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: Today is Wednesday, February 21, 2007. I’m at Judge Wolff’s house and we are continuing with yet another session. And I believe this is our sixth session. Actually it’s our seventh session, and where we left off last, we talked about judging and then started to talk briefly about, Judge Wolff, what you’ve been doing since judging. And you finished judging, I believe it was 1985? And so talk to us about what you’ve been doing.

Judge Wolff: Up until 1997, I did sit a lot on assignment. I sat in San Benito County for a long time, whenever they needed somebody. It’s a one-judge county and they need help frequently, because the judge knows everyone in the county, and everyone in the county knows the judge. So when there’s a serious criminal case in that county, the judge has to take it outside the county in order to get a jury, and he needs somebody to fill in. I enjoyed going to San Benito County. It adjoins Santa Clara County and is a very rural county and interesting one.

And then San Mateo County had a judge that had heart bypass surgery, and they needed help for a long time. The problem was I like to travel, and I did a lot of traveling, both while I was in the Attorney General’s office, while I was Port Director of course, and while I was on vacation with the court. And so, when you take assignments you frequently get stuck and it interferes seriously with a serious travel program. In December of ’97, I was a victim of my air bag. It exploded. It tore the ligaments in my shoulder. It smashed my arm.
At the time, I was also doing arbitrations and I should have mentioned that. The explosion had hit me in the face, did no damage to the car by the way except to blow out the windshield. I sat there watching it implode, and the only thing that happened to the car was that it had hit at the point of impact with a stake had been right at the censor. The censor had to be replaced, the windshield had to be replaced, and the air bag had to be replaced. Other than that, there was no damage to the car at all. But there was considerable damage to me. And at that point I felt I really did not want to do any more arbitrations, and I did not want to get involved with assignments.

When I went to Stanford, I went on this program where I had expected to and did get into the law school my senior year at Stanford. As a result of that, and because I had had to take all kinds of requirements, I had very little opportunity to take courses that just interested me but were not part of the curriculum for going into law school. Law school by the way now has virtually no pre-law school curriculum, but it had at that time. One of the courses I did take was in the art department, and I found it fascinating. I thought, this is something I really would like to learn more about and learn in depth. What I thought I would do is take docent training. I thought I would do it at the Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco. And one of my friends who was active in the Museum at Stanford said why don’t you come over and get active with Stanford. It will be a lot easier for you. Well, the result was that it was easier – but I was never able to take docent training because docent training requires a commitment for at least a year, and you cannot miss a
single session. My continued involvement with the court just never permitted that. I soon became aware of, again almost inadvertently, what was then called the Tour Committee and it was a challenge to set up tours for members, and still is. I became co-chair of that committee and became very active with it, and I am still doing that. As a result of working for the Cantor Arts Center as a volunteer, I am permitted to audit classes in the art department, and I’ve done that pretty consistently. I must say I developed a very great interest in painting and sculpture particularly, and its effect on all of us. So, and also it’s a challenge to see if I could put good tours together, because in my working life I’d always had a staff to do things like that, and I’d always had a staff to deal with all of the busy work of hiring hotels, getting buses – I could delegate all of that. It was a challenge to see if I could do it myself. I’ve enjoyed doing it, and I think I’ve managed to put on some very good tours for the members of what is now called the Cantor Arts Center, but most think of it as the Stanford Art Gallery, which is what it is. And that’s what I find I’m spending most of my time on.

Ms. Cordell: Judge Wolff, talk to us about your travels.

Judge Wolff: I brought up this subject because I do think it’s important. My mother was really dedicated to the thought of travel. She had a simplistic approach that I think is pretty valid – which was that if people knew more about one another, there would be less stress and much less strife and fewer wars. And she thought it was very important. I have to agree, and so when travel became available to us, which was after the war, I did devote a lot of time to travel. I
went to Europe. I wanted to see what the countries of Europe were like. And the first trip I took to Europe was a charter with the San Francisco Bar Association. And at that time --

Ms. Cordell: What year was that, Judge Wolff? About when in your life, then we can hook it up with where you – had you finished judging by then or was this before?

