

Clara Cynthia Munson (1861–1938)

By Richard Engeman

Clara Cynthia Munson had a brief but shining moment in Oregon history when she was elected mayor of the small city of Warrenton, on the Oregon Coast southwest of Astoria. In balloting held only a month after the statewide election of 1912 gave women the vote in Oregon, Munson became the first woman in the state to be elected and to serve as mayor.

Born in Oysterville, Washington, on June 15, 1861, Clara Munson was the daughter of Joel Wilson Munson, known as “Fiddler Smith,” and Sarah Sophia Kimball Munson. Joel Munson (1818–1899) had come to Oregon from New York in 1853 and worked as an oyster farmer on the Long Beach peninsula in Washington. In 1859, he married Sarah Kimball (1841–1917), who had come to Oregon with her family in 1847; they had two children. Joel Munson was named the lighthouse keeper at Cape Disappointment in 1865.

The Munson family lived in an isolated location near the U.S. Army’s Fort Canby, and in 1873 they advertised in an Astoria newspaper for a schoolteacher for Clara and her brother Fred. After Joel Munson left the lighthouse service in 1877, he built and captained a small steamboat, the *Magnet*, that served communities at the mouth of the Columbia. In 1880, he again took a position with the lighthouse service, this time at Point Adams, on the south side of the river. The same year, Clara graduated from Episcopal St. Helens Hall in Portland. After a brief stint at Wallacut school near Ilwaco, Washington, she began teaching at Fort Stevens, near Warrenton.

Munson was elected clerk of the Warrenton school board in 1908, a position she held until her death. She was active in the Rebekahs branch of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, serving as state treasurer, and in the Warrenton Civic Club. For a short time, she was acting postmaster of Warrenton. After the death of her father in 1899, Munson lived with her mother in a Queen Anne-style cottage with a small tower that still stands on Harbor Drive in Warrenton.

Warrenton was incorporated in 1899 and by 1910 had a population of 339 people. On November 5, 1912, Oregon voters approved woman suffrage in the state. Warrenton citizens soon convened a community meeting to draw up candidate slates for mayor and city council. The Citizens slate was headed by Clara Munson for mayor; the rival Independent slate was led by J. W. Detrich, whose candidacy was based on opposition to a woman mayor. In the city election on December 18, Munson received 38 votes to 22 for Detrich.

Munson’s one-year term as mayor began on January 1, 1913. Although she said she was “not very much in favor of woman suffrage,” she also believed that now that they had the vote women had a responsibility to “take an active interest in political affairs and show they are able to make good use of a ballot.” Her term was marked by civic improvements that included installing new wooden sidewalks, organizing a volunteer fire department, and establishing a dike inspector, necessary in a town built on reclaimed tidelands. In a cost-cutting move, she abolished the positions of city attorney and chief of police and assumed those duties herself.

Munson did not seek a second term. “I have reached the conclusion that mayorships are no positions for women,” she said in a UPI story datelined January 6, 1914. “I will not state my reasons, not wishing to become involved in controversies with those who believe differently, but they appear good and sufficient reasons to me.” She was succeeded in the mayoral office by George Schmitz. After leaving office, she continued her work with the school board and the post office, was active in the Rebekahs and the Warrenton Civic Club, was secretary of the Warrenton chapter of the American Red Cross during World War I, and volunteered at St. Thomas by the Sea Episcopal Church. After her mother’s death in 1917, she lived with her brother Fred.

Clara Munson died on October 18, 1938, and is buried in Ocean View Cemetery in Warrenton.

Sources

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The Oregon Encyclopedia

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