ABA Senior Lawyers Division

Women Trailblazers in the Law

ORAL HISTORY

of

SELMA MOIDEL SMITH

Interviewers: Honorable Kathryn Werdegar
Rosalyn Zakheim

Dates of Interviews:

June 19, 2013
July 11, 2013
October 24, 2013
October 31, 2013
January 10, 2014
November 8, 2014
November 10, 2014
November 12, 2014
We Congratulate
Our Friend and Colleague
Selma Moidel Smith
on her inclusion in the
ABA Women Trailblazers in the Law Oral History Project

“You continue to be an inspiration
and a role model to us all.”

California Supreme Court Historical Society
Fellows of the American Bar Foundation
Los Angeles County Bar Association
National Association of Women Lawyers
Senior Lawyers Division / American Bar Association
Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles
    and also
American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers
Selma Moidel Smith

Oral History, Session I — June 19, 2013

Interview by Kathryn Werdegar,
Associate Justice of the California Supreme Court

Women Trailblazers in the Law Oral History Project of the American Bar Association

Werdegar: Good afternoon. This is Kathryn Werdegar, Associate Justice of the California Supreme Court. With me in chambers is Attorney Selma Moidel Smith. Today is June 19th, 2013, and we have just come from a meeting of the Board of Directors of the California Supreme Court Historical Society, on which we both serve.¹

We will be holding a conversation that will serve as the introduction to Selma’s oral history — which she has been invited to record by the Women Trailblazers in the Law Oral History Project of the American Bar Association. The theme of this conversation will be the role that early influences — together with her own personal characteristics — have played in shaping the Selma that we know today.

To begin, I want to read a short item from Selma’s childhood. When she was ten years old, she was in the sixth grade and graduated from Grant Elementary School in Hollywood, California. Her family had moved to California from Ohio at the start of the school year [arriving August 25, 1929], so she had been at the school for only one year. Nevertheless, she received the single Honor Certificate given by the school at graduation.

It is dated June 27, 1930, and it gives the reasons Selma was recommended for the award. They are as follows:

Because she made a splendid chairman of her History group.
Because she has served so well on the Typing Committee, taking home many of the pupils’ compositions to get ready for our book.
Because she has made an excellent chairman of the “Clipping Bureau” for current events.
Because she has splendid executive ability and uses it.
Because of her excellent scholarship.
Because we believe that she is an outstanding member of the class and will make an excellent record in higher schools.

I know these characteristics, manifested at such a young age by Selma, have continued throughout her life because of my long association with her and my very pleasant opportunity to observe these talents in action. Selma, I’m going to ask you if you could explain some of these to me and elaborate on what the award mentioned. Will you tell me about your “History Group” and your chairmanship?
Smith: Yes, I’d be glad to. Takes me back a long way, but they were happy days, too. The History Group, actually, was formed by me from my class in the sixth grade. I had felt that history was so important and really wasn’t enough covered, and so I had spoken to the teacher and suggested that I might want to have a separate group that I thought might be the more capable ones, and that we would be able to meet for a little while — after — and discuss in depth more of what we were covering with the class. And so she gave her full permission to do this. I selected my students, and they named me chair — chairman, as they said at that time — and we continued to have our meetings, to discuss, as I say, more in depth and we, as a result, I think had quite an additional history upbringing, shall we say. Everyone enjoyed that very much.

Werdegar: Well, to my mind that’s rather extraordinary for a ten-year-old, and no wonder your school was impressed. But not only were you chair of your History Group, you served on the Typing Committee and, I note, you took home “many of the pupils’ compositions to get ready for our book.” Would you tell us about that, and the book that they’re speaking of?

Smith: Oh, yes. Well, our teacher felt that the epitome — the mark that she was working toward — was the book at the end that we had all contributed to, and that we had had an opportunity to write a composition for, and that it would become our book. I’m smiling to myself because it says “Typing Committee.” It was a committee of one [laughing]! I was the only one who was typing, and my own took so little time that I was able to volunteer to make all of them look their very best, if they were going into this book, and so I did, and that was how the book was compiled.
Werdegar: Now, what was the “Clipping Bureau” of which you were also chairman?

Smith: Oh, yes. That was related in a way. I suggested to the teacher that we really ought to have something — part of a bulletin board perhaps — where we could put up clippings that we had selected from newspapers having to do perhaps with a particular area that we were covering in our History class at that time. I brought in the first clippings that had to do with a certain country that we were discussing, and it encouraged others. They were put up on the bulletin board, and each child who had one — after all, this was a new experience for them — I was accustomed to reading the newspapers — they were not — and so the teacher was quite pleased to see that they now, instead of just looking at the comic section, were looking at the rest of the newspaper, too. And it did become, as she put it, the “Clipping Bureau.” That was my contribution to the group.

Werdegar: Well, continuing, the Honor Certificate cites, “Because,” you, Selma, “she has splendid executive ability and uses it.” I think we’ve already had an inkling as to what that was about, but would you care to expand?

Smith: Well, this was something they chose to identify in that way. I was simply doing what came naturally, and fortunately I was able to enlist the cooperation of the teacher, because it was her class [laughing]. She was happy to have these ideas presented, and when the award was given and I brought it home, and so on, I read that line and I said, “Well, I guess that’s what they call it, then.” I actually looked at that almost as something that was new to me — but there it was.

Werdegar: You didn’t realize that your talents came under the rubric of “executive ability”?
Smith: No.

Werdegar: And they say, because of your “excellent scholarship.”

Smith: Yes, that was always true. It never took me very long to dispose of whatever was being presented for our class work. As a result, and this went on — I’m picturing even into high school, and on — where they limited you to just two outside activities. In my case, they said, “Take that away.” They knew that it wouldn’t matter how many I would engage in, the scholarship would never be less, and that I could be in a number of other activities at the same time that I was doing my school work.

Werdegar: And the scholarship never was less, I presume.

Smith: No.

Werdegar: And in conclusion, the certificate cites, “Because we believe she is an outstanding member of the class, and will make an excellent record” in higher schools.

Smith: Yes, well, fortunately, again, it also had preceded in Ohio [city of Warren, where I was born in 1919] — in schools — before we came to Hollywood. It continued, both before and after. I don’t believe there was any year in which I was not in the highest scholarship.

Werdegar: Well, if I might interject a personal comment, Selma. I’m gratified to see that your talents were so early recognized because I have known you, as we mentioned, on the Board of the California Supreme Court Historical Society, and every one of these attributes cited in your Honor Certificate have manifested in your service on the
Board — a deep interest in history, of course, editing and compiling and writing articles for the journal [California Legal History], which you edit, and the newsletter of the Society — and manifesting “splendid executive ability” and using it. You’ve transformed the historical society. So the consistency there is impressive — and gratifying. Selma, in the beginning, where did this all come from? How did you get so interested in writing and editing and history?

Smith: The answer to that is simple and yet quite complex. Actually, the simple part of it is — it’s a reflection of the family into which I was born. My three older brothers, my older sister, all of them were in writing, also in speaking — also I might say, debate. If I were to take an example, one of my brothers was the youngest president of the National Amateur Press Association in the country. I can remember also that when my oldest brother became a lawyer, I was then six years old, and he, being fifteen years older, was twenty-one. But I must tell you one little story that connects to that, but tells you something of my family. When he went to take the bar exam — it was at that time in Columbus, Ohio — when he took the bar, it was the type that was writing, answering questions — all written — and the proctor in the room was sitting there. Then my brother got up and started to walk out, and the proctor said to him, “Son, don’t give up so soon. Just try again. Don’t just walk out.” And so, my brother said to him, “I did finish, and I passed.” At any rate, came time for our newspaper in our city, when they published the names of people who passed, his name was not on it. He had already been a frequent visitor to the newspaper, and those were his friends. They told him, “You’re not on [the list]. You didn’t pass,” and he said, “Yes I did.” And so they started an investigation. They got back to
Columbus. They had to go over it again, and lo and behold, he had indeed! But there was one hindrance — they couldn’t swear him in yet because he wasn’t yet twenty-one. So, they had to wait until his birthday, and so then he was sworn in and was indeed a lawyer.

Werdegar: Now, was this your oldest brother?

Smith: Yes. At that time, you know, I was already familiar with a typewriter in the house, and everyone was either typing or handwriting. Libraries were a living thing in our household — and studies, and speeches they were practicing, and debates they were trying out. All of it headed in a certain direction, of course — law. My sister was engaged in all the same things — the speech, the debates, the writing. All of them. So that when I was doing these things as a ten-year-old, I had already been speaking — as a six-year-old, in a public speech — and by eight I had written my first article, typed it, for the newspaper, and it was printed. And I remember, even after my speech, when I was six — I was selected by the school to speak, to dedicate a picture of a teacher who had passed away, a young woman. The name of the picture was “Aurora.” It was done in her name, in her memory, and I was the one to speak at the dedication and tell a bit about her, and so this is what I did do, when I was six.² The newspaper editor, the next day, came down to meet me at my home because he had published this, and I think he was trying to check up on it himself. So he said to me,

² “Six Year Old Girl Is Picked As School Orator,” Warren Tribune-Chronicle (Feb. 1926).
“Well, Selma, that’s really nothing.” He said, “Anybody can get up and make a speech,” and I said, “No, first, you have to have something to say.”

Werdegar: That’s true!

Smith: And so he backed off, and he said, “Yes, I guess so.” That was a sample of what happened when I was six. At eight, they published an article that I had written which referred to “The New-Fashioned Years.”

My brother, the youngest of the brothers, had always put me up on a counter or something, and because I hadn’t learned to read at the time he started with me, he would read me lines of poetry — Alfred Lord Tennyson — and I memorized them all. So I was able to give a reading, just from memory. On one occasion, in preparation for one of my class requirements, he absolutely insisted that I had to use hand gestures, which was something he did in his oratory. I said, “but Mitch,” and he said, “Well, just hear me out,” you know. “I want you to put your hand in that direction,” and so on. I said, “But Mitch,” and he said, “Don’t interrupt, just do like I’m saying,” you know. And so he said, “All right, finally, what was it you’re trying to tell me?” And I said, “I’m going to be speaking when something is being shown on the screen, and the room is dark!” [both laughing] So that was the end of my instruction in gestures, which I have never used.

My brother, who was the one who became president of the National Amateur Press, and remained always the youngest one — they never had a younger one before or after — would hand me things that he had written and ask me to “look it over,” to edit, as it were, and to make corrections.
Werdegar: Now, he was younger, or you were the absolute youngest?

Smith: Yes, I should say that my oldest brother was fifteen years older, the next one — the writer with the National Amateur Press — was close to thirteen years older. Mitch was the one who would be about eleven years older, and my sister was nine years older.

Werdegar: And then you?

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: Ah, so you had lots of siblings to tell you what to do —

Smith: And they did [laughing].

Werdegar: And watch you blossom. Sounds like you were born into a family of extraordinary intellect — and achievement. So that was a blessing.

Smith: Yes, I used good judgment in deciding where to be born [both laughing]. That would account for the typing, the writing, and in a small way — no, it doesn’t, it’s really unrelated — my oldest brother learned to play the violin. I well remember, I was then probably five or six years old, when he would bring home some sheet music, and put it up on his stand and play for us after dinner. There were seven of us around the table, with my two parents. I well remember that he did a pivotal thing — he put
the sheet music down on a chair, and at my height, it was just right [laughing]. I looked at the music, and I started to hum the music — which I had never heard — from looking at the notes on the paper.

Werdegar: And, of course, you hadn’t been trained in reading music, either.

Smith: No, and we had no radio.

Werdegar: And the fact that you could translate these marks on paper, that you were not trained in, into the sound in your mind is rather astonishing.

Smith: And when he heard me humming the tune, he stopped cold. He was putting up his stand, and realized that somehow I knew — he had already heard it played when he bought the sheet music — he realized that, obviously — well, let me say it resulted in a job that I had: I got to be page turner. That was my introduction, in a way — but obviously, it was there, and he saw that. So, that reaches out into the music in an indirect way.

Werdegar: Selma, as you reference your childhood and your older siblings and this — to my mind — amazing family that you joined and became part of, I notice that you were able to read music, read marks on a paper at age six, marks that you’d never been trained to understand what they were, and you weren’t yet playing an instrument, I believe. This reminds me of a conversation we’ve had in the past about your composing, and I once asked you and I’ll ask you now. Well, how does it happen? How do you compose all of this music, some of which has been orchestrated? And
we know you’ve done nearly a hundred piano pieces. How does that work for you?
Would you tell us a little bit about that?

Smith: Oh, yes. Actually it’s something I don’t know anything about, but I’ll tell you how it manifests itself. I can be doing anything, engaged in whatever. I begin to hear the beginning and a complete melody, and I hear it playing [from first note to last]. I know that it comes from some place that nothing else comes from. I know that once I’ve heard it, it’s there, it’s out.

Werdegar: And since I’m able to speak to you and not to Mozart, you know, I now understand that that is a phenomenon. Those of us — most of us — who’ve never experienced it, don’t get that, but you’ve explained it to me. It comes.

Smith: And I can come back to it anytime.

Werdegar: So you don’t lose it if you don’t immediately set it down?

Smith: No. In fact, one example of that — I was in Europe, with the International Federation of Women Lawyers, and I was washing my face at night before going to bed. I was standing over the sink, and I began to hear a tango, a particular tango. I heard it all the way through, and it was weeks before I had the opportunity to even approach a piano to — with my right hand — strike the notes of the melody.

Werdegar: You weren’t afraid you would lose that melody?

Smith: No, once it’s out, it’s out.

Werdegar: And you just accessed it later when it was convenient?
Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: You mentioned it was a tango.

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: As I recall, there’s some Spanish flavor in your life, your music, your creativity. Do you want to speak about that? You played the Spanish guitar, as I recall?

Smith: Well, yes, that came later. The first thing was, again, around that age of five or six or seven, something like that, when I was in the kitchen. I had wrapped myself in a Spanish shawl that my older sister had received as a gift. I wrapped myself in it, and I borrowed, without her knowing it, her high-heeled shoes, put my shoes inside, stood inside her shoes, and wrapped the shawl around me. My father, without my knowing it, that anyone was looking or knew that I was doing this, had summoned my mother to come and look because I was doing steps — with the shawl and with my heels.

Werdegar: Would you say this came to you the way the music came to you?

Smith: I guess it did, because I do remember it, and they of course couldn’t imagine where this came from. It had simply been there, I guess. I can’t account for it. So it, I think, was the harbinger of more to come. Later, in the seventh grade, they first started to teach Spanish. The only thing was, my teacher — it was Miss Kefauver, related to the senator, from the South, and she had a southern accent. Somehow, in spite of it, I came out sounding like the authentic Spanish.
Werdegar: You weren’t speaking with a United States American southern accent?

Smith: No [laughing], nor American, nor non-Spanish.

Werdegar: Was there any connection in your family to this strong Spanish affinity you had?

Smith: I really don’t think so, unless it was so far back we don’t know it.

Werdegar: Yes, so it wouldn’t explain this at all.

Smith: I don’t know. Later — I’m really jumping into different periods — I started Spanish guitar as well. And castanets. I was dancing. I’ve always danced. I continue to need only the sound of the music and I’m on my feet [laughing].

Werdegar: And your own compositions, many of them have this Spanish flavor. As you mentioned, tangos and —

Smith: Yes, about half of the music has something in it that would relate to that. The result is that I find that I can speak the language, somehow that they never imagine that I’m *norteamericana*, that I must be a, you know, one of them. They only are guessing which part of Latin America or Spain — and your friend Jorge — just identified me as *española*, from Spain. It’s part of the things I don’t understand happening. I don’t know anything about it. I simply know they are there.

Werdegar: Now, your family was extraordinary. Were you early identified as the most extraordinary among the extraordinary? I mean, you sound like a clear — what we would call a prodigy.

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3 Jorge Navarete, Assistant Clerk/Administrator of the California Supreme Court, who had escorted her to Justice Werdegar’s chambers.
Smith: Well, I was in the right place. I might say that the family never was concerned in any way at all. When you hear about parents helping the students with lessons, I mean, no one paid any attention. They, just at the end of each year, were summoned to the Honor Assemblies when I was given the six-semester star for scholarship in each of the terms, or something equivalent to that. They were never concerned.

