
Dr. Clara Schell: Pioneer Arizona Territory Optometrist, Suffragist, and Community Leader

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Optometry, women's rights, and animal rights all contributed equally in shaping the life of Dr. Clara Schell. She was born in Chicago, Illinois on June 27, 1872, the daughter of Charles and Catherine Kaub.¹ At age 19 Clara married Henry A. Schell on February 20, 1891 in Chicago, Illinois. Due to Henry's asthma, they moved to the small mining town of Morenci in the Arizona Territory where he worked at the Detroit Copper Mining Company store as a bookkeeper and optometrist.² Henry quickly became active in community and professional organizations and was elected as a delegate to the Territorial Democratic Convention in Phoenix.³ In 1898, he attended the organizational meeting of the American Association of Opticians in New York City and became one of 183 charter members.⁴ The Schells built a house in Morenci, furnished it with a piano shipped into town by train, and advertised for a housemaid in the Phoenix newspaper.⁵



Figure 1: Clara Schell (1872-1955) and Henry Schell. (photos courtesy of Aileen Schell McCurnin)

Henry Schell expanded his optometry practice outside Morenci and traveled by train and car to towns throughout southern Arizona and Sonora, Mexico to provide optometric care. He advertised his travel schedule in local newspapers and stayed at hotels where he gave eye examinations and prescribed glasses in his hotel room.⁶ In 1900, Henry moved his optometry practice to Tucson to provide a centralized base for his trips to visit patients.

After the Schells moved to Tucson, Clara returned to Chicago to attend the Northern Illinois College of Ophthalmology and Otology. After graduating in 1902 at age 30, Clara returned to Arizona and joined her husband in his optometry practice in Tucson. She was the first woman optometrist in the Arizona Territory and one of the first women optometrists in the United States.⁷

Clara became a partner in her husband's optometry practice and frequently traveled with him in southern Arizona and Sonora, Mexico to visit patients as well as friends. The office of Schell and Schell was located at 38 N. Stone Avenue.⁸ An *Arizona Weekly Citizen* article described Schell and Schell as "Arizona's oldest exclusive optical house with the first lens grinding plant in the state" well known "for accurately fitting glasses, good services and reasonable prices" by "Arizona's leading optometrists and opticians."⁹

Without legislation establishing standards for practicing optometry and licensing procedures for optometrists, at the beginning of the twentieth century anyone could practice optometry, a situation which was exploited by charlatans. Spectacle peddlers traveled throughout the rural United States with ready-made eyeglasses while other men gained optical experience as apprentices in watchmaker or jewelry stores or studied the limited available books on optics and eye physiology. The first optometry law was passed by a state legislature in Minnesota in 1901, and the American Association of Opticians was founded in 1898. This organization was later re-named the American Optical Association in 1910 and then the American Optometric Association in 1919.¹⁰

One of the key issues in the development of optometry and for professional recognition of optometrists by medical physicians was the creation of state optometry licensing boards to regulate the practice of optometry. When the Arizona territorial legislators approved a bill to create an Arizona optometry board in 1905, Governor Joseph Kibbey vetoed the bill on March 22.¹¹ Two years later in March 1907, the Arizona Territorial Board of Optometry was established, and Arizona joined 13 states with optometry boards.¹² Governor Kibbey appointed two optometrists, Henry Schell of Tucson and Ernest Munson of Phoenix, and physician H. T. Southworth of Prescott as the initial board members.¹³ The Territorial Board of Optometry members continued to be composed of two optometrists and a physician until 1918 when Dr. Southworth joined the military during World War I and the vacant board position was filled by optometrist D.D. Northrup of Phoenix.¹⁴

During the territorial optometry board's first meeting on April 6, 1907, Henry Schell was elected president. The new board created state licensing examinations, conducted licensing examinations and established \$5 dues. During a six month enrollment period for current Arizona opticians to register for licensure, 37 applications were received and processed by the board in 1907. On April 13, 1907, Henry issued Licenses No. 1 and 2 to himself and Clara. The first licensing examination was held on July 1, 1907 and one of three applicants (A.S. Green of Denver) successfully passed the examination with a grade of 83. In 1908 Henry Schell was re-elected president of the

territorial optometry board. During this year, the territorial optometry board approved a motion to publish lists of licensed optometrists in Arizona newspapers along with a \$25 reward for the arrest and conviction of illegal unlicensed optometry practitioners. During the next 16 years, Henry served as president or secretary of the Arizona Board of Optometry.¹⁵