Judge Wolff: Oh well, this was about 1964. I purposely made a kind of snap trip of many countries. Groups could get a charter plane. The San Francisco Bar Association did get a charter plane. And we deplaned in London and then exited from – I think we deplaned in London and exited from Paris. I had accumulated a lot of vacation time and had about four weeks I would say in Europe. Because I knew the people in the steamship industry and they were all very interested in my going to Europe, nobody had had much chance to travel because the war had been on. They gave me lots of suggestions. They called their counterparts in other areas such as Copenhagen, for example, and I met the port people and the steamship people, and they in turn introduced me to other people. So I had a very good high-level tour. I also was active in my service club here, which was Zonta International. The San Francisco Club did a lot of entertaining of foreign visitors, and I had been president and also area director, and I had entertained foreign visitors during the drawing up of the United Nations charter; had a big dinner that I presided over at the Palace Hotel for women who were being active in the drawing up of the United Nations charter, and I therefore knew them socially. So I had a lot of entrée to people who could give me more insight into their countries. And the
following year there was also a second charter. That time I thought it would be interesting to go into Eastern Europe. And I did. I saw a little of Russia and the Eastern European countries, including Hungary. Each time I had entrée to people that were really being effective in their own countries. So for quite a few years, I would do basically European travel. One year we had a port meeting, while I was still counsel, in Curacao and then I tacked on a vacation trip through South America, my most unsatisfactory trip by the way, as I was by myself and while I did know people in some of the countries, I found I was spending an awful lot of time in airports waiting for planes to leave and making hotel arrangements, and I decided that wasn’t a very good way to spend your travel time. I saw no reason to take group tours to Europe, but I began to realize that if you are going to some places both in Europe such as Eastern Europe, or you were going into more – places more difficult to travel. You were far better off taking something like Stanford trips. My first Stanford trip was to Greece and the Black Sea area.

Ms. Cordell: And that was about when?
Judge Wolff: I could give you exact dates.
Ms. Cordell: That’s okay. We’re talking ‘70s; we’re talking after judging --
Judge Wolff: Oh no, no, no. All this is while I’m still in the --
Ms. Cordell: So ‘50s, ‘60s, something?
Judge Wolff: Yes.
Ms. Cordell: Okay. And the first Stanford trip was to?
Judge Wolff: And the first Stanford trip was to Greece and the Black Sea. It also went into Russia, on the coast as far as Odessa and Yalta. It was a very thorough, good trip, and really I got hooked on going with Stanford which does an excellent job. Well it depends on who the professor is that’s doing the lecturing, but I have found that that was fascinating. The other thing I mentioned was that my mother felt travel was very important. And she had grandchildren who were my nephews and one niece – and I thought well really in honor of my mother, I would take each of the kids to Europe when I could. This also started while I was still with the port. Then my vacation time was more limited. I had to be on call. And by the way, in every vacation when I was chief counsel for the port, at some point papers from the port would come to me to be written, approved or edited, and I thought it was really very funny. You could never really get away. But I did manage to get all three of the kids into Europe. I don’t know how much good it did them, but it was an interesting experience.

Ms. Cordell: These are your brother’s children?

Judge Wolff: Yes.

Ms. Cordell: Uh huh.

Judge Wolff: And it was interesting for me to do it. Then in 1970, and by that time I was with the court, China finally opened to us. China had always interested me more than any other place. I took one of Stanford’s very early trips to China. China, by the way, is a very different travel experience today than it was then. One thing that was interesting was on my second trip to China, Fritz Mondale was the Vice President of the United States, and he was making the first
official trip to China. The Stanford group and Fritz Mondale were actually staying at the same guest house in Beijing. And those people who went out running, and a lot of Stanford people go running every morning, found themselves running with Fritz Mondale and his group. The point of my story is that Xian was being opened.

Ms. Cordell: Xian?

Judge Wolff: Yes, X-I-A-N, where the warriors had been uncovered. It was being opened to visitors because Mondale was there. I think actually that our Stanford group was the first of the American groups that went to Xian. And Xian was very different then. I have been back a number of times since. Now it has buildings and it has souvenir shops, and it looks very different from what it did then. But I actually stood on a catwalk in Xian when one of the figures came up out of the ground, being hoisted by a pulley, for the first light of day in 3,000 years. It literally brought tears to my eyes. It came out completely intact.

Ms. Cordell: Made of what?

Judge Wolff: They were made of metal. The emperor did not kill anybody. What he did was create an army of metal that guarded his burial place including charioteers bearing weapons, riding horses for example and having different facial features. The exciting thing was, you could see the little kids that were playing around the dig having exactly the same facial features as those facsimiles who were being pulled out of the ground. They had horses, charioteers, bowmen, spear carriers. It’s a fascinating concept. We were
lucky to see it in its very early stages of excavation. I point out, we think of ourselves as early travelers, but of course the United States was the only place that was not traveling there. You had this governmental coolness toward anybody we have been annoyed with, and it doesn’t make a lot of sense because everybody else goes there – Australians, Englishmen, etc. The first trip that I took to China was with Stanford, and it was a trip that devoted itself to the capitals, the ancient capitals of China. But the second, couple of years later, I went again and it was a trip that was devoted to the inroads of Buddhism to China. We think of the Chinese as being Buddhists, but of course actually Buddhism was imported into China and was a foreign religion – the Chinese religious system really kind of tolerated every religion.

