

**Edwina Mack Ellison: "The leading attorney in the community"**  
***A story from Schuyler County's history for March's Women's History Month***

Edwina Mack planned a life in music. Playing the organ at the United Methodist Church in Watkins as young as 11, she studied music at Cook Academy in Montour Falls, graduating from the school's program in 1913 and Watkins High School in 1914. She attended the Peabody Music Institute in Baltimore and, returning home to Schuyler County, taught piano locally and in Elmira.

But when Edwina Ellison retired, she didn't close out a career in music. Instead, she had been a practicing lawyer in Schuyler County for 40 years, breaking barriers and championing women's causes.

Arthur R. Ellison was working as a court stenographer and studying for his law degree when they married in June 1916. He began practicing law in 1918. His years as a lawyer included 1921-33 as Schuyler County district attorney and many years as county attorney, then both part-time positions. In his private practice he worked in criminal, civil and municipal law.

Working in the early years of their marriage as her husband's clerk sparked Edwina's own interest in the law. She enrolled in Cornell University's law school in 1923. Raising a family, clerking in her husband's Watkins Glen office and driving herself to classes in Ithaca in a Model T Ford, Edwina needed 12 years before admission to the New York State bar in 1935. She was one of very few women lawyers in New York State at the time.

Edwina and her husband worked together in all areas of the law until his death in 1946. She continued to serve the community until the mid-1970s. Their



**M****R****S.** **EDWINA** **ELLISON**, wife of former District Attorney Arthur R. Ellison of Watkins Glen, is one of the 558 candidates who passed recent bar examinations. A former president of the Zonta Club, she is the third woman attorney in Schuyler County. The others are Mrs. Harriet Wood Johnson of Hector and Mrs. Marcellus Cass of East Hill.

Elmira Star-Gazette May 10, 1935

partners' desk, a single piece of furniture at which they sat facing each other, is used today at the International Motor Racing Research Center in Watkins Glen.

Her husband's failing health led Edwina to take over his county attorney duties in 1940. After his death, she was formally appointed to the position by Schuyler lawmakers each year through 1969, when she declined to return. She had been the first woman in New York to be appointed to that county government job.

"I have no intention of retiring from private practice. But due to the stress of general law practice I feel that I should no longer continue as county attorney," she told the Star-Gazette at the time. Upwards of 160 people attended her retirement dinner.

The couple's son, William, joined his mother in the law practice and as deputy county attorney for a few years before moving on to be Schuyler district attorney, Schuyler county judge and then state Supreme Court justice. Edwina held the Bible as he was sworn in as Supreme Court justice in July 1974.



**TAKES OATH** — New York State Supreme Court Justice Charles B. Swartwood (left) administers oath of office to new Schuyler County Judge William N. Ellison

as Court of Claims Judge John F. O'Mara witnesses the ceremony. Judge Ellison's mother, Mrs. Edwina Ellison, holds the family's bible.

Elmira Star-Gazette July 20, 1974

Edwina served as president of the Schuyler County Bar Association, the first woman leader of the group and the only woman lawyer in the county for many years. She was influential in the Republican Party at the local and state levels. She was a founder in 1925 of the Watkins Glen-Montour Falls Zonta Club, which is still active today.

A sought-after speaker in the region,

her talks to community organizations focused on women's issues.

"When I came here, she was the leading attorney in the community," Schuyler County Judge John P. Callanan told the Star-Gazette for Edwina's obituary published on July 2, 1989.

Edwina Ellison died on June 30, 1989, at the age of 93.