

Manche Irene Langley (1883-1963)

By Trudy Allen

Manche Irene Langley was among the first women admitted to practice law in Oregon. During her nearly six-decade-long career, from 1909 to 1963, she was one of few women litigators in Oregon, an unusual profession for women until the 1980s. She was active in state and county politics and was one of the earliest women candidates for the Oregon legislature. She also taught law at Pacific University in Forest Grove. Widely admired as a person of energy, charisma, integrity, and professionalism, Langley was considered a matriarch of the law and was revered among generations of women lawyers.

Langley was born on August 19, 1883, in Furnas County, Nebraska, to parents William Langley, a lawyer, and Amanda Scott Langley. In 1891, the family moved to Washington County, Oregon, where Manche graduated from Forest Grove High School in 1898. She studied at Tualatin Academy and its successor, Pacific University, until 1903 and then read the law at Langley & Son, her father's office.

On October 12, 1909, Langley became the seventeenth woman to be admitted to practice law in Oregon. For almost twenty-five years, until 1933, she practiced general civil law in Forest Grove. *The Centennial History of Oregon*, published in 1912, described her as having a "keen intellectuality," "deductions...[that were] at all times logical," and "clear and forceful" reasoning.

In the fall of 1916, Langley ran for state representative for the Fifteenth District (Washington County) on the Democratic ticket, but she did not win. She served as secretary and chair of the Washington County Democratic Central Committee and was appointed Democratic National Committeewoman of Oregon on June 5, 1932. In 1920, she was a co-founder and first secretary-treasurer of the Washington County Bar Association, a professional association of lawyers.

Langley earned an LLB from the Northwestern College of Law in 1927 so she could teach law-related courses at Pacific University, which she did for five years. From 1933 until early 1935, she was a deputy district attorney for Multnomah County, serving under her brother, District Attorney Lotus L. Langley. She was the field representative for the U.S. Housing Administration in Oregon from 1935 to 1937 and was involved in overseeing the building of Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood. From 1937 to 1943, she was field representative, then district director of the Women's Division for the Works Progress Administration in Oregon.

In February 1944, Langley was appointed Multnomah County deputy district attorney and was assigned to the Women's Division. In 1961, she was named chief deputy of the Domestic Relations Department of the Multnomah County District Attorney's Office. Although assigned to work in domestic relations, she often served as special legal advisor to the Multnomah County Commissioners, especially in real estate matters.

Langley was an active member of the League of Women Voters, beginning in 1925. She was moderator for early sessions of the Northwest Institute of International Relations at Reed College, was on the state board of the League from 1944 to 1948, and in 1950 was a member of the organization's Committee on International Relations.

In 1925-1926, Langley was president of the Women Lawyers' Association of Oregon, formed in the 1920s. In 1948, she was a founder of its successor organization, Queen's Bench (now the Multnomah County chapter of Oregon Women Lawyers) and served as president in 1954. A lifelong member of Phi Delta Delta, a national women's legal fraternity, she was its province director for the second district (Oregon, Washington, Alaska, and British Columbia) from 1928 to 1932. From 1944 until at least 1950, Langley did volunteer work for the Oregon Prison Association, especially helping with parole cases; she was elected vice president of the association in 1949.

Among Langley's many interests were poetry, music, literature, theater, ballet, and gardening, and she was a connoisseur of western and Asian art. She was still vigorously practicing law when she died on July 13, 1963, a month before her eightieth birthday.

In a tribute written for *The Phi Delta Delta* in 1964, attorney Helen Althaus described Langley as "incomparable" and "unforgettable." She remembered Langley as "a warm, unique personality whose lively wit and humor put everyone at ease and enchanted all who met her...perhaps most of all, Manche was a humanitarian. Despite her efforts at anonymity, Manche's ever-impulsive, unselfish generosity to those in need became legendary in her lifetime." To perpetuate and honor her legacy and her influence on women in the legal profession in Oregon, a scholarship fund was established in Manche Langley's name at Lewis & Clark Law School.

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