In May 1908, after meeting with an American Association of Opticians representative Dr. William Houston, 70 Arizona opticians organized an Arizona Optical Society. Henry and Clara Schell were charter members of the Arizona Optical Society and regularly attended state meetings.¹⁶ On April 30, 1909, Henry Schell was elected vice president of the Arizona Optical Society. In 1921 the Arizona Optical Society re-organized as the Arizona Association of Optometrists with a constitution and bylaws¹⁷ and by 1923 there were two women optometrist members: Clara Schell of Tucson and Donna Fleming of Bisbee.¹⁸ Clara was the Arizona delegate for the 1922 American Optometric Association national convention.¹⁹ On June 26, 1926, Clara was elected president of the Arizona Association of Optometrists in San Francisco, California at their annual meeting one day before the American Optometric Association national convention.²⁰

Despite her busy professional schedule, Clara was a Tucson community leader and activist for women's rights. She served as the commander of the Old Pueblo Hive, Women's Benefit Association of the Maccabees and helped organize the Equal Suffrage Club of Pima County with Dr. Rosa Goodrich Boido, Josephine Brawley Hughes, Abbie Haskin, and Ruth May Nowell.²¹ Clara gave the first women's suffrage speech at the Old Pima Theater on West Congress Street, and was one of the Tucson suffrage leaders.²²

In 1891 Josephine Brawley Hughes, wife of the *Arizona Daily Star* newspaper owner, worked with Laura Johns, a National American Women's Suffrage field organizer from Kansas to organize an Arizona suffrage association. Governor Alexander Brodie vetoed a woman's suffrage bill passed by the 1903 territorial legislature. When territorial legislators prepared a draft state constitution for President William Taft's approval 1910, they did not include a clause for women's suffrage because they believed President Taft would veto a state constitution allowing women to vote. After Arizona became a state on February 14, 1912, Arizona Equal Suffrage Association President Francis Willard Munds circulated a suffrage initiative petition for the November ballot state-wide when the state legislature failed to pass a bill for women's suffrage.²³

During 1912, the Equal Suffrage Club of Pima County worked with the Arizona Equal Suffrage Association to organize mass meetings in Tucson and southern Arizona to support passage of the suffrage initiative on the November ballot. On March 6, 1912 the Equal Suffrage Club of Pima County organized a mass meeting at the Clifton Theater in Clifton with Dr. Rosa Goodrich Boido, Selim Franklin, Clara Schell, Rena Matthews, and Adele Fields as speakers.²⁴ In her speech, Clara Schell declared:

I have been asked to tell why I believe in Equal Suffrage. I know of no good reason why any fair minded person should not believe in it. Any intelligent person, regardless of sex, should have a voice in the making and maintenance of state laws under which he or she must live...You and I, my dear woman, have home, school, and property interests. We have the best interests of the community and our fellow man at heart. Hoodlums – the worst type of men are allowed to vote. You, my dear fellow woman, you and I have not. Is it right? Would you neglect your husband, children, and home for politics? No, not any more than your husband, brother, or

son would jeopardize his business interest because he is interested in politics and has a voice in the making and maintenance of the laws and affairs. I believe when women have the franchise, qualifications will be necessary for those seeking office other than being just a good fellow. Let us prepare ourselves for the proper use of the franchise which will surely be ours soon. Let us use it for the best interest of our fellow women, to the betterment of our homes, and to the purification of our politics.²⁵

In November 1912, Arizona voters approved the suffrage initiative to give women the right to vote but they were unable to register to vote until the following spring. One of the first women in Tucson to do so was Clara Schell who registered to vote on April 9, 1913.²⁶

In March 1917, the Tucson Business Women's Club was founded to create an organization for Tucson's working women, and Clara Schell became a charter member of the new organization. During the same year, Tucson Business Women's Club members raised \$1,000 and founded the YWCA organization in Tucson. When the Arizona Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (Arizona BPW) was founded in 1921, the Tucson Business Women's Club was one of six charter clubs of the new organization which was affiliated with the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs. At that time, the club name was changed to the Tucson Business and Professional Women's Club (Tucson BPW). The goals of Arizona BPW and Tucson BPW were to promote opportunities for women to advance in the workforce, provide networking for working women, provide scholarships for women, and address legislative issues affecting working women such as equal pay.²⁷

In 1922 Clara Schell was elected vice president of Tucson BPW and succeeded Agnes Biddle as club president when Biddle resigned in June 1922. Her interim presidency was so successful that she was quickly elected president in her own right the following year. During Clara Schell's presidency from 1922-1924, Tucson BPW membership grew to over 170 members.

