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A Woman's Place

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A Woman's Place

Antoinette Funk was photographed in 1914, when she was chair of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. (Photo collage by Gary Schwartz)



As a crusader for women's suffrage, Antoinette Funk, class of 1898, shattered stereotypes she once espoused.

Story by KATHRYN FUNK '99

"I am just a plain, old-fashioned woman myself," Antoinette Funk told the *Washington Post* in 1904. "I do not believe that women should vote, whatever their rights in the matter may be."

This quote, by itself, does not seem remarkable for the time. Many prominent women of that era spoke against the suffrage movement, arguing that a woman's role in her separate, domestic sphere was essential for preservation of the American way of life.

What is noteworthy is that a few years after this interview, Antoinette Funk would become one of America's foremost suffragettes.

My journey into the life of Antoinette Leland Funk, an 1898 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan's law school, began with an email. Although we share the same last name and the same alma mater, I hadn't heard of Antoinette

until I was contacted by Tim Obermiller, editor of *IWU Magazine*, with whom I worked as an editorial assistant during my senior year.

In his email, Tim sent a link to Shorpy.com, a website that features historical photos. The link sent me to a page featuring a photo of Antoinette. Her expression portrayed intelligence, poise and a hint of boldness; she looked like a woman who knew exactly who she was and where she wanted to go. According to the caption, the photo was taken in 1914, when Antoinette was working hard as co-chairman of the National American Woman Suffrage Association for women's right to vote.

Glancing through a forum of comments below this photo, one caught my eye. Titled "The Enigmatic Mrs. Funk," it shared excerpts from the *Washington Post* article, dated Feb. 22, 1904, when Antoinette was garnering attention as a lawyer practicing in Chicago:

For a professional woman Mrs. Funk has some extraordinary opinions about women in the professions. She does not believe in it. She is herself a lawyer by accident, and not by design, and she deplores the fact that women ever chose to enter the public or semi-public life. She has been practicing her profession for five years ... and she takes great interest in her work, but she says any woman is out of place in any of the professions.

"A woman is better off with a few babies at home than in a law office," says Mrs. Funk. "Woman's place is in the home, as it has always been. No change in social or economic conditions can alter that. The woman who enters the profession and assumes the duties and the hardships of public life gets out of her natural environment. The continual and increasing drift of women toward public action is working an ill effect upon society, and the ill will grow greater as the proportion of professional women increases."

These were indeed "extraordinary opinions" from someone who would, a few years later, become known as a passionate crusader for women's rights. My curiosity piqued, I told Tim I would love to investigate further and perhaps even solve the mystery of "the enigmatic Mrs. Funk."

I first wanted to establish Antoinette's relationship to the Funk family of McLean County, of which I am a descendant. In 1824 Isaac and Cassandra Funk, accompanied by Isaac's brother Absalom, came from Ohio to establish a homestead and farm 10 miles southwest of Bloomington in an area now called Funks Grove. They were soon joined by other members of the Funk family, including Isaac's sister, Dorothy Funk Stubblefield, and her husband Robert. Isaac, a renowned stockman and Illinois state representative and senator, was also one of Illinois Wesleyan's founders.

Consulting "the big green book" (as my family has affectionately dubbed an 800-page genealogy documenting several generations and branches of the Funk and Stubblefield families), I found that Antoinette wed Isaac Lincoln "Linc" Funk in 1895. Linc's father, Duncan McArthur Funk, and my great-great-grandfather, Isaac Funk II, were two of 10 children born to Isaac and Cassandra Funk — making Antoinette and me cousins of sorts, if only by marriage.



***To find clues about "the enigmatic Mrs. Funk,"
Kathryn Funk '99
(above) examines archival materials stored at the
Funk Prairie Home south of Bloomington. (Photo
by Marc Featherly)***

Next I turned to Bill Case, guide and historian for the Funk Prairie Home — a stately, Civil War-era residence near Funks Grove built by another of Isaac and Cassandra's sons, LaFayette, and his wife Elizabeth. The 13-room home, which has been preserved in its original condition and is open to the public, houses a substantial amount of archival material about the Funk family and McLean County history.

