

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5846

Lahey, May

(- 1984)

Died 31 December, 1984, Los AngelesLos Angeles California United States of America

Occupation Barrister, Judge, Lawyer

Summary

May Darlington Lahey was the first female Queenslander to practice law. Although her legal career took place overseas, Lahey can lay claim to being Australia's first female judge.

Details

Lahey was born in Queensland and attended Brisbane Grammar School, followed by Sydney University. She was said to be a feisty young woman with the gift of the gab, and it was an uncle living in California that suggested she put her skills to use in the courtroom.

By 1910 Lahey had moved to Los Angeles and enrolled at the University of Southern California College of Law. Lahey graduated on 11 June 1914 with an LLB (Honours). She was admitted to the Californian Bar the very next day, after which she specialised in probate law. In 1915 Lahey was appointed a Referee of the Probate Court.

Lahey became an American citizen in 1916. She was a prominent figure in women's organisations, such as the League of Women Voters and the Women Lawyers Club. It is reported that 'she was renowned for her vivacious personality, Australian accent and talent for public speaking.'

Lahey became the second female judge appointed to the Los Angeles Municipal Court, on Christmas Day, 1928 – only seven years after Mary O'Toole became the United States' first woman municipal judge and 37 years before Roma Mitchell's South Australian appointment. She took office on January 3, 1929. A few days later, a reception was held in her honour, whereby more than 600 guests attended, including virtually all the Los Angeles judiciary (State and Federal), many leaders of the Bar and numerous local residents.

Lahey was one of the most prominent members of the American Lawyers Club and she represented California at numerous prestigious legal conferences

After 15 years on the bench, Lahey was unanimously elected the court's first female Presiding Judge. She remained at the court until her retirement in 1965.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers>

Author Details

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