

REMEMBERING MARY LOU BAKER

In March 1939, Miami lawyer Ethel Murrell told an assembly of Florida State College for Women students that Florida law classified married women in the same class as lunatics and idiots. Murrell's remarks sparked a heated debate, prompting the Tampa Tribune to ask the question: "Should Married Women Be Classed with Idiots?"

Mary Lou Baker decided to do something about the legal status of women in Florida. For her efforts, she has been nominated for the Florida Women's Hall of Fame.

Born in British Columbia, Canada, in 1915, Mary Lou Baker moved to Pinellas County in 1925. A graduate of Clearwater High School, she attended Florida Southern College and received her law degree from Stetson University.

In 1942, she succeeded in winning a seat in the Florida House of Representatives, becoming only the second woman to hold office in that political body (Edna Giles Fuller of Orlando was the first, elected in 1928).

When Ms. Baker arrived in Tallahassee, she was the only woman serving in the 1943 Legislature. Spittoons flanked her desk. It was a man's world, a political environment enveloped in cigar smoke and dominated by rural politicians determined to keep taxes low and morale high.

Mrs. Smith Goes to Tallahassee

But in the midst of war, the home front introduced homemakers into the ranks of welders, taxi drivers, sawyers, and even legislators. An engine for change, World War I had provided the impetus to pass the Nineteenth Amendment (Women's Right to Vote). World War II was even more tumultuous, as millions of women not only entered the workforce but 350,000 joined the WACS, WAVES, and SPARS (women's military units).

War or no war, Baker startled her colleagues when she introduced the Married Women's Rights bill. The measure, Baker contended, would provide a married woman "the legal rights to carry on the business when her husband goes away to war." The measure also allowed married women the right to sue and be sued, convey property and execute documents. The press nicknamed it the "Women's Emancipation Bill."

The bill engendered rancorous debate. Rep. Archie Clement of Pinellas County called Baker's measure "a dangerous bill." Critics humiliated Baker from the floor while attempting to entangle the bill with crippling amendments.

E. P. Martin, a Hillsborough County legislator from Plant City, excoriated Baker. "I'm not opposed to women's rights--God knows they have more rights now than any man can ever hope to have," declared Martin. "I'm trying to protect them."

Improbably, Baker maneuvered her bill to passage. "Isn't it grand?" she exulted. "No bill of the session has followed so erratic and unpredictable course to victory," trumpeted the St. Petersburg Times.

Baker, however, failed in her efforts to grant women the right to serve on juries. She insisted that the introduction of women would raise the intelligence level of juries, arguing, "One can hardly overestimate the ignorance of the average juror in juries composed solely of males."

Restroom Equality

Amid acrimonious debate, the House defeated the measure 50 to 38. Rep. Warren Sanchez of Live Oak contended that the average mother should be "more concerned about her children at dinner time than listening to testimony in a trial."

Others sounded the race question, predicting the bill would force open the door to "Negro women to be on juries." Rep. Clay Lewis of Gulf County asked his fellow legislators, "How many of your wives have asked you to support this bill?" A Citrus County solon asked the body to consider the extra expenses required for separate restrooms.

The conservative Tallahassee Daily Democrat begrudgingly praised Rep. Baker, applauding her "poise, ability and strategy as to prove that women can make first-rate legislators."

Women eventually won the right to serve on juries in 1949. Change came so slowly that it required a landmark Supreme Court decision, *Hoyt v. Tampa*, (1961) to implement the law.

You may call me Mrs. Baker

Running for re-election in 1944, Baker's "feminism" became a campaign issue. Although married, she preferred to keep her maiden name.

When questioned about her name, she answered in a sound bite for the political ages: "The purpose of a name is to designate an individual, and to distinguish

that individual from others. I received my law degree and my certificate to practice as Mary Lou Baker . . . It might even be considered unsportsmanlike for me to use the name of my husband upon the ballot and thereby borrow from the good will established by the name of Captain Searle H. Matthews.”

Victorious in her re-election, Baker made an unusual victory announcement. She told supporters that just minutes earlier, she had talked to her husband, stationed in California, and told him that she was pregnant.

In the 1945 legislative session—still the only woman in the political fraternity-- Baker emerged as a leader in education reform. She played an important role during the debate whether to transform Florida State College for Women into a co-educational institution. Holding her eight-month old son, Lee Harris, she told reporter that she hoped he attended a co-ed college.

Baker was defeated in 1946. Her district, Pinellas County, was experiencing a ground shift in politics as new retirees and Midwestern transplants swelled a surging Republican Party.

Mary Lou Baker died in 1965. The “Florida Law Journal” eloquently summarized her career: “To Mary Lou Baker, the lady from Pinellas must be given credit for accomplishing the most historic change which has occurred in the basic law of the State of Florida in the past generation.”

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