

Marian “Minnie” Burck Smith

A Political Matriarch

The U.S. Census Bureau has always been ahead of the curve when it comes to employing women. Ever since 1880, when it started using professional enumerators rather than U.S. marshals, the Census Office had employed women in that role. With the advent of the Hollerith tabulating machine in 1890, women moved into the role of keypunchers. By 1909, 10 years before the 19th Amendment granted national women's suffrage, over 50 percent of the Census Bureau's 624 employees were women. As women proved themselves as capable as the men, and with the increasing number of women in the workforce, it became harder for the Census Bureau to justify assigning all supervisory positions to men. By 1920, the Census Bureau would once again push forward appointing the first five female supervisors, as well as the first three female expert chiefs of divisions.



(Photo courtesy of the Smith family)

A scan of a 1880 U.S. Census record for the Burck family. The document is a grid with columns for names, ages, and other details. A red box highlights the family's entry. At the bottom, there is a red text box with the following text: "Historic census records are maintained and released by the National Archives and Records Administration, not the U.S. Census Bureau. Visit <http://www.archives.gov> for more information about publicly available records like the one shown here."

Burck Family 1880 Census

Marian (sometimes Marion) Burck, called Minnie by her family, was born March 9, 1871 in Milam County, Texas, to Alfred and his wife, Frances. Over the next few years, a town sprang up in the area. It incorporated as Rockdale in 1874 and Alfred became its first mayor. In the mid-1880s, Alfred left the family and never returned. As the oldest child, the teenaged Minnie became a schoolteacher in order to support the family. In 1894, she married Roy Edgerton Smith, the son of a prominent politician. Together the couple had seven children. By 1920, Roy had also deserted his family, leaving Minnie with four children under the age of 17. Despite his abandonment, they never divorced and Minnie went by Mrs. Roy E. Smith for the rest of her life. She and her older children worked many different jobs to get by, including a stint for Minnie selling encyclopedias.

In 1919, Minnie joined the Census Bureau as the supervisor for the 6th District of Texas, and would continue to work with the Bureau for the next 15 years. With schoolteacher efficiency, Minnie methodically prepared for the 1920 census. On October 1, 1919, she advertised for enumerators with the goal of raising around 200, and planned training for October 27. In early November, she again advertised for the 45 enumerators still needed. In late November and early December, Minnie traveled her territory and met with local politicians to finalize plans for the count, which commenced on January 1. Despite her best efforts, Minnie did not get the needed enumerators and had to ask for an extension in order to get a complete count.



(Photo courtesy of the Smith family)

Marian Burck Smith and Children

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE—BUREAU OF THE CENSUS
FOURTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: POPULATION
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Smith Family 1920 Census

Despite being a single mother, Minnie sent every one of her seven children to college. Her daughter, Flo, was a journalist and public relations specialist for an aviation school before moving to Hudson, WI, with her husband. Another daughter, Polly, worked as a statistician for the highway department in 1930 and attended photography school in New York. In 1935, the Centennial Exposition hired Polly to celebrate the centennial of Texas through pictures. A third daughter, Mildred, was famous in 1930s and 40s Texas as radio persona Gail Northe before she moved to California and started a ranch with her husband. Minnie's oldest daughter, Dorothy, was a successful dress and costume designer who worked as for her

mother as assistant supervisor during the 1920 Census.



Photo from *San Antonio Light Collection*, University of Texas at San Antonio's *Institute of Texas Culture*
Polly Smith c. 1936



Longview News-Journal (Longview, TX); 11 Oct 1938

Mildred (Gail Northe)

Her sons found equal measures of success. Her youngest son, Burck, moved to California and became West Coast Manager for American Airlines. Bill, her middle son, became an artist who eventually moved to New York and worked in advertising. Cyrus Rowlett, known as C.R., climbed to the highest halls of power in Washington, DC. Working his way up from a cattle baron's office boy at age 9, to a bookkeeper at 12, and a tax accountant at 20, C.R. powered his way through the University of Texas despite having dropped out of high school. His meteoric rise continued through accounting firms and power companies until he ended up as the co-founder and president of American Airlines. His career had a temporary pause while he served as a major general (Deputy Commander of Air Transport Command) during World War II. C.R. was also actively involved in politics and, in 1938, he was able to introduce his mother to the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. In 1968, the Smith family fortunes came full circle when President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed him Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce—the agency that oversees the Census Bureau.

Unfortunately, Minnie never got to see this final chapter. She passed away at the age of 77 in January 1950 at the home of her daughter Mildred (Gail) in Auburn, CA. She is remembered as an amazing mother and a tireless public servant, who not only gave everything to her own children, but was also generous to the community at-large. In her honor, her son C.R. endowed the *Marion Burck Junior Fellowship Fund* and donated 575 volumes of Western Americana, the *Marion Burck Smith Collection*, to the University of Texas. Beyond her family, Minnie's work benefitted the Census Bureau, the United States, and the men and women she inspired.

Department of Commerce—the agency that oversees the Census Bureau.



Chicago Tribune (Chicago, IL); 17 Feb 1968