

Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles
Oral History Project

Interview of Selma Moidel Smith

President: 1947 and 1948

Video-recorded July 27, 2001

Decker: [Eileen Decker, past president of WLALA] Good afternoon. Today is July 27th of the year 2001, and we're here today interviewing Selma Moidel Smith. Welcome, Selma. Thank you for being here today.

SMS: My pleasure.

Decker: I wonder if you could tell us what inspired you to enter the profession of law?

SMS: Yes, I would be happy to share that with you. Very squarely, you are now in the midst of my family. What motivated the whole thing was, in fact, my mother. My parents were Louis and Mary Moidel. When my mother, Mary, was a young woman, she wanted very much to be a lawyer. Their marriage took place in 1902, in Pennsylvania, and that year didn't auger best for young women to be going into the profession of law, particularly if they were already married now. So, she had a fierce determination in her that, if she couldn't make it, all her children would — whoever they might be! [laughing] In the course of their marriage, there were five of us, and all five of us became law graduates, so if you want to know what motivated — and I was the youngest of the five, by nine years. I had three older brothers, and my older sister, and when I came along, of course, it was already taken for granted that there were no thoughts to be had on the subject and here would come the fifth of the lawyers. It was very interesting that this young woman, who couldn't make it herself — so similar to so many other women of that time, who couldn't realize their own dreams and their own ambitions — would have to see it through someone else.

SMS: Do you know what attracted her to the law?

Decker: I think it was the idea of — she had had occasion to witness a couple of trials, that she had by sheer interest walked into when she was still single, and she liked what she saw. She liked seeing that someone was there to do the right thing. Someone was there espousing a cause. She liked the dignity of it. She liked what she felt was representative of the best, and she thought, “Oh, if only I could do that!” She was a very, very bright woman, who could very easily have done that. So it’s not something that she aspired to and could never have done. She could have. So it was sheer chance I fell into that family, and when you ask what motivated it, sheer, sheer following in the footsteps of all the ones before me.

Decker: Did you ever think about entering any other type of profession?

SMS: Actually, no, because, by the time I was five or six, I had already been — what shall I say? — put on the top of a table and taught — I was reciting declamation, poetry, whatever — by memory. And public speaking followed when I was six years old, when one of our teachers, Kitty Howard, in the grade school, suddenly died, and they dedicated a portrait in her memory. So at the big high school, with an audience of three thousand, I stepped forward — I had been chosen by the school to make the dedication of Miss Kitty Howard’s portrait in her memory — I remember stepping forward and making my talk, which I had put together, and which I didn’t need notes for, and then I remember when I finished, I made a bow, and almost walked off the stage in my curtsy.

Everyone was very appreciative of the efforts. So I was accustomed to public speaking, and my family already considered that, you know, there was nothing more to be done. It was just that I would automatically follow through the school system and go into law school, and that that would be my path. And they were all state oratorical champions — this was in Ohio, which is where I was born. And they were all in debate and, in fact, I later went into those things, too. And I remember in high school they had a “girls’ court,” so for one semester I was on the prosecuting side, and in the other semester I was on the defending side. So I was already doing the very things we’re talking about. It sort of precluded thinking of doing anything else. And they were also engaged in writing a great deal — editorial kind of writing — and I started doing that, and I’ve been writing, and editing, and speaking ever since.

Decker: You’ve talked about your older siblings. Could you describe the impact they’ve had on you in terms of encouraging you and helping you in the legal profession?

SMS: Well, the first thing that I can tell you is that we had a very wonderful close family. I’m sorry to say they’re all gone. And I have very warm and loving memories of them. It was contrary to what we often see now. This was a happy and warm and — what shall we say — we were happy to be related to each other, which isn’t always the case. So in that setting it was, it was the feeling — and one never stopped to think about it — that you had every kind of support — personal, family, moral support — that you were never alone, that whatever you would want to do, they’d be there to help you do. And so it was Of course, when World War II

came — and I was admitted in January of 1943 — the war was already on, of course, from December of '41 — two of my three brothers, who were all in the office suite together, volunteered, even though they were over draft age, and I'm sorry to say that one of them was killed in action, and well So [pause], excuse me for feeling back where I was at that moment. But when the other brother came back from service and continued in practice, and so we were all together. It was a nice arrangement. I never had to look for a job; I was born into my office and my practice, and of course I was thrown into many things that I wouldn't have been so quickly, because I was there taking their place, as it were, while they were away. And I was exposed very early to many of the things you wait several years to get into, but my family was — it was that something we cherished, and something that we often, though we were in the same office, it was that we were associates. In other words, each of us had our own clients, we had our own fields of expertise, and we often consulted with each other as a result. So it was a matter of — we had lawyers referring, we had lawyers who were able to take over on vacation for each other, and it was an ideal situation. I didn't have to go, as so many young women did, to be rejected here and there, and I do remember that in the years that followed, we'd get calls from students coming out of law school, you know, "Would it be possible to join the . . . ?" And I remember my only answer was, "Sorry, you're a little late; you'd have to be born into this one," which was the absolute truth. So it was in that setting It's hard to explain what you do that you never had to examine, that you took for granted, but you realize later it was different from everyone else.

Decker: Let's talk about your law school experience for a few minutes. Why don't you tell us where you went to law school, what year, and what it was like being a woman in law school at that time?

SMS: Yes, in 1939 [laughing], which sounds like a few centuries ago, I had completed three years at UCLA, and in the three years, I completed enough of all the requirements to enter law school. I had applied to USC, and I was accepted, and I was one of five women out of a class of a hundred and fifty freshmen. So let us say, we didn't exactly overwhelm them. It provided interesting experiences. But I think we held our own pretty well. Three of us did finish and become lawyers. Two did not. One of the young women was already married and had a three-year-old child, who was, I'm afraid, very unceremoniously dealt with by a number of male students who said to her, "What are you doing here? You should be home taking care of your family, and why don't you leave." And, anyway, she did manage to finish — her mother was looking after her child while she was in school, and she did manage to finish, but, on the whole, it was Well, you were certainly conspicuous, and you knew that. When you were called on, everyone sort of [gesturing] looked, you know, where, when the male students were talking, nobody bothered to look around or turn around, but let a female voice begin and suddenly you were the center of attention, and you had better be prepared, because a lot was riding on you and you were aware of that. And I think that's kind of an extra burden that the women today, I'm happy to say, don't have to shoulder, now that they're coming into [being] half of the student classes now.

