

Sister Margaret Patricia McCarran

At a glance:

Born: July 22, 1904, Reno, Nevada

Died: December 31, 1998, Los Gatos, California

Maiden name: Margaret Patricia McCarran

Race: Caucasian; **nationality,** American; **ethnic background,** Irish American

Primary residence: Reno, Nevada; Oakland, California

Major field of work: Roman Catholic Sisters of the Holy Names

Other role identities: teacher, community assistance, writer



Sister Margaret McCarran

Photo courtesy the Nevada Historical Society

Catholic nun, daughter of U.S. Senator, focused on services to society

In Nevada, the name McCarran is well-known in political circles. But in religious, music and educational communities, the name also is remembered for reasons other than politics thanks to Sister Margaret Patricia McCarran's life and work.

In 94 years of living, Sister Margaret touched lives in several communities, particularly in Nevada and California, for her work in mental health issues, teaching and music in her years in the Holy Names religious order.

The oldest of four daughters and one son of U.S. Senator Patrick McCarran and Martha Harriet Weeks, Margaret McCarran was born in Reno in 1904. She attended schools in Reno and Carson City before entering high school at the

College of the Holy Names in Oakland, California. She also earned an associate degree at that school. Upon graduation, she was awarded medals for Distinguished Scholarship and General Excellence, the only graduate of the school at that time to win two medals, the *Reno Evening Gazette* noted on June 10, 1922.

Sister Margaret's mother was against her taking religious vows, and her father thought his younger daughter, Mary, more suited to religious life, as Mary McCarran said in her biography *Once There was a Nun*, published in 1962, in which Mary narrated her story to writer Ruth Montgomery.

Harriet McCarran "had strenuously opposed Margaret's decision to become a nun," Mary McCarran recalled in the book, "and Papa had also tried to dissuade her because, with her brilliant mind and broad interest in politics and world affairs, he felt Margaret should have a public service career."

But Margaret made her own decision, joining the Roman Catholic Sisters of the Holy Names novitiate in 1923.



Margaret McCarran Postulate, 1924.

Photo courtesy the Nevada Historical Society

Sister Margaret earned her bachelor's degree in music and political science at Mount St. Mary's College in Los Angeles, according to her obituary, published in the *Reno Gazette-Journal* on January 5, 1999. She then taught music in private and parochial schools for 23 years.

Sister Margaret was known as a harpist, but she finished her master's degree in art history at Washington, D.C.'s Catholic University. After receiving a doctorate in history with a minor in political science in 1952, she returned to Holy Names College to teach history. But in 1963, Sister Margaret returned to Reno to care for her mother, aunt, two sisters and brother until their deaths, the 1999 *Reno Gazette-Journal* article noted.

At the time, Sister Margaret was one of only a few nuns allowed to take such a leave, Sister Margaret said in a June 14, 1969, *Reno Evening Gazette* story about her efforts to save the family ranch, located along the Truckee River east of Sparks. She and her remaining family were living on the ranch, which was in danger of flooding if a proposal to cut a nearby reef on the river was allowed.

"I've been assigned to St. Mary's Hospital during my stay in Northern Nevada," she said, "But when there's not enough room, they sometimes let you stay with relatives. And St. Mary's just didn't have enough beds."

In addition to her duties as associate professor of social science at the College of Holy Names, while staying at the ranch, she waged a letter-and-phone-call campaign to see that the river channels in the area were properly drained and cleaned to alleviate flooding of properties along the Truckee.



Sister Margaret and her father Patrick McCarran at Lake Tahoe, 1935.

Photo courtesy the Nevada Historical Society.

“We’ve been injured over and over again out here,” she said of flooding. “Aside from our businesses, we have tremendous historical and cultural value here.”

During the 1960s, she wrote a biography of her father. In November 1969, Sister Margaret arranged an exhibit at the ranch of paintings done by her younger sister Mary, who died in 1966. Mary also had entered the Holy Names order as a young woman and gained renown as a teacher and artist (see Sister Mary McCarran biography). Mary left the convent in 1957 to care for her mother after the death of Senator McCarran in 1954.

Among her other works, Sister Margaret ran the Halfway House in Reno in 1970, helping people with alcohol addiction. She also worked as a special minister at the Nevada Mental Institute and was named an Outstanding Woman of Nevada in 1984 by Alpha Delta

Kappa honorary society for women educators, the *Reno Gazette-Journal* reported.

In 1976, Sister Margaret was a co-founder of the Nevada Poetry Society. She returned to the convent in 1996 as her health began to fail.

Still, in 1997, she led an effort to keep a racetrack out of the area of the family ranch.

Upon her death the following year, friends said her hospitality to political leaders, business people and others involved in civic and cultural pursuits was legendary, her obituary noted.

Sister Margaret’s memorial Mass was celebrated at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Sparks.

**Researched by Patti Bernard; written by Susan Skorupa Mullen
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Sources of Information:

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