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LONG BEACH

Pioneer's spirit still motivates

As the city's first elected woman 100 years ago, Myrtelle Gunsul opened doors for others

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Women holding elective office in Long Beach is now a century-old tradition.

Today marks 100 years since the 1919 election when voters sent the first woman, Myrtelle Gunsul, to City Hall. Even though she was up against three men for the city audi-

tor position, she glided to an easy victory with the backing of Long Beach's enfranchised women voters, possibly emboldened by the suffrage movement sweeping the nation. One month later, Congress passed the 19th Amendment, sending the question of whether women should get the right to vote to the states for ratification, which happened in August 1920.

For Gunsul, May 13, 1919, marked the beginning of a 32-year career. She was 46 at the time and won every re-election campaign that followed. To this day, she remains Long Beach's longest-serving elected official.

Despite the progress Gunsul embodied, four more men succeeded her over the next 55 years before another woman, Laura Doud, won the post.

Doud, who was elected in 2006 and has been re-elected three times since, views Gunsul as a source of trailblazing inspiration. She has fought to preserve Gunsul's legacy, including transforming Doud's own conference room in City Hall into an exhibit of Gunsul's life.

Now that the 100th anniversary of such a fundamental



Myrtelle Gunsul was elected in 1919 to be the city auditor in Long Beach. The first woman to hold a position at City Hall was re-elected 10 times and retired in 1951 after serving 32 years.

PHOTO BY ANA P. GARCIA

GUNSUL » PAGE 6

Gunsul

FROM PAGE 1

moment has arrived, Doud said, she looks forward to honoring the occasion.

"I will definitely take a moment with my office to just reflect on the past 100 years and just what a milestone this is," she said. "It must have been a really exciting time back then, for women to finally vote, and to have her be our first woman elected official."

As special as today is for Doud, it means more to Gunsul's family.

"It's been 100 years," said Gunsul's grand-niece, Darlene Koch. "I can hardly believe it."

Koch, 82 and the granddaughter of Gunsul's brother, was born as her great-aunt was serving her 18th year in the office. She said that by the time she was 4 or 5, she would often accompany Gunsul to work and witness her in action.

"I sat on her desk at times and just listened to her talk to other people," Koch said. "It was mostly the men, but they listened to her when she spoke."

"It was amazing to me, it really was," she added,

that any man in the 1940s would listen that intently to a woman.

"I was thinking, 'Why are they listening to her?'" Koch recalled. "They really paid attention. When I think about it now, I wish I would have known how important it was for a woman to be in her position."

By all accounts, Gunsul was well-respected in her role. She took the job seriously, and at one point made such a fuss over 18 misplaced cents that her efforts to balance the books made headlines.

That commitment to integrity and being a watch-

dog for the public is something that motivates Doud each day.

"Her emphasis, I think, on transparency and accountability, those are still in place today," she said.

While Koch never knew much about Gunsul's job as she was growing up — other than that she commanded respect — she did know that Gunsul was a loving great-aunt.

"She was just a prize," Koch said. "She certainly was."

When Gunsul wasn't holding up in City Hall, she would drive Koch to her cabin in the mountains,

where she would teach her grand-niece about the birds that flew by, the trees that were sprouting up and whatever might catch Koch's attention.

"She was always trying to teach you something," she said. "From my standpoint, she was a marvelous aunt."

If Koch regrets anything about her relationship with Gunsul, she said, it's that she didn't get to know her great-aunt well enough. She now maintains her connection with Gunsul through the memories and newspaper clippings of that momentous time in Long

Beach's history.

But for her and Doud, Gunsul's spirit lives on in the city through the women who followed.

"I think if she were here, she would be so happy and pleased to see how active women are in our Long Beach local government, and to see the impact that we're having," Doud said, pointing to the city's four councilwomen and the female majority on Long Beach's commissions.

"It's just really great to see that balance and that contribution," Doud added. "I just think she'd be really pleased."