Decker: Did you enjoy law school?

SMS: Yes, yes, and I even have to say I enjoyed the bar exam [laughing]. That's almost a terrible thing to say. It was three days of — at that time, all written, you didn't have any choice of yes-or-no's or multiple-choice's — it was straight — you wrote and you wrote. And all that you got were papers that you could not turn over until the appointed moment. You turned it over, and then you started reading, and all that they were were stories. They never told you, of course, what subject you were in. It was just like any client who might come in and tell you something, and then it said, "Discuss the problems and your decisions." And so this went on for three days, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was so happy to be doing it. I was one of a group of fifty who were typing — if you could imagine, we had typewriters at one time [laughing] — and I remember that I had to rent my typewriter to be used. We went to a special building, a special room, where fifty could clack away. My problem was that on the beginning of the third day, while we were waiting outside the door to be let in, the man from the rental office of the typewriters suddenly appeared and said he'd have to have my typewriter back, that somebody was scheduled to have it that day. Well, you can imagine what ensued. I assured him there was no way he was going to get that typewriter away from me, and whatever he had to do, he would have to take up with me later, at the end of the day, or with whomever they had mistakenly scheduled it. So I did succeed in hanging on to it, and the other students waiting around us were, frankly, quite interested in whether it was going to happen one way or the other. Perhaps the determination showed then, too, and I did manage to succeed in wresting my

typewriter so that I could have it to take in, and I felt my victory before I even turned over the pages *that* day. Otherwise, I wouldn't even have been there. These are the unexpected things that can happen to you. But, yes, I would say I did enjoy that. I did.

Decker: You've talked about being one of so few women in your law school class. I take it there were no women law professors at the time.

SMS: Oh, no. No, no [laughing]. No. no.

Decker: I wonder if there were any role models for you in terms of there being a woman lawyer who you looked up to at the time as a young lawyer. Was there anyone in the profession who stood out to you, or were you aware of the few women in the profession?

SMS: Oh, yes, you were certainly aware of them, although at that time when I was admitted, in January of 1943, there were already two hundred women lawyers in L.A., which is something most people don't realize. I immediately joined our women lawyers' association, which was the Southern California Women Lawyers Association at that time, and I joined the Los Angeles Bar Association, and I joined the Lawyers' Club. I really wanted to be in the mix of everything going on, and in the women lawyers' group, we had a mixture there of probably a goodly number of all the women who were . . . including the most well known, I would say. I don't think I ever thought, you know — it's interesting — I never thought of anyone as a role model. I always thought, "Isn't she great, doing what she's doing. Isn't *she* great, doing what *she's* doing!" And I

never, ever thought about it as a role model for myself. Somehow, I always just expected whatever I was, that's what I was going to be — and whatever that would ever turn out to be. So no, I can't say that I ever had a role model, and it may be, perhaps because my mother had been the actual driving force behind all of this, I already thought I knew a woman who was in herself a role model. No, I can't say that I ever did. I thought about that, and, in a way, I've wondered myself why, because so many people do have, but maybe because I came from a family of lawyers to begin with — and I do want to stress at this point something very important in our upbringing: Because my mother felt as she did, and she really was unhappy with the limitations, we were brought up in total equality. There was nothing that we, as the girls in the family, were not expected and totally prepared to do — equal to whatever my brothers did. And even in household chores, whatever it was, they were absolutely equal. There was no such thing as “woman's work” and “man's work.” We all shared in everything, and my brothers grew up totally knowing and accepting the fact that women could do anything they could do, and did, and, I think when they grow up in that kind of atmosphere, it makes a tremendous impact on their acceptance of women in fields — I think particularly professional fields. They're used to it. They're already accustomed to sharing tasks and to seeing women involved in the same things. It's not a case of having to break the barriers, and shatter the glass, and all the rest. There is no substitute for what one learns in the home growing up, and I think when that passes more and more into generations, I think a good part of that problem will be solved.

Decker: Did you realize your upbringing was unique?

SMS: No, not at the time [laughing]. I thought everybody does this, and everybody's going to law school, everybody's going to be a lawyer. I still remember in school when someone would ask — it was junior high school or high school — you know, what do you think you'll be, or whatever, and I'd say, "A lawyer," and then, "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha," you know, from people who "Oh, ho, ho, ho," kind of, "Where did she get that idea?" and "Oh, sure." So, I had occasion to meet those people in later time, and the "Ho, ho" was on the other side.

Decker: Selma, why don't we turn to your early years as a practicing lawyer in Los Angeles. I know you were at your family firm. Can you tell us a little bit about those experiences and what type of law you were practicing?

SMS: Yes, as a matter of fact, the very first case I had, which I didn't know I was going to have in that way, was a criminal case, because I was on the Legal Aid Committee — this started during the war, so it was for servicemen's legal aid and their families, and as it happened, I was appointed to represent this particular woman. And it was an odd thing, because my name being Mrs. Smith, and *her* name was Mrs. Smith, and she was about twenty-five years old, and I wasn't much older, so when I had to appear in court with her, I well remember that, after announcing myself to the clerk, and taking my place at the counsel table, and have her take her place beside me, the judge came in, got on the bench, and looked at the file in front of him, and then a moment later addressed the clerk and said, "Isn't counsel here yet?" So I immediately got up and

said, “If your honor please, I am counsel for Mrs. Smith,” and he said, “But *you’re* Mrs. Smith,” and I said, “Yes, and *she* is Mrs. Smith,” But, I said, “She is the defendant, and I’m the counsel.” And so, for that moment . . . and then, everything relaxed, everything was all right, and we proceeded. I was able to be of help to her, very much so, and I would say, after that — although there were times that I had occasion to be sitting in with someone on a criminal case — ordinarily, mine would be a general civil practice. I had been, I will say, often referred cases by lawyers — male lawyers — with whom I’d had some cases. I considered that a very nice gesture on their part, to find that they were now referring to me. One of the pluses of being a woman lawyer is that there was a San Francisco firm which, in fact, had referred a case to me to be tried in Los Angeles, and, one of the nice things is that when I was able to notify them that we had won the case, I received not only an extra bonus of my fee but a beautiful box of long-stem red roses. So that’s something that a man is not going to get, but it’s one of the little perks that a woman lawyer might look forward to.

