

The First 50 Women in Idaho Law

BEVERLY BARBARA BISTLINE

April 11, 1955



Beverly Barbara Bistline was born on August 28, 1922, in Coeur d'Alene into a prominent legal and political family of Idaho. Her father, Francis Marion ("F.M.") Bistline, later a lawyer and politician in Pocatello, served for several terms in the Idaho House of Representatives in the 1940s, including one term as Speaker of the House from 1941-43. Her mother, Ann (Glindeman) Bistline, was from Coeur d'Alene and college-educated, although she never worked outside the home.

Bistline's parents met at the University of Idaho and married in Coeur d'Alene, her mother's hometown. F. M. went to law school at Northwestern and, after graduation, the Bistlines moved to Boise where F. M. completed a one-year clerkship with Justice Robert N. Dunn of the Idaho Supreme Court in Boise. It was during this year that Ann was sent to her mother's home in Coeur d'Alene to give birth to the couple's only child, Beverly. After F. M.'s clerkship was completed in 1923, the young Bistline family returned to Pocatello.

The story of how the Bistline family ended up in Pocatello is one of fate. As Bistline describes things, her grandfather's family lived in Ransom, Kansas, in the mid to late 1800s. Her grandfather's older brother, Joseph (whom Bistline calls "Uncle Joe"), was adventurous and had been reading about the great opportunities in the mines of Butte, Montana. So, in 1888, he hopped on a train and headed west. As the train rolled through Ogden, Utah, however, he developed an intense toothache. And, by the time his train got to Pocatello, Uncle Joe was forced to leave the train and look for a dentist. Uncle Joe eventually found a dentist and was so impressed with the town and the people of Pocatello that he never got back on the train. Instead, he opened a grocery store in town and prospered. Hearing of his older brother's success in Idaho, Bistline's grandfather moved with his family, including Bistline's father, to Pocatello in 1903. And the family has been an integral part of the Pocatello community ever since. Indeed, both Uncle Joe and Bistline's grandfather, J. M., alternatively served as mayor of Pocatello and Bannock County Commissioner. This call to politics and public service was a trait passed to Bistline's father and herself.

Bistline attended Pocatello public schools, graduating from Pocatello High School in 1939. From 1939 to 1942, she attended the University of Idaho, Southern Branch in Pocatello and was very involved in drama. At the end of her two years, she transferred to the University of Idaho and graduated in 1943 with a liberal arts degree. Upon graduating, Bistline returned to Pocatello just in time to witness the beginning of World War II. Bistline decided to join the Navy WAVES ("Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services"), a program created in 1942 that established the Women's Reserve as a branch of the Naval Reserve.

In December 1944, Bistline was called up and sent to New York's Hunter College for six weeks of basic training, followed by more training at yeomen's school in Cedar Falls, Iowa. At the end

of her training, Bistline was assigned to the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, D.C., where, as she puts it, she saw “lots of gold braid.” In fact, she worked across the hall from Admiral Nimitz for a year and half. By 1946, Bistline’s tour was complete but she and her friends decided to sign on for an additional year, this time serving in the Navy’s NATS (“Naval Air Transport Service”). She was assigned to Moffett Field, south of San Francisco. From there she flew Douglas DC5s (which, Bistline is quick to point out, were not jets) to and from Honolulu, Hawaii working as a flight attendant. After completing this “plush” assignment, Bistline decided to return to Pocatello in May 1947. Although her service in the Navy was unusual for women at the time, Bistline recalls that her parents and family were always “very supportive.”

Upon her return to Pocatello, Bistline went to work for her father’s bus company, which shuttled people between the city center and the Army’s air base (now the site of Pocatello’s airport). Being a military veteran, she was welcomed on the base and had “lots of fun.” It is during this time that she met and married Arland Robert Spaulding. They were married in 1948 but divorced shortly thereafter, in 1949, after realizing that the marriage was “not meant to be.”

