

REVIEW

Texas Tornado, The Autobiography of Louise Raggio

Reviewed by Selma Moidel Smith

Texas Tornado: An Autobiography
By Louise Ballerstedt Raggio, with
Vivian Anderson Castleberry
Foreword by Ann Richards
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This is a story waiting to be filmed. It could be billed as the story of a woman who rose from farm to courthouse, who made her mark in “a man’s profession,” remained loyal to a difficult marriage, raised a family of lawyers, became the “Mother of the Texas Family Code”—and now looks back on her road to success.

Scene One: Prelaw

The protagonist, Louise Raggio, is the Texas-born child of Swedish and German immigrants. In her childhood years, she shared the hard life of a farming family in the rural wilderness near Austin. She also learned perseverance, independence, and self-reliance. In her own words, “If I—a poor, unattractive, unpopular girl from the mud farms of Central Texas, the offspring of immigrants—could make it, anybody can.” But there, of course, lay the crucial difference—she wasn’t just “anybody.”

She began by gaining the skills that were typical of farm children of the time. Early, she mastered the domestic arts. Before she was school age, she was part of the family wallpapering team (“I thought everybody grew up knowing how to hang wallpaper”). Soon her attention turned outward, to new achievements. “By the time I was twelve, I was driving the farm truck and tractor,”

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“A book that every aspiring woman will want...”

—GLORIA STEINEM

TEXAS TORNADO

The Autobiography
of a Crusader
for Women’s
Rights and
Family Justice



LOUISE BALLERSTEDT RAGGIO

WITH VIVIAN ANDERSON CASTLEBERRY

FOREWORD BY ANN RICHARDS

and also driving neighboring children to school “to free an adult for more important things.”

Then she ventured beyond the typical. Encouraged by parents who saw her potential, she became the first member of her extended family to graduate from college. Not only did she graduate, but she was also second in her class, a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and the recipient of highest honors from the University of Texas at Austin in 1939. This was followed by an exciting year of internship in Washington, D.C., as “one of ten girls and forty boys from all over the United States” chosen by the Rockefeller Foundation. Louise studied at American University, visited Eleanor Roosevelt at the White House, dated a young John Connally, met Lady Bird and Lyndon Johnson (her local congressman), and

returned to Austin with a job at the National Youth Administration.

She spent the following year working for the NYA, and in the course of her work met a young lawyer who was organizing the local Food Stamp Plan. Her husband-to-be, Grier Raggio, "was strikingly handsome, outgoing, and personable," and proposed marriage 17 days later. In three months, Louise and Grier were married. She left her job to be a full-time wife, but a short time later the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and Grier was drafted. In August 1942, their first son, Grier, Jr., was born, and the army sent Grier overseas for three years. These years, says Louise Raggio, "were my 'lost years.'"

By the time her husband returned, Raggio knew from his letters that theirs would be a difficult reunion. "No matter how much carnage a soldier experienced in war, he was expected to go home, pull up his socks, and proceed with his life as if nothing had happened." It was not until decades later that "post-traumatic stress disorder" entered the language, but in 1945 it entered Raggio's life. For the next 43 years, she struggled to provide the emotional equilibrium that would keep her marriage and family intact. Her husband found a low-paying job as a lawyer at the Veterans Administration, while she maintained the family home. In 1946, son Thomas was born. "My whole life had narrowed to a small apartment in a mud hole in a poverty pocket. Even though centered with a husband I loved and didn't know how to help and two little boys I adored, my day began and ended in what seemed to me an interminable dead end with no way out."

Despite his difficulties in adjusting, or perhaps because of them, Grier came home one day with the announcement that changed her life: "Louise, you're going to law school."

Scene Two: Into the Law

The setting for this portion of the story is Southern Methodist University. The principal characters are Raggio and family, with the addition of university and public officials.

On the home front, Grier promised her his full support. In the daytime, he would go to work while she took care of the

house and children; after dinner, he would take over at home so she could go to night school; on weekends, they would share the load. She says, "I cooked and baked with a law book in front of me," and gratefully acknowledges that "Grier was as good as his word."

At the university, she found the opposite mood. "If ever there was a persona non grata, in Southern Methodist University's night law classes, I was it!" Raggio reports, "Everybody in a position of authority at SMU discouraged me," adding, "I was reminded that . . . if I *were* admitted (and my qualifications were better than any other candidate) I would only be taking up space that could be occupied by a man who would *do something* with his degree." She was finally permitted to enroll in February 1947. Between this date and graduation in 1952 lay unexpected difficulties.

The first was Grier's sudden firing from the Veterans Administration in 1948. "We were charged with the ultimate crime: un-Americanism. . . . I say 'we' because I was just as involved as Grier. We knew our telephones were tapped. We knew we were under constant surveillance, but for what we did not know." Not until a few years after Grier's death in 1988 did Raggio succeed in obtaining answers from the government. She found that the accusation was entirely in error, and was in fact a case of mistaken identity concerning a man named "Riggio." At the time, Grier had protested his loyalty and had regained his position, but his career had been ruined. He eventually left government service and opened his own practice in 1955.

The second was Raggio's discovery early in 1949 that she was pregnant. This was not only a surprise, but a dangerous one. Her blood type, Rh-negative, had made each of her pregnancies life-threatening for her and her baby, and the problem had become increasingly severe. She and Grier wrestled with the choices. "I don't think I ever honestly considered giving up the pregnancy, but the experience taught me to be an adamant freedom-of-choice advocate." Of necessity, she became "a law school dropout," and once again became a full-time mother to look after newborn son Kenneth and her other two sons. She finally returned to law school, to the extreme surprise of the

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faculty. She also had a woman classmate for the first time, Barbara Culver, who was later a justice of the Texas Supreme Court.

