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Oral History Highlights

NEVA ELLIOTT RECALLS HER PIONEERING DAYS

From time to time, we will use these pages to cover highlights of the oral histories that are being gathered by historical society volunteers. The following article is based on an oral history of Portland attorney Neva Elliott, who was interviewed by Diane Rymerson, executive director of Oregon Women Lawyers and a member of Queen's Bench. Ms. Rymerson and several other Queen's Bench members have attended our society's oral history training sessions and are concentrating on collecting the reminiscences of women practitioners.



Neva Elliott became accustomed to being the only woman in various legal settings. For some 30 years she was a municipal court pro tem judge.

Maybe it was inevitable that Portland attorney Neva Elliott would be a pioneer in the Oregon courts. When she carved a niche among the few women attorneys and judges, she was following in the footsteps of two sets of ancestors who had been Oregon pioneers in the mid-nineteenth century.

On her mother's side of the family, Neva's great-grandfather, Christian Bonah, took the Sante Fe Trail to Sacramento, where he built the city's first house. When wanderlust again struck, he moved to Oregon and filed a donation land claim near Boring. On her father's side of the family, Neva is descended from an Oregon Trail pioneer who settled in Damascus.

Neva remembers her father as a man who "made all the decisions in the community" and "self-elected himself to all offices." Neva recalls that her entire childhood was spent showing her father that she was able to do anything a boy could do. "He wanted a son so bad that he imported two from the reform school in Salem," she recalls, adding that

they stole so much out of the store...he had to send them back. At last he was resigned to the fact that he was going to be stricken with four daughters the rest of his life. But he lived long enough to see me in law school, which satisfied me a great deal because I never felt that he was quite convinced that a woman was up to snuff.

Neva, however, began to demonstrate that she was "up to snuff" at an early age. In grade school she won county-wide spelling bees and in high school (spent at Jefferson in Portland), she earned top grades, edited the school *Spectrum*, and excelled in drama, debate, and public speaking.

After graduation she entered Reed College, where she concentrated on literature, English history, and drama. She recalls that she "appeared in every production that they had," often directed by fellow student James Beard. That training—and her high school public appearances—prepared Neva for a career in the public eye and helped her argue cases persuasively.

Law School During the Depression

In 1927, after Neva's freshman and sophomore years at Reed, the Elliott family ran out of money and Neva had to go to work. She learned stenotyping and became secretary to Charles Spackman, Jr., who ran the law school, and that—she recalls—"was the beginning of my law career." Mr. Spackman understood that she wanted to go to school, so he let her work days as a legal secretary and go to law school at night.

The law school (the Northwestern School of Law) was located in the Sherlock Building and, as was true of so many Depression-era enterprises, was in dire straits financially. It was operated by Mr. Spackman and Judge Hendrickson, a district court judge who had taken over the leadership after Judge Gantenbein died. Neva remembers that the school had no assets and was in danger of going out of business. However, Spackman and Hendrickson thought it was worth saving and hired practicing attorneys and judges to teach. "Our faculty," says Neva,

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President's Message by Katherine O'Neil



Katherine O'Neil

Spring in Oregon. President Clinton and Vice President Gore were early spring arrivals, looking distinctly uncomfortable jogging in the ice water that passes for spring showers in the Willamette Valley. Jeff Rogers, a member of our historical society, hit his pace in Zen-like concentration jogging alongside the power duo. Maybe it was his rain gear that helped Jeff look more at peace with the world.

Jeff, who is Portland city attorney, attended Yale Law School with Bill Clinton and Hilary Rodham Clinton, as did Justice Susan Graber and Kristine Olson Rogers (historical society members who were on hand to greet the President when he arrived). Professor Rogers, Judge Graber, and Ms. Clinton were also in the same class at Wellesley College. Christine Olson Rogers is a professor at Lewis & Clark Law School and a nationally recognized expert in the law and culture of Native Americans. Justice Graber, of course, is a member of the Oregon Supreme Court. She also serves on our society's board. I must say I'm proud that our society was so well represented in the welcoming party when the President came to town!



The greenest green in this Oregon spring is the jacket of our beautiful court history, *The First Duty*. Superintendent of Public Instruction Norma Paulus and I co-signed a letter to all Oregon high school librarians and social studies teachers, telling them about the book and its value to our young people. Kathryn Murdock, the education department's legal counsel, arranged for the department to deliver 500 free books to the state's network of educational service districts, where they would be available to interested teachers and to school media centers (libraries). Special thanks to Book Committee member Al Bannon, who made the initial contact with the department. We've had very positive responses from the schools, which have already requested more copies. In all, 1,000 books are set aside for free distribution.



George Fraser, our president elect, is looking ahead to his term, which starts after the annual meeting in November. Among his projects is completion of our court history project—which involves assembling a team of authors, lawyers, and judges to visit Oregon's secondary schools and discuss the history of the district court.



Kudos to Joyce Hyne and Jim Westwood, who provided training in oral history methods to over 20 of our members this spring. Our archive of oral histories continues to grow, thanks to many hours of volunteer time by our members.



This summer, we'll hold our first-ever picnic for society members and their guests on the grounds of the Bybee-Howell House on Sauvie Island. The date is Sunday, August 29; the time, 1 to 6 p.m. This will be a family event, with a barbecue in mid-afternoon. So come and enjoy good food and good company!

I'll be whale watching from a sea kayak the week before the picnic, so I could use some picnic committee members who'll be in the state and able to handle last-minute details. If you can help, please call me at 222-4545. Also, I'm asking the authors of *The First Duty* to join us, so bring your copies and have them and autographed.

Neva Elliott continued

"read like a list of the circuit judges and the federal judges and the top lawyers in town."

Tuition at the time was \$110, and classes were held three nights a week. It was Neva's job to "see to it that the professors got there on time and to take in money, if there were any, and [handle] any other administrative activities." She'd lock the office long enough to attend classes and open up again between periods. In her class were 80 or 90 men and six women, including Esther Weinstein and Nadine Burke. It was there, too, that she met her husband-to-be, Neil Chinnock.

"The biggest thing I remember," says Neva, "was the wonderful attitude they had about getting people an education as best they could and not haunting them for money." Mr. Spackman said that he would never sue a student. When Neva graduated in 1935, she says, we had a bundle of promissory notes that was 12 inches thick, ...and those notes were signed by some of the most prominent lawyers in Portland. That was the way, at that time, a lot of people got their education.

Neva remembers vividly taking the bar exam in 1935 and finding that Wayne Morse (then law school dean, despite the fact he had never passed the bar) would be admitted on motion without having to suffer through the examination in 100° heat. Neva recalls that "we never forgave Wayne Morse from that time on."

Learning on the Job

Neva found that her newly won degree overqualified her for a job with her employer, Mr. Spackman, who wanted a secretary not a lawyer.

"I was brokenhearted," she recalls, "but he did fuss around and, at last, sent me up to the Bankruptcy Court to meet Estes Snedecor, who was the referee in bankruptcy."

Snedecor hired her immediately and let her function as the "ex officio referee without portfolio." At his office, she became acquainted with Judge James Alger Fee, who was a great friend and golfing partner of Snedecor's. Neva remembers Judge Fee as a man who terrified lawyers in court and was "a pussycat" off the bench.

