

## Arizona HERstory: Annie Watkins

**Kaely Monahan** [00:00:00] I can't believe it's already. March 2024 is just zipping by.

**Amanda Luberto** [00:00:06] I mean, it is my birthday month, so I'm not like really complaining, but it is going by pretty fast.

**Kaely Monahan** [00:00:12] Okay, okay, well, in addition to being your birthday month and my best friend's birthday month and a bunch of other Pisces birthday month.

**Amanda Luberto** [00:00:20] It's a big birthday month.

**Kaely Monahan** [00:00:21] I know a lot of Pisces.

**Amanda Luberto** [00:00:22] Yeah.

**Kaely Monahan** [00:00:24] March is also women's history month. And in light of that, we're bringing back our special series, Arizona Herstory.

**Amanda Luberto** [00:00:44] If you are new to Valley 101, first of all, welcome. You might not have heard last year's inaugural series, and I highly recommend you go back and check it out. We highlighted four very cool women. But Arizona Herstory looks at the women who helped shape Arizona, but have been forgotten or lost to the shadows of history.

**Kaely Monahan** [00:01:06] With this series, our goal is to shine a light on those women who made their mark in their communities. Many of these women were trailblazers, leaders, and disruptors, and some were more notorious, remembered for villainous crimes rather than for the complicated women they actually were.

**Amanda Luberto** [00:01:29] All of this is to say that you won't be hearing about the Sandra Day O'Connor types in this series. Their stories are just as important, of course, but more widely known. Instead, you'll learn just how varied and rich Arizona women's history is, and we're starting with someone who might have shied away from the spotlight a little bit. And for that, we turn to our first story and our spring producer, Katrina Michalak.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:01:56] Hi guys. I'm very excited to start this series. This woman, like you said, wasn't about flaunting her work or demanding attention. Rather, she saw a problem and set out to fix it.

**Kaely Monahan** [00:02:08] I am so excited for this. Take it away, Katrina.

**Annie Watkins** [00:02:16] And some family will come to the theater. But we've come all the way to Babbitt's store across the street from the studio. Then we just walked to the theater. Well, this particular day, we decided we're going to come around the restaurant and then go to the theater, which was what was it, like, a hotel or whatever, And then they realized that we were, that I was Black.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:02:39] This is Annie Watkins. And The list of things she did for Flagstaff is extensive. She helped register Black citizens to vote, helped found the Flagstaff chapter of the NAACP and was a school teacher for years. Even though she passed in 2013. Her legacy lives on through the footprint she left behind in Flagstaff.

Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. About Metro, Phoenix and beyond. I'm producer Katrina Michalak. Today kicks off our annual HERstory series highlighting important women in Arizona who have been lost in time. In light of the upcoming local elections. We're starting with Annie Watkins, a community leader who gave African-Americans in Flagstaff a voice in the ballot box. The 1950s were a deeply divided time in society, and Arizona was no different. The Keystone 1954 Brown versus Board of Education case deemed that segregating children in public schools was unconstitutional.

### **Historical recording - a Black teacher addressing his class in North Carlonia**

[00:04:21] On Monday, May the 17th, Chief Justice Warren read the decision of the Supreme Court justices, which ruled out segregation. I am pleased personally at the vote that was handed down a nine-nothing vote.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:04:38] The superintendent of Flagstaff at the time, Sturgeon, Cromer and the Dunbar Elementary principal, Wilson Ryles, desegregated schools in 1952, two years before this ruling came out. However, that didn't mean there weren't still hurdles to overcome.

**Annie Watkins** [00:05:03] They assume I wasn't Black because, you know, when you blend in, you had the Indians and you had the Hispanics, very few whites. And because I was different from Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Johnson was kind of chubby. But she was typical Afro American, right? And a lot of times the kids would say to me, oh no, you're not Black. I said, everybody that's Black is not Black looking. I said, just like you kids, that blond hair or maybe reddish or whatever the color, that's it. But we all are human beings, you know?

**Katrina Michalak** [00:05:36] Annie Watkins was born August 14th, 1929, in Morris, Louisiana, to parents who were both the children of freed slaves. Annie found herself moving to Phoenix to attend nursing school. Since the tuition was cheaper, her older brother, who lived in Houston at the time, knew someone else who was going to Phoenix for school, and he helped Annie move. She then met her husband, Joe, who was living in Flagstaff. At the time, there was no nursing school in Flagstaff, so she switched to education and enrolled in the Arizona State Teachers College.

