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Homeschool, 10th grade
Essay Winner 10th - 12th grades

Gladys Pyle - A Life of Service

Gladys Pyle. Her name doesn't rank in our minds alongside Susan B. Anthony or Lucretia Mott, but perhaps it should. Her life was dedicated to serving her community and her career spanned the ladder of politics. All in all, she left a legacy of accomplishments that are impressive to this day.

Gladys Pyle was born on October 4, 1890 in Huron, South Dakota. Like all children, her parents were a strong influence on her. Gladys's father John was a lawyer and South Dakota's attorney general, while her mother Mamie Shields Pyle was a dedicated suffragette. She was president of the state's woman suffrage association and greatly aided in securing the right of South Dakota's women to vote. After John's death in 1902, Mamie took over the family business and served on several community boards. Her commitment to public service instilled the importance of civic participation into young Gladys.

Following several years of teaching after college graduation, Gladys began to tour midwestern states, lecturing for the League of Women Voters. During this time, she determined to get involved in politics herself. Gladys successfully ran for South Dakota's House of Representatives in 1922. Winning by 350 votes, Gladys made state history by becoming the first female elected to the South Dakota legislature. From 1923-1927 Gladys served her two terms with several positive accomplishments. She established the state budget, reorganized the government finance department, and pushed for women's right to serve on juries in South Dakota. Another significant action was her help in getting South Dakota to ratify the Child Labor Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1923.

During her terms in the South Dakota House, Gladys was appointed assistant to the Secretary of State. This was followed by her own election in 1926 as Secretary of State. Being the first woman elected to this position, Gladys became the first female in South Dakota to attain a statewide constitutional office. Her two-term career, from 1927-1931, was mostly marked by her introduction of motor safety laws.

In 1930 Gladys took another bold step in her political career: she sought the Republican nomination for governor. Campaigning on the slogan "Clean Up the Banks", she called for banking reform and a tighter control over miscellaneous state funds. Although she led in the primary, Gladys lacked enough votes to win the Republican nomination. Instead, the nominee had to be chosen by a special convention in Pierre. Voters had shown they appreciated Gladys's ability and constructive program, but she face hostile male opponents and delegates at the convention. After the twelfth ballot and some intentional delays, another candidate, Warren Green, finally won the nomination. Gladys and others suspected unfairness in the decision, but she took her loss calmly, still pressing for the reform she had campaigned for.



Gladys Pyle - A Life of Service continued

Her next position in politics brought Gladys to national attention. Following the death in office of South Dakota senator Peter Norbeck, a special state-wide election was called in 1938 to fill the five-week vacancy he left. Gladys was chosen by South Dakota's Republican party to run for the position. Campaigning for the entire Republican ticket, she succeeded in winning with 58% of the vote. Gladys's victory was very significant because she was the first Republican woman elected to Congress. Although her term was short, lasting from November 1938 – January 1939, Gladys made the most of it. Her work included securing support for highways and WPA projects in South Dakota, intervening for suffering landowners, and handling cases from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. She also took time to care for the individual needs of the South Dakotans she represented. One accomplishment she was especially pleased with was arranging a visit from Norway's crown prince and princess to her home state. Gladys became quite popular in Washington D.C. She was a friendly and gracious woman who favorably represented South Dakota. As her short term came to a close, Gladys commented that although the Senate had not been in session, that hadn't meant she couldn't be of service to South Dakota.

Gladys Pyle was a significant South Dakotan woman for several reasons. Her list of "firsts" includes being the first woman elected to the South Dakota legislature, the first woman elected to a state constitutional office, and the first South Dakota woman elected to either house of Congress. Throughout her political career Gladys set precedents for future female politicians across America. She proved that women were not only capable of voting leaders into office but were also able to responsibly fill government positions. Gladys Pyle spent her life seeking to make a difference in her community despite the challenges she faced. South Dakotans can be proud of this determined woman who went from small town schoolteacher to U.S. senator.