Bill suggested that, before searching those archives, I should read Antoinette's biography, written by Patricia R. McMillen, which appears in a 1998 book called *Bar None: 125 Years of Women Lawyers in Illinois*. Locating a copy at The Ames Library, I learned that Antoinette was born in 1869 in Dwight, Ill., and was orphaned at an early age. At 18, she married John Watrus, an actor, with whom she had one child, Anna Virginia.

Two years after John's death in 1893, Antoinette wed Linc Funk. The couple settled in Bloomington, where Linc's father was a well-known banker. A year later, Antoinette and Linc had a child, Rey Leland Funk, but their marriage "appears to have foundered," McMillen wrote in *Bar None*. Graduating from Wesleyan's law school and accepted in the Illinois Bar in 1898, Antoinette promptly moved to a boarding house in Pontiac, Ill., with her two young daughters.

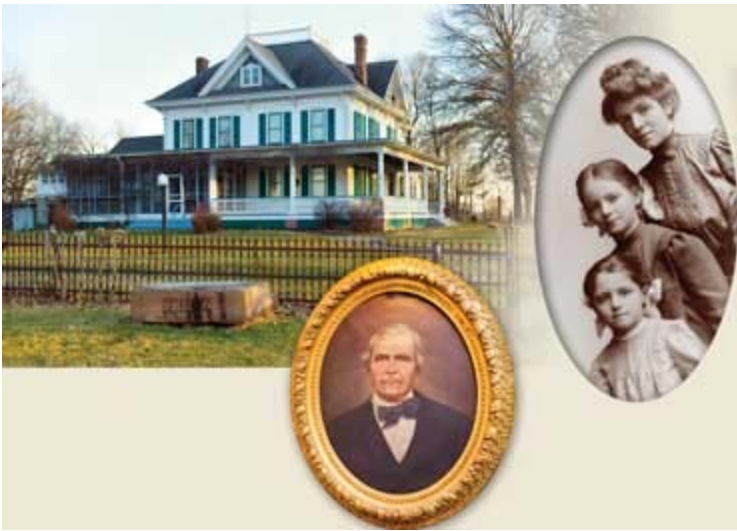
More research revealed why she picked Pontiac as her new home. A profile of Antoinette in the Feb. 13, 1910, *New Orleans Times-Democrat* states: "Her grandfather was ... on the appellate bench of Illinois for 42 years, and at the age when most children are rolling hoops and playing with dolls, little Antoinette Leland sat on the bench with her grandfather and heard evidence. Her father, Cyrus Leland, was one of the meteors of the Illinois bar." After her parents' early deaths, Antoinette was reared by her uncle, C. C. Strawn of Pontiac, one of Illinois' "best-known legal lights," according to the Times-Democrat.

Antoinette practiced in her uncle's Pontiac law office until 1902, when she moved to Chicago, opening her first private law office at 120 W. Adams St. Among her male colleagues, Antoinette became known for her quick wit, careful preparation and extensive knowledge of the law. The media took notice of her for defending accused murderers in high-profile cases.

It was such a case that prompted the 1904 *Washington Post* story excerpted on the Shorpy.com website. I found that story in its entirety online in a scan from the *Syracuse, N.Y., Herald* (perhaps indicating the story had been reprinted in papers across the country). It begins: "Standing before twelve jurors in the Criminal Court at Chicago recently, a little woman who does not weigh more than 100 pounds pleaded for the clemency of a man who had murdered the girl who had jilted him."

The story goes on to describe Antoinette's "hard and earnest fight" for the life of her client, Nathan Breen. Antoinette's defense was temporary insanity due to Breen's treatment by his girlfriend. Though the jury found Breen guilty, his sentence was a relatively light 14 years in the penitentiary, not the death by hanging sought by the prosecution.

