

**KATHRYN  
NEDRY  
VAN LEUVEN**  
**1888-1967**



**WOMAN  
HAVE  
POWER  
TOO**

Since the beginning of time, there have been distinct divisions in the roles of men and women. In “The Merchant of Venice” by William Shakespeare, Portia was beautiful, but also powerful and intelligent. She defined feminism through heroic attributes like perseverance, strength, and resourcefulness.

On June 28, 1925, The Daily Oklahoman headline was “Pretty Little Portia Gets the Gate”. The article was about Kathryn Van Leuven, an attractive assistant Attorney General fired by her boss George Short. In a letter to a constituent, he requested Van Leuven’s resignation for “disloyalty and causing discordance in the office”. Discord may occur when women obtain power in society.

Kathryn Nedry was born in February 1888 in Fort Smith. Her father came to Perry during 1892 Land Run but sickness caused him to return to Fort Smith a year later. Kathryn studied with her father, a well-known attorney and a prominent real-estate investor.

In 1904 Kathryn married Bert Van Leuven and moved to Tahlequah. They moved to Nowata in 1909 where she learned law largely through her husband. She was admitted to the bar in 1913. She became Oklahoma’s first female prosecuting attorney, serving as assistant Nowata County Attorney from 1915 to 1917. She completed eighteen months of special coursework at the University of Chicago from 1917 to 1919, but never received a law degree.

In 1920, she was hired by Attorney General Prince Freeling as the first woman Assistant Attorney General in the nation. Freeling was a staunch anti-suffrage advocate but his admiration stemmed from observing her present cases before the Oklahoma Supreme Court. Van Leuven would serve for six years.

Freeling and his two assistants Van Leuven and Short went to Tulsa on another case and stayed to investigate the Race Massacre. She thought Police Chief Gustafson devious and unreliable, even before the riot. Hired in April 1920, despite a previous job dismissal and a checkered background, his department were subjects of state attorney general investigations at the time of the race massacre.

The State contended that after the trouble at the courthouse, “the negroes who armed themselves to protect their lives and property violated no law”. The police force neglected to do their duty so the citizens took matters into their own hands. She was the first public officer in the United States to remove police officers for failure to perform their duty when she removed the Tulsa Police Chief and 27 men from the force.

She had a close relationship with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. In 1936 she submitted a plan to President Roosevelt that was precursor to the Federal Food and Stamp Distribution Plan of 1940. She was appointed to the Social Security commission legal staff in 1936, but resigned to set up Oklahoma Job Insurance. Van Leuven was inducted in the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1939.

She died in December 1967 at age 79 in Oklahoma City. She wrote the law to establish the first Literacy Commission and make child desertion a felony. Like Portia before her, Kathryn defied and broke the mold of traditional gender roles in our society and showcased admirable qualities that are still important today.