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The Constituency of Coya Knutson, 1954

Gretchen Urnes Beito

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THE CONSTITUENCY OF COYA KNUTSON, 1954

by
Gretchen Urnes Beito

Bachelor of Science, University of Minnesota, 1957

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota

August
1982

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This Thesis submitted by Gretchen Urnes Beito in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota is hereby approved by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done.

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(Chairman)

Richard E. Bergner

Elizabeth Hampsten

This Thesis meets the standards for appearance and conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

A. William Johnson
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ABSTRACT

Women rarely seek political office and even more rarely achieve the office they seek. Only one woman has been elected to Congress from Minnesota or its adjacent states--Coya Knutson from the rural Ninth District in 1954 and 1956. While legal barriers to women's participation in politics have been abolished, personal and institutional barriers remain. How Coya Knutson overcame these obstacles--and the penalties she paid for doing so--is the subject of this paper.

Coya Gjesdal Knutson grew to maturity on a successful North Dakota farm, where she learned the value of hard work and perseverance. After completing four years at Concordia College, she taught public school music and English, which helped develop skills that she used later as a campaign speaker and musician. Her husband Andy approved of her achievement in the state legislature but became unhappy when she decided to run for the United States House of Representatives.

In order to get on the ballot, she challenged the DFL nominee for the Ninth District in 1954, won, and subsequently defeated six-term Republican incumbent Harold C. Hagen in a stunning election victory. Her ebullient

campaign style included visiting farmers at 6 a.m., singing a satirical song about her Republican opponent, and delivering hard-hitting speeches over the radio and through a loudspeaker on a sound truck.

Although she worked very hard for her district in Washington and achieved the legislative landmark of Title II that enabled college students to obtain federal loans after the GI Bill ended, she was defeated in 1958. She had challenged and defeated party candidates in two elections; she had embarrassed Democratic DFL leadership by successfully championing Estes Kefauver in the 1956 Presidential Primary. The subsequent "Coya Come Home" letter, purportedly written by her husband, was sensationalized by television and press news. DFL leaders had manipulated the idea, "woman's place is in the home" to convince voters to not return their congresswoman to Washington, and Republicans quickly used the opportunity given them.

Through letters, news articles and government documents of the Fifties and through personal interviews and articles of the Eighties, this paper demonstrates that a rural woman had an interest in politics and could develop the skills necessary to be a congresswoman. However, since no area women have followed the path blazed by Coya it seems that she was one-of-a-kind, an anomaly. The question remains to what degree cultural and institutional obstacles prevent rural women from even thinking of entering the political arena.

INTRODUCTION

The voice on the radio urged listeners to become active in the political life of the nation. The wife of the President of the United States was speaking from New York, and mixed with static, her high-pitched voice poured into the silence of Coya Knutson's snug farm house. Coya's husband Andy was outside doing chores; there the flat fields stretched to the line of trees that served as wind-break. Without the sound of the radio, the house would have been silent. Eleanor Roosevelt told her listeners that too often governing bodies made up wholly of men shaped the great decisions; women were needed in political office. During her husband's thirteen-year presidency, Eleanor Roosevelt continually exhorted women to take leadership in the fight against social injustice with hard-headed political organization (Roosevelt 1933). The words struck a responsive chord in the thirty-year-old farm wife. She suddenly knew what she had to do, and she set a goal. Coya wanted to serve in a public office. Years later she said, "It was as if the sun descended on me that day in 1942" (Interview with Coya Knutson 1980).

Twelve years after hearing Eleanor Roosevelt's radio appeal, Coya Knutson challenged the endorsed

Democratic-Farmer Labor (DFL) candidate for Congress in the Ninth District and won easily. She went on to defeat the six-term incumbent, Republican Harold Hagen, in a stunning upset. "I do not know what I will do," said the dismayed former Congressman. "I never thought I would lose" (Fargo Forum, 6 November 1954, p. 1). He had cause for astonishment, for in the previous election he had won by a margin of 24,528 votes, the largest plurality ever enjoyed by any Ninth District candidate. Coya had beaten him by a margin of 2,355 votes (Minnesota Votes, p. 136).

Coya Knutson is the only woman whom Minnesota has ever elected to Congress. (Senator Muriel Humphrey was appointed, not elected, to fill the vacancy left by the death of her famous husband.) Coya's achievement is unique in the Midwest, for only South Dakota, of states that are adjacent to Minnesota, has ever sent women to Congress (two to fill unexpired terms).

In another sense Coya's achievement was unusual, because a minority of Congresswomen were married and few achieved their positions on their own merits. Of the sixty-six women who served in Congress between 1916 and 1969, only nineteen were married; the majority, twenty-nine, were widows of congressmen, and eight were widows of men of other occupations. Most congresswomen started at the top--as widows of incumbents. Often a widow was appointed or endorsed in order to capitalize on the good

will generated by her husband, to gain the sympathy votes, or to forestall a general contest; sometimes a widow was appointed on her own merit. But Coya Knutson was one of the few who got the job on her own. Through the election year of 1954, only twenty-three women had been elected in their own right, and most of these, like Coya, had to challenge their party to get on a ballot.

Women rarely seek political office and even more rarely achieve what they seek. (See Gitchens, Gruberg and Tolchin.) Focusing on how a rural Minnesota woman was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1954 illuminates the road one woman took in order to succeed in politics. While reams of newsprint have been used for reports on Coya in news magazines, a mere six pages in collective biographies have heretofore been published about Minnesota's Congresswoman (Fraser, pp. 265-67 and Chamberlain, pp. 264-66), and one paper written (Fargo, Masdahl manuscript). This paper seeks to address that lack of written history by using a variety of sources from 1950 to 1958 such as newspaper and magazine articles, letters, campaign literature, and the Congressional Record. The quantity of newspaper articles and editorials that Coya and the DFL generated was enormous. Two border-town papers of North Dakota, the Grand Forks Herald and the Fargo Forum, gave a relatively good close-range view of events. In addition to written sources, interviews with

DFL leaders and other residents of the Ninth District were done between 1980 and 1982. All were eager to relate, as one former Oklee resident said, "how after Coya put Oklee on the map, they made us look foolish" (Interview with Jo Quist 1981). Who "they" might be became part of this search.

Two points of view are juxtaposed, then, in this paper: a close focus on events as they happened in the 1950s and a reflective view of events by the participants from the distance of thirty years after the happenings. In the intervening years, society has taken a new look at what is and what is not permissible for women.

Of singular importance are the interviews with and the recent articles about Coya Knutson, for she tells her story not only from a different viewpoint, but with relative freedom. For some constraints on what she could and could not say have been removed. Moreover, she has perhaps changed over the years in what she thinks; a reflective view gives a different view through the lens of experience.

Most of the time I use "Coya" throughout this paper rather than the conventional last name, for she had the distinction of becoming known not only in her own district but across the nation by that single name. Everyone knew her as "Coya" and in 1982 many over the age of thirty-five still recognize it.

Because Coya Knutson stands alone, the question is, was she a trail-blazer for women in politics, or was she an anomaly, a one-of-a-kind? While legal barriers to women's participation have been abolished, personal and institutional barriers remain. How she overcame these obstacles--and the penalties she paid for doing so--is the subject of this paper.

CHAPTER I

THE VALLEY WAS HER HOME

Coya Knutson's childhood home was in North Dakota. On August 22, 1912, Cornelia Gjesdal was born on a farm near Edmore on the western edge of the Red River Valley. Her parents were Christian and Christine (Anderson) Gjesdal, who had emigrated from Norway. She had three sisters and one brother; Coya was the second oldest child. Little Cornelia could not pronounce her name at the age of two, so she called herself "Coya," and the name stayed with her. Her father was an active Nonpartisan Leaguer and was a personal friend of one of the party's leaders, William "Bill" Langer; but her mother had little interest in politics. Both parents were active members of the local Norwegian Lutheran church.

Coya knew the meaning of hard work. "Growing up on a farm," she recalled, "meant getting up at five in the morning to help with the milking before breakfast" (Congressional Record [CR], 10 Feb., 1955). She knew firsthand the kind of problems farmers faced: "I lived in North Dakota at the time when the grasshoppers stopped for lunch. When they took off again, the crops went with them" (Current Biography 1956, p. 340). But evidently the

hard work paid dividends, for Christian Gjesdal, who became a wealthy farmer, supported all four daughters as they went to college at the depth of the depression (Interview with Terrence Knutson 1980). His children, like most farm youngsters, contributed to his success; according to Coya, "I helped my father in the fields all the time, and when I got older I helped my mother with the cooking for all the men. We had a big farm. I used to work on the farm all the time. I went to college because I had nothing else to do" (Interview with Coya Knutson 1980).

After graduating from the Edmore high school in 1930, Coya entered Concordia College, a four-year Norwegian-Lutheran college in Moorhead, Minnesota. She studied piano, voice, and public school music, and also completed an English major to improve her chances of obtaining a teaching position, for jobs were scarce in those depression years. This decision had far-reaching effects, for twenty years later, after her successful 1954 Congressional campaign, Coya gave much credit for her triumph to her training in English and music. She said that those studies helped her convey her ideas to her listeners and taught her how to conserve her voice for the unusually heavy speaking program that she had scheduled during the campaign (Interview with Coya Knutson 1980). Even so, she hardly stood out at this early age. One classmate noted fifty years later that "she was a quiet, diligent

student. She had none of the charisma that was to be her trademark later" (Interview with Adelaine Aune 1980). Coya was a member of the Concordia Concert Choir, a select group, for three years. She served as an officer of the women's governing board and was a member of the Lutheran Daughters of the Reformation and the Mission Crusaders (Cobbers, Concordia College Yearbook 1934). Having completed a major in English and music and a minor in education, Coya graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1934 (see portrait, Fig. 1).

Jobs were very difficult to find in 1934, and teaching positions were at a premium. However, there was an opening at Penn, North Dakota, a village of ninety people only fifty miles from her home in Edmore, and Coya was selected to fill it. She taught at Penn for three school years (1934-1937), continuing her education during summer vacations. During the summer of 1935, she studied at the Juilliard School of Music in New York City, and the next summer did graduate work at Moorhead State Teacher's College (now Moorhead State University).

When she went back to Edmore for the summer, she met a good-looking fellow from Oklee, Minnesota, who was helping her father harvest. Andy and Coya liked each other and his cousin later explained, "Coya was doing all the things a farm girl does--feeding the men and carrying lunches. Andy was a lot of fun; he had probably a grade

Fig. 1. Portrait of Coya Knutson, 1934, graduation from Concordia College (Collection of Anna Strande, interviewee).



73
The [unclear]
[unclear]

school education" (Interview with Ray Strande 1981). Like many other young men of the area, Andy Knutson had gone into the Red River Valley to earn money by working in the fields. His parents, like the Gjesdals, were Norwegian immigrants who farmed near Oklee. Coya was evidently impressed with the handsome young men, for she sought a job that fall in Oklee. Having no success there, she found a teaching position in nearby Plummer (population 110), where she was remembered as "the best of teachers" (Interview with Merle Carlson 1982).

Three years after she began teaching in Plummer, Coya and Andy were married on March 31, 1940. Area residents claim that Coya pursued Andy until she won him (Interview with Gladys Ewing 1981; Pauline Walker 1981). Her parents disapproved of their twenty-eight-year-old daughter's choice. As Coya recalled, "It is true they did not approve, but then, my parents did not approve of my sisters' marriages either" (Interview with Knutson 1981). As was customary at that time, Coya retired from teaching when she married, and the couple settled down on their 160 acre farm near Oklee (population 494). Winning the respect of in-laws and neighbors, Coya actively participated in the affairs of the community. Her neighbors soon recognized her as a capable woman. Besides directing the choir at Zion Lutheran Church, she was organist and Sunday School teacher. She served as the adult leader of the 4-H Club. She sang at weddings, club meetings, and

funerals; she even went to New York to sing on Major Bowes' Amateur Hour, an event that some friends and neighbors still recall. As one of them noted, "We all tuned in to Major Bowes and were very proud of Coya" (Interview with Ray Strande 1981).

Coya increased her knowledge of farm problems when she served with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) during 1942-1944. AAA was a government agency established early in the Roosevelt administration to deal with acreage allotments and support prices for dairy products and crops. Her position required the ability to speak to groups of town and farm women and called for farm visits, a task that Coya relished. As a field woman, her job was to help step up war-time food production. She urged housewives to plant victory gardens. For her outstanding work for the AAA, she was one of two field women chosen to meet with Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard in Chicago (Current Biography).

But World War II changed her role and caused her to resume her teaching career. Confronted by a teacher shortage during the war, the superintendent of Oklee High School visited Mrs. Knutson to see if she might fill a vacant position. She was willing to help out, and in 1944 Coya began teaching music and English in the Oklee High School. She taught with great energy. A former pupil, now Coya's daughter-in-law, remembered, "She came into the

room like a white tornado and taught with great enthusiasm. We all wanted to sing for her" (Interview with Barbara LaJambe Knutson 1980). Coya directed Easter cantatas at Zion Lutheran and also presented them in neighboring churches. She was sociable; she started a birthday club (Interview with Pauline Walker 1980); and she was hospitable. For example, her superintendent related that she entertained the faculty at her farm home at a steak fry (Quist, MEA Journal) and assisted his wife with luncheons for graduating seniors. He prized her as a teacher: "Coya was always ready and able to take on extra assignments, and at no extra pay" (Interview with Carl Quist 1981). She directed school plays.

Maintaining her farm home, Coya drove to town daily to teach except when the roads were bad--then she roomed in town. When Andy secured a job in town as a school janitor, they moved from their farm house to town but continued to farm the land. They purchased a small hotel in Oklee with funds borrowed from the local bank, renamed it "Andy's Hotel," and operated it together. Andy's sister cooked the restaurant meals, and Andy rented out eight rooms (Interview with Knutson 1980). In 1948, they adopted a boy, seven-year-old Terrence.