Werdegar: What I see that I think is unusual, it’s not just that you were a star student, but you have these other attributes of creativity that were amazing and that came to you like a mystery. You don’t know their source even —

Smith: It is. It still is. I don’t know how one accounts for that, except that they are there. I’m grateful that they’re all melodic. I’m grateful that they are of a certain length, that, well — I hope that they add pleasure to someone. I guess, obviously, it had to be an expression of my own, coming from me. I’m often asked to explain, but I have no explanation, just that it happens. With regard to the Spanish, I’ve carried that out. In fact, at high school, I remember — at Hollywood High School — the Spanish class teacher wanted to sponsor me as a linguist as my career.

Werdegar: Well, that reminds me, your career could have taken many paths. Certainly, it could have taken the music path.

Smith: Well, you know, when you mentioned my sixth grade list of things, it so happened that when I was doing these [written] compositions, the teachers noted already I was using language. I remember a phrase, “seemed to abate the angry skies.” I had used that phrase in a sentence.
Werdegar: “Seemed to have made”?  

Smith: To abate.

Werdegar: Oh, “It seemed to abate the angry skies.”

Smith: It was the description of a storm. It was enough — the composition — that they summoned my mother to come. They wanted to inform her that I was a writer. They wanted to inform her that that should be my career, and that if it hadn’t been discovered in my family, that that’s what I should be doing. So my mother listened to it all, of course, said nothing about [laughing] — just thanked them for it and so on. That was how that came about.

Werdegar: Well, how did you find your way to the law? I know you had brothers that were lawyers.

Smith: Well, I think it was taken for granted. It was something that I — this is where everything was. When you’re surrounded with something, and you find that you have those same abilities that they’re talking about and they’re doing, and I was just one more of them —

Werdegar: And, of course, you’ve used all these talents all your life. Law didn’t exclude the others by any means.

Smith: No, no, they could live side by side, and that’s exactly what they have done. And in fact I well recall my situation when I was dictating to my secretary — that’s when we
dictated to secretaries [laughing] — a brief that I was waiting to file, and in the midst of it I started to hear a melody. And so I —

Werdegar: Would you have to stop what you were doing?

Smith: No —

Werdegar: Just to let it finish?

Smith: Oh, well, for just a moment. And I opened the drawer of my desk, reached for a little notepad, and while I was jotting down notes — just spaces in relative distance to each other [tapping the table]. At the same time, I would have to say I was just stopping to relive it, and see it. And then I would dictate directly to her, and jot down a few more until it was completed. So it was happening at the same time. It has no respect for anything — it just — as it will. And I have been doing dancing, in costume and otherwise. I think I’ve had quite a rounded career [chuckling], as it were, in dance. And, of course, it happened in singing as well. I was in singing groups, at university, for example at UCLA, too.

Werdegar: But with these manifest, manifold talents, you could have gone other directions, and why was it ultimately law?

Smith: The one thing is that it was my mother —

Werdegar: Ah!

Smith: It was my mother who wanted to have been a lawyer, and never got to be.

Werdegar: And she had ultimately how many children who were lawyers?
Smith: Well, all five of us were, ah — let’s say, if there had been more children I’m sure there would have been more [both laughing].

Werdegar: And what was your father?

Smith: He was a businessman.

Werdegar: And that means what?

Smith: They had —

Werdegar: Stores, or —?

Smith: Yes, that very thing. The one I knew, of course, was in Warren, Ohio. I would say, it was such a burning desire of hers that it was something she couldn’t even imagine not being in, that —

Werdegar: In her time! That’s extraordinary that she had —

Smith: Yes — well, that was —

Werdegar: — the imagination, in that day — not to mention you, a generation later, and all your siblings.

Smith: Yes. The fact was that she had such a burning desire, as I say, that it wouldn’t have mattered how many children there were.

Werdegar: Well, was she gratified that — especially the sisters, I think, because that was so extraordinary.
Smith: Well, as a matter of fact, my sister actually decided it didn’t suit her after all, and she didn’t practice.

Werdegar: So you carried this forward?

Smith: Yes, with my three brothers. You heard me say, “408 South Spring” — where we’re going for the reception on June 25? That’s where the suite of offices was, on the eighth floor.⁴

Werdegar: Oh, the family suite. I’d like to know, how did your mother — was she gratified and deeply —

Smith: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Werdegar: And, of course, you pursued it to the ultimate.

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: Fulfilled that unfulfilled dream on her part.

Smith: Yes, she had many of the same qualities she could have used herself. She spoke in poetic language at times. When I was on my way to a banquet — of our lawyers — she said to me, “Where you go, my feet will never go.”

Werdegar: Well, that’s both beautiful and poignant.

Smith: Yes, it is. It was. And she pinned on me, very often when I went to court, something that belonged to her.

⁴ Reception sponsored in Los Angeles by the California Supreme Court Historical Society.
Werdegar: Oh!

Smith: Yes, that’s how much — now you know how you got that many lawyers [laughing].

Werdegar: But the daughter is the one we’re talking about.

Smith: Oh, yes, absolutely. I came from a home where there was no precedent, really, for how *men* do, how *women* are supposed to do, what is theirs, and what is simply not a woman’s thing to do. It was completely egalitarian. We were brought up —

Werdegar: Contrary to the mores of the time.

Smith: Yes, yes, and my father was fully comfortable with all of that.

Werdegar: Well, he must have been extraordinary, too.

Smith: Yes, he was. Yes, he was.

Werdegar: Take that as a given.

Smith: And the result was that my brothers and my sister and I, we all grew up believing that women can do anything, and why not? In other words, in their lives, they never did any of the things that we have complained of, that denigrate women. They were simply equals.

Werdegar: [Unlike many other men] that have certain assumptions.

Smith: Yes, yes, very much so. And that, of course, was hardly preparation for the world outside [laughing].
Werdegar: Well, it sounds like you were blessed to be born into that family —

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: And that family was blessed to have you be its youngest member.

Smith: It’s fitting — I guess — I think I’m going to say something like this at the end of the whole thing, the entire thing, if I have the opportunity — “I was the youngest. I’m glad to gather them all together at this point.”

Werdegar: As they are right now, as we speak about them. They’re here —

Smith: They’re here, and [with great emotion] I’m so happy to be part of them.

Werdegar: Well, as your conversational companion, I’m so happy to hear about them. It’s just remarkable.

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: Before we conclude our conversation, I would like — for our listeners and our readers — to touch on two attributes of Selma that don’t come out in the star-student aspect but are a very important part of her personality and who she is. The first is her skill as a poet. And this, too, manifested at a young age. At this time I will read a poem that Selma composed at age sixteen. This poem is entitled, “Dawn and Sunset,”\(^5\) and the first time I heard it, it moved me a great deal, and I’ve always remembered it, and I’d like now to share it:

DAWN AND SUNSET

Dawn — and the world awakens
From its peaceful slumber;
   The pinkish hues of the morning sun
   Are tinting the hills and valleys.
   What can this new day bring?
   Perhaps a smile, perhaps a tear.
   But always inspiration!
As it turns a page in the Book of Life
It turns our hearts once more and again
Toward the God of Eternal Hope —
Dawn!

Sunset — the darkness has triumphed
And the world returns to its slumber:
   But over the distant hills and valleys
   Spreads a blanket of flame and gold —
   The last farewell of a dying day.
   Reluctantly it falls from view
   With one brief pause as if to say,
   “A day has passed — a day well done;
   What matters if there was a tear?
   There’s always inspiration!”
As it turns a page in the Book of Life
So turn our hearts once more and again
Toward the God of Peace, and Rest, and Memory —
Sunset!

Smith: I’ve been dying to say to you, that was a beautiful rendition. I have never heard it, you know. It’s always been in writing.

Werdegar: It’s like hearing your music played.

Smith: Yes!

Werdegar: Well, of course, you hear it up here.

Smith: Yes, but actually, you read it just beautifully.
Werdegar: Oh, I’m glad.

Smith: Really, as a writer, I couldn’t have wished for anyone to read it, that it would —

Werdegar: Oh, I’m so glad.

Smith: Yes, I’m so glad you suggested it. It added such a nice note.

Werdegar: It’s so special.

Smith: I’m grateful that it came to you to do, and —

Werdegar: — that I happen to have it right on my desk [both laughing].

Smith: And so, obviously, that had been with malice aforethought on your part [laughing].

Werdegar: Well, you deserve to hear it, my goodness!

Smith: It moved me when you read it.

Werdegar: I can’t imagine, at age sixteen — you obviously were born with a soul.

Smith: Isn’t it funny you say that. I don’t know how many people have said that word in connection with either the poetry or my music. You used the word “soul.” That word has been used so many times, and one of them was by the one who was presiding judge of our L.A. Superior Court [Charles McCoy] just before our first woman [Lee Edmon]. You met him — I introduced you to him, in fact at the time that we had our thing in L.A. at the Times building,6 if you remember.

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6 California Supreme Court Historical Society public program, June 1, 2009.
Werdegar: Oh, yes.

Smith: I called you over, and I introduced you to both of them.

Werdegar: You did.

Smith: He had been present and heard my music at one of the performances. We no more than greeted each other, and we were standing near each other waiting to go in [on a later occasion], and he said, “You are the soul of that orchestra!”

Werdegar: Ohhhhh.

Smith: And someone else also said, “It touches my soul. It reaches my soul.” Somebody else said, “It goes straight to the heart.”

Werdegar: Isn’t that wonderful!

Smith: So you picked the same — the same location [both laughing]!

Werdegar: Selma’s not only a poet. She’s also a composer, and I would like to offer something special at this time — a brief recording of Selma playing one of her own piano compositions. This is one of a group that she performed for the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles at their annual Law Day Luncheon in the International Ballroom of the Beverly Hilton Hotel on May 1st, 1966.

The title of this composition is “Waltz in B flat minor, No. 2, Opus 55.” And, yes, it is registered for copyright, like the rest of Selma’s nearly one hundred piano pieces. [Click below to play music.]
Zakheim: It’s July 11, 2013, and I’m Rosalyn Zakheim. This is my first interview with Selma Moidel Smith who is being interviewed for the ABA Women Trailblazers Project. It’s a delight to be here with Selma, and we just finished listening to her conversation with Justice Kathryn Werdegar. So we will take off from there. In the conversation with Justice Werdegar, she mentioned that your upbringing enabled you to do things that some women in your era could not have done because there was an assumption that women could do what men could do. And you said, “until I reached the world” — until the real world intervened. We’re going to start with the real world and your world as a lawyer, with your swearing-in on January 5th, 1943. Can you tell me about that?

Smith: Yes, I’d like to mention a few things about it. It was a bit unusual. I could have gone to San Francisco — in December, just before, to be sworn in — but I chose not to do that because I wanted to be able to have my family around me, knowing how much it would mean to them and how much it would mean to me. Since I was the last of the family, the last of five, I wanted those who could be present to be with me, and so I waited until January 5 when the Supreme Court came down to Los Angeles.

Zakheim: Your whole family was there at the swearing in?
Smith: Almost — my mother was there, my oldest brother, the youngest of the brothers, and my older sister [my father had died in Ohio in 1927 — I was eight]. The second and third brothers had already enlisted in the Army [shortly after the U.S. entered World War II]. They volunteered even though they were over draft age. The youngest brother was in Southern California, just before being shipped out to Europe. He was able to get a pass from his commanding officer and be able to appear. And, of course, there he was in uniform. All of us were very happy to be together on this last possible occasion for swearing-in in our family. When my oldest brother sent a telegram to the second brother, who was at that time in Florida just before being shipped out to North Africa, I remember the response that we got from him, and that was, “Another link forged in the chain of dreams” — referring to my being sworn in. He never did come back. This was the very beginning of what is the story of the last of the lawyers. I was always grateful that we could look around and see each other at that very important occasion that had just taken place.

Zakheim: Do you remember where you were sworn in?

Smith: It was in the State Building with the California Supreme Court. There began my actual association with women lawyers, because that very day, before the day was out, I went to the office of the treasurer of the Southern California Women Lawyers, which was the women lawyers organization that I had heard of. I signed my application for membership and paid my dues and became a member that very same day of the group that later became the Women Lawyers Association in 1964 — and I will talk about that much more in detail later. So my association with a women lawyers group began that very same day.
Zakheim: Did you know any members? How did you find out about the organization?

Smith: Oh, my middle brother, the second brother, was the one who had told me about it. When I was in my second year at law school, at USC, he had invited me as his guest to a luncheon of the Lawyers’ Club and introduced me as a law student there to the women lawyers. And so he was familiar with them. Before I was sworn in, I was invited to come to one of their meetings, and so I felt that I was joining my friends, you know. If it had been that it was the first time, it would have made no matter to me because I would have felt that I was at home anyway, and so I was delighted to start my membership the same day that I started my actual professional life. It has continued to this very day, and it will be the subject of a more detailed discussion when we get to that.

Zakheim: That’s right. Now we’re on your early history as a lawyer, and you said after the swearing-in you went back to the office. Can you tell me a little bit about the office that you practiced in?

Smith: Yes, that was at 408 South Spring Street in the Continental Building, which at that time was the tallest building in the city. We were in a large suite on the eighth floor. There was my oldest brother. At that very point, the two younger brothers were gone. I came in as some kind of — what shall I say — neophyte, long-in-training, long-in-waiting-for [laughing]. I had finally arrived there, much to his help as well, because he was literally trying to hold down the fort for the office, and I was trying to help before being sworn in, but now I could do it, and go to court, which I did immediately. I was being handed files and witnesses and clients and [laughing] — so
I was immediately put into service, shall we say. I, therefore, did not have that most common experience of a young woman lawyer trying to get employment, going from door to door, and being turned down. Or if she were fortunate enough to gain some employment, it would not be by any means at the level that the lawyers in the firm would have, but perhaps typing, perhaps in the back room somewhere, maybe allowed to do some research, perhaps assemble a file for the real lawyer to go to court with. These were situations where they were in need of employment. It was unfortunate that they had no opportunity to do anything but accept whatever they felt lucky enough to get. And sometimes they, not being able to get private employment, applied to state offices — county, city — in whatever form they could and gain some kind of work as a lawyer, in whatever second-place capacity it might be. By sheer fact of the family I was born into, what they had established, I was simply welcomed into an office where there already were the secretaries waiting to do what I was requesting. I actually could do what a lawyer does.

Zakheim: What was the name of the firm?

Smith: Moidel, Moidel, Moidel and Smith.

Zakheim: And you were the “Smith.”

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: You were the “Moidel Smith,” I guess [both laughing]!

Smith: Well, yes, I always was “Selma Moidel Smith,” but that’s what gave the last twist to the name of the firm [laughing]. Yes, it was a very busy time for me.
Zakheim: Did the firm start all together here in California?

Smith: No, as a matter of fact, in the first session I’d mentioned that our family came from Ohio and moved to Los Angeles, and so the oldest brother came at that time. The second brother had just become a lawyer, so the oldest brother was free to leave with my mother, my older sister, and me, and we are the ones who moved to California first. Then, as my second brother was free to leave, by reason of the fact the youngest brother had passed the bar in Ohio, then, we all had moved, and the whole office was manned by them. I must say, it was a rare privilege — a rare privilege — that I was accorded, to be in the center of a family that was happy to be working with each other, where there was a closeness of relationship and, very much, helping each other in whatever ways were needed. [with much emotion]

Zakheim: What was the nature of the practice — the type of cases you had?

Smith: Oh, well, that would have been a general civil practice. There were certainly occasions of criminal practice, but it would have been most likely for clients who incidentally now had a criminal charge — we’re not talking about the serious crimes. We’re talking about misdemeanors or whatever. They then appeared for their clients, who would have been their clients in any event. It would have been a general practice, because everybody was doing something different. We often consulted with each other, and referred things to each other, because we all had different areas.

Zakheim: What was your area?

Smith: Well, as a matter of fact, mine was pretty much similar. We were all litigators. There was not one of us who was not just as much at home in court as in the office. All of
us had our own tales to tell [laughing]. I think we probably would have included all of the civil law.

Zakheim: Are there any specific tales you’d like to tell — incidents that happened?

Smith: Oddly enough, my situation, because it came about as it did — somehow, I had a mixture of relationships, some pleasant, some unpleasant, by reason of being a woman lawyer. I remember very well going into a courtroom — not during trial — in order to see the superior court judge in chambers. I wanted to speak with him about something — not pending, of course — and I took my card out and gave it to the clerk to give to the judge who was in chambers alone. I waited for a moment or two, and then the clerk came back and handed me my card and said, “The judge said to say he does not see lady lawyers in chambers.”

