

A LADY IN THE SENATE

The Political Career of Reba Hurn

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COLUMBIA The Magazine of Northwest History, Fall 2005: Vol. 19, No. 3

Spokane attorney Reba Hurn was the first woman elected to the Washington State Senate. It is not surprising that she would choose to run for political office at some point in her life. By the time she sought election to the senate in 1922, she had already experienced several brushes with politics, having observed and perhaps assisted with her father's various campaigns, including for state legislator in Iowa and Washington State Superior Court judge. And from 1908 to 1910 she worked in New York and Washington, D.C., for Nathan Straus—co-owner of the Macy Department Store, philanthropist and political activist—in his efforts to provide a disease-free milk supply to the poor of New York and other large cities. She had run his errands to Tammany Hall and even helped in significant ways with William Jennings Bryan's 1908 campaign for the presidency, for which Straus was New York chairman.

Sadly, very few of Reba Hurn's personal papers remain; for her political career, the *Senate Journals* and newspaper articles are the chief sources. The first hint of a campaign on the state level appeared in a *Spokane Daily Chronicle* article of January 19, 1914:

Reba J. Hurn, Spokane's only practicing woman attorney, is being considered as a candidate for the state legislature from the Sixth District. Miss Hurn's friends are trying to persuade her to come out on the Progressive ticket and it is nearly certain that she will enter the race.... So far, no woman has been elected to office from Spokane County. Last election two were successful in other parts of the state in going to the legislature.

The Progressive, or Bull Moose Party, came into being in part as a reaction against the conservative administration of William Howard Taft. A break-off from the main Republican Party, it was active during the presidential election of 1912 and to varying degrees over the years on the state level. Among the many reforms espoused in its platform was the national franchise for women. However, nothing came of the suggestion that Reba Hurn run for the Washington State Legislature on the Progressive ticket in 1914. In 1922, when she finally did enter state politics, she was firmly within the mainstream Republican fold. A newspaper article asserted: "Miss Hurn has been active in women's Republican clubs. When the progressive Republican spirit manifested itself a few years ago she was caught in the enthusiasm of the period and fought, bled, and died with the issue, but never wavered in party loyalty."

The question for Reba Hurn in 1922 was not only *if* she should run for state office, but which chamber to seek. She gave the following reasons for choosing the senate:

I have decided to run for the senate rather than the house because there have been five women elected to the house and none has been re-elected. The reason for this is plain. The woman member has been considered a curiosity, written up in the papers, observed and reported on every time she raises her voice or puts on a new dress. She was there for but one session and then

men did not become accustomed to her presence. In the senate it is different. The state senator serves through two sessions. Perhaps I will be a novelty for a while but by the close of the first session they will be in the habit of taking me for granted, and by the time the second session comes around I shall have a foothold and be capable of worthwhile constructive work. My handicap at the first session attended will be no greater than that of a man, as what senator takes an outstanding role at his first session?

She ran as a Republican in the Seventh Senatorial District, defeating her Democratic opponent, George W. Belt, 2,697 to 1,299.

Although Hurn insisted that her presence as the lone woman in the senate should make no substantive difference, upon arriving in Olympia she did have to deal with a few special problems. One was where to put her wraps. The men's cloakroom remained off-limits to women, but the press corps gave her space in their area. Another question was whether or not to wear a hat during sessions. She decided not to do so, as she had never worn a hat in the courtroom.

Another issue involved the proverbial smoke-filled room, as most of the senators were in the habit of smoking in the senate chamber. The *Spokesman-Review* reported the following incident that occurred on the opening day of the 1923 legislative session:

Senator Reba Hurn, the first woman in the senate, proved to be a stickler at the start. Senator Morthland, Yakima, was the first speaker to realize the presence of a woman. He said "Senator Hurn and gentlemen of the senate." Then the others began changing their salutation. Another hitch came when Senator Metcalf, Tacoma, moved suspension of the [no] smoking rule, which caused Lieutenant Governor Coyle to remark, "The senator, of course, knows we have a lady with us."

"With the lady senator's permission, of course," replied Senator Metcalf with a courteous bow to Miss Hurn.

