



# Dr Lena Madessin Phillips

## Three Profiles



Lena Madessin Phillips was born in the then sleepy Kentucky hamlet of Nicholasville on September 15, 1881, in the fabled Bluegrass Region, Her formative years were spent in Nicholasville and Jessamine County, where her father was county judge for 44 years. She was a talented musician and although poor health forced her to abandon plans to become a concert pianist, she continued to study music in New York and did some composing.

After an interlude in Nicholasville, she turned to a life-long interest in law and in 1917 was the first woman to graduate with Honours from the University of Kentucky College of Law. She was admitted to the bar in the same year and began practicing law, first in her hometown, then in New York City, in whose teeming streets she came face to face with the injustice, despair and social ills which had never touched her sheltered youth. She quickly sensed what power could be generated by a national movement to organise all women who had a business or a profession. Together they could mould public opinion, set new working standards, improve economic and industrial conditions and lay enduring foundations for peace for the benefit of all mankind. To get such an organisation on its feet became her consuming passion.

In 1919, she was offered, and accepted, the post of business women's secretary for the national board of the Y.W.C.A. in New York which led to her position of leadership among the nation's business and professional women and the founding of BPW USA in the same year.

In the late 1920's while president of the US National Federation, she crossed and recrossed the Atlantic leading "goodwill tours" finding like-minded European business women to form an international organisation and inspiring them to give their all for the same cause. In 1930 her dream was realised with the founding in Geneva of the International Federation of Business & Professional Women. She was elected President, a position she held for 17 years. Under auspices of the Office of War Information, she toured clubs in various countries of Europe during World War II to talk with women and help plan for their future.

Dr. Lena Madessin Phillips practiced law in New York City from 1923, wrote for magazines and served as Consultant to Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. The University of Kentucky awarded her an honorary doctor of laws degree in 1939.





En route to a consultative conference with women leaders of the Middle East to be held in Beirut, she became ill and died on May 20, 1955, in Marseilles, France. She is buried in the family plot in the Maple Grove Cemetery, in Nicholasville, Kentucky

**“Each woman, as a citizen, must bring to the national policy of her own country, the contribution of forward-looking and constructive thought followed by determined action. Each woman must dedicate herself to protect and promote the interests of all other women in business and the professions. We invite the women of every nation to participate in this effort and every man who is in sympathy with it to lend us his moral support.”** **Dr. Lena Madessin Phillips**

**Phillips, Lena Madessin**  
(1881-1955), lawyer and clubwoman

Born in Nicholasville, Kentucky, on October 15, 1881, Anna Lena Phillips changed her given names to Lena Madessin at age 11. She was educated at Jessamine Female Institute and at the Woman's College of Baltimore (1899-1901; now Goucher College). Although she attended the Peabody Institute of Music in Baltimore for a time, an injury to her arm ended her dreams of a career as a concert pianist. Over the next decade she held various jobs, and in 1915, after suffering a nervous breakdown, she resolved to become a lawyer. Two years later she graduated from the University of Kentucky Law School. She soon became an attorney for the Young Women's Christian Association and secretary of its National War Work Council. In 1918 she was sent to New York City to organize the National Business Women's Committee for war work. Although the war had ended before the committee was able to begin its work, the members decided to form a permanent peacetime organization for women in business and the professions.

Phillips organized a convention in St. Louis, Missouri, in July 1919 at which was formed the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, and from then until 1923 she was executive secretary of the federation. While traveling widely to foster the establishment of local clubs, she helped found the federation's journal, *Independent Woman*, in 1920. In 1923, after receiving a master's degree in law from New York University, Phillips entered private practice in New York City. From 1926 to 1929 she served as president of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, and during that period she initiated the movement that culminated in the founding of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women (1930). She served as president of the International Federation from then until 1947. She was also president of the National Council of Women (1931-35), and in 1933 she was president of the International Conference of Women held in conjunction with the Chicago World's Fair. Phillips abandoned her legal practice in 1935 and for four years thereafter was associate editor of and a columnist for the *Pictorial Review*. Her work as president of the International Federation required her to travel frequently to Europe, and during and after World War II she worked to sustain and rebuild clubs and national federations there. She was also active in war relief work and the United Nations and later was chairman of the First International Conference on Public Information. Phillips died in Marseilles, France, on May 22, 1955.



