

Making history on Capitol Hill

by Lionel Van Deerlin

For most of its 200-plus years, the Congress of the United States could have been mistaken for a gathering of undertakers or certified public accountants. Mostly men in dark suits, they were presided over by such gray eminents as Speakers Dennis Hastert and Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill. A few years back, the somewhat scrawny John McCormack was likened by Time magazine to "an exhausted monk."

This order of things is changing before our very eyes. For the first time ever, a woman - wow, a petite and comely California grandmother, Nancy Pelosi - wields the gavel as House speaker. More than one-sixth of the membership over which she will preside (70 out of 435) are women. For the relief that bright colors provide, one no longer need ogle the visitors' gallery.

Hard to believe, but when I became a congressman in 1963, the House had only 11 women. Back then a woman's likeliest way of getting there was as replacement for a deceased husband. The only two women senators then were widows of men who had died in office. By contrast, today's crop of 14 women senators all made it on their own.

Without question, California leads all other states in fulfilling the hopes of 20th century suffragists. Its 19 women House members are a greater number than the full delegations of all but five other states.

Speaker Pelosi should avoid feeling lonely in her new office. All but one of those 19 Golden State women are fellow Democrats. And, oh yes - for 10 years now, both of California's U.S. senators are women. A couple of other states, Maine and Washington, followed California's lead in this regard.

Their historically thin numbers notwithstanding, the congressional women of earlier times provided some notable examples of leadership and courage. Consider just a few:

Republican Rep. Jeannette Rankin, the first woman ever elected to Congress - from Montana in 1916, four years before the national enactment of woman suffrage. A feminist and a pacifist, she's remembered for casting one of 50 House votes against U.S. entry into World War I and the lone vote, a quarter-century later, against war with Japan.

Sen. Margaret Chase Smith of Maine. Scarcely 5 feet tall, she was one of the first lawmakers to oppose what became known as "McCarthyism." Her Declaration of Conscience on June 1, 1950, ("I speak as a Republican, I speak as a woman, I speak as a United States senator, I speak as an American") encouraged other members to join in censuring Wisconsin Sen. Joseph McCarthy, whose anti-Communist crusade had ruthlessly ruined numerous government careers.

Rep. Martha Griffiths, a former city judge from Detroit who had served as lieutenant governor of Michigan. After the 1964 murder of three civil rights "freedom riders" in Philadelphia, Miss., she kept pressure on the FBI to find and punish the young men's killers. This meant overcoming counter-pressure from a number of Southern representatives who favored "going slow."

Rep. Edith Green of Oregon. Stunned when educational leaders testified about special help available to male students, but not to girls, she took steps that led to enactment of Title IX, guaranteeing non-discrimination by any school or college receiving federal funds. One result: collegiate women's sports have achieved near equality with men's.

Rep. Patsy Mink, a Democrat sent to Congress soon after Hawaii won statehood. Although her constituency works no mines, she was a leader in congressional action that outlawed unsightly strip-mining across Appalachia.

Rep. Shirley Chisholm, the first African-American woman in Congress. Elected from Brooklyn's troubled Bedford-Stuyvesant, she felt outraged when party elders consigned her to the House Committee on Agriculture. ("... because a tree grows in Brooklyn?" she asked.) Chisholm later confided she had endured more lifetime discrimination as a woman than because she was black.

New Jersey Republican Rep. Millicent Fenwick, a pipe-smoking patrician first elected, at age 64, among mostly "young Turks" in the wake of Watergate. A stickler for ethics, she argued for a congressional pay raise, though insisting "it must not be enacted furtively, in the dark of night." She's thought to have inspired the Lacey Davenport character in Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury" strip.

Rep. Patricia Schroeder, Colorado Democrat and first woman member of the House Armed Services (now National Security) Committee. Through 12 terms, hers was a voice for rational military spending.

Rep. Barbara Jordan, a black Democrat from Houston who drew national attention as a thoughtful Judiciary Committee member during the Nixon impeachment hearings.

A pretty good showing, I'd say. Heck, such ladies as these were not even registered voters until Prohibition days.

