

The First 50 Women in Idaho Law

PEARL TYER
February 1, 1922
(1878 – 1966)



Pearl Tyer was born in July 1878 in Adel, Iowa to John M. and Addie J. Tyer. Pearl was the youngest of three children. Her sister, Nellie, was born in 1869, and her brother H. Wilbert (“Bert”), was born in 1871. Tyer attended grammar school in Iowa and worked part-time in her father’s feed and seed business in the town of Perry.

Tyer attended Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa, beginning in 1895 where she double majored in Greek and Latin. When she was just a few credits shy of graduation in 1899, however, Tyer was forced to leave school for health reasons and was not allowed to participate in Grinnell’s commencement exercises that year.

After she recovered her health, in 1900 Tyer and her mother decided to move west to Ogden, Utah, where her brother Bert was living and working as an attorney (Tyer’s father had previously passed away). Tyer worked in Bert’s office and soon became interested in studying law. Her family says that she likely took up the law in an effort to stay close to her brother and to pursue an occupation where she could help people. A few years later, Bert moved to Boise, Idaho, and began a practice there. Tyer and her mother, again, decided to follow Bert, moving to Boise around 1908.

Tyer and her mother lived at 1023 Washington Street (on the site now occupied by the downtown Boise YMCA) for more than 50 years. Her home was originally used as a boarding house, a tradition Tyer continued when she took in women attending the local Link’s School of Business and girls attending Boise High School, which was directly across the street.

Although Tyer remained interested in studying the law, and continued to do so in her brother’s Boise office, she worked as a journalist for a number of years, at both *The Idaho Daily Statesman* and the *Boise Capitol News*. In so doing, she covered a number of high-profile events, including the trial of Harry Orchard in March 1908, the man who confessed to the 1905 killing of Idaho Governor Frank Steunenberg by a bomb attached to the front gate at his home. After Orchard was convicted and incarcerated in the Old Penitentiary in Boise in the 1930s, Tyer did a follow-up article on Orchard that appeared in the *Statesman*.

Tyer was active in the Boise community throughout her life. For example, she was influential in starting the YWCA in Boise in 1942. She was also a charter member of the Business and Professional Women’s Club and a life-long member of the First Church of Christ Scientist. Given her work in the press and being active in the community, Tyer knew a number of high profile individuals, including Cynthia Mann (for whom an elementary school in Boise is named). Mann, like Tyer, was an “enthusiastic club woman” in Boise and active in her community and the two became close friends. In fact, when Mann died unexpectedly in 1920 from the “Spanish

Flu” she remembered Tyer’s friendship with the bequeath of a large bureau that she had received from Governor Buhn, a territorial governor of Idaho, in recognition of the work she did to help Idaho become a state in 1890 (the Tyer family has since donated this item to the Idaho State Historical Society).

By the early 1920s, Tyer had studied the law for a number of years in her brother’s office and was ready to take the bar. She applied, and was successful, being admitted as the seventh woman to practice law in Idaho on February 1, 1922. Instead of going into practice, however, she served as a law librarian at the State Law Library in Boise (then located in the Capitol Building) for many years. Family members recall that she also maintained a small office in downtown Boise, but do not recall her engaging in any significant private practice work. Indeed, she is described as a shy, soft-spoken woman who, for that reason, did not seek trial work. Family members also recall that Tyer was given assignments, from time to time, by the state to collect all the laws applicable to one department (*e.g.*, all laws related to health and welfare were collected in one place for the department of health and welfare). This work involved hours of collecting laws in the library, as well as tracking new laws as they were made. Nonetheless, Tyer loved the work and excelled at it.

Tyer continued her writing throughout her life, including writing for educational magazines and children’s poems. Although she never married or had children, Tyer remain committed to her family – particularly her sister Nellie’s family which had also settled in Boise. She loved to drive fast and once owned a “Stanley Steamer” purported to be the fastest car of its time. Tyer stopped driving, however, once Boise starting installing streetlights. According to her family, Tyer did not want a “mechanical device” to control her movements.

In 1949, Tyer decided to attend her 50-year reunion at Grinnell, even though she never officially “graduated” from the school. In recognition of the many years of service she provided to the Boise community – both professionally and through her community work – Grinnell presented her with her college diploma in 1949.

Tyer died on January 8, 1966, in Boise at the age of 87.