

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

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## The fantastic journey of the state's first female attorney

History remembers a good many lawyers who enriched our profession, but few can match the iconic achievements of a scrappy teenage prodigy who burst on the legal scene more than 140 years ago.

Her name was Alta Hulett. She was the first woman in Illinois to obtain a law license. Her story is remarkable.

Hulett was born on a Rockford-area farm in 1854. She left school at age 10 to help support her family, somehow securing an appointment to operate a telegraph. Hulett eventually returned to her studies and finished high school in 1870, at age 16. For graduation, she read a poem about finding strength and helping others.

### Litigation is a man's game

Although Hulett was enthralled by the law, the Illinois bar in 1870 was a confirmed boys' club. Two years earlier, the state Supreme Court turned away a highly qualified female applicant, Myra Bradwell, because married women by common law could not enter into express or implied contracts, and thus were not competent to maintain attorney-client relationships.

While the justices expressed "profound sympathy" for Bradwell and blamed their decision on established precedent, the opinion also questioned whether women were gritty enough to litigate against men.

"There are some departments of the legal profession in which [Bradwell] can appropriately labor," the court conceded, but whether "to engage in the hot strifes of the bar, in the presence of the public, and with momentous verdicts the prizes of the struggle, would not tend to destroy the deference and delicacy with which it is the pride of our ruder sex to treat her; is a matter certainly worthy of her consideration."

Hulett, undeterred, set about to obtain her law license. She began an apprenticeship with a prominent Rockford attorney, where she studied court proceedings, and her presence at the bar caused a stir among the lawyers.

According to the Chicago Legal News, even though her "bright and prepossessing ... appearance" turned many heads, Hulett watched "the progress of a case with as much interest as any of the legal gentlemen present," and showed she was "earnest in her purpose to acquire a profession."

By 1871, Hulett completed her legal training and sat for the bar examination, where, one of the examiners told the Chicago Legal News, she "answered questions much more readily than the four gentlemen who were examined with her." Having met all requirements, Hulett, then 17, confidently requested admission from the Illinois Supreme Court.

Even though Hulett was not married, distinguishing her case from Bradwell's, the court's view of women at the bar had not changed. Hulett's application for admission did not even receive a response.

### Oration leads to legislation

Hulett was "grievously disappointed, but not disheartened," as

*In consultation with Bradwell and several legislators, she wrote a bill that precluded employment discrimination based on gender and lobbied hard for its passage.*

Phebe A. Hanaford noted in her book "Women of the Century." Instead of calling it a day and donning an apron, she wrote a lecture titled "Justice versus the Supreme Court," and argued eloquently for gender equality to audiences across northern Illinois.

The young trailblazer's speeches ignited a passion in her listeners. For example, the Beloit College Monthly extolled the lecture and lamented the "row of inhuman wretches [who] occupied the Illinois Bench."

Having garnered popular support, Hulett next took on the lawmakers. In consultation with Bradwell and several legislators, she wrote a bill that precluded employment discrimination based on gender and lobbied hard for its passage.



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In March 1872 the Illinois legislature assented, proclaiming that "no person shall be precluded or debarred from any occupation, profession or employment (except military) on account of sex."

Hulett said she would "never again know a moment of such

supreme happiness," as reflected in "Women of the Century." She sat for another bar examination, again finishing at the head of her class, and was admitted in 1873.

Old biases die hard, though. One of the examining justices reportedly grumbled that if Hulett were his daughter, she would be disinherited.

Hulett did not care a whit. She had her license. The new lawyer was barely 19.

### Successful solo practice

Hulett set up an office in downtown Chicago and went to work. Before long, reported Victoria Magazine, she "had attained an enviable reputation, and a practice amounting to three thousand dollars a year." Her new lawsuits were printed on the first page of the Chicago Daily Law Bulletin,

just like her male colleagues.

The Chicago Legal News glowed that "Miss Hulett tries these cases with an ability which would have been creditable to a man much her senior. In her argument, she comprehended the facts and applied the law to them with a readiness which seemed to astonish the court and members of the bar present."

Among her matters, Hulett scored a significant victory for married women in federal court, protecting a wife's assets and earnings from the husband's creditors. In another decision, the Illinois Supreme Court affirmed Hulett's judgment against a defendant who failed to timely obtain a bankruptcy stay.

"To say that Chicago is proud of its first lady lawyer," Hanaford exclaimed in "Women of the Century," "is only a mild form of stating the case."

### The profession mourns

Hulett's career tragically was cut short after only a few years, when she was stricken by tuberculosis in November 1876. She sought a healthier climate in California, but succumbed the next spring. Hulett was just 22. The Chicago Bar Association passed a resolution honoring her memory.

Hulett's intrepid spirit comes to life in a photograph taken the year of her admission, in 1873. A copy is on display at [encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/11197.html](http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/11197.html).

The camera takes in Hulett's intense gaze, right hand resting on a book, left hand at her side with forefinger extended, as if poised to make an emphatic legal point. Lacking a man's vest for her pocket watch and fob — the 19th-century version of a smartphone — Hulett gamely drapes the fob around her neck and tucks the watch in a waist pocket of her dress.

The image says it all. This tenacious lady litigator is truly one of the boys.

As you prepare for your next professional challenge, take a moment to reflect on Hulett's accomplishments. As she would tell you, anything is possible.