"Well," began Miss Hurn, her face flushing, "It's all right, certainly; I want you to go right ahead. I'll second the motion. If you will just forget that I am a woman, feel that I want to be just a senator, I'll be pleased," she explained, as the senators applauded.

She was introduced formally, made a brief talk, and was given a friendly hand, apparently winning the approval of the men.

Interestingly, the content of her "brief talk" was not reported. Thereafter, in deference to the lady now present, a box of candy was passed around each morning along with the customary cigars.

On opening day, in addition to the flurry over the smoking rules, she was one of three senators "appointed as a committee to notify the house that the senate was organized and ready to transact business." Later, she was one of six legislators from both houses dispatched to notify Governor Louis Hart that the senate and the house were in full session and ready to receive his message. Finally, when there was a joint session, Reba Hurn was one of four to escort the governor to his seat on the rostrum. No doubt the lone woman in the senate added novelty to these routine ceremonial functions.

The "woman issue" persisted throughout her political career and even long afterwards, particularly in newspaper and magazine articles. Reporters, male and female, could not resist bringing in the novel element of a "lady senator" and were at pains to emphasize that she was feminine and a perfect lady. Many commented on dress and demeanor in a way that was never

done for men in government. A 1926 newspaper article, reminiscing on Hurn's first term, is typical:

The nice thing about Miss Hurn is that she isn't one of these hustling and bustling women politicians who make men want to run to cover, and women, too, for that matter. We wouldn't really call her a politician at all. She is more the feminine type of woman with a poised confidence that expresses her mental power and a sincerity that makes you know her conscience acts as a perfect balance wheel.

On January 8, 1925, *Spokane Woman* reported on a speech she gave to the Young Men's Republican Club. The article gave short shrift to her remarks, then described the dress she wore for the occasion: "A new black satin gown, the skirt of which is beaded in various shades of blue which she will wear at the opening session of the legislature.... One of the chief charms of Spokane's woman senator is that she is essentially feminine, as the wardrobe which she is taking to Olympia will attest."

Yet *Spokane Woman* had commented in 1924, after Reba Hurn had been in the senate for a year:

There are no men or women in the state of Washington unwilling to agree that Miss Hurn as a senator "delivers the goods." She no longer is looked upon as an experiment. Her first request on assuming an office held by not more than half a dozen women in the whole country was that she be allowed to tackle things as a senator and not as a woman. She asked that she be considered one of 39 Republican senators, not as a minority of one. Miss Hurn...has a penchant for doing things men do, in spite of the fact that she is wholly feminine in her ideals.

The phrase "feminine ideals" sounded less strange in the 1920s than it does today. It suggested that women were assumed to care about such issues as public morality, the protection of children, and the promotion of schools, parks, and libraries. The election of women to state legislatures nationwide was enough of a novelty to warrant Spokane newspaper articles describing some women in other states who saw their roles strictly in terms of women's issues. On January 1, 1923, Edith Mitchell, elected to the Oklahoma legislature, is quoted as saying: "With women, the temperance cause, home, and child welfare are paramount to all else, and it is well understood where we are on moral questions."

Of course, not all women ran true to type. Unlike Mitchell, Reba Hurn chose not to regard herself as a woman's senator or to overly emphasize the causes of women. In seeking reelection in 1926, she claimed: "People often think of me as the woman's senator,...as though I represented women alone. I have always considered myself as the representative of my entire district and not of its women residents only. I have always dreaded being a woman's minority at Olympia. After all, there are no woman's issues."

Some of her committee assignments, however, did seem to support the stereotype of a woman's proper interests and sphere of influence. In 1923 she was appointed chairman of the Public Morals Committee and held that position throughout the biennium. In addition, she served on the committees on education, educational institutions, and parks and playgrounds. From 1925 through 1929 she was chairman of the State Library Committee, and in 1929 she chaired the educational institutions committee. However, she did have other committee assignments during her legislative career, such as industrial insurance, appropriations, judiciary, senate employees, and state penal and reformatory institutions, that were less stereotypically "women's work." Some, especially appropriations, put her in a position of real power.

