

Ethel May Potter Parker

At a Glance:

Born: August 13, 1891, in Utah

Died: October 31, 1970, in Las Vegas, Nev.

Maiden Name: Potter

Race/Nationality/Ethnic Background: Caucasian

Married: J. Benjamin Parker

Children: Milton, Robert, Franklin, Ralph

Primary City: Reno, Nevada

Major Fields: Civic clubs, music, history, journalism



Photo credit:
Reno Evening Gazette

Reno clubwoman, musician, journalist helped preserve Bowers Mansion

An active mother of four boys, Ethel M. Parker was a whirlwind of civic activity in Reno. She was an accomplished musician, a writer, a historian, and a political activist, a leader in the successful effort to preserve Bowers Mansion.

Born Ethel May Potter in August 1891 to James M. and Alice Potter, she is known to have moved around quite a bit, with the census listing her in Ogden, Utah; Owyhee and Wallace, Idaho; Salt Lake City, Utah; and ultimately, Reno and Las Vegas, Nevada. In 1911, she quietly wed J. Benjamin Parker on Christmas Day. He was a chemistry and assaying major from the University of Idaho, leading to his profession of mining engineer, and leading to many of Ethel's adventures and writing assignments connected to mining.

The couple had four boys, Milton, Robert, Franklin, and Ralph. When they were young, they comprised a family band which Ethel directed, as part of her many activities as a musician. She was an accomplished pianist, performing at various events in her different hometowns and representing musicians as a delegate at the Utah Federated Music Clubs convention in 1932.

In 1936, the Parkers moved to Nevada for J.B.'s mining business, Nevada Mineral Laboratories, and Ethel settled in with her family, including getting the oldest two sons into the University of Nevada. In 1940, she formed a local chapter of the National Legion of the Mothers of America, which she described to a reporter as a "non-political, non-profit, non-partisan group of 3 million women who are interested in supporting a strong campaign for adequate national defense, but opposing the conscription of American troops overseas..." She said the group was to encourage women to voice their opinions, to vote, and to study important public questions.

It came as no surprise, then, that she helped form and was the first vice president of the prominent Reno Women's Civic Club in 1944. She was president by 1946 and encouraged public speakers such as prominent suffragist Anne Henrietta Martin. In 1951, she met with several officials and groups to push the idea of building an underpass or overpass for the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks through Reno, an idea that finally came to fruition many years later.

Her music remained an important part of her life in Reno where, in 1947, she was elected president of the Nevada Repertoire Club, which put on many musical performances in the area.

Her husband's work informed much of her work as historian and writer. Ethel Parker was interviewed by the *Nevada State Journal* about her impressions of the mining ghost town of Bodie in 1936, and she gave such detailed information and impressions that she started writing articles for the paper about mining towns and characters. One of her more personal and detailed stories recalled how she and her husband learned of the possibility of prospecting for uranium from an airplane. They'd heard a talk on the subject at a convention and decided to take their small private plane, a 1936 Ercoupe, on an exploration of the idea. They had done prospecting on burros before, but this was quite different. She described having a nucleometer on her lap, which could detect uranium, and as her husband dipped the plane close to the mountains of the Sierra, the machine started making all sorts of noise, indicating it had worked and indeed detected uranium from the sky.

She was in the forefront of the civic club's drive to purchase Bowers Mansion for preservation as a park and historic site. One of the longest articles she wrote was her account of how the mansion was about to be snapped up by California developers for use as a bar and casino, when ladies from her civic club approached the owner and proposed its purchase for preservation instead of commercial use. The club raised a quarter of the money needed when the Washoe County Commission agreed to raise the rest and become the title owners of the park. The club still had a prominent part in restoring and furnishing the mansion in the style it was originally intended.

She was interested in the beautification of downtown Reno, too. In 1964, she wrote a letter to the editor of the *Nevada State Journal* on behalf of the Civic Club commending businesses who had worked to improve the exteriors of their businesses on Virginia and Fourth Streets.

In 1966, she moved to Las Vegas. In 1970, she died there and had her funeral, but she was brought back to be buried in Mountain View Cemetery in Reno.

Researched by Patti Bernard and written by Kitty Falcone

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Sources of Information

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