

# First Minnesota congresswoman faced tough test

In 1995, a total of 49 women were seated in the U.S. House of Representatives and another eight in the U.S. Senate. Their presence did not provoke a bevy of news stories detailing their fashion and decorative tastes.

But when Minnesotans elected Coya Knutson as their first — and only — female Congresswoman 41 years ago, local newspapers ran photos of her grocery shopping, washing clothes, and opening the oven door in her new Washington, D.C. residence. The *Minneapolis Tribune* reported during Knutson's first week on the job in 1955 that she was planning how to arrange furniture in her apartment, "like any woman."

While the former Minnesota state representative made news headlines for everything from securing a spot on the powerful Agriculture Committee to helping farmers and passing the nation's first student loan program, it was her departure from office that became infamous.

The legendary "Coya Come Home" letters, later used for the title of Knutson's biography, garnered nationwide headlines in 1958. They became the flash point of a national debate on the role of women in politics.

The *Fargo Forum* first reported the letters, released to the press and allegedly written by Knutson's husband, Andy. The first asked DFL officials to pick someone else to run for his wife's seat because he didn't want her to run again. The second letter, addressed to Coya, begged the legislator to come home to save her family.

News of the letters swept across the country. Newspaper headlines from coast to coast focused on the former school teacher from northwestern Minnesota, including one in the *New York Daily News* that said: "Demands Wife Quit Congress: Resents Her Right Hand Man."

Stories about Knutson neglecting her family surfaced, spurring a debate between supporters and critics.

U.S. Rep. Harold Cooley, chair of the powerful House Agriculture Committee, rose to her defense saying he "wouldn't swap [Knutson's] service on the committee for any man."

But others echoed the sentiments of a New Jersey woman who wrote to Knutson, "You are the typical American career woman. You are a disgrace to womanhood."

Republican challenger Oden Langen tapped into that criticism, making the letter a center-



When Minnesotans elected Coya Knutson to the U.S. Congress she made headlines for securing a spot on the Agriculture Committee and passing the nation's first student loan program. It was her departure from office, however, that became infamous.

Photo from: *Coya Come Home: A Congresswoman's Journey* by Gretchen Urnes Beito

piece of his election campaign for the seventh district seat. He narrowly beat Knutson in 1958, garnering 50.7 percent of the vote to her 49.3 percent.

A DFL party official later admitted to writing the letter, but said he only followed Mr. Knutson's orders, according to Gretchen Urnes Beito's *Coya Come Home: A Congresswoman's Journey*.

Throughout her political career, Knutson was referred to as outspoken and spirited. At times she was criticized by strict party liners for her independence, a trait in which she took great pride. In 1956, when Minnesota DFL officials, including Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey, backed presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, she rooted for Estes Kefauver. When most Democrats voted against a measure to give tax relief to a taconite company, she voted for it.

During her congressional term, she played an active role in increasing federal aid to mental health centers. The former school teacher also helped increase federal aid to schools.

Knutson also left her mark in the Minnesota House of Representatives where she served from 1951 to 1954. She sponsored a successful dairy act that increased the quality and sales of dairy products, helped pass a \$6

million appropriation increase for mental health programs, and helped establish the Fair Employment Practices Commission and Teachers Retirement Act.

Agriculture issues initially drew Knutson into politics as a young woman in 1941 when she began debating acreage allotments and farm support prices with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Her civic involvement continued in 1948 when she joined the Red Lake County Welfare Board and was later chosen to chair the county's DFL Party. She also helped found a local medical clinic and Red Cross chapter in Oklee, Minn.

It's hardly surprising that Knutson made several runs for political office after her unexpected removal from office.

She ran again for the seventh district seat in 1960 and defeated the DFL-endorsed candidate. Knutson then lost a rematch to sitting U.S. Rep. Langen in the general election.

In 1977, at age 64, she ran unsuccessfully against a DFL-endorsed candidate for a vacant state House seat. She told skeptics, "I may have gray hair but my feet are in good condition. Never say die and don't take yourself too seriously."

— Kendall Anderson

See **Then and now** next page.