Because she was interested in social welfare work, Coya Knutson served from 1948 to 1950 as a member of the Red Lake County welfare board. Her work with the AAA had

made her "concerned with human problems and their solutions" and led her to help establish the Oklee medical clinic, the Red Cross branch, and the Community Chest Fund (Current Biography 1956, p. 340). With this evidence of outstanding leadership ability, it was not surprising that the DFL chose Coya to be chairwoman of the Red Lake County DFL in 1948 (Chicago Tribune 7 Sept., 1958, n.p.).

Involved deeply in her community's affairs, Coya was now well-known. "She sang at every funeral and wedding in the area," said her cousin and part-time landlady (Interview with Anna Strande 1980). No one knew that since 1942, when she had been "struck" by Eleanor Roosevelt's words, Coya had been running for office. She wanted to be of service like her cousin, Tor Gjesdal of Norway, who was information officer for the Norwegian government. She already was giving her time to her neighbors--the farm and town families of the Oklee area. And she had a practical turn of mind. "OK. All these things were keeping me broke," she said in 1980. "I did not have any money. I thought, 'I can just as well run for public office and get paid for it'" (Interview with Knutson 1980).

And with her years of public service and her visibility in the community, it was not astounding that in October 1949, DFL county leaders asked Coya to run for the state legislature. "When they walked into the cafe, I knew they were going to ask," said Coya (Interview 1980).

In 1950 two representatives were to be elected from the 65th Minnesota Legislative District, composed of Red Lake County, where Oklee was located, Pennington County; and Clearwater County. The 65th district had elected Laura Naplin to the state senate (1927-1933), the first woman in the Minnesota senate.

Campaigning in the fall of 1950, Coya sang at Farmers' Union meetings. She spoke at a DFL rally in Red Lake Falls, where she contended that "more women are needed in government" (Red Lake Falls Gazette 5 Oct. 1950).

Coya won the November 7, 1950 election. Although the DFL endorsed both Walter Day and Coya Knutson, their names appeared on the ballot without party designation, as was the law in the state. She outpolled her three male opponents, including incumbent C. S. Reynolds and well-known DFL'er Walter Day; but the race was close, and all four candidates had relatively even strength throughout the district (see Table 1).

In a newspaper interview conducted just before the legislature convened in January, Coya said she wanted action on

FAIR EMPLOYMENT practices legislation: "I think we should take the lead in setting up a statewide FEPC to set a good example," she said.

STATE AID for education: "Our district needs so much help to bolster its building program," she said. "It's so overcrowded now, a teacher has trouble getting inside a school room."

STATE HEALTH program: "I think we must do something to provide school nurses. We can't get

TABLE 1
 65TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS
 NOVEMBER 7, 1950

	Clearwater	Pennington	Red Lake Falls	Total
Walter E. Day	2,051 (31%)	2,306 (32%)	1,199 (33%)	5,556 (32%)
Coya Knutson	2,122 (32%)	2,256 (32%)	1,244 (35%)	5,622 (33%)
C. S. Reynolds	1,524 (23%)	1,468 (21%)	711 (20%)	3,703 (21%)
A. W. Olson	<u>947</u> (14%)	<u>1,052</u> (15%)	<u>438</u> (12%)	<u>2,437</u> (14%)
Total	6,644	7,082	3,592	17,318

Compiled from Minnesota Legislative Manual, 1951, p. 354.

them and can't afford them," she said (Mpls. Trib. 10 December 1950, Sec. Upper Midwest, p. 10).

These goals were placed last in the 1950 article, perhaps because the editor did not know what to expect of a woman legislator--there had been no women in the state house since 1943. The feature article was headlined, "Coya Knutson, Woman Legislator, Credits Victory to Baby Talk." Besides explaining how she had mispronounced "Cornelia" at age two, Coya said, "Coya and Knutson together give me a good name for politics. I guess Coya has a good American-Indian 'twang' to it or something (p. 10). The article went on to relate that when Mrs. Knutson was not teaching, she planned menus, ordered and bought food for their cafe, and moreover, operated the business alone in the summer when her husband farmed their 160 acres.

She planned to add legislative duties to her home-making and teaching duties. Her husband supported her political career, for when the county leaders had asked her to run, she said that she "talked it over with my husband. Andy gave his 100 percent consent, but I don't think he knew what he was getting in for" (p. 10). At that time, the Minnesota legislature met from January to April every other year. She kept her teaching contract, for the superintendent of schools was willing to hire a substitute to take her place while she was in St. Paul.

Coya told the reporter that she believed Terry was exceptionally interested in politics for a boy of nine.

"He gets it from his father and from me," she said. Of ballots cast in Oklee, she had received 119 out of 200 votes. "Terry couldn't understand why I did not get all of them" (p. 10).

The reporter also related that Mrs. Knutson would stay home in Oklee until the legislature convened in January, "cooking for Christmas." Her specialties for the holiday season would be "fatigmand" and "kringler," Norwegian delicacies.

Coya was appointed to the Elections, Co-operatives, Public Institutions, Reapportionment, and University committees; she held no chairmanships. In the legislature she got along well with her fellow lawmakers; and she and Sally Luther of Minneapolis (DFL), the other woman in the state house, became friends (Fraser 1977, p. 265).

While a representative of Minnesota's 65th District, Coya authored a bill that increased the sales of dairy products. She also sponsored bills that gave educational aid to handicapped children, provided resident emergency maternity care for veterans' wives, and improved sanitariums (Current Biography 1956, p. 341). She followed through on her campaign promises to legislate more state aid for education and a state health program to provide school nurses; money to fund these programs was appropriated in the 1951 session.

Coya worked for the adoption of the controversial bill to restore party designation for election to the

state legislature; the bill was defeated, but it was a popular move back home. The editor of the Red Lake Falls Gazette wrote, "We are pleased that Mrs. Coya Knutson voted for the change and made a speech in favor of it. She had the courage to go on record, which few others of the House did" (22 Feb., 1951, p. 4). She worked too on a non-smoking in public places bill that was defeated.

Coya was easily re-elected in 1952 and again out-polled two male opponents. She received the highest number of votes that the district had ever given a candidate (7,953), but did not earn a majority (see Table 2).

In the 1953 legislative session, she served on the Elections Committee, the University Committee, the Health Committee, and the Towns and Counties Committee. In that session, the Minnesota legislature created a Fair Employment Practices Commission and a teacher's retirement act, programs that Coya had espoused in her campaigns. She kept her constituents informed through a "Capitol Chat" in weekly newspapers. She wrote about pending legislation and described bills that she had introduced. For example, in one column, she wrote, "It seems that most of my important bills are getting a hearing this week and one should be endowed with jet propulsion to get to meetings" (Thief River Falls Times 25 March, 1953, p. 5). She described pending bills such as designation of party in the legislature: the establishment of the Old Crossing

TABLE 2
 65TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS
 NOVEMBER 5, 1952

	Clearwater	Pennington	Red Lake Falls	Total
Walter E. Day	2,492 (37%)	3,582 (39%)	1,522 (37%)	7,516 (38%)
Coya Knutson	2,718 (40%)	3,597 (40%)	1,638 (40%)	7,953 (40%)
A. W. Olson	<u>1,598</u> (23%)	<u>1,914</u> (21%)	<u>930</u> (23%)	<u>4,442</u> (22%)
Total	6,608	9,093	4,090	19,911

Minnesota Legislative Manual, 1953, p. 545.

Treaty site as Huot State Park, the problems of depot closings, need for school buildings, and the possibility of a state educational television network. The House voted money for the latter project, but the Senate defeated it.

Her four years of achievement in the state legislature assured Coya of re-election. But she felt ready for a new challenge and a larger constituency. With enthusiasm and energy Coya was juggling many careers: in 1953 she was a teacher, a hotel and cafe manager, a homemaker, and a state legislator. She made up her mind to run for Congress but told no one. In fact, ever since she had been "struck" by Eleanor Roosevelt's broadcast, she had been running, waiting for the right opportunity. And she had been listening to the farm wives as she drove about the ninth district working for AAA. She had been running for Congress for twelve years.

In an interview after her retirement, Coya related, "It was a calling, a vocation, definitely. You had to have a strong motivation to carry it through. I didn't know half of the stuff that was going on [in politics]. I had to do it on my own--I could not depend on the party. I knew what I had to do, and I had a goal" (Interview with Knutson 1980). She found that winning an election might be less difficult than gaining the nomination for when she asked Ninth District Chairman Lee for DFL

endorsement for Congress, he told her, "The party cannot afford to lose your state legislature spot" (Interview with L. J. Lee 1982). Early in the spring of 1954, she decided to challenge her party in the September primary.

CHAPTER II

PRIMARY ELECTION, 1954

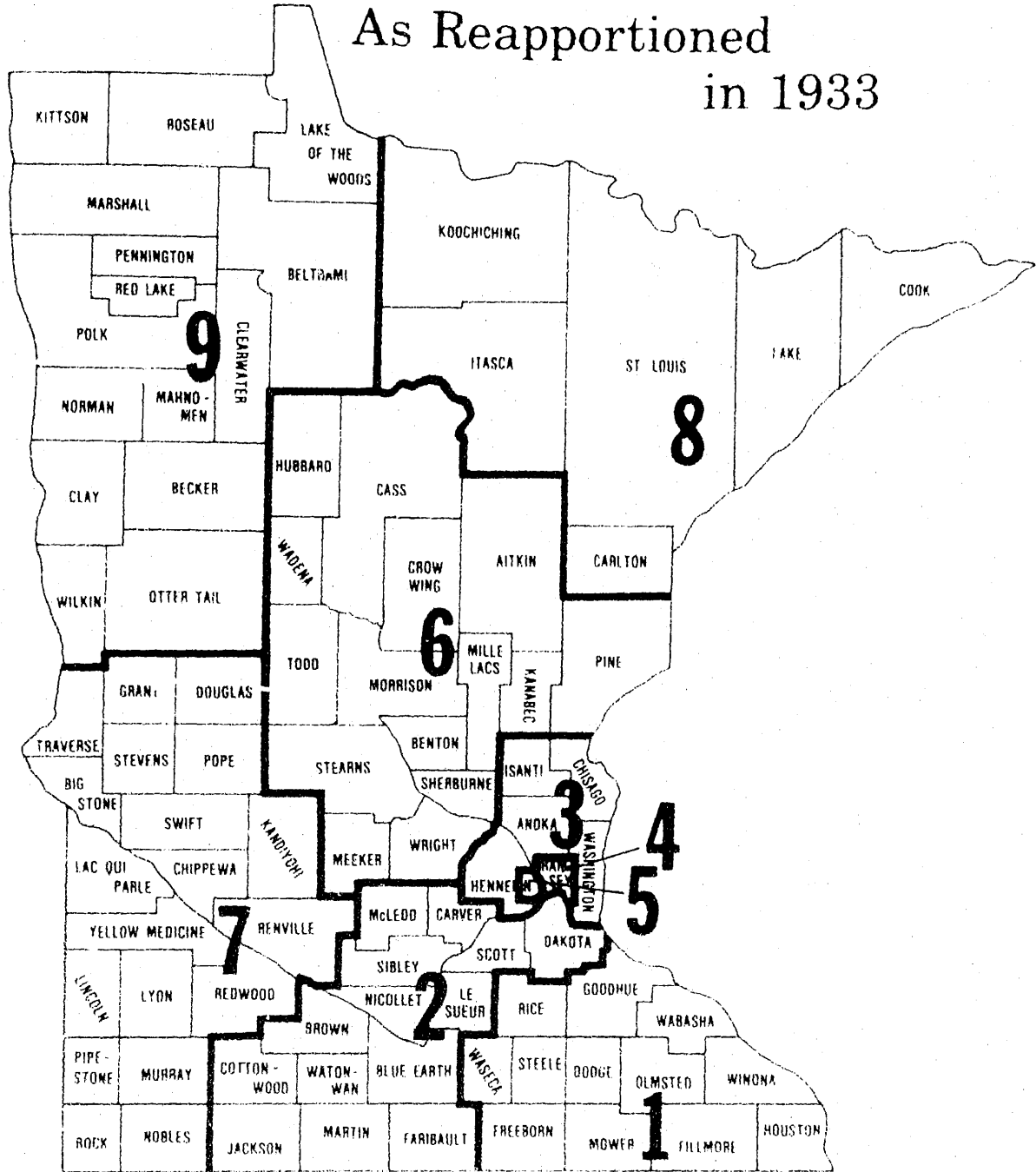
The Ninth Congressional District encompassed fifteen counties in the northwest corner of the state. Coya's three-county legislative district was centrally located within it (see Figure 2). The economy of the district was totally dependent on agriculture and the services that agriculture required. Different soils and land contour yielded a variety of farm products.

When one stands facing south on the high sand ridge near the tiny town of Trail, in eastern Polk County, one can see rolling hills with dense forest, interspersed with level patches of fields. This is the eastern portion of the Ninth Congressional District. Dairy products, chickens, beef, hay, and oats were the main farming products in 1954 (Minnesota Agricultural Statistics 1954, pp. 45-50).

Then, if one turns around and faces north from the sand ridge, the landscape looks entirely different. The high sand ridge, which extends as far as one can see, gradually slopes down until it encompasses a gigantic basin that stretches flatly to the horizon. The ridge is the oldest beach of ancient Lake Agassiz, drained

Fig. 2. Map of Minnesota Congressional Districts
as reapportioned in 1933 (Minnesota Votes, p. 9).

As Reapportioned in 1933



thousands of years ago. This is one of the richest agricultural lands of the world: the Red River Valley. The fertile land was virtually treeless, stoneless, and flat when the settlers arrived; it was ideal for cultivation with steel plows. Spring wheat, oats, barley, and flax were its principal crops in 1954 (Minnesota Agricultural Statistics 1954, pp. 45-50). Enormous fields were divided by straight roads that follow section lines; the fields stretch endlessly on, except for a cluster of buildings that form the neat small town of Oklee, the home of Coya Knutson. In 1982, Coya said, "I still love that land."

