



Harriet Jeanette Graham

June 28, 1922 - May 7, 2010

Harriet Jeanette Graham, 87, passed away on May 7, 2010. Among her many passions were family, politics, the advancement of equal rights for women, and being out in the natural world – particularly while birding and canoeing.

Harriet was born in Des Moines, Iowa on June 28, 1922, the daughter of Flarra and Clarence Wheeler. The Wheeler family had been long established in Waynesville, Missouri, and the young family returned there soon after.

Harriet married William C. Graham in 1944 and at the end of Bill's service in WWII, the couple moved to Wichita, Kansas where they became active in Democratic politics. Wichita at that time was dominated by the Republican Party. Harriet and her husband were elected Precinct Committeeman and Committeewoman and worked with others to develop a reform slate of candidates that swept the County offices in 1958. That year Harriet ran for Clerk of the District Court, opposing an incumbent who had held the office for many years. The campaign included door to door campaigning, uncountable bean dinners and memorable electric pink and black campaign signage. Out of over 84,000 votes cast, Harriet won by a margin of 151 votes.

During her two terms as Clerk, Mrs. Graham modernized and streamlined the office systems and processes, hired her staff on the basis of ability, and presided over moving the Clerk's office into the new County Courthouse. In

1964 she became the first female elected to the Kansas State Legislature from Sedgwick County. As the lone female in the House, she served on the Roads and Highways Committee, Education Committee and Welfare Committee introducing numerous legislative measures, including a bill for a Homestead Exemption Act for senior citizens. She successfully ran for reelection and was recommended to serve on the Tax Committee by both Democratic and Republican house leaders. Against all custom and protocol, the chairman of the Tax Committee blocked her membership, stating, "Women don't know anything about taxes."

That rejection led to her focus on gender discrimination for the remainder of her life. Mrs. Graham then introduced a bill requiring equal pay for equal work, an Equal Rights bill, and an anti-discrimination bill. Harriet introduced the bill to add an equal rights clause into the Kansas State constitution and that bill passed. During this period, President Kennedy appointed a National Committee on the Status of Women, with the governor of each state forming its own commission. Governor Robert Docking appointed Harriet head of the Kansas Commission and while Chairperson she lobbied for a legislative endorsement of the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Kansas Legislature did ratify the ERA.

Despite the demands of a successful political career, Harriet managed to raise her son William, Jr. and daughters Deborah and Laura, in the process being a leader in Bluebird//Campfire Girls and Cub Scouts, coach of a girl's softball team, and participating in community theatre. She also began her lifelong love of birding and canoeing.

After divorce in 1969 Harriet earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Wichita State University in 1972, attending some classes concurrently with her son and daughter, and moved to Topeka. In Topeka she served as a Contract Compliance Officer with the Kansas Commission on Civil Rights and began

work on a Masters Degree at the University of Kansas which she was awarded in 1977.

In 1978 Harriet returned to Waynesville, Missouri and became a teacher at Wood Middle School, retiring at the age 70. In Waynesville she continued to be politically active, lobbying for Missouri's ratification of the ERA. She served on the Waynesville Library Board and travelled extensively throughout the world with friends and family. She actively researched the family history in Missouri from the early nineteenth century and began attending the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Rolla, following her Unitarian heroes, Thomas Jefferson and Susan B. Anthony.

Harriet returned to Wichita 2003 following the death of her two sisters, Grace Wheeler Smith and Jane Wheeler Sullivan.

Harriet is survived by her son William Graham, Jr. (Isabelle) of Peynier, France, daughters Deborah Lynch (Martin), of Santa Barbara, California and Laura Graham of Los Angeles, California, grandchildren Brett Graham (Dana), Michele Capps, Rebecca Williams (Robert), all of Wichita, and Andrea Lewis (Phillip) of Woodland Hills, California, eleven great grandchildren and two great-great grandchildren.

Tribute Wall



“ *Harriet Jeanette Graham*

January 28, 2023 at 06:53 AM



“ *To the family of Harriet Graham, Sorry to hear of the passing of Harriet. I had the opportunity to speak with her on a number of occasions and she told me stories about the old courthouse and how she roller skated thru the side door and out the front as a child. I was just thinking of her on Sat. I send my sympathy and you will be in my prayers. Marge Scott, Friend & Curator of Pulaski County Museum (Old Courthouse)###imported-begin###Marge Scott###imported-end###*

May 09, 2010 at 09:32 PM



“ *Harriet was a wonderful woman. As a young teacher she was encouraging and supportive when I began teaching. She was an advocate for women and always active in creating positive change. She made a difference.###imported-begin###Cindy Grizzell###imported-end###*

May 09, 2010 at 04:00 PM



“ *Harriet was one special lady, one of a kind. We taught together for several years. I enjoyed her humor and the way she looked at life.*

Harriet was the first woman elected to the Kansas Legislature. That is quite a distinction. Farewell, old friend.###imported-begin###Luge Hardman###imported-end###

May 08, 2010 at 07:20 PM