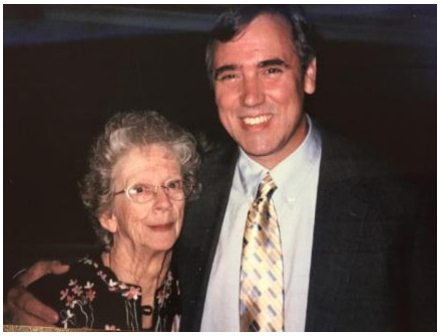
Nellie Fox-Edwards, a pioneer for women in labor

Oct 16, 2017



Nellie Fox-Edwards and Jeff Merkley.

Dec. 15, 1923 — Oct. 6, 2017

Oregon lost a working woman's hero Oct. 6 with the passing of labor leader Nellie Fox-Edwards at age 93. Hers was a life spent championing the rights of women, union workers, and the mentally ill.

Nellie Fox opened the door for women in the labor movement in 1975 when she was elected director of political education and legislation for the Oregon AFL-CIO. At the time, she was the highest elected woman union official in the United States.

She was a founder of the Oregon Pioneer Chapter of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), and she served as president of the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association.

Fox-Edwards got her start in the labor movement working as a clerk at a downtown Portland jewelry store, which was represented by Retail Clerks Local 1257 (now part of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555). She became active in the local and in 1962 was appointed a business agent. In 1965 she was elected second vice president of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

In 1971, Local 1257 merged into Food and Drug Clerks Local 1092, and she was hired as a business agent for that local.

Two years later she was appointed Women's Activities Director for the Oregon AFL-CIO. There, she helped establish 17 Committee on Political Education (COPE) offices around the state, boosting the success rate of labor-endorsed candidates.

Nellie Fox-Edwards with Oregon AFL-CIO officer Rosie McDonald.

In 1975 she was elected political director of the Oregon AFL-CIO, defeating incumbent Lloyd Knudsen and another challenger, Doug Dinsmore.

Fox-Edwards ran for state labor commissioner in 1978, losing in the primary to Mary Wendy Roberts, who went on to serve in that post for 16 years.

During her career, Fox-Edwards served on numerous boards and commissions, including the governor-appointed TriMet board of directors, the State Advisory Council on Sex Discrimination in Employment, and Planned Parenthood.

President Jimmy Carter named her to a nominating panel for a judgeship on the federal appeals court in San Francisco in the late ’70s, and in the early ’80s she was part of a Oregon delegation to China and was a whistleblower on unsafe working conditions in Nike factories there.

She retired in 1985 at the age of 62. She kept busy lobbying at the Oregon Legislature on behalf of mental health organizations and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). She held several offices in mental health organizations, including president of the Mental Health Association of Oregon. She also served as president of AARP’s Oregon branch, and was a member of its national governing board.

She received numerous awards for her work, including three from the Oregon Women’s Political Caucus, and a Labor History Person of the Year plaque. In May 1997, she was the first inductee to the Labor Hall of Fame sponsored by the retirees chapter of the Northwest Oregon Labor Council.

Nellie Mae Batman was born Dec. 15, 1923, in Yakima, Washington to Patrick and Laura Mae Batman. They moved to Oregon when she was one, and she lived in the Portland area most of her life.

At age 20 she became a widowed mother when her husband Edwin Ryder was killed in an auto accident. She married and divorced Robert Holmes, a dispatcher at IBEW Local 48, and the man she credited for “teaching me the basics of good trade unionism.” She was married to Francis Fox when she was elected political director. After they divorced she married Dr. L.E. Edwards, a Beaverton chiropractor. He died in 1993.

Fox-Edwards spent the last years of her life at an assisted care facility in Hood River, near her daughter in Mosier.

Fox-Edwards is survived by daughters Beverly Bruce and Ronell Currie, son Robert Holmes, two granddaughters, and three great grandchildren.

She was buried at the Union Point Cemetery in Banks, Oregon beside grandson John McDonald Bruce, and her mother. At her request, no service will be held. In lieu of flowers, contributions can be made to the National Alliance for Mental Illness of Oregon, 4701 SE 24th, Suite E, Portland, OR, 97202.