ABA Commission on Women in the Profession

Women Trailblazers in the Law

ORAL HISTORY

of

MIRIAM WOLFF

Interviewer: LaDoris Cordell

Dates of Interviews:

January  3, 2007
January  10, 2007
January  17, 2007
January  24, 2007
January  31, 2007
February 14, 2007
February 21, 2007
MS. CORDELL: It’s 9:00 a.m. I’m at Judge Wolff’s house. This is Ladoris Cordell and I am continuing with the oral history of Judge Wolf. This is our fourth session. Did you meet any resistance either within the organization or even without to your being the female head of port? Any resistance you can think of -- any incidents?

JUDGE WOLFF: I have to tell you one funny… I interrupted myself a couple of times on this story. I realized when I became Port Director that this was going to get wide play, internationally, and that the first question I was going to be asked was, was I going to be offended by not being allowed in the World Trade Club, and I knew that would be the question and I thought I was pretty well prepared for it and sure enough, it was the question and it carried headlines, literally all over the world. The Port Director of San Francisco is not permitted to be a member in the World Trade Club and it was about that time that -- would you like to know how the World Trade Club became…?

MS. CORDELL: Well, tell us about the Club.

JUDGE WOLFF: San Francisco, like a lot.. like New York and maybe Boston, I guess, really the business life of San Francisco is in clubs and the clubs were -- there were two women’s clubs but the rest of the clubs were male and they
excluded women. And it had a very deleterious affect on the success of women. It was essential that women be allowed the same rights.

MS. CORDELL: However, when you became Port Director and you said there was all these interviews, this was big news around the world, you were asked this question and at that time, the policy was to exclude women?

JUDGE WOLFF: It was to exclude women. Women were never excluded at dinner. They were excluded at lunch.

MS. CORDELL: Because?

JUDGE WOLFF: Well there isn’t any because.

MS. CORDELL: That business gets done at lunch?

JUDGE WOLFF: Business gets done at lunch and dinner’s social, but they were excluded from membership. In other words, they could be a guest at dinner but they couldn’t even be a guest at lunch. I didn’t get outraged until I called -- I can’t remember how it came about but I was having a meeting with somebody from the mayor’s office and I invited him to have lunch with me at my desk. It was going to be easier to work out whatever the problem was and I called the World Trade Club; my office was directly under theirs. I said to send down some food and they said, wouldn’t I like to have a private room? And I said I am not going to have a private room with a man from the Mayor’s office, so just send down the lunch.

MS. CORDELL: Were you pretty much in meetings all the time?
JUDGE WOLFF: Yes. I rarely had lunch that was not a luncheon meeting. Either connected with the port, connected with advocates for women, connected with something.

MS. CORDELL: But didn’t you get exhausted with just -- all day you’re dealing with people? All day, everyday? Even in the evening. I mean, wasn’t it exhausting or you don’t get peopled out? That just want the quiet time to...? It didn’t bother you?

JUDGE WOLFF: No.

MS. CORDELL: So, were you still playing bridge on the train even as Port Director?

JUDGE WOLFF: Yes, in the morning.

MS. CORDELL: In the morning time?

JUDGE WOLFF: With other lawyers who were also good friends and yes, I looked forward to it.

MS. CORDELL: How about as Port Director -- can you point to, and as many as you’d like -- what are the significant things you accomplished as Port Director? Any big -- number one, you said the railroad would eventually be sold off but what kinds of -- were there big issues that came up that you had to deal with?

JUDGE WOLFF: Yes.

MS. CORDELL: Spend some time on that.

JUDGE WOLFF: There were port development -- I had hanging behind my desk a list of the agencies that you had to go through to do any improvements on the port, and frequently after we got through all the agencies, somebody would say,
well, you started this two years ago. Maybe you’d better go back to Fish and Game and see if they have any objection now. It’s a big process. And of course ports have to develop. There’s dredging. There’s beautification of the outside. They’re all -- a myriad of things that have to be accomplished.

MS. CORDELL: Let me interrupt and ask you one question. So, who taught you how to do this job? I mean, you’ve never been a Port Director. I know you’ve been chief counsel but how do you know what to do?

JUDGE WOLFF: Well, you know -- you know what you’re trying to accomplish. You’re trying to keep the port efficient. Keep it up to date. Buy the necessary cranes and equipment that you need to operate it effectively.

MS. CORDELL: Who’s mentoring you? Who’s saying, okay, these are the things you need that are of primary concern. Don’t do this.

JUDGE WOLFF: These are the things your tenants are requesting, basically. Or your Board and it’s development is requesting.

MS. CORDELL: If you don’t have a mentor -- somebody who’s -- you’re calling and saying, okay, I need to sit down and talk, I’m unclear about what I should on this.

