

# Sevierville native Irene Baker served in Congress

*By Carroll McMahan*

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When Dr. Zachary D. Massey of Sevierville was elected on November 8, 1910 to serve the unexpired term of Congressman Walter P. Brownlow he became the only person residing in Sevier County elected as First District Congressman. His tenure lasted only 85 days.



A half of a century passed before another candidate with Sevier County ties was elected to congress. While Massey was a Sevierville resident and elected to serve its constituents, he was born in Madison County, North Carolina. Irene Bailey Baker holds the distinction as the only person born in Sevier County to be elected to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Edith Irene Bailey Baker was born in Sevierville on November 17, 1901. She was the oldest of the five daughters of Hagan Decatur Bailey and Cassie Free Bailey. Her sisters were: Ruby Mae (Maples), Lurlia (Davis), Nina (Hansen), and Charlotte (Wynn).

She served as a court clerk in Sevier County from 1918 to 1924, eventually becoming the deputy clerk and master in the chancery court.

On November 26, 1924, she married John V. Harless, a World War 1 veteran and court reporter from Knoxville. The marriage ended in divorce and Irene was hired by TVA as an abstractor of titles in the early 1930s. She met Howard H. Baker, Sr., a widower, and they were married on September 15, 1935.

The couple raised Baker's two children from his first marriage- Howard H. Baker, Jr. and Mary Elizabeth Baker (Stuart) - and one of their own, Beverly Baker (Palestides).

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Howard Baker Sr. was a lawyer who had served briefly in the Tennessee legislature before working as the attorney general for a judicial circuit that encompassed six counties. He also published the weekly *Cumberland Chronicle* in his hometown of Huntsville, Tennessee. He became a powerful figure in state Republican politics, working as a party official while establishing his own law firm.

Irene worked on her husband's unsuccessful campaigns for governor in 1938 and for U.S. Senator in 1940. When Baker won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1950, Irene worked in his Washington, D.C. office.

Congressman Baker eventually became a leading Republican power broker and served on the powerful Ways and Means Committee. In his subsequent six re-election campaigns he never faced serious opposition.

When Congressman Baker died of a sudden heart attack on January 7, 1964, the Republican leadership chose Irene Baker to run in the March 10, 1964 special election. Mrs. Baker pledged only to fill the remaining 10 months of her husband's term.

Potential Republican contenders stepped aside, and she ran an efficient campaign against her Democratic rival, Willard Yarbrough, who took an unpaid leave of absence from his post as assistant city editor of the Knoxville News-Sentinel to make the race.

Despite the Republican dominance in the Second District, Yarbrough mounted a spirited challenge. Interest intensified when an 11<sup>th</sup> hour controversy over an alleged \$100 contribution to Mr. Yarbrough's campaign from Republican Mayor John Duncan.

Yarbrough disclosed receipt of the alleged gift after Mayor Duncan became active in Mrs. Baker's campaign. The mayor's action broke a private pledge of neutrality, according to Yarbrough supporters.

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Mayor Duncan categorically denied that he had made the campaign contribution. Nevertheless, Yarbrough announced that he was sending the check back to the mayor.

Yarbrough, who conducted an arduous campaign, collapsed on the afternoon of the election. A physician said the candidate was suffering from fatigue and told him to rest. He listened to the returns at home.

Balloting in the nine counties comprising the district was extremely light in the special election. The returns showed that the total number of votes cast was 73,546 with Baker receiving 40,857 (55 per cent) and Yarbrough capturing 31,873 (43 per cent). James Potter, a third party candidate, garnered 815 votes.

Congresswoman Baker was sworn in to the 88<sup>th</sup> Congress on March 19, 1964. During her short term she served on the Committee on Government Operations. In that position she continued many of her husband's policies: advocating a balanced federal budget, protecting jobs in her district's industries of coal mining and nuclear research laboratories, and supporting TVA.

She also advocated cost of living increases for Social Security recipients and criticized the Johnson administration for risking inflation through excessive government spending.

As promised, Mrs. Baker declined to run for the office in 1964. She was succeeded by Mayor John Duncan, who served from 1965 until his death in June, 1988; he was followed by his son, John Duncan, Jr.

Returning to private life in Knoxville, Mrs. Baker served as Knoxville's director of public welfare from 1965 to 1971.

Her step-son, Howard H. Baker, Jr., continued the family political tradition. After an unsuccessful bid for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by the death of Senator Estes Kefauver, he was elected in 1966 and served in the U.S. Senate for 18 years, serving as majority leader from 1980 to 1984. He served as President Reagan's

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White House Chief of Staff and was President George W. Bush's Ambassador to Japan from 2001 to 2005.

Having outlived her four younger sisters, Irene Bailey Baker died on April 2, 1994 at age 92. She is buried beside her husband at Sherwood Memorial Gardens in Alcoa.