Lake of the Woods and Beltrami counties to the north, which had acres of marshland as well as huge lakes and small farms, offer a sharp contrast to the other areas of the district. Some of that sparsely settled land was state forest and resorts, another part included the Red Lake Indian Reservation. The White Earth Indian Reservation partially covered Mahnomon, Clearwater, and Becker counties (see Figure 3).

In 1950 farming was the chief occupation of employed residents of the Ninth District. The percentage of farmers was high: 69 percent of the employed men in Marshall County were in agriculture. Clay County had the least number of farmers, 34 percent (U.S. Census of Population 1950, pp. 264-65). Many women over twenty years of age worked outside their homes and farms; 31 percent in

Fig. 3. Map of Northwestern Minnesota ("Close Up:
USA," National Geographic).

Pennington County, 28 percent in Clay County, and 20 percent in Clearwater County. In no county were less than 20 percent of the women employed.

Surprisingly, many more men than women of voting age resided in the Ninth District. In the fifteen counties there were 87,000 men and 76,000 women over the age of twenty. Fifty-four percent of the potential voters were men; in no county were there more women than men of voting age. Perhaps this was a reflection of the fact that there were few choices for women in rural areas. State-wide, there were 958,000 men, and 951,000 women of voting age. Fifty percent of potential voters in the state were men (Census 1950). The Ninth District was a man's world. Men, twenty-five years and over, had completed an average of 8.5 years of school; women, 8.8 years. This compared with the state average of 8.8 and 9.8 (U.S. Census of Population 1950, pp. 365-68).

The largest foreign-born group was Norwegian, followed by Swedish and German people. Over 2,000 American Indians lived in the district (U.S. Census: Characteristics of Population 1950, pp. 345-51).

The condition of housing was below the Minnesota average. Dwellings with "hot running water, private toilet and bath, and not dilapidated" were, for instance, only 8 percent of the houses in Clearwater County; 15 percent in Lake of the Woods and Mahnommen counties; and

up to 40 and 46 percent in Wilkin and Clay counties. Only 25 percent of housing in the district had all of them (U.S. Census of Housing 1950, pp. 216-20).

This was a district with a relatively low income; poor prices for farm products had indeed been a long-standing problem. Low wheat prices had, since the settlement of the area in the late nineteenth century, triggered agrarian radicalism in successive waves of reform movements--the Populist, Progressive, Nonpartisan League, and Farmer-Labor parties. The district traditionally supported congressmen who voted for liberal domestic welfare issues, and especially those that affected rural interests (Cummings, p. 126).

Voters of the Ninth District were likely to choose a person rather than a party to represent their interests, and once a representative was elected, he was likely to be returned for many years. In fact, Coya's opponent in 1954 had switched from the Farmer-Labor to the Republican party ten years earlier without diminishing his popularity at the polls (see Table 3). The Ninth was a two-party district; usually one party succeeded the other when a congressman retired.

The September 14th primary was months away; the May nominating convention would be of little value to her, so Coya began to campaign openly in February 1954. "I knew what I needed to set this thing up," she related,

TABLE 3

PARTY SHIFTS IN NINTH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

	Political Party	Election Years
	Republican	1920 and before
Knud Wefald	Farmer-Labor	1922, 1924
Conrad Selvig	Republican	1926, 1928 1930
<p>Nine congressmen were elected at large in state-- five Farmer-Laborites, three Republicans, one Demo- crat--1932 (1933--Reapportioned to 15 counties; became 9th District)</p>		
Richard T. Buckler	Farmer-Labor	1934, 1936 1938, 1940
Harold C. Hagen	Farmer-Labor	1942
<p>Democratic-Farmer-Labor party formed.</p>		
Harold C. Hagen	Republican	1944, 1946 1948, 1950 1952
Coya Knutson	Democratic- Farmer-Labor	1954, 1956
Odin Langen	Republican	1958, 1960 1962, 1964 1966, 1968
<p>(1961--Reapportioned to 23 counties; became 7th District)</p>		
Robert Bergland	Democratic- Farmer-Labor	1970, 1972 1974, 1976
<p>Appointed U.S. Agri- culture Secretary 1976. (1971--Reapportioned to 27 counties)</p>		
Arlan Stangeland	Republican	1977, speci- 21 election 1978, 1980

and set it up she did. She called upon her cousin, Tor Gjesdal, who was the principal director of the United Nations' Public Information Department and who had been head of Information Services for the Norwegian government-in-exile from 1941-1945. At her request, he spoke in Crookston at the Red River Valley Winter Shows, in Moorhead at the Concordia College Chapel, and in Fergus Falls at the high school. She introduced him on each occasion. "That set me up," Coya recalled, "and helped me realize how much I had missed in life because he had done so much himself" (Interview with Knutson, Who's Who in the World, 1974-75, p. 186).

For Coya, the tour was a venture out of the three-county area that she represented in the legislature and a personal introduction to residents of the relatively populous and wealthy region of the Red River Valley. Voters might notice a woman legislator who introduced a dignitary from the homeland of the area's largest ethnic group. Tor's visit was not mentioned in the Moorhead or Fergus Falls papers, but the Concordia student newspaper related that his topic was peace. "Peace is something more than the absence of war," he said, "and requires that the sense of justice of the nations overcome their passions . . . to stop and fight does not stop the problem" (Concordian 5 March 1954).

Thomas Letnes, her colleague in the Minnesota legislature, drove Gjesdal and Coya between cities in his black Cadillac. Letnes would be one of her opponents in the September primary, and Coya knew it. "He [Letnes] was so rich and so pompous and so everything," she recalled. "I knew he was going to run [for Congress] and he might have had an idea that I might also. But he was flattered to drive Tor Gjesdal around. I did not have the money to do such a thing" (Interview with Knutson October, 1980).

Coya evidently thought that the short tour augered well for her political future, for in April she declared her intention to run. She made her announcement at chapel services at her alma mater, Concordia College (Interview with Knutson 1980). Harding Noblitt, professor of political science at Concordia, recalled: "When Coya was in the legislature, I invited her to speak in chapel, which was carried live on radio at that time. I did not know she was running, but President Joe [Knutson] did. Coya had already had cards printed up" (Interview with Noblitt 1981).

Four men--Curtiss Olson, Thomas Letnes, Oscar Johnson, August Teigen--declared that they wanted to be the DFL nominee for the Ninth District seat in 1954. Olson of Roseau, whom the DFL convention endorsed, had also been its nominee in 1950 and 1952 but had lost both races to Harold Hagen. After he earned a degree in political

science and studied law by correspondence, he became an insurance salesman. He also owned and operated an 800 acre farm in Roseau County and earlier had been manager of the Roseau Forum. Active in DFL politics, he had served ten years in the Minnesota legislature and had been Ninth District DFL chairman.

Letnes, a successful farmer and business college graduate from Neilsville, had, like Olson, served ten years in the Minnesota legislature. Johnson, a Crookston farmer, had been the endorsed and defeated candidate in 1948. Teigen, a Georgetown farmer, had done post-graduate work in political and social economics and had run unsuccessfully for office many times.

There was little news coverage of the primary race. Neither the area daily papers (Fargo Forum, Grand Forks Herald, Bemidji Pioneer) nor sample area weeklies (Baudette Region, Thief River Falls Times, Bagley Independent) had more primary campaign coverage than the cursory filing notices. The only editorial was an adulatory tribute from Coya's hometown newspaper. The editor of the Oklee Herald predicted Coya Knutson would win the primary "by a comfortable margin." He wrote that her legislative record "proves a willingness and adaptability to meet sometimes confusing challenges of driving toward a goal. . . . We are satisfied that she is incorruptible." Given the nomination, would she win the

general election? The incumbent "would win in normal circumstances, but these circumstances are not normal--there is Mrs. Knutson to contend with" (Oklee Herald 19 August 1974, p. 4). Newspaper coverage might have been light, but that did not matter to Coya. "We didn't care whether we had publicity or not," she recalls. "They started to follow us after awhile" (Interview with Knutson 1980). This was a person-to-person campaign.

After Coya announced her candidacy in Moorhead in April, she ran day and night, only stopping to have an occasional hamburger. She lost thirty pounds. Area residents recall her campaign vividly, for hers was a personal campaign that reached out to people: "She came to our Ladies' Aid at Trinity" (Interview with Ruth Legvold 1980). "She had sung at every wedding and funeral around Oklee the past few years; everyone knew her" (Interview with Pauline Walker 1980). "Coya was simple, direct; she was friendly and nice to everyone. She stole our hearts" (Interview with Mrs. Hollis Thygeson 1981). Coya's campaign was person-to-person; Olson relied on party-organized events. For instance, she went to county fairs, handing out cards and shaking hands.

She assumed that she was well-known in the northern part of the district, but needed to work hard in the southern part. She later explained, "I never did crack the Fergus Falls area--that is heavy Republican territory.

We took a plat book of every farm in Ottertail County and went farm to farm" (Interview with Knutson 1980). With her fourteen-year-old son, Terry, she traveled about in an old car. They slept in the car at night, and Coya got up about five o'clock and went out to a barn where a farmer might be milking cows. Sometimes the farmers were not out yet, and she would wait at the barn. During the day, she would trudge out into the fields to meet working farmers. She did not try to woo women voters. "No, I never looked for the women's votes; they thought a woman should be at home, or they were jealous," Coya reported years later (Interview with Knutson 1980).

One campaign tactic especially made people remember her. "I sang at the rallies. I had a guitar, and I sometimes played the piano. I sang 'Red River Valley' at the Kittson County Fair, and some thought I was terrible. But I didn't do so bad" (Interview with Knutson 1980). Indeed Coya's campaign singing attracted voters. "Yah, I voted for her," an elderly woman told a friend. "She sure can play and sing" (David Morken interview 1980).

The four leading candidates for the DFL nomination took out newspaper advertisements to stress that they owned farms and supported 100 percent parity for farm products. Knutson's ad stood out, because her ad was a half page, twice the size of the others. She included her picture and proclaimed:

State representative--65th District
 Polled highest vote in history of district
 Concordia College graduate
 14 years a high school teacher

GIVE WESTERN MINNESOTA A VOICE IN CONGRESS

Stands for: Debt-free farms with 100 percent parity
 Tidelands oil for our school children
 \$1000 income tax exemption
 Responsible use of government services
 Economic fairness for all
 Clean government

We Need More Women In Government. Their Influence
 Can Be a Powerful Force For Good" (Twin Valley
 Times 9 August 1954, p. 5).

Coya also ran an ad titled, "The Lady Legislator
 from Oklee," which was a reprint of the editorial from her
 hometown paper, the Oklee Herald. Underlined was, "We
 are satisfied that she is incorruptible" (Bemidji Pioneer
 Sept. 13, p. 8).

Aside from this small flurry of ads that appeared dur-
 ing the week of the primary election, little mention of
 the five-way Ninth District DFL contest was evident in area
 papers. The Grand Forks Herald, however, described the
 Ninth District DFL nomination as the "hottest contest" of
 the election (September 13, 1954).

In the primary election of September 14, 1954, Coya
 soundly defeated the four other DFL candidates (see Table
 4). She received nearly twice as many votes as her nearest
 opponent, the DFL-endorsed candidate. Coya polled 11,069
 of 24,557 votes; Olson garnered 5,938; Letnes 4,104, John-
 son 2,493, Teigen 953. Her opponent-to-be, Harold Hagen,
 won 18,082 of 21,557 Republican votes.

TABLE 4

NINTH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT DEMOCRATIC PARTY PRIMARY ELECTION RESULTS

SEPTEMBER 14, 1954

County	Oscar A. Johnson	Coya Knutson	Thomas A. Letnes	Curtiss T. Olson	T. Austin Teigen
Becker	337	748	368	1,548	167
Beltrami	263	829	281	560	107
Clay	202	808	373	513	122
Clearwater	141	926	76	230	26
Kittson	70	451	176	171	3
Lake of the Woods	42	216	28	143	5
Mahnomen	103	512	203	241	49
Marshall	134	574	185	256	32
Norman	79	423	229	240	13
Ottertail	447	1,281	447	610	245
Pennington	102	750	134	140	34
Polk	335	1,706	1,162	381	65
Red Lake	35	688	92	81	11
Roseau	98	635	130	572	23
Wilkin	105	522	220	252	51
Total	2,493 (10%)	11,069 (45%)	4,104 (17%)	5,938 (24%)	953 (4%)

The press did not give special attention to Coya's victory. "Few Upsets Develop in Primary Election," announced the Thief River Falls Times (15 September 1954). The Grand Forks Herald emphasized that the DFL vote was heavy and that for the first time the DFL had outvoted the Republicans statewide (15 September 1954). Her outstanding showing (45 percent in a five-way race) perhaps explains the quiet tone of the news coverage; maybe she was expected to win.

CHAPTER III

GENERAL ELECTION, 1954

Coya wasted no time in gearing up for the big November fight. While the DFL did raise a small amount of money for her, organize some events, and send a few state candidates to campaign with her in the district, for the most part she planned her own campaign and continued to make appearances throughout the district. She especially wanted to emphasize the areas where voters did not know her and which were Republican strongholds. She had become acquainted with a young political science student, Bill Kjeldahl, at the University of Minnesota who worked in the Minnesota legislature; he helped her find, tabulate, and analyze the voting statistics, precinct by precinct (Knutson to Beito 11 September 1980). "He had it all on myriad pieces of paper," she recalls. "He did what a computer would do today in a minute. He knew where we had to work--Otter Tail County was the biggest. If we could switch just so many votes in each precinct, we would win" (Interview with Knutson 1980).

