

# Edith Miller Klein: A Pioneer Woman in Idaho Law

Lindsey Hanks

In the spring of 1996 Linda Morton-Keithley, an archivist, interviewed Edith Miller Klein as part of an oral history project “Women and Political Activism in Idaho.” Edith was an attorney and one of the first 50 women lawyers in Idaho. She had a busy career that took her all over the country. She also helped pave the way for equal rights for women.

Edith’s father was a German immigrant and a meat cutter by trade. Her mother worked at her families’ room and boarding house, called The Pleasant Home in Moscow while she went to business school. Edith’s father, who was 20 years older than her mother, happened to be staying there when the two met. Edith was born in 1915 and spent most of her time in Moscow; her parents held a high value for education and wanted to stay close to the University of Idaho. They hoped their children would go there, which they did.

Going to the U of I Edith didn’t really know what she wanted to do other than get a college degree. Business administration caught her eye. She was actively involved in women’s sports including the Hell Divers, the university swim club. Looking back on her time at the U of I she doesn’t know how she survived. She had 20 hours of classes, 4 jobs, and played all the sports women could play, such as soccer and basketball. The house she grew up in is actually part of the farm at the U of I and was moved from its original location when the mall was built.



Edith Miller Klein

Wanting to get involved in state politics, she decided she needed to be a judge first. For about a year she served as a municipal judge and in 1948 she was elected to the Idaho Legislature.

After graduating with her bachelors at the age of 19 in Business Administration, she received a fellowship at the State College of Washington, now Washington State University, and taught business courses as she worked on her master’s degree. Due to finances she was unable to continue her master’s program. She moved back to Moscow and worked for a mail-order religion place doing secretarial work, answering letters, and doing all their proof reading. She remembers her boss telling her she had pretty good grammar.

Soon after Edith started to teach business courses in the high school in Weiser, but World War II broke out. She decided to sell her car and move to Washington D.C. Once accepted at George Washington University law school she began her career in law. She would have loved to have gone to Georgetown University, but they were not accepting any women. She really enjoyed her time at George Washington University. Working during the day in the War Department at the Pentagon and going to law school at night didn’t leave a lot of free time. She remembers working really hard and sometimes not having enough time to do her homework, but she managed never to fail a class.

During the war women were getting law degrees and civil service required offices to treat them properly.

She remembers her law school class having several women in it, even though the majority was still male. Edith never felt like she didn’t belong there and most people treated women well. She graduated a year after the war ended. After graduating she felt it was time for her to return to Idaho.

She applied to several law firms, including the one she wanted most, Langroise and Sullivan but she was hired at Anderson and Thomas, where she received a secretary’s pay. She decided to break off and start her own practice. Business was good. One day she asked one of her clients why he chose to come to her and he said, “Well, I figure the women are more honest and direct than men and should have the same knowledge. So, I thought I’d try one.” It turns out he was in real estate, and became a long-time customer.

Wanting to get involved in state politics, she decided she needed to be a judge first. For about a year she served as a municipal judge and in 1948 she was elected to the Idaho Legislature. Her campaign consisted of a couple of ads in the newspaper and she went door to door handing out cards. She says she was relieved when the person didn’t answer the door. In 1949, during her first year in office she married Sandor “Sandy” Klein, a newspaper man that often hung around the Statehouse.

Edith's husband received a job opportunity in Washington D.C., so she closed up her practice and moved. While she was in D.C. she got her LLM in tax law at George Washington University. She worked in New York for a little while before they returned to Idaho. She served as a member of the house and the senate. She served on multiple committees and was the chairman of the Commerce committee, health committee, etc. She drafted legislation for the house and worked at Langroise and Sullivan. She also worked with governor Smylie on the commission on the status of women, which tracked the progress women were making and how they can be equally treated in the work place. Edith wanted the name to be changed to the commission on women's progress. She says women's progress owes a lot to the

professional clubs women organized such as Building Powerful Women and the American Association of University Women.

When asked if she considered herself a feminist she says in some aspects she could be considered a feminist. She has always encouraged young women to do what they want and that they can do anything. Edith believes all people should be encouraged to do what they want.

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**About the Author**

**Lindsey Hanks** is a senior at Boise State University and spent the summer as an intern for the Idaho State Bar. She is studying for her bachelor's in English.



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