**Avi Callan** [00:06:22] She graduated from Arizona State College, which is what NAU used to be called back in the day when it was just a teaching college.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:06:27] This is Avi Callan.

**Avi Callan** [00:06:30] And she tried to get work at Beaver School specifically, but they already had a Black teacher. And when they found out she was also pregnant, they just completely rescinded. That offer didn't exist anymore.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:06:50] Avi is the academic program coordinator for the Comparative Cultural Studies and Philosophy departments at Northern Arizona University. She's a Lumberjack herself, and while she was in school, she worked on a project called the Resilience Exhibit. It's a traveling exhibit that showcases significant yet underrepresented women in our history, like what we're doing with our HERstory series. Avi researched Annie Watkins for the showcase. After graduating in 1953 with a degree in education, Annie Watkins soon found herself teaching in a different way.

**Avi Callan** [00:07:39] Instead, she got into voter registration and reregistration. And she did that for three years. And really, really quickly, she realized that the voters were getting their votes thrown out because they weren't filling out the ballots properly. No one told them that they had to do an X in the ballot, otherwise it would just be thrown out altogether. And so she made it her specific mission to teach all of these people exactly how to fill out the ballot individually. She would teach all of them and have them show her. How do you fill out the ballot and make sure that it was absolutely correct. And because of that, there was a massive influx of legitimate votes that were coming in from Precinctsix, which is where she was working, which also happened to be the largest precinct in Flagstaff.

**Katri** [00:08:30] At the time, that section of Flagstaff had the most voters. Now, Precinct 24, which is the most eastern part of the town, is the largest voting body.

**Avi Callan** [00:08:53] Her specific efforts made an incredible difference. Just in the votes that were coming in, to the point that politicians were coming to her to seek her endorsement so that she could get voters in Precinctsix to vote for them. Annie Watkins work was crucial during this era of Arizona's political history. Remember, the civil rights movement was happening during this time. Leaders of the movement like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X were becoming household names. Down in the Valley, Lincoln Ragsdale and the Greater Phoenix Council for Civil Unity, were also making moves to desegregate Phoenix Schools. During all this time, Annie Watkins was leading the way for minority voters in northern Arizona.

**Anthony Pratcher** [00:09:55] One of the things we have to understand about Arizona is that it's one of the first states that is under the 1965 Voting Rights Act, meaning that at the time, Arizona was seen as a state that practiced prejudice against voters of color. So the work that she was doing was really trying to figure out a way to create a multiracial democracy in Arizona, to ensure that voters across the spectrum would have access to a ballot at a time when people were trying to limit communities of color from being able to freely access to those same rights.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:10:25] That was Anthony Pratcher II, an assistant professor of African American studies at NAU. He credits Watkins as being a trailblazer for students and teachers who came after her to kickstart the history lesson. Here's a nugget of data. According to the 1930 census, there were only a reported 115 African-Americans in Flagstaff. By 1950, that number jumped to a recorded 667. These residents faced discrimination in restaurants, theaters, and other public places in Flagstaff, and in walk ins also played a part in desegregating local spots.

**Avi Callan** [00:11:19] We do know that she made a huge difference, and we know that she was instrumental in integrating several places in Flagstaff, including El Charro Café, which is now closed, but also the Orpheum Theater, which is really impressive.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:11:35] In a 2007 oral history interview, and you described how she was able to help integrate the community.

**Annie Watkins** [00:11:44] We were living in the El Charro's neighborhood. You could not go there and be served let's say just a couple like, because we never did do that because we knew better. So what we did, we went over to the management -- because our purpose was not to make you lose business. It was just to help us get service. And the first thing the manager or the owner, I'm not sure how this was established, said was that, you know,

he had a lot of different races of people, but he was just afraid that if the Blacks were coming into the restaurant, he might lose business. So we promised him that we were not there to make it lose business. But if he was going to lose business, just give us a chance. We would come for three but three different times. Nobody noticed us. People came down to eat not (see) who was there. So, you know, we were able to integrate it before the law was passed. So Flagstaff was ahead in many instances from the rest of the communities in Arizona.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:12:46] Annie Watkins did experience a full circle moment after her work with voters. She ended up fulfilling her dream of being a school teacher.