People turned out in large numbers for the DFL dinners in Coya's old legislative district that fall. A victory dinner at the Legion Hall in Bagley was sold out;

DFL candidate for Lieutenant Governor, Karl Rolvaag, was there, and Coya was the featured speaker. The program continued to midnight, but "almost all stayed to hear the political speeches" (Bagley Independent 30 Sept., 1954, p. 1). District Chairman L. J. Lee was the master of ceremonies, and national committeeman Byron Allen spoke. Coya told the crowd that she had been reluctant to run, because she liked the state legislature, but now she believed that a change was needed in Washington. "Everyone must be a missionary for the liberal candidate," she declared (Bagley Independent 30 Sept. 1954, p. 1). She told the voters what they wanted to hear from a woman; in reality she was far from being a reluctant candidate.

At a DFL "Meet Your Candidate Night" in the new Zion church building in Thief River Falls, a crowd filled the basement to capacity. Coya talked on the importance of the first vote in the House, explaining that it would elect the speaker of the house, the first step to organizing the House into important committees. She apparently wanted constituents to know that she was knowledgeable about the political process.

As the campaign gathered momentum, Coya went on the offensive. A speech at Moorhead in October was typical. She called for Democratic control of Congress as a step to carrying out programs, and asked why her opponent had not worked on farm legislation. Instead, she said, he

had worked for pensions for congressmen. Coya claimed that while Republicans had campaigned for 100 percent parity for farm prices, "we the farmers got sliding scale parity, which in a few short years will be no parity" (Fargo Forum 7 Oct. 1954). She challenged Hagen on "his votes for tax cuts to the wealthy." She said that tidelands oil moneys should go to the nation's school children. (Taxes from offshore oil should go to the federal government, not the adjacent state.) These points were repeated in the form of an attack that was printed in a brochure distributed by Coya's volunteer committee. The brochure included other appeals to emotion:

He voted against our Minnesota School Children by Giving Away the Tidelands Oil

- See Congressional Record--April 1, 1953

He voted for Racial Discrimination

- See Congressional Record--Feb. 3, 1950

He Refused to Vote to Help Our Legless Veterans

- See Congressional Record--Oct. 20, 1951

(St. Paul, Hagen Papers 1954 Campaign).

The issue close to the lives of her constituents--farm prices--was the heart of Coya's campaign. Between April and November she addressed more than 20,000 voters and covered about 25,000 miles in her sound truck.

She composed a special satirical campaign song, written to the tune of "Casey Jones."

THE SAGA OF SILENT HAROLD . . .

Gather round if you would hear
 The story of an electioneer
 Who mounted to his platform way down at Kasson
 To the farmers he promised parity and their votes
 that day he won.

Electioneering Ike, mounted to the platform
 Electioneering Ike, speeches in his hand
 Electioneering Ike, mounted to the platform
 To the farmers he promised parity and their votes
 that day he won.

Gather round and let us hear
 Of how the old electioneer
 Appointed Flexing Ezra to his cabinet that awful day
 For he and Ezra thought the folks could live on curds
 and whey.

Flexing Ezra, mounted to the cabinet
 Flexing Ezra, on that awful, awful day
 Flexing Ezra, mounted to the cabinet
 For he thought the folks could live on curds and whey.

Gather round and let us tarry
 To hear of how the farmer's secretary,
 Old Flexing Ezra, cut the dairyman's income by half
 For he wants each dairyman to live on curds and sell
 his calf.

Flexing Ezra, he's not the farmer's secretary
 Flexing Ezra, he's cut our income by half
 Flexing Ezra, he's not the farmer's secretary
 For he wants each dairyman to live on curds and sell
 his calf.

Gather round and let us scan
 The record of old Silent Harold, our Congressman
 When Ezra flexed the farmers, Harold never rose to
 sight

For Harold's been too busy with the pensions to
 worry with our plight.

Silent Harold, he's never even said four words
 Silent Harold, for he's forgotten us back home
 Silent Harold, he's never even said four words
 For he's been too busy with those pensions to worry
 with our plight.

Gather round and let us scan
 The record of old Silent Harold, our Congressman
 He's been so busy with those pensions . . . it must
 took him forty days
 Cause he's never said three words to help us through
 those days.

Silent Harold, he's been so busy with those
 pensions
 Silent Harold, it musta took him forty days
 Silent Harold, he's been so busy with those
 pensions
 Cause he's never said three words to help us through
 these days.

Gather round and let us scan
 The record of old Silent Harold, our Congressman
 Who never forgets the wealthy when the tax bills come
 to vote
 But never says two words for the rest of us who also
 cast a vote.
 Silent Harold, never forgets the wealthy
 Silent Harold, couldn't say two words
 Silent Harold, never forgets the wealthy
 But never says two words for the rest of us who also
 cast a vote.

Gather round and let us scan
 The record of old Silent Harold, our Congressman
 Who gave away the Tidelands oil to those wealthy
 millionaires
 But never said one word for our children and their
 heirs.
 Silent Harold, gave away the Tidelands oil
 Silent Harold, gave it to those millionaires
 Silent Harold, gave away the Tidelands oil
 But never said one word for our children and their
 heirs.

Gather round and let us scan
 The record of old Silent Harold, our Congressman
 Who wouldn't even vote to help our veterans back to
 health
 But labored forty days for those in Congress old age
 wealth
 Silent Harold, wouldn't help our veterans
 Silent Harold, forty days for pensions though
 Silent Harold, wouldn't help our veterans
 But he labored forty days for those in Congress old
 age wealth.

As we vote let's don't forget
 The record of old Silent Harold, in Congress yet
 Who as each farmer, veterans, child, and wife was
 flexed so tight
 Said not a word, for he's been too busy with the
 Congress plight.
 Silent Harold, wouldn't talk for man or wife
 back home

Silent Harold, not even for the child in
 school today
 Silent Harold, wouldn't talk for man or wife
 back home
 Cause he's been too busy with the pensions to worry
 with our plight.

Her campaign committee had the song printed in a brochure and added, "Since Silent Harold got his pension bill passed, let's put him on pension and get someone who will work for us in Washington" (St. Paul, Hagen Papers 1954 Campaign).

Knutson did not have the strong support of the DFL even though she had proved she was a vote-getter. In his weekly newspaper column, distributed statewide, DFL party spokesman Arthur Naftalin wrote that "Unendorsed candidates made little impression" (Bagley Independent 23 Sept., 1954).

Small amounts of money came in from DFL county organizations: \$50 from Becker County; \$150 from Kittson County; \$100 from the City of Moorhead, with the promise of more (Fligelman to Knutson 18 Oct. 1954; Jansen to Knutson 14 Oct. 1954; Rustad to Knutson 21 Oct. 1954; Bemidji, Knutson papers). Some DFL groups paid local bills: Red Lake County DFL paid a bill for \$17; Kittson County had paid the radio station at Hallock for advertisements, but many more bills for brochures and advertising were outstanding (Jansen to Knutson 8 Nov. 1954; Beyer to Knutson 21 Oct. 1954; Bemidji, Knutson Papers). Some

people offered in-kind services, such as distributing literature or the use of a room in their home when the candidate was in town (Zaberbier to Knutson 18 Oct. 1954; Allen to Knutson 21 Oct. 1954; Bemidji, Knutson Papers).

And funds were needed to pay for advertising, particularly for radio ads. The campaign fund was short; for example, after the election, \$32 was made as a down payment on a bill of \$132 from station KGDE. In a note to the station manager, Coya noted that the Volunteer Fund was \$400 short, and that they were in "debt up to their necks" (Knutson to Baxter 11 Nov. 1954; Bemidji, Knutson Papers).

Coya spent a total of \$5,000 on the campaign--a relatively small amount. However, she decided to sell more of the North Dakota farm land that she had inherited from her father to pay for campaign bills. She relied on herself, not the DFL party; in fact, the DFL Central Committee granted her only \$25 for the campaign.

In still another sense Coya was going it alone. While her son Terry was very enthusiastic about his mother's candidacy, her husband did not really approve of the congressional race. "It was all right when I ran for the state legislature. Then we knew that I would be in St. Paul only a few months every year. But this was different. I did not think Andy would move to Washington if I should win, and as it turned out, he did not. He was

afraid of losing his meal ticket" (Interview with Knutson 1981).

In her campaign, Coya seldom referred to her family--not unusual for a woman candidate; male candidates often put their families out in front while female candidates hide them, as noted by a more recent female politician, DFL candidate for Attorney General of North Dakota, Alice Olson, in a campaign speech (Grand Forks, Women's Programs, Taped Cassettes).

At one point in the campaign, Coya decided to change one thing about herself. She spoke Norwegian fluently but had never realized until she listened to a taped radio speech that she had a Norwegian accent. She resolved to eliminate the accent. While it was a distinct advantage to be able to speak Norwegian in the Ninth District, many residents looked down on people who spoke English with a Norwegian brogue. As in the primary campaign, Coya ran day and night; she had little time to worry about how she looked. By the time it was over, she had worn out the clothes she owned and had had no time to buy others (Grand Forks Herald 6 Nov. 1954).

The background of her Republican opponent was similar in many ways to Coya's. Harold Hagen's parents had also emigrated from Norway. They had settled in Crookston, which was also located in the Red River Valley, where Harold was born in 1901. Hagen's father published a

Norwegian language newspaper, Vesterheimen, which Harold inherited at age eighteen and dissolved at age nineteen. He worked on the Polk County Leader in Crookston but decided to go to St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. St. Olaf, like Coya's alma mater, Concordia, was a four-year liberal arts college founded by the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America. In 1927, at age twenty-six, he graduated and had difficulty finding a job. After a period of unemployment, he sold Crazy Crystal Mineral Water and Glas-Tab products, 1929-1931, and worked for the Minnesota Highway Department in 1933. During summers he promoted auto races.

His political career began in 1934 when he became secretary (called administrative assistant today) to Representative Richard T. Buckler of the Ninth District. Buckler, a member of the Farmer-Labor Party, kept Hagen on his staff until he stepped down in 1942 (St. Paul, Hagen papers, Inventory). Hagen ran for the seat vacated by Buckler and won as a Farm-Labor Party candidate. Two years later, however, when Hubert Humphrey, Orville Freeman, and others forged the union of the Farmer-Labor Party and the weak Democratic Party, Hagen decided to switch to the Republican Party. Although his defection lost him supporters such as powerful A.O. (Spot) Reiersen of Fosston and his 1942 campaign manager, Verner Nelson of Roseau, Hagen was re-elected to his seat by a larger

margin of votes than he had enjoyed as a Farmer-Labor candidate. (1942--1,059 of 70,371 votes; 1944--18,072 of 98,098 votes) (Minnesota Votes, pp. 128, 130). At the time he explained to one unhappy Farmer-Labor member: "The great majority of newspapers will be in my camp. My opponent will have only two or three, among which is the Crookston Times" (Hagen to Trovaten, McIntosh n.d.; St. Paul, Hagen Papers 1944 Campaign).

The six-term Congressman's record for vote-getting was sensational. His margin of victory was over 20,000 votes in 1946, 1950, and 1952. He won the elections of 1950 and 1952 by the largest margins ever recorded in the Ninth District. In 1952 he received 70,000 votes to his opponent's (Curtiss Olson) 45,000 (Minnesota Votes, pp. 130, 133, and 135). Any challenger faced a formidable opponent in Harold Hagen.

A daughter of Norwegian immigrants was challenging a son of Norwegian immigrants. A maverick Democrat was challenging a maverick Republican.

The two candidates campaigned on the same issues--parity for farm products and better farm income, higher egg and poultry prices. But Harold Hagen had made the mistake of saying favorable things about Secretary of Agriculture Benson early in the Eisenhower administration; he tried to backtrack but his early statements always followed him. According to Harding Noblitt, Professor

of Political Science at Concordia College, "one only had to mention the name of Ezra Taft Benson and a lot of people would go into orbit" (Interview with Noblitt 1981).

While both said that they wanted the same things for residents of the district, Coya was more convincing and reached more people. Harold Hagen was on the Post Office Committee and that was what he wanted to talk about. Like Coya, Harold Hagen wanted to meet the people, but as an incumbent, he expected the people to come to him. His office arranged for meeting places in the larger towns "for the purpose of meeting constituents and giving them an opportunity to discuss problems personally" (Fergus Falls Daily Journal 16 Oct. 1954, p. 1). He had dramatic meetings too. "The Republican Flyer," the GOP campaign helicopter, dropped down onto the lawn of Fergus Falls High School with Duane Lund, candidate for state treasurer, and Harold Hagen aboard.

Hagen made the normal pitches that a Republican in his district would make, but he also targeted three other groups: labor, veterans, and women. To woo the first two groups, he instructed that an advertisement titled, "Harold Hagen Publicly Thanks for Their Support" should be inserted in newspapers in "Labor areas like Thief River Falls, Bemidji, East Grand Forks and Moorhead," and these groups should be listed: Organization of Railroad Conductors, National Federation of Federal Employees, eight

Postal Employee Organizations, Plate Printers' Union of Washington, D.C., Police Association, Fireman's Association of Washington, D.C., Express Employees, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars and Disabled American Veterans (St. Paul, Hagen Papers 1954 Campaign).

But when the ad was run, loyal Coya supporters disavowed Hagen support. Thief River Falls Railroad Workers ran a newspaper ad in the form of a notice:

To the Members of the RR Brothers:

In order to clear up the confusion of conflicting statements as to the endorsement by the Brotherhood of congressional candidates, we wish to inform you that Coya Knutson has been endorsed by the Order of RR Conductors, Brotherhood of RR Trainmen, and Brotherhood of Firemen and Engineers and Brotherhood of RR Clerks (Thief River Falls Times 27 Oct. 1954; Rambeck and Quesnell).

Hagen also received angry letters from Legionnaires that demanded retraction of the Legion endorsement of his candidacy from the Crookston, Thief River Falls and Halstad Legion Commanders (Keller and Anderson to Hagen 28 Oct. 1954; Hellerud to Hagen 28 Oct. 1954; St. Paul, Hagen Papers 1954 Election). Hagen replied, "I cannot comply with your request" (Hagen to Hellerud 2 Nov. 1954, Hagen Papers).