Decker: Did you ever feel any hostility from opposing counsel, or felt they were underestimating you, perhaps, as a woman lawyer?

SMS: [Laughing] Oh, yes.

Decker: Would you tell us a little bit about some of those experiences?

SMS: Yes, there was a matter After we had tried the case and won, the lawyer called me and said, “All right, you’ve got your judgment. Let’s cut

it in half, and I'll give you cash." I said, "No, I have a judgment, and you're going to pay it." And I said, "Further, I have a lien on the real property." "No," he said, "You compromise, compromise," he said. "That's the name of the game," he said, "You'll learn that it doesn't matter, you're supposed to compromise," and I said, "But I'm not going to. These people have waited a long time. You owe this, and you're going to pay it." And he said, "Young lady, when you're old and gray," he said, "you'll learn that what you have to do is compromise on this!" and *bang* went the phone. That very day, at the Lawyers' Club luncheon, he sat across from me at the table, by chance, and he absolutely was not going to look at me or speak to me. So, I must say, I did ask him to pass the salt, and the sugar, and the mustard, and the mayonnaise [both laughing], and, as it happened, I did indeed He wouldn't believe me, but I went through a sale on execution of the real property, and we got everything including our nice legal rate of interest from the judgment.

Another matter — there was a firm, two lawyers, and when you say, had they underestimated or whatever, it was interesting that both of them happened to have matters with me in the same week. There were two trials, one at the beginning of the week with one of the members and at the end of the week with the other one. And the very first one, was a man about six feet four, broad shouldered, you know, and I think you see what I look like [laughing]. Anyway, he arrived in court with about four thick law books, spread them out in front of him, took his big heavy briefcase and put that on the table, and pulled out innumerable files, and his clients were sitting in the first row, and he was in full array. I had come in with a small file, whatever, and we had no sooner started — it happened to be an unlawful detainer matter in which I was

defending in this instance — and he had given a notice to quit on a certain ground, and he wanted to — as soon as we began — he asked if he could address the court, and he wanted to ask whether I would stipulate to his amending the complaint at that point. The judge and I looked at each other, and I said, “So stipulate.” So he made his motion to amend, and as soon as he finished the motion to amend, I said, “and I move for nonsuit.” The court said [gesturing downswing of gavel] *click*, “Motion for nonsuit granted.” He got up from the bench, and the lawyer was standing there, and wondered what happened! And what had happened was — which he wasn’t well enough prepared to know — that in an action for unlawful detainer, the complaint had to state the ground on which the notice had been given, and being a summary proceeding, it would be strictly construed, and that could not provide a different statement in the complaint for a ground that had never been stated in the notice before. So in about thirty seconds, the case was over, and his clients came up to him and said, “What happened?” And he said, “Well, we’ll talk outside.” And he had to gather up all of his things, and he looked down at me — and I mean down [laughing] — and he absolutely couldn’t speak. He was beyond speech. He gathered up his things, all of the things, which took him a few minutes, and he departed with them on his trail, waiting to ask questions. And I’ve often wondered what he was able to say afterwards. So he went back to his office with that happy news, and at the end of the week, there was a trial with *his* partner, in fact, which took place in Pasadena. It was a jury trial, and we went through the whole thing, and on the second day, the jury came in and found for me, and on this occasion — he had come in looking like, “I’m here to avenge, I’m here for blood,” you know, “You can’t do this to us”

kind of thing — and I remember that when he left, not looking very happy either, at me, I said something like, “Give my regards to your partner,” and, anyway, they left in a huff, too.

I must say, many of these things, you know, wouldn't happen, in quite that way [to a male lawyer], but they had looked at this, you know, like twenty-five-year-old girl, who didn't look like much of anything, and couldn't do anything. I will say that it shows the difference in people as well, because there was another occasion — this one was a trial in federal court, and it was also a jury trial — when that one was over, and I did succeed in that, the attorney called me from his office and said, “I wanted to tell you,” he said, “that I want you to know that you are the most worthy adversary I have had.” He said, “You are prepared in a way I have not seen prepared,” and he said, “You have conducted this case with dignity,” and, he said, “I'm years your senior, but I learned a great deal from you.” And he said, “I want to wish you well,” and he said, “I know you will do well.” He put it in a very nice way, he said, “I lost today, but I think I really won because I won a friend.” And he did. He did win a friend. So you see, it really depends on the person. It depends on I think of him because I was sorry when we lost him. He was a very fine gentleman, and so on, from one of the very large firms, by the way.

Decker: You've talked about so many of your experiences in the courtroom. Were there very many women judges at the time?

SMS: No. Judge Georgia Bullock was already on the Superior Court. She was the only woman on the Superior Court. There was Judge Ida May Adams, who was on the Municipal Court, and she was the first woman to defeat

an incumbent — and she had never been appointed to the court. She won an election and displaced an incumbent man, a judge, and did it by going door-to-door, and she espoused the women’s causes in her campaign, and whatever. She mounted such a campaign that she was able . . . and we all know what it takes to defeat an incumbent — and for a woman to do this, was quite something else. She established herself at that time, and these were women that I certainly knew. But, no, when we speak of, “Did we have lots of [women]?” no. When I was president of our women lawyers’ association, Mildred Lillie became a judge, and so it was nice — I remember greeting her at that time, welcoming her to our group, to speak to us, and to the bench. And that is something that did happen — when new judges were appointed, we, as presidents, got to be participating in the welcome that was made to the new judges, and so we had an opportunity to be heard in that venue also.

Decker: At that time, were the women lawyers’ association, the bar association, actively involved in trying to get more women on the bench at that time?

