The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5383

Hart, Elizabeth Hamilton

(1904 - 1982)

Born	19040531, Indooroopilly Queensland Australia
Died	19821225, Clayfield Queensland Australia
Occupation	Barrister, Lawyer, Solicitor

Summary

Elizabeth Hart was the second woman to be admitted a solicitor in Queensland and went on to enjoy a career that spanned five decades. She was a partner for thirty-four years and then a senior partner for twenty-one at the major Brisbane firm, Flower and Hart.

Details

Elizabeth Hamilton Hart was born into the law. There have been six generations of the Hart family working as lawyers in Queensland since 1863, when Elizabeth's grandfather, Graham Lloyd Hart was admitted. The firm she worked for, for her entire life, Flower and Hart, was established in 1876 by her grandfather and his partner John Henry Flower. The firm remains one of Brisbane's leading commercial law firms. Other family members, including her father, William Hamilton Hart, had careers in the law, including her uncle, Percy Lloyd Hart, who served as an acting judge of the Supreme Court of Queensland.

Born in Indooroopilly, Brisbane in 1904, Hart attended Brisbane Girls Grammar School where she excelled academically. She was a good sportswoman, and particularly enjoyed basketball (now netball) where she enjoyed a significant height advantage. She went on to complete a BA at the University of Queensland, graduating in 1924 with Honours in Modern Language and Literature.

Straight out of university, in 1925, she entered into Articles of Clerkship with her father at Flower and Hart. On 1 October 1929, she became only the second woman admitted as a solicitor in Queensland. She was a hard worker, a straight talker, reliable, well-spoken and was rewarded with a partnership in the firm in November 1938. When her father passed away in 1951 she became senior partner.

It is said that Hart would ask colleagues and partners to view her just as 'a fellow practitioner' and 'not to think of her as a woman'. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that gender had an impact on her reception by the business community at large. Her brother Bill, younger than her by eight years and a partner in the firm while she was a senior partner, was invited to sit on the boards of a variety of Queensland companies, including the Queensland Board of the National Bank, when she was not.

A pioneering woman in the Queensland legal world, Elizabeth Hart provided jobs to several women who went on to have prominent careers. She gave Naida Haxton, Queensland's first practising female barrister, her start in 1963, although Haxton's decision after three years to pursue a career at the Bar after three years saw her dismissed for breach of contract, which required three years' service with the firm post-Articles. Haxton recalls Hart as being a somewhat 'daunting and engaging' woman who trained her young lawyers to 'be careful to the point of pedantry'.

Hart maintained a busy commercial practice and did the odd bit of pro bono work if the cause suited her. She was respected and liked by her colleagues and her retirement came about largely through bad health; she had a fall at work in 1971 and broke her hip. She retired on December 31, 1971, continuing to work as a consultant for two more years before retiring completely.

Hart never married and lived with her elder sister, Eleanor, who also never married. She was not particularly interested in professional social events, preferring to mix with members of the Moreton Club, a women's club established in 1924, of which she became a member in 1929. She was a devoted aunt to her six nieces and nephews and is remembered fondly by them for her generosity. She died on Christmas Day in 1925. Never an active feminist or political activist on behalf of women, her legacy to women lawyers who came after her is the longevity of her career. Certainly, the advantages of her family position in Brisbane legal circles made a legal career accessible. But a fifty-five year career, regardless of her gender, is worthy of celebration.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book Section
Elizabeth Hamilton Hart, Doherty, Siobhan and Whitton, Laura, 2005

Article
A Woman Lawyer, 1929,
http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article22919436

Called to the bar, 1929

Resource Section
Law, Kerwin, Hollie and Rubenstein, Kim, 2014,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0624b.htm

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

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