

Ellen J. 'Nell' Roberts Tabor Martin

Last Elected Town Recorder, First Appointed City Recorder and Treasurer-Recorder
3rd Child, 1st Daughter of Councilor Owen Roberts, Sister of Mayor Fred Roberts



Nell Roberts, Age 1 in 1892

1891-1966 ♀ The woman who would become known as the “First Lady of Milwaukie” was born on September 9th, 1891 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The third child of Councilor Owen and Mrs. Margaret Roberts, she was two years old when the family moved to Milwaukie, Oregon, settling in the Minthorn Hill area, near the present day intersection of Harrison Street and 42nd Avenue. The family was known to sell water from Minthorn Springs to visitors on the hill. At age 6, Ellen, known as ‘Nell’, had a serious and nearly fatal bout of pneumonia which left her thin and “puny”. She survived the ordeal and until 1906 attended Milwaukie School, which sat on the same block as present day City Hall, where Nell would serve Milwaukie for many years.

After spending the 1908-09 academic year as a student at the Holmes Business College in Portland, Nell launched a 32 year career as a hair stylist primarily in the Portland-Milwaukie area, although she spent some time in Lewiston, Idaho where she owned a beauty salon with one of her sisters. Upon returning to Oregon, Nell lived briefly on a farm in the Tualatin Valley before finally resettling in Milwaukie, where she would live in the original Roberts family home for all but the last two years of her life. By 1936, when her second husband Roy Martin passed away, Nell had been widowed twice and had two sons, Robert A. Tabor and Howard O. Martin. Howard would serve in the United States Air Force, and both sons would remain close to their mother, living in the greater Portland area for most of Nell’s life.

In 1940, Nell joined her brother Fred, known as Bid, on the ballot as a candidate for the Office of Town Recorder. Bid was running for Mayor. Both Roberts siblings won their elections that year and would serve together at City Hall for most of the next eighteen years, and both would pass away while holding office. As Recorder, Nell was charged with setting-up elections and running the polling booths and prior to 1944 performed many duties now assigned to the Municipal Court Judge and City Manager. As Judge during the war years, Nell gained a deep insight into the human emotions of a nation at war and she offered much valuable counsel and understanding to the City’s troubled youth. She was always willing to lend a hand to those who came to City Hall looking for assistance. In one instance she went to great lengths, within a matter of hours, to assist a young service man about to ship out who was looking for his long lost mother. Although not able to find his mother, they located his sister and at the Recorder’s request a member of the Milwaukie Fire Department drove the young man to Oregon City for the brief family reunion. Nell’s re-election in 1944 was the last time Milwaukie elected a Recorder, as major changes to the City Charter that same year made the position an appointed one. Nell has the distinction of being the last elected and first appointed Recorder.

In addition to her service at City Hall, Nell was very involved in the Milwaukie community as a member of the Milwaukie Historical Society, Milwaukie Friends of the Library, Milwaukie Community Club, Milwaukie Business Women’s Club, Milwaukie Covenant Church, Daughters of the America Legion, she was a Past Royal Matron of Amaranth Clackamas Court 10, a member of Eastern Star Daphne Chapter No. 13, board member of the Milwaukie Pioneer Cemetery and was a member of the Oregon Historical Society. She was active in planning and organizing the Centennial Celebrations for the Milwaukie community in 1950 and for the State of Oregon in 1959, courageously leading the singing of the newly adopted and not-well-known state song “Oregon, My Oregon”. In commemoration of the City’s 50th anniversary as an incorporated City she wrote several articles for local newspapers and alongside brother Bid helped to dedicate the Founders plaque on the Pioneer rock in front of City Hall. And on top of all this, the Oregon City *Enterprise-Courier* reported in 1953 that she was a good and knowledgeable cook.

After 16 years serving Milwaukie as Recorder, Ellen Martin had decided it was time to step down, sort-of. At the end of 1956 she formally retired as Recorder, and at the same time was appointed by City Manager Earl Burdick to the newly created post of Treasurer-Recorder, essentially becoming the part-time clerk of the City Council. Most saw this as a move to keep Nell around City Hall in a role she loved. At the time, she was quoted by one local paper as saying “a person who is healthy and has two feet and two hands has no reason to say they haven’t anything to do. All they need to do is look around them, and find that there is always work for willing hands.” Retirement for Nell didn’t mean a life of leisure; it meant doing the work she loved and perhaps less of the other stuff. But by 1957 she had six grandchildren to keep her busy and she still lived in the original Roberts family home on Minthorn Hill, near the intersection of Harrison Street and 42nd Avenue.