The woman who had stated in her first campaign that she "had no causes" nevertheless brought with her to the senate several firm convictions and personal values that would be reflected in her committee work, her support of bills on the floor, and her voting record. One that most closely aligned her with women's issues of the time was that of Prohibition. Her opposition to the consumption of alcohol in any form was lifelong, and she described herself as a "third-generation dry."

The origins of this attitude are not difficult to find. Alcohol abuse had become widespread during Reba Hurn's formative years and was regarded as a moral failing rather than an illness. Such organizations as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Anti-Saloon League sought to close the taverns and reform their frequenters. To temperance crusaders, the obvious solution to the alcohol problem would be to make its manufacture, sale, and consumption illegal. Indeed, the WCTU promoted woman suffrage in part because of the need to swell the ranks of voters who would support Prohibition. Washington passed a dry law in 1916, three years before the 18th amendment to the United States constitution made Prohibition the law of the land until its repeal in 1933.

How did all of this passionate opposition to alcohol affect Reba Hurn's activities in the Washington State Senate? During her first term, her Public Morals Committee was solidly behind Senate Bill 17, a proposal to establish "a day for observance by public schools as 'Temperance Day' and imposing upon the superintendent of public instruction and the teachers of the public schools certain duties in relation thereto...." It was passed by the house as well as the senate but was not signed into law by the governor. Throughout her legislative career, Hurn defended Washington's "bone dry law."

That said, it is impossible to know if Reba Hurn was aware of the drinking going on right under her nose in Olympia. A woman counterpart in the house, Maude Sweetman, Republican of King County, recalled in a published memoir:

A new member of the legislature arrived from Spokane in 1923. He came fresh from his dry constituency imbued with various fundamental reforms and exalted with the sense of a true statesman's responsibilities.... Before forty-eight hours had passed he approached me in the house with unsteady steps...[and] the odor of liquor which pervaded his explanation gave me assurance that his leadership was slipping, if not doomed.

No doubt, this unnamed freshman legislator brought his bibulous habits with him from Spokane, a city well-supplied with locally made moonshine as well as liquor smuggled over the porous border with Canada. According to Sweetman, lobbyists were a major source of liquor in Olympia: "Every amateur lobbyist has the idea that a suitcase of liquor brought to the Capitol is the open sesame for the passage of a bill," but "the real leaders of the house are only disgusted with him and his liquor and ignore him completely."

Early in Reba Hurn's first term, a "woman's issue" dear to the hearts of club women lobbyists and most women in the house of representatives, as well as to many of Senator Hurn's constituents back in Spokane County, was the attempt to reopen the Women's Industrial Home, a detention center at Medical Lake that had been closed for several years. This idea had arisen during the previous legislative session, only to be vetoed by Governor Hart. The 1923 proposal entailed an appropriation of \$150,000. On January 7, the *Spokesman-Review* predicted:

The "vote no" sentiment is expected to kill the chances of the women to have the Women's Industrial Home reopened, and the women encounter a surprise in the action of Senator Reba

Hurn. Miss Hurn managed to go through her campaign without a commitment in favor of reopening the home and, it develops, she is not inclined to vote for it.

The bill died, however, before reaching the senate.

Most of the issues Senator Hurn worked on could not be construed as "women's work." In 1923, when she arrived in Olympia to take up her senate seat, Republican Louis F. Hart was governor. A moderate and conciliatory man, Hart seldom took a position of aggressive leadership. Yet, he held some firm convictions and in his quiet way accomplished some important things. World War I had brought on expansion and prosperity for industry and agriculture that continued briefly into the postwar period. In Washington this prosperity, plus earlier Progressive Era reforms, had resulted in an expansion of state government and services. The bursting of this prosperity bubble occurred in Washington long before the stock market crash in 1929. Thanks partly to Hart's efforts, government retrenchment was well under way when Senator Hurn arrived in Olympia. The achievement for which this governor is most remembered is the laborious construction of a civil administrative code that greatly reduced the overlapping tangle of bureaucracy in which Washington's state government had become enmeshed over previous decades.

This achievement had occurred before Reba Hurn arrived in Olympia, but apparently she felt there was still more to be done. In her 1922 campaign she said: "I have no causes. I am in favor of no reforms, unless it would be enactment of fewer laws and more concentration on codifying the mass of legislation which has been piling up in this state for years." She was a bit disingenuous in saying she had no causes: the reduction of taxes and appropriations and the support of Prohibition proved to be as important to her as the reduction in laws.