Zakheim: Oh, my!

Smith: At which point, I think my jaw literally dropped. I had never in my life been refused access to speak to someone in a formal setting. Now I was being labeled as something that I had not lived with as a label — a woman this or woman that. That had all been taken for granted. Well, of course, I was a woman, and what difference did that make? Until then, it didn’t make any difference. I said, “Very well,” and I left. I will not give the name of that judge because if I do, we’ll be talking for a long time [both laughing].

I remember other situations, for example: One thing I did a lot of was Law and Motion. I very often ended somebody’s case in Law and Motion, by some defect in pleadings that could not be remedied, or something, or sometimes that could be
remied but by which time settlement had been made. On this occasion, this was something of an opposite kind of occurrence. It happened just once in my whole career. We were waiting to be called. The opposing counsel, who had brought his clients with him — which is not customary, really, in Law and Motion — asked if he could see me out in the corridor. So we stepped out. I was in my twenties still, and he was probably about forty-five. Anyway, he said to me, “I have to ask a favor of you.” I said, “Well, what is it?” And he said, “I don’t do very well in court.” And, he said, “I’m very much afraid that I’m not going to be able to do it properly. My stomach,” he said, “takes a terrible toll, and I can see already that you are very accustomed to doing this kind of thing. And so I’m going to ask if you could possibly think of some way not to embarrass me before the court.” I said, “Well, I can think of something, I’m sure,” and so, we went back in. We both stated our positions. I made my motion, and he said whatever he had to say as best he could, and I stepped forward. I said, “May we approach?” We stepped forward, and he was surprised, too. And I said to the judge, “Would you please be good enough to take this matter under submission?”

Zakheim: Very kind of you.

Smith: Well, I really did not feel that it was appropriate on my part to take advantage of something that would not have — and he was just forever grateful. Of course, he lost the motion. He was through. It was one that he couldn’t remedy, and his case was over, but at least, in the presence of his clients it was under submission. He could retire from the immediate scene of the discussion, and go out with them as he asked to do. I can assure you that that happened only once [laughing].
Zakheim: It must have been very odd to be a woman who was a litigator, because you were telling me how most of the women lawyers had trouble even finding jobs, and my guess is that it was even harder for a woman to get a job being a litigator.

Smith: Well, she usually wasn’t allowed to. She was lucky if she was sitting at counsel table, and handing him exhibits or something. Yes, I would have to say, this was unusual at the time, because it was immediately, you know, in ’43. I can say that I never gave it a thought, because I had always done public speaking. I was accustomed to speaking on my feet. As my opponents usually ended up saying, I was “well prepared.” It was not a matter of feeling inadequate.

One situation that only a woman could have, but that was of the positive variety: A case had been referred to me from San Francisco, from a firm. It was going to have to be tried in L.A., and so I was asked to present their case. I remember that when I received the file, I looked at it and I sent back a letter to them saying that “I see that this case involves everything but oil and gas, and I’m expecting to strike that any moment now” [both laughing]. At any rate, fortunately, I was able to win the case for them. Much to my surprise — and this is where this comes in, that only a woman can get this — my secretary knocked on the door, and I looked and I couldn’t understand what she was doing. She was holding a long box from a floral company. Inside were a dozen long-stem red roses.

Zakheim: Now there’s an appreciative client!

Smith: There it was, with a very lovely note, and so they even had added a little bonus in addition to the fee that I was being paid, and wanted to present me, I guess a — what
shall I say — a bit of gallantry? And so that was one of the positive things that a man cannot look forward to [chuckling].

Zakheim: That’s true.

Smith: I remember also that — well, this is more of the other side: This is where we were going to be at trial, and so we were in court with our respective clients. And so my opposing counsel — a tall man, over six feet, and pretty heavy build — came to court with a large briefcase and a number of law books that he, ostentatiously, stood up in front of him at the counsel table. And I had come with a thin file, and nothing else. At any rate, he did an interesting thing. He addressed the court and said, first, he would like to ask counsel, namely me, to stipulate to a change in his complaint. I immediately said, “So stipulate.” As soon as I said, “So stipulate,” I finished my little sentence by saying, “and I move for nonsuit.” And he turned and looked at me. The court — I still see him in front of me now — raised his gavel, brought it down, and said, “Motion granted.” This man turned and looked at me as though — I won’t finish the sentence — what he would like to have brought down upon me. He said to me, “What is this? What do you mean? What is this?” And I said, “You brought a summary action. What you are doing is a summary action which must be strictly construed. It says that when your complaint changes the ground on which you served someone — a complaint on the basis of which you were proceeding — that that would take it right out of your ability to proceed.” And I said, “That’s exactly what you did.” And he didn’t know that. It was a summary proceeding, and he had not prepared himself despite all the books in front of himself. And his clients are now on
their feet behind him, asking why the judge just left the bench [both laughing]. I would say that was the shortest piece of litigation that one could imagine.

To make things more so, it just happened that he had a partner — there were two partners in the firm — it so happened I had a matter with the other partner as well. The next one, shortly after, was a trial, and it was in Pasadena. That trial continued to the end. It was a jury trial, and, at any rate, it was a verdict in favor of my client. When we both stood, having received the verdict of the jury, I looked at him, and he looked at me. He was obviously in a very bad state, with his clients waiting to get a question answered. As I turned to leave, I said, “And do give my regards to your partner.”

Zakheim: Ooooh.

Smith: Yes, as it happened, the two of them had, throughout my dealings with them, been extremely rude, had been contemptuous. I, of course, prepared, but I certainly could not have guaranteed which way it was going to go, and I never took issue with them. So it all ended up with each case, both partners with the same person that they had spoken down to — it was that moment that I could sympathize with the position of women lawyers and at the same time feel that perhaps, the hard way, they had learned that they really needed to extend a professional courtesy — that there should be an equality based upon their ability to do their work.

Zakheim: You mentioned one client who sent you the red roses.

Smith: Yes.
Zakheim: How were your relations with your clients? Did they accept having a woman be their lawyer?

Smith: Well, I can say that, happily, they were open to this. Those who had been referred to me by my own office, of course, already understood that this was a lawyer that was going to be presenting a case for them that was a woman. But we had already established our rapport. Also, I had had referrals from clients that I had known in college, so they had known me personally. It never would have crossed their mind not to, you know. So I was able to do that, too. I will say that my relationships with clients — and I certainly had a large number of men clients as well — always were very professional. They dealt with me as they would with men lawyers, in the sense of giving courtesies and civility and that kind of thing.

It does remind me of another lawyer who hung up on me. It was a matter in which I had gotten a judgment and I had proceeded to execution on real property, and I had scheduled it for sale. He had called to find out if I would settle for half cash [laughing]. I said, “Why would I do that when I have a judgment for the full amount, and we are at the point of a sale on execution?” I said, “You’re perfectly well entitled to bid at the execution sale as well,” and he said, “No, you’re supposed to settle!” I said, “At this stage?” I said, “I didn’t hear anything about that from you before.” He said, “Well, you’re supposed to.” I said, “I don’t see it that way.” I said, “You’ve held out as long as you could — to make my client wait and wait and wait — and now that I have the judgment, and now that we are really proceeding, why would I do that?” He said, “When you’re an old lady and you have gray hair, you’re gonna learn that the thing you’re supposed to do — you’re supposed to be a lady, and you’re
supposed to settle for half!” And he banged down the phone. As it happened, that was a Wednesday, and on Wednesday at lunchtime, many of us gathered for lunch at The Lawyers’ Club, which was a weekly lunchtime, and, of all things, we were sitting directly across from each other at the table [laughing]. I’m afraid it made it uncomfortable for him. I didn’t do anything to alleviate it. I’m afraid that he also had to learn that civility with counsel would go a long way and should not have done it in that way.

But that was an improvement, in fact, over another opposing counsel who threatened me on the phone. This was involving an unlawful detainer. He had sent a notice to the people to move. He found out that the wife had been diagnosed with M.S. — he just didn’t want them on the place. He, having learned this unfortunate news, which was disastrous for this couple, wanted them out. So he sent them a notice to leave. I said, “But you have no grounds, you have nothing,” and he said, “Well, I’m telling you that if you don’t get out of there she’s going to need an ambulance to move, and you’re going to need one too!”

Zakheim: Oh, my goodness!

Smith: Yes. And he also banged down the phone. Let’s just say that I was able to take care of him in court in short order. I remember still how he stalked out. He didn’t mind making a great show of stalking out. I felt sure he would not really have done that if he had had opposing counsel that was a man, and that he really felt that he could threaten, he could frighten this woman and her husband, and me — and that I certainly would back down, and they would just get out. So I was able to save that for them. You know, when you look back over various situations, then, I have to say on
the other side — I picture Justice with the scales balancing at this point — a very nice lawyer in Pasadena who was very kind. He, unfortunately, lost also. He called from his office to me in my office after the case, after he had gotten back. He was a perfect gentleman. He said, “I want you to know that I have to applaud your efforts as a lawyer.” He said, “You are better prepared than any I have had the pleasure to appear with.” He said, “You’ve taught me what a woman lawyer can do.” He said, “And I’m sorry I lost the case,” he said, “but I feel I’ve gained a friend.”

Zakheim: That’s wonderful.

Smith: Yes. That was unique. I can weigh certain things against others and say that the road as a woman lawyer has been a rocky road at times and, at other times, especially nice.

Zakheim: You started practice during World War II.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: And from what I gather you did have an involvement with the Civilian Advisory Committee.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: And could you tell me something about that?

Smith: Yes, several things, actually. There was the Women’s Army Corps, and the Civilian Advisory Committee to the Women’s Army Corps. I was asked to serve on a committee, which would be primarily speaking to women’s groups in efforts to obtain their cooperation in matters that would be helpful to the Women’s Army Corps — and
also to interest them in joining the Women’s Army Corps in the various capacities that they could. This went on for some time, and I did do this for a period of time. The interesting thing is that, when I had finished doing this, there appeared at my office, without prior call or whatever, a woman in uniform from the Marine Corps — an officer who, I guess, had heard something — I don’t know — and she offered me a commission as an officer in the Marine Corps.

Zakheim: Oh my goodness.

Smith: This was quite a surprise, and I said, “I’m sorry, I wish I could help you in that, but as it happens this office has needed my help [chuckle] with the absence of two brothers in the Army. I really could not just leave, much as I see the merit of what you’re requesting.” And she said, “This would be a commission at once. You would not have to do anything further. We can offer you that.” And I said, “Well, I thank you very much but my office, my oldest brother, would not thank you. I’m badly needed on the home front right now, and I hope you will understand.” So that was an interesting offshoot from the other. One never knows how one is perceived, after — I guess, they may have mentioned something back and forth. That was totally unexpected and never came to pass, of course.

Zakheim: I think you have other involvements with war service?

Smith: Oh, yes, with veterans — for the State Bar and also for the L.A. County Bar — it wasn’t “County Bar” then, it was “Los Angeles Bar Association.” It later became “County Bar.” Yes, I had done a good number of services for veterans who were referred by the committees — to such an extent that at the end of the war the Army, in
order to say thank-you, held a big dinner at one of the large hotels on the beach in Santa Monica. We were the guests, those of us who had served on the Servicemen’s Legal Aid Committee and had been assisting them and their families, were invited. I was there, and it was a very lovely affair, and the officers were there to express their thanks. They wanted us to know, very much, that it had meant a great deal to morale and that they were grateful in many cases for acts that went beyond the ordinary call of duty. I thought myself, as did the rest of us, that this was a very nice gesture on their part. We certainly were not expecting that, and it was quite a nice evening.

Zakheim: That’s wonderful. You were talking before about your relationships with male judges and opposing counsel. What was your relationship with other women lawyers?

Smith: My relationships with other women lawyers were excellent. And one of the things I would certainly say to any young woman who is entering the profession is that one of the best things she can do for herself is to join women’s legal organizations and bar associations, in addition to the usual. She will gain from the women’s bar associations a variety — and of course, when you are thinking that I’m back to 1943 again — these offered any number of advantages of common concerns, needing to know what they would suggest. At that time, we had to make up our own forms, and some forms were made finally by the court, but if you didn’t happen to have them, other women lawyers who were anywhere within reach were happy to provide you with what you needed and to suggest to you as well that you might also want to do this or that. There was a great spirit of camaraderie among the women, and I’m pleased to say that. I know that we had two women lawyers groups which we finally unified in 1964. I was in the forefront of that as well. But, before and after, I had
friends in both groups. It was recognition on their part, I think, of the mutual regard — that I was asked to be the person to set up the actual succession of offices that would take place between the two groups in the new organization.

Zakheim: Let’s start with your involvement in the Southern California Women Lawyers Association, and I know, you just told me, that you signed up the very day you were sworn in to the bar.

Smith: Yes, and, as I say, it continues to this day. When I did begin, the Southern California Women Lawyers had a dinner meeting each month at which judges and other experienced attorneys would come and speak to us on lawyering skills in general, and also in specific areas of the law. We were able to learn a great deal that you would not want to have to learn the hard way, individually. By being part of the organization, you were there for what your cooperation could bring, the goodwill among you, and the feeling that human beings always need, and that is they’re not alone in something — especially when women were making their first strides, not the real pioneers of the 1800s but the mid-1940s. I would say that it was a dinner meeting because, being that their scope was Southern California, it enabled the members to come in at the end of the day from wherever they were located. And I remember that there was one from San Diego — I even remember her name, Elizabeth Crable — who never failed to attend a meeting. She came from San Diego every meeting time and would not have missed it.

The other group, the Women Lawyers’ Club, did have one thing that was different. That was, they had a committee for admission. In other words, in addition to the fact you had passed the bar, the committee would then meet with you and
determine your admission to the Women Lawyers’ Club. That was not the case at the Southern California Women Lawyers Association. If you passed the bar, you were a lawyer, and you were welcome as a member. It was just a difference in philosophy, I believe. Nevertheless, they did proceed on a different basis as well. Theirs were luncheon meetings, luncheon because it was at the time when lawyers were primarily downtown. It was their opportunity to do a similar kind of thing, although the Southern California Women Lawyers was accredited by the State Bar to have delegates first [in 1934], and then later, the Women Lawyers’ Club did the same [in 1947].

Zakheim: About how many members were in each group, if you remember?

Smith: Well, when I began, there would have been about two hundred women lawyers in the area. We’re not talking large, large numbers, but each one counted for a lot more than just one, because as we say, the more rare the jewel [laughing], the greater its cost. I think the Women Lawyers Association, if I use its current name, after ’64, will lose some of the cause-and-effect things that existed before ’64, because I was practicing twenty years by the time we did that. So in the first twenty years, even then it was still precarious, and I guess they are quite accurate when they refer to the “women trailblazers.”

Zakheim: Well, I know that you were very active in the Southern California Women Lawyers Association, and from the very moment you became a lawyer, became active and involved as an officer.

Smith: Well, yes.
Zakheim: Can you describe your involvement with that group and your leadership?

Smith: Oh, yes. I dipped a toe into the waters, first as treasurer, then as secretary, then vice president, and then president. It seems that I was the youngest president they had had, or have had since. That would have been in 1947, so I would have been twenty-seven years old.

Zakheim: Your colleagues must have been very trusting of you, to entrust that kind of responsibility on someone so young.

Smith: Well, yes, I’m afraid that I made a bit of a joke: They insisted upon reelecting me for a second term, and I remember saying to the group — because it turned out to be by sheer applause, you know — I said, “Well, it’s very clear that we don’t all learn from our mistakes.” [both laughing] At any rate, it has always been a pleasure to work with my “sisters-in-law,” my very, very good friends. I have great regard, great respect, for women lawyers — what they’ve achieved and what they are capable of achieving.

Zakheim: That’s a beautiful place to stop for today, Selma. Next time, we’ll begin with your presidency of the Southern California Women Lawyers. And now, just as your conversation with Justice Werdegar concluded with one of your musical compositions, we’ll hear another of your pieces. This one is “Tango in D minor, No. 4, Opus 81.” [Click below to play music.]
Zakheim: Hello, this is Rosalyn Zakheim, on October 24th, 2013. I’m here to interview Selma Moidel Smith — to continue our interview, actually — for the Women Trailblazers in the Law of the American Bar Association. We are in Selma’s home in Encino, California, and we left off speaking about Selma’s immense involvement in all different women lawyers’ organizations. I’d like to start again with your involvement in the Southern California Women Lawyers. Could you talk about that, Selma?

