

## Helen Kolb Herr

### At a Glance:

**Born:** August 3, 1907, Fargo, North Dakota

**Died:** June 23, 1999, Victorville, California

**Maiden Name:** Helen Kolb

**Married:** Gottlieb Herr, Joseph Bartell

**Children:** Geraldine Herr Bauer

**Primary City and County of Residence:**

Las Vegas/Clark County

**Major Fields of Work:** Politics



Helen Herr  
Legislative Counsel Bureau

---

### ERA opponent fought for wide range of women's rights

The first woman to be elected to the Nevada State Senate was known as a strong protector of women's rights but also a strong opponent of the Equal Rights Amendment. It was one of her most profound political fights.

Helen Herr was born Helen Kolb in Fargo, North Dakota, on August 3, 1907, to Conrad and Hilma Kolb. She attended teachers' college in her youth. She married Gottlieb Herr at the age of 20, and divorced him in Ely, Nev., in 1961. Four years later, she married Joseph Bartell but didn't keep his last name after Nevada Attorney General Harvey Dickerson ruled that candidates must file for office under their true and full names. She said she had used the last name of Herr throughout her entire professional life, so she had it legally changed.

She had lived in Los Angeles, but in 1948 her doctor advised her that for her health, she should move to the drier climate of Nevada, so she ended up in Las Vegas, where she opened Helen Herr Realty in 1949. She tiptoed into politics by being elected vice president of a brand-new Democratic Women's Club in Las Vegas, organized by Democratic National Committeewoman Gladys Dula.

In 1956, as a realtor, she foresaw the damage from the proposed freeway from Las Vegas to Boulder to property owners along the path. So, she worked hard to keep it a highway, not a freeway. She was elected secretary of the newly-formed State Highway Advisory Board.

Her fights against the Boulder freeway ruffled some feathers. In December 1957, she demanded an apology from members of the Clark County Commission for saying she'd exceeded her authority as secretary of the Committee. She accused the commission of trying to "muzzle her," and said, "Generally, you gentlemen are right, but in this instance, you were wrong. I hope you will be man enough to admit it." She also declared, "I shall never stand by and allow the investment of millions of dollars to be jeopardized if my small voice can possibly prevent a possible tragedy."

She was later elected president of the Boulder Highway Association. In those two positions, she worked with then-Governor Charles Russell on a compromise to improve highways from Las Vegas to Boulder, but also to Henderson. She chided the state highway department in a letter to the governor, to "try to work a little closer to the people." But a compromise was reached, in which she said, "Two good things have been accomplished...first, it will restore the highway to normal values and business, which have been deprived for the last year and a half, and secondly, it is saving \$1 million of the taxpayers' money."

This was the springboard to her long-term foray into politics.

She won her first Nevada State Assembly seat in 1957 and served until 1961. She then lost an election but came back in 1963 to serve until 1966. During that time, she focused on issues affecting women, children and seniors, as well as accused lawbreakers. In 1958, she sponsored a bill to use an increase in marriage license fees to fund what she and judges across the state saw as a pressing need: public defenders in all Nevada counties.

Herr held many government and volunteer positions when she was running for her second Assembly term. She was chairman of the East Las Vegas Town Board; secretary of the Ground Water Board; secretary of the Board of Directors of Clark County Sanitation District Two; member of the Zonta Club, a global organization of "professionals who advocate for women's rights, education, and equality," according to its website; member of the Small Business Committee of the Western States Conference; member of the Clark County Humane Society; member of the Church of Religious Science; member of the Las Vegas Press Club; and member of the Fraternal Order of Police Auxiliary.

In 1966, she became the first woman to run for what one newspaper editor called "The Men's Club" of the legislature, the state Senate. She won and served



Senator Helen Herr, 1973  
Legislative Session Photo

there until 1977 when she lost her primary. She blamed the loss on her opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, as she was chair of Nevada's "Stop ERA" campaign. She felt that the Amendment did not do what proponents said it would and continued opposing it even when it cost her a State Senate race.

The issue was supported by an overwhelming majority of people in the state's largest senatorial district, according to its supporters, as well as by 60% of people in the state. Still, it was not approved by the Nevada state legislature then. But 35 years past the national deadline, it was approved in 2017, despite the point of being moot. The ERA was first passed by Congress in 1972 and last approved by a state (Indiana) in 1977. Congress set a deadline for state approvals, which was not reached in time to make it law.

