and instead, the club went silent. Members of the club refused to further discuss the matter of approving the appointment of Jeffs. However, a club spokesperson suggested that the primary reason the club withheld approval was because “Mrs. Jeffs annexed herself to the strong right arm brigade of the (police) force rather than act in the capacity of friend and counselor and help those of the weaker sex.”

A final commentary about Jeffs came from one “unnamed” club member who told a reporter that the chief of detectives had assured her that, “Mrs. Jeffs is not to arrest a drunk that was not intended, and she should desist in the future and just do the work that the mayor had instructed.” She added, “We don’t want a woman who must arrest men.” In retort, the reporter asked, “What would you do if Mrs. Jeffs found a masher on the street? Would you care to have her pass up the masher if she observed one?” The woman replied, “I don’t know what a masher is.” The reporter explained, “It means a fellow who approaches an unaccompanied woman or girl on the street.” To that explanation, she replied, “Well I suppose she ought. We ought to dictate the duties of the matron, but I suppose we have no right to expect to dictate.”

Two weeks after this kerfuffle ended, Jeffs received a letter from the mayor outlining her duties:

You are expected to come to the police station at any hour, to take charge of any female prisoners who may be brought to the station or paroled into your custody, as you will be held responsible for their behavior. Although it will be impossible for you to have regular hours, you will not be expected to put in as many hours as you would otherwise the next day. You should have regular hours for visiting public places and making investigations throughout the streets of the city, from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., and from 8 p.m. to (midnight). You should visit the moving picture shows, dance halls, theaters, and places of public amusement to suppress, eliminate or correct anything contrary to public morals looking especially after the female population of the city. Also, you should make frequent visits to the train depot to keep a check upon the going and coming population to discover things which ought to be corrected.

Dedicated to Justice

The Gentler Side of Jeffs was often described as “stern in appearance but kind, with a gentleness that is immediately apparent, relentless in her pursuit of justice and righteousness as she sees it, without fear of any kind.” To her, “jail was not a pleasant place” and neither was her job. In the jail’s women’s quarters,

there were four cells and her desk, with cots and a lavatory that were, under Jeffs' direction, always kept spotlessly clean. She believed that "unless it was absolutely necessary, she did not close the cell doors because it helped her charges who feel bad enough already." To Jeffs, "there but for the grace of God go you and me," and from her perspective, "they are often kids, little girls not yet out of their teens, who become enmeshed with the law, through circumstances beyond their control or through their own fault." She "straightened out the lives of innumerable girls (and even young women), regardless of their creed, color, or religion."

According to an F.B.I. report, upon Jeffs' completion of 10 years of service, J.J. Philips wrote, "She was considered one of the busiest, if not the busiest individual in the department." She is also "Noted throughout the country as one who, to use the vernacular, 'knows her vegetables.' Mrs. Jeffs does yeoman service in the police department." Beyond her regular police work, "she is called upon by other agencies to act for them." A resume of the work done by Mrs. Jeffs during the last year reveals that "she had made separate investigations for juvenile court authorities, humane societies, social hygiene organizations in addition to investigations especially assigned to her by the Chief of Police."

Additionally:

Jeffs arrested 356 women for various offenses who were under her personal supervision. Inspections of women employed in restaurants and cafes were also part of her routine. At given intervals she must inspect health certificates and keep in touch with the activities of each woman. Jeffs made surveys of nearly 1,220 cases, 927 waitresses, 191 dish washers and 123 women cooks. Of the women she arrested, 210 were married, 146 were single, 284 were white and 72 black. Only 30 girls under 21 were arrested, 104 women arrested for disorderly conduct and 90 on warrants. Of the women arrested, 137 were arraigned in court of which 128 were fined upon conviction.

After 10 years of service, despite Jeffs' accolades and workload, the mayor claimed that he was unable to "find the money" to increase Jeffs' salary. At that time, her salary was \$135 per month, which was lower than recently hired police officers, at the rank of "fourth-grade patrolman." All senior officers received various salary increases, two clerks were increased to \$170 per month, and one newly hired clerk received a salary of \$150 per month. (Jeffs never complained to the press, but she did include the newspaper clippings in her scrapbook.)

