

## **Effie Henderson (1859-1938)**

Effie Henderson was born on October 29, 1859 in Towanda, Illinois. Her parents, Franklin and Sarah Metcalf Henderson, strongly influenced her later decision to become a lawyer—Franklin by his involvement in politics and pursuit of justice, and Sarah for her loving attention and encouragement. Effie was one of seven children, five of whom survived to adulthood.

Effie moved from Towanda to Bloomington at a young age, and in 1877 at the age of 18, Effie and her brother Frank enrolled as freshmen law students at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington. The fact that Effie, a woman, was allowed to study at a university at all was rather unusual. In the late 1800s most women, if they did work outside of the home, were only allowed to become house servants, maids, factory workers, teachers, or nurses. After a woman got married, she would have to give up her job to remain at home caring for her family. Effie however, studied literature and legal studies. Frank graduated with a law degree in 1881 but Effie had become ill her senior year and had to postpone graduation. When she finally graduated on June 14, 1892 with her LLB, she gave an address to her all-male class entitled “The Star that Rose in the West.” Effie was the only woman in her graduating law class of thirteen students. She was only the second woman (the first being Marietta Brown Reed Shay in 1879), to receive a law degree from Illinois Wesleyan despite the fact that IWU was socially progressive. In fact, IWU was one of only four Illinois colleges before the 20<sup>th</sup> century that allowed women to study law. The other universities were University of Chicago Law School, Northwestern University, and The Chicago College of Law.

Effie became the 37<sup>th</sup> woman admitted to the Illinois Bar Association on June 14, 1892 and set up her practice soon after. Even though her brother Frank was also a member of the bar, there is no mention of them ever practicing together. She specialized mainly in real estate law and she participated in at least three reported Illinois Supreme Court cases involving real estate matters. She would continue to practice law in Bloomington for the next eleven years.

She also became involved in a landmark case regarding women’s suffrage in the fall of 1892 when she petitioned Circuit Judge Thomas Tipton to mandate that McLean County Clerk Maxton print ballots to allow women to vote in a local election. Effie and several other women alleged that they were registered and legal voters in McLean County and the state of Illinois. They felt that this entitled them to vote in the election of November 8, 1892 to elect trustees of the University of Illinois. They also petitioned that it was the duty of the county clerk to furnish ballots and ballot boxes at all polling places for all legal voters—which included women who were registered voters.

Prior to this election, women of Illinois had received limited voting rights on June 19, 1891 when the “state legislature passed a bill that entitled women to vote at any election held to elect school officials.” However, since these elections often occurred at the same time as elections for other public offices, women had to use separate ballots and ballot boxes since they were only allowed to vote for school officials.<sup>1</sup>

The County Clerk stated that while he was willing to provide ballot boxes for all voters, he was not going to furnish separate ballots for women at public expense without

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Sorensen. “Ahead of their Time: A Brief History of Woman Suffrage in Illinois.” [http://www.historyillinois.org/links/illinois\\_history\\_resource\\_page/suff.html](http://www.historyillinois.org/links/illinois_history_resource_page/suff.html) 4

a court order. The reason for this was because the trustees that were to be elected were voted for on the same ballot as other state officers to be chosen in the same election. Women could only vote for school officials so therefore would need a separate ballot with only those school officials they could legally vote for on it.<sup>2</sup> Judge Tipton agreed with the county clerk and subsequently ruled that women could vote in this election but had to provide their own ballots if they chose to vote. He stated that the earlier legislation which provided women the right to vote for school officials “had no provision for furnishing ballots for women voters at public expense.”<sup>3</sup> Although Effie lost this case, the verdict eventually helped to pave the way for complete women’s suffrage later in Effie’s lifetime.

In addition to being a successful lawyer, Effie was involved in a variety of community activities. She was a member of the Bloomington Women’s Club which allowed her the opportunity to share her love of literature. At one meeting, she is reported to have presented an essay on “The Ramayana,” an ancient Sanskrit epic. She also enjoyed music and participated in the Amateur Music Club which was known for its strict admission policy and public concerts. Effie was also a member of the Oratorio Society. As secretary of the Oratorio Society, she helped to organize a vocal music festival in spring of 1903. She was a lifelong member of Grace Methodist Episcopal Church.

In 1903, she gave up her legal practice and closed her office in the Griesheim building in Bloomington to care for her beloved mother who was suffering from paralysis. After her mother, father, and brother Frank had all passed away, she left her home at 301 N. East Street (location of IWU’s Dodds Hall) and moved to Long Beach California, where she resumed her legal work in real estate. This was quite adventurous for an unmarried woman of her time.

Thirty-two years after establishing her California practice, Effie Henderson passed away at her Long Beach home on February 4, 1938 after suffering from a short illness. She never married and had no children. Her remains were returned to Bloomington and buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in the Henderson family plot.

By: Laurie Peterson 2008

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<sup>2</sup> “Judge Tipton’s Decision,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 5, 1892

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