BAS 064 Ella Haskell

Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Ella Knowles Haskell must have been an amazing woman. She’s one of the few women with an entry in the 1500-page inappropriately named “Progressive Men of the State of Montana.”

Best remembered as the first woman lawyer in Montana, Ella Knowles was confronted in the 1880s not only with prejudice and outright laughter at the idea of a female lawyer, but also by an actual Montana state law that prevented women from practicing law. She worked successfully to repeal that law, and was admitted to the Montana bar December 26, 1889, when she was 29 years old.

But she was a lawyer with no clients. She sought work in Helena as a collection agent, but found no takers until one man sarcastically suggested that she go collect the three umbrellas he had loaned out. She did – and when she returned with the umbrellas, charged a fee of fifty cents. Impressed, the businessman was soon giving her all his legal business. Her first real case, in Helena in 1891, was in defense of a Chinese client who sued a black restaurant owner for back wages of $5. Knowles won, but her fee is not recorded.

In 1892, the Populist Party nominated her for state Attorney General, the first woman in the United States to run for that office in any state. She narrowly lost the race to Henri Haskell, who then appointed her Assistant Attorney General, and married her in 1895. She was the first woman in America to argue (and win) a case before the United States Supreme Court.

The Haskells divorced about 1901, with Henri moving to Glendive and Ella relocating to Butte, where many of her cases focused on mining. She lived alone in an apartment in the Napton Building on Granite Street, and maintained her law office in the Masonic Temple on Park, and later in the Silver Bow Block at Granite and Hamilton. In addition to her work as an attorney, she was also a delegate to the International Mining Congress and Montana’s first female notary public. She had become active in the women’s suffrage movement, serving as the Montana Equal Suffrage Association president in 1896.

Knowles had come to Montana from her native New Hampshire in 1888, seeking a better climate following a bout with tuberculosis, and her accomplishments are all the more impressive given her ongoing poor health. In 1910, she embarked on a recuperative seven-month trip around the world, which included her attendance at a march of 25,000 suffragettes in London, accompanied by 60 bands and culminating in a mass meeting at the Victoria and Albert Hall.

Ella Knowles gave a lantern-slide presentation on her world trip in the Butte Library Auditorium in December 1910. The tour, intended to improve her health, seems to have done the opposite. She died in her apartment at the Napton on January 27, 1911, at 50 years of age.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.