



Women's History Month Special: A Look At WLALA'S History

by Selma Moidel Smith



In 1931, California's first woman lawyer, Clara Shortridge Foltz, gave a farewell address at one of the monthly program meetings of the Southern California Council of the National Association of Women Lawyers, one of WLALA's predecessors.

As members of WLALA, we are fortunate to have three auspicious beginnings.

We enjoy the heritage of two groups of women lawyers who united to form WLALA in 1964. The story of the older group, the Women Lawyers' Club, has more often been told. This article explores a few highlights of the younger group, the Southern California Women Lawyers Association.

As introduction, WLALA's first predecessor was the Women Lawyers' Club founded in 1918 by a group of outstanding women lawyers. Their stated purpose was "promoting and advancing the interests of their profession." The organization became a member of the General Federation of Women's Clubs and other women's groups. Ten years later, when the Club was incorporated, *The Los Angeles News* of August 28, 1928, noted, "No woman is eligible to membership unless she is a member of the State Bar of California and has been recommended for membership by the membership department of the Women Lawyers' Club."

The creation of the second group was announced on July 1, 1928, when *The Los Angeles Times* reported the formation of the Women Lawyers' Association of Southern

California. Among its stated purposes were "to advance the cause of women, to take an active part in civic affairs, to indorse and support candidates for public office, and to analyze proposed laws and give information to the public thereon in a form and language that can be readily understood."

The association's president was Mab Copeland Lineman, who had served as the fourth president of the Women Lawyers' Club in 1922. She received her LL.B. from USC and was admitted to the California Bar in 1917. In 1926 she was the first woman judge *pro tem* of the Superior Court. She specialized in women's legal affairs, and was a prominent speaker for women's causes. Oda Faulconer (later Judge) was secretary-treasurer.

In the fall of 1930 the group was reorganized as the Southern California Council of the National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL), with membership open to all women engaged in the active practice of law. Lineman served as temporary chair at the meeting of November 29, 1930, at which Ida May Adams (later Judge) was elected president and Oda Faulconer vice president. Adams was a leading advocate for women's rights. She fought unsuccessfully to establish that married women have an existing, undivided, one-half interest in community property, as against the then-prevailing view that the wife had a "mere expectancy" in the community property. (One result of the latter view was the wife's obligation to pay inheritance tax on her own interest on the death of her spouse.)

While serving as president of the Southern California Council of NAWL, Adams defeated an incumbent judge in the June 1931 election, becoming the first woman judge of this municipal court to serve without prior political appointment. Oda Faulconer was appointed to the court in August 1931. The women lawyers elected Judge Faulconer to two terms as president (1938, 1939), and reelected Judge Adams in 1942.

Advocacy for women's rights became an immediate and continuing feature of the group's activities. An example was the successful fight against bills to bar married women from public employment during the Depression.

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Speaking against the proposed Cronin Bill in 1931, Judge Adams said, "We are against any bill which has as its basis sex discrimination . . . efficiency of the applicant, plus good character should be the only requirements." A second example of advocacy, from 1947, was the gradual attainment of maternity leave for women employed by the state and other government agencies.

When the first Conference of State Bar Delegates was held on September 19, 1934, the Southern California Council, with members throughout Southern California, was the only women's bar association accredited by the Conference. Although four women, including Ernestine Stahlhut, were among the delegates from the Los Angeles Bar Association (renamed "County Bar" in 1961), the Council was the sole voice of organized women lawyers. In recognition of this singular status, both the State Bar president and the president of the Los Angeles Bar Association came to speak at the October 1934 meeting of the Council. The voice of women lawyers was happily augmented in 1947 when the Women Lawyers' Club was accredited by the State Bar.

The Council was one of several NAWL Councils throughout the country, and its members were active in the national organization. When NAWL's annual convention was held in Los Angeles for the first time in 1935 (during the Depression), Council members opened their homes. At this convention, Percilla Lawyer Randolph, president of the Council in 1933, was elected national president and served until 1938.

The Council remained a constituent part of NAWL until 1942, when NAWL discontinued its local Councils. The group then became the Southern California Women Lawyers Association (SCWL). Nevertheless, SCWL maintained its affiliation with NAWL and for many years shared a portion of its dues with the national organization.

Members of NAWL and SCWL were among the founders of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) in Mexico City in 1944. When Los Angeles hosted the first U.S. convention of FIDA in 1949, SCWL members chaired committees and hosted visitors. SCWL members, through their attendance at FIDA's biennial conventions throughout the world, were able to learn about the professional and personal problems of their colleagues, and often to provide assistance. In 1958, delegates to the concurrent NAWL and FIDA conventions in Los Angeles again received a warm welcome from SCWL members.

A continuing feature of the Council, and later of SCWL, was the monthly program meetings at which prominent judges and lawyers, both women and men, were speakers. California's first woman lawyer, Clara Shortridge Foltz, gave a farewell address in 1931. The nation's first (and highest ranking) woman federal judge, Florence E. Allen of Ohio, spoke in 1952. The local women judges were frequent speakers, and many were members of the group's Executive Committee. A special event, begun in the mid-1930s, was the annual dinner meeting of the women lawyers and women doctors, a tradition continued to the present by WLALA.

The third beginning for WLALA was the decision in 1964 to unify the Women Lawyers' Club and SCWL. A special committee of members from both groups (including the author) worked for several months to realize the goal of creating a unified women's bar. (The author was honored to serve as chair of the first nominating committee for the new organization.)

These, then, are our predecessors. We celebrate the foresight and contributions of these early leaders who laid the foundations for the WLALA we know today.

President's Message

Women's history month is an appropriate time to reflect on our past as an organization and also on women's progress in the legal profession. I can think of no more appropriate person to write our cover story than WLALA's unofficial historian, Selma Moidel Smith. Selma is one of our past presidents (actually president of Southern California Women Lawyers in 1947



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and 1948, one of the two predecessor organizations to WLALA). Like many of our past presidents, Selma has continued to contribute to the organization in a variety of ways. In 1998, WLALA recognized her many contributions to the organization by naming her our first, and only, honorary life member. I encourage you to read her article and learn more about our rich history as women lawyers.