**Avi Callan** [00:12:57] Eventually, and like three years after that, she did get worked as a teacher because of her work in voter registration. Which is really interesting, actually. And her supervisor just looked at her and was like, you are a trained teacher and you have been educating and registering voters for three years, why don't you have a job as a teacher?

**Katrina Michalak** [00:13:24] Watkins was able to extend her political and educational outreach when she helped found the Flagstaff chapter of the NAACP, where she served as secretary and treasurer.

**Anthony Pratcher** [00:13:38] So in this sort of sense, it's part of a broader wave of not necessarily integrationist, but civically engaged activism on behalf of educators, homemakers, women of many stripes across the country. So what you wind up saying in Western cities is that the NAACP is a vehicle for these types of civic leaders to get involved in politics in a way that allows them to rely on their not just political, but their professional skills and their talents, which was working in an integrated environment such as education. I think that's what you wind up seeing in Flagstaff. That's what that sort of impetus is emerging out of.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:14:31] Annie Watkins was instrumental in helping change the political landscape in Flagstaff. Yet many people, including myself, have never heard of her. How does such a woman go years in the shadows of history instead of in the spotlight?

**Avi Callan** [00:14:50] Sometimes that didn't really seem like they like, really wanted to, you know, not even just brag, but -- I think they recognized their impact and they didn't really want to share that, you know, they didn't they didn't feel the need to let people know or like broadcast that. It was just this is what I did. And if you're not seeking out those stories, then it's hard to find them. And there was a really positive consequence from it. And, you know, it was just like a very matter of fact kind of impact. And so if you're not seeking out those stories, then it's hard to find them.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:15:33] Anthony says that Annie ran into conflict with her school board after decades of teaching, and she was forced into retirement in 1987. Her impact touched many families in Flagstaff. It's also important to hold ourselves accountable and telling the story of Annie, walk ins and others who have been an influence in Arizona's history. For instance, Annie's role in voter registration and in the Flagstaff education system isn't usually mentioned in school curriculum, Anthony says, including women such as Annie. Walk ins could be a crucial step in acknowledging her contribution to Arizona and ensuring that students are learning about these figures in local history.

**Anthony Pratcher** [00:16:23] We have to focus on collectively what's going into the curriculum in the school, because that's really where a lot of the education is happening. I can ask, you know, almost any school child in the state about the five C's, and they're going to know about it as they should, because that's in the curriculum. But, you know, we have to really reinforce, especially in secondary education, what it means to engage, with local history.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:16:47] According to Anthony, any walk in story is told through various newspaper collections over time, specifically in the Arizona Daily Sun. This local Flagstaff newspaper is a great starting point for those wanting to learn more about Annie walk ins. In honor of Women's History Month, the exhibit will be stationed at the Historic ice House for people who want to learn more about Annie Watkins.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:17:37] Thank you for listening to this episode of Arizona HERstory, our special series on Valley 101. Next week:.

**Rocky LaRose** [00:17:47] She had strong beliefs in sport participation for women and she made that happen on campus. She was up against many that disagreed with her, as you can imagine, including our very first director of athletics, Pop McKale. Legend has it that McKale became so angry hearing that there was going to be a women's basketball game in the old hearing gym, that he ordered a football player to flood it with fire hoses the night before the game.

**Katrina Michalak** [00:18:20] Valley 101 is a podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. If you enjoyed this episode, share it with your friends and if you haven't already, make sure you're subscribed. Don't forget to rate and review us and go ahead, give us five stars. Remember to submit your questions about Phoenix and Arizona to Valley, 101 azcentral.com. Your question might be in our next episode. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram @azcpodcasts. This episode was written and produced by me, Katrina Michalak. Amanda Luberto and Kaely Monahan provided additional production support. Kara Edgerson provided production oversight. Music for this and all our shows comes from Universal Production. Music Valley 101 is An Arizona Republic and AZCentral.com production. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next week with episode two of Arizona HERstory, a series that is just kicking off and will feature more women throughout the month of March.