As club president, Clara also worked to promote women's issues. In January 1924, the club organized a public meeting with a national speaker to discuss passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.²⁸ Another legislative issue which Clara addressed was the Arizona minimum wage law for women. As women began working at the beginning of the twentieth century, a series of what became known as protective laws were created to "protect" women workers.²⁹ One such law was the 1917 Arizona minimum wage law which established a minimum wage of \$10 weekly for women except women agriculture workers and housemaids. In 1917, although Tucson BPW did not officially oppose passage of the Arizona minimum wage law for women, many club members circulated a petition of opposition to the law.³⁰

When Representative Rosa McKay introduced a bill in the 1923 state legislature to increase the minimum wage for women from the \$12 wage approved by the state legislature in 1919 to \$16 per week, Clara discussed the issue at a Tucson BPW executive board meeting of nine members and they voted to officially oppose passage of the proposed McKay bill and authorized Clara to travel to Phoenix to lobby state legislators. Tucson BPW opposed the McKay bill because members believed it would result in young girls losing their jobs, increase consumer prices, and cause loss of business from Arizona

to other states with lower prices. An *Arizona Star* article about the board meeting reported:

So long as women are competing with men in the business world, give them an equal chance is the opinion of the (Tucson BPW) board. If a minimum wage law is found necessary, let it apply to both men and women then there will be no discrimination shown when it comes to employment of either.³¹

Clara spent several days in Phoenix discussing the issue with state legislators and when she returned to Tucson, she reported to Tucson BPW members at a club meeting: "I may have done some good but I should have been there a week ago" and stated most of the state senators opposed amending the minimum wage law for women.³² However, state legislators voted unanimously to amend the minimum wage law for women, and Governor George Hunt signed the McKay bill into law on February 13, 1923.³³ A Tucson newspaper article about the February 15 Tucson BPW meeting stated:

(Clara) had been censored and commended for her action at the suggestion of the board of the club...but was first, last, and always for the working girl and her interest, but that after a complete study of the bill she felt it would do more harm than good to the working girl. (Clara stated) It is the young girl who is just starting out to work that will be most seriously affected for without experience the employer will not want to pay her \$16 a week. Whereas if she worked for sometime (sic) obtaining experience at ten or twelve dollars she, with the aid of her family, would be able to get along. The bill has been passed and the only action which can now be taken is to get a certain number of names on a petition and to have the bill voted upon by the public in general.³⁴

However, the Arizona minimum wage law for women did not end until 1925 when the United States Supreme Court ruled the Arizona minimum wage law for women unconstitutional.³⁵

In 1923 Clara organized a three car caravan of 15 women who drove over rugged, unpaved roads to the Arizona BPW state convention in Prescott, Arizona. At the convention, Clara promoted Tucson as the site for the next state convention and the club members worked together for the election of Tucson postmistress Allie Dickerman Brainard as state president.³⁶ During the second year of Clara Schell's presidency when Allie Dickerman Brainard was Arizona BPW president, they worked together to organize the 3rd state convention in Tucson. The convention was held at the Tucson BPW clubrooms from April 11-12, 1924 and was attended by over 100 club delegates from throughout Arizona.³⁷

Following her presidency, she continued to be an active member of Tucson BPW and served as chair of several committees. In 1932 she was part of a Tucson BPW delegation to greet First Lady Lou Hoover when President Herbert Hoover's train traveled from California through Tucson to Washington DC.³⁸ In 1936 as Tucson BPW public relations chair, Clara organized the National Business Women's celebration in Tucson from March 15-21, which featured a hotel banquet and daily radio broadcasts by club members.³⁹

In 1905, Clara also helped re-organize the Arizona Humane Society which was based in Tucson and served as the secretary for the next 17 years. In this capacity, she traveled to Clifton, Globe, Bisbee, and Nogales and founded Arizona Humane Society chapters in those cities. Clara also organized Be Kind to Animal Weeks in Arizona, distributed information to newspapers about animal right issues, and prepared annual state reports to the National Humane Society. In recognition of her work for animal rights, she was awarded a life membership.⁴⁰

During these busy years of medical and community activities Clara and Henry adopted two young children: William and Helen. After 34 years of marriage, the Schells separated in 1925 and divorced by 1929. Clara continued working in Tucson while Henry moved to Phoenix in 1939 where he worked until his death in 1946.⁴¹ When William Schell graduated from Los Angeles College of Optometry in 1929, Clara and her son practiced optometry together as Schell and Schell until 1936 when William opened his own optometry office.⁴² Clara continued to work in a solo optometry practice until her retirement in 1946 at age 76. Two years later, the Arizona State Association of Optometrists awarded Clara a life membership in recognition of her contributions to Arizona optometry.⁴³

