

## Myth #134: Dispelling Myths of State's First Native Female Lawyer by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

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Felice Cohn, Nevada's first native-born female lawyer, was a woman of many accomplishments, but she was neither a child prodigy nor a graduate of Stanford University. The mythology begins with an article in the June 9, 1905, Goldfield News, correctly acknowledging her having passed the bar in 1902 and incorrectly stating that she was a graduate of Stanford University.

Stanford University Archives confirm that while Cohn attended the university during the years 1895-96 and 1896-97, she never graduated with her class of 1899.

The 1880 Federal Census reported Felice Cohn born in Carson City in 1878, as did the 1900 census. In 1910, however, her age was given as 28, making her birth year 1882.

A *Ladies' Home Journal* article (September 1928) emphasized her youthful successes, including having passed the bar in 1902 at the age of 18. Had this been true, it would have placed her birth date in 1884, six years after the fact.

The 1930 U.S. Federal Census indicated Felice's age as 45. Depending on the date the census was taken, she could have had a supposed birth year of 1884 or 1885. Cohn was living alone in Reno at the time and likely was the person who provided the census enumerator with her age.

The incorrect birth date appeared in a *Nevada State Journal* feature story on March 2, 1930, then found its way into her obituary in 1961, and into numerous subsequent biographical sketches.

As recently as March 26, 2008, the *Reno-Gazette Journal* carried an article repeating the saga of Cohn's alleged exploits as a teacher at the age of 11, a Stanford graduate at 15 and as Nevada's youngest lawyer at the age of 18.

The same piece reiterated the widely believed report that she was appointed Assistant U.S. Attorney for Nevada in 1906. The facts are that after passing the bar in 1902, she worked as a court reporter and shared a Carson City office with Samuel Platt.

He was appointed U.S. Attorney for Nevada in 1906 by President Theodore Roosevelt. Felice Cohn might have served as an assistant to him in his capacity as U.S. Attorney, but there is, as yet, no evidence that she had a federal appointment to this office.

By then, rather, she actively was involved with land and mining legal matters in Goldfield.

Cohn gained a western regional reputation as an expert in land law policy and for several years had an office in Denver.

Cohn is correctly remembered as a Nevada women's suffrage proponent. She disaffiliated herself from Ann Martin's Nevada Equal Franchise Society in 1913 and became a leader in the non-militant suffrage movement. Her understanding of the law and Nevada politics allowed her to craft the women's suffrage resolution first passed in 1911, which became the language of the 1914 amendment to the Nevada Constitution granting women the right to vote and hold office.

In 1916, she was admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. Cohn ran unsuccessfully on the Democratic ticket for State Assembly in 1924 and in the same year was appointed U.S. Referee for Bankruptcy for the State of Nevada.

She worked for child labor law amendments and opposed any legislation adversely affecting women and children. She served as trustee and lawyer for the Reno YWCA, vice-president of the American Bar



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Association for Nevada (1930-31) and for ten years she headed the Nevada branch of the National Association of Women Lawyers. Although she was unaffiliated with Temple Emanu-El, the B'nai B'rith Women's Grand Lodge certified Cohn as president of the B'nai B'rith Nevada Auxiliary #9 on March 2, 1941.

Cohn ran unsuccessfully for Washoe County District Judge in 1942, 1950 and 1952 but her resume encompassed an extraordinary list of distinguished public services. The facts of her remarkable career do not need the oft-repeated exaggerated claims of her youth, education or subsequent positions.

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Photo of Felice Cohn courtesy of the Nevada State Museum.

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