

**UNA  
LEE  
ROBERTS**  
**1875-1950**



**WOMEN  
NOT ELIGIBLE  
TO HOLD  
STATE OFFICE**

Pioneer work of any kind is seldom easy. It is particularly difficult when it means breaking away from established customs. Under these conditions all the more credit is due to those women who braved public opinion by accepting political appointments. Great is the gratitude due them when they have made good.

In 1907, the only woman state official was the Commissioner of Charities and Corrections. In 1925, Assistant Secretary of State Una Lee Roberts discovered while reprinting the Oklahoma Constitution that only “males” were eligible to hold any other state office.

Una Lee Roberts was born in Hallsville, Texas in April 1875. She received her education at James College and a local Dallas business college. After graduation, she worked for her father’s lumber business, one of South’s largest wholesale lumber companies. In 1905 she went to work for the National Park Bureau in Sulphur at the Platt National Park, where she worked for fifteen years.

When Colonel R. A. Sneed left the national park for Oklahoma City as state Confederate Pension Commissioner, Roberts came with him. When Sneed was elected Secretary of State in 1923, he appointed Roberts as Assistant Secretary of State. She became the first woman to hold the office in the United States. She continued in that position after Colonel Graves Leeper was elected in 1927.

In January 1923 the Oklahoma Legislature approved a constitutional amendment to remove “male” from the qualification for state executive offices. It passed in a special election in October 1923 but Governor Walton, who was about to be impeached, nullified the election and its results. Roberts was shocked when she discovered in 1925 that the outdated law was still on the books.

In January 1927, Oklahoma’s first female Senator Lamar Looney introduced the resolution again but it never reached the Senate floor for a vote. In February 1929, it was introduced in the House but the Senate never considered it. In May of that year, it was introduced again and received eighteen ‘ayes’ but failed because nineteen others didn’t vote.

In September 1930 former Senator Looney petitioned the Supreme Court to force state election officials to place the 1923 amendment on the state ballot. She argued the vote was not completed when Walton cancelled the election. The court ordered the vote but it still failed in November 1930 because many voters didn’t see it at the bottom of a long ballot. It also failed in 1936 and 1940. The turnout was very low in the 1942 election but the amendment finally passed – barely.

In 1933, Roberts was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. She finally retired in 1935. In retirement she fought for equal pay and continued the battle for women to hold higher office. She died in 1950 at age 75. Roberts realized an awkward, and often incompetent, political system delayed full woman suffrage in Oklahoma.

Women had fought for equal suffrage in the courts and legislature from the first Territorial legislature. Women were elected to county offices because the law allowed it. Failure to amend the Oklahoma Constitution to allow women to run for state executive positions – between 1923 and 1940 – sent the opposite message. It was not Oklahoma’s culture that held them back. It was the dysfunctional constitution helped by incompetent politics.