

# A Mayor... And More

How voters of a small Kansas town  
changed the national conversation



As the state library's choice, "A Vote for Susanna, The First Woman Mayor" will represent Kansas at the 2022 National Book Festival of the Library of Congress!

The voters of Argonia were in no mood for a sneaky political prank.

It was Election Day, April 4, 1887.

Kansas women had recently gained the right to vote and run for office in municipal elections, and that made some Kansas men anxious. It was, after all, still more than 30 years before women would win the right to vote in national races.

On Election Day, a crew of schemers nominated a woman for the position of mayor of Argonia. Her humiliating defeat would be assured, they assumed, and would send a clear message to women across the state: Stick to your knitting.

Argonians did send a clear message when they cast their ballots, but it was a more powerful one than the bullies expected: Respect the political process and don't take our votes for granted.

More than 135 years later, Election Day 1887 is a timely reminder for Kansas co-op members.

In a powerful act of common purpose, Argonians made history, and news of their decision rocketed across the country, inspiring American women, igniting debate, spawning dozens of newspaper columns and changing the political landscape.

**Susanna Salter was not looking for notoriety or to be a trailblazer. But when an opportunity presented itself, she was ready, she recognized it, and she accepted it.**



It also made 27-year-old Susanna Salter America's first-ever female mayor.

Salter was doing laundry when opportunity knocked on the morning of Election Day.

A delegation, sent by a local political leader, brought news: Susanna's name was on the ballot for the job of mayor.

This surprised Salter, who had neither put her name forward nor campaigned for the post.

But when the delegation asked if she would serve if elected, Salter's answer came readily, "Yes."

Unbeknownst to the bullies, there was little question that Salter would be well-qualified for the post. She was college educated. Her father had been the city's first mayor, her husband its first city clerk and author of its first ordinances. Salter herself had taken a leadership role in the local Women's Temperance Union.

But allowing her name to stand was still an enormous risk, not only for Salter personally but also for the credibility of both the Temperance Union and the Prohibition Party to which she belonged. Losing the election would mean the bullies had won.

Karen M. Greenwald is the author of "A Vote For Susanna: The First Woman Mayor," an illustrated children's book about Salter's unprecedented election to office. Greenwald devoted two and a half years to research, including digging deep into primary resources, like Salter's handwritten letters.

"Susanna Salter was a pragmatic, ethical, and thoughtful woman," Greenwald said. "She took her role as Argonia's mayor with great seriousness and succeeded far beyond what the bullies could have imagined."

Salter was not looking for notoriety or to be a trailblazer. But when an opportunity presented itself, she was ready, she recognized it, and she accepted it.

That's what makes this story from 19th century Kansas resonate with members of rural electric co-ops in the 21st century.

Since 2016, Co-ops Vote ([www.vote.coop](http://www.vote.coop)) has been encouraging co-op members whenever they're called to a ballot box to take



The Salter House Museum was once home to the first woman elected to any political office in the United States and is located in Argonia.

advantage of the opportunity, maximizing the ability of rural communities to be heard on issues of common vision, values and interests.

The organization's website is a one-stop shop for current and prospective voters, including voting registration, lists of upcoming elections, directories of local representatives, handy guides on issues of particular interest to co-op voters, and more.

Kansas is also home to a dozen "5-Star" co-ops, including Sumner-Cowley Electric, that have been recognized for helping members to be informed about elections at all levels, encouraging active engagement with elected officials, and developing advocacy plans on behalf of their members.

When her well-respected term ended, Salter said she was happy to focus on caring for her family. But her influence rippled well beyond the borders of Argonia. Argonia's famous mayoral election stands as a powerful, profoundly Kansas reminder of the importance of voting.

Since 2016, Co-ops Vote ([www.vote.coop](http://www.vote.coop)) has been encouraging co-op members whenever they're called to a ballot box to take advantage of the opportunity ...