SMS: The *women* were. Yes, oh yes. I remember that we would solicit, we would send letters to the governor, to whoever was in charge of a panel of those who were going to examine the applications of candidates for judgeships, and we tried our very best to get as many [women] — as long as they were qualified. We never said, “because she’s a woman,” but just that “let her not be disqualified because she’s a woman.” So, yes, and much of the time it didn’t work, but some of the time it did. It was always an effort that was being made. It was one of those perennial topics that we were dealing with constantly.

Decker: You mentioned being the president of one of the Women Lawyers Association's predecessor organizations, the Southern California Women Lawyers Association. Can you tell me what, or who, prompted you to get involved in the organization, and about your year — your *years* — as president of the organization? What were those like?

SMS: Well, again, I naturally did that. I didn't need outside prompting. I wanted to be part of it. I wanted to be with them and to know them. I always enjoy people, and it was a natural thing for me. There they were, and there *I* was. We should be together. So I immediately joined. In fact, when I came out of the first meeting, I was told that I was going to be tapped for treasurer, before I'd even warmed the seat. So I made my way up through the ranks, as it were, treasurer, to corresponding secretary, to recording secretary, to vice president, and then to president. That was in the year 1947, which also sounds like a few hundred years ago. And then I was reelected for a term in '48. We had quite a few issues that were before us at that time. Much was happening. At the same time, I was invited in '48 to present a paper to the International Bar Association meeting at The Hague, and I chose as my topic, legal education — legal curriculum — because I was so recently out of law school that it was still fresh in mind. And all the holes that I thought needed to be filled in preparing students for actual [practice], and what I suggested is something that has become taken for granted, and that was that the third year should be largely clinical — just as the medical students had internships — that law students should have an opportunity to participate in a trial, in preparation of cases, the kinds of things that are taken for granted now. It was quite novel at that

time to have that idea. Duke University was trying it out, and it was one of the things that was very much on my mind.

I will say also, just speaking of — if I put myself back into that timeframe — I remember that our group . . . we had monthly meetings. Well, we had some luncheon meetings, but primarily dinner meetings because the Southern California Women Lawyers, just like their name, meant that we had members all over the area — all the way from [Santa Barbara] down to San Diego and around. And if we made it dinner meetings, they had a chance to come in, and we weren't foreclosed at the end of it by a bind of time to get back to our offices and to court. So we had . . . and I know during my terms, I made sure that every meeting, whether it was luncheon or dinner, I had invited the judges of every department — whether criminal, civil, probate. It didn't matter what it was, I wanted our group to get information, an education, tips, on everything that would improve their lawyering skills. We had some very productive, very productive meetings. Good feedback and, by questions that were asked afterwards of the speakers, the judges who came (and court commissioners and whatever), they acquired a little respect for the women who were asking these questions and attending these meetings. It gave them the opportunity to know that there really were some women lawyers around. It made for an ease of approach that nothing else takes the place of. You have to have seen each other in a setting that allows you later to say hello in a way that you wouldn't if you had never been able to, such as the time I needed to speak to a judge — not on a pending matter, but wanted to arrange for something — and I went to the [judge] — it was about probably 3:30 in the afternoon, after a trial had finished — presented my card to the clerk and asked if I

could see the judge in chambers. A few minutes later, he walked out and he said, "Judge So-and-So does not see women lawyers." So, I retreated from that one. And that judge never did. However, I would say we had the most marvelous representation of wonderful judges who came to speak to us, and whenever we could use the opportunity for a woman judge, believe me, we did. They got, really, spread thin [laughing], and also other women lawyers, because some were already experienced in certain fields, and we were there to share information. We helped each other. We sent each other forms and files of things. If we knew that somebody needed something, and probably wouldn't think of something, we were ready to make a phone call, spend time with the person. We were doing the kind of thing — they talk about mentoring — we were doing that early on. And that was just — you didn't have to be much older to be a mentor, you were just somebody who had that kind of case before. I'm so glad to say that there was this kind of camaraderie that enabled us to [do this]. Sometimes we were out of forms, and you needed it that minute, that you had to get something filed in a hurry or you were on your way to the courthouse. You'd call somebody, they'd send some over, whatever it was, you had your thing. There are no words, you know, "price above rubies" or something, to pay for that kind of sharing of responsibilities as women lawyers and the help they gave each other. I'm really proud of what women can do when they pool their efforts and their knowledge and their skills, and I was happy with them.

Decker: Did you use this network of women lawyers throughout your career as an attorney?

SMS: Oh, yes, yes. This was always true. The woman who was president of the National Association of Women Lawyers when I was admitted was the very one who moved my admission to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1958. She then had me write a letter for her. She was in Washington, D.C., and she wanted a particular position — she was in the tax field — and I had been admitted to the tax court because, without trying, somehow my clients had been involved in — and I'm not referring just to making returns — I'm talking about tax problems, so I had had to be admitted to the court. So she wanted a letter from me, which I did send to President Kennedy, backing her request for the office. Fortunately — she was, obviously, a very skilled lawyer — she did get the position. And always thanked me — as though that were *the* thing [laughing], but it's the kind of thing that we did for each other. Yes, it went back and forth.

Decker: Can you describe how your career progressed and changed? We focused a little bit on the 1940s. In the '50s and '60s, how did it develop and change?

SMS: Wills that had been drawn became probate estates. You were involved now in families that had come first when it was just the signing of documents, and now all the work had to be done. I know that I had good relationships with my clients — and I'm thinking back when you mention that — I'm thinking of those probate situations. I remember reaching across my desk many a time to squeeze someone's hand, and hand a Kleenex or whatever to bereaved families to whom I, obviously, had also become attached. They were not simply numbers or names on a file, they were people, and we always had personal relationships. I

cherished letters that I would receive from clients along that feeling. Let's say that the practice became in many ways — well, you do some things one or two times, and some things you do repeatedly. Of course, there were the inevitable divorces, the custody things, the adoption things, the bitter disputes, bitter, bitter disputes.

