

The First 50 Women in Idaho Law

MARY ELIZABETH SCHMITT

July 27, 1940
(1914 – 1984)



Mary Elizabeth Schmitt was born on February 18, 1914, in Madison, Nebraska, to Julius and Katie Schmitt. Her father was in the real estate business and her mother was a housewife. Schmitt moved to Gooding, Idaho, with her parents in 1916. She attended school there, graduating from Gooding High School in 1931. After high school she attended Gooding College, and worked as a stenographer in the Gooding law firm of Bissell & Bird from October 1931 to September 1934. During her work in this law firm, Schmitt became interested in the practice of law and “decided it was the thing for her.”

To pursue her goal of becoming a lawyer, Schmitt transferred to the University of Idaho and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1938. She was then admitted to the University of Idaho College of Law and, after spending one summer in 1939 at Colorado University, graduated in 1940 with a Bachelor of Laws degree. On July 27, 1940, Schmitt was admitted in Idaho.

Schmitt began her legal career practicing in Rexburg, and was successful, among other things, in sending “three burglars to prison.” After eight months, however, she moved to Boise to be a law clerk for Idaho Supreme Court Justice Raymond L. Givens, thereby becoming the first woman law clerk at the Idaho Supreme Court. Thereafter, she moved to Canyon County and worked as an associate in the firm of Dunlap & Dunlap. Her boss, former Idaho Supreme Court Justice S. Ben Dunlap, allayed any doubts about Schmitt’s legal ability in an article announcing her joining the firm: “she can handle lots of cases I don’t have time to do. In fact, I don’t know what I’d do without her.” Later she opened her own law office in Nampa. Schmitt practiced law for 11 years in Nampa and Caldwell, serving as Canyon County deputy prosecutor for 5½ years. She also served for one year as president of the Seventh Judicial District Bar Association.

In 1956, Schmitt returned to Gooding. She was court reporter for Judge D.H. Sutphen and Judge Charles Scoggin for a total of 18 years, before retiring. After “retiring,” however, Schmitt opened a law office with Judge Scoggin under the name of Scoggin & Schmitt. Boise attorney Dick Fields recalls, “there wasn’t much about the practical ins and outs of litigation which [Schmitt] didn’t know.” Given that she was the “nearest thing that Judge Scoggin had to a law clerk,” Fields observed, “one who listened to Mary Schmitt did much better in Judge Scoggins’ court (as well as other courts) than those who didn’t. She was a delightful individual whose door was always open.”

Schmitt was a member of the American Bar Association, the Idaho Bar Association, the Order of the Eastern Star, the Daughters of the Nile (an international fraternal organization founded in 1913 for women who are related by birth or marriage to Shriners), and the United Methodist Church of Gooding. She was also active in community affairs, serving on the City of Gooding Public Library Board, the board of directors for the Gooding Chamber of Commerce, the

Gooding County Senior Citizens Board and the board of trustees for the United Methodist Church at Gooding. She was also a trustee from Crippled Children and Adults Association of Gooding County.

Schmitt died on March 10, 1984, in Twin Falls.