THE CELEBRATION OF THE FIRST 150 WOMEN LAWYERS IN FLORIDA:
THE LEGACY AND THE LEGEND
(A RETROSPECTIVE)

By: Edith G. Osman

After nearly two years of exhaustive research and
seven months of planting, the celebration of the first 150 women lawyers in Florida became a reality first on
May 25, 2000, at the Sheraton Bal Harbour in Miami,
and next at a Supreme Court ceremony on June 16,
2000, in Tallahassee. The project began shortly after I
was elected President-Elcctor of The Florida Bar and
announced an ABA meeting at which I learned that a
few other states had presented similar projects in honor of
their Bar’s anniversaries. Coincidentally, The Florida
Bar was to be celebrating its 80th anniversary during
the year of my presidency.

As a Past President of state-wide and Dade County
FAWL, I had long intended to find a project that would
bring The Florida Bar and Florida Association for
Women Lawyers together during my presidency. This
time seemed perfect. After several discussions, FAWL
signed on, with Presidents Kathy Castor and Jeanmarie
Whalen’s full support. Wendy Loquasto, at Tallahassee
lawyers, had recently completed her research on Louise
Rebecca Pinkell, Florida’s first female lawyer. She
greeted spearhead the research of the first 100 (at
the time), but warned that the project would not be easy.
In fact, she would not commit to going beyond 50.
The complexity surprised me. I had envisioned open-
ing a book and finding the list of the first 100 women
lawyers, calling a caterer, planning a party, and voila,
the celebration would be ready.

Instead, it took 20 researchers over 18 months to
identify, research, locate and write about our first 30
pioneering women attorneys. Wendy reviewed her work.
out of Tallahassee and realized, in the first and major
year of the researchers came from Tallahassee FAWL
Chapter. But as time went on, we exhausted these
resources and Wendy needed help statewide.
Fortunately, many of our members came to the rescue.
From what I understand, their gift to the project was
only surpassed by the personal satisfaction they
received by the work they did and the people they met.
A shameful and revealing fact emerged from the
research: the first 150 still did not mirror our African
American women lawyers. While harassment and
sexual discrimination were no different in those we
recognized, were still not able to have a Supreme Court
Appeal.

Front Row (l to r): U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, Chief
Justice Mary Hardwick Winn, Pres.-Elect, National
Bar Association; Black Bowler (l to r): 11th Circuit Court
Appeal Judge Roseline Barkett, Justice Barbara Pariente;
Edith G. Osman, FAWL Past President; Martha Barnett Pres.-
Elect, ABA and Justice Peggy Quince.

Bowles Marks Hawkins (1935), Grace Williams
Butwell (1935), Reba Fugler Danner (1936), Judge
Mattie Belle Davis (1936), Daisy Richards Bizz (1937), Lucille
Carrie George (1948), Jeanette
Edithie TeSelle Thompson (1948), Lois Ellen Thacker
Grieser (1941), and June Alice Eide Deacon Fenswally
(1942), Caroline Adams (1942), Mary Frances Evoll
(1942), Ellet Denvir Clarence Watson (1942),
Bernice Gaines Dom (1958), Ruby Bawars Mczier
(1955), C. Bette Wimbish (1960), and Arthelia L.
Jenner (1960). Sadly, Rebecca Pinkell passed away
less than a week before the event. Nevertheless, ten of
the women were present with their family members
and the families of many of the deceased honorees.
I had the privilege of escorting the honoree to a
private room to read, pose for pictures with the
Attorney General. What a sight it was to see our
own reunion and the touching moments it engendered.
Attorney General Reno knew many of them personally.
The minutes in that room were certainly not empty
because any of these women would have imagined as they
fought their way through their legal education and
then legal careers.

The committee, in addition to planning the event,
had commissions a video to be made of our surviving
first 150. Under the tireless leadership of Jacki Scott,
the video crew traveled to various parts of the state to
interview our honorees and to cut, edit, and add
music to a beautifully produced piece of work. It
was shown during the dinner on a six-foot screen.

Interestingly, the media attention surrounding the
even caused it to be attended by a large corps of national
press, and so 75 members of the press found their
way to the history of Florida women lawyers, as
told by the evening’s speakers and the video. Of
course, they all sprang to attention when Attorney
General Reno began to speak, the last speaker of the
evening.

Emerged by the wonders of our May 25th dinner
in South Florida, we looked toward our Florida
celebration at the Supreme Court on June 14th. As
President of the Bar, I was on behalf of FAWL. I must
recognize and thank those who helped plan and
organize the event: U.S. Attorney General Janet
Reno, Chief Justice Mary Hardwick Winn, Pres.-
Elect, National Bar Association; Black Bowler;
11th Circuit Court Appeal Judge Roseline Barkett, Justice
Barbara Pariente; Edith G. Osman, FAWL Past President;
Martha Barnett Pres.-Elect, ABA and Justice Peggy Quince.
South Florida, we looked towards our North Florida celebration at the Supreme Court on June 14th. As President of the State, and on behalf of FAWL, I must recognize how blessed we are to have a Supreme Court that recognizes these priorities and generously partner with us in this celebration. The logistics of this celebration were spearheaded by the Tallahassee FAWL Chapter under the leadership of Nina Ashford and Wendy Loquasto.

Although many of the speakers at the June 14 ceremony were the same, Chief Justice Harding, Judge Rosemary Barkett, Martha Barnett, Wendy Loquasto, Terramee Wedo, and myself, we had to change our strategy. Chief Justice Barkett had to change her strategy, since it would be a bit more convenient for our neighbors in Alqova and Palm Beach.

Unravelling, planning, researching, and book writing occurred at a frantic pace between January and May. On May 25th, we opened doors to the Sheraton Pal Mal saranon to reveal tickets for 900, each sparkling with 500 multi-colored roses, silver candles, and pearl strands, and each embossed with the photograph of one of our honorees. It was a beautiful sight.

Unfortunately, there was also a sight to behold outside the hotel. By the time the event occurred, Attorney General Rere had ordered the removal of young Elise Gonzalez from the home of her Miami relatives and this was her first return to Miami. The Cuban-American community’s reaction culminated in the celebration of women from the national media. Outside the hotel, protesters on the road, sea, and in the sky denounced Attorney General Rere’s actions. Supporters praised her actions, and other groups, such as Haitians, condemned the U.S. government’s immigration policies. Nevertheless, as a tribute to our American system of government, the celebration proceeded peacefully.

In a wild sepia scene, our head table was set with eight women and one man, Chief Justice Mayo Harding. With the crowd of almost 900, the cocktail hour and dinner celebration were electric. Friends enjoying visits and everyone reveled in the significance and history of the event. Going into the event, there were only 14 women among the first 150 and first 5 judges: Dixie L. Leringham Chuston (1930), Dr. Catherine Stewart Hohman Carter (1934), Rebecca

Honoree Dixie L. Leringham Chuston (1930) with son Bryan.