HELEN RULISON SHIPLEY

At A Glance:

Born: July 23, 1870, Dayton, Nevada

Died: June 6, 1955, Reno, Nevada

Maiden Name: Helen Mullen Rulison

Race/Nationality/Ethnic Background: Caucasian

Married: Robert H. Shipley, July 19, 1916, Reno, Nevada

Primary City and County of Residence and Work: Reno (Washoe County), Goldfield (Esmeralda County), Tonopah (Nye County)

Major Fields of Work: Dentist

Other Role Identities: Teacher, Wife

Dr. Helen Rulison Shipley
Nevada State Journal, 1955

First Nevada woman dentist was last of Reno pioneer family

Miss Helen Rulison had the honor of being Nevada's first female dentist when she joined her brother David in his dentistry practice at Reno in 1899. Three members of the Rulison family, David, Helen, and Fred, were among Nevada's first professionally trained dentists, and their offices were to be found in Reno for over 50 years. Only when she reached her 66th year did Helen finally retire from the profession she had practiced in San Francisco, Reno, Goldfield, and Tonopah, and to which she had devoted 49 years of her life.

Born Helen Mullen Rulison on July 23, 1870, this "pioneer" woman's story began at the Keystone Mill near Dayton. Her father, Charles Henry, her mother, Ellen Mullen, and her oldest brother, Charles James (b. 1861), were early pioneers of a different sort who had left Huntley Grove, Illinois, and crossed the "Great American Desert" in the spring and summer of 1863 bound for the Comstock. Over the years three more boys, Helen, and another girl were added to the Rulison family of six children.

"Nellie" as Helen was known in her youth, received most of her education in the Dayton schools. Her father had moved back to Silver City in the late 1870s, only to return to the Lyon County seat a few years later. Unfortunately for this young girl, who consistently received the highest scores in her class, the ever-deepening Comstock mining depression had severely affected her father's occupation as a millwright which prompted him to move his family to Reno on February 16, 1888, half-way through Nellie's senior year in high school. Despite the rather abrupt transition in her life, Nellie graduated from

Reno High School in June at the top of her class. In September she enrolled in the University of Nevada's School of Business and graduated that academic year on June 13, 1889.

Helen Rulison Shipley
Nevada State Museum
Carson City, Nevada

Like many young women in the latter 19th century, Nellie chose teaching, one of the few vocations then open to females. January 1890 saw Nellie instructing 37 students at the South Side School across the Truckee River from Reno. Sixty-five dollars per month must have seemed like a great deal of money for a young woman of 19, and her "fortunes" were to increase the next academic year. While teaching third grade at Reno's elementary school, Nellie's monthly salary had increased to 70 dollars. In June 1892, after having taught fourth grade for one year, Nellie apparently had enough of the pedagogical profession.

Impressed by her brother's success as a dentist, Helen followed in his footsteps in 1894, moved to San Francisco, and enrolled at the University of California College of Dentistry. She received her Certificate on August 5, 1897. Soon there were two dentists in the Rulison family, David practicing in Reno, and Helen in San Francisco while her younger brother Frederick attended California Dental College. Helen came to Reno in 1899 at the request of her brother David Rulison, to cover his dental practice while he was in Honolulu. A new Nevada State Board of Dental Examiners was appointed on April 10, 1905, which included Helen Rulison. Helen found her career had been given a considerable boost with her membership on the board.

Reno, Tonopah, and Goldfield were swept up in a mining boom in the first years of the 20th century. The smaller community of Reno included a total of 20 dentists, while more populous Goldfield had only 13. This discrepancy caused Helen to look southward for improved opportunities. Late in 1906, Helen boarded the south-bound Southern Pacific train for Esmeralda County's golden mecca. She hung out her shingle at the San Jose Hotel – soon to be renamed the Gray-Craig Hotel – in November 1906. She advertised in the local newspapers that crown and bridge work were her specialties. While living there she speculated on the Goldfield stock market in hopes of instant wealth. Although she made no fortune, apparently Helen did well with her investments.

Helen saw the handwriting on the wall when a few years later Goldfield's decline began. By 1912, she had moved to Goldfield's sister town some 30 miles to the north. Tonopah's population had stabilized and so had its silver mining industry. She had determined that the Nye County seat could support another dentist. For 14 years, her office would be located in the State Bank Building at the corner of Main and Brougher streets in downtown Tonopah.

Surprising most Tonopah residents, at age 45, Helen married Robert H. Shipley, a Tonopah millman, in Reno on July 19, 1916. She had lost her mother in 1915, followed by the death of her brother David a little over a year later. When her father passed away

at age 90 in April 1926, plus the fact that Tonopah's economy was on the wane by the mid-1920s, Helen was motivated to return to Reno.

Opening an office at 126 Ridge Street, Helen quietly practiced her profession until she retired at 76. Death took Helen on June 6, 1955, at the Twaddle Rest Home in Reno. No male had been born to carry on the Rulison family name; thus, Nevada not only lost its first female dentist and a pioneer woman, but also a pioneer family who had been fortunate enough to realize the "American Dream."

Helen Mullen Rulison Shipley and Robert H. Shipley are buried in the Masonic Memorial Gardens, Reno, Nevada. They share a headstone with Helen's parents and brother David.

Researched and written by Guy Rocha. Condensed by Kay Sanders. Posted 2010 Updated 2025

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