



NEVADA

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

This was Nevada Series

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Clara Dunham Crowell: Nevada's First Lady Sheriff

Although the involvement of women in law enforcement is becoming increasingly common today, this was not the case a half-century ago when Clara Dunham Crowell became Sheriff of Lander County, the first woman in the state to hold such a position. The daughter of a pioneer Austin family, she was educated in the local schools and worked as a waitress before marrying George D. Crowell, a rancher who later ran a stage-line before being elected Sheriff.

George Crowell was re-elected in November of 1918, but he fell ill with bronchitis and heart trouble two months later. On January 11, 1919, he went to Oakland, California for medical treatment, but failed to respond and he died six weeks later, February 24.

Most of the citizens of Austin assumed that Deputy Thomas White would take over until the next election, but among the applicants for the position was the recently-widowed Clara, forty-three years of age at that time. Since she had a small daughter and was entirely without a means of making a living, the people of Austin circulated a petition asking the Lander County Commissioners to name her to the job. When the Commissioners met on March 7, they found that the other applicants had withdrawn, so Mrs. Crowell was appointed.

Several bondsmen came forward a few minutes later and many men notified the new Sheriff that they would be willing to do anything they could to assist her in her duties. According to one account, Mrs. Crowell was told that she would be Sheriff "in name only," but she replied that she intended to be Sheriff "in fact" and indeed she was.

Over the next year and a half, she broke up fights in saloons, took in bootleggers, apprehended an Austin merchant who had been selling liquor to the Indians and traveled to Battle Mountain to assist Deputy Jack Phelps in his duties. When Phelps was wounded in taking a bootlegger into custody in June of 1920, she aided the Nevada State Police in the capture of his assailant and saw to the appointment of Jack Madison

as Phelps' temporary replacement. She also investigated an outbreak of dog poisoning in Austin, gathered evidence for the prosecution of a burglar and conducted a Sheriff's Sale of the assets of a defunct mining company.

Mrs. Crowell also dealt with some dissension in her own office and she removed Deputy White in November of 1919 and replaced him with Don Maestretti. Her bondsmen also withdrew at that time, but she secured new ones. In July of 1920, George Lowney joined her as an additional deputy and he filed for her office in August.

Other filing were John H. Spencer of Austin and Joseph A. Parker of Battle Mountain, but Mrs. Crowell did not seek the office. The stresses of the office had taken their toll and she went to San Francisco for treatment of a "nervous condition" in August.

The primary election was held on September 5 and the voters chose Lowney to run against Parker and Spencer, both independent candidates, in the general election. Mrs. Crowell took no part in the campaign and Parker was elected in November.

The new county officers were not due to take office officially until January 5, 1921, but Parker worked with the ailing lady sheriff without pay until that time. On January 4, the day before she was to leave office, the County Commissioners granted her a pension of \$25 a month. They also appointed ex-deputy White to the position of courthouse janitor and named W.C. Collins to replace Deputy Maestretti. The next day, Mrs. Crowell handed over her badge and handcuffs to Parker and retired from office.

Clara Dunham Crowell later went into nursing and was the matron of the Lander County Hospital in Austin for many years. She retired and moved to Reno in 1940 to live with a sister. On June 20, 1942, she died in a Reno hospital at the age of sixty-six. Services for her were held in Austin two days later and she was buried in the local cemetery next to her husband and a son who had died as an infant many years earlier.

Nevada Historical Society

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