

NAWL'S SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA COUNCIL
[later known as Southern California Women Lawyers Association]

by Selma Moidel Smith ©

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Our members of NAWL may be interested to know that, at one time, NAWL had local "Council" affiliates in addition to individual members. These Councils were local women's bar associations in various parts of the country.

Today, the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles combines the heritage of two women's bar organizations. One of these was the Southern California Council of NAWL.

As introduction, we should note that, of these two groups, the older was known as 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." That 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 had 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. 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 president of the State Bar 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 WLALA of today, with over 1000 members, was created in 1964 when the decision was made 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.)

Perhaps this will spark an interest on the part of other members whose group's early history formed another chapter in the history of NAWL.

Selma Moidel Smith served as president of the Southern California Women Lawyers Association in 1947 and was reelected for a second term in 1948. She served as Regional Director of NAWL in 1949, as State Delegate in 1949-51, as chair of numerous committees over many years, and received NAWL's Lifetime of Service Award in 1999.

This is an adaptation of an article that appeared in the March 2001 *WLALA Newsletter* for Women's History Month.