

Green Bay News-Chronicle

Ruth Clusen, a former Green Bay schoolteacher who became national director of the League of Women Voters in the 1970s, died Tuesday. She was 82.

Clusen, who lived in Bellevue, also ran for Congress as a Democrat in 1982, losing to incumbent Toby Roth. She served as an assistant secretary in the Department of Energy under President Jimmy Carter, a follow-up to her successful push of the LWV into environmental issues.

Clusen became nationally-known when, in her role as LWV president, she hosted the televised debates between Carter and Gerald Ford during the 1976 presidential campaign. The debates were the first between presidential candidates since 1960.

The debates were sponsored by the LWV to get around equal-time rules in force at the time requiring television networks and stations to offer equal time to all political candidates if free time was offered to one or two. With the league sponsoring the debates, networks and stations could cover them as news events, exempt from the equal time rule. The debates later passed from LWV control to the political party-controlled Commission on Presidential Debates.

The event gained Clusen a slightly different recognition when she was played by Lily Tomlin in a spoof of the debates during the second year of "Saturday Night Live."

Clusen was elected president of the LWV in 1974 and late that year, was one of 19 women's organization leaders selected to meet with Ford, according to the LWV Web site.

In 1975, she was a member of the U.S. delegation to the United Nations Conference on Women in Mexico City.

During her term, the LWV supported the Equal Rights Amendment, moving its 1975 convention out of Chicago because Illinois had not ratified the ERA.

Prior to her presidency, she had been state LWV president and served on national LWV committees on the environment.

In 1977, she was honored as Woman of the Year for politics and government by Ladies Home Journal.

Clusen stepped down as president in 1978, then served from 1978-81 as assistant secretary of energy for the environment in the Department of Energy.

In 1983, she was named to the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents, serving until 1992. In 2001, she was named to the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. In the official presentation on Clusen for the honor, she was quoted as saying.

"We speak dry words at times, but if one has eyes to see and the mind to perceive that what we are working for is the quality of our environment in this and the next generation, one cannot but feel a quickening of the senses."

Clusen's husband, Donald, was a former warden at the Green Bay Correctional Institution.

Funeral services are scheduled for 10:30 a.m. at First United Methodist Church, 501 Howe St. She will be buried in Manitowoc.

A memorial has been established for the Alzheimers Association.