

Susanna Salter: Stay-at-Home Mom to First Female Mayor Overnight

How a prank transformed into a political milestone for women everywhere.

The first female mayor in the United States never intended to be mayor at all. In fact, she didn't know she was on the ballot until election day.

Susanna Salter, a resident of Argonia, Kansas and a leading officer in the local sector of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), was hanging her laundry on the drying line when she was approached by a group of Republican Party representatives, sent by the chairman of the party himself.

Why were they at her house? Susanna had been nominated for mayor by the Prohibition Party of Argonia, without her knowledge or consent. Why had she been nominated? As a joke. The men in the party believed no one would vote for her. They wanted to make a statement: Women were not welcome in politics.

Seconds after finding out that her name was on the ballot, the group asked Susanna if she would agree to be mayor if elected to the position.

She simply responded, "Yes."

Less than 24 hours later, the first female mayor in the United States was elected. Susanna had made her own statement: She was right where she, and all women, belonged.

Susanna Madora Kinsey — or Dora, as her family called her — was born on March 2, 1860 in Belmont County, Ohio. When Susanna was 12, her parents moved her to Silver Lake, Kansas where they lived and maintained an 80-acre farm.

Susanna enrolled at Kansas State Agricultural College as a sophomore after completing multiple college-level courses while in high school. However, Susanna never finished college. She was forced to drop out six weeks before graduation due to an unknown illness.

While there, Susanna met Lewis Salter, and the two married in 1880 before moving to Argonia, Kansas with the rest of Susanna's family. When the town became incorporated in 1885, it was Susanna's father that was elected as the first mayor, foreshadowing Susanna's own election just two years later.

While Susanna's father was in office, women gained major rights in the state of Kansas. In 1887, a law was enacted by the Kansas legislature that gave women in first, second, and third class cities the right to vote, which included Argonia.

It was during this time that Susanna became an officer in the Argonian chapter of the WCTU, which would go on to be invaluable in passing the 18th and 19th amendments. But in 1887, the group's main focus was Prohibition.

Once Kansan women received the right to vote in city elections, the Argonian WCTU stopped protesting outside of saloons and began actively seeking change in the political system — much to the contempt of many men in the city. This was the first domino that started Susanna's journey to mayor.

As the Argonian mayoral and city council election drew near, it was Susanna who was tasked to preside over a WCTU-called caucus, where the group decided on a ticket of men they wanted to back in the upcoming election. The ticket passed with no objections, but twenty men in the crowd were less than pleased with the idea of women entering the realm of politics.

Meeting after the caucus in the back of a local restaurant, the men created their own party ticket. The catch? Their ticket mirrored the WCTU's exactly, with only one difference — Susanna was nominated for mayor.

The men assumed that no respectable man would vote for a female mayor, and Susanna would only receive 20 votes from the women in the WCTU. They hoped this embarrassment would discourage the group from continuing to speak out about political issues.

They never could have predicted how their prank would backfire.

Once Susanna learned that her name was on the ballot — whether she wanted it there or not — she got to work. Despite the fact that she only had one day to campaign, Susann immediately gained supporters.

The Republican Party backed her, stating, “All right, we will elect you and just show those fellows who framed up this deal a thing or two.” The WCTU also put aside their original nominee for mayor and declared that they were now endorsing Susanna.

With these endorsements, Susanna earned more than 20 votes. Many more. She won the election with a two-thirds majority, making the 27-year-old the first female mayor in the United States — 25 years before women gained the right to vote in state elections and 33 years before the 19th Amendment was passed.

Susanna became mayor of Argonia on April 4, 1887. Five new council members were also elected that day, three of whom were part of the same group of men that had nominated Susanna as a prank.

However, in accordance with her nature, Susanna had no trouble keeping the peace between the all-male council and herself. On her first day in office, she addressed them: “Gentlemen, what is your pleasure? You are the duly elected officials of this town, I am merely your presiding officer.”

Mayor Salter was known for her short meetings and no nonsense policies. Not much happened during her one-year term, which one would expect in a town with a population of less

than five hundred people. Her most influential ruling was the banning of hard cider from Argonia.

Despite her uneventful office, Susanna never let those around her undermine her position. In contrast, she was a stricter mayor than the men who had come before her, often using her position to reprimand unruly children in the streets. One reporter stated that “mischievous small boys appear to regard her much as a New York gamin does a cop,” and that the phrase, “There’s the Mayor,” became a signal for “a general scattering of urchins.”

After her election, Susanna didn’t just become mayor; she became an international celebrity and a role model for women everywhere. Hundreds of newspapers, both domestic and foreign, traveled to Kansas to report on Argonian town meetings and interview locals about their opinions on the mayor, with both positive and negative reviews. Susanna also received thousands of letters from across the country that either celebrated her or denied the validity of her election.

Susanna never let the publicity take away from her job. At one of her first council meetings, a reporter from the *New York Sun* sat in. He stated that Susanna “presided with great decorum” and “checked discussion which she deemed irrelevant, showing that she was a good parliamentarian.”

Susanna decided not to rerun for mayor after her one-year term, which fueled even more “fan-mail” — as she liked to call the hate mail she received — accusing her of giving up on the position and setting women back in politics.

More likely, she was a mother of nine with no real interest in the political sphere. She had only been paid an annual salary of \$1.00 during her stint as mayor, which wasn’t enough to make up for the time she had to spend away from her children.

When asked if she intended to become a leading female politician in the future, Susanna replied, “No, indeed, I shall be very glad when my term of office expires, and shall be only too happy to thereafter devote myself entirely, as I always have done heretofore, to the care of my family.”

Soon after, Susanna and her family moved to Oklahoma where they lived happily until Susanna’s death in 1961 at the age of 101. Today, Susanna’s original family home in Argonia is a registered national landmark.

Though many still do not know Susanna’s name, the precedent she set for future generations of women cannot be understated. During her year as mayor, *The Manhattan Nationalist* detailed how high Susanna set the bar for future female politicians. It stated, “There are many others in Kansas just as capable as she, but as among men, there are some incapable. It cannot be said now that the very beginning [of women in office] was a failure.”

Susanna stepped up when she was needed, and she showed the world how powerful women can be. Today, with the recent appointment of Kamala Harris as the first female vice president, we can see just how far women have come since 1887. And how much farther we still have to go.