By then, Bistline was ready for a change and given all the “GI credits” she had available, decided to go to law school. After all, as she describes it, there were “more lawyers than anything” in her family, including her father, long-time Pocatello attorney R. Donald Bistline, her cousin, and her more famous cousin, Stephen Bistline, who served as Justice of the Idaho Supreme Court from 1976 to 1994. Bistline applied to and was accepted at the University of Utah. Asked why she did not go to the University of Idaho College of Idaho, she merely replies that she “had already seen Moscow.”

Bistline began her law school career at the University of Utah in the fall of 1951 with a class of 75 people, four of whom were women. By the time she graduated, however, in 1954, only two women remained. After graduation, Bistline returned to Pocatello and “played like a lawyer” in her father’s office.

On April 11, 1955, Bistline was admitted as the twenty-sixth woman to practice law in Idaho. But, she was restless. So when her aunt moved to Los Angeles and she realized that she had three semesters worth of “GI credits” left, Bistline decided to move to southern California and attend the University of Southern California where she took tax courses. Although she was never admitted in California, Bistline worked in a small firm in Los Angeles for the next five years. Then, in 1959, when her aunt was transferred to San Francisco, she decided to join her in her move. For the next 10 years, Bistline worked in San Francisco at Long & Levit as an office manager, and had “the most fun” going to the theater and opera and just exploring all parts of the Bay Area.

In December 1968, Bistline decided to come home for the holidays, but while visiting her parents in Pocatello fell ill with the Hong Kong flu. Thus, she was forced to stay in Pocatello longer than expected until she recovered. During her period of convalescence, her father was involved in defending a person accused of murder in Blackfoot. Each day her father asked her to join him in driving to Blackfoot to observe the trial, but she refused. Then, on the day of President Nixon’s inauguration in January 1969, she finally felt well enough to join her father.

After making the treacherous journey from Pocatello to Blackfoot in January, Bistline recalls sitting in the back of the courtroom and watching her father. At some point during the trial, she recalls, Judge Beebe leaned over the bench and asked her father if would like to sit down. Then, suddenly, her father collapsed and died of a heart attack. It was shortly thereafter that Bistline realized that she “had no alternative,” she had to return to Pocatello and take over her father’s practice – a move she has never regretted.

Bistline recalls that she was “always interested in politics,” having seen many members of her family run for public office. She first ran for office in 1972, but lost by a just a few votes. In 1974, she was elected as a Democrat to the Idaho House of Representatives representing District 33 (Pocatello). During her term she served on two prestigious committees, House Appropriations and Judiciary and Rules and Administration – thanks in great part due to her good friend Patricia McDermott (a fellow woman attorney and legislator from Pocatello, and No. 32 on this list), who was the minority leader in the House. Bistline’s primary interests as a legislator were in land-use planning, education, including kindergarten and higher education, and developmental disabilities in the health and welfare field. Bistline loved her time in the legislature and says that she “learned so much during those two years.”

Bistline has long been active in her community as a member of the United Church of Christ, the Soroptimist Club, P.E.O. Sisterhood, Idaho State University Foundation, American Bar Association, Idaho State Bar Association, and the Sixth District Bar Association, where she served as vice-president. But, she may be best known for her generous philanthropic pursuits, endowing numerous scholarships at Idaho State University and making substantial contributions to ISU to build a performing arts center, which includes “The Bistline Theater.” The center opened in 2004 and houses ISU’s drama department – much to Bistline’s pleasure given her long standing interest in drama – and the Pocatello symphony, among others. In addition, Bistline has supported numerous community organizations in and around Pocatello, including the Portneuf River Greenway project. Bistline has been recognized for her generous support of the community, including receiving the 2002 “Idaho Statesman of the Year” award from the Pi Sigma Alpha national political science honor society, and was the 2003 recipient of the Pocatello Mayor’s Awards for the Arts.

In 2004, the Idaho State Bar awarded Bistline with its Professionalism Award, which is given to an attorney who “has engaged in extraordinary activity in his or her community, in the state, or in the profession, which reflects the highest standards of professionalism.”