Reba Hurn entered state government at a time when the prevailing mood matched her own in most regards. She was, to say the least, a Republican among Republicans in the senate, there being 39 of her party, one Democrat, and two members of the Farmer-Labor Party. With such an imbalance, the fault lines in Olympia were less between parties than between eastern and western, urban and rural, and house and senate interests. Cutting across all these lines, however, was the mood against what was considered excessive taxation and appropriation. Reba Hurn was committed to supporting this agenda, as were all of her fellow Spokane legislators, urged on by such antitax groups as the Spokane Taxpayers' Economy League.

Senator Hurn was one of the more zealous guardians of the purse strings, and her position on the powerful Appropriations Committee gave her a platform for implementing fiscal restraint. On January 31, 1923, commending the committee for its "records for speed and deep cuts," the *Spokesman-Review* reported with apparent approval: "Miss Reba Hurn, Spokane, is being mentioned as the 'most drastic slasher.' One of the senators intimated that Senator Hurn's attitude seemed to be 'cut first and talk afterward.'"

When it came to relief for draught-stricken eastern Washington farmers, however, Reba Hurn supported Governor Hart's request that the legislature come to the aid of those who had suffered crop failures and would need seed for the next year's crop. The governor's modest proposal was for "some relief, without expense to the state, by providing a revolving fund...." By January 25 the so-called "seed bill" transfer of \$250,000 from the reclamation fund had passed both the house and the senate.

As the 1923 regular session of the legislature wound down, Reba Hurn expressed positive feelings about her new role as a senator. The first woman legislator in Texas had been quoted as

describing her work as "a difficult, thankless, and unprofitable job." In Washington, the four women in the house and the lone woman in the senate disagreed emphatically with this assessment. While not minimizing the difficulties, Reba Hurn declared her experience to have been essentially positive:

Being a legislator has not roiled me as it apparently has roiled the lady from Texas.... This is probably because I anticipated that I could not please everybody. With four to six committee meetings every day I agree with her on long hours and hard work, but I differ about the poor pay.... It is something to share in the service, and the real things in life are never compensated for by money. I like it, enjoy every minute, and I'm having the time of my life. As for the men in the senate, they are sincere in their work and courteous—the nicest bunch of men you could imagine.

The first session of the 1925 legislature saw a new governor in power, another Republican who shared some of the conservative values of his predecessor but pushed them to the limits. Roland H. Hartley, however, was a very different sort of governor: reactionary, blunt, abrasive, and insistent on his own program to an uncommon degree. He wielded a vigorous veto pen throughout his two terms in office, and much hard work in committees and on the floor of both houses came to naught when it reached his desk. His stance toward the legislature was adversarial except with his closest cadre. A Republican from Spokane, Floyd Danskin, chosen speaker of the house, was considered a Hartley man. Reba Hurn was at pains to demonstrate that she was neither "anti-Hartley nor pro-Hartley. The merits of the issue...is all that she considers." Yet her positions on proliferation of laws and government functions and on taxation and appropriations could not have matched his more closely.

One of the first issues to come before the state legislature during the 1925 regular session did pit Reba Hurn against the new governor. It was the ratification of the proposed constitutional amendment on child labor. In his inaugural address, Governor Hartley had referred to its supporters as Bolsheviks. The 1923 session had joined a number of states in "memorializing" Congress in support of this ultimately unsuccessful amendment, "giving Congress the power to regulate the labor of persons under eighteen years of age." Reba Hurn had supported this memorial in 1923. On January 28, 1925, the *Spokesman-Review* reported that the amendment was the subject of her maiden speech when it came to the senate for ratification, "the first time a woman took part in a debate in the senate in Washington." In spite of the apparent momentousness of her speech, the newspaper account was brief:

Senators and spectators sat up as Senator Reba Hurn arose—and the word was passed, "It is her first speech." Senator Hurn was firm of voice, but appeared uneasy. She nervously fingered a string of purple beads.... She said some of the arguments against congress "sound like a nightmare. But the main question is...do we believe children of 14 years or 16 years ought to work in mines, mills, or factories? I don't know how many are working in such places, and I don't care—if there is one, that is too many." She was given loud applause.