I will say that one — it was very fortunate — it was a trial — non-jury — I did get a judgment against someone and it meant also their having to be removed from certain premises. And it was fortunate — I had no idea until the case was over and my client and I repaired to the ladies' room afterwards, before leaving the courthouse building, and as we approached the sink, she opened her purse and she had a small pistol that she had brought into the courthouse — into the courtroom — and I, of course, my eyeballs almost fell out when I saw what I was looking at, and she said, "If we had lost, I was going to kill that blankety-blank-blank," and she really meant it. I said, "We are leaving this building at *once*." I ushered her out. She said, "I have a permit," and I said, "You're not bringing it into a courtroom." I said, "If I had known . . .," and she said, "That's why I didn't tell you." My heart was beating, I assure you, as I got that woman out of the courthouse, but I give you this as an illustration of how deep the bitterness can be, and when people come to litigation what they are prepared to do. I did not represent that person again, but I do remember two of my colleagues — two women — who were shot to death — one in her office by a husband who was being divorced by his wife — he simply came in and fired point-blank, shot her dead at her desk and walked out. Of course, they did capture him. The other one was shot in the back in her home by someone who was waiting for her to arrive. These were women who were very much in

litigation, and it didn't matter that they were women, they bore the same risks that men did of what could happen. There was violence then, too, and these were both close members of the women lawyers' groups. I give you this as an example of those things happening, too. I would say it was a time when much more was going on than people would have imagined in later years. When they look back, they think very little was going on, but a great deal was going on.

Decker: What timeframe was that?

SMS: One of them, the first one, would have been in about the late '50s, and the other one would have been in the early '60s. We did have a woman in particular who specialized only in criminal law. She represented only defendants who would be considered high-risk, but she managed, and built her whole practice on it. There are many examples, if one were to peel back the pages to find that the lives of women lawyers have been quite full.

Decker: Were these incidents of violence focused on women lawyers, or were all lawyers at the time subject to such acts of violence?

SMS: They would all have been subject. It was not because they were women. I don't know whether because they were women they thought they would be easier targets, but, no, I don't think it had any bearing on that. It was just the matter of what they were going to be violent about that completely And they never did find the one, by the way, who shot the one woman lawyer in the back in her home.

Decker: Can you describe the L.A. legal community for us in the '40s, '50s, and then later in the '60s, such as where you practiced law? You talked earlier about Spring Street being the hub of activity? Could you tell us a little bit about that?

SMS: Yes, well, that was the street where so many of the big law firms and the courts — were all on Spring Street — the banks, the head offices, the stock exchange — all of them were on Spring Street. We were located at Fourth and Spring, and it was just a short hop to the courthouse. There was a streetcar that ran by on Spring Street, so we would just have a pass or walk the four blocks, or hop on and be delivered there in a few minutes. It made it very easy. Everything was close. Lawyers were primarily downtown. We didn't have what we do now in the matter of so many different areas where there are large concentrations of large law offices. It was all centered pretty well there. And of course, the location of the courts is what determined that, the Hall of Records, the City Hall, the criminal courts — everything were all located in very much that location. So geographically, you go where the important things are. I would say we had various bar associations, and lawyers have always been engaged in activity by committees — and of course I participated in many of the bar associations, their activities — over all the years. That never changed, nor has it changed. I would say the practice was Well, I can tell you even at that time, lawyers dropped dead on the steps of the courthouse. It was considered one of the hazards of practicing law — the tension.

I remember an instance where — this was [in] Law and Motion — I was there because I had filed a motion to dismiss. This lawyer, who

was the one who had filed the complaint, actually — it's surprising, to this moment it surprises me — he tapped me on the shoulder as we were sitting in the front row waiting for ours to be called — and usually clients are never in Law and Motion — and he asked if he could speak to me out in the corridor. I said, "Of course," so we walked out in the corridor. I remember that he was probably in his mid-40's, and he said, "I have to tell you, I'm not good at being in court." He said, "I get very upset," and he said, "The worst of it is, my clients are here." He said, "I'm very much afraid you're going to win this," and he said, "I have a stomach that can't take the stress." And he said, "Is there any way that we can do this where I'm not going to be confronted with what I really won't be able to physically take," and I said, "Well, of course." I said, "Leave that to me." So when the motion was called for, I asked if we might approach, and so we did, and I asked the court if it would be possible to just have the matter taken under submission." He [the judge] was a little nonplussed, and I said, "I think that would be the most convenient for all concerned," and he didn't know quite what it was but he gathered that there was something afoot, and so he said, "Yes, this matter will be taken under submission." As we walked out, the lawyer said to me, "You just saved my life." He said, "I'll never forget this," and I thought to myself, how hard that must have been for him, especially because it was a young woman lawyer. He had to have swallowed his pride in a hundred ways. Sure enough, his clients were trailing him, but he had nothing he had to say to them because it was under submission. These are the kinds of things, you know, you don't expect are going to happen to you, and you have to be available with all kinds of answers and remedies and *compassion*, I think, for whatever. Lawyers are

subject to all kinds of things, and it's well known that there are many lawyers who will not go to court, whose practice consists entirely of office [work], or negotiations, or business/commercial affairs — anything that will not take them into a courtroom into litigation. Where in England they separate that out between the barristers and solicitors, we don't do that, and yet in effect, I think, we separate ourselves out anyway, because those who can, do, and those who can't, don't. This was just a sidelight of the kind of thing that did happen.

Decker: Selma, when did you stop practicing law?

SMS: Oh, well, that took years to accomplish, actually, even after I had decided that. I had started very early and I had literally paid my dues — in both directions — I began to do this. It was not easy because my clients were usually long-standing clients and were not happy to know that this was going to be dissolving, and I had to do this over a span of years. It depended, too, on the type of work that was involved. Years passed before all of the files had been returned or were completed, or whatever. I didn't leave anything in the middle. I finished everything out that needed to be done, but I made clear that I was no longer available for anything future. So I lived out everything that I was due to do. And several called back later or wrote back — had I reconsidered? In each case, I said “no.” No, it took a long time to make the decision, and finally, I would. It's been of very recent years actually that I haven't been involved in the actual practice. But I have never left the venue of the lawyers, the bar associations, the association with lawyers in so many ways. I wouldn't know how to do that. It *is* part of my life. I find myself

always involved, as I am to this day, of course, with my activities with the American Bar Association.

Decker: And during your years in practice, at one point, you had a son?

SMS: Oh, *yes* — who is now an architect.