"Few women in America have appeared in defense of criminals of Breen's sort," the article noted. "Few times, therefore has the public seen the kind of fight waged by Mrs. Funk."



Clockwise from top: 1) The Funk Prairie Home has been preserved in its original condition. 2) Antoinette Funk is shown with her two daughters. 3) Antoinette's relationship to the Funk family was through marriage to a grandson of Isaac Funk, who was one of Wesleyan's founders.

Such fights became more common, largely due to Antoinette herself. Her 1910 profile in the *Times-Democrat* mentions another homicide case, "the People vs. Rightshell, where the feeling even in staid Illinois ran so high the militia guarded the courthouse." As with the Breen case, Antoinette secured the minimum sentence for murder for her client.

The *Times-Democrat* article also shows that her positions on equality for women had shifted by this time. "Mrs. Funk, while not a suffragette, is a firm believer in the principle that women should be on an equal footing with men; at the same time insisting that women are not yet ready to tread the hard and stormy paths men travel, because their education and training for such careers are not yet of sufficient generations."

The article quoted Antoinette as saying, "Women must begin to reform themselves before they are fitted to reform other things," and summarized more of her opinions: women "should cultivate the habit of deduction from facts, of reasoning from right premises, of judging without prejudice or personal feeling before they can be

able to really grasp the many-sided questions of politics, or to successfully suggest any improvements regarding the present government."

• • •

A few years later, Antoinette herself fully entered the world of politics. According to Patricia McMillen in *Bar None*, Antoinette "was active in the unsuccessful Progressive party campaign to re-elect former President Theodore Roosevelt; in 1916, she 'stumped the state' for Democrat Woodrow Wilson."

Her work for women's suffrage began about this same time. As part of the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association, she championed a bill passed in the state legislature on June 11, 1913, that allowed women to vote in presidential elections, making Illinois the first state east of Mississippi to grant such rights. Antoinette's carriage is reported to have led a victory parade of more than 15,000 women down Chicago's Michigan Avenue.



A poster promotes a similar march in the nation's capitol, where Antoinette Funk lobbied Congress for legislation to change voting laws.

In the fall of that year, she entered the national stage as a speaker at the national convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in Washington, D.C. Antoinette so impressed delegates that they elected her to NAWSA's congressional committee, working to amend the U.S. Constitution to allow women the right to vote. In this role, Antoinette testified before the U.S. House Judiciary Committee on women's suffrage and, behind the scenes, lobbied Washington congressmen for their support.

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A year later, Antoinette ran afoul of her NAWSA colleagues by drafting a compromise that addressed the concerns of congressmen who opposed the suffrage amendment on the basis of states' rights. Her amendment "provided for state-by-state ratification of the federal suffrage amendment by a majority of its registered voters," wrote Patricia McMillen in *Bar None*. Funk's amendment outraged delegates at the 1914 NAWSA convention, who returned to their "earlier (and ultimately successful) position" that universal suffrage would be "binding upon all the states once it had been ratified by legislatures of 36 states."

This rebuke didn't deter Antoinette, who traveled through the Midwest and Western America to win over potential voters for the amendment. For a 1922 book on the history of women's suffrage, Antoinette recalled one stop at the South Dakota State Fair.

"Every prize-winning animal, every racing automobile and motorcycle carried our pennants. ... The snake charmer of the midway carried a 'Votes for Women' pennant while an enormous serpent coiled around her body."

In 1917, Antoinette halted her suffrage work to join the Women's Committee of the Council of Defense. Urging women to buy Liberty Loan bonds supporting the war effort, she wrote: "Since the government has called upon the women to give their sons for our country's life, [we] dare to call upon them to sustain those sons."

In 1920, the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote was signed into law. At that time, Antoinette was still in Washington, serving in the education department of the Democratic Party during the unsuccessful candidacy of James Cox against Warren Harding. Her political career continued when she was appointed assistant commissioner of public lands under President Franklin Roosevelt in 1933. She resigned in 1939 due to ill health and died two years later in San Diego. She was 73.