JUDGE WOLFF: I would say not. Other than your own staff, and of course the port was in the process of a lot of changes. A lot that you absolutely cannot accomplish and I knew could not be accomplished. For example, we had had a lot of surveys presented that showed where the population of the bay area counties would be in ten years or twenty years, and I appeared at a lot of functions trying to explain that and I would have these voices saying,
well, isn’t there someway -- you’re telling people they need roads, for example. They need bridge connections. They need all these things, because you’re sitting there realizing what was going to happen and how long it takes to accomplish something -- and on the other hand, you’re having people say, well, isn’t there someway we can avoid having all that population? Why will we need all that space. For example, take the Embarcadero Freeway, which I think I mentioned at one point but we dropped. The Embarcadero Freeway -- the freeway itself was designed to marry the two bridges. There was to be direct access or as direct as you can get.

MS. CORDELL: With the two bridges being?

JUDGE WOLFF: The San Francisco Bay Bridge and Golden Gate. Obviously going around the Embarcadero was not the way to do it. I had appeared for the port at all of these hearings. We had the railroad where the Embarcadero Freeway later came and taking up that part of the Embarcadero, we had tremendous truck traffic because during the war, the port of San Francisco actually shipped 15 million tons of cargo per year. Not one ton of army cargo came out of Oakland Army Facility because that facility was not finished until the war was over. It all went through San Francisco. So, the port, if it worked around the clock, which it did during the war years, was capable of tremendous shipping and that required an infrastructure, which was evident, but San Francisco had a mayor who had been a judge and he hated the Port of San Francisco. I guess basically the reason was, it was a
state owned port. It didn’t belong to San Francisco and there was always this tug-of-war between the city and the state, but actually the port was a very good operation under the state. We did our own budget. We had no problem. We were self-supporting. Completely self-supporting. We also supported the World Trade Organization. It was just a very good function.

Anyway, to connect the two bridges, the logical choice was to go down some street like Franklin and join the two bridges together. I thought that logic had prevailed and it didn’t. And so, what happened is they built the Embarcadero Freeway and as you know it was a monstrosity. It cut off the view of the bay. Then it was difficult to remove it because once you have it there, it’s very difficult to remove and it was a boom to Chinatown, or at least they thought it was, and it was a very expensive thing. Had it not been for the earthquake, I doubt it could have ever been removed. It would never of course be done now. It would never be started now.

MS. CORDELL: So, I’m just now trying to understand to finish that up. So, did you -- the freeway -- the Embarcadero Freeway -- it does not connect the bridges?

JUDGE WOLFF: No.

MS. CORDELL: So, what did you do…

JUDGE WOLFF: There is no…

MS. CORDELL: Right. So, what did you do to stop it? I mean how did you…?

JUDGE WOLFF: Well, I appeared as counsel for the port. There were a lot of public hearings as there are, and I would appear and discuss it and of course the
Division of Highways was eager not to build it that way and I never quite knew how it got foisted on the public.

MS. CORDELL: So, the Railroad, the Embarcadero Freeway -- can you think of any other major...?

JUDGE WOLFF: Well, the whole thing of port development and in fact, there is some very funny -- there were funny things going on. For example...and it’s 10:00.

MS. CORDELL: Right. This is going to stop shortly. So, maybe we’ll hold off. So you were getting ready to tell me about -- just so I know where we’ll pick up the next time -- you said...

JUDGE WOLFF: But I’m wondering how relevant it is.

MS. CORDELL: It’s fine. Oh, it’s all relevant. It’s all relevant. What is it you were going to tell...?

JUDGE WOLFF: I was going to tell you about my lack of understanding, and how I almost got myself in serious physical difficulty.

MS. CORDELL: Oh, no I have to hear this. Oh, absolutely.

JUDGE WOLFF: It’s a kind of fun story, but so stupid.

MS. CORDELL: So, do you want to save that for next time? We’ll start off with that?

JUDGE WOLFF: Alright.

MS. CORDELL: Okay. We’ll do that. This is your -- and so you’re saying it’s a story about how you perhaps got into physical harm?

JUDGE WOLFF: Somebody else got harmed. I didn’t, but he did.

MS. CORDELL: Alright. We’ll start off with that in our next meeting.
JUDGE WOLFF: And maybe give you a little idea. The fact that the port was a kind of rough environment.

MS. CORDELL: So, you’ve got my curiosity up, obviously. Do you recall what your salary was?

JUDGE WOLFF: No. It was -- it was better. I should know but I don’t. And besides, you know, money -- it was a different -- we’re talking an entirely different money.

MS. CORDELL: What do you mean?

JUDGE WOLFF: When we say something was worth $100,000 or $60,000 then and it’s now worth $1,000,000, it’s the same object. We’re just talking a different valuation.

MS. CORDELL: So, were you ever afraid as Port Director about making a mistake. I mean, the public eye is on you all the time and if you made a mistake it would just -- people would say, see, women can’t do this. This is...

JUDGE WOLFF: No.

MS. CORDELL: Did you ever -- have you ever felt the pressure?

JUDGE WOLFF: Well, you felt the pressure from your Board, obviously.

MS. CORDELL: Meaning, don’t mess up. Don’t embarrass us.

