

Hattie Bratzel Kremen (1908–1996)

By Diane Rynerson

Hattie Bratzel Kremen was Oregon's first elected female district attorney. She was one of two women to serve as a district attorney in Oregon until the 1980s. After World War II, she worked as a court reporter for the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal in Germany.

Hattie Bratzel was born on November 8, 1908, in Hebron, North Dakota, to parents Frederick Bratzel and Auguste Duckwitz. When she was a year old, her father's poor health and the harsh North Dakota winters prompted the family to move to Gresham, where her paternal grandparents had retired. Her parents purchased a farm and peach orchard in Mulino, and her father worked for a logging company and a flour mill. World War I was raging, and Hattie's schoolmates teased her because of her German heritage, sometimes throwing rocks at her and her older sister. The sisters were sent to live with their German-speaking grandmother and two college-age aunts in Gresham, where Hattie attended German classes taught by a Lutheran minister. Ultimately, the farm and orchard in Mulino weren't profitable, and the family moved to Salem, where her father did carpentry and construction work.

Bratzel studied commercial law in high school, and after graduation in 1926 she worked for a Salem attorney for ten dollars a week. When he refused to give her a sufficient raise, she found a position with another firm and began working part-time as a court reporter, substituting for court reporters in other counties and helping the court reporter for Marion County. In about 1943, when the Marion County court reporter retired to get married, Bratzel assumed the position.

At age thirty-seven, Bratzel registered for night law school at Northwestern College of Law (now Lewis & Clark Law School). She attended classes for a year, while continuing her work as court reporter, and decided not to register for a second year; she didn't want to drive to Portland alone, and her fiancé at the time didn't want her to continue.

In 1947, Bratzel learned that Oregon Supreme Court Justice James T. Brand had been appointed as a judge for the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal in Germany. She phoned Justice Brand, whom she had come to know during her court reporting work in Coos County, to congratulate him and jokingly suggested that he remember her if he needed a good court reporter. Two weeks later, Justice Brand's wife called with the news that he wanted her to work for him. For the next two years, Kremen worked first as Brand's secretary and then as a court reporter for the Tribunal.

When she returned to Oregon in the fall of 1948, she enrolled at the Willamette University College of Law and took a few final classes at Northwestern. She passed the Oregon State Bar exam in 1951, one of four women among the ninety new lawyers in the state. She began the private practice of law, first with her former employer, William H. Trindle, for whom she had worked when he was city attorney and district attorney, and then on her own.

When Bratzel learned that some of her law school classmates were running for Marion County district attorney, she decided that she knew more about that work than they did and filed as a candidate. At that time, she later explained, "nobody wanted the political job," which usually went to a recent law graduate. In a contest against four men, she came in second. She ran again in the 1956 election and won, becoming the first female elected district attorney in Oregon. Living just a few blocks from the courthouse, Bratzel was usually on the scene when serious crimes or fatal accidents required the presence of someone from the district attorney's office.

On April 25, 1959, Hattie Bratzel married Leonard Kremen, the manager of the Salem Lipman Wolfe & Company store. Their work schedules and active civic engagement didn't leave them much free time, but they enjoyed weekends at their cabin on the Little North Fork of the Santiam River.

In 1960, Hattie Kremen won re-election to a second term by defeating Jason Lee. When she lost her bid for a third term in 1964, defeated by Gary Gortmaker, she returned to private practice, taking on a variety of cases but emphasizing estate planning. It would be fifty-three years before a second woman was elected to serve as Marion County District Attorney.

During her years of private practice, Kremen enjoyed traveling in Oregon and abroad with her husband, and she volunteered for a variety of charitable causes. In 1978, the Salem Chamber of Commerce presented her with its Distinguished Service Award. After Leonard Kremen's death at age sixty-one in 1975, she continued to travel and to practice law on a limited basis.

Hattie Bratzel Kremen died on October 29, 1996. Her estate provided funds for an annual scholarship at Lewis & Clark Law School.

Sources

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