Smith: While I was president and, actually, it was for two terms — two years, 1947 and 1948 — there were a variety of events and issues, of course. I will simply mention that our first event included Judge Edwin Jefferson, who was historically, as we can put it now, the first black judge west of the Mississippi. Later, he was elevated to the

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3 “Law Group Picks Selma M. Smith, Los Angeles Times (Feb. 28, 1948): A16; “Women Lawyers Group Again Picks Selma M. Smith,” Metropolitan News (March 2, 1948) [apparently the first story about a local women’s bar to be printed in this legal newspaper].

California Court of Appeal. We know him also as the older brother of Justice Bernard Jefferson. In addition, Mildred Lillie had her first speaking engagement as a new judge at the Biltmore Hotel at our luncheon, and after that, I appointed her to our Executive Committee.\(^5\)

Zakheim: And for those who don’t know, Justice Mildred Lillie was a judge for a very long time in Los Angeles and became a justice of the Court of Appeal.

Smith: Yes, and for many years on the Court of Appeal. I can jump to the final event of the presidency — and I, of course, will be speaking more about it — with Judge Clarence Kincaid who was presiding judge of the superior court. And he was the speaker of the event, as well as with Judge Leo Freund who was the presiding judge of what was the municipal court at that time.\(^6\) We had those two sets of courts. Now, of course, we have only the one, the superior court. Our locales for our events were the Biltmore, also the Hotel Clark, and occasionally the Chancellor.


\(^6\)Photo and caption, “Women Lawyers Install Officers, Hear Address by Judge,” \textit{Hollywood Citizen–News} (Feb. 17, 1949) [see photo above, this page].
I’m often asked those questions, so that’s why I mention it at the outset. They wonder where would the women lawyers have been gathering, and those were usually dinner meetings. Occasionally, we had a luncheon.

Zakheim: How frequently did you meet?

Smith: We met every month. They were full programs. I can say that at those programs, I had arranged for speakers that would be very educational to our women lawyers — judges who would be able to give us something of the inside, the do’s and don’t’s, something about forthcoming decisions (that is, that have already been made, and would soon be able to be made familiar). By this means, the women lawyers actually had a college that they were attending, and I wanted them to continue, always, to be learning. No matter how long, there is always something more you can learn. Many who started out to be, perhaps, working primarily in the office, were tempted into the trial court, to try their skills and to gain some skills so that they could represent someone in court — which they really felt was the ultimate. I had judges come in for that purpose as well, to say what would be most advantageous in the courtroom. They were receiving the equivalent of another degree [laughing]. Often, I spoke on different topics myself.

Zakheim: What kind of topics?

Smith: It would include, automatically, pending legislation, because this was something we needed to know. If we were going to be working within the framework of that new legislation, we had better know about it. Also, in court, if we are going to cite the case [chuckling], we had to be up on the decisions that were coming down. We had
better know about those, too — no point in citing something that’s just been reversed. So it had to do with every phase of a practitioner, including the very simple matter of locating where you were going to go before you got there. Because I do recall that on one occasion I was chatting with Judge Georgia Bullock, and it was just about time for me to leave for Department 1. There had been some new thing at that point, for a temporary purpose, and so she asked if I knew where that was, and I said, “Actually, I haven’t located it yet.” And so she said, “Bailiff, escort Attorney Smith directly.” This is something I passed along to them, and I said, “Be sure that you have done all this. You are expected to know many more things than just what is on the papers you have filed and the pleadings. You will be interviewing your witnesses.” And there was a whole session on interviewing witnesses. There was another session on opening statements, and closing statements.

Zakheim: Selma, will you remind the listener how old you were at this time?

Smith: Well —

Zakheim: Or how young I should say [both laughing].

Smith: I was admitted to the bar, of course, on January 5, 1943, at the age of twenty-three, and this was 1947 [chuckling]. I think they can do the math.

Zakheim: And you were very comfortable in inviting judges to come and speak to the group.

Smith: Oh, yes! Of course, because I felt that the better our relationships with members of the bench, the better it would be for making your appearances. Just in general, it’s one thing to appear before a stranger, and to whom you are a stranger, than it is to
someone who has already had the ability to, shall we say, “size up” who the person is, going both ways [laughing]. It was very instrumental in that first step that all of the women lawyers had to take to familiarize themselves and to make connections.

Zakheim: Now, I know one of the controversies at that time was a hat controversy. Can you speak about that — in 1947?

Smith: Oh, yes. Yes, I certainly can. It was just two months after I became president when a judge was assigned from some other county to a court in Los Angeles County, and we were equally unfamiliar with each other. It just happens that one of our lawyers — her name was Nadia Williams, a very competent lawyer — was appearing before him, and of course she was dressed in what she felt was the most — . I was quoted later in the newspaper as saying that women feel that they are often better dressed, and with more respect to the court, to have on a hat as well. And she was wearing one that actually completed her outfit. The moment she tried to speak, the judge said, “Take off your hat.” And she was absolutely nonplussed, of course. This had never happened before, and none of our Los Angeles County judges had ever raised this issue. She said, “Well, may I speak?” And he said, “After you take off your hat.” And I happen to know that she had a hat pin, that was holding it on, and that when she would take it off, her hair would be down in a different arrangement [both laughing]. The hat was holding it in a certain place. At any rate, she had to take off the hat. This was a disturbing thing to everyone in the courtroom, except to that judge. One week after that event, I was there at the courthouse, in the courtroom in what would have

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7 “L.A. Judge Makes Woman Lawyer Doff Hat in Court,” *Los Angeles Herald Express* (April 7, 1947): 1, 8.
been Department 1, for the swearing-in of one of our judges to the superior court. That was Paul Nourse, a very competent judge, at that. This was the celebratory gathering of all the bar associations to wish him well, et cetera, and I was there representing the Southern California Women Lawyers. Up to a certain point, I made the usual complimentary comments about his reputation and recognition that he had received, and then I said, “Speaking on behalf of women lawyers, we would appreciate it very much if you would give us some advance information now as to any particular requirements of dress.” At which point, everyone in the courtroom just completely [both laughing] — it just broke down everything, and the judge laughed very heartily as well, and he said, “No, I don’t.” And, at any rate, it had to be repeated in the columns of the newspapers, because it was quite a startling event that had taken place a week before. 

Zakheim: What was the attire of women going into the courtroom?

Smith: It was regular business dress, I would say.

Zakheim: In addition to being active with the Southern California Women Lawyers, and other groups, you were also active with foreign women lawyers. Can you tell us about that?

Smith: Yes, I will do that at this point just to make mention that, during my term, there were some women lawyers who came to Los Angeles, who sought me out, who had learned that I was president of the women lawyers, and I was happy to host them as best as I could in courts. For example, there was Helga Pedersen from Denmark, who was in

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8 “Paul Nourse is Inducted as Member of Superior Bench,” Los Angeles Daily Journal (April 16, 1947).
fact a prosecutor and personal assistant to the minister of justice of Denmark [and later minister of justice herself]. I took her to visit the courts of our women judges, which were Georgia Bullock, Ida May Adams, and Mildred Lillie. She was quite impressed, quite impressed, and thought that we had done a very good job of women lawyers making their way, and of course we certainly wanted her to see the best of ours.

Then later, Josefina Phodaca, who was a councilwoman from Manila, in the Philippines, came — and this was quite a different kind of visit. I showed her around. She met with our group informally. I will say that by the time we had struck up some kind of friendship with her, we were made aware of the sad plight of the women lawyers in the Philippines. So we gathered together five hundred dollars, and we gave it to her as a gift to the women lawyers of the Philippines. It was something that I was very proud of, that we were able to do, and they were most grateful. We had future relations with them and certainly with Josefina. (We would understand it as “Josephine.” It was [pronouncing the name:] “Hosefina Podaca.”) She had done quite a great thing for them, although when she came she didn’t know that was what she was going to be going back with. So, it was, again, just something of women lawyers helping women lawyers — not with boundaries.

Zakheim: In addition to that, you had a very busy two years as president. I know there was an annual women lawyers and doctors dinner you’re very proud of. Could you discuss that? Actually two of them.

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Smith: Yes, actually, that was a custom that was initiated by the Southern California Women Lawyers Association. That existed only in our group. And in 1964 when we did unify, that was kept as part of the tradition, although the other group, Women Lawyers’ Club — they were certainly aware of it — and thereafter we would have that, and it’s been kept to this day, although they’ve lost track of where it originated and why they have it. Again, it was a matter of our broad outreach, something that I felt — you know, women lawyers–women doctors. We have many things in common as problems. There’ll be more of that later on when I talk about what was known as the Medical College of Pennsylvania — originally as the Woman’s Medical College — in Philadelphia, and my fifty years with them [see interview Session VIII].

Zakheim: What were the topics that the women lawyers and doctors discussed, or presented I guess would be the word?

Smith: Well, we alternated as to who was presenting. We did this annually. In ’47, the topic that we brought to the table was “legal-medical problems arising out of psychiatry.” It was quite an engaging conversation, back and forth. Then, the following year, it was the medical women’s, and that was artificial insemination. Again, we’re talking now in 1948, when that was something that was being discussed in the entire medical profession. So, of course, there would be legal ramifications without end.

Zakheim: As we’ve seen since.

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Smith: As we’ve seen. In 1948 that was a topic that we were discussing and bringing authorities to bear on, and so on. It has been a very rich interchange. It’s something that I’m so glad we did, and I was very happy to continue the practice to this day. When I see in our newsletters, online and whatever, that we’re having that meeting, I nod to myself and say: Little do they know where this began, and little do they know what they are now about to do, when they’re not aware of the tradition.

Zakheim: I hope maybe you’ll write a little note for the bulletin next year and inform people.

Smith: Well [chuckle], that remains to be seen.

Zakheim: I know after you were president, you stayed active in the Southern California Women Lawyers. Can you discuss that?

Smith: Oh, yes! Yes, of course. I continued to do all the things, unofficially, that I had been doing. I spoke on election measures, issues on domestic relations, child care, education in general, taxes, taxation. I had it under the heading of “Law Every Woman Should Know,” and I gave that on a panel for the Los Angeles Business Women’s Council, with which I was involved as well. That was in 1954. Then, in 1955, the Legal Secretaries Association invited me to be the speaker for their meeting, and so I decided to, maybe, drop a few seeds here and there and talk about law as a career for women. And indeed, in fact there were several who did go on to become lawyers, and I’m very glad for that because many of them had not been able to afford

to pay the tuition for law schools, and they were working to provide for themselves and their families. This gave them the prospect and the hope, and some familiarity with it, so that they would not feel that this was some closed thing to them but rather to open it to them, and to give them some idea of what they might have if they were able to make that struggle to become a lawyer. And I’m happy to say, several did, and as we know, many more have followed.

Zakheim: That’s right. In addition to speaking, I believe you hosted events at your home.

Smith: Oh, yes, for almost twenty years. I was happy to do that. I’ve always been happy when all the women lawyers are getting together and seeing each other socially as well. These were mixed — we had business to transact at our meetings. The fact that we could also then break for our meal and so on, on the patio or whatever, was just another way of doing our work in a familiar setting. And it helped open up doors in several instances of women who, in connection with other women in the group, were able to become on a friendly basis, rather than just professional. Ties were made that lasted into all the years. So I’m glad that I was able to add that feature to it, too, because we wanted to remain — I believe we want to remain, always — as well-rounded in the way we live, and inclusive.

I just remembered, too, for about three years at UCLA, I was asked — in fact, the request was made to the Women Lawyers to send someone to “a class of women who are looking for where they should live their lives professionally,” who want to

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enter a profession — and what would I tell them about becoming a lawyer and being a lawyer, the life of a lawyer. So I did. They sent back my name to them, and so I appeared there in the classroom at UCLA to address this group and to give them all the very positive things that there were for becoming women lawyers. And I’m happy to say that I heard afterwards, a few years later, from some of the people who had been around, that it did bear fruit. I was glad that that opportunity was open, too. Believe me [chuckling], I’ve waved the flag for the women lawyers. And I’m really very proud of women lawyers. I have great respect for them.

Zakheim: By staying friends with people and opening up the profession, it seems you were the ideal person to forge the relationship between the two women lawyers organizations in Los Angeles. Can you describe each of the organizations and how you brought them together?

Smith: Yes, that goes back to 1964. At that point, it took a number of months to accomplish, and a number of meetings, including at my home. [chuckling] There were different points of view, because, well, there were certain individuals in each group who felt that they had different missions and that possibly it was better to just go as they were. Somehow, it seemed to me, as the numbers were growing, and Los Angeles was growing, that for all purposes it would be something to our mutual advantage if we could “pool our assets,” as it were, and work together. And so, if it took a little bending on missions, or whatever, the approach might be to newly-admitted women — and therefore candidates for membership — then perhaps everything would be improved. With that in mind, there were several of us who were like-minded, on both sides, and from that, at our various meetings, we, shall we say, hammered out — and I
do mean at times, physically hammered out [both laughing] — the various points of any organization — who would be doing what, and how, and when.

And of course, came up the matter of succession. They said, “Well, all right, but then what happens?” I will tell you that I was told that both sides would have agreed on me as their first president. Frankly, I felt that having been president, for not one year but two years already — that that would be much. And so they insisted that I chair the first nominating committee. So here came the meeting, the crucial meeting for the chairman of the first nominating committee of the new organization. I had worked out in my mind what I thought would be the fair and equitable thing to do.

When they walked in, you know, they walked in kind of lacking determination in the feeling that “we’re going to do it now.” They didn’t know how it was going to end.

Well, I proposed to them — speaking for Southern California Women Lawyers, and my group got to hear it [chuckling] — that we would agree that the first president would be from the other group. That was Carla Hills. However, her term was quite short. It happened that on our calendar, at the point where we were in the year, we would be really breaking up the order of when a term commenced, what our fiscal year was, so she had a term of about six months [laughing]. I said, “We will give it to you — for six months.” When I first said, “We’ll give it to you,” I saw some eyes open, you know, and when I said, “for six months,” then the other eyes opened [both laughing]. I said, “After which, we will go on the ladders of both. We will alternate so that everyone who was in line for president will be a president, and we will all unite behind that one president, and we will commence our operation. I’m sure we will all be happy together.”
Zakheim: And were you?

Smith: Yes, we certainly — we are today [laughing]. Yes!

Zakheim: What were the names of the two groups?

Smith: The other group was the Women Lawyers’ Club, and the Southern California Women Lawyers [Association] of which I was president.

Zakheim: And what was the name of the group once they joined forces?

Smith: It was the combined name. They dropped “Southern California” and they took on “Association” — “Women Lawyers’ Association.”¹⁴ They had never used anything but “Women Lawyers’ Club.” And now it was an association of lawyers, women lawyers.

Zakheim: Weren’t you recognized by the Club with which you joined?

Smith: Well, yes.

Zakheim: They were very appreciative of what you had done and how well you had done it.

Smith: Yes, it sits here. As you can see, we’re looking at it. Would you like to read this?

Zakheim: I’d like you to read it. I think it’s such a wonderful tribute to you.

Smith: All right [both laughing]. “Know all men and women by these presents: It is hereby proclaimed that by service at considerable personal risk in an area of danger by

¹⁴ The name was expanded to “Women Lawyers’ Association of Los Angeles” in the early 1970s, and the apostrophe was omitted in the early 1990s.
explosion, Selma Moidel Smith has distinguished herself and is hereafter entitled to wear and display this award, which is admitted to be a most inadequate physical manifestation of our heartfelt appreciation and esteem. Presented the 6th day of November, 1964, at Temple City, California.” And it was signed by all of the people who were officers of the other organization. All their names appear here, and their names were: Lucile Watt, Eddie May Armstrong, Doris Baker, Ariel Hilton, Jessie Torrance, Evelyn Whitlow, Martha Yerkes [Robinson], and Judge Kathleen Parker.

Zakheim: That’s quite a tribute to you. I think it’s hard for people now to realize what difficulty was involved in merging the two groups.

Smith: Yes, I’m sure it’s hard to ever replay for someone what really took place. I was just happy, and so were all of us finally, that we were all together now, all under one umbrella. And that’s what it has been ever since, and I have taken personal great delight to see the fruits of the labors of this particular group and to know that such a thing can be accomplished, and with positive results into the future.