Decker: That must have had an interesting impact on your career, and how to balance how to be a practicing lawyer and a mom. Could you tell us how you were able to balance all of that?

SMS: Well, I will say that in those first years I made sure — and this could only have been done, again, because I had the wonderful situation of a family office where I tried, I think quite successfully — to do my work at home, speak to the secretary at the office with phone calls, with mail, with other forms of communication. I was able to keep up what I was doing, and I was able to, therefore, give what I felt was a mother's attention as I would only have wanted to do. It was when my child was then going to nursery school, and later into kindergarten and that kind of thing, that I was fulltime back in all the time, but [only] during the hours that my child would be at school — it was those hours I devoted to that. When my child was home, my child was not aware that I had even been away. So as far as he was concerned, I was just there, and that was the way I wanted it to be.

Decker: Selma, we'd like to turn now to some of your extracurricular activities, so to speak, and your involvement with so many organizations, if we

could touch on a few. Why don't we start with the International Federation of Women Lawyers.

SMS: That would be nice, because I have nice memories of all of that. That's an organization that was founded in Mexico City in 1944, and the first time they came to Los Angeles for the international convention was in 1949. I had just finished my two years as president of the Southern California Women Lawyers here, and so I was much involved in their arriving and what would be happening with them. We had a wonderful convention here. Many of us opened our homes to women lawyers from other countries, and it was for many reasons that we did this. We came to meet them when they arrived, and there we were. And here was the person you were going to be hostess to — someone who didn't necessarily speak English particularly well. Since I was one of those who had offered my home, I was presented a particular woman who was from the Dominican Republic. She spoke very little English, and I had learned Spanish, which I enjoyed very much using, and so I had been assigned to be her hostess. We greeted each other at that point. Her name was Milady Félix de L'Official. Just a few years before that, women in the Dominican Republic had been granted equality and the right to vote, and she became — was voted in — to become the first woman senator from her country. It was in that capacity that she was designated for her country to represent them in this international gathering. At our City Hall, the mayor, who was then Mayor Bowren, and his wife, had made big arrangements, as we had arranged with them to do. We used the large hall in the City Hall where all of the guests — we had the flags flying of all the countries represented, and it was open to

the public as well, and all of these women lawyers, we asked them to say a few words, you know, which were of course translated for us, and they sometimes gave their best in English. It was quite a sight. It was quite an event and the first time this had happened in the United States, that this group had gathered, and fortunately it was Los Angeles. I remember that Milady — it was a title bestowed upon her, and so it was used as her first name, Milady — was one of those who was a very fiery orator. She made her talk with, what shall I say, great aplomb and, as well, with pauses that were *significant*, while she assumed her regal position, and she had bearing to match; she was well built with shoulders and whatever, and she really made quite a spectacular presentation and representative for her country, and for Spanish-speaking women. In my home, she and I became instant sisters, to all kinds of personal things. She was with me for ten days during this conference, and I would have to tell you — that was in '49 — it was not until last year that she passed away — that we had been close friends through all the years that followed. We met in New York. She came again to Los Angeles, and she stayed in my home. We wrote regularly, we spoke on the phone regularly. We shared each other's lives — to such an extent that when we were in her country for the conference in the Dominican Republic, she took me to *her* home to meet her husband, who was a physician, and her young son who was 16 at the time, who became a physician, and she said to him, in Spanish of course — I give you the English — but she said, "Dígale a ella lo que le dije." Anyway, he said, "What my mother told me, and what I have agreed to do, is that when I am older and I marry, the first child I have who is a girl will have the name Selma" — which gives you some idea of the extent to which she and I had become, really,

sisters. And actually that's what happened. The child was born while he was in Spain studying with an eye specialist. The child was born in Madrid, and she was named Selma. I became her godmother, and attended her wedding a few years back as well. It was that kind of — we were bound together. And for Spanish-speaking people to do this kind of thing, it truly means family. When we were in her country, I have to say that I did play a little joke on her, but to tell you that, I would have to say that when she was leaving *my* home after the first meeting of ten days that I referred to, she had left little notes for me everywhere that I would look — if I would open a cupboard, if I would open a drawer, if I lifted my pillow, there would be another little note from her — it was our way of having another way of communicating. At any rate, when the plane arrived, landed in the capital in her country, she was waiting down below and I could see as we were waiting to deplane, I could see through the windows where she was standing — only, of course, she and her limousine, and a couple behind — and she kept looking and looking, and I let everyone get off — and she was looking and waiting, “Dónde está Selma, dónde está Selma?” And I could see, and finally I peaked around the corner, and she said, “Ay, aquí tengo Selma” — “Here I have Selma.” Then she had the young lady who was standing there with beautiful, again, long-stem red roses that were to be presented to me. And then she ushered me to the limousine that was behind her. She said, “This one is for you.” It was in this style that she received me in her country. I remember we were put up at the Hotel Embajador, which was *the* place to be. Every day, a messenger would arrive at my room where she had sent another gift — a box that I would open would have something more, something more. We were together every moment. We were in

the meetings together. When the meetings were over, her husband would drive. We would sit in the back seat. She would have her shoes off, we would have our heads together, laughing, enjoying something, and I remember that her husband would look at us in his rearview mirror and seeing her — you know, this dignified woman — and there we were rollicking and laughing together and having a wonderful time in the back seat, and oh the latest on this, the latest on that, and with our arms locked. It was a wonderful, wonderful relationship, during which all of this time, our work was being done as well at the conference.

It is a mixture — as you see, I had mentioned whether it was with clients or whether it was with associates in the various bar associations — the personal side of this — that it has been such a rich kind of experience for me. The friendships, more than friendships, that have endured through so many years, and wonderful memories. There is more than just the case in front of you. There are the people who are part of it, and the people who are inside the lawyers you deal with. It's never just a matter of a case. It's something far more than that. If you want your practice to be something that fills your life that is fulfilling, it can't just be decisions, another decision, looking up something, checking something, hurry, hurry, hurry — if the human element isn't there, and in hearing what I'm choosing to tell you about, I realize again that it reminds me that it has been uppermost with me, and perhaps this is why these relationships have existed, but it has been by far the things I remember most. I'm sorry when I see so many young lawyers who are being harried through the days and weeks and years of their practice, barely able to keep up with themselves, and losing out on so much of what really will count when you look back. When you're in it, you don't

think you're going to be looking back, but you will, and I can't help thinking that.

