

IOWA HISTORY

by Cheryl Mullenbach



Julia Addington

Did Iowa Elect First Woman?

Could it be a joke?

A woman's name on the ballot in Mitchell County, Iowa, in the fall of 1869? Heck, women couldn't even vote. They surely couldn't hold office, could they?

Well, apparently it was true, and the people of Mitchell County were accused of being "earnest and zealous supporters of 'Women's Rights'" as a result! What were they thinking in that far northern county?

In a letter to the editor an indignant writer, who signed off with: "Yours truly, Common Sense," expressed this opinion: "The constitution, and the laws of this State expressly declare, that none but white male citizens of the United States, who have become residents of this State, shall be entitled to the right of suffrage, and to hold office in our State."

Common Sense went on to express his (or her?) disdain for the very idea that a woman—Julia Addington—could hold the position of county school superintendent. (The writer was wrong about who could vote—an 1868 amendment had deleted the word "white" from the state constitution.)

Julia had been elected to the office on October 12; however, her victory didn't come easily. She was nominated by a group of Republicans in the county who were labeled "bolters" because they had broken off from the regular Republicans to nominate its own slate of candidates. There ended up being two slates of Republican candidates for all the county offices. Milton M. Browne, a lawyer from Osage, was put forth as the county school superintendent candidate from the regular Republican group. Republican voters would cast their votes for either Browne or Julia Addington.

Was the county ready for a female name on the ballot? Yes! On election day 633 people voted for Julia; and 633 voted for Milton Browne. A tie! It was decided the best way to solve the issue was to "cast lots." Now it was a game of chance. And Julia Addington came out the winner.

Although the writer who signed his letter "Common Sense" was wrong about voting being limited to white men, he was right about women being denied the vote. It wasn't until the 19th amendment to the US Constitution was passed in 1919 that women were given the vote. But what about holding office? That's a question that was posed to the Iowa Attorney General after Julia was elected.

Attorney General Henry O'Connor ruled in favor of her. "...women are citizens as well and as much as men. ... in my opinion, Miss Addington is eligible to the office to which she has been elected..." O'Connor wrote.

The news of O'Connor's ruling was reported at the national level in Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's newspaper, *The Revolution*. The headline: "Can Women Hold Office?" They reported: "Recently, the right of woman to hold office has been more directly declared in Iowa than in any other state, the Attorney-General having given an opinion in the case of a young woman elected Superintendent of Common Schools."

How did things turn out for the two candidates for the post of county school superintendent? Milton Browne went back to practicing law. The local newspaper reported he had "fully recovered from the depressing effects caused by the triumph of 'women's rights,' at the late election." And that he was "now a firm believer in 'strong-minded' women, and will hereafter give all such a 'wide berth.'"

Julia Addington assumed the duties that she had been elected to perform. She oversaw 76 schools—including 3 log schoolhouses, 2,231 students and 122 teachers. She wrote that she hoped "the time is near at hand, when teachers will be paid according to the service they are capable of rendering."

Not all of Julia's fellow educators were ready to accept a female in their ranks. When she missed a meeting in Des Moines of all the state county school superintendents shortly after her election the attendees (all men) passed a resolution welcoming the first woman to their group. However, it was recorded in the minutes that five individuals voted against the resolution!