To complete her studies, she attended both day and night classes for a full year, and finally was eligible for the bar exam. “I’ll never know how I passed the bar; 75 was the passing grade and I made 75! Grier and all three of our sons made higher grades on their bar exams, but that 75 was the most wonderful grade I’ve ever received.” Word finally came in September 1952 that she had passed. “I was, at last, a full-fledged lawyer. Without a job,” she noted.

“The employment bureau at SMU would not schedule me for interviews because it said, quite correctly, that no jobs existed for women and it would depress me always to be turned down.” She took small cases referred by friends, and endured offers to work in a secretarial pool. Finally, her friend, Judge Sarah T. Hughes (known to history for administering the oath to President Johnson in Dallas in 1963), told her about an opening in the office of the Dallas County District Attorney, and supported her bid to be hired. Hired she was, as an assistant district attorney, and given charge of all child and family cases.

Raggio tackled a backlog of hundreds of cases, and brought order to a neglected area of the office. She succeeded, and only a year and half later was promoted to handle criminal cases in addition to her domestic cases. “It was front page news when a woman was assigned to do criminal prosecution. Any fool knew a woman could not handle criminal cases.” She soon became a representative of the office with the press and in speaking engagements with civic, social, and school organizations. She also followed Hughes’s advice to join the various women’s professional clubs. “By the time



At Southern Methodist University for the endowed Louise B. Raggio Lecture Series.

I won the Zonta Award for public service in 1970, I’d made around 1,000 speeches throughout the Metroplex.”

Grier encouraged her to join the practice he had started in 1955, and the following year, “I resigned and joined my husband. We became Raggio and Raggio,” as the firm is known to this day, and the partners include the three Raggio sons. Clients and cases gradually increased, and Raggio became known as an excellent lawyer. She also became active with the Texas State Bar.

In 1960, she was asked to join the newly formed Family Law Section of the State Bar, and was elected vice chair in 1964. And then, instead of being promoted to chair as was traditional, she was asked to remain as vice chair. She confided to a committee member that she would not be skipped over. “A woman chairing a bar committee? There was no

precedent for such a thing!" However, she said she knew the needs of the Family Law Section as well as anyone, "because I had lived the legal restrictions of a married woman. . . . As a lawyer, I required the signature of my husband before I could file some documents. As an only child, the inheritance I would receive from my parents would legally be controlled by my husband." She vowed to be elected chair, or resign—and won.

Scene Three: Against the Law

Raggio's election as chair of the Family Law Section of the Texas State Bar "marked the beginning of a series of amazing advances for women and families in Texas law."

Raggio and her committee discovered that 44 different Texas laws discriminated against women, in particular, married women. A married woman could not give or sell her own property, even if she had acquired it before marriage. Her husband controlled her bank accounts, and she could not borrow in her own name. She could start a business only if her husband joined her in a suit to "have her disabilities removed." But the disabilities of traditional "coverture" were removed only for business purposes, not for professions. "All of us who were married and professional women prior to 1967 were practicing illegally. . . ."

Following years of unsuccessful efforts by others, Raggio then commenced a three-year campaign to enact a new Marital Property Bill. She convinced the president of the State Bar to assign the matter to her Family Law Section and convinced her Section to support the project. She then appointed a task force to draft the bill. She says she "thought we could write a bill in a matter of hours that would take away all of the legal disabilities under which married women in Texas lived. It took two years and seven separate drafts!"—following which they lobbied the legislature to pass the bill, and Governor Connally signed it in June 1967.

Her success prompted a second call to action. She received a phone call from the president of the State Bar, "who said we had done such a good job with the Marital

Property Act that he felt it was imperative we take on a new assignment. Would the Family Law Section undertake a complete revision of all the family laws in the State of Texas?" After a decade of work, in Raggio's words, "The Family Law Section of the Texas State Bar created the first complete Family Code of laws in the world."

Scene Four: Above the Law

With all of these accomplishments as foundation, Raggio has continued to earn, and receive, the honors owed a trailblazer. For the complete story, as the expression goes, you'll have to read the book. Among the many highlights: She was named chair of the ABA's first Family Law Committee, which evolved into today's Family Law Section. She was also chair of the Family Law Committee of the ABA Senior Lawyers Division. She was the first woman to be elected a director of the State Bar of Texas, and has received numerous high honors from the Texas and Dallas bars.

Raggio is a life fellow of the American Bar Foundation. In 1995, she received a Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award from the ABA. In her own city, the Dallas Women Lawyers and the National Business Women Owners Association each have established "Louise B. Raggio" awards given annually to outstanding women, and Southern Methodist University has an endowed Louise B. Raggio Lecture series, which has been presented annually since 1998. In 2000, Raggio received the President's Award from the National Association of Women Lawyers.

The list of triumphs continues to grow, but to see only triumphs in this surprisingly candid story is to ignore the private interior life of a woman who also had her own demon to conquer: the recurring, disabling depression that became her companion, and for which she sought treatment, making more remarkable all that she managed to achieve.

Now, she savors a life that is free of the enormous burdens and responsibilities of her former years. She has found an inner peace, a base from which to seek new adventures, to enjoy all the fruits of her labors, and to tell this story—to her grandchildren, and to us. ■

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