Besides aiming at labor and veterans' groups, Hagen called attention to the fact that his opponent was a woman. He planted letters that were designed to be printed as letters to the editor in area newspapers:

Dear Friend:

When I think of the faithful service that Representative Harold C. Hagen has rendered to all of us in this part of the Ninth District generally, the idea of substituting a reputable lady school teacher for solid worth seems very out of place (Hagen to Holmlund, editor, Marshall County Banner, Argyle, Minnesota 8 Oct. 1954; St. Paul, Hagen Papers; Hagen to Eastman, Thief River Falls, "to be inserted in the Crookston paper" (8 Oct. 1954, St. Paul, Hagen papers).

The recipient of Hagen's letter responded in pencil on lined paper:

She can't do what Harold Hagen has done for the farmers in water wet lands and brush if she is a smart woman she should be able to work in some bank that is intended for a woman and not stick herself in a mans place (Eastman to Hagen n.d., St. Paul, Hagen papers).

Hagen appealed to the women in a set of advertisements that emphasized that many women did not support the DFL candidate. The chairman of the Women's Division of the Republican Party National Committee gave him the idea in a letter in which she also suggested that the heading for the ad be "Women for Hagen" (Kelleher to Hagen 8 Oct. 1954, St. Paul, Hagen papers). The ad was soon run in newspapers of the larger towns of the Ninth District.

Women for Hagen

We, the undersigned, are among the thousands of women of city, town and country in the Ninth District supporting U.S. Representative Harold C. Hagen for re-election. All women can conscientiously back him on November 2nd because Representative Harold C. Hagen is a Christian, a family man, devoted to his family, his country and his God. He serves every citizen regardless of politics, race or creed, and is a credit to state and

nation. We urge other women to call their neighbors and friends in his behalf. . . . (Signatures) (Bemidji Pioneer 29 Oct. 1954, p. 6).

In Bemidji, no less than thirty-five signatures were appended in support of Hagen: in Baudette, twenty-seven signatures; in Thief River Falls, twenty-four signatures.

Most editors of weekly papers were silent; however, newspaper editors supported Hagen if they supported any one. The editor of the Fergus Falls Journal commented that Coya "fairly shrieked" when she made charges against her opponent, and he said of Hagen:

No congressman has ever kept in closer touch with people of his district than Harold Hagen. He has not only voted for everything that was to their interest, but was one of the men who never fails to give any request immediate and personal attention (18 Oct. 1954, p. 6).

The Bemidji Pioneer editor saluted "The Servant Who Serves," and in a similar vein the Baudette editor announced that Hagen was the "Best friend the dairy farmers ever had" (Baudette Region 27 Oct. 1954, p. 4). He also asked the voters to remember that they should support popular president Eisenhower and then vote against men who are ready to support him. Vote for a Republican, who will help Ike put through his program" (20 Oct. 1954, p. 4).

But favorable newspaper editorials, front page coverage, and written advertisements would not win this election. The sounds of Coya's campaign--singing, radio ads,

speeches, personal visits--were effective. She won, 48,999 to 46,664, carrying all but four counties: Ottertail, Wilkin, and Clay in the more prosperous and urban section of the district, and Beltrami on the far eastern side. There the Bemidji Pioneer editor had offered Hagen "To give 'em both barrels from this end" (Arney to Hagen n.d. Oct. 1954; St. Paul, Hagen Papers 1954 Campaign). Hagen failed even to carry his home county, Polk, while Coya carried her home county, Red Lake, two to one (see Election Table 5).

With victory, Coya became front page news. The Grand Forks Herald, under a heading "New Minnesota Congressman Widely Hailed," declared that "Minnesota political history was made this week by a housewife in the little town of Oklee, Minnesota, where she won election as the first woman congressman from the Gopher state. Political wiseacres said it couldn't be done--that Mrs. Coya Knutson of Oklee 'didn't have a chance . . .'" (6 Nov. 1954, p. 1). The Fargo Forum related on page one that "Peppery Mrs. Coya Knutson rode to victory as a self-described 'down to earth public servant' and a lusty campaigner. 'I guess it takes a woman to beat you fellows,' she quipped at her home Wednesday after she served sandwiches to well wishers" (4 Nov. 1954). But the Bemidji Pioneer, a pro-Hagen paper, tersely captioned its front page article, "Hagen Loses," and explained that Hagen had been defeated

TABLE 5
 NINTH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS
 NOVEMBER 2, 1954

County	Harold C. Hagen	Coya Knutson
Becker	4,428	4,501
Beltrami	3,498	3,314
Clay	4,963	4,949
Clearwater	1,458	2,373
Kittson	1,374	2,280
Lake of the Woods	784	934
Mahnomen	1,139	1,684
Marshall	2,517	3,176
Norman	2,138	2,616
Ottertail	10,850	6,216
Pennington	2,023	2,971
Poik	6,520	7,122
Red Lake	834	1,900
Roseau	2,152	3,057
Wilkin	<u>1,986</u>	<u>1,906</u>
Total	46,664 (49%)	48,999 (51%)

Minnesota Legislative Manual 1955, p. 536.

by "a hotel operator at Oklee" (3 Nov. 1954). The New York Times reported, "Republicans surrendered the Ninth District to the first woman elected to Congress in Minnesota. Coya Knutson, 42, former school teacher, whose energetic campaign included songfests and piano-playing, upset Harold Hagen, veteran of six terms" (4 Nov. 1954, p. 17).

Democratic spokesman Arthur Naftalin changed his tone --he called the Coya Knutson victory "a highlight." He stressed that the Seventh District candidate whom he had predicted to win had lost only by a few thousand and attributed the statewide DFL victory to GOP dairy policies and the leadership of Hubert Humphrey (Bagley Independent 11 Nov. 1954).

Republican editors mourned the defeat of their candidate. The Fergus Falls Journal declared, "Everything considered, it is surprising the Republicans did not lose more than they did. Minnesota has joined Georgia and the solid South" (3 Nov. 1954). The Baudette Region lamented, "Over the years he [Harold Hagen] has done dozens of nice things for folks here, and yet he lost the county by 400. It isn't fair" (10 Nov. 1954, p. 4). The editor reported that Hagen had put on an exceptionally strong campaign, "but was swept under by the strong swing to the DFL" (p. 4).

But no one was more surprised than the defeated incumbent. At an interview in Crookston, Harold Hagen

said he did not know what he would do in January when the time came to give up the house seat that he had held since 1942. "I had never anticipated I'd lose, and as a result, I wasn't thinking about any job except the one I had" (Fargo Forum 5 Nov. 1958, p. 1).

Nationally, journalists were particularly interested in how Coya planned to combine homemaking and a career in Washington. "We are beseiged by women reporters who want 'human interest' copy on you--your campaign, family, interest in special types of legislation, hobbies, etc. They particularly want to know what your husband does now and whether or not he will come to Washington," wrote the director of Women's Activities for the Democratic National Committee (Katie Louchlum to Knutson 20 Nov. 1954, Bemidji, Knutson Papers).

The public question in Andy's position was well taken. "He refused to come to Washington," Coya explained long after she was out of Congress (Interview with Knutson 1980). But if she did not have her husband's active support, she told her constituents that she did. In 1954 Coya explained to a newspaper reporter that her husband went along with the idea of being of service from the very beginning. He talked politics, served on the township board, and "egged" her on. "When we first began to talk about this campaign last Christmas vacation, and as it took more definite shape at Easter time, he was backing me" (Grand Forks Herald 6 Nov. 1954, p. 10).

In the same interview, however, the first question raised concerned how the family would manage with mother in Washington. The reporter stated that the new congresswoman

makes her plans after careful consideration and no one knows better than she does that you can't just walk out and leave your husband and teenage son to shift for themselves. She [Coya] was the first to see the funny side of that, for she said laughingly, "After all, they have had to learn to look after themselves and do it pretty well. I am serving my second term in Minnesota's legislature and this past year I haven't spent much time around here!" (p. 10).

During the campaign, Coya's mother, Christine Gjesdal, had closed her home in Edmore and had moved to Oklee to manage the Knutson household.

But the victory was sweet, and any problem at home was subordinated to the achievement of election. The mayor of Oklee designated the city the "Capital of the Ninth District." A program was arranged in Oklee to honor her, with John Blatnik of the Eighth District as the main speaker. Her former pupils gave her a desk set; the village businessmen gave her luggage and a brief case (Bagley Independent 11 Nov. 1954, p. 1). Congratulatory letters and telegrams arrived, such as, "It took a woman to beat friend Harold. That's what really tickles me. In spite of all the dire predictions of defeat you did what we have failed to do" (Adelaine [sic], Bagley, to Knutson 5 Nov. 1954, Bemidji, Knutson Papers 1954). Her

cousin Tor telegraphed from Norway, "Heartiest personal congratulations. Family in old country proudly rejoices" (Gjesdal to Knutson 6 Nov. 1954, Bemidji, Knutson Papers 1954).

CHAPTER IV

WASHINGTON YEARS, 1954-1958

Because of Coya's election the party balance in Minnesota delegation shifted to the Democratic side. Before 1954, there were five Republicans and four Democrats; after Coya's election there were five Democrats and four Republicans. Her election also contributed to Democratic control of the House in the 84th Congress. The Democrats had gained nineteen seats (see Table 6). A record number of women--sixteen--had won Congressional seats. All the women incumbents--seven Republicans and five Democrats--were re-elected. But three female newcomers had ousted Republican incumbents--Democrats Edith Green of Oregon, Martha Griffiths of Michigan, and Coya Knutson of Minnesota. Iris Blicht was elected from the one-party state of Georgia. "If the gentlemen of the 84th Congress appear a little better shaved and a little better mannered than usual, there'll be a reason: women," the International News Service reported (Chamberlin 1973, p. 248).

In January Coya moved into a two-room, air-conditioned Washington apartment--alone. Terry accompanied his mother for a brief sight-seeing visit but returned to school in Oklee for his sophomore year in high school.

TABLE 6
PARTY BALANCE IN THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES FROM 82nd TO 86th CONGRESS

	82nd	83rd	84th	85th	86th
Democrats	235	213	232	234	283
Republicans	199	221	203	201	152
Independent	1	1	0	0	0

America Votes, 1959, p. 45.

Terry would be "keeping his father company while Mother is in Washington" (Mpls. Trib. 23 Jan. 1955, sec. Picture, p. 5).

The list of needs for her district was long: more electric power for Moorhead through construction of a power line from West Fargo to Moorhead, more air service for Bemidji, a new port of entry on the Canadian border, flood control for the Red River Valley, dollars for the Red Lake band of Ojibwa Indians. All these were in her portfolio when she arrived in Washington.

But farm problems took priority. She wanted price supports back up to 90 percent, relaxation of controls on farmers who grew corn, increased support for feed grains and durum wheat, and larger acreage allotments for sugar beet growers (p. 5). She knew what the number one industry in her area was, and she went after the committee assignment that would most help her and her constituents. Congressman John Blatnik of the neighboring Eighth District advised her to write immediately to congressional leaders Sam Rayburn and John McCormack for help in getting on the Agricultural Committee (Blatnik to Knutson 11 Nov. 1954, Bemidji, Knutson Papers). Her Republican predecessor had been unable to do so; no Minnesotan served on the committee that affected so many of Coya's constituents.

No woman had ever served on the Agricultural Committee--Virginia Jenckes, Democrat from Indiana, 1932;

Kathryn McCarthy, Democrat from Kansas, 1936; Katherine St. George, Republican from New York, 1950, had all been rebuffed in their bids to serve. When the committee's chairman, Harold Cooley, Democrat from North Carolina, protested to Speaker Rayburn that he "didn't want a woman on his committee," Rayburn told him, "She did the impossible of getting elected, and she's going to get her pick of committees" (Chamberlin 1973, p. 266). Later she and Cooley "became the best of friends" (Grand Forks Herald 6 Nov. 1968, p. 14). Coya won the seat with help from her colleague, and her picture captioned by news of her appointment appeared in the New York Times (14 January 1955, sec. 10, p. 4).

On the House Agricultural Committee, Coya worked on the Dairy Products and Domestic Marketing subcommittees. She introduced twenty-four bills related to farming during her four-year tenure (U.S. Congressional Record [CR] 23 Aug. 1958). Her strident criticisms of "big-business farm policies" of GOP Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson filled many pages in the Congressional Record, but she failed to secure the action she wanted for farmers (U.S. Congressional Almanac 1955, pp. 564-662). However, her fight for recognition of the problems facing family-sized farms led to the establishment of the first congressional subcommittee to study the family-sized farm.

Grass-roots opinions were heard on congressional hearings held throughout the nation, including one in Fergus Falls.

And thousands of letters from forty-five states came flooding into her office after Better Farming published two articles, "Meet the Farm Woman's Congresswoman," by Fred Bailey (March 1955) and "Protect the Family Farm Now," written by Coya (June 1955). Presenting Coya as a Democrat from a Republican district who had fought her way into Congress and onto the Agricultural Committee with "butter and egg" electioneering," the article touched a responsive chord in the nation's farm families (U.S. Congressional Record [CR] 1955, pp. 8385-8386).

She introduced twenty-one other bills, including one that was a legislative landmark. The loan fund for college students was created under Title II of the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (H.R. 5479). Fourteen years of teaching high school students in North Dakota and Minnesota had made her aware of students that had the ability but not the funds to go to college. "I worked on the bill for four years, and no one knew we were working on it," Coya said (Interview with Knutson 1980). She modeled the bill after the program already in effect in Norway; she sent Bill Kjeldahl to Norway to get facts after Tor Gjesdal told her of the student loan fund there. Speaking for a subsequent omnibus education bill on the floor of the House, Coya explained

that for generations, college education had been the domain of wealthy families, but that the GI Bill, no longer in effect in 1958, had changed that. The GI Bill had filled an unforeseen vacuum during the critical years following World War II. But, she declared, the present need was for

. . . trained talent for producing television, for new designs of modern defense, and for the very advance know-how of space travel. If we are to have an informed electorate, a substantial portion of the population must also know enough to decide intelligently our country's domestic and foreign policies. A free society must have access to the facts or it will fall (CR 1958, p. 16743).