The same article gave much greater coverage to the actual arguments, pro and con, of her male colleagues and did not mention their attire or demeanor.

In her 1926 bid for reelection, Senator Hurn was enough of a wild card to the Hartley partisans that they proposed another Spokane candidate for the Republican nomination. He was Otto Weile, a consulting engineer who "in general, agrees with the governor on the major issues such as educational, timber, and roads policies." She was able to fend off this challenge during the primary and was reelected unopposed for another term.

During her 1926 campaign, Hurn emphasized her independence, declaring: "I went to Olympia unpledged, and, if I go back it will again have to be unpledged. I have seen too many men squirm in corners on account of their pre-election pledges to bind myself with promises." Yet her declarations and subsequent votes coincided with the positions of various groups and constituencies that might have exacted such pledges. During her tenure in the legislature, women's clubs, the Anti-Saloon League, American Legion, WCTU, Civil Service League, and such broad groups as labor, farmers, railroads, public power, and highways all had their lobbyists. Of these interest groups, Senator Hurn was most sympathetic to the causes of the tax reducers, the farmers, and the "dry" lobby; but, of course, once in office she was subjected to the clamoring of the full spectrum of lobbyists.

Like her house counterpart, Representative Maude Sweetman, who recounted a blatant attempt to bribe her when she held a crucial vote, Senator Hurn had little use for the paid free-lance lobbyists to be found lurking about the lobbies and corridors of Olympia hotels and chambers of government. The one mention of Hurn in Sweetman's memoirs comes in connection with Reba Hurn's attempt to regulate this class of lobbyist:

In the 1927 session a measure known as Senate Bill No. 157 was introduced by Senators Reba Hurn of Spokane County and Dan Landon of King County.... It provided for "regulating the employment and providing for the registration of persons employed for compensation to promote or oppose legislative action and providing for the violation thereof."

Unfortunately, there had been insufficient publicity and no concerted action in the matter. The measure, although it passed the senate, was never introduced in the house.

One particularly acrimonious issue dominating Hartley's governorship was his constant animosity toward University of Washington interests. University President Henry Suzzallo was himself an active lobbyist, as were members of his board of regents. Governor Hartley, determined to cut him down to size, opposed university appropriations and, in 1927, replaced pro-Suzzallo regents with a board that followed the governor's bidding to fire the university president.

A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Northwestern University with graduate study in Germany and a significant part of her law training at the University of Washington, Senator Hurn was surely one of the more highly educated members of the senate. Thus she reasonably could be expected to support university appropriations. Yet, any higher education sympathies Reba Hurn may have held were more than balanced by her fiscal conservatism. Even before the Hartley onslaught against university appropriations, Hurn had been a holdout against increasing its funding. In 1923 the university regents had granted Suzzallo a \$6,000 raise, a move that did not go down well in Spokane or the surrounding countryside, especially among hard-pressed farmers, whose interests always found an attentive ear with Senator Hurn. During the 1925 session, as a member of the Appropriations Committee, she had been one of four among its thirteen members who voted against the University of Washington appropriation.

When the senate passed the higher education levy, Reba Hurn voted against it. While campaigning for reelection in 1926, she explained the actions she had taken during the past legislative session: "Much of my [law] business consists of the closing of farm mortgages. When I have fewer mortgages to close..., I will be ready to spend the state money for [university] improvements." However, she did vote for a senate proposal to create a school equalization fund of \$375,000 to aid poorer one-room and grade schools.

There were issues during the 1927 session, though, on which Hurn and Hartley parted company. She introduced Senate Bill 201, a progressive piece of legislation that drew one of the governor's most caustic veto statements. The *Senate Journal* described it as:

An act empowering cities and towns to regulate and restrict the height, number of stories and size of buildings and other structures, the percentage of lot that may be occupied, population, and the location and use of buildings...empowering such cities and towns to adopt comprehensive zoning plans, to create zoning commissions....

Governor Hartley described such zoning restrictions, commonplace today, as "an excellent example of government sticking its nose into the private business of citizens."

