

## **Bertha Denton Snell- A True Pioneer**

Bertha Denton Snell was anything but your ordinary nineteenth century woman. Although she was not born in Malta, her roots do reside here. John Clancy Denton, her father, was raised near Dunning Street and her aunt Phoebe was Elmer Ellsworth's mother. Ellsworth, a great friend of the Lincoln family, was the first Union officer to be killed in the Civil War. Bertha's mother, Abbie Jane Scidmore, was also from a prominent local family and both families traced their roots to pre Revolutionary War pioneers.

Both of her parents had an adventurous spirit, not uncommon from the general mind set of the time. They were often times on the move; experiencing the true pioneering life in the West and their story reminds one of the Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House" books. Although Bertha was born in a log cabin in Illinois in 1870, the family eventually settled down in Indiana, creating a life for themselves and setting up a farm. Tragedy was not far from them however, when a fire burned down the entire life that they had established. Not only that, but Abbie Scidmore was left to look after her four children alone, as sadly her husband died in the fire. Due to the impracticality of continuing on in the true pioneering spirit she had shared with her husband, Abbie decided to move back to Malta with her children.

Upon arrival in New York, the new widow, overwhelmed by responsibility, decided to place some of her children with relatives. Bertha was sent to live with her Aunt Mary and Uncle Patrick Meehan in Galway. It was here that she finished her education and began to study at the Teachers Institute in Saratoga in 1888. However, her true passion was law. She would often times sit in her uncle's law office and read over cases and ponder different aspects of the subject to become as familiar as possible with them. She also studied business law and shorthand in Albany. She was a true scholar.

Meanwhile opportunity was arising as the exploration into the Western territories was continuing. The Northwest was untouched for quite a long time but in the late 1880s the railroads allowed for easier access to the territory. Thus, Bertha took the opportunity to move to Tacoma, Washington. She would arrive on November 10, 1889, the day before Washington was declared as a state and forever after proclaimed herself "a pioneer" who had arrived in the "territorial days". She found employment in the new State Capitol and was soon appointed secretary to the Governor and helped establish the newly formed government.

Not only was Bertha establishing her career, but she also became engaged to a man by the name of Marshall King Snell. He also happened to be a lawyer. After their marriage they set up a practice together working side by side. Bertha was quite a strong and independent woman and achieved success on her own merits. Her expertise from working for the governor and her passion for the law gave her the ability to make a difference...

The most astounding thing about Bertha's accomplishments is that she managed to do all of this at a time when women were generally considered to be inferiors to their male counterparts. Although women had been allowed to vote back in the "territorial days", the right was revoked when Washington became a state. She was able to prove that women were

just as capable of making a difference in the world, and that they could be just as intelligent as anybody else. Bertha proceeded to pass the Bar Exam in 1899, being the first woman admitted to the Bar in the State of Washington. She also became a partner in the joint firm she owned with her husband, Snell and Snell. They worked primarily with cases of land and water use in numerous territories in the West.

Marshall Snell died in 1939, yet Bertha continued to practice law until 1953. Bertha died in Tacoma, Washington on October 20, 1957, living to the age of eighty-eight. Her legacy lives on in Tacoma, as every year the Tacoma Bar Association presents the Bertha M. Snell Award. This is awarded to someone “who triumphs over difficult obstacles in their quest to become a lawyer and in the practice of law.” Bertha Denton Snell was a woman who truly strove to become something great, and was able to do so making a difference in the world at the same time.

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