

Among the first women to serve in the Minnesota House of Representatives was a twentysomething "flapper" whose idealism and determination thwarted attempts to dismiss her.

Dubbed by the press as the "flapper legislator," Myrtle Cain, a women's labor union activist from Minneapolis, drew national attention by introducing legislation to combat the Ku Klux Klan, and she led an early attempt to pass equal rights legislation.

Historical documents are unclear about Cain's precise age when, in 1923, she joined three other women in being the first females to enter the state House. Most records estimate she was born around the turn of century and was in her early 20s when she came to the Capitol.

Cain was raised in a working-class Minneapolis household and worked for the Telephone Operators Union, where she was a leader in its first strike in 1918. She also was active in the Women's Trade Union League of Minneapolis and the National Woman's Party.

In the wake of the success of the women's suffrage movement, Cain felt compelled to seek public office. A pro-

Do you know?



Myrtle Cain, among the first women to serve in the Minnesota House of Representatives, was a twenty something "flapper" who introduced legislation to combat the Ku Klux Klan and led an early attempt to pass equal rights legislation.

Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

union platform won her election in 1922 from a labor stronghold in Minneapolis.

Cain's youth, good looks, and liberal ideas brought her the "flapper legislator" and "working girl legislator" tags and provided grist for those clinging to the notion

that politics ought to be solely a man's game.

However, her work in the Legislature demonstrated that she belonged. Cain authored an anti-Ku Klux Klan measure making it illegal to appear in public with a masked face. Fifteen states imitated Cain's idea. (The Minnesota law was altered in 1995 to allow concealed faces for religious reasons and for protection from weather.)

After the 1923 session, Theodore Christianson, who served with Cain in the Legislature and later became governor, described Cain as "a quiet and painstaking worker who shunned the limelight consistently."

In 1924, Cain, along with the three other female incumbents and six female newcomers, sought election to the House. Eight of the women lost that year, including Cain, who fell to a male opponent by a margin of 39 votes.

Cain was never again elected to public office, but she returned to the Capitol in 1973 to speak in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment, a national proposal similar to the measure she sponsored on the state level 50 years earlier.