

IOWA HISTORY



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Emma Harvat, Iowa City Mayor, 1922

Female Mayor Cleans Up Iowa City in 1922

“Woman Mayor Refuses to Sign Big Contract Before Investigating”

The headline in Albia’s *Daily Times* newspaper must have caught the attention of readers in 1922. A woman mayor? And one who was hesitant to spend thousands of dollars in taxpayers’ money? A curiosity, for sure.

The woman was Emma Harvat, an Iowa City native who had been appointed mayor by the city council after Ingalls Swisher resigned. Harvat was a successful business owner, a partner in book and stationery sellers, Lee Brothers & Harvat. After selling her interest, Harvat bought a woman’s clothing store in Missouri. She and her partner, Mae Stach, operated the business for nine years, turning it into a “winner” after “a half-dozen men” had failed at the enterprise,

according to the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*. Returning to Iowa City, the two women owned another women's ready-to-wear shop. Harvat also entered the real estate business. She was elected alderman in 1921, the first female in that position.

"I thank the council for the honor conferred upon me," Harvat said after her appointment as mayor. "You know where I stand, and I have only one thing to say: 'I propose to do my duty as mayor of Iowa City.'" That was her inaugural address, short and sweet.

Within days, Harvat balked at signing a contract to spend \$13,000 for a "triple combination pumper, chemical and hose car" for the water department. She feared the machine was too large for the city's hydrants and mains; she wanted more information. After getting a report from the fire and police commission, she agreed to sign the contract with a company to install the equipment.

One of her first actions was to hire university football player, Clifford Anderson, as a part-time motorcycle cop to enforce the city's traffic laws. Within his first four days he had brought in over \$125 in fines. That amount more than covered his month's salary.

Harvat made it her mission to enforce the laws. She reminded citizens that there were state laws on the books governing gambling and the sale of liquor. "I agree with the vast majority of fellow-citizens of the state that gambling and bootlegging are abominations," she said.

Harvat oversaw the city's police court. She told one offender of the liquor laws to "go and sin no more," letting him off with a warning for his first offense. She told him next time it was 30 days in jail. She expected him to "drink no more and work much more," according to the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*. Harvat fined another offender \$10 for drinking. She didn't buy his excuse that he imbibed to ease the pain of a boil on his leg.

Harvat pointed out that parents from across the state were watching what happened in Iowa City. "This is a college town, to which nearly 6,000 fathers and 6,000 mothers are sending their sons and daughters. They are watching us," she said.

She added, "I am not a 'crank,' nor a fanatic—but neither am I one of those 'liberals' who cannot differentiate between honorable and desirable liberty, and lawless license."

After a month in office Harvat told the local newspaper, "I am 52 years old, don't care who knows it; and I'm going to clean up this town and then run it properly."

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Sources:

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