Zakheim: You already mentioned the Los Angeles Business Women’s Council. Could you describe your activities with that group?

Smith: Yes, their mission was “the advancement of women in business, industry, and the professions.” I became president of that group as well.
Zakheim: That was in 1952?

Smith: Yes.\(^{15}\) This was a group that also got quite an education from the speakers that I selected for them. In fact, it was not unusual that someone would become president on condition that I would be program chair, and this was one more of those groups. So, I was program chair [in 1951], and believe me, they heard about law, and lawyers, and women lawyers — I would say, most of the time. I felt that this was a great opportunity for women to become more informed, and I arranged for speakers and spoke several times myself during the year. Many of them related to me afterwards that, really, it was quite an education. They had no idea how important it was to their very personal lives to know about what women could do, and could not do. And what we needed to be changing. At that time, too, was the “Wives Paycheck Bill.”

Zakheim: Could you describe that?

Smith: Yes, briefly, it was a bill that would permit a woman to collect her own paycheck. It’s called “Paycheck Bill” because, under the law of community property, the husband was the one in charge. He was the one who collected the paychecks. Unfortunately, it became obvious from the number of cases that arose of women who had earned their paycheck, only to have their husbands arrive in time to collect the paycheck — and that would be the last of it. Unfortunately, the wife had to continue to find some way to feed the children. Really, it was not even just largesse on the part of men who had previously opposed letting women collect their own. It became more a matter of the fact — and I was one of those who pointed it out — that the rest of the men, who

did support their families, would be carrying the weight of the others who would eventually become recipients of county relief, who would come for social welfare, who would have to ask for someone to feed and clothe the children and have a roof over their heads. And so, finally, it was changed. We actually lobbied for it in Sacramento and otherwise. Finally, the law was changed, and oddly enough [both chuckling], a wife would be able to collect her own paycheck.

Zakheim: You should be very proud about that.

Smith: Well, I —

Zakheim: You made generations of women happy about that.

Smith: Yes, and unaware of course of the fact that, until that was changed, that this was the sorry state. It was a very big step forward.

Zakheim: What other kind of topics did you engage as program chair or as president?

Smith: Yes, also in connection with taxation, because it was usually a very oblique kind of thing, something they had really very little contact with, or any semblance of any idea about it. And I’m referring just even to a simple personal income tax return, and what kinds of things could be deductions, things that would be considered income. This was all news to them. They were unaware of anything that actually led to change of decisions about how they were going to do certain things, knowing what would be the advantages and disadvantages. They got a primer in a basic need that I think everyone should have. It’s one thing for a complicated affair, but for many people it would be a

\[16\] California Civil Code Section 171c, signed by Governor Earl Warren, June 16, 1951.
very simple thing if they were ever in position to learn about it. So I felt that this was something that women had to do and to learn.

And I’m sorry to say that I well remember in my own practice, in various estates, I have to say that I was embarrassed myself to find that my woman client, who was the executrix of her husband’s estate — I’m picturing a particular woman whose name I won’t mention — she had never written a check, and she had never dealt with a check. Her husband had taken care, and that’s in quotes, “taken care” of all things, and so she knew nothing about it. She had a check in her hands that she had received in the mail, and she didn’t know how to even endorse it. And she was embarrassed to ask a man, “How do I do this?” She was very happy that she had a woman lawyer, and could say, “Would you please tell me, what do I do with this?” And I showed her the back of the check, and where to endorse, and how to endorse, and various kinds of endorsements. I assured her that she would be able to do it very well, and to not be — . Well, I’m picturing her now, and she was all the things that I’m hesitating to say — about the responsibility. She had been named, and how did he expect her to do anything if he left her in that state of total lack of knowledge.

Zakheim: In addition to giving this knowledge to the Business Women’s Council, did you also expose them to political candidates, ballot measures. Could you describe that?

Smith: Absolutely. Yes, we were particularly talking to them about the judges, because they would have no way of knowing the judges. We could pass along what experience we might have had with regard to the general reputation of the judge, you know. And in most cases, it would certainly have been approbation. Instead of just blankly stabbing at anything that was on the ballot, at least to do so in an informed way, and when they
got to hear about some of them, and more about them and the kinds of things they had done, and stood for or whatever, they felt really quite good about approaching the ballot and, with some knowledge, being able to vote intelligently rather than just with absolutely no information at all.

Zakheim: Did women candidates come to the group to talk?

Smith: Oh, yes. Yes. They were invited [chuckling]. If there was a vacancy, we always sent something to the governor requesting the consideration of a woman. We gave all of the details about her qualifications in the hope that more women would be added to the bench.

Zakheim: Did you at one point, or your organization, write to Governor Earl Warren about an appointment?

Smith: Oh, well, yes. This was at the time that former President Nixon had become vice president. That created a vacancy [in the U.S. Senate], so we had urged him to consider — . Yes, there were other occasions as well. And in most instances it just didn’t happen, but on rare occasions it did and, thankfully, the governor’s office in more recent years has been more open to the petitions made, both orally and in writing, with regard to qualified women candidates.

Zakheim: I believe there was an installation dinner of the Los Angeles Business Women’s Council that you wanted to talk about.

Smith: Yes. On the occasion of my installation as president of the Los Angeles Business Women’s Council, I was happy to have our very popular judge, Georgia Bullock, as the speaker for my installation. A young woman, Judge Roberta Butzbach, was the installing officer. She later became quite active and established a good name for herself. I won’t go into Judge Bullock’s very kind references [chuckling]. She was very complimentary in her talk, the manner in which she expressed her belief that it would be a very good day for the women lawyers that I was assuming the presidency [of the Council].

Zakheim: Well, I know that your successor thought the same thing, because I’ve seen a letter from June Taylor, who succeeded you as president of the Los Angeles Business Women’s Council, in which she said, “Life has been good to me as a whole, but it really put the jackpot right in my lap when it gave me the privilege of working with you. You will always be an inspiration to me. I know there will come a day when we can all say of you, ‘I knew her when.’”

Smith: Yes, that was very kind of her. She was on the board of governors for some time before she became president, and we did work together quite nicely, as I hope I did with the others as well. That was on a happy note, too. A life membership was also presented to me. It’s a bronze plaque which says, “Life Membership, Los Angeles Business Women’s Council, is presented to Selma Moidel Smith, President in 1952, for outstanding service in behalf of California women.” And that is something that I was very pleased and proud to receive from them, as that was not something that was routinely done.

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Zakheim: And I think it also ended with a presentation by Judge Stanley Mosk, at one time, in appreciation of your work. Could you describe that?

Smith: That was an award that bore the heading of the Los Angeles Business Women’s Council. We’re looking at it at this moment. It says, “This certifies that Selma Moidel Smith, Past President, with honors in public speaking, and also by reason of devotion to the advancement of women in business, industry, and the professions, is entitled to this Award of Merit duly presented in open meeting by Judge Stanley Mosk, L.A. Superior Court, in witness whereof we have hereunto set our hands, this 18th day of January, 1958.” And that was signed, of course, by the officers and by the board of governors. And the very same June Taylor who wrote that note is the one who headed the board of governors at that time.

Zakheim: Thank you, Selma. And now we’ll conclude this session — like the previous ones — with a selection from your musical compositions. The orchestral version of this piece was played at the 1968 Installation Dinner–Dance of the Lawyers’ Club of Los Angeles by Ivan Scott and his orchestra — in the Crystal Room of the Beverly Hills Hotel. Here is the original piano version. It is titled, “Beguine in F minor, Opus 2.”

[Click below to play music.]
Zakheim: Hello, it’s October 31, 2013. I’m Rosalyn Zakheim, and I’m at the home of Selma Moidel Smith to continue our interview of Selma Moidel Smith for the ABA Women Trailblazers Project. Selma, last time we were talking about your involvement in various bar associations, and could you tell us now about the Council of Bar Associations of Southern California and your involvement with that?

Smith: All right, yes. We actually had an interesting, short-lived, Council of Bar Associations of Southern California.¹ Max Gilford was president, and I was elected to be the charter secretary, for the representation of the Women Lawyers’ Association. This was in 1949. We were scheduled to meet on a particular day, and I started out from my office on Spring Street to go to Sixth and Hope, where the University Club was situated, briefcase in hand, and thereupon encountered a bit of history. When I arrived at the door of the club, and I was smiling at the person who opened the door, the gentleman on the other side informed me I could not come in.

Zakheim: And why was that?

Smith: Women were not allowed at the University Club, unless perhaps in a rear elevator in which they were going to a social event of any occasion. I said, “No, I’m not here for anything social. No, we’re having a meeting of the Council of Bar Associations.” He said, “Yes, they’re all here, but you are not permitted to come in.” I held up my briefcase, and I said, “I have here what we need for the meeting, and they will be wondering why I haven’t appeared.” And he said, “Well, I’m sorry, madam, but you will not be entering the University Club.”

Zakheim: And what did you do?

Smith: Well, I did the literary turn on my heel, and left, and came straight back to my office, and I sent a telegraph message — I wrote out for Western Union — and sent to Max Gilford, to inform him, and it was addressed to him at the club. He did indeed receive it, and that day the meeting did not exactly take place [chuckling]. I will say that, historically, we did not ever return to it again. So I can say that I’ve had the pleasure of [laughing] being turned away, and I believe that that is the very kind of thing I think we have improved on at this late date.

Zakheim: Where did the meetings proceed in the future, after the University Club incident?

Smith: We held them at the private rooms of a restaurant or somewhere that would be a public place where we could not possibly engage in this kind of conversation again.

Zakheim: Did the men who were part of the Council of Bar Associations say anything to you about this incident?
Smith: No, Max himself apologized, saying it never crossed his mind, saying, “Please forgive the oversight,” and that it was a shameful thing, et cetera, and said, “It will never happen again.” So that was the event that I think stood out for me in mention of the Council. For three years, I did continue to represent the Women Lawyers’ Association. By that time, the Los Angeles Bar, later the Los Angeles County Bar Association, had already, shall we say, “enclosed” the bar associations and so, as I now look back, it was rather short lived — well intentioned, but short lived.

Zakheim: Did the L.A. County Bar Association permit women members from the beginning?

Smith: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Zakheim: Well, I know one of the other organizations that you’ve been extremely active in was the National Association of Women Lawyers, or “NAWL.” We refer to it as NAWL most of the time.

Smith: Oh, yes, we do.

Zakheim: Could you tell us about that involvement?

Smith: Yes, well, that one started early and continues to this very day, and will continue as far as I will be able to [laughing]. Well, let us say that it is a long-time association because, as it happens, the National Association had its own groups in various states that were affiliates. And at that time, the Southern California Women Lawyers Association was indeed an affiliate. So that when I became a member of the Southern California Women Lawyers the day I was admitted to practice, I automatically was becoming a member of the National Association of Women
Lawyers. It has been a long association, I’m happy to say.\(^2\) They have been very kind on many occasions — in fact, have honored me.\(^3\) In most recent times [2005], they established for the first time a law student writing competition and kindly gave it my name. Each year it does have its competition nationally, and a young woman law student will be recognized, and published, so that we have participation *early* from women law students who are, shortly we hope on those occasions, going to be members of the bar — additional women lawyers.

Zakheim: Have you met any of the young women who’ve received the Selma Moidel Smith [Law Student] Writing [Competition] award?

Smith: I was able to meet one of them. I’ve also had contact otherwise — I have not met them, but I did have one. And we were at the luncheon together, which was at the Waldorf, which is where NAWL has its annual event.\(^4\)

As it happens, I had occasion to write the history of the National Association of Women Lawyers. This is intertwined, as we will see later, with the American Bar Association because I arrived at the American Bar as the liaison from the National Association of Women Lawyers at the request of the Senior Lawyers Division of the American Bar Association [in 1996].\(^5\) By that introduction, I then became a member


\(^3\) Smith was presented the NAWL Lifetime of Achievement Award at the 1999 NAWL Annual Meeting in Atlanta.


\(^5\) For articles written by SMS as liaison in NAWL’s *Women Lawyers Journal*, see her C.V.
of the Division — I had already long been a member of the ABA — and continued, and continue now to work with the Senior Lawyers Division and ABA.

The National Association of Women Lawyers was founded in 1899. I wrote the centennial history, and that was published as a first offering in the Senior Lawyers Division of the ABA. It was a cover issue, with a very lovely picture of a gathering of the National Association of Women Lawyers at a luncheon, a large picture that covered the whole cover of the entire publication. So, they were very kind to do this, and I was glad that as a liaison the first thing I did was to make a broad path for NAWL in the annals of the ABA. And that was reprinted in the journal of NAWL.

I wrote the history of the Southern California Women Lawyers as well. That was in 2001, and both the now—Women Lawyers Association and the National Association of Women Lawyers published it.

Zakheim: Where were they published?

Smith: In NAWL’s Women Lawyers Journal, and in the Newsletter of the Women Lawyers Association, which was printed in hard copy at that time. So it is not lost in the archives.

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The text of this, and most of SMS’s other articles (all of which are listed in her C.V.), may be found on her Web page at the Stanford Women’s Legal History Biography Project: http://wlh.law.stanford.edu/biography_search/biopage/?woman_lawyer_id=10901.


Zakheim: That’s what we like to hear.

Smith: Yes!

Zakheim: We’ve been discussing NAWL, and I know that you were involved in a Law Day celebration in 1960 and, I think, ’61 for NAWL. Can you describe that?

Smith: Yes. Actually, they took place in Los Angeles. In 1960 and ’61, I was appointed by the president of NAWL to be the California member of the Law Day Committee that had been created in response to President Eisenhower’s declaration of Law Day. So we planned quite a nice event, some of which spilled over into 1961 when we had the next one. The one of 1960 was held at the Ambassador Hotel, in the Cocoanut Grove. It had originally been scheduled for a different place, a smaller hotel. By reason of the interest that was generated, I’m happy to say that we actually filled the Cocoanut Grove. I was on television, and radio, talking about the forthcoming Law Day. By all means, this was not simply a women’s event of either the National or the California or Los Angeles women lawyers. The men were there as well — judges and officials. They were very, very successful events.

Zakheim: How did you publicize them?

Smith: We had several good ideas about that. One of them, of course, was television. I appeared on several programs, always for the purpose of publicizing the fact that we

were going to initiate a new thing under President Eisenhower’s declaration of this event. Law Day was May 1, and it was not by chance that that was what was called Law Day, drawing contrast, of course —

Zakheim: Now, was there an essay contest?

Smith: Yes, I was in charge of the contests. I gave the title, “What Law Day Means to Me.”¹⁰ I’m happy to say that we did have a winner.¹¹ The prize was, in fact, a volume that had just come out, Professor Barbara Armstrong at Berkeley Law School with her book, *California Family Law*. We knew that this would be of great interest to all women lawyers, and men as well, but primarily it was, as we know, the women who would be concerned with family law.

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Then, in 1961, it was expanded and now it was going to include a court motto contest and a song.12 So we decided we would have judges, prominent judges. They included Raymond Burr who was, of course, very well known for the “Perry Mason” program. And for the song, we had Steve Allen and his wife, Jayne Meadows.13 We were all sitting on the dais together and had the opportunity to have nice conversations. As it happens, Steve Allen and his wife lived up the street from me, and our children were often together, at my home and theirs as well. [Jayne and I were Spanish dance partners at a local dance school. I had also written an article on Steve Allen at UCLA Extension which he asked permission to use for his own P.R.]

Zakheim: I wondered what the Hollywood connection was.

Smith: Oh, yes [laughing]. At any rate, those were expanded, and I appeared on television again. It was called, “Social Security in Action,”14 and there was a whole segment of it that was given to me to publicize — and I was interviewed about — Law Day.