During the last week of the 1927 session came the long-awaited move to the new capitol building. Its construction had begun before Governor Hartley came to office and he regarded it as "a monument to extravagance in architectural design and waste and profligacy in furnishings." The press made much of there finally being a woman's lounge, "a handsome room, brocaded in golden tapestry and made luxurious with leather and overstuffed chairs, and all the appointments that belong to such a room." Although certainly in favor of such a facility for herself and future women legislators, the fiscally conservative Senator Hurn might have agreed with Hartley's view of excessive luxury.

Toward the end of her legislative career, a mild flurry of activity centered on Reba Hurn when she was nominated for president pro tem of the senate for the 1929 session. This time the Hartley faction was solidly behind her in an effort to keep the anti-Hartley Fred Hastings of Seattle from the position. The *Spokesman-Review* had declared in December: "It has become reasonably certain...that backers of Governor Hartley have decided to do their utmost for Miss Hurn and thereby make the presidency fight a test of strength between the administration and the Metcalf-Condon-Hastings majority that ruled the 1927 senate" to the detriment of Hartley's program. The Hartley partisans did not succeed, and Hastings easily defeated Hurn.

The legislation that defined Senator Hurn's participation in the 1929 session was a bill she herself introduced: Senate Bill 83, "an act relating to the abandonment of township organization, the disincorporation and the winding up of affairs of townships, and defining the powers and duties of certain officers in relation thereto...." Spokane County was one of only two remaining counties in Washington—Whatcom being the other—with this form of organization, which interposed below the county level a layer of paid officials including three supervisors, a clerk, treasurer, assessor, justice of the peace, constable and overseer of highways. According to the *Spokesman-Review*, this arrangement amounted to "virtually 50 counties within the county." In her campaign to eliminate this wasteful layer of government, Hurn had the support of the state tax commission and many in the legislature, but angered some of her rural constituents. Not only did her efforts fail at the time, but Spokane County was not free of the last townships until 1974.

In 1930 Reba Hurn ran for a third term. Her speeches and statements to the press give a clear picture of positions she had honed during her eight years in state government. She again came out emphatically for the continuation of Prohibition. Furthermore, she declared herself opposed to state-funded old-age pensions because "a legislator should not be philanthropic with other people's money," a position that mirrored Governor Hartley's view. As for the ever-present tax question, she "favors state taxation of municipally owned public utilities, thinks it imperative that something be done to relieve the tax burden on real estate, and favors a state income tax as the only fair way to tax intangibles."

The women's clubs of the state apparently had forgiven Hurn's failure to support the Women's Industrial Home and gave her a solid endorsement. Mrs. George Campbell, president of the State Federation of Women's Clubs stated:

We are especially fortunate in having a woman in the state senate who is in a position to visit personally our state institutions in an official capacity, and who would have the authority to find out the things we want to know which the casual visitor would not. Miss Hurn's committee assignments make her especially desirable in the federation's interests.

But Hurn lost her bid for reelection in the primary. It was widely considered that the township issue had defeated her. The *Yakima Republic* declared that the township supporters were "more interested in perpetuating a decadent political subdivision—the township organization—than they were in the welfare of the state.... [Senator Hurn] incurred the wrath of those holding township offices and they took off their coats and defeated the lady."

Reba Hurn never again achieved public office. She flirted briefly with entering state senate races in 1932 and 1934, and in 1936 ran for superior court judge in Spokane County but was defeated. Yet Senator Hurn could look back with justifiable pride on her years in the senate. She was a woman in a man's world, conducting herself with becoming decorum, yet quietly forceful in presenting and defending her convictions. The modest estimation she held of herself upon entering the senate was realistic for any freshman legislator and had nothing to do with her being a woman. She bore with good grace a lot of coy nonsense with which the press reacted to the "lady in the senate." For all her hard work and even leadership, Reba Hurn did not leave a record of legislative successes, yet her performance over eight years in the Washington State Senate was admirable. Whether or not hindsight agrees with her priorities, she was a serious, hard-working legislator, contributing to the sum total of responsible state government, as well as helping pave the way for women in public office to be judged on their merits.

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