

March 11, 2015

Women quietly do extraordinary things every day. To help shed light on the resilience and strength of Hoosier women and celebrate their accomplishments and contributions to history we are releasing an article every day in the month of March. These articles showcase how women have moved Indiana and our country forward and who inspire others to do great things in their own lives.

Women in Indiana have an important role to play. You can make a difference by:

- Learning more about the issues affecting women in Indiana.
- Voicing your opinion on issues important to you
- Serving as an advocate for women
- Mentoring another woman
- Join ICW's mailing list or social media outlets to be notified of upcoming events, programs and resources available to women

Go to www.in.gov/icw to learn more about the Indiana Commission for Women and their current initiatives.

Sources:

- **Encyclopedia of Chicago** (<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1353.html>)
- **Franklin, Lu Ann** (15 October 1996), "Former mayor of Whiting dies," *Northwest Indiana Times* (http://www.nwitem.com/uncategorized/former-mayor-of-whiting-dies/article_61cf66df-b758-5972-a70a-d7f820588ea1.html)
- **Hammond Times, The** (18 November 1957), "Mrs. Bercik, Whiting Mayor, Uses Routine" (<http://www.newspapers.com/image/55788594/>)
- **Whiting Public Library** (<http://www.whiting.lib.in.us/Mayors.html>)

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Women's History Month 2015

Telling 31 stories in 31 days this March.

Mary Jancosek Bercik (1914-1996)

About seventeen miles southeast of Chicago is Whiting, Indiana, a small city on the shore of Lake Michigan. Whiting was established in 1889 by Standard Oil Company in order to serve its growing kerosene and lubricant trade for the interior of the country. The refinery brought construction teams and workers, especially immigrants, who settled the area with their families.

When her husband, Mayor William Bercik, was elected Mayor in 1955, Mary Bercik had been his first lady and staunch supporter. However, when he died in office in 1957, the city council appointed Bercik to serve the remaining two years as mayor. By doing so, this small city made Indiana history when she became the first woman to serve as mayor of an Indiana city. And, after completing her husband's term, Bercik ran her own campaign and was elected by the citizens to serve another four years as Mayor of Whiting.

The job wasn't an easy one. She hadn't planned to be make history as a politician. She was busy in her own right raising the couple's eight children. At the time when she assumed the office, the age of her children ranged from 21 years to 17 months. With the help of her mother, Bercik was able to develop a routine that enabled her to serve as Mayor. When interviewed by *The Hammond Times* newspaper in November 1957, she said

If you enjoy your work, you will find time for everything... I do a lot of running here and there, but I still have time to enjoy my family.

Bercik was thrust into a big situation, running the city and having an all-male council to content with. She had become Mayor during a turning point in Whiting's history. In 1955, an explosion started a fire at the refinery. The fire was so massive that it could be seen from downtown Chicago and lasted for eight days. The massive damage forced Standard Oil to modernize the facility in a way that reduced the demand for employees, which eventually led to layoffs in the early 1960s. Likewise, Bercik's legacy was one in which she championed modernization, which ultimately led to her downfall in politics. Despite advice to the contrary, Bercik ordered water meters to be installed in homes and businesses to determine more accurately the amount of water being consumed. She also was instrumental in building the Schrage Avenue fire station and paving Whiting's alleys.

But, one of Mary Bercik's greatest legacies was raising her eight children as a widow. One of her sons, Robert Bercik, later became Mayor of Whiting in 1988, serving in that office until 2003. When Mary Bercik died in 1996, her daughter, Mary, stated:

She did a good job (as a mother). She encouraged us all to be our own person.