

## DAKOTA IMAGES

Few South Dakotans did more to promote equality for women than did Dorothy M. Rehfeld. A daughter of Brown County pioneers, Rehfeld holds several "firsts" in South Dakota's history.

Dorothy Marie Rehfeld was born 23 March 1884 to William and Bertha Voight Rehfeld on a homestead near Warner, South Dakota. After graduating from the eighth grade and teaching school, she attended Aberdeen Business College. Rehfeld then worked as a stenographer with the Lester T. Van Slyke law office in Aberdeen. As she observed court procedures, she grew fascinated with the art of litigation and aspired to become a lawyer.

Rehfeld was the only female among twenty applicants to take the state bar examination in April 1914. Upon passing with the highest score of her group, she became the first woman licensed to litigate in South Dakota and the first female admitted to practice law in federal court in the state. In 1916, she formed her own independent law practice. Rehfeld was sought out by female clients, whom she helped with domestic matters such as probate and divorce, and German immigrants, as she was one of the few German-speaking attorneys in Brown County.

Having established herself as a lawyer, Rehfeld turned to the cause of woman suffrage. She was one of ten state representatives to the first national conference of the League of Women Voters in 1920, where she spoke on civil service laws and women. Later that year, she represented the United States at the eighth congress of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance in Switzerland. There Rehfeld became acquainted with Carrie Chapman Catt, renowned leader of the woman suffrage movement. Rehfeld went on to chair the South Dakota League of Women Voters and serve on the Committee on the Legal Status of Women for the national League of Women Voters.

In 1927, Chief Justice (and former president) William Howard Taft accepted Rehfeld to litigate in the Supreme Court of the United States, making her the first South Dakota woman to receive that honor. Throughout the rest of her career, she lobbied for legislation friendly to the interests of women and children.

Rehfeld remained an independent lawyer in Aberdeen until retiring in 1932. She died in Pasadena, California, on 22 February 1934.

—Matthew T. Reitzel



Dorothy M. Rehfeld

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