Jeffs was described as "the first and only member of the police department who looks further than mere arrests. She performs her duties well, but it is not the recorded duties that she does, but it is those which are not recorded that make her one of the best police officers in the country. Lost children are one of her

hobbies. She has traveled miles to take a little shaver back to its mother and wayward girls as well. If Jeffs' influence means anything, these girls are halted before they begin their life along the primrose path. But on Jeffs' report, these incidents do not show and a major portion of her services to the city goes unrequited except for the thanks of those who have come under her influence."

Jeffs never spoke publicly about her accomplishments, but her scrapbook did. As explained by a reporter, "only Jeffs knows how many homes have been preserved by her timely intervention, straightening out domestic difficulties. Only she could tell you if she would, and rest assured she won't, how many girls she has chatted with who found the right path." To her, "they are girls and young women who have gotten off to a wrong start" and she is "eternally hopeful that they will see the error of their ways." In one case, her scrapbook contained a letter, dated Sept. 21, 1932, posted in Ripley, N.Y. with a special delivery stamp, sent to Jeffs' home by a 14-year-old girl. It read:

Dear Mrs. Jeffs, I have left home. I don't want to stay there with my father and stepmother. I went away last night and I'm with my mother. My father will be coming up here and will make trouble. I would like it fixed so he could not bother me and make trouble for my mother. The place I lived at was not suitable for a girl. My father isn't working, and my stepmother was suffering. They were talking about starting a bootlegging joint. And I don't wish to be there. My father has done many a jail sentence. So, I don't see why I have to stay with them. Will you please call this number (provided), which is the home of my father's brother, and tell them that. You can reverse the charges.

Within a week, the girls' uncle was charged by Jeffs with "kidnapping his niece from her mother's home, and a fugitive from justice." Unfortunately, Jeffs' well-founded charges were withdrawn by the family, and the girl was placed back in her father's care.

The Tougher Side of Jeffs was rarely reported in the newspapers but, it was clear, she "could be when the occasion called for it and had to be that way many times, including the mashers who crossed her path." Over the years, she quickly gained considerable agency that went beyond her initial duties. When it came to arresting men, she was not afraid and "had done so on many occasions and doubtlessly she will do it again and again." To the question, "Are women braver than men?" Jeffs' replied, "I do believe women are more courageous than men. I am not afraid of going anywhere a man does." She added, "When men are arrested, they act sheepishly, perhaps embarrassed or ashamed, and they're no tougher to handle than a female." Jeffs once remarked, "I personally believe that women are as brave as men at any time, and in many instances they are braver."

Columnist Eugene Janas praised Jeffs for quickly establishing a record of justice, “tempered with common sense.” These attributes, he noted, had “won her respect from fellow officers” and achieved for her “an adoration which few minions of the law can command.”

The chief of police was very clear about Jeffs’ toughness, characterizing her as “a real copper, a regular policeman. And there are very few women, if any, in the police game today that Mrs. Jeffs would have to take a backseat for. She has been (frequently) called out to aid police investigation of murders, robberies, and other crimes. Danger, policemen will tell you, she does not recognize. She has answered riot calls and raids, aided in bringing prisoners to jail, stood toe-to-toe with policemen during fights, and backed away from no one.” Recalling one of her confrontations, he said: “Mrs. Jeffs went to arrest a woman on shoplifting charges. After she entered the woman’s house, a man who was living there pulled out a revolver and threatened to shoot her. But before he could pull the trigger, Mrs. Jeffs landed a right-cross to his jaw that dropped him to the floor and his gun fell out of his limp hand.” It turned out these two were part of a larger robbery ring. Her punch was forever described as a “real haymaker” a “Joe Louis” knock-out punch. When asked if she had ever been injured while answering calls she replied, “No, but I have landed many a haymaker to protect myself,” then grinning she continued, “Yes, that punch is still good.” When questioned about her age, the reporter was surprised when Jeffs said, “Why I’m sixty, ready for action.”

At another headlined face-off, “Police Matron Kayos Youth During a Raid,” Jeffs and a fellow officer were called to investigate a suspected break-in of a house. Upon entering the house, they “found two young men under the influence.” While her fellow officer searched the house for the owner, Jeffs proceeded to arrest them. But one of the men began talking to her in “most insulting terms.” This 24-year-old continued with a barrage of insults aimed at Mrs. Jeffs and made it clear he had no intention to leave. His “vitriolic attacks” escalated until he hurled a particularly personal remark at her. At that point, Jeffs, a normally “mild-mannered” policewoman, let go with her right cross, and “he hit the floor.” After that, “he was far more agreeable and respectful to the police matron.” Both young men were arrested and taken to jail.