I would skip ahead to Law Day 1965 [and the Women Lawyers’ Association (of Los Angeles)]. We did something unusual there. I had suggested the inclusion of Spanish-speaking representatives. I thought, how nice to have the women lawyers

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who were the Latin-American consular corps — diplomatic service — serving in Los Angeles. And so I had contacted my friend, Concha Gonzalez, wife of the editor of La Opinión, the newspaper that was renowned, of course. I suggested to her that it would be nice to do that. She agreed, and I said, “Would you like to invite them,” and she said, “Well, yes, you know,” she said, “but my feeling is, this is so far out of their duties — they’ve never done this kind of thing before.” She said, “I really don’t think they would come.” So I said, “Oh, all right,” and then I promptly called one of them, and after our little chat, in Spanish of course, she thought that was nice and agreed to come. I then called the second and the third. They also were coming. And so at that point I called my friend Concha back again, and I said, “I now have three.” And she laughed at the other end, and she said, “Selma,” she said, “you are a woman who does not take ‘no’ for an answer” [and she then invited the others]. [both laughing] I’ve remembered her words through the years. We were very close friends. By reason of her, we had splendid publicity in the Spanish newspaper for this event, all talking about Law Day and the meaning of Law Day. So we were publicizing this — not just to our own women lawyers, or our immediate community, but to the wider community. And involving a segment that, in the thank-you’s that I received afterwards, included one that I’ve remembered very much — one who said, “And I want to thank you for letting us know. We see how far ahead you women lawyers are in your country.” Of course, we knew the gaps, but they were taking a lesson from this. Where they had attended, and what they had seen, and this large gathering — this is something that they took back to their countries.
I must tell you about a certain dimension that was included in the program, in the way that they were made known. The president, Carla Hills — she was the first one after our unification — would be introducing me. And she was unaware that while she was making the introduction of me — and this was, again, at a full gathering — she was unaware that I had brought with me a small bag from which I was taking, and took out, a Spanish shawl. And while she was talking, I was wrapping the Spanish shawl around my shoulders. And when I stood up to make the introductions that I was scheduled to make of all of the women of the diplomatic corps, I was wearing my Spanish shawl and I made the introductions in Spanish — to their great delight, and translated of course into English. This they had never seen before and which [laughing] I’m sure hasn’t been done since, in that way. So this was something that they burst into applause about. I had had placed at their special table a little flag of each of the Latin-American countries represented. And so, with my Spanish shawl and my lift at the end with my swish of the shawl over my shoulder, I concluded that portion of the program. And it was very widely acclaimed, I must say, and remembered, as I thought it would. And so it linked large communities of lawyers, women lawyers, Spanish-speaking, English-speaking — it stood out, and everyone talked about it for a long time.

The speaker at Law Day 1965 was Judge Sarah T. Hughes of Texas, whom I had secured as our guest speaker. She was, of course, as we well remember on that unfortunate day of President Kennedy’s assassination, to swear into office Lyndon B. Johnson as president. She gave a marvelous talk to us on Law Day.
I do want to say at this point that in that group of Spanish-speaking attendees was Dr. Carlos de la Torre, who was president of the Cuban Bar Association in Exile, living in Los Angeles at that time. When I introduced him, I had checked ahead for the highest ranking kind of introduction, because I knew him personally. We were good friends. I finally encountered the phrase that I wanted to use in introducing him, which was “el señor doctor don Carlos de la Torre.” All of the Spanish-speaking people recognized this was the highest rank of introduction that one could give. And he was the author, in Spanish, of a book on “El Imperio de la Ley” — “The Rule of Law.”¹⁵ This was something that was very memorable to people on that occasion as well. He attended not only that one but came the next year as well.

Moving into the one of 1966, the Law Day on that occasion was in the International Ballroom of the Beverly Hilton Hotel, in Beverly Hills, of course. We filled the International Ballroom, and again, we had our Spanish-speaking guests. I do want to say that on that occasion, I had checked with Justice Mildred Lillie, and I asked her to introduce our guest speaker. I had invited Lorna Lockwood.¹⁶ I was

¹⁵ Carlos de la Torre y de la Rosa, El Imperio de la Arbitrariedad Como Norma Fundamental de Gobierno (Mexico City, 1964), arising from the International Commission of Jurists’ El Imperio de la Ley en Cuba (Geneva, 1962).
¹⁶ “Justice Lockwood To Address Women Lawyers,” Los Angeles Daily Journal (April 22, 1966); “Many Programs Underway for Law Day,” LADJ (April 27, 1966); “Edna Plummer To
chair of this meeting, not just the Spanish-speaking part but the whole program. The
guest speaker, Lorna Lockwood, was from Arizona.

She was the very first woman to be a chief justice of a state supreme court.

Mildred Lillie made a very nice introduction of her. I also had California Supreme
Court Associate Justice Marshall McComb in attendance. Again, we had essay and
court motto contests.¹⁷ I wanted to make gifts to those winners, and one gift was the

*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a twenty-four-volume set, for the essay winner. And the

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¹⁷ “Law Day Essay Context Told, Program Slated,” *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (March 9,
1966); “Motto Contest Under Way,” *Metropolitan News* (March 16, 1966); “Two Contests
Announced by Women Lawyers Assn.: For Youth, Lawyers,” *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (March
18, 1966); “Attorneys, Students Eligible for Lawyers’ Assn. Contests,” *Los Angeles Times* (April
3, 1966); “Two Contests Set Up By Women Lawyers,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* (April 20,
1966).
other winner, for the motto, was a six-volume-set of Roscoe Pound on Jurisprudence. I want to indicate that there was recognition given to this kind of contribution to Law Day as well.

Then I moved from the podium, where I was introducing all of these events, and I simply walked a few steps over to the piano that was on stage. I sat down without a word to anyone, and I began to play the piano, which was of course something unknown completely to all of my associates, my friends, my fellow members of the associations, and certainly all members of the bar. I performed several, four or five, of my compositions. I will say that on this occasion, I certainly added a couple of tangos so that my Spanish-speaking friends could all enjoy them. Afterwards, I made my little bow, to which everyone applauded very loudly, I will say, and then just as quietly, returned to the podium and continued as chair of the Law Day event. This, of course, was the first time that they had any inkling of the fact that I did play the piano, that I was a composer, and in fact I have to remember that [state Deputy Attorney General] Ariel Hilton stepped up immediately afterwards and said, “Are these all copyrighted?” [both laughing] And I said, “You may be sure they are, each and every one.”

Zakheim: Oh, that’s funny.

Smith: As it happens, they total about a hundred piano compositions, many of which have been orchestrated and performed both ways. I will say that that did provide a surprise occasion that was quite talked about, shall we say, and I guess added another facet to my lifelong interests. So that is also part of “my story.”
Zakheim: Was there anything you wanted to add about the various Law Days?

Smith: Yes, I would like to say that in 1968, we had as the guest speaker Yvonne Brathwaite — later, of course, her name became Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, and now, she’s recently retired as L.A. County supervisor — who was then the first black woman elected to the California Assembly. She spoke on the need for understanding between the white population and the black population. She made an excellent appearance before us.

Zakheim: I know she also, I think, became a congresswoman, didn’t she, in later years?

Smith: Yes, in later years.

Zakheim: And what was the impact of her speech about black–white relationships?

Smith: I think it had a very salutary effect.

Zakheim: Do you want to tell me about the articles in “Vida Social” in La Opinión — and the picture you have in front of you, of the first Law Day meeting with the consular people from various Latin-American countries?

Smith: Yes, we are looking at a photo that was taken in the office of the Mexican consul-general. I’m looking at these faces: the very lovely women who graced our occasion.
There are nine of us who are there. The very same photo was reproduced in the Spanish newspaper, *La Opinión*. The entire story of the occasion was written up in detail, which was very kind of Concha to publish. Then, also, when we had the occasion of Yvonne Brathwaite, I’m looking also at that — we are looking at the “Vida Social” — of the three of us in a photo: that was Yvonne Brathwaite and Judge Kathleen Parker, who was the one who received an honor, and myself. At any rate, the story is replete with telling how, in the 1968 occasion, I had again all of the ladies, now not just from the consular corps but, as well, all of the women presidents of all of the many Spanish-speaking social organizations in the city of Los Angeles, which I had again the pleasure of introducing. All of them are named in this cover-all story that was written in *La Opinión*. They gave us wonderful cooperation to spread the word of Law Day to everyone of Spanish speech as well. So I think our goal was met. Certainly, we informed the English-speaking community of this new and continuing occasion, and I think much to the profit of all of us.

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The *La Opinión* was used — she used it with me if I took a trip. She put in my photo. She told where I was, and “su hijo Marcos,” because I would take him. She was a dear friend of mine. She wrote to me, “I write you things that I could never tell my sisters.” I mean, we were that — . You could have picked up *La Opinión* frequently, and there would be something about me. She looked forward to the fact I attended the Agrupación de las Angelinas. I was part of all their social life.

Zakheim: You did amazing things. You were probably the first person to bring the Mexican consular corps anywhere in the legal —

Smith: Oh, it was more than Mexican. It was all of Latin America. I should have read off the countries that were represented.

Zakheim: Before we proceed, I wanted to ask, Selma, I know you speak fluent Spanish.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: You are not somebody who they would go, “Oh, she’s trying to speak Spanish.”

Smith: No.

Zakheim: How did you come about that skill?

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Smith: I was in seventh grade. We had to take a language, you know. Usually it was Spanish or something. So we did. But here’s what happens with memory at this moment. Before the seventh grade — this was back in Ohio — I had borrowed my sister’s high heels, and there was a Spanish shawl, the kind of thing they used to give as gifts at that time, and so I gathered it around me, and I was doing steps — that I had never seen. I had had no Spanish antecedents that I know of. And there I was doing what turned out to be — the heel things, you know?

Zakheim: Yes!

Smith: Don’t ask. I never saw it anywhere. We wouldn’t have, there in northeastern Ohio [both laughing]. What would we be doing with Spanish, you know? There weren’t any that I ever heard of or knew. Where this came from I don’t know. So when I was pulling that shawl on my shoulders at the Law Day, I was really drawing a connection, unknowingly all the way back to there. Little did I know when I was there that I was going later to be doing this [laughing] for real. And of course, in between, I was learning Spanish dance. When I did dance school and so on, I was doing Spanish dance as well. In the seventh grade — to come closer to the answer to your question, and you see what a detour it took, we were having a visit. It was near Cinco de Mayo. They were going to tell us about it, you know, but in the meantime, we were doing our Spanish in class, and the teacher was from the South. Let us say, I don’t know whether you’ve ever heard Spanish with a southern accent [both laughing]. Somehow, however, when I spoke, I realized — and they realized — that I spoke with a Spanish accent, I mean, as a native Spanish speaker. I’d never heard a word of Spanish, and somehow the sounds that I made, and maybe you noticed it —.
You see, if I were to simply read to you, for example, the names of these people [in the 1965 Law Day photo]: Olivia de Anguizola, del país de Panamá; Trinidad Simó Alemán, de El Salvador; Margarita de Hedger, Paraguay; Adela de Guzmán, de Honduras; Laura Morphy, de México, María Armendáriz, Blanca Días Pou, de la República Dominicana; Clementina de Arcia, Nicaragua.

This is how I always spoke. Don’t ask me where it came from, or anything else, except that on the occasion in the seventh grade, the teacher, of course, and the students, had already recognized who was speaking Spanish. So the event took place right on Olvera Street, because that’s where they first came in and settled themselves — there’s a nice clearing there. And because this was the occasion, the Mexican consul general was there, and so our teacher announced that her class had studied and that “we have a student who has a little message.” I got up and simply spoke. I wasn’t reading, I simply spoke. I had read what I was supposed to, to myself, but I didn’t even have it with me. I’ve never read from notes. That’s why I was always at ease in court and speaking. Whether it was the summary, or whether it was the opening statement, that was never a problem. All of those things came easily to me. And heavens, certainly on cross-examination, I [laughing] — it came easily.

Zakheim: Oh, I bet you cut them apart. That would be fun. I wish we had tapes of that.

Smith: If I got a smell of a liar on the stand, ooooh! [both laughing]. Then everyone knew it before I was through. Anyway, so I made my little talk in Spanish, of welcome to him, you know, and how happy we were to be on Olvera Street — to such effect that he said to the teacher, “If she ever comes to Mexico, I want her to come and visit us there.” That’s how pleased he was. That was my first public speaking of Spanish.
It’s just always there. And anytime, anywhere, that I encounter someone who has, by their names or appearance — I will say something to them such as, “¿De dónde proviene usted?” And they tell me, “O, ¿habla español?” [both laughing] “Sí, ¿cómo no?” Y entonces, cualquier tiempo, y inmediatamente, me dicen, “¿Y de cuál país es usted?”

Zakheim: “What country are you from?”

Smith: Y, entonces yo digo, “¿Qué opina?” Y he recibido, de numerosos países, “¿de Sudamérica, de Centroamérica, de España?” — ¡También!

Zakheim: No, “los Estados Unidos” [laughing].

Smith: Nunca, pero nunca [both laughing]. I have no explanation for it.

Zakheim: Did you continue taking Spanish in school?

Smith: I did. Well, I had to fill in, at Hollywood High, so I took advanced Spanish. In fact, my teacher, Mr. Johnson, wanted to sponsor me as a linguist.

Zakheim: How wonderful!

Smith: He wanted me to have my career in language. And of course, in my sixth grade, they wanted me to have my career as a writer — poetry and prose, and so on. And in Warren, of course, in Ohio, I was all set following in the footsteps as a lawyer, and as a speaker. So here I am —

Zakheim: You could have been a composer.
Smith: Yes — well, I am.

Zakheim: Well, you are. I mean as a career.

Smith: Yes, in fact, you may have seen sometime the listing in the *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers*.

Zakheim: Oh, how wonderful! Oh, Selma!

Smith: And so I’m just showing it to you. This was a note that I had received [from the editor].


Smith: Yes, in other words, this was not just pop stuff. And that was the card, his card that he put in. And they shipped out the book to me. This was what I furnished them. They wanted a photo, so they have the photo there. Somewhere here is the actual listing.

Zakheim: There you are!

Smith: Yes. They listed about thirty-some of my compositions. How they chose these particular ones, I’m not sure. And this was published in London and New York.

Zakheim: And that was in the 1980s.

Smith: Yes. You’re a perciptient witness.

Zakheim: Right [both laughing].

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Smith: Yes. This is how I would prefer to be talking. Whether I say many things out loud, I’ve connected, while I was talking, to things that — aha, I never saw the connection between the two Spanish shawls before.

Zakheim: Well, when you talked about that, I just lit up, and I was so glad the tape was on [laughing], because I thought “That is perfect.”

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: Because you were just talking.

Smith: That’s what’s happening. Two processes are going on. Here, I’m trying to talk within certain bounds. So much is going on, inside, at the same time. I’m speaking one thing — I’m there at the Biltmore Bowl, I’m there at the Ambassador, I’m there at the International Ballroom. I’m sitting there. I mean, I’m at the podium! I can look out and see everybody. I’m at the piano. I mean, it’s going on — my memory works that way. I’m right there.

Zakheim: That’s what you tell me.

Smith: And then, when you’re dipping back into things, you see things in them that you had never seen — in addition to all the things you are seeing while you’re there. You now have an overlay, and that’s made up of, “Now, how do you see it — all these years later?” And then, boom, while I’m talking to you — there you have it! I tell you this because, for someone like myself, all of the things now all hop to each other. It’s like glue or, I should say, a magnet. Something is a magnet. Everything having to do with it comes to the fore. There it is, and I’m suddenly sitting here, experiencing it. And I
didn’t even know *that* until I’m talking to you now. And I have to overcome those feelings in order to just — verbalize. And feelings are — I mean — why do I have music? Because there are things you don’t say with words.

Zakheim: Which is something to *say*.

And now, to conclude this session of Selma’s oral history interviews, we’ll hear one of the pieces she performed at the 1966 Law Day Luncheon of the Women Lawyers’ Association of Los Angeles in the International Ballroom of the Beverly Hilton Hotel. It’s a tango, one of many tangos Selma has composed. The title is “Tango in C minor, No. 2, Opus 71.” [Click below to play music.]
Zakheim: Today is January 10, 2014, and this is Rosalyn Zakheim. I’m at the home of Selma Moidel Smith to continue her interviews for the ABA Women Trailblazers in the Law Oral History Project. Selma, I understand that today you’ve brought out a number of items to “illustrate” your thoughts, in addition to our usual questions and answers.

Smith: Yes, today is different. I took out a few things to show you. This is the medal that I was given [see p. 14]. That was in the Dominican Republic, and in their newspaper, *El Caribe* — you can see here that this is “República Dominicana.” You see the date?

Zakheim: “1956, April 20” — “Abogada de California” — California lawyer comes to the women jurists congress?

Smith: Yes, “Juristas.”

Zakheim: This is so exciting, Selma! I love it!

Smith: While I was there, of course, we went from the Dominican Republic to Havana, and here is the key to the city of Havana that I received.

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Zakheim: Oh, Selma!

