

The Honorable Mrs. Griffiths

By JOHN CAULEY



John R. Cauley has been a member of the Washington bureau of the Kansas City Star for the last 15 years and bureau chief since 1964. A native of Indiana, Cauley moved to Kansas City when he was 14. He was graduated from the University in 1932 with a bachelor of journalism degree. In Washington, Cauley's main assignments have been the White House, State Department, and politics in general.





Mrs. Martha Wright Griffiths, who was graduated from the University of Missouri in 1934, is a fierce and articulate advocate of the rights and independence of women. Yet, if it had not been for a man — her husband — she might have never achieved her present eminence as a lawyer and a member of Congress from Michigan for the last 14 years.

"I never dreamed of being a lawyer or going into politics," confessed the attractive, brown-haired 56-year old house member in her office on Capitol Hill. My husband pushed me into everything."

Mrs. Griffiths recalls the occasion in 1946 when she received a telephone call at her home after attending a meeting of women lawyers in Detroit.

"One of the women who had been to the meeting said I should run for the state legislature," she said. "My husband could hear what I was saying, but he did not know what the woman on the other end of the line was saying. I was telling this woman 'No, I could not do it. I am a Democrat and you are a Republican.' So after the conversation was ended, I told my husband what this woman had asked me to do.

"And he asked, 'Did you tell her you would run?'"

"I said, 'No.'"

"So my husband said, 'Now you get back there on that telephone and tell her you will run.'"

"I did."

It was thus that Martha Griffiths, whose parents were rural mail carriers in Pierce City, Mo., got into the great game of politics which led her to being the first woman ever appointed to the powerful Ways and Means Committee of the House.

Mrs. Griffiths represents a constituency in the northwest part of Detroit which is free of poverty and where almost every person owns his own home. She believes that she continues to get elected because so many voters have roots in the middle west — and for another reason not entirely irrelevant: she tends to her job.

"If you don't work hard for your constituents you don't come back," she observed.

The most satisfying part of serving in the House, Mrs. Griffiths said, is the opportunity she has for seeing that justice is done and to help people.

And what about the frustrations?

Mrs. Griffiths smiled and replied, "The frustrations come when the other 434 members don't want to do what you think they ought to do."

Quickly her countenance turned serious when she said, "What is maddening is when another member comes up and says 'I know you are right on this issue — but —'."

What would Mrs. Griffiths do about Vietnam?

"I would call Ho Chi Minh," she replied, "and tell him 'we can't afford this war so we are getting out.'"

"No matter what we do the Commies are going to take over there. I do not believe that we can tell the Asians what to do or to be of much help to them. It's a very corrupt continent."

Mrs. Griffiths said her concern over the American involvement in Vietnam increased when the first big escalation of the war began, and she believes the United States had a great opportunity to withdraw gracefully after the election of a new regime in South Vietnam.

On another important issue, racial turmoil, Mrs. Griffiths explains, "I represent a district which is going to have to pay for the riots."

Mrs. Griffiths believes the basic solutions should come in job opportunities and in decent housing. And she takes a much more realistic view on the responsibilities for coping with riots than some of the bleeding hearts members of Congress.

"You've got to have force and use it quickly to put down riots," she says. "At first everyone tried to be nice and persuasive, but that day is past."

As a member of the tax-writing Ways and Means Committee, Mrs. Griffiths voted against the 10 per cent surcharge provision, now law, because "I don't believe you can cure inflation by putting people out of work."

Mrs. Griffiths, born in Pierce City, describes it at that time as sort of a library-starved area of Missouri. On her first day at the University she headed for the library and within 24 hours

had run up a \$2.65 bill for removing Goethe's *Faust* from the premises.

After two years at MU Mrs. Griffiths's money ran out so she returned to Pierce City and taught school for a year. Upon returning to Columbia she remembers getting into arguments in a class with a boy from Schenectady, N. Y. — Hicks E. Griffiths — an encounter that culminated in marriage in their senior year.

"In a way we got married so we could finish our arguments," she said with a grin.

After graduation Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths enrolled at the University of Michigan law school where Martha worked in a campus candy store — "at \$9.48 for a 54-hour week" — and Hicks was employed in the library.

"At the Missouri commencement exercises," Mrs. Griffiths said, "neither of us could afford a cap and gown. At Michigan we just didn't see the point of spending the money to look at each other in a cap and gown."

Martha and Hicks then began to practice law in Detroit and later became active in Democratic politics. As an attorney for the office of price administration, Hicks had built up a wide-spread personal and political friendship throughout the state.

Mrs. Griffiths lost her first race for the state legislature in 1946, but she won in 1948. In 1952 she ran for Congress but was defeated. Then in 1953 she was appointed a judge and recorder of the Recorder's court in Detroit, the first woman ever to hold the post. In 1954 she ran for Congress again, was elected and has held the seat ever since.

"The people didn't know who I was in 1952," Mrs. Griffiths recalls. "But because of my work on the court, people would lean out of the windows of their cars and wave at me in 1954."

Mrs. Griffiths lives in nearby Virginia but every Thursday or Friday she flies to Detroit to be with her husband. Hicks and Martha have a 110-acre farm 45 miles from Detroit where they spend the weekends.

On a shelf in her office is a trophy formed by a basket of flowers on which is inscribed "Hi-Mar award 1966 champion weed puller."

The trophy was a gift from her husband, and in her office Martha stoops down and shows a visitor how "I can pull weeds for hours." □