After reading of her accomplishments in newspapers, books and congressional records, it felt like I was still missing something important about Antoinette's life. I especially remained curious about why she seemed to change her opinions about women's place in society so radically and in so short a time. Learning from Bill Case that her great-granddaughter, Sarah Quinton, had information and materials concerning Antoinette's life, we arranged to meet at the Funk Prairie Home.



Antoinette's great-granddaughter Sarah Quinton (center) and Sarah's daughter, Natalie '07, meet with Kathryn Funk at the Funk Prairie Home. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Sarah shared stories passed down the generations about Antoinette, among them that when her first husband John was dying, he asked his friend Linc Funk to "take care of Antoinette." As for Linc, Sarah confirmed that Antoinette left him almost immediately after giving birth to their daughter, Rey, but refused to give him a divorce, probably because of her Catholic faith, "so they lived apart but were still married."

As for those early newspaper stories in which Antoinette is quoted as speaking so strongly against women's suffrage, Sarah says, "We questioned that when we read it. It was an eye-opener. But, you know, it was really hard to be a woman lawyer at that time and so she was probably playing both sides of it."

Sarah was in the process of donating to the Funk Prairie Home materials that included postcards and letters that Antoinette had mailed to her daughter Rey (Sarah's grandmother) over the years. Apparently, after moving to Chicago, Antoinette sent her two daughters to be raised by relatives. The postcards indicated the girls often followed their mother to places around the country where she was working and speaking, but Sarah senses her grandmother wasn't always happy with the arrangement. Sadly, Sarah did not have the opportunity to know her grandmother, who died at age 52, before Sarah was born.

Initially, it was tempting for me to pass judgment on Antoinette Funk for neglecting her role as a mother in her pursuit of a life in law and politics, particularly since my connection to her is familial. One could certainly envision her as a clever and driven woman who said and did whatever she felt was required to achieve her goals, which could explain her seeming to "play both sides," as Sarah suggested.

But when I stopped to consider the times, I began to sympathize with the difficulty of the choices the "enigmatic Mrs. Funk" had to make. She was a woman who was essentially raised to be a lawyer and may have even felt that she was ill-equipped to be a mother. It's hard enough for a woman to balance a career and motherhood now; then it must have seemed next to impossible, particularly for a woman alone. Antoinette's lifestyle was so extraordinary in those days that she clearly saw herself as an exception among women. It's possible that she even had doubts about her choices, creating internal conflict that may explain the notable contradictions between her words and actions.

A hint of this internal conflict is detectable in a quote from the 1910 *Times-Democrat* article. "I am trying to give my daughters the best to be procured in the way of education, accomplishment and environment," Antoinette said, "but I want them to marry good men and rear good children. The natural life for a woman is that of a wife and mother, and while my daughters must be prepared to cope with the problem of self-support should the necessity occur, I sincerely hope they both may be of those happiest of women — the women who have no history."

Antoinette did have, and make, history. Through her life's work, she changed not only the lives of her own daughters but those of all future generations of women, enabling them to make choices that once would have seemed possible only in their dreams. Although her last name is Funk only by virtue of an unsuccessful marriage, her legacy measures up to the stories of other pioneers who blazed trails and broke molds, and I am proud that we share the same last name.

That same feeling of pride can be heard in the words of Antoinette's great-great-granddaughter, Natalie Quinton '07, who was a political science major at IWU, graduating more than 100 years after Antoinette received her law degree.

"Reading about her life, and the changes she inspired, is exciting and encouraging," said Natalie. "It's been an inspiration to me. To realize all that she did for women is very empowering."

The author, Kathryn "Katie" Funk '99, majored in English at IWU. Currently living in McLean, Ill., she is a freelance book and journal editor and teaches yoga classes at Deoskar Integrative Health in Bloomington.

To read about Illinois Wesleyan's former law school, [click here](#).