

The First 50 Women in Idaho Law

M. PEARL McCALL
December 17, 1919
(1876 – 1977)



M. Pearl McCall was born on April 12, 1876 in Greenville, Kentucky to Ridley Williams and Ophelia Ann (Reynolds) McCall. Pearl and her siblings, John Reynolds, Sallie Elizabeth (McKellar), Myrtle (died at an early age) and Mary Amanthus (“Molly”), grew up on a farm near Fairfield, Illinois. Her father served in the Civil War along with other Fairfield families, including the Borah family (whose decedent, Sen. William Borah, would later lead McCall to Idaho).

McCall graduated from Haywood College and attended the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music where she studied piano. The Conservatory was established in 1867 and catered to “well-bred young women,” offering courses in music, as well as social graces, languages and posture. From 1900-01, McCall attended Wilson College, a small, private, Presbyterian (USA) affiliated college in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, established for the education of women in 1869. Thereafter, McCall moved to Grafton, North Dakota to teach school and piano.

While in Grafton, McCall met and began dating Robert Lindsay McKellar, the Superintendent of the local flour mill. About this same time, McCall’s sister, Elizabeth, decided to visit McCall or to live with her and teach school in Grafton. Apparently, Elizabeth and McKellar immediately hit it off and were married in September 1907. In 1910, the McKellar family was transferred to Harlowton, Montana to work at the flour mill there. While they were able to convince McCall’s brother John, and his wife, Edith, to join them in Montana and acquire a large tract of land under a late enacted homestead act, McCall did not elect to join them. Instead, she continued her education for a brief period at the University of Seattle in Washington, and then taught school in Idaho for a period of time.

From 1910-12, McCall attended Washington University in St. Louis. Thereafter, she moved to Washington, D.C. and began working on Capitol Hill where, it is believed, she became reacquainted with her family friend, William Borah, now a U.S. Senator from Idaho. McCall was active in the women’s suffrage movement and marched on Washington in support of that cause. During this time, McCall also attended Strayer Business School and George Washington University.

In 1915, McCall began pursuing a law degree at Washington College of Law (“WCL”) in Washington, D.C. (now the law school of the American University). Founded by two early women lawyer pioneers, Ellen Spencer Mussey and Emma Gillett, in 1896 as the Woman’s Law Class, and transformed into a degree granting institution in 1898, WCL was the first law school established by and for women in the United States. As such, the school attracted many of the country’s earliest woman lawyers. After receiving her

law degree in 1918, McCall was admitted to the United States District Court for the District of Columbia on June 29, 1918.

McCall continued her legal education at WCL, receiving her L.L.M. in 1919. Shortly thereafter, McCall ventured west to Idaho at the request of Senator Borah, himself a women's rights supporter. It is believed that Sen. Borah mentored McCall in her professional efforts. McCall may have also been interested in returning to Idaho because her aunt, Mary E. Reynolds, a pioneering woman doctor in Weiser, gave her family ties to Idaho. McCall was admitted to practice law in Idaho in Boise on December 17, 1919 and, thereby became the sixth woman admitted to practice in Idaho.

By 1921, McCall had returned to Washington, D.C. and was appointed the first woman Assistant United States Attorney for the District of Columbia. She was responsible for handling cases involving women and girls as plaintiffs and defendants and for postal law and food and drug act violations. McCall played a key role in bringing about the Diploma Mills Bill, requiring registration and strict standards to be met by organizations conferring degrees.

On January 24, 1924, McCall was admitted to the bar of the United States Supreme Court, thereby becoming the first Idaho woman attorney admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court. McCall served as an Assistant United States Attorney until 1934, at which time she began an "active" private practice. Contemporaneous reports from the *Washington Post* indicate that McCall was involved in numerous high-profile cases, including murder trials, throughout her tenure at the United States Attorney's office. McCall retired in 1963, but remained active in a number of organizations until she was incapacitated by a fall in 1970.

Throughout her career, McCall was very active in Washington, D.C. affairs, serving as president of the first women's bar association in the United States, the Women's District of Columbia Bar Association, from 1925-27 and again in 1932, as a member of the Washington Criminal Justice Association, the General Council of the American Bar Association, the Women's City Club, the League of Republican Women, the Republican National Committee's speakers bureau, the Daughters of the American Revolution, Phi Delta Delta (a national legal fraternity that promoted a higher standard of professional ethics and culture among women in law schools and in the legal profession), the Order of the Eastern Star, and a founding member of the National Antiweapon Association and the Bureau of Rehabilitation (an organization for the relief of prisoners and their families associated with the Community Chest).

M. Pearl McCall, who never married or had children, died at the age of 100 on January 23, 1977 at the Marsalle Nursing Home in Washington, D.C. She is buried in the Maple Hill Cemetery, Fairfield, Illinois.