

# Legislature's Lady Feels Half 'Gentleman'

## Women's News

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"I feel like I'm half 'gentleman' by now," says Helen McMillan, who is the only woman now serving in the Minnesota House of Representatives.

When speakers address meetings they frequently fail to notice the petite 58-year-old Austin Liberal, and start off "Gentlemen, ..." adding "... and lady" when they finally spy her.

This is the first session since her election in 1962 that she has been the only woman in the House. There were two or three women in each of the previous three sessions.

Does it make a difference? "Oh yes, the men treat me a little like their mascot now. Maybe they feel responsible for me—I get more offers for rides, dinners. It didn't happen when the other women were here."

It also may have led indirectly to her co-sponsorship of the abortion reform bill.

"I am the only woman, and I think they felt there should be a woman backing the bill. I had planned to vote for it, so I agreed to co-sponsor it," she said.

The bill, whose chief sponsor is Robert C. Bell, Roseville Conservative, would leave the question of whether an abortion should be performed in the hands of the doctor and his patient.

"I'm worried about the men," she admitted. "They all came to congratulate me on taking the position, but they may be afraid to

vote for it—worried about their constituents. But a bill like this takes time for people to get used to having the idea around.

"My basic position is that a woman should have power over what happens to her own body."

About her background, Mrs. McMillan declares, "I feel I'm the antithesis of what you would expect in a politician. I'm not a college graduate, I'm not a high-pressure type, and I'm not politically minded."

She was born in Ortonville and raised in Minneapolis near the University of Minnesota—"it permeated the atmosphere." She was a professional dancer (mostly ballet), in Chicago for three years and then returned to attend the University of Minnesota for one year. She married Kenneth McMillan, an attorney, in 1938.

After McMillan's service in the war they started "from scratch" in his practice, and decided in 1945 to live in Austin. "It felt right," she said.

Mrs. McMillan was very active in nonpartisan civic affairs such as the Red Cross and the American Legion Auxiliary, and was state president of the League of Women Voters from 1953-55.

Just when she had "tried everything" in civic affairs, her legislative district was reapportioned to include just the city of Austin. With the more conservative surrounding area eliminated from her district, the DFL decided

on a push to defeat the incumbent conservative.

"The party was smart," she said. "They approached my husband to talk me into running. And really, unless a woman has her husband's support, she can't succeed in politics."

It took about six months of persuasion. When Mrs. McMillan decided to enter the race she began her "walking" campaign.

"Labor worried me. I thought they would hesitate to vote for a woman. There are 4,000 men at the Hormel plant, and I went out at 5 a.m. with my pamphlets, and I went on a house-to-house campaign. It seemed to work."

She was returned to her fourth term by an 80 percent vote, using the same campaign techniques.

Mrs. McMillan expresses pride in her constituency. "They're really extraordinary — enlightened and progressive. If something is a new idea it doesn't scare them. I just don't get crank letters."

Her hobby is bird watching, and she finds time when she is in Austin to be a "gray lady"—hospital volunteer, worker. "It's therapy for me, and it helps me as much as the patients. Gets me busy away from legislative business."

But, back at the Legislature, "Helen keeps us on our toes, we have to stay in her good graces," said office-mate Samuel Barr, Ortonville Liberal.



**HELEN McMILLAN, AUSTIN LIBERAL**  
*Only woman in the Minnesota Legislature*