

**Myth #136: Who was the First Woman Elected to the Nevada Board of Regents? by Guy Rocha,
Former Nevada State Archivist**

Molly Magee Knudtsen (1915-2001) had a long and distinguished tenure on the Nevada Board of Regents. A recent biographical sketch proclaimed that "Knudtsen became the first women elected to the Nevada Board of Regents, serving for twenty years (1960-80) and helping to establish community colleges, the University of Nevada Press, and the Department of Anthropology at UNR."



All of that is true of her legacy and more, except for two things. Knudtsen was not the first women elected to the Board of Regents, she was the fourth. While numerous secondary sources make the erroneous claim, three women were elected, and two appointed, to the board before Knudtsen won her race in 1960. In addition, Knudtsen served as a Regent for eighteen years, not twenty, between 1960 and 1980 with a break in service.

The first woman to win a state-wide race after Nevada's male electorate gave women the right to vote and hold office in 1914 was Mrs. Edna Catlin Baker, a Republican, elected in November 1916 to a two-year term on the Board of Regents. A native of Carson City, Baker graduated from the University of Nevada in 1895. Earlier in 1916 she had been elected to the Sparks Board of School Trustees and made its president, thus holding local and state offices at the same time.

Regent Baker voted in the majority for the removal of University of Nevada President Archer W. Hendrick shortly after her taking office in 1917 and she supported the appointment of Walter E. Clark--father of renowned author Walter Van Tilburg Clark--as President later that year. Baker also served as chair of the board's finance committee. However she chose not to run for reelection. An excellent biographical article written by Dana Bennett and entitled "Leading the Charge: Edna Baker Helped Set Nevada's Course," was published in the March/April 1997 issue of UNR's *Silver and Blue*.

Mrs. Eunice Esther Hood of Reno was elected to an eight-year term of the Board of Regents in 1918. The previous year the state legislature had made the regent post non-partisan. When Regent Miles North resigned in 1923, Governor James Scrugham appointed Mrs. Sophie E. Williams of remote Hot Creek in Nye County to the board. Now two women served on the five-member body until 1926. Mrs. Hood did not run for reelection when her term expired and Mrs. Williams died in 1927.

When Molly Flagg Gibb came to Sparks from New York City to train race horses in 1940, Anne Wardin was sitting on the Board of Regents. Mrs. Anne Wardin of Reno, like Edna Baker an 1895 graduate of the University of Nevada, was elected a regent in 1938; she was the third woman elected to the board. Wardin died in 1944 and Governor "Ted" Carville appointed Mary Henningsen to the remainder of the ten-year term.

Surely Molly Magee, who had divorced Robert Pinkerton Gibb in Reno in 1941 and married Grass Valley rancher Richard "Dick" Magee the following year, knew that Mrs. Wardin and her successor Mary Henningsen of Gardnerville were Nevada regents.

An article in the June 22, 1960 issue of Reno's *Nevada State Journal* entitled "Housewife Files For Regent Post," accompanied by a photograph of Molly Magee captioned "Lander County housewife," noted the five female regents who had served before her run for office. The story also pointed out the 1957 legislature had expanded the size of the Board of Regents to nine and provided for election by district.

Magee handily beat her male incumbent opponent for the District No. 3 seat representing Nevada's fifteen rural counties. The margin of victory was larger than all the other races for board district seats in 1960. She went on to serve eighteen years as a regent, 1960-72 and 1974-80, serving two terms as vice-chair.

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UNR History Professor *Emeritus* Jim Hulse paid Molly Magee Knudtsen--who divorced Dick Magee in 1968 and married William C. Knudtsen--high praise when he described her in his university history published in 1974 as "one of the most articulate and best informed persons to function as a regent in recent years."

Photograph of Molly Magee Knudtsen (UNRA-P1791-1) courtesy of University Archives, University of Nevada, Reno.

The Historical Myths of the Month are published in the Reno *Gazette-Journal*; the *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley; *Humboldt Sun*; *Battle Mountain Bugle*; *Lovelock Review-Miner*, and *Nevada Observer* (online version).