

A Brief History of Women Elected Officials in the Texas Panhandle

The Louise Daniel Women's History Luncheon highlights the contributions of women in Amarillo and the Texas Panhandle. This year we recognize women who have served in local elected offices, celebrating such firsts as **Myrtie L. Darly**, Treasurer, Ochiltree County (1889); **Mrs. Mary L. Tudor**, County Treasurer, Potter County (1912); **Mrs. Mattie Biddle**, Treasurer, Castro County (1912); **Flossie W. Ingram**, District/County Clerk, Oldham County (1912); **Dollie M. Ray**, Justice of the Peace, Lipscomb County (1928); **Oma Bryan**, County Tax Assessor Collector, Hutchinson County, (1935) and **Mrs. C.E. "Fannie" Pipes** who served out her husband's term as the state's first female sheriff, Gray County (1934-35). Since 1889, more than eight hundred women have served in local elected office in the Panhandle. Other significant elections include the first female Mayor of Amarillo, the largest city in the Texas Panhandle, **Debra McCartt**, who was elected in 2004, and the first female elected Potter County Judge, the second largest county in the Texas Panhandle, **Nancy Tanner**, who was elected this year.

The question of women's public service in elected office in Texas was inextricably linked to the question of suffrage. Texas suffragists, led by **Minnie Fisher Cunningham**, organized, spoke out, marched and lobbied for the right to vote in the WW I period. Unlike women in many Western states, Texas women did not win the right to vote at all until 1918, then, they could vote only in state political primaries and state party conventions. Panhandle women served in more than a dozen elected offices before Texas ratified the **19th Amendment** in 1919.

The Texas Panhandle is also distinguished by having **Mary Lou Robinson** become the first female in Texas elected to serve on a Ct. of Appeals, the 7th located in Amarillo, and later become the first female Chief Justice of a Ct. of Appeals in 1978! She was first elected as a Potter County Court-at-Law Judge in 1956, and then elected as a Potter County District Judge in 1960, before being elected to the 7th Ct. of Appeals in 1974. **Judge Mary Lou Robinson** was the 2nd female federal judge in Texas! She was appointed for the Northern District, Amarillo Division, by **President Jimmy Carter** in 1979, she was sworn in by the 1st Texas female federal judge, **Sarah T. Hughes**.

Texas women were not given the right to serve on juries until 1954. ***The Marital Property Act of 1967***, championed by Texas attorney **Louise Raggio**, granted Texas married women equal rights in insurance, banking, real estate, contracts, divorce, child custody and property rights. It was the first such comprehensive family law in the U.S.

In the sparsely populated West, where every person had to lend a hand for society to function, Texas women were vital to their communities and their state, taking on roles their Eastern sisters had fewer opportunities to fill. We celebrate the first Texas Panhandle women who served in elective positions, and the modern Texas Panhandle women who carry on their commitment.

Note: The list of local elected officials provided marks the beginning of a longer research project. The committee would like to thank **Sidney Patterson Steinle** and the reference staff at the **Amarillo Public Library** for their assistance in compiling this list. **Carol Autry**, **Susan Coleman** and **Lou Ann Garrett** were all instrumental in the research. The committee also thanks archivist **Warren Stricker** and the **Panhandle Plains Historical Museum** for agreeing to house the documents and research collected for the **Louise Daniel Women's History Luncheon and Lecture**. The list provided is a working document. Please send any additions or corrections to **Dr. Elizabeth Clark** at eclark@wtamu.edu.

Further Reading:

Jones, Nancy Baker. *Capitol Women: Texas Female Legislators 1923-1999*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000.

McAfee, Alice G. "The All-Woman Texas Supreme Court: The History Behind a Brief Moment on the Bench," *St. Mary's Law Journal*. 2008: 39, pp. 467-[497].

Stuntz, Jean A. *HERS, His & Theirs: Community Property Law in Spain and Early Texas*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2005.

Taylor, A. Elizabeth Ruthe Winegarten, and Judith N. McArthur. *Citizens at Last: The Woman Suffrage Movement in Texas*. Austin, TX: Ellen C. Temple, 1987.

Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide. Dallas Morning News, 1925.