

# First ladies featured in Truman Library program

By **BRIAN BURNES**

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Women need exercise.

It wouldn't seem a controversial position. But it was during the late 1920s, when Lou Henry Hoover, the first lady, advocated physical fitness for all women.



It's one example of how the role of first lady has evolved and what in the past has represented controversy, said Patricia Krider, executive director of the National First Ladies' Library in Canton Ohio, who speaks at the Truman Library today.

Krider's appearance is part of the Truman Library's observance of the 124th birthday anniversary of Bess Wallace Truman.

The First Ladies' Library, a private nonprofit organization, operates the First Ladies National Historic Site, consisting of two properties in Canton, Ohio, one of which was the home of former first lady Ida Saxton McKinley.

Krider spoke to *The Star* about the history of first ladies:

### **How have first ladies defined their role?**

There is no first lady training manual. It is not a paid position and they are not elected.

So they have had the freedom to choose how to play the role. Before Eleanor Roosevelt, first ladies — although they had always played a role — usually kept it pretty quiet. When Woodrow Wilson had his stroke, there was a lot of criticism from some who thought Edith Wilson was doing more than she should.

So many first ladies preferred to stay in the background, although not all. Lou Hoover, in the 1920s, was a proponent for physical fitness for women at a time when some people thought women shouldn't sweat. That took a lot of guts.

Then Eleanor Roosevelt demonstrated that she believed first ladies should have a more public role.

**Bess Truman didn't seek to match the high public profile that her predecessor, Eleanor Roosevelt, had known. Why not?**

There is always a comparison. I look at Bess as saying, "I am not going to be Eleanor, I can never do as much as Eleanor does, so I am just going to do what I want to do." And good for her. That took a lot of courage. When you follow a person as active as Eleanor Roosevelt, it is always going to be difficult to live up to that.

**What do Americans expect of Michelle Obama?**

They expect her to take an active role and I think she has spearheaded it, basically saying what her agenda is going to be.

She went to visit the Department of Education first off. She has said her interests are going to be education and helping families that are juggling busy lives.

**Will Michelle Obama seek a role more like that of Hilary Clinton or Laura Bush?**

It looks like she is positioning herself between Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush, saying: "I don't want to be out there on policy like Hillary, but I don't want to stand back as much as perhaps Laura did."

**Is the role of first lady better understood today?**

Even now the first lady's role is still being defined.

I ran across a quote from Harry Truman that I love. He said, "I hope someday someone will take the time to evaluate the true role of the wife of the president and to assess the many burdens she has to bear and the contributions she makes."

Here we are some 60 years later and the role still hasn't been evaluated. In some ways, people still don't acknowledge the contributions made.

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#### **The details**

Today's 2 p.m. program with Patricia Krider at the Truman Library in Independence is free with paid admission. After the program, the Independence Pioneer Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution will host its annual Bess Truman Birthday Tea for all guests.

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