She told her colleagues that the opportunity for capable students to go to college was the "latest horizon to be faced," and that "we had seen destitute students go by unnoticed" (p. 16743).

Coya also authored a bill to provide more than one million dollars for cystic fibrosis research, then the third-ranking fatal children's illness. She spoke for expansion of the school lunch program and aid to Indians. To memorialize Minnesota's Centennial, she recommended that a seven-foot bronze statute of Maria Sanford, University of Minnesota professor of English and advocate of higher education for women, be placed in the Capitol rotunda. All these bills became law (U.S. Congressional Almanac 1958, pp. 84-87).

During the four legislative sessions, 1954-1958, Coya had worked hard for her district and had voted with

the Democratic majority. Of the thirty-four votes considered most important and most controversial by the Congressional Almanac, Coya had voted with her party thirty times (see Example 1958, Table 7; also U.S. Congressional Almanac 1955, pp. 49-52; 1956, pp. 85-91; 1957, pp. 83-84).

However, following the party was not enough, and she made the mistake of championing the cause of Estes Kefauver in his bid for the presidential nomination. Under the leadership of Senator Hubert Humphrey, the state DFL Central Committee had endorsed Adlai Stevenson at a meeting in Duluth on October 29, 1955; Ninth District DFL Chairman L. J. Lee, Bagley, made the nominating speech. At that time Coya supported Stevenson too, posing with him for news photographs. But Coya chose to back Kefauver instead, and in December Lee learned "by reading in the Minneapolis paper" that she was to be state chairwoman of the Kefauver for President Committee. Lee was furious (Interview with Lee 1982).

In a five-page letter to Lee, in which he outlined reasons for supporting Stevenson, Senator Humphrey explained that he had talked with Mrs. Knutson, whom he had gladly supported, who had a "distinguished record," and whom "we needed" in Congress. However, Humphrey wrote,

I explained to Congresswoman Knutson that she was at liberty to make any choice she desired and that I would respect her judgment. I had

TABLE 7
 REPRESENTATIVE KNUTSON'S VOTING RECORD ON KEY
 ISSUES IN 1958, 85th CONGRESS, 2nd SESSION

1. Unemployment Compendation	nay	#
2. Mutual Security	yea	#
3. Alaska Statehood	yea	#
4. Department of Defense Appropriation	absent	
5. Trade Agreement Extension	nay	#
6. Smith Bill	nay	#
7. Price Support	yea	#
8. Defense Reorganization	nay	#
9. Municipal Loans	yea	#
10. National Defense Education Act	nay	#
11. Housing Act	yea	#
12. Labor-Management	yea	#

#--Voted same as Democratic majority; Congressional Almanac 1958, pp. 84-87.

hoped that we could work together on the same team with the same slate--just as we did in 1954. I deeply regret that her choice makes this impossible in this particular situation (Humphrey to Lee 14 February 1956, St. Paul, DFL Central Committee Papers, HHH Corres. 1956).

Coya's disaffection forced Lee to resign as chairman of the district, a post of power that he had held since the formation of the party in 1944. Sadly he explained, "I could no longer serve both my congresswoman and my party" (Interview with Lee 1982). Marvin Evenson became chairman, and Coya had eliminated one of her opponents in the DFL.

Coya went ahead on her own; she used extraordinary means to bring Kefauver to the people. For example, just a few days before the March 20th primary, she scheduled Kefauver to be in Moorhead at the same time as Stevenson. The DFL had obtained the use of the Concordia College Fieldhouse for a rally, and when they did not allow Kefauver to appear on the same platform with Stevenson, Coya brought Kefauver's sound truck to the entrance of the fieldhouse and loudly invited rally-goers to come to a bean feed for Kefauver being held nearby (Interview with Dr. Joseph Knutson, President Emeritus, Concordia College 1981).

A successful campaign was waged statewide; Coya and Hjalmer Petersen, Minnesota's Railroad and Warehouse Commissioner and a long-time party maverick, stumped for

Kefauver. She spoke again and again on the question of bossism--whether the state DFL could dictate to the voters by imposing its endorsement of Stevenson or whether voters could choose the candidate in the primary. Election results embarrassed party leaders: Kefauver captured twenty-six of the thirty convention delegates (Grand Forks Herald 21 March 1956, p. 1). Lee lamented many years later, "None of us were delegates to the national convention" (Interview with Lee 1982).

Some political changes might be partly attributed to this embarrassment. That year the DFL-controlled state legislature eliminated the presidential primary in Minnesota--the parties, not the voters would henceforth choose national convention delegates. And Coya seemed to change, for at the Democratic convention in Chicago, she side-stepped backing Kefauver or Humphrey. "I'm just backing the Democratic Party," she said (Fargo Forum 15 August 1956).

She perhaps was politicking for herself. The DFL Ninth District Chairman, Marvin Evenson, predicted that she would win by 5,000 votes in her race and that she had improved her chances by supporting Estes Kefauver in the primary (Fargo Forum, 31 October 1958). Why did she defy the party? "Because Estes stepped aside in 1952 when Democrats promised him the bid in 1956. It was the principle" (Interview with Knutson 1981). During

the campaign she had said, "Because he [Kefauver] has illustrated his stand on a sound, vital farm program" (Grand Forks Herald 19 March 1958, p. 1). In 1982, both Allen and Lee interpreted Coya's actions as coming from her own as well as Bill Kjeldahl's ambition to achieve a position of significance in a Kefauver administration (Interviews 1982).

Coya's switch to Kefauver had caused deep anger within Walter Turgeon, DFL chairman in her home county of Red Lake. When Coya requested caucus material be given to precinct captains, he replied,

I am much more worried and concerned about disunity and poor working relationships when someone high in the party, like you for instance, lets [sic] yourself get involved in a political fracas like the Minnesota primary turned out to be. I hope and pray it will not be disastrous to any of our candidates (Turgeon to Knutson 7 May 1956, St. Paul, DFL Central Committee Papers, Knutson correspondence).

Back home in Oklee, husband Andy and son Terry were not faring well. Townspeople said that Terry was able to do anything he wanted. Andy was drinking more and more, and the greater success that Coya enjoyed in her career, the less dependable he became. His cousin said, "Andy was in a bad bunch in Oklee" (Interview with Ray Strande 1981). His banker said that "Andy was simply not working and not paying his bills" (Interview with George Lee 1982). Andy was an alcoholic.

The disgruntled husband and desperate party leaders had already found each other. Evidently, the party leaders

had contacted her unhappy husband, and he then threatened his wife in a letter written in pencil on lined paper:

My dear wife,

Some of the party had a meeting they called me over and asked me lots of things. Well, I didn't say much because I want to see first how you turn out. They want another meeting now about February 1 and they let me know. Well, Coya, if I don't hear from you by that time I am going to tell them the whole works. I don't get any money from you, so I'll have to get it some other place. I'm broke and need money. The cafe's got about \$50-\$75 coming from me. I really can make money out of this deal.

The rest is up to you, Coya, which side of the fence you want me on.

I love you, honey (Andy Knutson to Coya Knutson n.d. January 1956, St. Paul, Reiersen Papers, Box 1, Knutson correspondence).

However, her tragic home situation and intra-party strife did not affect her showing at the polls in 1956. In the 1956 congressional election, she was unopposed in the primary and trounced Harold Hagen in the general election by a margin of 5,979 votes. She carried every county except Wilkin and Otter Tail, the southernmost counties (see Table 8). Hagen had been hurt in an auto accident near Detroit Lakes and was unable to get around and campaign for some time, which possibly impeded his chance of regaining his seat. And Coya had the confidence of voters.

Coya was in charge.

TABLE 8
 NINTH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS
 NOVEMBER 6, 1956

County	Coya Knutson	Harold C. Hagen
Becker	5,548	4,669
Beltrami	4,414	4,122
Clay	7,024	6,751
Clearwater	2,350	1,632
Kittson	2,742	1,476
Lake of the Woods	1,112	781
Mahnomen	1,603	1,106
Marshall	4,126	2,550
Norman	3,259	2,252
Ottertail	7,253	12,476
Pennington	3,345	2,487
Polk	8,791	7,337
Red Lake	1,722	879
Roseau	3,380	2,113
Wilkin	<u>2,247</u>	<u>2,306</u>
Total	58,916 (53%)	52,937 (47%)

Minnesota Legislative Manual, 1957, p. 642.

Fig. 4. Portrait of Congresswoman Coya Knutson,
Minnesota Representative to Congress, 1954-1958 (Collection
of Author).



CHAPTER V

"COYA, COME HOME"

"Is Coya the target of both the GOP and DFL?", asked a Minneapolis Star headline on November 18, 1957. "A number of prominent DFL leaders have been urged to challenge Coya Knutson in the primary. Even her severest critics in the party, however, declare that she has done a good job. Her feat in getting a house subcommittee on family farms into Fergus Falls was brilliant." The newspaper headline was close to the truth. A fight was underway that would capture headlines all across the country during the coming election year. Coya Knutson stood at the center of the controversy.

The struggle within the party was bloody at the Ninth District DFL convention on May 4, 1958 in Crookston. District Chairman Marvin Evenson chastised Coya for breaking with party leaders. Led by former District Chairman L. J. Lee, those leaders were seeking an opponent for Coya (Fargo Forum 4 May 1958, p. 1). John Michels of Breckenridge, leader of the pro-Coya faction, criticized Evenson and opposed his re-election as chairman: "I feel that the only reason for the existence of this organization is to wholeheartedly support our congresswoman" (Fargo

Forum 5 May 1958). Evenson expressed his sentiments:

"This organization exists not to build one man or one person or one leader; we need to build at the precinct grass roots if we're to get more Freemans and Humphreys for our party." After six hours of balloting, the convention elected John Michels as the new DFL chairman and nominated Coya for Congress. Coya had won the intra-party fight for control of the district. But all of the county leaders of her former state legislative district, Red Lake, Pennington, and Clearwater, voted against her (see Table 9).

Andy Knutson, an alternate delegate, requested that the statement that he carried in his pocket be read, but the convention chairman, Harvey Wilder, refused him permission (Fargo Forum 7 May 1958). Andy then released to the press his demand that Coya return home:

I have as of this date, May 4, informed my wife, Coya Knutson, a Ninth District Representative in Congress, I do not want her to file for re-election to Congress. I expect her to comply with this request. Therefore, because of my interest in the DFL Party, and as a party member, I believe it should be the business of this convention to discuss a candidate, or candidates to file at the primary so my wife's position will be filled again by DFL member (U.S. Congressional Hearings, H.R. 656, p. 109).

In a second statement called "Press Release from Andy Knutson" datelined Crookston, May 4, her husband detailed the reasons he expected her to comply with his request:

Our home life has deteriorated to the extent that it is practically nonexistent. I want to

TABLE 9

DFL CONVENTION VOTE FOR NINTH DISTRICT CHAIRMAN

MAY 4, 1958

County	<u>Pro-Knutson Michels</u>	<u>Anti-Knutson Evenson</u>
Becker	1-1/2	1-1/2
Beltrami	3	
Clay	1	3
Clearwater		3
Kittson	3	
Lake of the Woods	3	
Mahnomen	3	
Marshall	1-1/2	1-1/2
Norman		3
Ottertail	2	2
Pennington		3
Polk	5	
Red Lake		3
Roseau		3
Wilkin	<u>2-1/2</u>	<u>1/2</u>
Totals	25-1/2	23-1/2

Fargo Forum, May 7, 1958.

have the happy home that we enjoyed for many years prior to her election. Coya hasn't been home for Christmas for two years and for Easter the past three. I have seen our son but a few times and for only brief visits (p. 109).

Further, he accused his wife's young administrative assistant, Bill Kjeldahl, of improprieties:

Another reason for my request is her executive secretary, Bill Cheldahl [sic], who by his actions and dictatorial influence on my wife has taken the close relationship and affection we enjoyed before.

Finally I believe that it is useless for her to be elected as the decisions that are made are not hers but Cheldahls, [sic] an individual who assumes no responsibility yet dictates the policy of her office (p. 109).

An eager press seized on the "Coya Come Home" letter, which was reprinted in newspapers and magazines and repeated on television newscasts across the nation. "How do you deal with a thing like this?" asked Mrs. Knutson's campaign manager. "There are two sides to every story, but Coya can't tell her side without appearing to criticize Andy in public. That wouldn't be good policy" ("When A Woman Goes Into Politics").

Nationally syndicated columnist Doris Fleeson wrote about the political double standard that was troubling Coya. She said that colleagues in Washington lauded Coya Knutson as a hard worker and that many in Washington, not all of them women, felt that Coya was marked down as "fair game" simply because she was a woman.

There are many better stories here than
l'affaire Knutson and they are about much more

prominent people, but it is not considered cricket to use them as a political weapon.

The lesson is that, as a practical matter, women are held to a far higher standard of accountability in politics than men are. Women clearly cannot count on the club spirit for protection (The Evening Star 13 May 1958).

Jack Anderson, writing for absent Drew Pearson in another syndicated column, also sided with "golden-haired" Coya:

For years, Andy blew his wife's money on costly drinking sprees and sponged off her between binges. She paid for most of his living expenses, bought him a 1955 Plymouth and kept him in cigar money--he smokes twenty a day.

For the sake of his pride, she painted her husband's name--"Andy's Hotel"--on a small, two story frame hotel she owns. Several months ago, Oklee merchants received a letter from her, warning that she could not longer make good her husband's debts. Andy threatened to sell out unless she released the purse strings (Raleigh News & Observer 18 May 1958).

The columnist was correct, for Oklee banker George Lee stated that Coya had circulated a notice to Oklee businessmen that disclaimed responsibility for any debts that her husband might incur (Interview with George Lee 1982).

