

# Mattie Belle Davis

By Selma Moidel Smith

NAWL has lost a friend and leader with the passing of Judge Mattie Belle Davis. She quietly left us on July 3, 2003 in Coral Gables, Florida, at the age of 93.

Mattie Belle served us well as a long-time member who rose to become the association's president from 1965-1966, our Delegate to the ABA House of Delegates from 1967-1975 and 1977-1987, and also Editor of the *Women Lawyers Journal* from 1981-1982. During her tenure as Delegate, and for several years after, there was no other woman in the House of Delegates.

Mattie was an active member of the ABA, distinguishing herself in several of its most important committees.

In 1970, she was elected a Fellow of the American Bar Foundation, the second woman and first Florida woman to be so honored, and in 1987 became the first and only woman (until 2002), to receive its annual Fifty Year Award. It was a crowning achievement for her to receive the accolades and enthusiastic approval of her peers in the profession. This was especially significant because Mattie Belle always felt that she had drifted into the law.

She had never aspired to be a lawyer. In 1927, at the age of 17, with only a few months of business school training, she found a job. It happened to be with a law firm in Miami, and she became a legal secretary in that office. Her thoughts began to turn to the possibility of becoming a lawyer. Shortly after, the firm merged with another firm, which brought other lawyers into the office. One of them was Troy Davis. Mattie Belle began to study law with him and,

after passing the bar exam, she was admitted to practice on November 28, 1936. The following year they were married and they practiced law together until his death in 1948. She continued the practice until 1959 when she began her long judicial career, finally retiring in 1996.



*Judge Mattie Belle Davis during her term as President of Nawl, 1965-1966.*

Throughout her career, Mattie Belle was generous with her efforts.

When the National Association of Women Judges held

their founding session in Los Angeles in 1979, it was Mattie Belle who was chosen to preside, and two years later she was elected a life member of the association.

She was a founder and president of the Florida Association of Women Lawyers, and was honored by them in 1987 with the creation of the "Judge Mattie Belle Davis Award." The same year she was honored by the Board of County Commissioners of Metropolitan Dade County with a proclamation naming March 3 as Judge Mattie Belle Davis Day. She received many awards for her contributions to the community at large, and was especially pleased to be honored in 1998 by being inducted into the Florida Hall of Fame by then Governor Lawton Chiles.

In the early days of 2001, this writer

interviewed Mattie Belle for an article to appear in the Spring 2001 issue of the ABA Senior Lawyers Division publication, *Experience* magazine.

In the course of our many discussions, she expressed her thoughts about the great number of honors and awards she had received and said, "I've been very fortunate—all the recognition I've received has come to me while I could

enjoy it."

How fitting, then, that Mattie Belle requested that her services be private. To her mind, her story spoke for itself. Nothing more needed to be said.

*Selma Moidel Smith is a past president of the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles and a recipient of NAWL's Lifetime of Achievement Award.*

## Get Involved

Getting involved in a NAWL committee provides a unique opportunity for women to serve in leadership roles in a national organization. Join with other NAWL members to continue the work of promoting women in the profession and women's rights. To join a NAWL committee, contact the committee chair or NAWL at (312) 988-6186 or [nawl@nawl.org](mailto:nawl@nawl.org)

NAWL is currently looking for enthusiastic new members to serve on the following committees:

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Margaret B. Drew, Chair  
[mbdrew@socialaw.com](mailto:mbdrew@socialaw.com)

**Constitution & By-Laws**

Katherine Henry, Chair  
[henryk@dsmo.com](mailto:henryk@dsmo.com)

**Gender Bias**

Nancy Johnson, Chair  
[nancy@barsecrets.com](mailto:nancy@barsecrets.com)

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Eva Herzer, Chair  
[eva@igc.apc.org](mailto:eva@igc.apc.org)

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[mji@cwsl.edu](mailto:mji@cwsl.edu)

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