

# 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 planning, 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 14, 2000, in Tallahassee. The project began shortly after I was elected President-Elect of The Florida Bar and attended an ABA meeting at which I learned that a few other states had presented similar projects in honor of their Bars' anniversaries. Coincidentally, The Florida Bar was to be celebrating its 50th 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 one seemed perfect! After some discussions, FAWL signed on, with Presidents Kathy Castor and Jeanmarie Whalen's full support. Wendy Loquasto, a Tallahassee lawyer, had recently completed the research on Louise Rebecca Pinnell, Florida's first female attorney. She agreed to 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 opening 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 87 researchers over 18 months to identify, research, locate and write about our first pioneering women attorneys. Wendy based her work out of Tallahassee and needless to say, the first and majority of the researchers came from the Tallahassee FAWL Chapter. But, as time went on we exhausted those resources and Wendy needed help state-wide. 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 did not include any African-American women. We wanted to recognize our

Bowles Marks Hawkins (1935), Grace Williams Burwell (1935), Reba Engler Daner (1936), Judge Mattie Belle Davis (1936), Daisy Richards Bisz (1937), Lucille Cairns George (1940), Jeannette Edythe TeSelle Plump (1940), Lois Ellen Thacker Graessle (1941), June Anne E'del Deacon Fenyvessy (1942), Caroline Adams (1942), Mary Frances Dewell (1942), Ethel Dorothea Clarson Watson (1942), Bernice Gaines Dorn (1958), Ruby Burrows McZier (1965), C. Bette Wimbish (1968), and Arthenia L. Joyner (1969). Sadly, Rebecca Hawkins passed away less than a week before the event. Nevertheless, ten of the women were present, as were their family members and the families of many of the deceased honorees.

I had the privilege of escorting the honorees to a private room to meet and pose for pictures with the Attorney General. What a sight it was to see their own reunion and the touching moments it engendered. Attorney General Reno knew many of them personally. The minutes in that room were certainly not ones that any of those 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 commissioned a video to be made of our surviving first 150. Under the tireless leadership of Jacki Scola, the video crew traveled to various parts of the state to interview our honorees and to cut, paste, 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 event caused it to be attended by a large corps of national media, and so it came to be that probably 25 reporters listened to the history of Florida's 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.

Energized by the wonder of our May 25th dinner in South Florida, we looked towards our North Florida celebration at the Supreme Court on June 14th. As President of the Bar, and on behalf of FAWL, I must recognize how blessed we are to have a Supreme Court that recognizes these pioneers and their families.



*Front Row (l.to r.) U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, Chief Justice Major Harding, Evette Simmons, Pres.-Elect, National Bar Association; Back Row (l.to r.) 11th Circuit Court of Appeal Judge Rosemarie Barkett, Justice Barbara Pariente; Edith G. Osman, Fla. Bar Pres., Martha Barnett Pres.-Elect ABA and Justice Peggy Quince.*



*Attorney General Janet Reno visited all the honorees prior to the dinner; (back row) Janet Reno, C. Bette Wimbish (1968), Ethel Dorothea Clarson Watson (1942), Arthemina Joyner (1969), Lois Ellen Tracker Graessle (1941), (front row) Dixie L. Herlong Chastain (1930), Judge Mattie Belle Davis (1936), Grace Williams Burwell (1935), and Daisy Richards Bitz (1937).*



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 did not include any African-American women. We wanted to recognize our African-American sisters in the law and therefore expanded the project to include Florida's first five African-American women lawyers.

I always envisioned having all of Florida's top female attorneys present at the event. The First 150 Committee knew that getting the top female attorney in the country, Florida's own Attorney General Janet Reno, to attend would be the most difficult, so in inviting her, we allowed her to set the date through her calendar. Once she accepted, the rest fell into place. Judge Rosemary Barkett from the Eleventh Circuit; Justices Barbara Pariente and Peggy Quince from the Florida Supreme Court; Martha Barnett, then ABA President-Elect; and Evett Simmons, National Bar Association President-Elect all accepted our invitation to participate. The committee selected the Bal Harbour Hotel for this state-wide celebration, since it would be a little more convenient for our neighbors in Broward and Palm Beach.

