

Myth #72: Stepping Up to the Bar: Female Attorneys in Nevada by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Prior to 1970 few female attorneys practiced law in Nevada. In fact, so few that the handful of practicing women lawyers after World War II claimed they were among the very first. Not surprisingly, the legacy of their pioneer sisters has virtually been lost with the passage of time and it was presumed that the history of women practicing law in the Silver State essentially started after World War II.

Actually twenty-four women were admitted to practice law in Nevada prior to 1941. After the 1893 legislature changed the statute to allow females to practice, the first woman, Laura May Tilden, passed the bar exam on July 23, 1893 at the age of 22. She was the daughter of Virginia City attorney Marcellus C. Tilden, probably studied for the law in his office, and, according to the *Carson Morning Appeal*, was the person responsible for the passage of the bill allowing women to practice law in Nevada. Miss Tilden and her father opened a law firm in Sacramento in 1894. Following her father's death, Laura married Fred Ray in 1898. She moved to Colorado after Fred's death where she was admitted to practice law on September 4, 1901. Laura Tilden Ray was one of the few women attorneys in Denver. She married Walter Curtis Wilson, retired from her law practice sometime after 1914, and, by 1920, the Wilsons had moved to Montrose, Colorado. Laura died from injuries sustained in an auto accident near her home on May 31, 1928 and was buried in the family plot in Sacramento.



On April 4, 1898, Gertrude Grace Grey, was the second woman admitted by the Nevada Supreme Court to practice law. She was admitted to practice in the federal courts on January 8, 1900. Attorney Oscar H. Grey, a former state legislator and Secretary of State from 1891 to 1895 was her husband. It is not known if she actually practiced law in Nevada. She lived in Washington, D.C. and Salt Lake City before dying in Carson City on January 23, 1925. Mrs. Grey's obituary in the *Daily Appeal* erroneously claimed "she was the first woman attorney admitted to practice law in Nevada."

The first woman known to practice law in Nevada was Georgia J. Johnson. Born in Inyo County, California, she moved to Carson City as a young woman and for six years worked for federal district court judge Thomas P. Hawley. Encouraged to study the law by Judge Hawley, Miss Johnson was admitted to practice in Nevada on July 30, 1898 and in the federal courts two days later. Prior to moving to Utah in 1902, marrying there, and opening a practice, she was counsel in a number of Nevada cases including the Paiute war claims. Georgia Johnson Dooley died in Pasadena, California, on September 14, 1953.

Anna Mudd Warren, admitted to the Nevada Bar on July 29, 1899, ranks fourth among female attorneys. Warren worked as a court reporter and served as the United States Commissioner for Nevada from 1913 until her death on July 31, 1944. A feature story in the Nevada State Journal headlined "Outstanding Woman Lawyer Dies In Reno" noted that Mrs. Warren had been a member of the Washoe County Bar, Nevada Bar, and the American Bar Association. The article wrongly claimed she was "the second woman to be admitted" to the state bar.

The fifth woman admitted to the Nevada Bar was the first native-born woman admitted to practice law. Born in Carson City in 1878, Felice Cohn was the granddaughter of Rabbi Jacob Sheyer. Miss Cohn pursued course work at Nevada State University in Reno and Stanford University before graduating from Nevada Business College in 1899. She reportedly attended George Washington Law School in Washington, D.C. On June 17, 1902, shortly after her twenty-fourth birthday, she was admitted to practice law in Nevada. She worked as an assistant to the U.S. Attorney for Nevada from 1906 to 1914. Miss Cohn also held the positions of Ormsby County district court reporter, a referee in bankruptcy proceedings, and a U.S. hearings attorney for the General Land Office. By 1924 she had a private practice in Reno, where she died on May 24, 1961.

Bird May Wilson, admitted to the Nevada Bar on June 28, 1906, was a Goldfield attorney and stockbroker active in the women's suffrage movement before returning to California. Miss Wilson wrote a compelling

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pamphlet, "Women Under Nevada Law," directed at male voters that helped women win the right to vote in Nevada in 1914. She died on January 27, 1946 in Alameda County, California.

Edna Howard Covert, admitted to the State Bar on September 4, 1912, opened a practice in Eureka, married, and was appointed Eureka County District Attorney in 1918. Edna Plummer, the state's first female district attorney, ran for the office but was not elected. Mrs. Plummer moved to Los Angeles to practice law where she died on May 25, 1972.

Ruth Averill, a school teacher in Tonopah and daughter of District Judge Mark R. Averill, passed the bar exam on April 5, 1920. The Virginia City native was elected to the State Assembly in 1921 and appointed to the Committee on Education. Miss Averill, born in 1897, became the second woman and the first female attorney to serve in the state legislature. She married Jay Edwin Logan in 1922, moved to Oregon, and later California, where a daughter, Ruthella was born. Ruth suffered from a mental illness and was last known to be alive in 1941, apparently living in Nevada.

Prior to World War II, there were also a number of husbands and wives who worked as attorneys. Fannie McKay Waggoner, admitted to the bar on July 6, 1920, practiced law with her husband Robert in Yerington. Alfreda Moss Noland, who passed the bar exam on September 29, 1930, partnered with her husband in Las Vegas, and later in Los Angeles, where she died on September 17, 1946. Sallie Ruperti Springmeyer, admitted to practice on October 2, 1936 after attending the University of Southern California Law School, occasionally assisted her husband George Springmeyer, the former U.S. Attorney for Nevada, in Reno. Much of the time she used her legal training to advance public service goals, mostly on children's issues. Mrs. Springmeyer died on December 23, 2007 at the age of 104.

Hester Mayotte, admitted to the bar on January 3, 1927, has the distinction of being the first female attorney to be a member of a law firm, Hawkins, Mayotte & Hawkins. Tragically, her career was cut short when she died in auto accident near Colfax, California on October 18, 1931. The front page, headline story in the *Nevada State Journal*, "Reno Woman Attorney Killed in Crash," referred to her as a prominent attorney who attended the University of Nevada. Miss Mayotte joined the law firm as a full partner in September 1929.

The last woman admitted to the Nevada Bar prior to World War II was Margaret E. Baily on October 29, 1938. She began her law practice in Los Angeles in 1923 and moved to Reno in 1934 where she was married. Mrs. Baily was admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme in 1963. She died in Reno on February 16, 1968.

Lest we forget those who came before us and deny their rightful place in history.

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