And this again, because I'm speaking of something in the Spanish, reminds me again of what I was relating to you earlier, my wish to include the Spanish-speaking women in our Law Day events. Let me say just a little bit about our Law Day events of the Women Lawyers, because this was very important. When Law Day was selected by the president, Eisenhower, and May 1 would be Law Day throughout the country, it was something that was used by the National Association of Women Lawyers to plant programs all over the country, to engage the services of all the lawyers, women lawyers, to educate the American public about the law, the law system, to make them more familiar with law. At any rate, I was involved immediately and early on in Law Day ceremonies and programs, including the National. They had events here in Los Angeles, and we had some wonderful events which brought to the public a closer connection to the system of law in this country. As a result, I chaired contests for our groups — essay contests — a variety of things for law students, for individuals, for adults, whatever, and for which we gave prizes. We had prominent speakers from so many places, and I was put on television for the varieties of occasions we were going to have. I would precede them by appearing on programs and talking about Law Day. One of those was Groucho Marx — I don't know if that name means anything too familiar, I know it does to people of, shall I say, my generation and many generations after. I think he's been seen on so many reruns on television. I actually did appear on his program, too, which was an unforgettable experience, if you can imagine. He had a woman lawyer there, and of course my maiden name was Moidel —

and the firm name was Moidel, Moidel, Moidel and — well, I mean, he only needed to hear something like that to launch into [laughing] any number of things while he was knocking off ashes from his cigar. Despite all of that, I did manage to get across the message of Law Day [which was heard by the studio audience but edited out of the version shown on television]. I also appeared on a number of other television programs — not with Groucho's, shall I say, form of communication, but a little more of what we expect. It served the purpose, when we had these Law Day programs, of bringing in many, many people who otherwise would have no close relationship. Here we took them to — held open the courtrooms; we had the judges sitting extra time, particularly women judges, and we would bring people to them, and let them have some look at what was going on — a familiarity that they would never otherwise have. We educated the public about what their rights were as to this and this in preliminary ways, ways that are preventive rather than trying to cure when you've already done the wrong thing. It was something that captured the attention of everyone, throughout the country.

It was at these events of the Women Lawyers [WLALA] that I also chaired our Law Day events that — I mentioned to you that I had chosen to invite the women of the Latin-American consular corps, those who were themselves the officials representing their countries in Los Angeles. I arranged for them to be guests, and I took occasion to introduce all of them, in Spanish, which was a great delight for them and which they appreciated very much, and of course in English for the benefit of everyone else. One of the persons I invited — and that included several of our judges here — one of the persons, I started to

say, was Carlos de la Torre, who was president of the Cuban bar association already in exile — in Los Angeles — with whom, again, there was a marvelous friendship, which lasted all of his years that we shared together — who in fact had written a book there on the rule of law. In other words, that was the thing, the rule of law, and it was part and parcel of what our Law Day was all about. He was one of those that I honored on that occasion. I had asked him offhandedly on one of our social occasions, “If you want to honor someone, how would you introduce this man, by what means, his name?” “Oh,” he said, “first I would . . .” He explained to me in Spanish, “I would say it this way,” and he gave several . . . and I said, “I see, I see.” So when it came time, when he came to the Law Day event and it was time to introduce him, I used the very means by which he said you’ll give the greatest honor. I had used it as “Señor Don Carlos de la Torre y de la Rosa,” and he was so appreciative. And, of course, the rest of the Spanish-speaking guests realized also what I had done. It was a nice moment, a very nice moment, in what might otherwise have just been speeches, speeches, you know. It was contagious, everyone applauded, again, it was something I like to feel was added to what ordinarily would never happen. Of course, as I mentioned to you, I did one other thing — this was in 1966 — that was new for all of my women-lawyer friends as well, or lawyers in general, and that was: in our programs, we had a musical interlude. On this occasion, after finishing the formal parts of the event, I said, “We will have our music interlude now,” and I walked across the stage to the concert grand piano that was sitting there, and I sat down and began to play. I played a number of my compositions, which happened on that occasion, I chose, were Latin-American in theme. Of

course, this brought quite a bit of acclamation because my colleagues had no idea that I was involved in music, and certainly as deeply as I was. It was, again, an additional opportunity to use Latin-American [culture]. At any rate, I will say that the Law Day events that took place, finally, I think served their purpose and thereafter, sometime after that, the Los Angeles County Bar Association took on the role of the Law Day celebrations, and so the women lawyers groups sort of acceded to that, in Los Angeles. What were you going to ask me other than that?

Decker: Well, I'm curious because you have so many interests — practicing lawyer, your Spanish-language skills, your interest in international issues. I wonder, as a practicing lawyer, have you ever debated going into another field, or trying something like politics, or anything along those lines?

SMS: Actually, no. In fact, there was an occasion when they were — as we did, we would send the names to the governor or whomever for selection of women judges — and on one occasion, the group had wanted to submit my name — along with others, you know — and I asked them not to. I said I would prefer not, and I actually did not When you mention politics, I couldn't see myself in that arena. I knew that those waters were not for me, and I have never been tempted to do so. In fact, I've gone out of my way not to. I've had to go out of my way not to — [laughing].

Decker: And what about the bench? It didn't interest you at all?

SMS: I felt, no I thought it was a marvelous thing, and I was delighted for every woman lawyer who went on the bench, and I, to this day, it never fails to delight me when it happens, but I didn't see myself in that role. I saw myself more in the lawyer than on the bench.

Decker: Can we talk a little bit about your involvement in the ABA?

SMS: Yes, actually I had joined the ABA in 1946, and in fact at that time, shortly after, I was on the Activities Committee — of the Junior Bar [of the ABA] because I was a fairly new admittee. I was the only woman on the whole committee of at least fifteen. I still remember the listing of “Mrs.” in front of my name, which was the only one. I continued for some time in committee work, but then there was a lapse of years with that particular group while I was very busy with the National Association of Women Lawyers. However, of more recent time, the National Association of Women Lawyers asked me to be their liaison to the Senior Lawyers Division of the American Bar Association. So I found myself back in the activities of the American Bar, and this time at the other end, the Senior Lawyers rather than the Junior Bar. As it happens, I have been elected to the governing Council of the Senior Lawyers Division and have just recently been reelected for another two years.

