

PRESS-TELEGRAM

LOCAL NEWS

100 years later, tales of Long Beach's first woman to hold elective office stay alive

Myrtelle Gunsul, still the city's longest-serving elected official, first won office on May 13, 1919



An exhibit of Myrtelle Gunsul, Long Beach's first woman to hold elected office, is seen in a conference room at the Long Beach City Hall on Tuesday, March 26, 2019. Myrtelle Gunsul was first elected in 1919, after serving 4 years as Chief Deputy City Auditor, she was re-elected ten times and retired in 1951 after serving 32 years. (Photo by Ana P. Garcia, Contributing Photographer)

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Even a century ago, Long Beach was ahead of the political curve.

As far as national history goes, the spring of 1919 was marked by the strengthening of the women's suffrage movement, a campaign that would soon see victory in Congress passing the 19th Amendment and the states ultimately ratifying it on Aug. 18, 1920.

But by that point, women in California had been voting for [nearly a decade](#). Long Beach had moved on to a bigger question as it faced a May 13, 1919, election for City Auditor: Should the town vote in its first woman to hold public office?

The city's longest-serving elected official

Myrtelle Gunsul, who was 46 at the time, was up against three men for the job. But as the person who had served as the Deputy City Auditor under the retiring Charles Boynton, she had an edge. Her experience, coupled with the energized support of the city's enfranchised women, led to an easy victory: She won 4,093 votes, with her closest competitor — and the man Boynton had endorsed — claiming fewer than half her tally: 2,022 votes, according to the 2013 book “Prohibition Madness,” [written by local historian Claudine Burnett](#), which documents that era of Long Beach's history.

Gunsul would go on to be re-elected for the office 10 more times, a feat that has yet to be replicated by any other elected official in Long Beach. [Her tenure in the job lasted 32 years](#), which spanned six presidential administrations, the beginning and end of the Great Depression, and the beginning and end of World War II.

Gunsul also held the job as change swept through Long Beach. According to local historian Craig Hendricks, Long Beach was home to about 50,000 people when she was first elected. But by 1930, in the wake of the [discovery of oil in Signal Hill](#), the population had grown to over 160,000. For much of her 32 years, Hendricks said, she was the highest female public official in the western United States. But despite her stature in the city and her status as a pioneer for women in elective office, her records were nearly lost to history — until the [current City Auditor Laura Doud](#), who is only the second woman to hold the post, decided she wanted to learn more about the history of her position, shortly after she was first elected in 2006.

“I said, ‘Why don't we do some research and find out when this office was first established, and who was the first auditor to be elected, and what was the mission of this office?’” Doud said. “The idea was, so we can kind of prepare better for the future, as we learn from the past.”

Doud had no idea her staff would uncover the tale of a trailblazer.

How she won the public's trust

“I found out that two of her core values that she held dear were independence and integrity,” Doud said, which were two ideas that were critical to her own campaign for the office. “I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, I didn't even know this woman existed, and that was my platform.’ I just really felt so connected to her.”

As Doud and her staff continued to research Gunsul, they learned more about how a woman in that era could win the public's sustained trust. One of Doud's favorite newspaper clippings is titled, “Just eighteen cents bring real flurry to Auditor's office.”

According to the article, 18 cents — which would be about \$2 or \$3 today — had prevented the budget from balancing under Gunsul's watch. So her staff spent months trying to track those pennies down until, the article said, her deputy city auditor found “the apparent discrepancy was the result of a transposition in bookkeeping.”

For Doud, that kind of diligence serves as a model for her own aspirations in the office.

“She cared about the taxpayer’s money, and it didn’t matter if it was 18 cents or one cent,” Doud said. “She would’ve done the same thing. \$1 million, or one cent, whatever. She cared about it. She protected it.”

Doud said she also read about plenty of instances when Gunsul used her office’s powers to reject officials’ request to expense costs to the city.

“She denied all kinds of stuff,” Doud said. “I saw, someone bought flowers for a city event, and she said, ‘Taxpayer money doesn’t pay for flowers.’”

For Hendricks, who has studied Gunsul’s career, that attentiveness is likely a key reason why she kept being re-elected — even as she faced opposition from within City Hall.

“Reading between the headlines, one gets the idea that the powers-that-be at City Hall really didn’t expect her to be much more than a figurehead,” he said. “They just expected her to rubber-stamp their decisions, and boy, she did not. She conducted audits, and when she found something wrong, she went after people.”

Hendricks said there were many instances of subtle retaliation against Gunsul, including the city manager refusing to allow a telephone line in her office and reassigning a spacious office designated for her to another department. But, Hendricks said, Gunsul held her own and continued to keep Long Beach officials accountable to the taxpayers.

What’s more, Hendricks said, she managed to earn her outsize reputation as an auditor for the people without ever making a speech while in office.

For Doud, that profile fits right into one of Gunsul’s reportedly favorite phrases, “Actions speak louder than words.” But, given the era, Doud also said, “She was probably elected 11 times *because* she didn’t make a speech.”

How Long Beach keeps her memory alive

Regardless, the countless tales of Gunsul’s commitment to the people keep Doud inspired. Since she first learned of Gunsul’s story, Doud has done her best to make sure her memory stays alive in Long Beach. To commemorate the centennial of the Long Beach City Auditor’s office in 2008, Doud held an open house where she displayed some relics the library held of Gunsul’s career. Doud also named her own conference room in Gunsul’s honor.

Doud’s staff tracked down Gunsul’s grand-niece, who kept an old scrapbook of newspaper clippings along with other artifacts from Gunsul’s life. All of those items were then donated to the city to aid Doud’s mission, and Doud now exhibits them in Gunsul’s conference room.

But as the summer grand opening of the city’s new Civic Center — and the demolition of the current Long Beach City Hall — looms, the question of how Gunsul’s memory will fit into the new space is still being debated.

“I’m not sure about the wall space yet,” Doud said of her new office. “We haven’t had a chance to go over there and scope everything out. We’ll have to check it out.”

A letter that reads, “City Auditor Gunsul wrote a letter for a time capsule buried at the Long Beach Municipal Auditorium in 1931. The time capsule was opened 44 years later in 1975, and this letter to the women of the future was discovered.”

What she does know, she said, is that city leaders are hoping to have some section of the new City Hall dedicated to Long Beach’s history — and the story of Gunsul’s career should certainly fit into that.

Particularly because of a 1931 letter that Gunsul wrote “to the women of the future,” Doud feels a special responsibility to honor her.

“I hope that the position of women in National and City Administrations of the future shall be more clearly recognized as a great constructive force for the betterment of all,” Gunsul wrote. “I have blazed this trail and endeavored to leave a record that shall be an incentive to women. I hope that, increasingly, women shall enter into public service and instill high ideals and motives into both political and business life.”

For Doud, instilling those high ideals into Long Beach’s political life keep her moving forward, even as she looks back to learn from the past.