

Dedicated to the Law

A History of Texas Women Attorneys

BY BETTY TRAPP CHAPMAN

At the turn of the 20th century, women in Texas began their struggle to achieve the rights equivalent to those enjoyed by the male population. Among these women were some who had the desire to enter the legal profession — a field that was firmly closed to them. This strong desire, coupled with their steady perseverance, led them on a long and arduous journey. Their efforts were ultimately successful and opened the doors of the legal profession to women. Today, women lawyers are found across Texas in places both large and small as they use their education and their skills.

The journey of women lawyers in Texas has never been adequately documented. Little information has been compiled on the subject, and some of the extant material is incorrect. While 1910 has been widely accepted as the year in which the state licensed its first female lawyer, research has revealed that several women were licensed before that date. Edith Locke, for example, passed the bar examination in El Paso in 1901, and Alice Tiernan was practicing in Galveston as early as 1908.

The first difficulty women faced was in acquiring a legal education. The earliest available route was through reading and studying under the tutelage of a licensed attorney. Others attended privately owned law schools which were opening in places such as Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, and Fort Worth. Still others pursued their studies through correspondence courses. In 1914, the University of Texas School of Law awarded degrees to its first female graduates, Irene Brown of San Antonio and Rose Zeloski of Fort Worth.

As more law schools admitted women, their numbers grew. By 1920, the U.S. Census listed 52 female attorneys in Texas. Research has identified 35 of those, together with data on their education, residence, and employment. Many interest-

ing stories have unfolded, including those of the dilemma posed to women on whether to wear their hats into the courtroom, as well as the more serious difficulty of finding employment in the legal field.

One area in which women were hired in larger numbers was government service. As a result, women entered both state and local branches of government as county and city attorneys, assistant district attorneys, assistant attorneys general, and in a variety of other legal positions. In 1923, a woman lawyer, Edith Wilmans of Dallas, became the first female elected to

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the Texas Legislature. Over the next eight decades, 26 additional women lawyers served there. A few Texas women have even reached the halls of Congress.

Women's entry into the judiciary began in 1925 with the All-Woman Supreme Court, which was appointed to hear only one case. In 1935, Sarah Hughes of Dallas was appointed the first female judge of a state district court, a position to which she was repeatedly elected. A few more appeared on the bench over the next 40 years. Not until 1982, however, was a woman, Rose Spector, elected to the Texas Supreme Court. Today, women are found at every level of the state's judiciary.

The slow journey continued. World War II offered new employment opportunities for aspiring female lawyers, and

additional law schools opened in the state. Even with these advancements, the 1960 U.S. Census enumerated only 322 female lawyers in Texas. The next two decades, however, produced a tremendous surge in women law students.

The most recent State Bar report on the status of women in the profession indicates that women attorneys comprise 30 percent of the bar's total membership, a 300-percent increase of women attorneys in the last two decades. This trend is expected to continue since 47 percent of the students currently attending Texas law schools are women.

The story is filled with many "firsts" — the first female attorney in dozens of locales across the state; the first graduate of each law school in Texas; the first from various ethnic groups; the first judges in specific courts; the first to serve on law school faculties. The list goes on and on. But this is not only a story of "firsts." This book will cover the entire journey of women lawyers over the past century. The journey has been filled with hardship and rejection, but it has also been marked by achievement and success. The women who have traveled this road have been intelligent of mind, persistent in spirit, and dedicated to the law. Their story needs to be told.

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The State Bar of Texas Committee on Women in the Profession is spearheading the publication of a book on the history of women lawyers in Texas. Historian Betty Trapp Chapman of Houston will be the author. She has written this brief overview of the book, which the committee hopes to publish in 2007. Bar members who can provide historical information or interesting stories are asked to contact Chapman at bchapman4@houston.rr.com.