

Senator Borah's Lady

*Keeping a Statesman-Husband Fit
Through 22 Strenuous Years
Might Be Considered Sufficient
Occupation for an Ordinary Woman.
But Mary McConnell Borah
Has Done That, Steered a Sane
Social Career in Washington.
And Befriended a Regiment
Of Needy and Disabled Soldiers*



Mary McConnell Borah... Taciturn, independent, courageous, she has earned the title: "The perfect wife for a public man." (Portrait sketch by Paul Krosen)

IN Washington you will hear it said that Senator William E. Borah's little lady is "the perfect wife for a public man," and in Washington's official gossip there is a story going the rounds which illustrates the point.

It all happened at one of those more or less official dinners right after Herbert Hoover's nomination. Mrs. Borah was there, but her husband was not. Very delicately, but none the less obviously, some of the guests were suavely bringing the conversation around to comment on Hoover's cabinet. Speculation was rife. Who would Hoover pick? This one? That one?

The host was a close friend of the Borahs, and he tried to avert the question which everyone wanted to ask Mrs. Borah without being too inquisitive. The question could have been averted, too, had not Mrs. Borah, utterly unperturbed, aided and abetted the conversation.

"You must realize," she said as the whole table stilled, "that I can't say very much right now, but since I feel perfectly sure that I'm in the hands of my friends, I'm going to tell you all—"

The host, apoplectic with fright, tried to wigwag danger signals and smother the sputtering fuse of this topic so loaded with political dynamite, but "Little Lady Borah" went right on.

"I want you to know," she said calmly, "that the secretaryship of state has been offered the senator—"

A gasp here, till she concluded her sentence with: "By everyone except Mr. Hoover."

There, in a few paragraphs, you have a perfect example of what it means to be an effective wife in Washington society. A less skillful conversationalist, by an inopportune remark or a misunderstood silence, might easily have created an embarrassing situation for either her husband or the president-elect. But by deftly sticking a pin into the balloon of rumor, Mrs. Borah stopped needless gossip and quieted a ticklish situation.

And Mrs. Borah is a master at this dinner table diplomacy. In the score and more of years that she has been the wife of a most distinguished senator, she has gathered experience which well qualifies her for the title of "the perfect wife for a public man."

Mrs. Borah herself laughs at the reputation, declaring that she hasn't been able to pay all her calls in years, that she never plays social politics, that she doesn't play up to important people, and that she doesn't exhort "Billy" to do likewise—unless he wants to, which he most always doesn't.

ANYWAY, Mr. and Mrs. William E. Borah came from Boise to Washington as "the new senator from Idaho and his wife," just 22 years ago. Roosevelt was president then, and four other White House tenants have been hosts since the Borahs first dined with the Roosevelts in the White House.

Twenty-two years is less time in Washington than in most places, where some senators come and some go but a few stay on forever. But it's been long enough for "The Lone Wolf from Idaho" to be called "one of the old guard," and long enough for "those Borahs" to be called about the most important people in the social crowd of official Washington.

Washington has various acid tests of importance. Senator Borah meets the chief one. He's so important, and so beloved and so accepted just as he is, that even the White House won't ask him to all the dinners it would like to because it knows how he hates to get into his evening duds and utter official sweet nothings for a whole evening.

For a White House invitation can not be declined or even disregarded. Officials summoned to a White House function cannot send a "sorry, but I'm busy on the ninth." The invitee must go.

Therefore, if a man's likes and dislikes are known and respected he just isn't bothered by being asked. Which is what "Bill" Borah has achieved.

But the achievement of Senator William E. Borah isn't all his own. There's a woman in the story. She's known as "Little Borah," in contrast to her husband, "Big Borah," who could gobble her up at one bite. Her full name is Mary McConnell Borah. And it might be said that she was born to public life. Her father served Idaho at one time as governor and as a United States senator. But Mrs. Borah was only a child in those days.

MARY McCONNELL BORAH knows, as do few wives of political husbands, what it's all about. She knows that being a senator is infinitely more than going down to the Senate office building at 10 o'clock, looking in on the Senate on the way to lunch, speaking a few choice words to make the gallery applaud, and coming home to talk

about the hard day in Congress.

Reared in the home of a busy public official, and accustomed from childhood to learned talk of governmental policies and politics; serving later as helpmeet to one of the most spirited senators on "The Hill," Mrs. Borah knows something about the books and papers and reports and investigations that must be read and reported upon. She knows that being a senator has about as much physical and mental fatigue attached to the job as being a plumber or tight-rope walker.

