

Helen R. Brewer

Helen Richards Brewer was a pioneering historian and college professor in Montana, and a role model for women in education.

Helen Brewer was born in Massachusetts in 1862. Her family lived on the east coast until 1877, when they settled in Grinnell, Iowa. Despite an interruption due to illness, she earned her bachelor's degree from Grinnell College in 1888, graduating with a Phi Beta Kappa honor for academic excellence. A few years later, she injured a knee to such an extent that she was homebound for some years. At the end of her recovery, she was able to attend the University of Nebraska, where she studied history and botany.

She had begun teaching in Nebraska after leaving Grinnell College, and also taught at a high school in Minnesota from 1896-1898. William F. Brewer, her younger brother, was already a professor at Montana State College (now Montana State University) at that time. He was permitted to take leave for a year's additional study at Harvard, and suggested that his sister might serve as a worthy substitute in his place. During his year away, the campus and student body had grown considerably and more faculty were needed. Helen Brewer was asked to remain, and to take on the organization of the History Department. She remained as head of the History Department until 1932, while her brother was in the English Department.

Her alma mater of Grinnell College bestowed an honorary Master's degree on Brewer in 1925. At the same ceremony, her niece and namesake, Helen Adele Brewer, received her bachelor's degree. These were the eighth and ninth degrees from Grinnell awarded to members of two generations of the Brewer family.

She seems to have been a woman of adventurous spirit. She had taken a solo journey to the east coast in 1905, to join an academic tour of Europe, especially in Greece and Italy. Her colleague (and successor as department head), Merrill G. Burlingame, commented that she and her students benefited more from that journey than if she had gotten a PhD. And later, when her brother was doing war work near Tacoma, she and an intrepid young neighbor girl who could drive took his car to him, traveling over the Rockies and Cascades in the Tin Lizzie on undeveloped dirt roads with few signs and poor maps. The women both had an adventure, said hello to their brothers at Camp Lewis, and took the train back to Bozeman.



Brewer's teaching methods at the college got attention. She reserved a portion of each class for a student-directed "International Relations Club". The club taught itself parliamentary procedure and chose its own topics. This type of learning was highly unusual at the time. The Carnegie Endowment for Peace paid tribute to her methods by donating a collection of books to the campus library in her honor. Brewer's academic work focused on the use of source materials, the original documents that influenced the conclusions of historians. Added to that, she had an abiding interest in Montana history, and strove to collect and preserve at the college the source documents of local history.

Miss Brewer was also active outside of academia. She was involved with developing a YWCA at the Montana State College campus, and served as state chair for the YWCA organization in 1907. She joined the Montana Women's War Council as a representative of the YWCA, to support war efforts during World War I. She was active with the Bozeman Daughters of the American Revolution, serving as the State Historian for the DAR in 1913 and as her chapter's Regent 1927-1928. Brewer was a member of the American Association of University Women, and served as its president from 1929-1931. She helped found the Montana State College Alumni Association, and became its only honorary member. She taught Sunday school in her church, and was a member of the Bozeman Women's Club and the Bozeman Business and Professional Women's Club. She also maintained her interest in botany, particularly with studying Montana wildflowers.

In 1932, Brewer retired. When she came to Bozeman, Montana State College had been a young institution, with only 46 students. At her retirement 34 years later, the student body had increased in size by some 2500%. Dr. Alfred Atkinson, the president of Montana State College lauded her, noting her unusual position as one of the few women to hold a professorship in history. "She has gained wide recognition as a teacher and holds a high place in the esteem of the faculty and students." Brewer died in Bozeman in 1946, and was buried with her parents in Grinnell, Iowa.

Sources:

Anaconda Standard, "Miss Brewer Ninth of Family to Get Degree from Grinnell College", June 6, 1925

Billings Gazette, "Retired Professor of History Dies", March 5, 1946

Billings Gazette, "State College Woman Resigns; Prof. Helen Brewer to End 34 Years of Service", May 4, 1932

Great Falls Tribune, "Quarter Century Club of Faculty Members at State College Will Banquet on Tuesday", October 27, 1930

Spice, Wilma Helen Heckenlaible, *Those Brewer Women!: Two Generations*, (Privately printed, Lodi, CA, 2014, 2017), pp. 38-47

Photo Credit:

Family photo posted at <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/53212764/helen-richards-brewer>, retrieved March 21, 2019. Used with permission.