



This was Nevada Series

Mary Ellen Glass

First Woman Elected in Nevada: The Election of 1916

In 1913, for the first time, the Nevada Legislature passed for voter approval a constitutional amendment giving women the right of suffrage. This followed passage of the amendment through the 1911 legislative session, and some stormy controversies over whether women were either fit to vote or might be degraded by exercising the franchise. Many people believed that women were naturally inferior both in intellect and physical makeup and should therefore be denied full citizenship. Others argued that women's entry into "dirty" politics would sully their natural virtue and general superiority. Suffrage advocates disagreed with both positions. Either way, the struggle became heated through the legislative sessions and some earlier ones that failed to pass the necessary resolutions.

In 1914, the voters (all men) yielded to pressure from local and national groups and passed the constitutional amendment for female suffrage. This opened the way for women who wished to do so not only to vote, but also to run for office. Their first opportunity came in 1916.

Mrs. Edna Nevada Catlin Baker came to the voters in the general election that year as a Republican candidate for regent of the state university. Nominated first from her Sparks precinct in Washoe County, and then by the state Republican convention, Baker was one of only two women to appear on the statewide ballot. Baker was a native of Carson City, where she was born in 1876. She attended Carson City schools and graduated in 1895 from the University of Nevada Normal School, later the College of Education. She became a teacher and followed that career. Edna Baker thus brought good qualifications to her race for the Board of Regents. The board in those days was elected on a partisan basis, on a statewide ballot, and with both two and four-year terms being open. Baker did very well in her contest. In a race against a well-known Democrat, I.H. Kent of Fallon, and the Socialist candidate J.F. McQuestion, she polled a plurality of 1,106 in gathering 13,425 votes to Kent's 12,319 and McQuestion's 4,654. Only one other woman appeared on the statewide ballot for office (some were named as presidential electors) Lucy Parker, a Socialist, also ran for the Board of Regents for a long-term post was defeated, running fifth in a field of six. Edna Baker thus became a historic figure in Nevada: the first woman to be elected on a partisan, statewide ballot.

Baker served only one two-year term. She decided that the four-times-a-year meetings took too much of her time and did not run again for the board of Regents. She did, however, become a member of the Sparks School Board, where she served some years. She died in 1957.

The other women won election in local contests that first year of female suffrage in Nevada, one in the southeastern section of the state, the other in southwestern Nevada. Each later claimed to be the "first woman elected in Nevada" and each might have been right in the claim.

Jennie Wadsworth was born in 1880 at Panaca, Nevada, the oldest child in what would become a family of ten. She attended school in Panaca and enjoyed education. Although there was no high school in Lincoln County at that time, she attended the eighth grade twice. Later, she attended Brigham Young

Academy in Provo, Utah, studying music and hoping to become a singer. Jennie Wadsworth married a musician, Franklin Wilcox, and had two children before she was widowed. She supported herself and the children by cooking in cafes in Caliente and Pioche, and later opened a confectionary shop.

Her public Career really began with a job in the office of the Lincoln County Auditor and Recorder, where she worked for eight years. She worked for two more years in the office of the Clerk and Treasurer. Then came the election of 1916, and Mrs. Wilcox filed as a Democrat for the position of Auditor and Recorder. In a race that presented a “first” for Lincoln County, as the only woman on the local ballot, Jennie Wilcox was elected by the largest majority of any of the successful candidates. Her other first came in a peculiar way: realizing that this might be a history-making occasion, and also knowing that Lincoln County was – unlike most of the rest of Nevada – on mountain time, the election board rushed the county of the ballots in the sparsely-populated county, and declared Jennie Wilcox “the first woman elected to office in the state of Nevada,” probably before the polls were closed in the rest of the state.

Jennie Wilcox served in the office only a short time; she married County Clerk Charles Culverwell and retired from all civic affairs and church activities. Jennie Culverwell died in Lincoln County in 1956.

Lastly, Rita Millar’s supporters were unaware that any other woman could spoil their claims that Millar was the “first woman elected in the state of Nevada,” and continued to declare her title until the time of her death.

Rita McCarthy was born to a pioneer Nevada family in 1884. Her father, A. J. McCarthy became the owner of Hawthorne’s Walker Lake Bulletin while she was still an infant. Rita McCarthy attended school in Hawthorne and then in Chicago, where she met and married James Millar. She returned to Hawthorne after her husband died, leaving her with three small children. In Hawthorne, Rita Millar worked at the Bulletin, ran a newsstand, made a little money singing at wedding and funerals, and drew a small county “mothers’ pension.” Then came the election of 1916.

Rita Millar decided to make politics her career. She filed for the office of Mineral County Auditor and Recorder as a Democrat and won easily over a woman opponent. The sparsely populated county allowed a fast count of ballots, and Mrs. Millar’s supporters declared her “the first woman elected to office in Nevada.” If Mineral County had been in a different time zone, they might have been correct.

Despite the dubious claim to “first-ness,” Rita Millar served three successful terms as Auditor and Recorder of Mineral County before she was elected to the State Legislature in 1922. She served one term in the Legislature, and then abandoned her political career. Millar worked with her brother who had become editor of the Yerington Times. Later, when her brother was State Printer, she served as deputy State Treasurer. In 1953, when she died, the governor ordered flags at the capital at half- staff for Rita Millar’s funeral.

So ended the public careers of the three women of the election of 1916. Each made a special contribution, and each in her own way, provided a “first” in Nevada political history.

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