Although Jeffs had always tried to avoid publicity, it was unavoidable when she became the custodian of a woman charged with a horrific murder. In 1930, a stepmother was charged with burning her stepdaughter to death. The woman was accused of killing “an 11-year-old girl to benefit from the child’s \$6,000 estate (left by her mother when she died) and to become the sole recipient of her husband’s affections.” This notorious case made the headlines daily and was closely followed by appalled Erie residents. It was big news for a mother to murder her child, let alone a stepchild, but to be motivated by money was outrageous. Upon New York state extradition approval (the woman had moved

there), Jeffs accompanied the shackled woman for 10 hours on a train back to Erie to stand trial and accompanied her to and from the trial. As many of the city's residents awaited the verdict, the trial of the "Wicked Stepmother" progressed slowly. After four months, the stepmother's appeal was denied. The jury had found her guilty of second-degree murder and the judge sentenced her to 10 years in prison.

Dedicated to Public Service

In 1930, during the peak of the Great Depression, columnist John Kelley wrote, "There is more destitution in Erie this winter than ever before in its history, and Erie is meeting this situation better than most cities." On Nov. 25, 1930, Mulligan Hall opened its doors in the basement of an old church next to City Hall, "To feed the hungry three daily meals, creed or color is no barrier." Columnist Tom Sterrett, named the hall "Mulligan" after a stew concocted by hobos who rode the rails looking for work. The stew was made from whatever food they could beg, borrow, or earn by doing odd jobs for a meal or leftovers. Unlike the hall's name, Sterrett insisted the hall was "not a soup kitchen; we haven't served soup yet and every stew is full of vegetables and meat."

A month after the Hall opened; the New York Times published a story titled: "Erie men feed idle in Mulligan Hall, in old church." It went on: "Seventeen Hundred in Erie eat in Mulligan Hall. The city (under Mayor James Rossiter) solves the problem of the hungry idle; gifts support activity and those getting meals, have no (church) service to listen to and, no questions are asked." Sterrett later wrote, "I know that Mrs. Jeffs, the policewoman, has been on duty at Mulligan Hall from the first day we opened our doors. I'll bet you the women and children who are fed each night were never as orderly and quiet as our kids at Mulligan Hall. Mrs. Jeffs is responsible for that. Now Mrs. Jeffs is supposed to be hard boiled, I heard that she once pelted a guy on the chin, and he was out for half an hour. Even so, Mrs. Jeffs loves children and she's the most motherly soul you'd ever meet." Perhaps too, the orderliness and quiet was also an expression of the relief and security that the women and children felt, because, as Jeffs pointed out:

In some of the homes I've been in, the father sits there with a big plate of meat and potatoes in front of him while the wife waits on the big hog. The mess of children cowers in the corner. If there's anything left the children and the dog gets it after the old man has finished. The children are forced to be petty thieves; they must steal to get enough to eat. But since we have opened Mulligan Hall, there is no juvenile crime to speak of as police records show.

The police chief paid Jeffs the highest tribute when he called her "a good cop who cares about people, especially the people of her city. She is more interested

in justice than in the strict letter of the law.” After many years on the police force, Jeffs had earned the reputation of being one of the most capable policewomen in the country and is considered the “Deaness of all policewomen throughout the United States.” (Today she would be Dean.) Local women’s and welfare organizations, including the Red Cross, welfare workers, and the Humane Society were most appreciative of her help. On her 74th birthday, columnist Bill McClelland praised her: “Mrs. Jeffs has long been a policewoman and the good she has done can never be measured. She is responsible for the rehabilitation of girls who took the wrong turn; the mending-up of broken families; her plain down-to-earth advice. She’s all human and held in high esteem by all local women’s organizations.” (We don’t know if Jeffs was held in high esteem by the Women’s Club of Erie.) In 1942, the Professional Women’s Club honored her for her achievements. In a short speech, written on a scrap of paper, Jeffs addressed the audience:

Thank you for the honor and recognition, for the privilege of appearing. I believe there is a place in the world today for business and professional women; as has already been demonstrated, not only in my own case, but throughout the world. I have withstood the rigors of police work for the last 25 years, and I am still hale and hearty. Thank you again.

