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Reflecting on 125 Years of Service: A Look Back at the LBA's History

This Women's History Month, we delve into the past to highlight the experience of Maria C. Meuter, who served as the Louisville Bar Association's first executive director from 1952-1971. The following was originally printed in the March 2000 issue of *Bar Briefs* as part of the LBA's Centennial celebration.

The Way We Were – Kentucky Before World War II

Each year there were several women admitted to the Kentucky Bar but most of them got employment in a bank or school. It was impossible to get an interview with a law firm and with some government agencies. I had been employed by the Federal Land Bank of Louisville when I was 18 years old and had stayed with them in various departments. When I graduated from law school I was a clerk in the legal department.

I was sworn in to the Kentucky Bar in September 1939.

Then in the spring of 1940 I received my first announcement (invitation) of the annual meeting of the Bar which would be held in Louisville at the Kentucky Hotel. At the time I was still single and the announcement was addressed to Maria Coolman, Esquire. Now that Esquire really got me. In the announced program it stated that the President of the American Bar Association would speak at the annual luncheon. To me the President of the American Bar Association had to be the most important lawyer in the United States and it would be something I should not miss. I could not discuss this with my father William E. Coolman who was a member of the Indiana and Kentucky Bars. He thought ladies should not be lawyers. Not that they were unable but that there were things about the law that ladies should not hear. I had not told him that I was entering law school until I was ready to go to my first class so I really could not ask him about the annual meeting. I had already heard that the Smoker that the men held after the annual banquet was something that no woman would be allowed to attend. However, this luncheon had never had any kind of criticism that I had heard but there wasn't any reason to take a chance and get grounded. Luckily Dad had to go out of town that week and so the problem did not arise.

I still had the lawyers in the legal department at the bank to contend with. I waited until the day before the meeting and told my boss (a Harvard man) that I wanted several hours off to attend the luncheon. He informed me that I could have some time off since I had earned it but that ladies did not go to the annual meeting. I told him I paid my dues and had gotten the announcement and I was going. The other attorneys in the department tried to talk me out of it but I just had to go.

On the day of the luncheon about a half hour before meeting time I donned my flowered hat, called a cab, and set out for the Kentucky Hotel. When I arrived there was a line of about 20 men at the registration desk.



Louisville members of the National Association of Women Lawyers at the Old House Restaurant, Louisville, Kentucky, 1955.

I just stepped up at the end of the line. I ignored the stares from the men. Several more came in and when they saw me they went up and got ahead of one of the lawyers in line in front of me. Finally I was the only person left in line and the lady in charge of registration started gathering up her papers. I did not move. She looked at me and asked if she could help me. I told her "Yes, I would like to register." She smiled very sweetly and explained that they only registered lawyers. I told her that I knew that and that I was a lawyer. She started rattling those papers and looking around for help. Since there was no help about she went on and registered me.

The entrance to the dining room was at the back of the room so I had no trouble in entering. At one of the back tables I spotted one of the men I had attended some classes with and went over and sat down. After a few odd glances the men just seemed to accept the fact that I was there.

I looked around and never saw such a dreary sight. There were no decorations or flags to give some color to the room. There were just tables with white cloths on them. The speaker's table just had a white cloth, and it looked like some men were sitting on one side of a directors meeting table.

And then they served the food. We had country ham and blackeyed peas and fried potatoes. I wondered what this man who was the head of our profession thought of Kentucky. I don't remember his name or the name of the President of the Kentucky Bar Association but I do remember that day. It was some years before I attended another of those luncheons since marriage, World War II, and children intervened. Guess what they served—country ham, blackeyed peas, and fried potatoes. I hoped the day would come when I could change that menu and it finally did. That is a long story and someday I'll tell it. It was even a bigger disaster. ■

WOMEN'S HISTORY AS LEGAL TRAILBLAZERS

PIONEERING CHANGE, INSPIRING GENERATIONS

1870

Ada Kepley, first woman to graduate from law school. She graduated from Northwestern University's Pritzker School of Law.

1872

Charlotte E. Ray, first African-American woman to graduate from law school. She was also the first female to formally practice law in the United States.

1910

Nellie Almee Cartwright, first female to graduate from the University of Louisville Law Department.

1913

Florence E. Allen, first female assistant county prosecutor and the first female elected to a judicial office in Ohio and to be elected to the Supreme Court of Ohio.

1967
1982

1967: Margaret Huff was first female law professor at the University of Louisville
1982: Barbara B. Lewis became the first female Dean of the law school

1981

Sandra Day O'Connor was the first female appointed to the United States Supreme Court.

1993

Sara Walter Combs was appointed to the Kentucky Supreme Court and Janet Stumbo was the first female elected to the Kentucky Supreme Court.

2022

Ketanji Brown Jackson was the first Black woman to serve on the United States Supreme Court.

2025

Debroah H. Lambert is the first woman to serve as the Chief Justice of the Kentucky Supreme Court.

BE SURE TO FOLLOW US ON INSTAGRAM AS WE
CELEBRATE WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH.