

The First 50 Women in Idaho Law

MARY DURHAM ADAMS

May 16, 1958



Mary Durham Adams was born on August 18, 1923 in Hartshorne, Oklahoma to Grace Ross Durham, a schoolteacher, and Frank S. Durham, who was in the coal mining business. The family moved to Fort Smith, Arkansas, where Adams and a younger brother attended grade school through high school.

From 1940-41, Adams attended H. Sophie Newcomb College in New Orleans, a small liberal arts and sciences college created in 1886 as the first degree-granting college for women to be founded within a university (Tulane) in America. From 1941-42, she attended the University of Arkansas, where she was a member of the Pi Beta Phi sorority. Adams says,

When I was a teenager I decided that I wanted to be a lawyer. I believe it was because it would be a challenge, unusual for a woman, and a respectable profession. I could help other people, and it was attainable. But my plans were changed by the events of World War II, love, marriage and children.

In 1943, Adams married Capt. Maurice D. Adams, later a Lieutenant Colonel, who was stationed at Camp Chaffee near Fort Smith and serving with the 14th Armored Division. Together they had three sons. When Maurice was transferred to Camp Campbell prior to going overseas, they lived in Clarksville, Tennessee, and Adams took classes at Austin Peay College. After the war, the young couple lived in Fort Smith and then moved to Idaho Falls where Maurice was employed with an Atomic Energy Commission contractor.

When her youngest son was a toddler, Adams started thinking about the law again. Regular law school attendance was not a possibility, so she studied law by correspondence (LL.B., LaSalle Extension University) and spent four years studying law as a law clerk for Boyd R. Thomas, a practicing attorney in Idaho Falls at the time and later district court judge. Her studies proved successful as she passed the Idaho Bar and was admitted on May 16, 1958. She would later also become a member of the Arkansas state bar and the U.S. Supreme Court.

Adams had a private practice in Idaho Falls and served as a deputy prosecuting attorney under Eugene Bush. In 1960, she was elected as a Magistrate Judge for Bonneville County and served in that capacity for several terms until 1968. Her husband Maurice died in 1967 after a lengthy illness. In 1968 Adams lost a bid for the Republican congressional nominee by fewer than 900 votes. She says that she “deeply appreciated the many friends and supporters during those times.”

Adams was very involved in the Idaho Falls community. She served as Chairman of the Salvation Army Advisory Board, Trinity Methodist Church, on the Governor’s Committee on the Status of Women, as Co-Chair of the Idaho Lawyers for Nixon campaign and helped establish

the Harbor House at Idaho Falls. For these and many other contributions to her community, Adams received a special award by the Idaho State PTA for services to children, and in 1974 was listed in the Who's Who of American Women.

In 1975, Adams moved to New York City where she was employed with a Fortune 500 Company. She said she was lucky, "They needed a lawyer and a WOMAN!" Adams completed her undergraduate degree in business economics at Hunter College of City University of New York by attending night school. And, she says, she "LOVED New York."

In 1980, Adams returned to Fort Smith to be with her ailing mother. For a while she served as a bank trust officer and on advisory boards of the Bonneville House and Heritage Foundations, and on her church finance committee. She now spends time with church and social activities, plays bridge and visits with friends and children. Reflecting on her life, Adams says:

It took a long time and was a struggle for me to become a lawyer. But, I enjoyed the challenge and work as a lawyer. I am grateful for my husband's and children's support and help. I believe family should always come first and have tried to balance family responsibilities with personal goals. I am most proud of our sons: Maurice, graduate of USMA, West Point and MBA, Stanford; Donald, BS, Idaho State and M. Div., Garrett Theological Seminary; and Douglas, BS, Washington and Lee. All have families of their own and are in private business. I have had a mixture of joy and sorrow and had and have a great life.