Eliza was born in Pennsylvania on September 8, 1833. Hers was the first name drawn for jury duty that day in 1870 March. She served with five other women (as well as men) on a grand jury in Laramie, Wyoming Territory. It was the first formal jury in the world to seat women. While her “first” makes her noteworthy in history, her many other accomplishments seem lost to contemporary historians. Stewart was the eldest of eight children. Her mother died soon after the birth of the last child. Stewart took on the role of raising her seven younger siblings.

Despite the hardships, she graduated in 1861 from Washington Female Seminary in Washington, Pa., as class valedictorian. Her valedictory address, ten typed pages of rhymed verse titled “Entering Service,” was published in the newspaper in Meadville, Pa. For the next eight years, she taught school in her native Crawford County.

In December 1868, she decided to move West, arriving in Laramie just as the town was about to open its first public school. When it was learned she was a veteran teacher, she was hired—the first teacher in the Laramie public schools. First classes began in February 1869. Shortly after that, she met Stephen Boyd, a machinist in the Union Pacific car repair shops who had come to Laramie before the first train arrived in 1868 and who she would soon wed.

Before her marriage, however, Stewart received the call to serve on the jury. Stewart’s unique position as the first woman selected gained worldwide fame and made her a celebrity. Nonetheless, when jury service ended, Stewart returned to teaching.

Two months after her marriage, Eliza was named to the organizing committee for the Wyoming Literary and Library Association. She helped draft the constitution of the organization and became a charter member, one of the first in Wyoming to promote libraries and the arts. She also continued to write poetry.

In August 1873, Eliza became the first woman in Wyoming (and probably the entire United States) to be nominated to run for the territorial legislature. For unknown reasons, she declined nomination, withdrawing her name from the ballot. Eliza Stewart Boyd retained an active interest in politics, however. Part of her interest came in her support for prohibition of liquor.

In November 1883, she was a charter member of the newly organized Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in Laramie, serving for many years as the organization’s secretary. In the Prohibition Party’s state convention in February 1888, she was selected as one of two Wyoming delegates to the party’s national convention, held that June in Indianapolis. She continued to play an active role in Laramie’s “society.” In the winter of 1912, she read a paper at ceremonies opening Whiting School in Laramie, in honor of Miss Whiting, a long-time teacher and administrator. Three weeks later, Eliza Stewart Boyd slipped in a patch of ice in front of her home and broke her hip. Within a week, the 79-year-old pioneer died.

Sources


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