

Laura Harris

Early Oregon Women's Rights Advocate



Born in Carlton, Oregon in 1855, Laura Harris moved to Monmouth with her family at age 5. In 1869, at age 14, she earned her teaching certificate from Monmouth Christian College. She taught school in Monmouth until she married Dr. T.W. Harris at age 17. She lived in Albany and finally settled in Eugene in 1884.

Laura worked beside her husband for 18 years until their separation. She was the first woman in the Willamette Valley to specialize in the treatment of women's diseases and advocated for improving women's health.

The Oregonian Journal's obituary stated, "She long was active in civic affairs, and took a leading role in the early day campaign to win the vote for women in school elections." Her advocacy for women's suffrage lead to a lawsuit against election judges who prevented her from voting in a 1878 school election.

Mrs. Harris' \$50 damage award was quickly appealed to the next higher court. In the end, Oregon Chief Justice Charles Edwin Wolverton, also educated at Christian College, ruled in her favor nearly a year later, deeming it legal for women to vote in school elections. In his opinion brief he affirmed Laura Harris' right to vote for a Lane County school director, and provided a long history of school voting decisions. He stated the framers of Oregon Statehood could imagine women as voters. He wrote, "Under the Oregon territorial law of 1855 every inhabitant above the age of 21, without regard to sex [who met resistance and taxpaying requirements] was declared to be a legal voter at school meetings." Women did not achieve full suffrage until 1912.

During her life she was active in many civic clubs. She was a charter and life member of the Evangeline chapter of Eastern Star, a member of the First Christian Church, Ladies of the Elks and an honorary member of the Quota Club of Eugene.

Her son, Lawrence T. Harris, mirrored his mother's charge for civic responsibility and the law, becoming a lawyer, circuit court judge and speaker of the House of Representatives. Laura died only 18 days before her 100th birthday in September of 1955, leaving a long legacy of better life for women in Oregon.



*Laura Harris from her obituary
printed in the Eugene Register
Guard, September 2, 1955*