The following is an extract from a speech given at BPW Canada Provincial Conference at Sechelt, British Columbia by their Archivist, Mae Jeffrey:

## **BPW Founded in 1919 by a Woman Who Fell Down.**

The Business and Professional Women's Club in Canada is 70 years old, but it was 81 years ago in St. Louis, USA that BPW was actualized by a woman who came to a crossroad in her life when she fell and hurt her arm ending her budding career as a pianist.

Anna Lena Phillips was born in 1881 in the village of Nicholasville, population 200. Her father was the County Judge of Jessamine County, population 2,000. She was a Daddy's girl, wherever he went she was taken for granted. Through him she learned about politics and law. He did not discourage her in learning unlady like skills as shooting, carpentry, gardening, fishing and camping. When she asked for a bicycle, he bought her one. Tongues wagged when Anna with her ankle length skirt billowing and pigtailed flying rode her bike to school.

Her mother was a staunch Methodist and a Lady. Her domain was her house and on Sundays, the Church. She had dreams, like all mothers, that her daughter would be highly educated, beautiful and a good housekeeper which of course was for the purpose getting a husband.. Her mother did manage to instill in her a love of music and although the other girls surpassed her in such desirable things as personal appearance, beaux and charm, her claim to fame was that she was an accomplished musician.

Her mother did her best, but from the start it was lost cause No matter how hard Anna tried she just could not live up to her mother's standards that were imposed on her just because she was a girl. She just wanted to be herself and that could not be, the price exacted by society was too great, the cost to her conventional mother was too high. This caused in her a sullen resentment that things had to be as they were and envy of the large life open to men.

She had a short career in business at the age of about 5 when she noticed the farmers hitching their horses and wagons in her father's driveway. She had a penchant for candy and saw a way to get a bag full by charging them 5 cents. The farmers thought it so funny they told her father and she was marched back down the driveway to give them their nickels back

When Anna was eleven she scored her first victory over parental determination. She detested her given name and invented a new one. She was fascinated with the French word for medicine - "medecin". Perseverance was one of her strongest traits and it was not long when 'Anna' was erased from everyone's memory - **Lena Madesin Phillips** was her name and to her family and friends she was just "Madesin."

Her interest in politics was well established when at age 15 she wrote a letter to the Jessamine Journal with the heading "A Spicy Letter From A Nicholasville Damsel Who Talks Politics."

At 17 she electrified the country side by organizing twenty-one of her schoolmates into a military company. She believed they were helping to win the Spanish American War by reminding people about the blowing up of the US Battleship *Maine* in Havana Harbour.



At 18 she managed to graduate Magna Cum Laude from the Jessamine Female Institute even though she had wanted to run away on more than one occasion. She entered the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore and her future was clear - a career as a concert pianist. Soon she was doing public concerts and was to play the Schumann Concerto in A Minor with full orchestra, when it happened - she fell on the ice, taking her full weight on her right arm that severely damaged the nerve. Her career was over.

Returning to Nicholasville she became so despondent that her father decided to take drastic measures and got her a job in a grocery store at \$5.00 a week - which he paid. Nice girls did not work in public places unless extremely impoverished and even the poorest did not clerk in a store.

Then she met a young man who convinced her that she could make a minimum of \$2.00 a day selling a "Child's History of the United States" - door to door. Not only did she have to work every day, eight hours a day, it was a scandalous job for the daughter of the County Judge, however, she learned the power of persuasion and by facing and overcoming the disagreeable, as she would say, "put iron into her soul."

