Entry type: Person
Entry ID: PR00323

McWhinney, Agnes

(1891 - 1987)

Born	18910101, Ravenswood Junction Queensland Australia
Died	19870804, Brisbane Queensland Australia
Occupation	Lawyer, Solicitor

Summary

Following the introduction of the Legal Practitioners Act of 1905, Agnes McWhinney became the first Queensland woman to be admitted as a legal practitioner in 1915. Agnes was also the first female solicitor to practise in Queensland.

Details

Agnes McWhinney wanted to be a doctor after she graduated from Townsville Grammar School. The nearest medical school was in Sydney and very expensive, therefore Agnes was persuaded by her brother Joseph, who had nearly completed his Articles of Clerkship in Townsville at Wilson and Ryan, solicitors, to take articles herself. In 1910 Wilson and Ryan accepted Agnes as an articled clerk which was a revolutionary step at the time.

Northern Supreme Court Judge Mr Justice Pope Cooper was not impressed with the idea of a woman entering his legal profession and became distinctly choleric at the very mention of her name. Ultimately he was unable to fault her qualifications and conduct and found himself powerless to find any basis on which to refuse her admission. On 7 December 1915 Agnes was admitted to practise as a solicitor which was sufficient to make her a part of Australian history.

Agnes undertook work of the same complexity and importance as that of her colleagues, however, she was paid the same as the unqualified office boy. Agnes did not stand for her bosses' discrimination and her persistent protests resulted in her wage rising to 3 pounds ten shillings per week. Agnes continued to practise as a solicitor with the firm until 1919 when she married Lowell Mason Osborne on 23 March 1920. After her marriage Agnes did not undertake paid employment again but used her skills in community service. The Queensland Law Society's award, which commemorates 100 years of women in the law, is named in honour of Agnes McWhinney.

Published resources

Resource
Agnes McWhinney, The Supreme Court of Queensland Library, 2003,
http://www.sclqld.org.au/schp/exhibitions/witl/biographies/mcwhinney.htm

Agnes McWhinney (1891 - 1987), The State of Queensland; Department of Communities, 2009,
http://www.women.qld.gov.au/q150/1910/index.html#item-agnes-mcwhinney

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book Section
Agnes McWhinney, Bird, E., 2005

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

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