

Champions by Choice: The Long Climb to the Top

Legacy of Woman Suffrage in Washington State

This series was created to honor and celebrate the contributions made by women in Washington state to advance suffrage and equal rights over the past 100 years. This program will run in The Sunday Seattle Times from October 31 – December 5, 2010.

CHAPTER 4 **Holsters and Heels: Women Join the Police Department**

At the end of the 19th century, very few women had been given opportunities to succeed in the Seattle or King County workforce. The city's growth was exploding, however – in 1890, the population was 12 times what it had been just ten years earlier. And in 1893, the state of Washington passed a law that required all cities with a population of 10,000 or more to employ at least one matron on the police force. These early policewomen had the duty of taking care of all females who were arrested and detained in a city's prison.



Emma Taylor was working as a dressmaker when she was hired as the city of Seattle's first police matron. The City Council agreed that women in the police department were to be paid \$50 a month. Even though Taylor earned less

than her male counterparts, she often provided women or children in her care with her personal clothes, combs and towels. Taylor was described as firm, but kind and discreet.

Corinne Carter is one of the few African-American women listed in early city records. Beginning in 1912, she served as a volunteer

for the Seattle Police Department (SPD), working with African-American children who were brought into the station. After a few years, Carter was given the title of "Special Policewoman" so that she could be paid for her travel expenses. Carter also helped establish the Phyllis Wheatley Branch of the local YWCA to provide short-term overnight accommodations for women in need.

Although policewomen have been on the rolls of the SPD since 1912, equity in pay, rank and job description has taken many years to achieve. In the 1940s and 1950s, women worked in a separate division known as the "Women's Bureau." And as late as 1975, female police officers still wore a uniform consisting of a hat, jacket, skirt and heels, carrying a shoulder bag for their handcuffs, gun and bullets. But then things began to change.



Terri MacMillan (photo courtesy of Seattle Police Photo Unit)

Terri MacMillan, one of the first female recruits to go through the same application process, training and fitness tests as the male recruits, graduated from the police academy in 1976. Her graduating class of five women and the

following class of four women were known as "The First Nine." In a 2004 Seattle Times article, MacMillan recalled her experiences: "It was a test every day. The male officers watched to see what we were going to do ... We knew we had to be athletic, motivated, driven to take on a challenge like this." In spite of feeling she had to prove she was as physically and mentally strong as her male counterparts, MacMillan set an example for

those who would follow in her footsteps with her persistence, willpower and sense of humor.

There are now many women police officers in the Seattle Police Department – and King County's current sheriff, Sue Rahr, is a woman. Without the tenacity and determination of the women who came before them, however, these officers might not be able to serve the public today.

Time to think! Do you know any female police officers? How would their jobs be different if they weren't expected to perform the same tasks as their male partners? What other groups of public servants have only recently added women to their ranks?

Women in the Seattle Fire Department



Bonnie Beers (photo courtesy of Seattle Fire Department)

Women experienced prejudice in the Fire Department, too. Many assumed that they were not physically strong enough to handle the job. When the Fire Department was ordered to hire women in 1975, **Barbara (Bonnie) Beers**, a member of the University of Washington basketball team, took a year off to train for the entrance test. She became the first female firefighter in the Seattle Fire Department when she completed her recruit training in 1977. By 1997, Beers had been promoted to Battalion Chief.