An Oregon Journal photo of Nell Martin and the Pioneer Rock in front of City Hall

Although semi-retired, Nell continued her activities as she always had, including her community involvement. In 1959 she was awarded the 50 year pin by the Rose City Chapter of the Eastern Star. After seven decades in the same house, in 1962 Nell left her parents’ home and moved into an apartment at 1935 Jefferson Street in downtown Milwaukie. Although she denied having hobbies or collections, she had special bookshelves built to hold and display her impressive collection of historic mementos and souvenirs and she began to paint. She continued to attend all Council meetings – she had attended around 500 by 1966 – and she continued to be active in the community, helping to cut the cake at the 50th anniversary of the Milwaukie Grammar School early in 1966, which turned out to be her final public appearance.

On March 9, 1966, Nell entered Holladay Park Hospital in Portland due to an attack of influenza. Less than a week later she passed away at 11:30 AM on Monday March 14, the influenza proving to be the final straw in a series of heart and respiratory troubles. Nell’s sudden death, at the age of 74, moved all of Milwaukie to tears. The original funeral arrangement calling for a ceremony at Peake’s Funeral Home in Milwaukie was quickly moved to the larger Masonic Lodge across Harrison Street from City Hall due to the overwhelming turnout. The pall bearers were “Nell’s Boys”, the Milwaukie police and fire men who would often give her rides home after Council meetings. She was survived by one of her four siblings, Margaret, her two sons and ten grandchildren.

In the 26 years Ellen Martin served Milwaukie she had become a living legend, the authority on all things Milwaukie past and present. Known to some as the “grand lady of Milwaukie administration” she had made it her business to know the City and its people and was always willing to share her memories.



Ellen J. "Nell" Martin
City Recorder 1940-1956
Clerk 1957-1966

Her collection of photos and other Milwaukie documents were turned over to the Milwaukie Historical Society after she passed away. Never one to sit idle, she was known to be a good conversationalist and was often heard saying “I have no spare time, I just keep busy”, a mantra likely fueled by her belief that “things are bound to get better”, another of her quips. She was remembered by Mayor Bill Hupp as the “feisty” red-head who refused to record parts of Council meetings she didn’t approve of, which, according to Mayor Hupp, caused the Council to record Council meetings.

After a lifetime witnessing the development of a community Nell certainly had her opinions on the issues facing the City, but ever the optimist, the daughter and sister of civic leaders, clerk and recorder of the Council, keeper of Milwaukie history, a legend Nell Martin shall always be. Good, bad or otherwise, she loved Milwaukie and she believed it had a better tomorrow built on a solid pioneer past. 🐦

RESOLUTION NUMBER 10-1966

WHEREAS, Almighty God, in His infinite wisdom has seen fit to remove from this earthly life, ELLEN J. MARTIN, and

WHEREAS, ELLEN J. MARTIN was a highly respected citizen of the area close to the City of Milwaukie, and had faithfully and honorably served the City of Milwaukie as

CITY RECORDER, JANUARY 1, 1941 to DECEMBER 31, 1956, and
CITY CLERK, JANUARY 1, 1956 UNTIL HER DEATH ON MARCH 14, 1966

with credit and honor to herself and to the City of Milwaukie, and

WHEREAS, the Council of the City of Milwaukie is appreciative of the services rendered to the City by the said ELLEN J. MARTIN and the high type of citizenship which she exemplified, and regret her passing,
NOW THEREFORE

BE IT, AND IT IS HEREBY RESOLVED, that the appreciation of the Council of the City of Milwaukie, of the high type of citizenship exemplified by ELLEN J. MARTIN, and the creditable and honorable services which she rendered to the City, and further, the regret of said Council at her passing, be conveyed to her surviving relatives, and further, that a copy be spread upon the minutes of the proceedings of this body.

Passed by the Council of the City of Milwaukie, this 21 day of March, 1966.

Approved by the Mayor this 21 day of March, 1966.



Robert E. Richmond
Robert E. Richmond, Mayor

Fred C. Dyer
Fred C. Dyer, City Manager

Max C. Thompson
Max C. Thompson, Assistant City Manager

R. E. Osborne
R. E. Osborne, City Recorder