

Ruth B. Doyle: 'Harbinger of Social Change'

*Judge Angela B. Bartell,
Dane County Circuit Court*

Although Ruth Bachhuber Doyle has had many careers—as politician, homemaker and mother, state legislator, civic leader, school and university administrator, counselor, editor and local historian—she has really always been a teacher—a teacher by training and by example. This modest, diminutive woman with twinkling eyes has, for decades, been a harbinger of social change, a conscience of her community, and a role model for many women who have followed her.

Let's start her story in 1938 when she graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a major in history. By 1939, she had received a masters degree from Columbia University in history and education, and begun teaching high school in Lake Mills, Wisconsin.

She married a promising young lawyer, James E. Doyle, in 1940. They began a family that included four children: Mary, James, Jr., Katherine and Anne—all with successful legal careers—a law school dean; a former Dane County District Attorney; a Wisconsin Tax Appeals Commissioner; and a labor lawyer.

In 1948, Ruth declared she was—in her words—"breaking the silence of 4½ years of diaper washing" to speak on behalf of the candidacy of President Harry Truman. The Madison headlines proclaimed: "Housewife Steals Show with Plea for Truman." Ruth Doyle's political career had begun.

In 1949, she ran for and was elected to the first of two terms as Madison's sole representative to the state assembly, starting a string of electoral victories that most politicians can only dream about. Her election to the Wisconsin Assembly made her the fourth generation of Bachhubers—all Democrats—to serve in the Wisconsin legislature.



With hindsight it is now clear that Ruth Doyle—not Betty Friedan or Gloria Steinem—started the modern women's movement! In 1950, Mrs. Doyle wrote:

Women need to realize that, just because they are women and mothers, they are not automatically excluded from political life; they should be helped to discover that they have a free choice of whether to become candidates or workers in politics.

To acquire this free choice, they need not only the help of other women, but also the enthusiastic cooperation of their husbands. Father should be willing to help with the kids and to make the financial adjustments necessary to permit mother to run for office, if it seems right that she should. He must take pride in her success, and never make fun of her failures.



And to demonstrate the principles involved, Ruth Doyle successively ran for and served seven years on the Dane County Board of Supervisors, and then nine years as a member and then president of the Madison Board of Education.

Always years ahead of developing social policy, Ruth Doyle declared in 1950 on the subject of lobbying that "it is a violation of good public policy for legislators to voluntarily incur obligations to large private organizations every one of which will be seeking favors when the legislature meets again." It was years before the state caught up to Ruth and passed an effective lobbying law.

In 1961, she opened a new chapter in her service to education in the Office of the Dean of Women at the University of Wisconsin. There, she founded and

developed a special program for minority students. Under her directorship, the program quickly grew into a financial aid and tutoring service for minority and disadvantaged students. Here again Ruth Doyle acted on issues of social equality decades before others even recognized them as issues.

I first met Ruth Doyle in 1969, when she began ten years of work as financial aids director at the UW Law School and as editor and publisher of the *Gargoyle*. She offered her encouragement (along with a cup of coffee at the Memorial Union) to young women tentatively venturing into a male-dominated legal profession. Her optimistic outlook, reassuring manner and quiet confidence were infectious.

By her retirement in 1979, having held

public office for 18 years, Ruth was planning a new schedule of community activities. She said (no doubt with a mischievous grin): "If I release all pressures at once, it would be like the opening of Pompeii. You know how all the long preserved people disintegrated."

And so, demonstrating the principle of preservation without disintegration, she now serves regularly as an English tutor with the Madison Literacy Council, and she exercises her devotion to local history as an officer of Historic Madison, Inc., whose object is preserving and recording oral history.

Her latest accomplishment, she tells me, is—at long last—balancing her checkbook. In this, she is, once again, way ahead of the rest of us!