Coya won the primary election battle on September 9, 1954 by a margin of 4,158 votes over former chairman Marvin Evenson. Conceding victory to her, a tone of bitterness crept into Evenson's statement: "I have always been a Democrat and will be supporting all the DFL candidates to whom people of our district can look with respect and who

are a credit to the cause of good government" (Fargo Forum 10 Sept. 1958). Coya carefully pointed out that her home town had stayed with her, not Andy. "I am in deep gratitude to my constituents and friends who have given me such a generous vote. My heart is warmed by Oklee's outstanding support, 107 to 44" (Fargo Forum 10 Sept. 1958). She was pointing out that voters in her home town understood her situation and wished her to ignore Andy's demand. The voters of the district still supported her, even if their county leaders did not (see Table 10). She had outmaneuvered former party leaders at the May convention and in September once again she had beaten their candidate at the polls.

Back in Oklee, the issue of whether she was abandoning her child had been negated. Terry had enrolled as a freshman at Lutheran College in Decorah, Iowa, and would be home for vacations only. But Andy was at home, alone, and in his letter had told the world that he "expected her to comply" with his request that she not file for re-election. But the truth was that there was no longer any home in Oklee--there had been none since 1956. In that year, Coya went back to Oklee to run her campaign from headquarters in the tiny hotel. She brought along William Kjeldahl to assist her in the campaign, and before the election the Knutsons came to a disagreement. They saw each other only a few times after that; in fact Mrs. Knutson stayed

TABLE 10
 NINTH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT DEMOCRATIC PARTY
 PRIMARY ELECTION RESULTS
 SEPTEMBER 9, 1958

County	Marvin Evenson	Coya Knutson
Becker	1,379	1,564
Beltrami	1,198	1,252
Clay	2,387	1,759
Clearwater	764	939
Kittson	483	1,575
Lake of the Woods	141	362
Mahnomen	895	790
Marshall	767	1,213
Norman	911	1,199
Ottertail	2,050	2,366
Pennington	1,260	1,637
Polk	2,094	3,273
Red Lake	263	713
Roseau	936	1,513
Wilkin	609	562
Total	16,137 (44%)	20,717 (56%)

Minnesota Legislative Manual, 1959-1960, p. 445.

in a nearby town when she came into the district in 1957. By 1958, a bird had built its nest on the campaign office sign she had put on "Andy's Hotel" ("When A Woman Goes Into Politics").

Reaction from Democrats to her 1958 campaign were mixed. Andy said he could not vote for a Republican, so he would vote for his wife in the general election (Fargo Forum 21 October 1958). He did very little in the campaign, and Bill Kjeldahl also remained in the background. During the September primary campaign, Evenson and his supporters had said that they would "sit on their hands" if Coya were nominated. However, two state officials also running for office, Governor Orville Freeman and senatorial candidate Eugene McCarthy did campaign with Coya in the Ninth District.

Coya had a formidable GOP challenger to beat in November; Odin Langen was a three-term state legislator and a farmer from Kennedy. He did not take public notice of the split in the Ninth District DFL nor of the family issue between Coya and Andy. Langen campaigned for less centralization in government and a balanced budget. A well-built, six-foot, five-inch man, Langen simply campaigned as "a big man for a big job" (Fargo Forum, 21 Oct. 1958, p. 1).

Coya's campaign manager, John Michels, criticized the "Republican press" for failing to show a comparison

of Republican congressional candidates' expenditures with Coya's expenditures. But for the most part, Coya was on the defensive. For instance, her campaign manager answered charges made by Langen's Volunteer Committee Chairman, Maurice Nelson. Nelson claimed that Coya had part-time workers on full-time wages, shortchanging the Ninth District's taxpayers (Fargo Forum 21 October 1958, p. 1). Coya retorted that the charges were false. He also charged absenteeism as reported by her opponent in the DFL primary (Kittson Enterprise 20 October 1958); however, her voting participation in 1958 was 88 percent (U.S. Congressional Weekly Report 1958, p. 315).

But the wife's dilemma of home or politics was the question that voters faced. It was a relatively new question for Americans, for until 1942, when Clare Booth Luce was elected, no married woman had served in Congress. Mrs. Luce explained to a reporter that when the question whether a woman could run a home and a political job at the same time, the answer depended on whether her home was in commuting distance. "Her choice, in case her home is not within commuting distance, is to move her home to where her job is, or she won't have a home," said Mrs. Luce ("Women's Dilemma: Home or Politics"). The problem was complicated by the size of Mrs. Knutson's congressional salary, \$22,500 a year, which was enormous when compared to her husband's income. Mrs. Luce explained,

"I think it is easier for a man who is successful himself to adjust to a successful wife than for a man who is a failure," said Mrs. Luce. "His ego is not as likely to be hurt" (p. 70). In 1958, six other married women served in the House, and all but Coya and Mrs. Green of Oregon commuted weekly or had husbands who moved to Washington.

The opposition took advantage of the opportunity to elicit sympathy for the neglected husband. For example, Republican newspapers published a front-page interview, written by the publisher of the Crookston Daily Times:

He's a lonely man, this Andy Knutson. The loneliness is written all over his thin, somewhat careworn face. It is betrayed by the slight stoop of his shoulders. It is evident in the somehow desperate way he clinches an ever-present cigar between his teeth (Bemidji Pioneer 10 May 1958, p. 1).

There was also an unspoken issue. In 1954 when Mrs. Knutson went to Washington, she was described as a "fairly typical Midwestern farm woman in appearance," according to U.S. News and World Report (p. 42). But in 1958, the article continued, "Now her hair is brighter. Her dress is modish. Her figure is trimmer." This idea was repeated in interviews thirty years later; several Ninth District residents complained that Coya "changed" while she was in Washington (Interviews 1980, 1981).

Coya lost the election, 47,863 to 46,473 (see Table 11); a change of only 696 votes would have kept her in the House. "A woman shouldn't be running around," Oklee

TABLE 11
 NINTH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS
 NOVEMBER 4, 1958

County	Coya Knutson	Odin Langen
Becker	3,709	3,755
Beltrami	3,242	3,688
Clay	5,068	6,160
Clearwater	2,090	1,484
Kittson	2,162	1,912
Lake of the Woods	1,029	697
Mahnomen	1,629	1,096
Marshall	3,182	2,497
Norman	2,591	2,146
Ottertail	5,565	11,044
Pennington	2,801	2,110
Polk	7,392	6,343
Red Lake	1,533	735
Roseau	2,935	2,160
Wilkin	<u>1,545</u>	<u>2,036</u>
Total	46,473 (49.3%)	47,863 (50.7%)

Minnesota Legislative Manual, 1959-1960, p. 445.

resident Mrs. Carl Ramstad gave as her reason for voting Coya out (Chamberlin 1973, p. 265). Another Oklee voter said, "Woman's place is in the home, and her boy probably needed her. A teenager needs his mother most at that age" (Chamberlin, p. 265). But this was not the sentiment of the majority of the Oklee area residents who knew Andy as well as Coya. Red Lake County voters cast 1,533 ballots for Coya, 735 for Langen. The counties having urban populations (over 2,500) and located far from her home area voted against her--Becker (Detroit Lakes), Clay (Moorhead), Otter Tail (Fergus Falls), with the exception of Beltrami (Bemidji). The counties having urban populations and located within ninety miles of Oklee voted for her--Polk (Crookston and East Grand Forks) and Pennington (Thief River Falls). The eight counties without cities over 2,500 voted for her, with the exception of Wilkin.

She was the only Democrat in Congress who was replaced by a Republican that year. The "Coya Come Home" letter had been a crushing blow.

Before the votes were counted, Andy declared that he was filing a \$200,000 suit against Kjeldahl for alienation of affection (Fargo Forum 5 November 1958). His attorney was Benedict Fitzgerald, a Washington, D.C. lawyer. Interviewed at election headquarters in Moorhead after her defeat, Coya made but one statement, "It's not over yet" (Fargo Forum 6 November 1958). A few weeks

later, Terry came home, and with the help of his Uncle Torkel Knutson, persuaded his father to drop the case (U.S. Congressional Hearings, p. 78). Andy realized that people were using him and took steps to drop the suit when he fired Mr. Fitzgerald:

I am firing you as my lawyer because you did not drop the case against Kjeldahl like I told you to do almost two weeks ago. I want you to know that you do not represent me in any way any more and I want you to send back to me all the papers and letters you got from me.

The main thing is that you understand that I don't owe you a red cent more than I already paid you.

I told you that I didn't have any money when you said you could prove the two counts against Kjeldahl. I told you I didn't have any evidence but you went ahead on your own. A lot of innocent people got hurt, including me. A lot of people said they were trying to help me but they really just wanted to get Coya defeated (Andrew Knutson to Fitzgerald 21 Nov. 1958, U.S. Congressional Committee to Investigate, Report, p. 122).

The next week Coya made headlines when she disclosed that she was asking the House Elections Committee to investigate the Ninth District election. She refused to answer any questions on family affairs and said that the House Elections Committee would bring out what was pertinent (Fargo Forum 28 November 1958).

The Special House Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures began hearings on December 15, 1958. Coya charged that "malicious conspiracy" had been used to defeat her. Since she was the only one of the 222 Democratic incumbents in Congress who had been defeated, she

believed that the stories related to the "Coya Come Home" letters had unfairly persuaded voters against her.

The letters were the main object of investigation. There were actually three letters: the "demand" intended to be read at the Ninth District DFL convention, the "command" mailed by Andy to Coya in Washington, and the "press release." Testimony from Andy Knutson revealed that on April 27, 1958, a week before the DFL nominating convention, a meeting had been held at the Walter Turgeon farm home near Oklee (U.S. Congressional Hearings, p. 62). Present were DFL chairman for Red Lake County, Walter Turgeon; Walter's son, Jimmy Turgeon; former District Nine chairman L. J. Lee; and Andy Knutson. The object of the meeting was to draft a letter to be given to the chairman of the coming convention. Andy claimed that Lee wrote the "demand," "I have as of this date informed my wife," dated May 4. Andy copied and signed it, and then Lee tore up the original (p. 63). After he got home, he said, Andy wrote and sent the "command" to Coya in Washington:

My dear wife,

Coya I want you to tell the people of the 9th Dist. Sun. May 4, 1958, that you are thru in politics. That you want to go home & make a home for your son & husband.

As your husband, I compel you to do this. I'm tired of being apart from my family. I'm sick and tired having you run around with other men all the time, & not your husband.

I love you honey. Your Husband (Andy Knutson to Coya Knutson 29 April 1958, p. 110).

Lee, however, stated in 1982 that while he was at the farmhouse meeting, he was not sure who wrote them, and that the meetings and letters were Andy's idea.

The third document, the "press release" from Andy Knutson, "I have requested to my wife" of May 4th, had been typed on several sheets and handed to Andy by Jimmy Turgeon on a Crookston street after the convention election. They had gone to Turgeon's car where Andy had signed it, and Andy assumed that Jimmy Turgeon had written it. However, handwriting experts at the hearing proved that the original handwritten copy had not been written by Jimmy Turgeon, but by someone that used entirely different writing habits and that the design, slant and spacing were similar to the handwriting of Nelson, Langen Volunteer Chairman. However, in an astounding revelation in a 1982 interview, Lee stated that the handwriting experts were wrong and Andy had been right: Turgeon had written the press release. According to Lee, Coya had brought charges against the wrong party; "The Republicans had nothing to do with the letter" (Interview with Lee 1982).

While controversy had swirled about just who had written the letters, the most important factor had been obscured. People from her own party had made certain that voters should consider, "Coya, Come Home."

Other testimony from Andy revealed that before the convention and during the campaign, people in Oklee were

feeding Andy stories about Administrative Assistant Bill Kjeldahl and Coya (U.S. Congressional Hearings, p. 67). Then in late September or early October, Andy had received a letter on National Press Club stationery from a "Gervaise Trevalion" in Washington that told about "that rat, Kjeldahl" (p. 131). The Washington informer, who could never be located, recommended a Washington lawyer, Benedict Fitzgerald. Not sensing political motivation behind the stories, Andy became so angry that he went to the Oklee-area lawyer, Maurice Nelson, in nearby Fosston, to seek advice about suing Mr. Kjeldahl. Attorney Nelson advised Andy that no one in the district would take the case.

Andy did contact Fitzgerald, whose office was in the Press Club, and on November 5, 1958, the suit for \$200,000 for alienation of affection and slander was filed against Kjeldahl. But when Terry returned home from college, Andy realized that people were using him and dropped the case. He said he had no money to pay Fitzgerald.

Andy's testimony related Fitzgerald with Jimmy Turgeon. When Andy arrived in Washington November 29, he called Turgeon to tell him the FBI wanted to find out who wrote the letter. Turgeon said that he had written the letter, and that "he would take the blame for it" (p. 69). When Turgeon asked Andy if there was anything he could do to help, Andy told him he was broke. Turgeon

said he would have to "see a couple guys" and would wire money. Later that evening Turgeon called back and instructed Andy via the desk clerk to contact Fitzgerald. Andy dropped the matter at that point.

An affidavit submitted by Andy was filled with contrition, but this time he said he did not know who wrote the letters.

There were some people that I thought were my friends and who said they were trying to help me but all they really wanted to do was to get Coya defeated. I should have smelled a rat a long time ago but I guess I was too mixed up from all the stories they told to me. They said all over the place in all the newspapers that I wrote the Coya Come Home letter. I will swear on a stack of bibles that I don't know who wrote the original letter but I know I didn't write it. It was handed to me by someone already written and the next thing I knew things were moving so fast that I did not have time to stop and think. They kept after me (U.S. Congressional Hearings, p. 143).