Jeffs was also known for making appeals in the newspapers to help others. Once she was seeking the donation of a baby buggy, which brought forth at least a dozen offers. She said, “I wanted it for a two-month-old baby whose parents did not have the means to purchase one.” It was said that “If she could provide no other home for a hapless family immediately, she would gather funds, including some of her own, and send the mother and children to a hotel.”

In another appeal there was a family of nine, with seven children, who had been without food for 24 hours. “The woman driven to despair had sought to end her life but was prevented by her little 13-year-old daughter who knocked a bottle of poison from her hand.” In that appeal, according to the mayor’s thank you note to kindhearted contributors: “within an hour after the papers left the press Mrs. Jeffs was deluged, received numerous phone calls and packages. The baby clothes contributed (consisted) of blankets, night gowns, booties, sweaters, stockings, dresses, hoods, shirts bands, buntings, and other necessary baby attire. In addition, we also received some cash, which was presented to the little mother.” It was Jeffs’ regular appeals for aid for destitute families that produced such outpouring of charitable gifts.

When Jeffs took a stand on issues she was also very influential in the press. In 1931, she proclaimed, “Prohibition is filling Erie jails with girls. When I began my work here it was a rare occasion when I arrested a girl of sixteen; now there are more young girls in the last five years and soon they will outnumber the adult women, prisoners. Many of them are from good families who have

succumbed to the flask-toting era brought on by Prohibition and eventually they land in jail.” Jeffs also noted that “While these girls and young women were not unruly, they were more temperamental prisoners than men. They scream in their cells or singing loudly to banish the dull care of the barren walls and cold bars.”

According to a press report in 1932, “Jeffs is the only policewoman in the city engaged in a business that is quite different than the ordinary run of work that women assume.” During her 15 years with the Erie Police Department, “she has done excellent work.” She attends the yearly convention of policewomen and “has often won recognition for her important work.” At the annual convention of the International Association of Policewomen, attendees came from all sections of the United States and Canada. The association asked Jeffs to report to the convention on the work that she had done. According to figures submitted by Jeffs, she was one of the busiest in the country with more than 2,500 women handled by her, on various charges, during the past 15 years.”

In 1949, there was some speculation that Jeffs would retire, but the press disagreed:

She’s 73 but isn’t thinking of retiring, she is no more than fifty years of age. In all her years she depended on her glib tongue and sweet mild manner to win over even the most difficult people. ‘Ma’ affectionately known to many Erie people, has more ambition and pep than the youngest rookie on the force and there is no one on the force who can match her tongue when it comes to good old Irish wit. In the years she had been on the job she had made hundreds of arrests, conducted scores of investigations to successful conclusions. But of all Jeffs’ arrests, it is her proudest boast that no one took a ride unless they deserved it.

Sadly, Jeffs retired a year later because diabetes necessitated a leg amputation up to her knee. But she never lost her sweet manner, as her great-granddaughter Moira can attest when she played with her “Nanny.” At the age of five, she remembers climbing into bed with her Nanny and being allowed and encouraged to crawl under a small blanket-tent positioned to cover her Nanny’s amputated leg.

Over her lengthy career, Jeffs achieved several firsts. The Fraternal Order of Police journal reported that she was a “charter member of the Haas Memorial Lodge No.7 founded in 1918.” A certificate of appointment signed by High Sheriff of Erie County Paul E. Babbitt, dated Jan. 25, 1949, appointed Jeffs to Special Deputy Sheriff. She was the “first policewoman to become a member of the policemen’s pension fund with the same rights as male officers.” She was also the first policewoman to host a convention held by Pennsylvania’s Fraternal

Order of the Police in 1936. And in 1941 she was the “first policewoman to be admitted as a member of the Fraternal Order of Police.”

Epilogue

Homage “To her human understanding as a police matron was accorded Mrs. Elizabeth Jeffs by 150 friends at a dinner after 34 years.” “Because of Mrs. Jeffs’ influence over the span of years, Erie has been made a better place to live in,” the state treasurer said. He declared that “she had been a real friend of Erie girls and mothers and had put hundreds of them back on the right track after they had met with obstacles.” Jeffs was also honored for her “instinctive intelligence for police work and her abilities at solving numerous criminal cases.”