In 1904 she was asked to head up the Jessamine Institute music department where she taught and wrote music until it burned down in 1914.

In 1915 Madesin announced she was going to be a lawyer. Some conservative male students disapproved of her entrance in their classes, believing their work would be retarded, but when the semester grades were posted, their attitude changed. When she received her Bachelor of Laws degree, she was the only honor graduate in a class of fourteen men, and the first woman to graduate from the Kentucky Law School with Honors.

At the age of 36 she hung out her shingle in a building across the street from her father in the Court House. She was now a mature and settled woman with a growing law practice and content with her life in Nicholasville and had given up trying to change the local attitudes.

In 1918 two things happened, World War 1 and the Young Women's Christian Association. She was asked to attend the first Conference of the War Work Council of the YWCA in Manhattan, all expenses paid.

Her first impression of war-time Manhattan was electrifying - there were women everywhere! The War Work Council was composed of 100 of America's most prominent women whose job it was to try to fit a chaotic mass of volunteers into a workable scheme of activities and at the same, try to deal with countless unprecedented problems brought on by the sudden entrance of millions of women into fields of employment previously held by men.

It was into this sea of activity that Madesin was plunged, but no one told her what she was expected to do. She sat through speechmaking, teas, luncheons, and dinners and at first enjoyed the activity and a sense of belonging to the action. However, it was not long before she was restless and with thoughts of her work piling up on her desk in Nicholasville, she announced she was going home.

Walking down Lexington Avenue with a National Board Secretary, she asked why they had invited her. She was told they had hoped she might become one of their field secretaries. Madesin asked how many of them there were and when she found out there were eleven, she said she would not leave her home, her profession, or her



father for anything of which there were eleven. She was then asked, "Isn't there some phase of our work that you would be interested in? Madesin replied, **"Yes, I think I would be interested in doing something for business and professional women."** She was asked to stay a couple more days and present a report on how she would reach the unorganized business and professional women. She then returned to her law practice, but it was not long when a letter arrived invited her to become a Staff Secretary specifically responsible for working with business and professional women, she accepted.

The War Work Council called a Business Women's Conference to consider forming a national organization of business women for war service in May of 1918. Nearly 100 women gathered for the opening session. What little she had learned about organizing has been through the Methodist Church, so her first plan of action was to pick twenty-five women to travel across the USA as missionaries to tell and listen.



Her barn-storming came to an abrupt end when she was told to stop her work immediately, she had been appointed director of the Women's Division of the Eastern Department of the United War Work Campaign to raise 75 million dollars of the goal of 170 million for the war. Suddenly the war was over and the whole idea of organizing business and professional women to serve the ends of war ceased to have meaning and Madesin went home.

Unknown to her, key women from every part of the country flooded the War Work Council with pleas that the work to organize a federation be carried on. Madesin again received a letter and again went to New York. The only existing women's organization at that time in the USA was the National Women's Association of Commerce and she presented a plan to the YWCA to unite under a single national federation.

On July 14th, the YWCA delegates, representing 45 States and the Commerce delegates streamed into the lobby of Hotel Statler in St. Louis. Representatives from Good Housekeeping, Pictorial Review, Harper's Bazaar, were sent to cover the meeting. Major newspapers had their reporters at the press table. President Wilson sent his good wishes. Commonplace today, but sensational in 1919.

The YWCA group met on the first floor and the Commerce women met on the second. Each group was to work out the details of the proposed amalgamation and then would meet in a joint convention to create the federation. When the time came to meet the Commerce women asked for more time. By 3 o'clock an ultimatum was sent, if they did not respond the YWCA group would proceed without them, and proceed without them they did.

On July 14, 1919 at 3:00 p.m. The Business & Professional Women's Club of the United States of America was organized with Madesin's goal - a national organization of business and professional women to bring about solidarity among women throughout the nation and eventually throughout the world.

Excerpts from **A MEASURE FILLED**

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