A woman who enjoyed life, Clara enjoyed traveling with her husband on fishing and hunting trips. In 1917, the Schells bought a Studebaker and she kept a detailed log of their trips throughout southern Arizona in their new car.⁴⁴ Clara and Henry also enjoyed traveling in Mexico. During 1909 they traveled by train, steamer, and stagecoach to Culiacan, Mazatlan and other towns.⁴⁵ Henry and Clara built a 2-bedroom cabin on Mt. Lemmon for weekend visits and bought a house in the desert which they named Alta Vista. She also enjoyed playing bridge and frequently organized card parties for community clubs.⁴⁶ After she retired, Clara lived briefly in Chicago, Illinois and then returned to Tucson where she died at age 83 on April 24, 1955.⁴⁷ She will be inducted into the Arizona Women's Hall of Fame in spring 2017 in recognition of her achievements as a pioneer optometrist and community leader in Arizona.^a

Although Clara Schell's professional accomplishments may seem unique, she practiced optometry during an era when women optometrists received professional recognition by their male peers earlier than women physicians or women lawyers. When the American Association of Opticians (later re-named the American Optometric Association) was founded in 1898, two women optometrists, Mrs. William C.C. Ball of Connecticut and Annie Starr of Canada were charter members.⁴⁸ Elva Cooper was elected second vice president of the American Optometric Association in 1910, and she presided at the organization's national convention in 1911.⁴⁹ By 1912 there were approximately 500 women optometrists, and an issue of *The Optical Journal and Review* featured articles and letters from 18 women optometrists in Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Oklahoma, Ohio, Kentucky, Maine, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Colorado, Indiana, Illinois, Louisiana, and New York describing their experiences as optometrists along with their recommendations for women seeking to enter the field of optometry.⁵⁰ In 1917, Mildred Winslow was elected fourth vice president of the American Optometric Association. During 1920 Dr. Mae Booth-Jones was the first woman president of an optometry school, Washington School of Optometry in Spokane, Washington.⁵¹ Women and men students attended and graduated together from optometry schools and there were no separate optometry colleges founded for women students.

By contrast, when the American Medical Association was founded in 1849 there were no women members for 27 years until Sarah Hackett Stevenson of Maryland joined the national organization in 1876. The first woman vice president of the American Medical Association (Lillian South of Kentucky) served in 1913 but the first woman president of the American Medical Association (Nancy Dickey of Maryland) did not serve until 1989.⁵² Because women were an under-represented minority in their profession, women physicians formed the American Medical Women's Association in 1915 for professional support. Similarly, because it was difficult for women to enter medical schools during the 1800's, medical schools were founded for women students such as the Woman's Medical College in Pennsylvania in 1850⁵³ and the New York Medical College and Hospital for Women in 1863.⁵⁴

Early women lawyers encountered similar obstacles. The American Bar Association was founded in 1878 by 75 male lawyers but the first two women lawyers were not elected to membership until 1918 (Mary Florence Lathrop of Denver and Mary Grossman of Cleveland). In 1995, Roberta Cooper Ramo of New Mexico was the first woman to serve as president of the American Bar Association.⁵⁵ Since they were unable to join the American Bar Association, in 1899 eighteen women lawyers in New York City formed The Women's Lawyer Club which re-organized in 1923 as the National Association of Women Lawyers.⁵⁶ The first law college established for women students was the Washington College of Law in the District of Columbia (now known as American University Washington College of Law) in 1896.⁵⁷

Another successful woman optometrist whose career closely paralleled that of Clara Schell during the same time period in the West is Texas optometrist Mollie Wood. She obtained an optometry degree in 1898 and became the first woman optometrist in Texas, was appointed by Governor Miriam Ferguson to the first Texas optometry board, elected president of the Texas Optometry Association in 1923, elected to the national American Optometric Association board of trustees in 1928, published an optometry journal *The Texas Optometrist*, and organized Brownwood Business and Professional Women's Club.⁵⁸

Clara Schell was a pioneering woman optometrist in the Arizona Territory who traveled widely throughout southern Arizona and Mexico to provide optometric care and created a lasting legacy in Tucson for women's rights, and animal rights, and optometry.

Notes

- a. The Arizona Women's Hall of Fame "honors posthumously women who played a significant role in the history of Arizona." It is a very competitive nomination process and only four women are admitted into the Hall of Fame bi-yearly. Schell is the first woman optometrist to be admitted to the Arizona Women's Hall of Fame and one of very few women in the Hall of Fame in the optometric field.

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