

Laura A. Batcheller, National Bank President

by Karl Sanford Kabelac

IN THE 2000 CENSUS, FINGAL, NORTH DAKOTA (in Barnes County in the southeastern part of the state) had a population of 133 people. It must be one of the smallest communities in the nation to have a flourishing bank, which a century ago was the First National Bank of Fingal. And its president was a woman, Laura A. Batcheller.

Laura A. Donahoe was born in Ontario, Canada, in 1873. Her family settled in eastern North Dakota when she was a child. She herself taught school for several years before her marriage to Charles E. Batcheller on June 28, 1899. They had no children.

He was born in western New York State in 1863 and had come to North Dakota in 1892. He was first employed as a telegraph operator and then became the cashier of the First National Bank of Buffalo, ND. In 1898 he settled in Fingal and organized the Bank of Fingal, serving as its cashier. In 1904 it became the First National Bank of Fingal (charter #7295), and he continued as its cashier.

Laura A. Batcheller, who had been vice president of the Bank of Fingal, became vice president of the new national bank. Two years later in 1906 she was elected its president.

She was active in both state and national banking organizations. In August 1903 she was the only woman at the founding convention of the North Dakota Bankers Association. In 1905 she was the only woman delegate to the American Bankers Association meeting in Washington, DC. While there, she was elected vice president of the North Dakota association. The *Washington Post* noted she "has the appearance of a thorough business woman, and is decidedly attractive in her personality."

At the North Dakota Bankers Association meeting in Fargo in July 1906, she gave a report of the ABA meeting. That year she also served as the treasurer of the NDBA. Later in 1906 she attended the annual meeting of the ABA in St. Louis where she was the only woman bank president at the convention.

In 1913, when the ABA met in Boston, the *Christian Science Monitor* ran an article about her headlined "Woman President of Bank Attends Convention Here." Although she is quoted as saying that it must have been gallantry that caused the four men directors to elect her president nearly a decade before, she went on to say that she saw "no reason why a woman should not be a bank president, if she is qualified for the position." When

asked about woman suffrage, she confessed that she was not keen about it, but that "We are going to have it."

Her spirit of public service continued. In 1918, with our nation at war, she volunteered to serve the Red Cross for one year with no salary. She traveled to the east coast and then on to France, where she was to establish informational filing systems at various Red Cross offices there and perhaps in Italy also.

That autumn the serious influenza epidemic swept the United States. Mr. Batcheller was ill with it, and resulting complications caused his death at their home in Fingal on Friday, February 23, 1919. Mrs. Batcheller had been informed by telegram of his illness, and she was returning by boat from France at the time of his death. She arrived in New York City early in March, and had the body of her husband brought to New York State where he was buried in Stockton, the village of his birth. She then returned to Fingal.

In June 1919, when the bank directors elected N. P. Langemo as president, the local newspaper reported that the directors of the bank and several others were the stockholders, and noted "they have taken over all the Batcheller interests in the bank."

At some point she moved from North Dakota. The 1930 census found her in Los Angeles County, California, working, appropriately enough, as a clerk in a bank. She died in Los Angeles on August 6, 1946, which was her 73rd birthday.

The First National Bank of Fingal became the Fingal State Bank in 1932. In 2003 it took over the Page State Bank and changed the name of the combined bank to Quality Bank. Its two offices, some 35 miles apart, today serve the communities of Fingal and Page and the surrounding areas.

Sources

The Fingal Community History (1980) has a section on the bank, pages 25-26, and a biographical sketch on Charles E. Batcheller, pages 85-86. His obituary is found in *The Fingal Herald*, February 28, 1919. Mentions of bank conferences attended by Laura A. Batcheller are found in the *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, August 29, 1903, October 19, 1905, and July 17, 1906; and in *The Washington Post*, October 14, 1905, and the *Christian Science Monitor*, October 9, 1913. Her Red Cross work is noted in *The Fingal Herald*, June 14, 1918, and the change in the bank's ownership in the same newspaper for June 27, 1919. ❖