She knows that a senator's reaction to a mound of dinner invitations with his, "I'm too tired and I'd like to stay in tonight," may be quite legitimate and sincere. Some wives might like the social racket so much that they would nag and threaten and cajole. If they couldn't budge the senatorial husband they might go alone, taking two roles—the pitiful, lonely, abandoned wife one, or the bluffing, excuse-making one—the sort who gushes. The senator was so sorry to have to refuse, but he has an important committee meeting tonight.

Mrs. William Borah has steered a middle course. She herself does not care particularly for social life and is perfectly willing, most of the time, to join the senator in his refusals. But when she wants to go, she goes, and she does none of the usual "smoothing over."

Washington's acceptance of Senator Borah's aversion to formal dinners and formal dinner clothes is from seed planted by his own wife. She has spread the word and made it possible for him to stay at home with his Emerson and Fox and Thackeray and reports.

Perhaps it's the very unavailability of the Borahs as social material most of the time which makes them so sought. Every Washington hostess' slogan is "try to get the Borahs." Perhaps it's because they themselves are so likeable, so "folksy," so altogether entertaining. Whatever the reason, though, they probably entertain less than almost any official family in the capital and go less, their invitation mail is perhaps the largest.

WASHINGTON is a bit curious about "Little and Big Borah." Perhaps it's because they are both the non-conformist type. Washington is rife with tales about the senator's horse and the senator's riding on the street car and "the unusual people" found in the Borah apartment almost any hour of the day or night.

These "unusual people" are most often unfortunate soldier boys whom "Aunt Mary," as many of them call Mrs. Borah, takes under her wing. The various government hospitals for shell-shocked soldiers are to her what the social racket is to the average official Washington woman.

The war and its boys are an old story to many. The war was ten years ago. But year after year and month after month and week after week, Mrs. Borah visits her boys at the hospitals, taking them fruit and cookies and games, but, most of all, taking them the knowledge that there is a friend who has their welfare at heart and who never forgets.

It's one thing to make a pretty Lady Bountiful gesture, to set aside one or two days a week for the doing of good works. Accepting the full burden of duties and problems and tragedies, however difficult and unpleasant, that result from such self-imposed tasks, is quite another thing.

Mrs. Borah has learned that her soldier boy interest is almost a full-time job. For the soldier boy has relatives—mothers, sisters, wives—and some of them want money and some of them want advice. Day after day and hour after hour the Borah phone rings. Often it's a new voice, someone who has heard that Mrs. Borah would be glad to do this or do that, or see that personage or this, always ending with, "I heard about you from so-and-so at the hospital."

The soldier boy himself needs so many more things than an afternoon call and a basket of fruit. Sometimes there's recovery and that means work and new living arrangements. It means trips to the Veterans' Bureau about this adjustment and that. It means answering letters from distraught parents and wives back home whose only contact with the soldier boy may be through letters written them by his good Samaritan.

"Of course I run into imposters," Mrs. Borah pazzies with her critics. "But most of these boys are not imposters and how can you disregard those who need help just because one or two might take advantage of your kindness?"



Mrs. Borah... has filled her home with things from the Orient, and has a small herd of elephants, the emblem of the political party her husband serves.

MRS. BORAH is one of several official wives inclined to be rather free and easy about the official "day at home" demanded by Washington etiquette. Perhaps it's because her apartment must be available most any time for her proteges.

They appreciate the colorful atmosphere of Mrs. Borah's home, the gay Chinese furnishings—bright tapestries, artfully woven; pottery, lacquered chests and quaintly carved chairs. Those who have become familiar with the rooms quickly notice new articles that have been added and comment when old familiar landmarks have been moved to a different position.

Elephants seem to be a passion with Mrs. Borah, perhaps because they are the emblem of the political party to which her husband belongs. She has a small herd fashioned of yellow pottery, bronze ones and blue ones—elephants in a variety of poses and in many different sizes. In connection with them she tells this amusing story.

Returning from an out-of-town sojourn she discovered that a very tiny little fellow had been mysteriously added to her collection.

The senator's wife was showing it to one of her soldier boys, and her perplexity was reflected in his face. He studied the little elephant and he studied the larger elephant beside it, which he had seen before. Then he offered his explanation, laconically: "Looks like his maw!"