Andy also claimed in the prepared statement that the Republican volunteer chairman had tricked him:

My lawyer in Fosston never told me that he was volunteer campaign chairman for the Republicans. It's hard for me to trust anyone now. This trick seems to have hurt everybody except the Republican. I have been a Democrat all my life and I voted for Coya but the Coya Come Home letter which was written for me has hurt an awful lot of people I didn't mean to hurt. Our boy who has been going to college has been hurt. Coya got hurt. A lot of stories and lies came out of this and most of all the good things Coya worked so hard for got hurt. Not to mention me. It may be too late for a lot of things but it isn't too late to get the truth out into the open. All the good people in Oklee and Fosston and Crookston and all the other towns should know that it's no use having elections if you can't keep them clean. In all my fifty years I have never seen a campaign like

this one. Coya told the newspapers that she would not talk about her personal life and I was real proud of her. I wish that it would not have taken me all these months to tell her and everybody that I am sorry. It's a terrible feeling for a man to think that he might have had something to do with defeating one of the best people in Congress (p. 144).

The affidavit reads like someone else wrote it; nevertheless, it tells the tragedy that the political events had caused.

Mrs. Knutson took the stand with a fifteen-page document in hand. She claimed the campaign charges were false and that the letters had caused her defeat.

The committee decided that the exploitation of the family life of the Knutsons was indeed a contributing factor in her defeat. It ruled, however, that no matter how distasteful the interjection of the family life of a candidate into a campaign might be, it was something that "must be left to the good taste of the electorate for correction" (U.S. Congressional Committee to Investigate, Report, p. 52). The special committee also concluded that if there were unethical conduct on the part of her husband's lawyers, it was not within the jurisdiction of that committee. No further action was warranted.

The smoke cleared; Coya ran again for Congress. In 1960 she challenged the DFL-endorsed candidate, Roy Wiseth. She again won the primary, 14,249 to 11,484, but she lost the general election to Odin Langen, 57,114

to 62,322. In retrospect, she said that she knew she could not win but ran to support the candidacy of John F. Kennedy for President and that it was her district that helped Kennedy win Minnesota by only 1,500 votes. In appreciation he gave her a job as Congressional Liaison for Civil Defense, which she kept for a decade (Interview with Knutson 1980).

Coya divorced Andy in 1962; she never did go back to live in Oklee. And Andy got drunk one night in 1969, went home, and died, Coya told a reporter (St. Paul Pioneer Press 3 Jan. 1982, sec. Accent, p. 1). Maurice Nelson practices law in Colorado; L. J. Lee was a regent of University of Minnesota and is now mayor of Bagley. Bill Kjeldahl married soon after he returned from Washington in 1958, ran unsuccessfully for the Seventh District (formerly Ninth District) nomination in 1977, and is currently fighting the Farmers Home Administration's foreclosure on his Brooten farm (Mpls. Trib. 10 Jan. 1982, p. 1). Coya became Congressional liaison officer in the Office of Civil Defense in the Pentagon. She wrote for children's television and for farm magazines. She returned to the Midwest in 1972 to make her home with Terry. She ran again for Congress in the special election of 1977, but received few votes. Today she lives in a Minneapolis suburban townhouse with her son and his wife Barbara and two children.

She is proud of the job she did in Washington and credits her work on the Agriculture Committee with focusing attention on the problems of family farms. She notes that the University of Minnesota was the recipient of more than one million dollars for cystic fibrosis research and that great inroads have been made on that disease. And at a recent reunion of Minnesota's former Congressman and their wives, she asked those who had used the student loan fund to raise their hands. More than half did. "Do you know that millions of kids have used the student loan bill," she asked. "There aren't many people who can say their bills could carry that much territory," (Grand Forks Herald 14 Feb. 1982, p. 6B).

But in the recent interview, she noted that women still are a minority in politics. "They'll have to work awfully hard, they'll have to have a very definite program. Women are still vulnerable--about getting equal pay, about getting the same kind of recognition in the higher echelons that men get.

"I've always found that women have to work twice as hard as men to accomplish the same job. They're coming up from behind and they have to catch up" (p. 6B).

Her advice to politicians today is, "Get down to grass roots and find out what people are thinking. One person can make a difference" (Interview with Knutson 1982).

CONCLUSIONS

Coya Knutson's rural background prepared her to represent the people of the Ninth District. She grew to maturity in the place in which she was born--a farm; she had time to learn the informal rules by which people live in an environment that was knowable and manageable. By the age of thirty, when she heard Eleanor Roosevelt's plea to women to become involved politically, she was ready to take on community causes in addition to her teaching and homemaker duties. In the tiny town of Oklee, she came to know the structures of power on a small scale. Involvement in a rural community was her training ground for social responsibility and the participant style.

She demonstrated the perseverance, competence, and hard work that had been highly valued in frontier women, and her neighbors respected her. She took easy and natural steps from community work to the DFL county chairwoman position in 1948 and two years later to election to the state legislature. While a woman in the House was rare (no women had served since 1943), she got along well with her colleagues. The voters in her three-county district remained her base of support throughout her political career, through good and bad times.

She worked outside the DFL Party structure in order to be elected to Congress. Coya did not wait to be invited or persuaded. She recognized the possibility that she could win; she became determined to go to Washington. Because she was a woman, she went directly to the voters, not the party, to see if they thought her worthy of the task. If she had analyzed how the few other women had been elected to Congress, she would have found that most of them had first challenged their party in a primary. For women, "winning elections has proved less difficult than getting nominated, a process that forces women to choose between breaking down the locker room door, or circumventing the locker room altogether" (Tolchin, p. 62). She had learned to trust her own ideas, to go ahead; and she neither asked for nor received help from her party. She perhaps had an advantage for as the lone woman among four male candidates, she stood out.

Many talented and qualified women do not attempt to compete with a party's vast resources, but Coya had several driving motives. She wanted to be of service to others, like her Norwegian cousin Tor Gjesdal. "He has done so much," she said. It was a calling, a commitment to others already illustrated in her profession of teaching and in her volunteer work of 4-H leader, church choir director, founder of the town clinic. But community service did not fulfill her life, for her marriage was

unsuccessful; Washington was also a way out of the unhappy marriage. "I had to get out," she said in retrospect. Her husband had an eighth grade education; she a college education; and the more Coya succeeded in public life, the less able he was to cope with his world. Finally, she decided that she might as well run for public office and be paid for her service efforts. Her determination to achieve these gave her the energy and the initiative to be at farms before anyone was up, waiting to meet a potential voter.

She continued her ebullient campaign style after she won the primary easily and tried new tactics. The press failed to take this hard-driving female candidate seriously, and Coya relied on the radio and on personal appearances to win voters. She used a sound truck as she went to the small towns, sometimes singing, other times giving hard-hitting speeches over the loudspeaker. Her cynical campaign ballad, "Silent Harold," also helped to make her memorable. Thinking that women would be jealous of a woman who had dared step outside her sphere, Coya did not campaign specifically for women's votes. She went after the majority of voters; 54 percent of the district population were men. Her dynamic, forceful personality led the way to victory over twelve-year veteran Harold Hagen.

Coya did not depend on party support. After she had distinguished herself by her appointment to the

Agricultural Committee, by the introduction of legislation that could affect farm incomes, and legislation that enabled college students to obtain loans, she blatantly defied her party. Senator Hubert Humphrey, the leader of the Minnesota DFL in the fifties, backed Adlai Stevenson for President in 1956. Other DFL regulars across the country also supported him, but Coya took on the Minnesota chairmanship of the "Kefauver for President" Committee. She repeated her barnstorming campaign tactics that had worked for her in her congressional campaign. She escorted Senator Kefauver around the state, blaring away with a sound truck. The people listened, and Estes Kefauver captured twenty-six of the thirty DFL Minnesota delegates in the presidential primary. She had carried a candidate to the voters and had won. Embarrassed, the DFL-controlled Minnesota legislature did away with the presidential primary that same year. Coya's stumping for Kefauver perhaps enhanced her own legislation ratings in her district, for he was re-elected easily. Coya had challenged DFL party leadership and had won, forcing the district chairman to step down. But some leaders of the Ninth District would not tolerate a maverick who would have nothing to do with direction from its leaders.

"Woman's place is in the home" was used to defeat her. What her party had against her was not that she was a woman, but that she had challenged the party and

had beaten it. To get rid of her, the former DFL leadership used her vulnerability as a woman and the idea that a wife and mother who worked miles away from home was a threat to family. A fracas emerged at the District nominating convention in 1958; but after a bitter fight, Coya's supporters emerged victorious. A letter had already been written over her husband's signature stating, "Coya, Come Home," and this was duly released to the press. "Coya, Come Home," was a short hand phrase which summoned up a whole set of traits and attitudes thought proper for women, implying obligations and restrictions. The deposed Ninth District chairman, Martin Evenson, opposed her in the primary, but Coya again won easily.

Her husband was a tactic, not the real cause of her defeat in the general election of 1958 when she lost by 1,300 votes; her party evidently persuaded him to actively oppose her re-election, then publicized his opposition to her public life. "Coya, Come Home" served to distract attention from the fact that she had been working for her district in Washington. Innuendoes about her relationship with her administrative assistant complicated the "woman's place" issue, and an eager press seized on the sensational story. A post-election hearing by the Special Congressional Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures ruled that while it was true that family problems of the defeated incumbent had been used distastefully, it

was up to the electorate to decide. No further action was necessary, the committee ruled.

Coya had succeeded without party support in two congressional primaries and in a presidential primary; she had campaigned and worked in Washington without even tacit approval from her husband after they separated in 1956. However, she needed either party support or the appearance of approval from her husband in order to stay in office. It was not necessary that her husband take an active part; only that he continue to acquiesce publicly to her absence and to her investment of time and energy. Had Andy continued to keep quiet and do nothing, she presumably would have been all right. Coya did not manage as fine a finesse as her mentor, Eleanor Roosevelt who, it seemed, "traded off" her husband's acquiescence--not real support for her activities--in exchange for staying quiet about FDR's extra-marital affair. Coya behaved as though she believed that she could succeed on her own and as if she trusted that her hard work in Washington would convince voters of her competence. But first her own party, then the opposing party tested society's idea that for a woman, husband and home come first, career second.

Whether Coya Knutson was a trail-blazer or an anomaly is yet a question. Her career, even though it ended prematurely, demonstrates that some women do more than watch history be made. And for a time, she influenced

attitudinal change in men and women. For instance, in North Dakota, where television broadcasts and newspapers emanate from cities that border on the Ninth District, Agnes Geelan won the 1956 nomination of the North Dakota Republican party for Congress, a rare occurrence in the nation and a first in that state.

However, one must conclude that Coya Knutson was one-of-a-kind, a unique personality with a combination of extraordinary ability, motivation, and energy. Northwestern Minnesota women have not followed the trail that Coya blazed to the state legislature or to Congress. In the first thirty years after woman suffrage, four of the ten women elected to the Minnesota legislature were from northwestern Minnesota: Laura Naplin of Thief River Falls, Harriet Weeks of Detroit Lakes, Hannah Kempfer of Erhard, and Coya Knutson. In the past thirty years, when relatively larger numbers of women have served in the state legislature, only one, Donna Christianson of Halstad, has represented a northwestern Minnesota district. Perhaps part of the reason can be found in the very success--and subsequent attack--on Coya Knutson. The smear campaign linking Kjeldahl and Coya may have convinced women that they do not have a fair chance. The alienation of Coya and her husband has perhaps taught a generation of women--and their husbands--that family life and politics

cannot be combined successfully for a woman. Since Coya's tenure, no women have been elected to Congress from Minnesota. Cultural and institutional obstacles are still in place, at least for rural women. A married woman who aspires to political ambition would, in addition to having outstanding qualifications, need to have the approval of her husband toward her activities known, to prove that she would not be neglecting her family, and to be absolutely circumspect. These are not prerequisites for a male candidate; men are not as vulnerable at the polls to the effects of gossip.

Coya was a unique type of female politician. Jeane Kirkpatrick drew a profile of U.S. women who had served several terms in state legislatures (Political Woman 1974); she reported that they have a conservative personal style and reflect traditional values, which meant they have been good wives and mothers as well as office-holders. Most did not resent male dominance nor challenge the established leadership nor use their legislative service as a stepping-stone to higher office--the pursuit of power was not considered feminine. Coya did place herself within the parameters of a traditional female role by allowing herself to be billed as a farm wife and by being described as a hostess "serving sandwiches in her home," and by being an entertainer through singing and playing the accordion. However, she also openly pursued

power by challenging party leadership and by seeking higher office, unlike Kirkpatrick's successful female politicians.

In 1982, twenty-two or 10 percent of the members of the Minnesota legislature are women; none are from the northwestern quadrant of the state. In 1950 when Coya served, only two women or 1 percent of the Minnesota legislators were women. There has been a significant increase in women representatives in the state legislature and Coya's presence there in 1950 was unique. But there has been a decline in woman legislators from northwestern Minnesota.

In 1982, nineteen or 3.5 percent of the 535 members of the United States Congress are women; in 1954, sixteen or 3 percent of members of Congress were women. There has been little change nationally; Americans have perhaps deluded themselves about an increase in women's participation in national politics.

Yet, Eleanor Roosevelt's challenge remains. Surely more capable women could make contributions to public life. Coya's tenure indicated that rural women have an interest in politics and can develop the skills necessary for effective functioning in institutions oriented to power. In the Seventh District of Minnesota (the Ninth District of the 1950s), a new generation has come of age that has not experienced the ignominy of Coya's defeat. Support groups for women, such as the DFL Women's Caucus and National Organization for Women are visible

and able to take a stand against such political tricks as a "Coya Come Home" letter. It is time for more women to be elected to office.

Perhaps we need to create a more extended, more rational view of what women's and men's roles are and what they might be. These are not new conclusions, as illustrated in this 1958 letter written by a woman from the Ninth District to Coya Knutson:

Why must a woman be twice as capable and twice as "everything" to compete in this so-called "man's world?" If a man had campaigned as well, he would have been "in" a la Langen. To say I am sorry you lost is saying it mildly. I am especially irate at people who do not consider results of good work done by a candidate in office, who think in horse and buggy style--a woman's place is in the home, no matter what the circumstances in that home may be.

My husband joins in the same wish. Your lively and convincing delivery is a joy to listeners (Ella K. Trost, Warren, to Coya Knutson 12 November 1958, Bemidji, Knutson papers 1958 election).

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