Smith: While we were there, in Havana, this is a picture that was taken: This is Anna Brenner Meyers from Miami, Florida; this is Raymonde Paul from New York and Paris; and this is Bea Burstein, a judge [from New York]; and somebody —

Zakheim: Selma!

Smith: As you see, I’m the youngest, by far, as usual [both laughing]. See, our names are given below.

Zakheim: I always wanted to go to Cuba. You not only went, you were honored there.

Smith: And we were in all the Scandinavian countries. If your Norwegian is up to snuff — [showing a newspaper photo from Norway].

Zakheim: No, my Norwegian is not —
Smith:Mine is where yours is.

Zakheim:I understand enough Spanish.

Smith:And see, there it is, in 1954 — And you know who this woman is: Judge Florence Allen. Do you want to guess the age of the various people?

Zakheim:You are clearly decades younger [laughing] than the others.

Smith:Always the youngest in every group I’ve ever been in.

Zakheim:Oh, that’s amazing. Oh, Selma!

Smith:And you saw this, of course [showing another photo] —

Zakheim:I love this, wonderful!

Smith:And that was in ’65, in D.C., with Chief Justice Earl Warren.

Zakheim:[reading the caption:] “World Peace Through Law” — I was just graduating from high school that year. [laughing] Of course, you look like you were graduating from high school. You look so young!

Smith:[laughing] I was! Yes. That’s almost fifty years ago.

Zakheim:That’s adorable.
Smith: I’ve put out so many things to show you today, beginning with the Washington Conference. This photo of me with Chief Justice Earl Warren was taken at the U.S. Supreme Court during the First Washington World Conference on World Peace Through Law in 1965. This was the creation of Charles Rhyne, who was then a recent past president of the American Bar Association. It was a six-day event in Washington, D.C. in September of 1965, to which high ranking judges and lawyers were invited from all over the world. I was asked to serve on the Spanish Language Committee, which acted as hosts and interpreters for foreign guests — in my case, of course, jurists from Latin America. Among these was the president of the Supreme Court of Costa Rica. I came as the representative of both the International Federation of Women Lawyers and the National Association of Women Lawyers, as well as the Women Lawyers’ Association of Los Angeles, and my legal scholastic sorority, Iota Tau Tau — in which I had recently held several positions. (Incidentally, I had won their first place scholarship award in 1942.

Zakheim: It doesn’t surprise me, Selma! [both laughing]

Smith: I had even been told in my younger years I would have made a good ambassador to any Spanish-speaking — .

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4 “Legal Sorority Celebrates 21st Anniversary At Breakfast Monday,” Los Angeles Daily Journal (Nov. 8, 1946); and “Legal sorority to celebrate 21st anniversary,” Los Angeles Daily News (Nov. 7, 1946): 30 [both announcing award to SMS, delayed by World War II].
Zakheim: You would have.

Smith: And in fact, I did go to [Guadalajara] Mexico with a goodwill group [of Americans], and I was selected by the Mexican group as the one who had contributed the most to inter-group good feeling. We stayed in a Mexican home. The home that I got — it was like heaven for two weeks. No, Mark was not involved. He hadn’t been born yet. This was in ’55. We took classes while we were there. There was a class every day in dance, a class every day in Spanish music. I heard a woman play the piano, and I heard, oh, these lovely pieces that I had never heard. And another class in language. They brought people in ad hoc to sit down and give us conversation — nice people, strangers, that would sit down and, “What would you like to discuss?” — in Spanish. So you had the opportunity to practice your Spanish.

Then they had one evening that we went to one of their big performances in Guadalajara, which is a lovely city. And for one weekend, we went to Guanajuato. On the bus, our dance teacher also played the guitar. It was just sheer heaven. I have to say, at the beginning of the first class in dance, our teacher would demonstrate certain things, just in general, and then when he said, “Now I want to show you how it would be done with a couple” — I’m sitting there, and all of a sudden, he’s standing in front of me with his hand out — so, of course, I get up and off we go into what is in their social life. Here I’m dancing something that they have customarily danced. My skirt was a tight skirt [both laughing] — you know, you need those wide skirts. I did the best I could. He used me as the one to show them with. How he imagined [chuckling] that I would even know!

It was just a marvelous two weeks. And in the afternoons, they brought us back. We had lunch at our homes, and we had a siesta time. My bedroom was up on the second floor, a lovely bedroom. It was the nicest house, I understood, of all of them that they were assigned to. Down below, on the first floor, the son of that household, Felipe, was playing Chopin on the piano.

Zakheim: Aaah!

Smith: That’s where I lived. I heard it on the TV. I heard somebody announce that this is what they had. I called and I said, “I’m in!” [laughing] It was just right for my vacation time in the summer. I said to myself, “I’m going.”

Zakheim: It was made for you.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: Absolutely made for you — music, dance, language, everything.

Smith: Everything. We got a certificate at the end. I tell you, there were so many things. Felipe himself, the young man of the house, was an artist as well as a pianist. We hit it off beautifully. So, I landed in the perfect place, and every day, siesta time, Felipe is there practicing the piano, with lovely music. That’s part of the story of my life.

Zakheim: Oh, I love it, Selma!

Smith: [Turning to photos on the table] I had put these out to show you.
Zakheim: Now can you tell me — I was once a member of this, and I don’t know if it’s “FEE-da” or “FY-da”?

Smith: FEE-da. [FIDA, Federación Internacional de Abogadas]. No, it’s Spanish:

“Federación.”

In ’49 we had a conference, and that was when Milady [Milady Félix de L’Official of the Dominican Republic] — my friend for fifty years (she passed away) — was my houseguest.

Zakheim: Ahhh.

Smith: And we were together in New York after that. She came and stayed with me here.

We were so close, we were sisters. And that happened in the first ten days. She was with me for ten days. Of course, we spoke only Spanish. Her English was very limited.

Zakheim: You met her in 1949?

Smith: It was at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. Those of us who were going to have a houseguest met there. The bus brought them from the airport, and they assigned so-and-so to you, and so-and-so to you. And so they said to her, “You will be the guest of Selma Moidel Smith,” and we looked at each other, and I said, “Tanto gusto en conocerla,” and she said, “Ay, Selma!”

Zakheim: She must have been so happy you spoke Spanish [both laughing].
Smith: Well, they knew what they were doing when they put us together. And from that moment — you wouldn’t believe — we would come back from events where we had our heads together singing, you know —

Zakheim: Ohhhh.

Smith: Which we did again in the Dominican Republic. Her husband, who was a physician — and who was killed in an auto accident when a drunk came through a red light, and the doctor was on his way to the hospital —

Zakheim: Oh, how tragic!

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: It’s “Milady”? Is that how her name —

Smith: Yes, it was a title bestowed upon her. Yes, “Milady.”

Zakheim: Such a nice title.

Smith: “Félix” was her maiden name — “de L’Officier” was the name of her husband, the physician. When my plane was landing in Santo Domingo [the capital], she was there. I could see her from the window of the plane, you know, as we’re waiting to get off. I’m looking out there and I can see her. There’s a limo, and then there’s another limo [alongside the plane]. And I see that she’s standing there. And there is a young lady standing there with her. I waited to the very end, and then I did like that [peeking out]. Instead of just coming out the door, I [gesturing] — and I hear her saying, “¿Dónde está Selma?”
Zakheim: “Where is she?” [laughing] “Where is she!”

Smith: “¿Qué pasó? ¿Dónde está Selma?”
And then I emerged like this
[gesturing]. “¡Ay!” [both laughing]
And this young lady was there with
a dozen long-stem red roses.

Zakheim: Oh, Selma!

Smith: And she had a chauffer-driven limo for
me — and hers. It was [as if] in state.
That was my greeting, my welcome. Whenever our group lined up there [in the
Dominican Republic] very unobtrusively, she would come and stand, take my elbow,
take me out of the line, just casually walk with me — even for their chief priest who
was to greet everyone.

Zakheim: How serendipitous, though, that you happened to meet that way —

Smith: Yes, yes.

Zakheim: And became so close immediately.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: That’s wonderful.
Smith: Yes. My mother was alive at that time. And I still remember she was very respectful to my mother, and when she would come in, when she would leave, she would always kiss my mother. She would go over and kiss her on the cheek. So, when we were in the Dominican Republic, she brought me to her home and to meet her mother and so on. So I did the same with her mother. I have pictures of her, of course — you can imagine. And you will have to see some pictures of us together.

Zakheim: I’d love to.

Smith: Yes. Anyway, we sang together; we had our song, “Noche de Ronda.”

Zakheim: “Night of —.” What’s “Ronda?” Round? Circle?

Smith: Rounds. You go from one place, and you go to another place [serenading] — “Noche de Ronda.” And that was our song, wherever we were. And when I came to the Dominican Republic, she took me out everywhere, aside from in her home. She took me out to a lovely cabaret, and when she came in, she motioned, and I hear them begin, “Noche de Ronda.”

Zakheim: Ohhhh. What a lovely person.

Smith: Yes, and I think I told you — with her son, Iván. They had one son, who became a physician also. He was sixteen at the time that I was in the Dominican Republic, and so she said to him, “Tell Selma” — she’s speaking in Spanish, obviously — “Tell Selma,” you know, “Dígale á ella lo que le dije á usted” — “Tell her, what I told you, and what you will do.” And so he said, in his best English, “that when I marry and my first baby is a girl, her name will be Selma.”
Zakheim: Ohhhh, Selma!

Smith: And he did. Their first child was born in Madrid, and would you —

Zakheim: Did you ever meet her?

Smith: Oh, yes! I was *la madrina*. I was —

Zakheim: Godmother?

Smith: The godmother. And I was to come, and Mark [my son] came, too —

Zakheim: Ohhhh, Selma! I’m starting to cry, it’s such a wonderful story.

Smith: And I have a photo — if I brought them all out — all of us at the wedding party. I’m the only blonde [both laughing] — light hair, light skin — all the rest are Latinas, you know.

Zakheim: What a compliment!

Smith: Yes, and she knew that I was her godmother. Everyone at the wedding knew that I was the godmother.

Zakheim: Oh, Selma!

Smith: It was on a private island off of Florida. That’s where we came. And she said, “Es la madrina — Selma Moidel Smith.” That’s how she introduced me. And in fact, where she had her desk, where she did her work, she had a glass cover, like we had on desks. Under the glass was a picture of me, and one of Mark.

Zakheim: Ohhhh, her other family!
Smith: And she autographed a photo to Mark, as well. And she knew him from when he was a baby, crawling. It was not in this house. It was in another one here in Encino, in Royal Oaks. We never stopped corresponding, and we spoke on the phone. And when she was going to be going to New York, she would let me know and I would come to New York. And we would have time together there.

Zakheim: Oh, how special!

Smith: We’d stay a week or whatever it was. And then, when she was coming to attend anything, because she represented — she was a senator — I would have her at my house.\(^6\) We sat there and played some game that she taught me [chuckling] that the ladies there play — for a little diversion (these are all women of accomplishment) — and she was president of the women lawyers in her country. She was here, and at this table. And we were playing along, and it was a game like rummy, you know, and you have to discard. I’m looking, and she’s looking. And so she says, “¿Bueno? ¿Bueno? ¿Qué vas a hacer?” — “What are you going to do?” So I said, “No voy a bajar nada. Es que las necesito todas.” [both laughing] “I’m not putting anything down. I need them all.” She absolutely started to laugh, I thought we were going to carry her out. She absolutely — she called and told her friends back there, “¡Qué hizo Selma!” It was always, “Sel-ma” [very musical]. I picture it because we sat at that very table. She had her back to the bar — she put down her cards and she laughed.

When she went back, she told all her friends [laughing], “When you play cards with me, if I need ’em all, I keep ’em.” [laughing] “I don’t discard. I refuse to discard.”

Zakheim: Right, right. [laughing] Oh, that’s cute.

Smith: Well, and she said to me so many times, she said, “I can talk to you.” She said, “I tell you things I wouldn’t tell my own sisters.” With her son — that he has to name — she had to have “Selma” in her family.

I stayed at a hotel, El Embajador, which was the best hotel. That’s where she had me stay. Every morning, there was a knock on my door. A representative from her place would have a gift for me.

Zakheim: Oh, my goodness.

Smith: Each morning. It’s interesting I mentioned it right at this moment because right here — let me just take it out and show it to you [opening china cabinet]. I admired that.

Zakheim: Beautiful! Oh, Selma.

Smith: I admired that. You know, I made the mistake when I was in her home, and she opened, just as I opened this. She said, “This has belonged to my family,” she said, “for a hundred years.” And she said, “Para Selma.”

Zakheim: Oh, Selma. And you’re crying.

Smith: Yes. I said, “This belongs to you.” She said, “Es la tuya, también.” That means, “It’s yours, too.” It was a unique — and I have all her letters.

Zakheim: Aaahh, Selma!
Smith: Yes. [Then, turning to other items on the table:]

All of these items are from the early FIDA conventions I attended, beginning with their first visit to Los Angeles in 1949. Following that, I traveled with American FIDA members to the convention in Europe in 1954, and to the Dominican Republic and Cuba in 1956. The decoration I showed you from the Dominican Republic [at right] is the decoration of “La Orden del Mérito Juan Pablo Duarte,” who was one of the founders of the country. It was awarded at the time of our FIDA convention there in 1956. I had immediately checked with the State Department to ask whether I could accept it, and they informed me that Vice President Nixon had recently accepted the Commander’s rank of the same decoration.

Then, in 1958, the FIDA convention returned to Los Angeles to be held at the same time as the ABA and NAWL Annual Meetings. My involvement in the 1958 meeting was more limited because I had just given birth to my son, Mark, the previous November of 1957, but I did host a gathering for all the delegates at my home.

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One of the most important aspects of the FIDA conferences was the opportunity it gave us to improve the status of women and of women lawyers, both here and abroad. Because of the international stature of our group, we were greeted by heads of government and local elected leaders. We met in the most prestigious locations, and that was true both here and overseas. For example, in Los Angeles in 1958, our plenary session took place in the City Council Chambers and we were welcomed by the mayor, Norris Poulson, and Councilwoman Rosalind Wyman. Everywhere we went, in those years when women lawyers were still relatively rare, the press covered the unusual event of dozens of international women lawyers coming to visit. The photos I’ve shown you are just a few of those that were published. In each location, we held meetings with the local women lawyers’ organizations, and this, too, helped to give them increased prominence in their own countries.

When FIDA held its 1949 convention in Los Angeles, I had just completed my two terms as president of the Southern California Women Lawyers, and I was serving as NAWL’s Regional Director for the Pacific Region. Of course, at all of the FIDA conventions, I served on various committees. Here in L.A., I gave an address on the radio to inform our own public about the events of the convention.10 And aside from the business of the FIDA convention, I hosted a dinner sponsored by NAWL for the delegates at Ciro’s Restaurant, which was the most popular place at that time for Hollywood celebrities on the Sunset Strip.

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In 1954, we visited most of the European countries, from Scandinavia to Monaco. In Finland, where our official sessions took place, we were welcomed by the minister of justice and the mayor of Helsinki. We were also greeted by the president of their women lawyers association, a woman I came to know over many years, whose name was Helvi Sipilä. As you may know, she held many important positions in Finland and also at the United Nations. One of our reunions was at the U.N. in 1964, on a day when I served as NAWL’s U.N. Observer. The next came in 1976 when she was a commencement speaker at the Medical College of Pennsylvania. The staff arranged for us to sit together at lunch, and we had an opportunity to reminisce — but my years as a member of the National Board of the Medical College will be the subject of another session [interview Session VIII].

It happened that the 1954 convention of FIDA coincided with the annual conference of the International Bar Association, which was being held in Monaco, to which we also traveled. As background, I should say that I had been invited to present a paper at the IBA’s conference that took place at The Hague in 1948. The title of my paper was “Curricula for Legal Education,” and it focused on a topic that was still close to my heart, being only a half-dozen years out of law school. I focused on the need for practical legal education — what we call today, “clinical” courses — but which were then an almost radical innovation. The IBA translated my paper into

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numerous languages and, at their 1954 convention, I was surprised to find it was still available and on display in English, French, and many other languages.

Zakheim: That’s wonderful!

Smith: You know, when I was still in my twenties, I guess — maybe I’d gotten to be thirty — I didn’t even know it. I had an urge to travel. I was the only one in my family who had that urge to travel. It began early. As a result —

Zakheim: Uh-huh.

