

WATERLOO CEDAR FALLS

M A G A Z I N E

Remembering a Rebel

Ralph Thuesen with a picture of his mother, Julia, Iowa's first woman voter

Two links in the Jamesville, IA chain inspired me
to find out the story behind the first woman to
vote in IA. — SE

[feature]

Remembering A Quiet Rebel:

Julia Guldager Thuesen, the First Woman to Vote in Iowa

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When asked how she had inspired him, Ralph Thuesen replied that he remembers his mother, Julia, for her daily loving care, “taking one day at a time,” as he tells it. Now a man of 76 years, he knows well her place in Iowa history. It’s just that he, in his own quiet way, doesn’t make too much of it. A lot like his mother, that man Ralph.

It is a morning in late summer, in 1920. For 72 years women from all walks of life had worked toward, rallied for, and dreamed of this day. If Julia Guldager Thuesen had paused a moment in her busy life as a young farm wife, perhaps when doing the breakfast dishes that morning, maybe she would have felt the weight of history on her shoulder, if just for a moment. But then, she was a practical woman, with a civically-active husband and a busy two-year-old son. She may have reasoned she was doing what any caring wife would have done, following the wishes of her husband, a commissioner of elections. After all, she simply would be sliding a marked piece of paper into a slotted box. What was so special about that?

Quiet person that she was, she was probably a bit uncomfortable hearing about all the attention paid this day. Even the *Waterloo Courier* reported that representatives of a film news service would be in Iowa to commit the event to history. And now, by her simply sliding a piece of paper into a box, she would help make that history, becoming the first to fulfill the dreams of her Iowa sisters. On this day, August 27, 1920, Julia Guldager Thuesen joined other Grundy County women in voting for the first time ever.

On that August day, in the Fairfield #9 School District, Grundy County women joined men in deciding whether or not to consolidate parts of Grundy and Black Hawk counties in the Fairfield District. The *Des Moines Register* of Saturday, August 28, one day after the vote, said, “The ballots of the ladies were kept separate on a precaution over possible contest of illegality of vote.” The paper also mentioned that a large number of women cast their ballots.

The front page of the *Waterloo Courier* of that Saturday proclaimed that 67 women helped pass the ballot issue by voting. The actual tally was 56 women for, 11 against the school consolidation.

At the head of this procession into history walked 25-year-old Julia Guldager Thuesen. It was morning; the polls had just opened. Into Hearst School she stepped with her two-year-old son, Ralph, in tow. Student desks were arranged for school; there were no voting booths.

At slightly more than five feet tall, this brown-haired woman of Danish descent became the first woman in Iowa to vote. The next day’s *Des Moines Register* said she was the first woman in the United States to vote but that contention has not been proven. It was barely a day after final ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, the constitutional guarantee giving women the right of franchise.

Thuesen was very likely aware of what had led up to this historic occasion because she liked to read and keep abreast of current events. The family subscribed to periodicals like the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Country Gentleman*, said her son, Ralph, now a resident of Dike. The Thuesen home was a place where books were prized; Ralph remembers often receiving them as Christmas gifts.

Although she only completed the eighth grade, Julia and her husband, Jens, would sometimes attend winter sessions at a then-Danish institution, Grand View College in Des Moines. Like many others of Danish blood, they took courses not for college credit, but to brush up on their education in English, mathematics, history, religion and other liberal arts courses.

One of Julia’s contemporaries remembers her friend well. Now 101 years old and a resident of the Cedar Falls Lutheran Home, Mattie Schmidt said that Thuesen was not a suffragist. “She was too quiet for that,” says Schmidt. “(She was) a good homemaker and a good housekeeper.” Schmidt recalls that Julia’s main concerns were caring for her husband Jens (Jim) and son Ralph, volunteering at the Danish Lutheran Church in Fredsville and working hard on the family’s Grundy County farm.

Schmidt believes Thuesen voted because of her husband. She recalls Jens as the sort who enjoyed the limelight, who liked being noticed. As the commissioner of elections, he had the responsibility of opening the polls. He also had the privilege of making sure it was his wife who cast the first ballot for the women. “I’m sure she wasn’t going to contradict him or anything like that,” says Schmidt. “(She would) just let him do what he wanted to do and she went along with it.” Ironically, it seems that the first Iowa woman to exercise her right of franchise was not a suffragist but a traditional wife following the wishes of her husband.

In her own quiet way, Julia Guldager Thuesen was a rebel. With the flick of her wrist, in that simple act of voting, she finished what Iowa women before her had started; she began what women after her continue, the right to fully participate in American life. For this, she is to be remembered. And she is. By her friend, Mattie, her son, Ralph, and in a museum honoring suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt, now being planned in Charles City.

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