

IOWA HISTORY



(Courtesy Library of Congress)

Iowan Becomes Highest Paid Woman in Government

Clinton, Iowa, in the 1870s was home to plenty of “rough freedom-loving frontiersmen” who worked in the numerous lumber rafting and milling establishments that lined the riverfront. It was a relatively new city with a population of a little over 6,000 and businesses of all kinds were booming.

With all those thirsty lumber men the saloons in the city were flourishing. Iowa law allowed the sale of ale, wine and beer. However, it prohibited sale to “minors, intoxicated persons, or persons in the habit of becoming intoxicated.” And Clinton’s saloon owners were notorious for breaking the law. The city’s saloonkeepers became the target of one of Iowa’s most prominent activists against the evils of alcohol.

In 1869 J. Ellen Foster moved to Clinton from New England. She had met and married EC Foster, a lawyer who practiced in Clinton. Working in her husband’s firm she began to learn law and was soon practicing alongside her husband. In 1874 when Ellen was admitted to the bar she became one of the first women to practice law in the state and in the nation. (Fellow Iowan, Belle Mansfield, may have been the first female lawyer when she was admitted to the bar in 1869.) By 1875 Ellen became one of the first female lawyers admitted to present cases to the Iowa Supreme Court.

Ellen had worked among the “unfortunates” as a young woman in Massachusetts and continued to aid poor families in Clinton when she moved there. As she worked among the disadvantaged she often saw the hardships caused by alcohol. When she became a lawyer she prosecuted saloonkeepers who violated the law. She became active in the Ladies’ Temperance Aid Society of Clinton visiting saloons trying to persuade drinkers to reform and saloon owners to close their shops. She paid a high price when an arson burned her home and all its contents in the fall of 1874.

In the mid-1870s Ellen became well-known throughout the state as a gifted speaker on the topic of temperance. When the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was formed in Cedar Rapids, Ellen joined and was elected to represent Iowa at the national conference in Cleveland, Ohio. She started WCTU chapters all over Iowa.

When the Iowa Republican Party took on the cause of Prohibition Ellen became an active member. In 1882 she worked to persuade the legislature to pass a Prohibition amendment.

In the 1880s Ellen and her husband moved to Washington, DC, where Mr. Foster worked in the Justice Department. During this time, Ellen continued to be active in the Republican Party at a national level. She made hundreds of speeches all across the United States for Republican candidates. She helped form thousands of Republican women’s clubs.

At a time when women couldn’t vote, Ellen said, “The country needs the political work of women today as much as it has ever needed women in any other work at any other time.”

In Washington Ellen soon caught the attention of some of the nation’s most powerful politicians—including presidents. During the Spanish-American War in 1898 President William McKinley appointed her to inspect sanitation in military barracks and to make recommendations for improvements. And in 1900 he asked her to travel to the Philippines to study the conditions of women and children.

In 1902 President Theodore Roosevelt asked Ellen to represent the United States at the International Red Cross conference in Russia. And in 1906 she was asked by President Roosevelt to inspect working conditions of women and children across the United States. She brought groups of women to Washington to testify before Congress about their wages and living conditions. One news report boasted that President Roosevelt had “the fullest confidence in her ability as an investigator and statistician.” By 1908 when Roosevelt named Ellen a special agent of the Department of Justice to investigate conditions for female prisoners at federal prisons across the country she was earning an annual salary of \$2000—thought to be the highest salary of any woman in government.

“Millions of women are wage earners. They and their dependents must be fed and clothed, and trained for life’s duties in society, which are governed by law. Those who are responsible should have a voice in making law,” Ellen said.

Not surprisingly, Ellen became an advocate for women’s right to vote. And she was a champion for equal pay for women.

Sources

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