

Margaret Jensen Williams

At a Glance

Born: Nov. 17, 1917, Gardnerville, Nevada

Died: June 30, 2000, in Sparks, Nevada

Maiden name: Jensen

Race: Caucasian

Married: Dr. Loring Rider Williams

Primary residence: Reno and Sparks, Nevada

Major field of work: teacher, expert on native plant and rock gardens



Margaret Jensen Williams
Reno Evening Gazette, 1941

Reno teacher loved native plants, rock gardens

Margaret Jensen Williams discovered the true passion of her life when she was already in her 30s. She devoted much of her life to teaching elementary school students in the Washoe County School District. But in the 1950s, she discovered the world of native plants and rock gardening and began devoting much of her time to educating others about the beauty and mysteries of the Earth.



Margaret's
high school
graduation photo.
Courtesy NNNPS
newsletter.

Margaret was born in Gardnerville, Nevada, on Nov. 17, 1917, the daughter of John Arendt (Babe) Jensen and Wilhelmina (Minnie) Springmeyer Jensen. Her family worked on ranches in the area, buying a dairy farm in Gardnerville when Margaret was 11 years old, according to a lengthy obituary in the Northern Nevada Native Plant Society (NNNPS) newsletter of September 2000. She graduated from Douglas County High School in 1934 as valedictorian and from the University of Nevada in 1938 with a bachelor's degree in chemistry. She completed a master's degree in math in 1940. She was a member of Delta Delta Delta sorority and Phi Beta Kappa honorary fraternity.

In 1941, she married Dr. Loring Williams, an assistant chemistry professor at the university. The couple took an extended honeymoon to West Virginia, the groom's mother's home, then to Niagara Falls and Yellowstone National Park.

During her post-graduate years, Margaret taught math at the university until 1943, then continued to work at the university and at other jobs including editing the university catalog and being an assistant in the dean's office. In 1955, she began teaching in the Washoe County School District until her retirement in 1981, the NNNPS newsletter reported. Margaret taught fourth grade at Libby C. Booth Elementary School for years.



Margaret as a teacher, 1961.
Photo courtesy NNNPS newsletter.

In the early 1950s, Margaret began to garden, with an interest in both flowers and vegetables. She joined a local gardening group that traveled to several states to view gardens. At a spring garden show in Oakland, Calif., she met Owen Pearce who told her about rock garden societies, and she joined one.

In the late 1950s, she attended a talk in Reno on wildflowers where she met the speaker, Phil Cowgill, his wife Faith, and Faith's sister Laura Mills. Margaret and Laura spent time together looking at plants and anything in the realm of natural history. They spent a lot of time exploring the back country at all times of the year seeking out plants and other natural history phenomena.

Margaret visited gardens in California that contained alpine plants, then decided to grow a few in her own garden in Reno. In back issues of the Quarterly Bulletin of the Alpine Garden Society of the Great Basin, she read a series about plant-hunting explorations in Nevada and neighboring states. Some of the plants she read about and saw photos of, she put in her own garden. She started collecting seeds and sending them in exchanges throughout the world.



Margaret Williams and Rupert Barneby in the Pine Nut Mountains of Douglas County, Nevada, on May 31, 1982. The plant in the foreground is named for Margaret, *Astragalus convallarius* var. *margaretiae*.

Photo by Frank Almeda.
Courtesy NNNPS newsletter.

Margaret was an avid and exciting speaker with talks highlighted by her own photos. In 1971 John Thomas Howell, curator of the botany department of the California Academy of Sciences, asked her to start work on a "flora of Peavine Mountain" project and she began collecting specimens.

That same year, the Williams family moved to Sparks, where Margaret began directing work on a rock garden with plants from all over the world. In 1975, she decided to start a local native plant society. She was co-founder of the Northern Nevada Native Plant Society. On April 17, the society was born with Margaret as president. She

served in that position for three years, then as executive director for another 17 years. She envisioned the group as a way to unite people who were interested in plants. She also continued her field work on native plants through most of the 1980s.

Many of her photos of native plants were published in magazines and books. She has three plants named after her and spoke at local, national and international rock garden plant conferences. Her many awards included the Marvin E. Black award from the American Rock Garden Society in 1988.

Margaret died on July 7, 2000, in Sparks. She had suffered a stroke in 1994. She broke her hip in the summer of 2000. Her husband and two brothers preceded her in death. She was survived by her daughter Elizabeth, her son Stephen, a sister Elinor Erickson, a niece and five nephews.

Researched by Patti Bernard and written by Susan Skorupa Mullen

Sources of Information

Ancestry.com Year: 1920; Census Place: *East Fork, Douglas, Nevada*; Roll: *T625_1004*; Page: *9B*; Enumeration District: 5 [Margret Jensen]

Ancestry.com Year: 1930; Census Place: *Gardnerville, Douglas, Nevada*; Page: *1A*; Enumeration District: *0002*; FHL microfilm: *2341031* [Margaret Jensen]

Ancestry.com Year: 1940; Census Place: *East Fork, Douglas, Nevada*; Roll: *m-t0627-02276*; Page: *11A*; Enumeration District: 3-3 [Margout Jenna]

Ancestry.com.; *Seventeenth Census of the United States, 1950*; Year: 1950; Census Place: *Reno, Washoe, Nevada*; Roll: *2301*; Page: *41*; Enumeration District: *16-34* [Margerite Williams]

"Awards Given At Exercises Here Monday." *Nevada State Journal* (Reno, Nevada), 10 May 1938, p.9.

"Church Ceremony Unites Well Known Couple." *Reno Evening Gazette* (Reno, Nevada) 14 May 1941, p.12.

"Faculty Club Enjoys Debate." *Reno Evening Gazette* (Reno, Nevada), 7 March 1940, p10.

"Margaret Jensen Williams." *Reno Gazette-Journal*, (Reno, Nevada), 7 July 2000, p.46.

"Reno Pair Wed at Rite." *Nevada State Journal* (Reno, Nevada), 15 May 1941, p.5 (with picture).

Tiehm, Arnold. "Tribute to Margaret." Northern Nevada Native Plant Society Publications. V. 25, No. 7, September 2000.

"Twenty-Two Graduate from Douglas High School." *The Record-Courier* (Gardnerville, Nevada), 1 June 1934, p.8.

"UNR Alumni Honor 7 at Homecoming." *Reno Gazette-Journal* (Reno, Nevada), 3 November 1988, p.41.