

***The YWCA Northwest Women's Hall of Fame Salutes  
Legacy Awardee Frances Cleveland Axtell  
(July 12, 1866 –April 1, 1953)***

*Frances Cleveland Axtell could well be called "Frances the First." It's the word that accompanies her name in headlines and history books. She was one of the first two women elected to the Washington Legislature in 1912 and the first woman ever to be appointed to a Federal Commission in 1917. There were other firsts as well.*

*Born Sevilla Cleveland on an Indiana farm, she earned her doctorate from DePauw University at 23; not the first woman to earn a Ph.D., but one of the few in 1889. It was there that the girl with auburn hair and twinkling blue eyes met her future husband, William Henry Axtell, a medical student. Before they married two years later, she taught for a year at Northwest Normal School in Lynden, forerunner of Western Washington University, then toured Europe, a popular way to "round out" a young woman's education at that time.*

*In the Black Forest of Germany, she learned woodcarving that she later employed to construct panels flanking the staircase of a grand home that still sits at 413 East Maple. She and William built it in 1902, eight years after settling in Bellingham. It was a warm and welcoming place for the family that now included two daughters, Ruth and Frances. Grandson William Hussey recalls that she was "a fantastic cook." Christmas, especially, with the house thoroughly decorated, brings him memories "that warmed my whole life."*

*It wasn't long after arriving here that the "firsts" began. In 1895, she helped found the Aftermath Club, a landmark women's organization that endured for 107 years. She also became the first President of the New Whatcom Ladies Cooperative Society, formed to help stimulate the local economy during a recession. With wide community support, she was elected to the state Legislature in 1912. During this campaign she adopted her daughter's first name, Frances, believing it would be more familiar to voters than Sevilla.*

*As one of two women among 95 male legislators, she worked – among many other things – to pass a minimum wage, an issue she would champion tirelessly. She was an independent, broad-minded reformer characterized admirably in the press as "the lady from Whatcom who votes as she pleases." In 1916, she made a daring bid for Congress. Only one woman was elected that year, Jeannette Rankin of Montana. In 1922, she again defied heavy odds and ran for the U.S. Senate. A woman wouldn't be elected to the Senate until 1933.*

*In 1917, President Woodrow Wilson appointed her vice chairman of the new U.S. Employees Compensation Commission – the first woman ever appointed to any Federal commission. It was created to compensate Federal employees injured on the job. But the United States entered World War I three weeks after she arrived in Washington, D.C., and she was soon visiting every arsenal and Navy yard in the country, making safety recommendations to prevent injuries. She also wrote a report concluding that women could do many defense production jobs that were then reserved to men – an idea embraced fully during World War II.*

*After her Senate bid, she worked primarily behind the scenes promoting legislation to ban child labor, provide financial aid for farmers and grant bonuses to World War I veterans. In 1944 at 75, she moved to Seattle where she died April 1, 1953, leaving behind a legacy of vision, integrity and dedication that endures and inspires us.*