Antique shops and funny little stores intrigue Mrs. Borah and there she finds many of the Chinese bits she needs—some pottery, a brocade, a Buddha, a scarf, or a chair. She laughs about some curiously carved Chinese lacquer red chairs in her drawing room, the obtaining of which quite embarrassed the senator, she confides.

She saw the chairs in an Atlantic City hotel. They were so exactly what she wanted that she asked the management to sell her a couple. The management couldn't do that, but after she had returned home they arrived, packed in a great box, with a card bearing the compliments of the hotel owner.

BUT the charm of the big, sprawly Borah apartment consists not only in Chinese wall pieces and pottery elephants and herons and fanback chairs. Golden sun splashes rooms gay with chintz on big soft couches. Yellow birds fly about uncaged, and there is a back porch built almost into the heart of a great sycamore tree.

The Borahs live on this back porch during spring and autumn when most official people are fleeing the city. For in nearly a quarter of a century of Washington living the Borahs have never forgotten what living is like "back home."



"Those Borahs" . . . are looked upon by many as the most interesting, most likeable and busiest official family in Washington.

where spacious houses, green tree-studded lawns and great open spaces are taken for granted.

Even today Mrs. Borah misses the leisurely landscapes of the west and cannot help feeling cramped in a city apartment. She has found herself lonely for the pets she knew—the dogs and cats that could not be brought with her to Washington. Sometimes she visits the shops where kittens and puppies are sold and she has one cat that, she says, is injured to apartment house living. He is silky and white and he looks real enough to eat mice. But he has a musical box instead of a "me-ow" in his tummy.

Sometimes meals are served on the porch under the sycamore tree. Pleasant attentions such as these little festivals, comfortable surroundings, the soft couches, the big, workable desk—are all part of "Little Borah's" recipe for looking after the Senator.

His home is his castle. It's perfectly all right for soldier boys and all the unfortunate of earth to ring her bell and make demands upon her, but she is adamant to lobbyists, salesmen and politicians who attempt to approach the senator in his own home!

Some observers who do not know the Borahs have commented on the fact that they are seldom seen publicly together, but no one can enter their Washington home without feeling the solidarity here. Their conversation reveals a mutuality of interests and a fine understanding.

They are lovers of books, not only informing books, but just books for books' sake. The senator prefers the old favorites to most of the newer works, though he likes knowing what the current publications are all about, too.

SENATOR BORAH was admitted to the bar in Kansas at the age of 21, after reading law in the office of his brother-in-law. When the time came for him to strike out for himself he turned toward the west, thinking that he might journey to the Pacific coast and there seek his fortune.

He had gone as far as Boise, Idaho, when his funds became exhausted, making it necessary to stop in that city, and there he opened his own law office. In about eight years he was one of the big men of the state, drawn into the famous Coeur d'Alene outrages when labor agitators dynamited the governor of the state in his own yard.

Mary McConnell first met Senator Borah when he was campaigning for her father, William McConnell, then a candidate for governor.

They were married during the time her father was Governor of Idaho. Shortly afterward, Senator Borah was elected to serve his first term in the U. S. Senate and it is interesting to note that he carried the counties which were hot-beds for the radical labor forces he had prosecuted.

Senator Borah once told an interviewer that he never consciously "went into politics." He explained modestly that it was simply a case of having exhausted all the legal practice available in a western, sparsely settled state like Idaho, that a next move had to be made in order to function in a broader way, and that running for the Senate seemed the answer.

He has always been one of the Senate's most picturesque, dramatic figures. The very whisper that a Borah speech is to be made at a certain session crams the galleries and brings all the senators to their seats without being sent for. Those who know the senator best say that this tribute embarrasses him, especially when it directly precedes or follows a colleague's speech made to empty desks and galleries.

SENATOR BORAH has been alternately lauded and lampooned. Always the "Lone Wolf," he refrained from "yes yesing" when the country was demanding war and when hesitation was branded un-American.

They called him "a little American" in the Senate on that November day of 1919, when the ratification of the peace treaty was up for final consideration. He made a speech that day. He accepted the title, saying simply: "Leave us the word American, keep that in your presumptuous impeachment, and no taunt can disturb us, no gibe discompose our purposes."

So here are "those Borahs," the most interesting, likeable, busy official family in Washington.

"Little Borah," who has seen so much of Washington in the past 20 years, is going to write about it for this newspaper. Her story, bright with amusing and interesting experiences and rich in explanation of how officialdom lives in the capital, has been done in a series of four articles. The first of these will appear in an early issue of this newspaper.