

The Passing of a Pioneer

By Teresa K Kobelt



Betty Brown, 1948 and 2021

I long for the day when we run out of “firsts.” The first woman, the first minority, the first transgender, anything. However, we cannot understate the importance of those “firsts,” and the paths paved for those that followed.

I recently read the obituary of Attorney Betty R. Brown, and decided to look a little deeper. What I found was the story of a remarkable, accomplished attorney, the “first” on several fronts.

Betty grew up in Madison, and graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1946 with an undergraduate degree in History, and from UW Law School in 1948 with an LL.B. (Bachelors of Laws at the time), notable in itself given that there were still so few women in law at that time, when women were often looked upon as taking a spot that rightfully should have gone to a man.

Her admittance into Law School was no mistake, as Betty excelled, serving as Executive Editor of Law Review, and as a member of the Order of the Coif.

Her career after law school did not follow what many would expect to be the traditional path. Betty worked at a law firm in Eau Claire for a few years, but worried that she would spend the next 20 years doing the same thing without having done anything “interesting.” Things definitely got interesting. Betty left her firm to join the Air Force during the Korean War, where she served as Assistant Chief of Criminal Investigation. Upon her return, she served as a Madison police officer. Although official records are long gone, word is that Officer Betty received a commendation for capturing two fugitives. After the Police Department, Betty worked as a consultant with State Division of Children and Youth.

From there, Betty went to the Wisconsin Department of Justice, where she worked for ten years as an assistant attorney general. In 1971, she published a book through the DOJ, *“The Wisconsin District Attorney and the Criminal Case,”* considered the “bible” for prosecutors throughout the State. In 1973, Betty became the first Solicitor General for the State of Wisconsin, which at the time was one of the highest positions ever held by a woman. In 1978, Betty became the first woman elected to the State Bar of Wisconsin’s Board of Governors.

I was also able to speak with a few of Betty’s family members, who described her as kind, modest, practical, with a wonderful sense of humor and a love for playing cards. Betty was also well-traveled, having visited all corners of the United States and throughout Europe.

Betty R. Brown passed away on August 29, 2021, at age 95. I wish I had known her.

[NOTE: Photo credit to UW Law School Digital Repository, Alumni Photo Collection.]