

Muskegon's First Woman Candidate for Public Office

She was born Nellie Belle O'Connell on 3 May 1870 to Clara Cordelia Rogers and Maurice M. O'Connell in Montague, Michigan. She graduated from Montague High School at the age of 15. It was one of the new rural schools being started around the state at the time. Her first teaching assignment was at the Trading Post School on White River. While teaching at Mouth School, she even had some lumberjacks attend her classes. She taught school for some time until she returned to school herself at the Ypsilanti Normal College (which later became Eastern Michigan University) and graduated in 1893 with high honors. She taught at several places in Michigan including in the Upper Peninsula. She taught at Wyandotte, Michigan and became the principal of the high school there. She was so highly regarded that they kept her on year after year with increases in pay. She also taught at one of the most successful schools in Muskegon. She returned to Montague and married John Chisholm on 10 July 1896. John had previously been the superintendent of schools in Schoolcraft County. Nellie and John had one son; John Alexander Chisholm born 20 May 1897.

Nellie was a life member of the New York Society of Self Culture, the White Lake Unity Club, the Montague Gymnasium Club, the Ladies of Modern Maccabees, the Relief Corps of the Eastern Star, and the State Teacher's Association.

In January of 1907, Nellie announced she was seeking the republican nomination for County School Commission. She was the first woman candidate for public office in Muskegon County. As you can imagine, this didn't go over so well with some of her male counterparts. In an article on 09 February 1907 in the Muskegon Chronicle, it mentions that her candidacy "aroused the wrath of the Casnovia correspondent of the Ravenna Times, who *pitches into* Mrs. Nellie Chisholm in this manner". It goes on to say, "We see by the Muskegon papers that one Mrs. Nellie B. Chisholm of Montague is a candidate for county school commissioner on the republican ticket. Voters, cannot this woman's husband support her? What will she do with her children while visiting schools – take them along, eh? We understand Mrs. N. B. Chisholm's husband is a rural mail carrier and receiving good pay. We hope that our voters will look to the interest of our schools and re-elect Mr. John O Reed."

On 12 February 1907, the editor of the Muskegon Chronicle (William Manning) wrote an article regarding the attack on Nellie by the correspondent of the Ravenna Times. He wrote, "Now we have hundreds of examples of the first question all around us. We have scores of husbands who are able to support their wives and families, but they don't do it. The wife goes into the factory, takes in washings and enters into competition with her husband in different occupations. Now why does not the correspondent appeal to the voters of this county and try and compel these women to stay at home and rock the cradle and look after the children? I say to the voters if it is all right for these women to go out and try to keep the demand for their labor supplied it is just as fair to let them hold a political office and have good, clean employment. They should know the needs of the boys and girls much better than a man, who is more apt to have the salary in his mind. But even if her husband can support her, she no doubt has made provision for the welfare of her little ones. The correspondent, I judge from his talk, considers the gentle sex beneath man, and no doubt he looks at them in the light of slaves, and thinks that they should stay at home, year in and year out, and slave in house drudgery from 4 o'clock in the morning until 9 at night. He is of these people who do not want women to be as intelligent or have a bare chance with man." He goes on to say that she should be given an opportunity with the rest of the race.

Apparently, the majority of republican voters thought Nellie should be given that opportunity also because she won the republican nomination against 3 male opponents. She received 259 more votes than Richmond W. Brock, her nearest competitor. Her other 2 opponents were, John O. Reed and T.J.G. Bolt. After his loss, John O. Reed said he thought the requirements of the office and the necessity of the occupant's traveling

around the county in all kinds of weather made it “impracticable for a woman to fill the position”. He also “expressed horror at the possibility that such a contingency would make it necessary for a man to stay at home and attend to the children and wash the dishes while his wife was out earning a salary inspecting schools”.

Nellie went on to run against the democratic candidate, James H. Cogshall. She won with a comfortable margin of about 450 votes.

John Chisholm died in 1910. In 1913, Nellie had planned to resign as commissioner. She was engaged to be married to George Hill, who was the Mayor of Antigo, Wisconsin. He died before they could be married so she withdrew her resignation. She never remarried.

Because of her teaching experience, love for her students and fellow teachers, Nellie was an excellent County School Commissioner. They even named the middle school in Montague after her, the “Nellie B. Chisholm Middle School”. She continued to get re-elected until 1935, when at the age of 65, she became the White Lake News Correspondent for the Chronicle for the next 23 years. She died on 16 August 1958 at the age of 88. She and her husband John are buried at Oak Grove Cemetery in Montague, along with her son and Nellie’s parents.

Sources: Genealogybank.com, Ancestry.com, Findagrave.com, and the White Lake Beacon. Pictures from shorelinemedia.net



VOTE FOR
Nellie B. Chisholm,
for the nomination for
County Commissioner of Schools,
on the Republican Ticket.
Primary Election, Feb. 26, 1907.