The police chief said at Jeffs’ retirement that, “She had a natural inclination for police work in all its varied forms and caught on fast, becoming a valuable asset to the department. She came in contact regularly with many of the city’s most prominent persons, also policewomen of many other cities. She had also become a well-known person with jurists of Erie County and federal courts along with members of the Erie County Bar Association. She was highly respected by dignitaries for her untiring efforts with the courts.”

In 1950, Mrs. Jeffs was considered the oldest active policewoman in age and service in the nation. In recognition of her accomplishments, J. Edgar Hoover, chief of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, honored her with an official scroll that commended Mrs. Jeffs for “her many successful years as a policewoman.” She also received honorable mentions in publications throughout the country. Some opined that Mrs. Jeffs had long been a policewoman and the good she had done “could never be measured.” Another asserted, “Mrs. Jeffs had established a record for justice that few ever reach.”

Upon Jeffs’ death, the Erie Dispatch-Herald, on June 17, 1952, declared: “Ma Jeffs, Real ‘Cop,’ Dead at 76.” In tribute to her career, it said: “Elizabeth L. ‘Ma’ Jeffs, Erie’s only policewoman was friend and counselor to thousands of Erie’s ‘bad girls’ and young women. The cheery bright-tongued woman once said she had joined the force because she’d always been the ‘weeping stone’ in her neighborhood. She began her career as a mender of broken homes and a patcher of torn lives. She worked quietly and uninterruptedly, controlling with her obvious goodwill and humor, what the harsher of her male colleagues could not cope with. In her makeshift office at the city jail, she avoided the limelight, trying to shelter the charges for whom she had so much pity from the glare of notoriety.”

The Erie Daily Times headline on June 17, 1952, reported: “Mrs. Jeffs, Retired Police Aide Dies.” In a memorial to her it stated: “Erie’s only policewoman literally grew up with the department, about double the size now, and has been

affectionately called ‘Ma’ and ‘Mother’ by all its’ members young and old. Soon Mrs. Jeffs had become known far and wide for her kindness in befriending wayward girls and women who had become entangled with the law. Mrs. Jeffs could be stern when needed and she gained the respect of all repeat law offenders. Elizabeth Jeffs was something to everyone, a happy, decent, motherly-type good soul. She did an outstanding job; much of it unpublicized at her own request. She could handle the toughest man when it became necessary. Reporters on the police beat knew her best. They watched her respectfully as she handled the sordid and cheap; the repeaters, those who turned to her when they had no one else, and many others. She preferred to handle them in her own way and many young ladies were steered back on the right course because of her. The best Mrs. Jeffs would have had said of her [self] is that she was a good policewoman. That was her life, and it is her epitaph.”

Erie Times columnist Jay James (John Mead Jr.) also memorialized Jeffs: “Mrs. Jeffs, Erie’s first policewoman, was a woman stalwart in body and soul whose conscientious contributions to public service will forever be a monument to her. There are hundreds of persons today, mostly grown women, who owe their rehabilitation and renewal of self-respect to the advice given to them by Mrs. Jeffs. Many of them, who have been put on the right track by Mrs. Jeffs, never forgot Erie’s policewoman with a greeting card on her birthday and Christmas. She needs no encomium here. She rendered a fine account of her stewardship. The Almighty blessed her with talents to handle problems, usually too sordid for the average human.” At Jeffs’ funeral service, “members of the city Police Department served as active and honorary pallbearers. Sixteen members formed an honor guard and escort. After the service, “high city and county officials joined in paying a fine tribute for Erie’s first policewoman.”

Over her 34 years of public service, let it be said that Mrs. Elizabeth Jeffs’ moxie, savvy, fearlessness, kindness, and agency took her far beyond the scope of her original duties, earning her numerous accolades and achievements. Although the scarcity of policewomen in the U.S. over 100 years ago reflected strongly held stereotypes and mores of that time, Ma Jeffs would be pleased to know that there are more policewomen today following in her footsteps; but disappointed to learn that as of 2020, “only 13.1 percent of full-time law enforcement officers were female.”

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