

NEWS

Chicago's trailblazing first female judge known for looking after juveniles, stating, 'There are no bad children'



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In November 1923, an entourage accompanying Mary Bartelme to her Circuit Court chambers bore witness to a significant occasion.

"At the door, she was caught in a swirl of employees, flower baskets, after election cigar smoke and soprano congratulations," the Tribune's Genevieve Forbes reported. "The procession of club women, judges, scrub women and dependent girls filed past. And Miss Bartelme enjoyed it much as a debutante with her first party."

The day before, Bartelme had won the popular vote to become a Circuit Court judge,

Two girls who'd been before her in Juvenile Court said they were so glad "their friend" was now "a real judge." For 11 years Bartelme had been an assistant judge in juvenile court, appointed because the head of Juvenile Court threatened to quit if he didn't get someone to do his pretrial investigations of girls.

Jane Addams, the famed pioneer of social work, recommended Bartelme for that post. They agreed that truancy isn't necessarily a telltale sign of delinquency. Maybe a child is hungry and there's little or nothing to eat at home.

"The natural reaction is for them to break away from school and go foraging for what they can find," Judge Bartelme would tell the Tribune in 1931.

The day after being elected, Bartelme spoke at a luncheon in her honor at the Chicago Woman's Club. She denied "any exclusivist feminist ideas."

"Women have no bigger place than the place that makes family life right and normal. Some of us are not in those places. So we do other things that help the family life," she said. "And perhaps we 'mother' some children, even though we may be the judge of a court."



Mary Bartelme in an undated photo.

She was known as “Suitcase Mary” because of her follow-through when removing a child from an abusive or neglectful household.

“She would fill suitcases with clothes, nightwear and other necessities and give them to the needy children,” the Tribune noted. “‘Gee, is all this mine?’ a typical Mary girl, pleasantly surprised, would exclaim when given a packed suitcase.”

Bartelme said: “I believe that the young girls of Chicago and of all Cook County are entitled to at least one judge who can deal with them in terms of real sympathy and

Bartelme was born in 1866. Her parents were German immigrants who lived on the open prairie that later became the Fulton Market. Graduating high school at 16, she taught school for six years, and dreamed of going to medical school, until she met Myra Bradwell, the first woman to pass the Illinois bar exam.

“One visit to her, and I was determined to take up the study of law,” Bartelme recalled.

The Illinois Supreme Court denied Bradwell a law license because she was married. Instead Bradwell edited the Chicago Legal News, having been granted an exemption on a prohibition against married women running a business by the Illinois legislature.

Thus forewarned of the potential pitfalls of a woman entering the legal profession, Bartelme enrolled in Northwestern University’s law school in 1892. After graduating, she opened a practice concentrating on contracts and other aspects of business law.

Then her do-gooder gene kicked in. In 1897, she became the first woman appointed Cook County’s public guardian. She protected the legal interests of children, senior citizens and the incapacitated.

That brought her into local courts at a pivotal moment, as she recounted in a 1914 essay, “The Opportunity For Women in Court Administration.”

She noted that abused and wayward girls were subjected to the same procedures as adults: “a large public courtroom presided over by a man, whose clerks were men, whose other occupants were men, women and children waiting to have the cases in which they were interested heard or perhaps mere curiosity seekers.”

 The Cook County Juvenile Court building, circa 1939.

The Cook County Juvenile Court building, circa 1939.

A judge in Cook County’s Juvenile Court – the world’s first juvenile court – decided that situation was not “conducive to secure the facts from the child, or to do justice to her.” Instead, the judge appointed a woman to hear what the girls had to say, with as few other people involved as possible.


Bartelme made such gentler proceedings her trademark as she went from public defender to assistant judge and elected Judge. It got her kudos from unlikely sources.

In 1917, the father of a girl who alleged she was being abused by her parents was accompanied to court by Barney Grogan, a salon-keeper politician. Getting constituents out of legal jams was standard operating procedure for ward heelers such as Grogan at the time, but watching the hearing under Bartleme's direction he switched sides, the Tribune reported.

"See here," said Mr. Grogan, turning to the father, "the court is doing the right thing for the little girl. She is afraid of you and she is sick and nervous and needs quiet and care."

Terminating parents' custody presented Bartelme with a vexatious problem: Where to place an abused child? In jail, cellmates would likely tutor delinquents in advanced criminal techniques.

In many cases, Bartelme found a simple solution. She took children home with her. She and a sister, unmarried and motherly just as she was, shared a three-story house in the Austin neighborhood.

 Judge Mary Bartelme, seated, assures Paddy Ryan, 5, that he will be taken to his brothers and sisters at St. Mary's School in Des Plaines, circa 1931.

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Two German orphans came to live with her and her sister in 1914. After the horrors they'd experienced back home, the German girls sensed themselves not just sheltered, but given a home. The morning after their arrival, Bartelme heard a mixture of German and American accents and went down stairs, the Tribune reported:

"There, seated along the wall in a row, their little hands folded solemnly across their laps, sat the four little girls. They had dressed themselves, made their beds, and while they waited for their benefactress and their breakfast, they sang."The newcomers were teaching the American orphans a German patriotic anthem: "*Die Watch am Rhein.*"

During her 16 years as public guardian, she and her sister took in at least 400 children annually. Each stayed until a permanent placement could be found. That inspired the creation of "Mary Clubs," or "Mary Bartelme Clubs," in Evanston and

Bartelme's strength with women voters provided her with a following that would not be denied when there was vacancy on the Circuit Court in 1923. "Women's clubs throughout the city and county rallied to the support of the 'woman judge' who had gained widespread fame in the handling of delinquent girl cases," the Tribune reported the day after her election.

"Social workers and civic leaders from around the world came to see her at work in her courtroom, and the message they heard was simple," the Tribune wrote in 1968. "There are no bad children," she told them "There are confused, neglected, love-starved, and resentful children, and what they need most I try to give them — understanding and a fresh start in the right direction."

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