

Champions by Choice: The Long Climb to the Top

Legacy of Woman Suffrage in Washington State

This series was created to honor and celebrate the contributions made by women in Washington state to advance suffrage and equal rights over the past 100 years. This program will run in The Sunday Seattle Times from October 31 – December 5, 2010.

CHAPTER 5 VOICES IN GOVERNMENT: Women take office

In 1890, the Washington legislature passed a law that disqualified women from holding public office, with the exception of some school positions. Even though the law wasn't formally repealed until 1963, women began to run for elected office once they had the right to vote.

More and more women also realized the significance of being informed about the issues that were most important to their future rights and equality. In 1918, the Washington Legislative Council of Women Voters was established to identify appropriate legislation and to advocate for its passage.

The first women from Washington state to serve in the United States Legislature, Frances Axtell and Nena Croak, were elected in 1912 and the first senator, Reba Hurn, in 1923. Three years later, Bertha Knight Landes was elected the mayor of Seattle and served for two years. Landes was the first woman to be elected mayor of a major U.S. city. And Washington state elected its first woman governor, Dixy Lee Ray, in 1976.

It was not until the 1960s that women of color were eligible to be elected to public office. Over the past 50 years, influential women of all races and nationalities have held public office, promoted continued change and reform, and inspired generations of young people.

Ruby Chow was the daughter of poor Chinese immigrants. Her father died when she was a young girl, and the family had to work very hard to survive. Chow attended Garfield High School, but dropped out to help support her family by becoming a waitress. After learning



Ruby Chow (Photo courtesy of Seattle P-I Collection, MOHAI)

the restaurant business from the ground up, she opened the hugely successful Ruby Chow's Restaurant – the first Chinese restaurant in Seattle outside of Chinatown.

But it troubled Chow that there were still misconceptions and biases in the community about the Chinese culture. She and her husband encouraged the general public to come to community events, such as the annual New Year celebration, to break down these misconceptions. She promoted Chinese involvement in local parades and formed the Chinese Community Girls Drill Team so that young girls could develop social skills and self-esteem.

After her children were grown, Chow decided

she could do even more for people in Seattle's international community by running for public office. In 1973, she became the first Asian-American member of the King County Council, where she dedicated her dozen years of public service to improving the lives of Seattle's immigrant populations.

For more information about Ruby Chow, see *HistoryLink.org* essay 8063.

Marjorie Pitter King experienced hostility and prejudice against African-Americans in her early years. In the 1920s, her family moved into a house in Washington Park, across from Broadmoor. The neighbors were so unfriendly that King's mother had to buy a gun for protection. When the family relocated to the Central District, the neighbors signed a petition to keep them out – but this time, they stayed put.

King attended the University of Washington for a time, but felt she was treated unfairly due to her race. When she started her own business, M and



Marjorie Pitter King (Photo courtesy of the Black Heritage Society of Washington State)

M Tax and Consultant Services, she was one of the state's earliest African-American business women. King was determined to help all people who needed her services, regardless of their race, religion, nationality or ability to pay.

King was also politically active, serving as chairwoman of the

37th District Democratic Party and organizing political activities for local youth. When Ann T. O'Donnell, the Washington state legislator from the 37th District, was killed in a car accident in 1965, King was appointed to succeed her. She was the first African-American woman to serve as a Washington state legislator.

For more information about Marjorie Pitter King, see *HistoryLink.org* essay 8828.

Time to think!
What differences do you think there might be in our government if women were not allowed to be elected to public office?



Did you know? In 1893, Washington was invited to participate in the Chicago World's Fair floral exhibit, which would display each state's official flower. Washington did not have an official flower at the time, so the Washington State Fair Committee left the decision to its female members. The rhododendron was named the winner, beating out other contenders including the four-leaf clover, wild rose and dogwood. This was the only time in Washington state history that females were the only ones allowed to vote on an official issue. The choice was confirmed by the Washington State Senate in 1893, but the rhododendron did not officially become the state flower until 1949, when it was confirmed by both houses of the legislature.