



Women in Union Cemetery: Gertrude Kirk Cornelison

The women featured in this series of articles are part of the Women in Union Cemetery Tour conducted by Mike Roberts in 2024.

Gertrude Kirk Cornelison 1889 – 1974

Buried in Placerville Union Cemetery, Section 17 Block 30 Plot E

Portrayed by Lori Whittle, Save the Graves 2022 event

Gertrude was the only daughter of William S. Kirk and Annie Summers Graft. She was ten years old when the family arrived in El Dorado County in 1899. Her father owned a newspaper called the Placerville Nugget, which later merged with the El Dorado Republican.

The 19th amendment, which gave women the unilateral right to vote, wasn't ratified until 1920. But several western states, full of men who were desperate for women, passed suffrage laws allowing women to vote in state and local elections much sooner. Montana did so in 1869. Forty-two years later California caught up with Montana and did the same. Gertrude became the first woman in Placerville to register to vote on January 3, 1912.

Gertrude's father William was a serial entrepreneur who, in addition to his newspaper, also had the first Ford dealership in Placerville. Gertrude taught new automobile owners how to drive.

The limitations of the new-fangled autos were a large concern of the general public and an obstacle to success for William and Gertrude, so they came up with a promotional gimmick to deflate public concern. They got permission to drive up the new El Dorado County Courthouse steps, demonstrating that a car, driven by a woman no less, could easily go anywhere a horse could go.

In 1914 Gertrude expanded the family empire by purchasing the Dodge dealership in Placerville.

When WWI ended in 1918, she went to France with the Women's Division of the YMCA to serve as a canteen worker for the troops still stationed in Europe while the treaty ending the war was being negotiated. During this time, she wrote articles about her experiences which were published in the El Dorado Republican.

She returned from France in October 1919 and went straight to the Dodge factory in Detroit to pick up a new Dodge Touring Car. She and a fellow canteen worker drove across the continent on the new Lincoln Highway. In many of the small towns they traversed, young men who knew, or knew of them from France turned out to celebrate their contributions. The women enjoyed a lot of celebrity.

In 1921, Gertrude married California Highway Patrolman Richard Cornelison. The couple had a daughter, Gloria. In later years, Gertrude became active in several clubs. She was a 60-year member of the Order of Eastern Star and a member of the American Legion auxiliary and the Shakespeare club.



Gertrude in her new Dodge touring car

Interpretation by Mike Roberts, 2024

SaveTheGravesElDorado.org

Category

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