Fund-raising, planning, researching and book writing occurred at a frantic pace between January and May. On May 25th, we opened the doors to the Sheraton Bal Harbour ballroom to reveal tables set for 900, each sparkling with two dozen multi-colored roses, silver candelabra, and pearl strands, and each embellished 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 Reno had ordered the removal of young Elian Gonzalez from the home of his Miami relatives and this was her first return to Miami. The Cuban-American community's reaction catapulted our celebration of women into the national media. Outside the hotel, protestors on land, sea, and in the sky renounced Attorney General Reno'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 in tolerance, all this occurred peacefully.

In a seldom seen sight, our head table was set with eight women and one man, Chief Justice Major Harding. With the crowd of almost 900, the cocktail hour and dinner celebration were electric. Friends enjoyed visiting and everyone reveled in the significance and history of the event. Going into the event, there were only 18 surviving women of the first 150 and first 5: Judge Dixie L. Herlong Chastain (1930), Dr. Catherine Stewart Howarth Carter (1934), Rebecca

South Florida, we looked towards our North Florida celebration at the Supreme Court on June 14th. As President of the Bar, and on behalf of FAWL, I must recognize how blessed we are to have a Supreme Court that recognizes these priorities and generously partnered with us in this celebration. The logistics of this celebration were spearheaded by the Tallahassee FAWL Chapter under the leadership of Nina Ashenafi 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, Jeanmarie Whalen and myself, Dade County Circuit Court Judge Maria Korvick and honorees Lois Graessle and Arthenia Joyner also took the podium.

Is the story of these trail-blazing women in the law unfolded in the packed courtroom, a message of inspiration sprang forth. Indeed, much has been accomplished in the 102 years that have followed Louise Pinnell's admission to the bar in 1898, but still much needs to be accomplished. In the words of Judge Barkett, who provided the keynote address, a debt of gratitude is owed to these women "for forcing the reality of this country to align itself a bit more with its ideals of equality and justice." She cautioned, however, that our society is still evolving into one of equal justice for all, and that "one of the greatest impediments to that goal is permitting ourselves the luxury of believing that we have achieved it."

The ceremony concluded with the presentation of a plaque including all the women's names to the Florida Supreme Court and a sumptuous buffet reception in the Court Rotunda. Media coverage of the event resulted in articles spotlighting the Supreme Court ceremony and honorees in newspapers ranging from Fort Walton Beach's Northwest Florida Daily News to the Tallahassee Democrat and The Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville, and south to News Journal in Daytona Beach, The Gainesville Sun, Tampa Tribune, St. Petersburg Times, The Palm Beach Post, and the Naples Daily News. For those of you who missed the event, you can see photographs and read some of the speeches or you can view them at <http://www.flcourts.org/pubinfo/Photos/First150/index.html>.

The first 150 and first 5 celebrations were great moments for Florida's women lawyers and thanks are owed to all those who helped with the events, including the following Dade County FAWL members: Mary Jo Francis, Judge Gill S. Freeman, Amy E. Furness, Sheila M. Gonzales, Rosana E. Hernandez, Allison Doliner Hockman, Lori J. Ketchledge, Judge Shelly J. Kravitz, Pamela I. Perry, Michelle A. Pivar, Adrienne F. Promoff, Janeen L. Rivers, Lida Rodriguez-Taseff, K. Renee Schimkat, Jacqueline Hogan Scola, Christi H. Sherouse, Lea Souza-Rasile, and Lori K. Weems.



*(L.to r.) Jackie Scola, Miami-Dade FAWL Pres.-Elect, Lea Souza-Rasile, Partner Carlton Fields, Judge Gill Froem, Edith G. Osman, President Florida Bar Association and Allison Hochman.*



*(L.to r.) Jean Marie Whelan, Pres. FAWL; U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, Edith G. Osman, Fla. Bar President.*



*Honoree Dixie L. Herlong Chastain (1930) with son Bryan.*



*Cindi Hibnick, Nancy Schleifer, Marsha Rasen, Rosemarie Roth and Cynthia Johnson Stacks.*