Ms. Cordell: Where will you go next?

Judge Wolff: Well, this year I’m going to take a trip down the Hudson with Stanford. And last year I actually did not travel, but the year before that, I went to Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia and Poland. Again, with Stanford. And it was because that was a part of the world we really could not travel in very satisfactorily before. We can now, and it’s interesting that they are so glad to be out from the Russian yoke. It’s really amazing how well they have done and how much they have recovered.

You did ask me about my “travels,” which played an important part in my life and did a great deal to mold my philosophy in general. In the beginning I traveled in Europe extensively either alone or with one or two friends and devised my own itinerary. I traveled through South America in 1968 the same
way but found I wasted a lot of time and had I not known people in those
countries I do not think the travel would have been as rewarding. In 1969 I
did make an extensive trip starting in Japan and traveling throughout South
East Asia. In the early 1980’s I really started traveling with Stanford Alumni.
Stanford selects excellent professors to lead the trips, has great contacts in the
places we visit, and I have found it very rewarding and informative. Since
then my travels have covered many areas: At least six extensive and extended
trips to China; a number to Japan, Hong Kong, and many to Eastern Europe
and Western Europe; Stanford trips to Antarctica, Morocco, Egypt, France,
England, Tunisia, Provence, Venice, England and Wales, Thailand and
Burma, India. I also went on a charter flight with Stanford throughout much
of Africa. The professors who were with us on the Africa trip were Ezra
Solomon, a Nobel prize winner in economics, and Professor Heller, one of the
most distinguished and interesting professors in the Biology Department. I
have also traveled extensively in the United States, Mexico and Canada,
although I confess I am leaving a lot of local travel for my old age.

Before we leave “my life” I might mention I am listed in a number of
“Who’s Who” and I received a number of Honors including a Women of
Distinction Award in 1975; Outstanding Leadership Award in 1973; and
Associates honored me with an Award of Merit. I am especially pleased with
that award because I feel I owe Stanford a lot.
Ms. Cordell: So as we wrap things up, I have to tell you I’ve sat here for I guess seven sessions now, and sat across the table from you, and I have – I absolutely, and I say this not to flatter, but absolutely in awe of you for a number of reasons. One is you tell me, and I do not disbelieve you that you are ninety and a half years of age. I find it very hard to process it, because sitting across from you and I’m looking at you, and you look terrific, that brain of yours is just amazing, and I want to wrap this up by just asking you, and it’s a more philosophical kind of question, so talk to me about – finally, do you think about mortality, do you think about death, do you think about God, and if so, what are your thoughts about that as we bring all this to a conclusion.

Judge Wolff: Basically I don’t think about mortality. I must say I go to a lot of funeral services now of other friends. In fact I went to one Monday, and Charles Parnell who was a lawyer with whom I played bridge and liked and admired very much. His wife had a party for his memorial service, if you want to call it a memorial service. She said Charles didn’t believe in funerals, and I don’t believe in funerals either. And I certainly don’t believe in burials. I think bodies ought to be disposed of. I always maintained even on my travels – in fact I actually wrote out a directive, that if I died overseas, I did not want my remains brought back to the United States. I cannot understand people spending a lot of money getting their remains brought back. I never expected to live so long, and I don’t think the thought of death frightens me particularly. I accept it as inevitable. I certainly don’t like the fact of having friends die before I do, and I don’t like the idea of having to suffer before
death. I think all of my family are in agreement with that, that nobody is going to put a lot of tubes and things in place. I think I’ve been a pretty lucky person, so I’m assuming that I’ll just drop dead and that’ll be that. As for God, it’s very hard for me to believe man is made in the image of God. I can’t imagine how the universe came into being, and so I assume that there’s some mentality beyond our ability to reason. For people who imagine that God made man, that is a thought, a concept that’s conceivable but improbable. But how do they assume that the universe itself was created? If there’s some other mentality that we don’t see, so be it. It’s just beyond our comprehension. I have trouble accepting any kind of a personal God, but if I were God I certainly would recycle human beings. I think that’s a nice concept whether it works or not, I have no idea. And for people who have some kind of faith, I would never discourage them. I think that’s fine. If you have it, you have it and more power. I just don’t have any real idea.

Ms. Cordell: I can tell you, this has just been an extraordinary experience for me. You are truly a trailblazer, and I’m just thrilled that so many, many more people now around the country are going to know about your life and all the things you’ve done to break down barriers, especially in the legal profession, for women. I think it’s just extraordinary, so I thank you for just the privilege of being able to sit here and listen to an extraordinary – a story about an extraordinary person, so thank you.

Judge Wolff: Thank you for doing it and taking all this time.

Ms. Cordell: It’s been a pleasure.