

In reading the Winter 2005 issue of *Central Nevada's Glorious Past*, I was struck by the statement that popular, long-time public educator Rita Agnes Cannan was "the first women principal in Nevada." The short biography in the Central Nevada Historical Society publication noted that Cannan had moved from Goldfield to Reno in 1930 and taught at Mary S. Doten elementary school. The following year she was appointed the school's principal and held the position for twenty-seven years.

While I didn't know who the first female principal in a Nevada public school was, I did know that it wasn't Rita Cannan. Education was one of the few occupations that allowed women to become administrators at the turn of the 20th century. For example, Maude Frazier, a long-time state legislator and Nevada's first female lieutenant governor in 1962, was an elementary school principal in Goldfield in 1918, then became the Sparks High School principal, and in 1921 became the Nevada deputy superintendent of the fifth supervision district.

Rita Cannan, in fact, replaced a female principal, Miss Opal Martyn, at the Doten school in 1931. A check of school records found at least ten female principals in Washoe County in that year. Cannan surely would have known that she was not the first female public school principal in Nevada.

Trying to find the first female principal in Nevada would be a monumental task because of the paucity of public school records for early Nevada. We know that Hannah Keziah Clapp was the principal of the private Sierra Seminary in Carson City beginning in the 1860s. The *Educational Directory* for 1901 first lists public school principals in Nevada and there were at least seven female principals.

Among the first female public school principals in Washoe County was Libbie Conover Booth. After arriving in Reno from her native Hollister, California, in 1888 to teach school, she served as principal of the Southside School when it first opened in 1904. Libbie's marrying George Booth in 1900 did not prevent her from being an educator, although her husband died in 1907. After construction of Orvis Ring School in 1910--one of the Spanish Quartet elementary schools that included Mary S. Doten in Reno--she became the principal. Booth held that position until retirement in 1935, not long after Rita Cannan was appointed principal at Mary S. Doten.



According to her obituary, Libbie C. Booth, age ninety-five, died in San Jose in 1948, where she had been living for the past four years. In 1955, the Washoe County school district opened the Libby Booth elementary school at 1450 Stewart Street. Mrs. Booth had been remembered by her community and colleagues in the school district, but the spelling of her first name had been forgotten. The confusion apparently started after her retirement and prior to her leaving Reno. A caricature in Lew Hymers's *Seen about Town* (1944) even spelled Libbie's name as Libby.

In the end, the claim that Rita Cannan was Nevada's first female principal and the misspelled Libby Booth elementary school is a reminder that memory betrays us all.

Photo credit: Caricature of Libbie Booth from the Lew Hymers' book *Seen about Town: a Series of Cartoons and Caricatures That Have Appeared in the Reno Evening Gazette Over a Period of Five Years*, published in 1944. NSLA made every effort to contact the copyright holder of this image. If you feel that you hold the rights to this image please contact us.

The Historical Myths of the Month are published in the *Reno Gazette-Journal* and the *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley.