

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

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Laurel C. Thayer, Self-Supporting Women, and the Struggle for Waged Equality in Early Twentieth Century Indiana

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In 1917 Indianapolis Mayoral candidate Charles Jewett courted the city's female vote as he spoke to the Marion County branch of the Indiana Woman's Party. The Indianapolis Star reported on his speech to local club women wherein Jewett promised to bring women like themselves into city government by establishing a women's courts, hiring female probation and police officers, and by working to feminize social and outreach services. He promised "'If I am elected mayor, of Indianapolis I shall depend on the women to share the great responsibility for a better government, a cleaner city, a decent city and efficient service in the departments of government.'" Women like Laurel C. Thayer (1874-1944) the daughter of abolitionists, long-time member of the National Consumer's League, and self-supporting workingwoman responded with enthusiasm. It was a vision of governance borne of her suffragist and reformist background that she had long pursued in her work as a city reformer, reporter, social worker, probation officer and more.

Thayer's happy alliance with the Mayor and his successors was to be short lived. Handicapped by her advancing age and by her gender, Thayer increasingly found herself at odds with the Mayor's office. Chaffing under the shifting political fortunes of city hall, Thayer contemplated leaving her position as a longtime probation officer in the late 1920s. Yet she was forced to concede that "the financial impossibility of living without employment or of going elsewhere unless to fill a position definitely engaged." In 1927 she sued for \$1800 in back wages after realizing that she was being underpaid in comparison to her male counterparts. She won.

This paper examines the underpinnings of Laurel C. Thayer's commitment to Progressive Era reforms and her insistence on relatively egalitarian visions of women's waged work in the first half of the 20th century as it explores her efforts to carve out a career for herself in city reform work. This paper integrates Thayer and her work into a broader discussion about women's waged and into conversation about how to shape women's history in the state and beyond. It engages with the earlier work of Barbara Springer and seeks to deepen our understanding of the avenues of resistance and reform that "ladylike reformers" deployed in this time period. This paper was published in the [Indiana Magazine of History](#) (December 2016).

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