



Selma I. Starns

Retired 2004; formerly with Anderson Group CPAs LLC, Corvallis

Selma Starns became a practicing CPA in 1956. This year, Selma will celebrate 60 years of being an OSCPA member and a pioneer of the profession.

Tell us about your background.

I am a fifth generation Oregonian. My great, great grandparents came here on wagon trains in the 1840s and 1850s. I was born at the bottom of the Great Depression, a time when many families chose not to have children because they simply couldn't afford them. I have one brother, who is four years younger. We grew up on the farm outside Junction City that my father purchased at age 18.

Who influenced you the most in your youth?

My parents encouraged me to work hard and to take classes, such as bookkeeping, in high school that would help me earn a good living. One of my teachers also had a strong influence. She was a public accountant who taught math, bookkeeping, and a few other subjects. She told me to take all the accounting classes I could, and she encouraged me to go to college so that I could become certified.

Where did you go to college?

I attended the University of Oregon. In those days, to be accepted into college, you had to take entrance exams. I hitched a ride with a boy who was going to take the exams. I didn't even tell my parents what I was doing. A couple of weeks later, my parents were surprised when they got my acceptance letter in the mail. I graduated in 1954 after the winter term of my senior year.

What obstacles did you encounter in becoming a CPA?

During my senior year, accounting firms

came to the school to interview graduating seniors. Several firms wouldn't interview me. At that time, firms didn't want to talk to women. I started using only my initials to sign up for interviews. When I got an interview, the firm representatives liked me, but they were still reluctant to give me a second interview. I found out some years later from my husband, whom I met at work, that the firm that did hire me did so as sort of a joke; but I was able to hold my own because I had learned the new tax law in college.

In the early years, I was not allowed to go to the clients' offices; they didn't trust women. I got my break when a client had an emergency situation and all of the men were out of the office. I handled the situation well, and the client was happy to have me back from then on.

My husband and I had our daughter about ten years into our marriage. We kept the pregnancy a secret, because pregnant women weren't allowed to work in offices in those days.

What, if anything, would you say was the highlight of your career?

I would say it's knowing that I was part of breaking down barriers in the profession for women. There were very few women CPAs in the 1950s and '60s, and even many of us in accounting were teaching. I was pushing the boundaries in public practice. Now, over 50 percent of those going into the accounting profession are women.

What advice do you have for new or aspiring CPAs?

Don't rely too heavily on technology and computers. They're useful tools but

no substitute for learning about business and developing critical thinking skills.

What are you doing now that you're retired?

I've been a member, and many times the treasurer, of the Zonta Club of Corvallis for 57 years. I have been on the board of an assisted living facility and also served on the Willamette Community Bank Board of Directors since 2002. That is stimulating work, but it's also very different from my past work as a CPA.

What do you do for fun and relaxation?

I enjoy gardening in my spare time. My husband and I used to enjoy trips to the Oregon Coast, and I still like to go there with family and friends. My daughter's family lives close by, and I enjoy spending time with them.

What would people be surprised to know about you?

I can't think of anything. I lead a pretty ordinary life. ☺



Pictured here with 2015-16 OSCPA Chair Timothy R. Filkins, Selma was a membership milestone honoree at the 2015 OSCPA Circle of Excellence.