JUDGE WOLFF: And you’re running a big business, but I never thought of it in terms of being a woman. It was in terms of the correct decision-making. So -- the story I’m going to tell you is germane to that.

MS. CORDELL: So, we will get to the story. So, did you always though everyday feel a lot of pressure -- public pressure, fishbowl, or did it not phase you at all?
JUDGE WOLFF: Yes, it did phase me. When I took the job. I had a number of telephone calls from friends. Mostly lawyers friends or steamship people saying, you know Miriam, you’re out of your mind -- but…

MS. CORDELL: Why were you out of your mind? To take the job?

JUDGE WOLFF: To take the job and…

MS. CORDELL: Why did they say that?

JUDGE WOLFF: Because it was a tough job. It was an ulcer-making job. There is no question about that -- there was no question in my mind about it and my response to those calls and there were probably half-dozen was, look, no woman has ever had this opportunity before and I would like to do it, and I think I can do it for five years and I was absolutely positive. I told all my personal friends that if I did what had to be done for five years, that would be it. And that was exactly right.

MS. CORDELL: Amazing. And did you get ulcers?

JUDGE WOLFF: No. But I was happy to retire to be a judge.

MS. CORDELL: So, you were there as Port Director from 1970 to 74?

JUDGE WOLFF: ’75.

MS. CORDELL: ’75. And then the next transition was on to the bench.

JUDGE WOLFF: Yes.

MS. CORDELL: But we’re not going to get there because I do want to talk about -- hear about the story and I -- I thought we were near our hour’s up and I hate to tell this story and then be cut off in the middle it. I’m going to stop it just for a second and see how much tape is left.
JUDGE WOLFF: I’ll tell you the story as being kind of -- tempting because you’ve been interested in what’s sort of typical for a Port Director. The rental section brought in someone, a group, to talk to me as Port Director and, they, this group was buying or contracted to buy area on the Embarcadero that the port did not own -- it was the other side of the Embarcadero. But to make their development, they required access to the water, which was our side of the Embarcadero, and I talked with them and I felt there was something seriously wrong. It’s the feeling you get as a lawyer when you’re interviewing witnesses and you know there’s something you’re not really uncovering. You get that feeling that there’s something wrong, but you can’t put your finger on it. I concluded that probably what it was that they did not have sufficient financing and I rejected the project. Well, I learned later that it wasn’t that they didn’t have sufficient financing. They were -- they were trying to launder Las Vegas money. I knew there was something, but I didn’t know what it was and that actually -- I also learned later -- put me in very grave physical danger. One of my friends started following me as a protective device…

MS. CORDELL: We’re talking the mob?

JUDGE WOLFF: Yes. In fact, it was a big project.

MS. CORDELL: And you rejected it?

JUDGE WOLFF: And I rejected it but I could never -- until I had become a judge I did not know what the background was.

MS. CORDELL: Did anyone -- no one actually suffered harm?
JUDGE WOLFF: Yes, he did. He was beaten.

MS. CORDELL: This is the person who was…

JUDGE WOLFF: Protecting me.

MS. CORDELL: And he was beaten?

JUDGE WOLFF: Yes. He had a couple of ribs broken and he then assigned a bodyguard to me but I was very unaware. I was unaware of being followed.

MS. CORDELL: You didn’t know you had a bodyguard?

JUDGE WOLFF: I did not know I had a bodyguard.

MS. CORDELL: And you learned this after you…

JUDGE WOLFF: We were socially friends, you know. But he was not about to tell me. I mean that -- he didn’t think that was a very good idea.

MS. CORDELL: So, you learned all this after you left the job?

JUDGE WOLFF: Yes. There were many things I learned on the job but that’s one I learned after.

MS. CORDELL: Absolutely amazing. Well, so, how about our next session we’ll start with your transition from being director of the port to becoming a judge.

JUDGE WOLFF: Alright.

MS. CORDELL: Is that alright? And we may want to just see if there’s anything else in your job as a Port Director that we did not go over, that you think, you know, want to be talked about. We’ll do that. So, we’ll recap and make sure all of that was covered and then we’ll just start your next career. Is that alright?
JUDGE WOLFF: Before we leave my Port experiences, I did break ground for women who followed me by participating in a number of Port and Trade organizations. I was the first woman President of the California Association of Port Authorities; Vice President of the Pacific Coast Association of Port Authorities; on the Board of Directors of the American Association of Port Authorities and the first women to hold office in the San Francisco Marine Exchange. I was also on the Board of the Propeller Club and was a member of the Board of Directors of the National Defense Transportation Association.

You know I did monitor the original discussion the American Bar Association held when it endorsed Title 7.

MS. CORDELL: And you did this in what capacity? What job had you…

JUDGE WOLFF: Just as a member.

MS. CORDELL: Were you on the bench at that point?

JUDGE WOLFF: No.

MS. CORDELL: So, this was before. So, we need to talk about this next. So, this is Title 7. Is that right?

JUDGE WOLFF: Yes.

MS. CORDELL: So, you had something to do with Title 7. We’ll start out with that.