In her time in the Senate, she helped pass the 1973 guarantee of equal pay for equal work. She advocated for social reforms for women, children, and the elderly, including the requirement of measles vaccinations for school-aged children. She worked tirelessly to improve conditions in the state's prisons. She especially was concerned about the plight of teenage girls who ran afoul of the law. She was a guiding force for the construction of the "girls' training center" in Caliente, now known as the Caliente Youth Center, which now serves both boys and girls from 12 to 18 years of age.

Herr advocated for firemen and policemen, too, fighting to reduce the age of retirement by five years, and to have heart disease considered an occupational hazard of not just firefighters, but of policemen as well.

She worked to protect antique car owners in the state, making a "NV Antique Vehicle" license plate available and removing them from the requirement of paying vehicle privilege taxes.

One of the odder bills she was asked to sponsor was called the "Bare Bosom Bill," which involved prohibiting semi-nude floor shows at Vegas Strip hotels. She slow-walked the bill, which ended up dying in her committee.

She once fought conservative Douglas County Assembly Speaker Lawrence Jacobsen, who ordered legislative women to not wear pantsuits or maxi-dresses. He was in the Assembly, she in the Senate. She pointedly said, "We are moving into a new legislative era – one which retreats to medieval days." She noted that the dress code did not prohibit mini-skirts. She succeeded in stopping the code in the Senate.

In 1991, an elementary school in Las Vegas was named after her, and in 1993, she was elected to the Nevada Senate Hall of Fame.



Photo by Mona Reno.



She moved back to California, where, in Victorville, on June 23, 1999, she died of heart failure. She is buried beside Geraldine H. Bauer, Helen's daughter, at Davis Memorial Park in Las Vegas, Nev.

Photo added to Find-A-Grave by Lora.

**Researched by Patti Bernard and written by Kitty Falcone**

### Sources of Information

Ancestry.com. U.S., *Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015. [Helen Kolb Hoerr]

Ancestry.com. Year: 1910; Census Place: *Kensal Ward 1, Stutsman, North Dakota*; Roll: T624\_1147; Page: 2a; Enumeration District: 0217; FHL microfilm: 1375160. [Helen Kolb]

Ancestry.com. Year: 1930; Census Place: *New Rockford, Eddy, North Dakota*; Page: 1B; Enumeration District: 0012; FHL microfilm: 2341469. [Helen Harr]

Ancestry.com Year: 1940; Census Place: *Santa Monica, Los Angeles, California*; Roll: m-t0627-00256; Page: 8A; Enumeration District: 19-749. [Helen Hoerr]

"Antique cars tax exemption is proposed." *Reno Evening Gazette* (Reno, Nevada), 20 March 1973, p2.

"Bare Bosom Bill Slowed Down." *Nevada State Journal* (Reno, Nevada), 3 March 1959, p6.

"County Plans for Public Defender Financing Move." *Las Vegas Review Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), 11 December 1958, p1.

"Democratic Women Form Club." *Las Vegas Review Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), 11 July 1950.

"Dress Code Arouses Women Legislators." *Nevada State Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), 20 January 1971, p1.

“Equal Rights Amendment Backed by Clark Survey”. *Nevada State Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), 16 February 1975, p48.

“Ex-Law maker Helen Herr dies at 91.” *Elko Daily Free Press* (Elko, Nevada), 2 July 1999, p8.

“Helen Herr Asks Apology of Commissioners Board.” *Las Vegas Review Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), 10 December 1957, p1.

“Helen Herr Gets Marriage License.” *Reno Evening Gazette* (Reno, Nevada), 29 June 1965.

“Helen Herr in Court to Change Name Legally.” *Nevada State Journal* (Reno, Nevada), 6 May 1966, p16.

“Helen Herr Named to Highway Board Position.” *Las Vegas Review Journal* (Reno, Nevada), 6 June 1957, p2.

“Helen Herr Planning Bid For Position in Assembly”. *Las Vegas Review Journal* (Las Vegas, Nevada), 13 February 1962, p15.

“Helen Herr Plans to Run for Senate.” *Nevada State Journal* (Reno, Nevada), 18 June 1966, p7.

Koch, Ed and Cy Ryan, “First woman state senator, real estate broker Herr dies.” *Las Vegas Sun* (Las Vegas, Nevada), 1 July 1999.

Women in Nevada History. “Helen Herr.” *Makers: Women in Nevada History*. <https://womennvhistory.org/portfolio/helen-herr>. As seen 1 October 2024.