

Gladys Ellsworth Knowles: Montana's Mrs. Republican

Gladys Knowles was a petite woman, who described herself as “five feet, one-half inch in high heels”, but she packed a powerful energy in her small frame. She was a businesswoman, a rancher, an energetic volunteer, and a stalwart supporter of her party.

Gladys Knowles was born in Nebraska in 1892, and grew up in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Her grandfather had immigrated to the US from England, and thought it was a wonderful thing to be able to participate in the political process. Her father and her uncle were deeply involved in local Republican politics.



Gladys Knowles.

Knowles moved to Omaha to attend business college. When she was 26, she married William Heinrich, who brought her to Montana to ranch on the Crow reservation south of Hardin. William died in 1933, and it was up to Gladys to keep the ranch running, which she operated until 1970, when she was nearing 80 years old.

Knowles followed her father in getting involved in Republican politics on the state level early on. She cast her first vote in Montana in 1920, as women had not been enfranchised in Nebraska while she lived there. She strongly urged other women to participate in the voting process, even going so far as to babysit children while their mothers went to vote. She became vice-chair of the state Republican party in 1932 and served in that position for four years. During that time, a law was enacted to provide a committeewoman for each precinct, as well as a committeeman.

She remarried to Aubrey Knowles in 1937, and they moved to Missoula. She became a national committeewoman for the Republican Party in 1940, and began attending all the national conventions. At the 1952 GOP convention, the Montana delegation was nearly unanimous in their support of Senator Robert Taft as their candidate. They voted 7-1 for him on the first ballot. Gladys was not a voting delegate that year, but she liked Ike, and thought he was the right choice, and pushed hard for him. She was greatly relieved that Eisenhower won the nomination, and the election that year. After the convention, she was elected as secretary for the Republican Party.

In 1953, Gladys and Aubrey Knowles moved to Billings. In 1955, she was named Montana's outstanding business woman of the year by MSU's School of Business Administration. At the 1956 GOP convention, where Eisenhower was returned as a nominee, it was Knowles's voice ringing out, calling the roll of state delegations.

Knowles collected elephants, the symbol of her party, and friends added to her collection regularly. One such gift was a pair of elephants inscribed “To Montana's Mrs. Republican.”

Away from the political field, Knowles raised prize-winning roses, and was deeply involved in a number of community organizations. The list of her activities astonishes: she was district and state president of the Montana Federation of Women's Clubs, president of the Yellowstone PEO, a board member of the the Montana Tuberculosis Association, the Montana Cancer Society, and the state Easter Seals. During the war years, she served as the war fund chair for the Red Cross for Missoula and Mineral Counties. She was also a member of the DAR, Zonta, the Montana Stockgrowers Association, the Montana Woolgrowers Association, National Cowbelles Association, and Landmarks of Billings.

Gladys Knowles died in Billings in 1985 at the age of 92. She is buried in Mountview Cemetery.

Sources:

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