I was appointed to chair the Editorial Board of the quarterly magazine [*Experience*], the national magazine that is put out by the Division. As it happened, when I took that position that I was appointed to, I was the first woman that they had ever had to chair the Editorial Board of that magazine. I can tell you that I have had a busy time in preparing a good fifty pages every three months for a magazine that is

for thousands of members all over the country. Next week, on Wednesday, which will be [August] 1st, I will be leaving for Chicago for the annual meeting of the American Bar Association, and our meetings of the Council of the Senior Lawyers Division. I have meetings to chair, I have many preparations to make. Our magazine for that quarter will be out right now, and its cover is "Chicago." It has been quite an adventure because I've had twelve lawyers who are on the Editorial Board, and I have separately an American Bar Association staff which does the actual production of the magazine, the physical production of it. I have sort of been riding herd, as it were, in all directions. I was very pleased just yesterday to receive a letter from the director of the Senior Lawyers Division which, well, said some rather nice things about what had been done for the magazine, in thanking me on behalf of all of them for contributions that I have made already now to the Division. In fact, it was a very nice way to receive thanks for what you do without thinking of thanks but has been quite an interesting adventure by itself because it was not a journal but truly a magazine, with feature stories.

One of the first things I did — one of the many changes I made — was an "Authors" page in which we would have the photos of all of the authors of the articles appearing. They had never done that before, and I wanted them to see the *people*. Again, I wanted — without being aware of it, I was doing the same thing again — I wanted it to be reader-friendly. I know when I open a magazine, I like to see who wrote it. When I see who it is and a little blurb about the person, somehow I feel a little closer to the article they wrote. So that was initiated, and it was immediately a great success. Everyone appreciated this — certainly the authors did — but the readers particularly, and immediately they told

me, “This was a great idea. We’re so glad to get to see the faces of the people, instead of” And this is for people who don’t come to meetings necessarily, who are spread out all over the country. We meet four times a year in various parts of the country. Not everyone can get to go to all of the meetings, and they don’t get to meet the people, they don’t know who the authors are — they have no contact really. It came back that this really made it feel closer for them.

I had even done this with the members of the Editorial Board. They were spread out all over, and I insisted that they all come together, meet at one time, and I did indeed get them all together to make camaraderie among them — again, the feeling of family. I realize I was reenacting family and wanted them Again, I said, “If you know that one of your colleagues here is working on something and you’ve run across something that you think would be good for it, let him know.” They had been for years on the Editorial Board and had never met each other and, once again, what I realize now is that I can’t stand human beings who are apart from each other. I want to bring them together. They know that I require certain things of them, but one of them is that we’re all in this together and I want us all to brainstorm together, share ideas together, and we’re going to enjoy each other’s efforts. It has made quite a difference.

I converted the whole process of the review [of prospective articles] to open it up to all of them, instead of just some of them, and changed the whole process for the ABA Publishing people who were serving our Division. Instead of sending out the articles by mail, which took a lot of staff time and addressing and stamps and paper and, you know, expenses that really didn’t need, I thought, to be spent that way,

I've converted it entirely to an electronic system where it all goes out by email, and they send back their replies by email of their reviews. It's now a no-cost situation, all of them are able now to do so, and it's just a click and it reaches everybody at once. The article goes out, everybody has it. This morning, in fact, before coming here — my email was coming in with the answers, with the reviews, the words we were waiting to hear from them. It's a whole process that never existed before. I'm glad I was able to bring it up to date in that way. It saved so much money for them that all the members of the [Editorial] Board now have a paid trip to a meeting of their choice, of the bar association. I also stopped them from using what they would call paid writers. Instead of having articles sent out for someone else, I said, "No way, we're not doing that anymore. It's all coming from here. We're not spending anything for that." So I saved money for *that*. Altogether it's been rewarding in the sense of now we have many different kinds of articles, and again, I have to say now, instead of just legal topics, we're talking about the lawyers themselves, individuals. We're having interviews of lawyers, where we're learning about them as people. They get to talk about things in their personal lives. We've had wonderful response to this kind of thing.

Decker: And are there other women on the Board with you?

SMS: There were two with me. I must say that's a thing by itself, too. But to have the first woman chair of the whole thing was really a big milestone, and so I was grateful for I certainly did not ask for it. I had no idea, of course I was on the Editorial Board — I've always been writing and

editing, again something my whole family did — and it was a natural kind of thing to do, but I did not expect to be tapped for the chair because I knew that it had never happened, you know. That was one — shall we say — we broke the glass ceiling on that one, so I hope they're none the worse for wear now.

Decker: Selma, can you — we always ask this question of the people we interview, and it is, can you offer any advice to young women entering the profession today? What advice do you give them?

SMS: Well, I would say, find your place. By that I mean, find what it is that gives you back the feeling that you're not only giving your services but that it's rewarding to you in the personal sense. If you feel that you want to be in a particular field, then go for that. If you feel that your attributes, whatever makes you what you are, puts you in litigation, that's the place for you. If you feel you're in mediation, that's where you go. I guess what I'm saying is, know yourself, or get to know yourself, as you start out. Perhaps you know enough about yourself to know what you wouldn't want to do, but you have to find your place. By all means, be open to every kind of experience because sometimes you find it where you least expect it to be, and then you feel, "That's where I belong." You want to be of public service, but as a human being if your own needs are not being filled, very soon you're going to know it in a lot of ways. I think the best advice I can give them is: Try to live as well-rounded a life as you can. Have diverse interests. Have avocations. In other words, "get a life" [laughing], because a lawyer is a living human being, but you've got to get a life, and you will be able to bring that much

more to your practice, to your clients, to your associates. I have to say, whatever we are we bring to whatever we do. And the most well-rounded person you can be is what you will bring to whatever you do.

Decker: Thank you.

SMS: Thank *you*.