Smith: Of course, with all the things I was doing — you can see in ’54 I was in Europe, in Scandinavia, I was in North Africa, I was in Spain and Portugal and so on. It was natural for me. I well remember, I started my son young. He was eight or nine years old, and I took him for his first real trip — to Alaska. I’ve taken him most all of the places that have been [significant to me] — and he showed his own [interest], for architecture and so on, from baby on — and so I thought he should see them. I had already been to Rome, but I took him to the center of Rome and where the Roman legions used to commence and march out, and come back with their prisoners. I said to Mark, I said, “This is where that happened.” I said, “But the Roman legions are gone, and [with much emotion] we are here.” Because I never just saw it. I never went anywhere [saying] just, “Hm, hm, nice building — hm, yes, what’s next?”

Zakheim: I’m always amazed when you say, “Well, Roz, I can’t do it because I’m going to San Francisco that week [laughing].

Smith: Or New York.
Zakheim: Or D.C.

Smith: Or New Orleans, or Chicago, or whatever, you know.

Zakheim: Exactly [laughing].

Smith: It could be anywhere. To me, I’m still accustomed —

Zakheim: So your life is still full and ongoing —

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: Because you have such an interesting life!

Smith: Well, continuing: Among the items I have to show you is an article I wrote in 1999 that has particular relevance to the history of women lawyers. As I mentioned last time, I had written the Centennial History of the National Association of Women Lawyers to celebrate their one-hundredth anniversary in 1999 — which first appeared in Experience magazine, published by the Senior Lawyers Division of the ABA, and was reprinted in NAWL’s Women Lawyers Journal. Immediately after that, I noticed that the timeline of the history of women lawyers, put out by the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession, indicated that the first women members were admitted to the ABA in 1918 — but didn’t have their names. I learned that their identities had indeed been lost, and I set out to find them. My research led to newspaper accounts that announced with some fanfare each of the two women who were the first to be
admitted to the ABA — Mary Belle Grossman from Ohio, who was soon elected a judge, and Mary Lathrop from Colorado. I also discovered that both were vice presidents of NAWL for their respective states. That article, too, appeared first in *Experience*, then in the *Women Lawyers Journal*. And this was my last article before being appointed chair of the Editorial Board of *Experience* magazine.

I was the first woman to hold that position. The Editorial Board had a dozen members, nearly all of whom were men. It was a quarterly magazine, intended to be filled with substantive articles, but I was aware of a number of improvements that could be made. At that time, many of the articles in the magazine were written by staff and freelance writers hired by ABA Publishing. Instead, when I organized the first meeting of my Editorial Board, I called each of the members and arranged for an article they might write or solicit an author to write — and also persuaded all of them to attend in person. The result was a fully functioning Editorial Board that reflected the interests of our own Division in the pages of the magazine. I, myself, solicited a large number of articles, both from members of the Division and from outside judges, lawyers, and academics.

In 2000, I created a fully electronic — that is to say, paperless — process for review of articles by Editorial Board members. Previously, articles had been sent for review using the old method of copying and mailing paper copies to all the reviewers. Instead, I proposed what is now commonplace — sending everything electronically over the Internet. At that time, it was an innovation, and in fact, we became the first

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of all the magazines from ABA divisions or sections to adopt an electronic review process. At the end of the year, ABA Publishing informed me that the cost-saving from the process, and no longer hiring freelance writers, was such that there would be money left in the budget to fund a special meeting of the Editorial Board in Chicago.

I also introduced the first use of color in the magazine, and improved the quality of the illustrations. And I took on the job of copyediting every article myself, in addition to the staff’s routine editing. A major change started in 2001, when I arranged for the first online posting of articles from Experience magazine on the Division’s website. Since that time, of course, the magazine’s web presence has grown continually. At the same time, I prepared an 8-year cumulative index of the magazine. I expanded the cumulative index in 2006 to cover 16 years, and again in 2012 to provide a total 21-year cumulative index, which is currently available on the Division website.¹⁴ When I finished my terms as chair, I received a lovely letter from the director of the Senior Lawyers Division, Judith Legg. It’s right here on the table — dated July 26, 2001 — and I’d like to share some of it with you:

Dear Selma,

I was just moved to write this note because I want to be sure that you know I believe your contributions to this Division have been invaluable. In just a few short years, you’ve turned our magazine into a truly enjoyable publication that holds something of interest for every member. We all owe you a huge debt of gratitude for the many improvements you’ve made to our most visible member benefit.

On a personal note, I appreciate your integrity and sense of responsibility. You are truly a gem, and the Division has been so fortunate to have you as a member and a leader.

(Signed), Judith.

Zakheim: That’s wonderful!

Smith: And long after I served as chair, I’ve continued to be appointed as a member of the Editorial Board, and to be active with special projects.

I should add that I was elected to the governing Council of the Division at the same time, in 1999, and that I served the maximum allowable two, two-year terms (a total of four years). And then, two years ago, I was elected to serve as an Honorary Member of the Council [and re-elected to a second two-year term at the 2014 Annual Meeting], and so I am continuing to attend their various meetings around the country.

Now, returning to my work as chair of Experience magazine, I initiated the idea for a special feature. In each issue I would have a cover story on the state where the Division would be holding its next meeting. I wanted it to be an article on points of interest in the legal system in that location — or interesting, new aspects of the law. I called all over the country — it didn’t matter whether I knew the person or not — and contacted lawyers, judges, and professors to write articles.

The first instance was for the Fall 1999 edition of the magazine at the time of the Division’s visit to San Juan, Puerto Rico — I telephoned and worked (in Spanish) with staff and members of the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico to develop the cover story for the Fall 1999 issue. This included features on their justices, intended to introduce them to readers outside their usual circle. I also wanted a photo of their
very attractive modern courthouse for the cover of the magazine, and when the clerk said they didn’t have one, I persuaded him to have another staff member go out in front of the building with his camera and get some photos to send me, which he did. The articles I solicited included substantive legal articles by their chief justice and others.15

Then, in 2001, the ABA was coming to California. As part of the California feature, I interviewed Justice Stanley Mosk.16 This was the last time I saw him, just shortly before he died. Of course, I had known him since the late 1940s, when he was a young judge and I was president of the women lawyers and had arranged for him to speak to our group. Here is a photo from 1993, in which we both appear, side by side, on the occasion of our becoming Fifty-Year Members of the Los Angeles County Bar Association.17

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15 See features and photos, Experience 10:1 (Fall 1999): cover, 6–12.
17 “Bar Association Meets for Award Luncheon,” Los Angeles Daily Journal (May 24, 1993); see also feature and photo in “Class Notes,” USC Law (Fall 1993): 53.
But to return to the California feature in *Experience* magazine — I needed an author for a special article. I contacted the president of the American Society for Legal History who referred me to their past president, Professor Harry Scheiber at UC Berkeley School of Law. He is, of course, a distinguished legal historian. I called him and he agreed to write the article. I told him I had in mind a unique topic, namely, California as the nation’s leader in legal innovation. He saw good possibilities in it and it became our cover story. I titled the article, “California — Laboratory of Legal Innovation.”¹⁸ Later the same year — 2001 — shortly after finishing my terms as chair of the Editorial Board, I received an email from Harry, worded like this [chuckling], “Would you object if I were to nominate you for a position on the Board [of the California Supreme Court Historical Society]?” — something like, “Oh, we need you,” or something like that.

Zakheim: How wonderful. Smart man!

Smith: Anyway, so I wrote back [laughing] — you know what I wrote back?

Zakheim: Oh, oh! [both laughing]

Smith: I really had not heard about the Society.

Zakheim: Ohhhh.

Smith: You see, as much as I am in and about, and out and about, I didn’t know about it. So I wrote back, “I’d like to consider it. Can you tell me, who might be some of the people I’d be working with?”

Zakheim: Oh, the chief justice [both laughing].

Smith: Well, anyway, he wrote back, nicely you know, and I said, “Well, all right.” [both laughing].

Zakheim: It’s true. They didn’t have much publicity. They had no footprint in the public —

Smith: No, no. And I was the best proof of it. Anyway, that’s how I came in and —

Zakheim: You’ve been in ever since, haven’t you?

Smith: Yes, that was in ’01.

Zakheim: Wow!

Smith: We had never met until we had a subsequent Board meeting. I have to smile because [chuckling] when we saw each other, you know, he was talking to one of the Board members and he pointed to me and he said, “She’s the best editor I ever had.”

Zakheim: [applauding]

Smith: A few years later, the Society needed an idea for a program they were going to present at the annual State Bar Conference, and I suggested the identical topic. This was for
the 2006 meeting in Monterey. I arranged a panel program that included current California Supreme Court Justice Kathryn Werdegar (a member of the Society’s Board) and former Justice Joseph Grodin, a professor of law at UC Hastings. I asked appellate Justice Elwood Lui [retired] to serve as moderator. The other panelists were Professor Robert Williams of Rutgers University at Camden, and Gerald Uelmen of Santa Clara Law School who filled in at the last moment for Harry Scheiber who’d had a medical emergency. As part of the work that was done at the California Supreme Court in preparation for the panel, the Court’s Chief Supervising Attorney Jake Dear [a Board member of the California Supreme Court Historical Society], and Reporter of Decisions Edward Jessen, researched the statistics of the California Supreme Court’s leading role in the nation. Jake presented the results as part of the panel program, and this served as the basis for their article on “Followed Rates and Leading State Cases” that was published in the *UC Davis Law Review.* All of which is to show the long course that ensued from the article I originally requested from Harry Scheiber.

Here’s another item I wanted to share with you. I served for a number of years on the committee that worked successfully to have our Los Angeles Criminal Courts

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Building renamed in honor of Clara Foltz — it’s now known as the Clara Shortridge Foltz Criminal Justice Center.\textsuperscript{21} As you know, Foltz was a prosecutor here in L.A., and she invented the idea of the public defender. I have Barbara Babcock’s book on Clara Foltz here. When it finally appeared in 2011 after many years of her work and Barbara was arranging her book tour, she asked me to organize an event here in Los Angeles. So I planned a panel program that would feature Barbara, with two of her former students who were experts in the field. I arranged for the current L.A. County Public Defender, Ronald Brown, to moderate the panel. I also arranged for welcome greetings to be given by Judge Arthur Alarcón of the Ninth Circuit — who had also been very active on the Foltz Committee — and by Presiding Judge Lee Smalley Edmon of the Superior Court, who was the first woman elected to that position. My own contribution to the panel was to include our local expert on the subject of juvenile justice, Myrna Raeder, as one of the panelists. As you may recall, I had chosen her to interview for a feature in Experience, and had then invited her to publish an essay in California Legal History, which appeared in my first volume in 2009. When she passed away last week, it was a great loss. I’m grateful I was able to do these things with her, and that she was so pleased to be invited again. The Foltz panel program took place in April 2011. To

give the best possible setting for Barbara’s book event, I selected the Banquet Rooms on the top floor of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion at the Music Center for the venue. I arranged for the Women Lawyers Association to provide continuing legal education credit, and for the California Supreme Court Historical Society to sponsor the reception. More than a hundred lawyers attended, and, by the end, every last copy of Barbara’s book had been sold and autographed.22

At the California Supreme Court Historical Society, I’d become editor of the Society’s biennial Newsletter, which I completely reworked — both in content and appearance.23 Then, in 2008, I was asked to take over as editor-in-chief of the Society’s annual scholarly journal, California Legal History, which had been founded, in fact, by Harry Scheiber, and who had retired as editor a couple of years before that.24 I’ve now completed five volumes — the latest is the 2013 volume that I have here on the table, and which just came out this week — and I’m already at work on the 2014 volume.

In addition to selecting or inviting the articles, a few of the features I’ve introduced so far include: A “Symposium” of papers by law students on a given theme in California legal history. That was inaugurated in 2012, and I’m planning the same for this year. This is in addition to publication of the winning entry in our

24 Commencing with Vol. 4 (2009). Available in hard copy at libraries and from W.S. Hein Co.; also available on the Internet through subscribing libraries at HeinOnline.
annual student writing competition — a project I initiated in 2007 and have continued to coordinate each year.25

A definite first for our Society was the idea of sponsoring a panel of scholars who would present papers on aspects of legal history in California at the Annual Conference of the American Society for Legal History — with the idea of publishing the papers in our journal.

That took place for the first time at their 2012 conference, which I invited Professor Reuel Schiller of UC Hastings to organize and chair.

Another new item in the journal has been a continuing feature on the holdings of various archival collections in the field of California legal history. The purpose is to make known otherwise hidden materials that would be of interest to scholars — and others — in these collections. So far, I’ve published articles on the holdings at [the California State Archives, 2009], the Huntington Library in San Marino [2010], the

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25 Society President Dan Grunfeld announced at Smith’s 95th Birthday Celebration on April 13, 2014, that the competition had been renamed in her honor. The revised name is “CSCHS Selma Moidel Smith Law Student Writing Competition in California Legal History.”

Bancroft at UC Berkeley [2011], the Stanford Law School Library [2012], and UC Hastings [2013].

Each volume also has an oral history of a California Supreme Court justice or other distinguished jurist. In each case, I try to present a group of related articles, that would include an introduction by a scholar familiar with the jurist’s historical importance, an article or speech by him or her, and an unpublished article or speech by the person, and if possible, a personal reminiscence by a colleague or family member. In this way, the oral history section of the journal becomes a more well-rounded feature.

I’ve also tried to give exposure to unpublished works by justices of the California Supreme Court or other leading California jurists, in general. For example, I presented a series of unpublished articles by Stanley Mosk in my first volume in 2009 — in this current volume, 2013, there is a group of unpublished speeches by Justice Roger Traynor, and for the next volume, I have a speech by Chief Justice Donald Wright.

I do all-around editing —

Zakheim: Uh-huh.

Smith: All around. It doesn’t go out without copyediting by me. Let’s just say, if it’s on the paper [laughing] —

Zakheim: You look at it!

Smith: And I will have already chosen the paper — and the type — and the size. And, as I say, that bundle of work just came to an end. You will get your own, but I thought I
would pull one out — it just came off the press and is in the mail to the members.

Zakheim: I can’t wait to read it!

Smith: And just so you’ll see in advance [pointing to the photo on the cover] —

Zakheim: Oh, Herma Hill Kay! She was one of my teachers. This is wonderful!

Smith: Well, it’s her oral history.

Zakheim: I will love it! She was my small section teacher, my first year at Boalt. Oh, how wonderful! I took many classes that she taught.

Smith: She was the one who was a clerk for — him! [pointing to the other photo on the cover] That man I think you know.

Zakheim: Traynor, right?

Smith: Traynor, of course! [former Chief Justice Roger Traynor]

Zakheim: And his son, Michael Traynor, is in the California Academy of Appellate Lawyers.

Smith: Oh, yes, I know. Well, I know him because I printed something of his, and I’m going to be sending him this as well because he’ll want that.

Zakheim: I so look forward to this, Selma. Now, I’m going to be checking the mail all the time.
Smith: Yes [laughing]. That’s the photo I chose for her [Kay]. That’s her favorite. So that’s the one we used.

Zakheim: It captures her. It really captures her.

Smith: And the introduction — I got in touch with her, I called her [Professor Eleanor Swift]. I have an introduction myself, after her introduction. That is her introduction [turning pages] — ah, there’s my Editor’s Note.

Zakheim: Oh, okay.

Smith: And that explains a good deal about the whole thing. And here’s her C.V. and also I have her [bibliography] —

Zakheim: And she was dean of the law school after I left.

Smith: The first —

Zakheim: First woman dean.

Smith: First woman dean. I pulled it out because I wanted you to have a preview.

Zakheim: This is a very special one. This really is.

Smith: Well, I’m glad it hits the spot. And here is the table of contents. You may want to just take a look. There’s a special section. I got in touch with Hastings [College of the Law], because I usually have something in that tells researchers where they can find certain holdings. And so I asked them about [Roger] Traynor — that’s where he put
his [papers] — there were nine of his speeches I chose, previously unpublished. And so they are published here, and —

Zakheim: Selma, you are a miracle worker. You not only got a picture of all of these justices [for the journal covers], but you found unpublished speeches of Justice Traynor.

Smith: So I’m putting them in. Then there are special articles. One of them is the prizewinner that got the twenty-five hundred dollars. His name is Jonathan Mayer, from Stanford. And the last article in here — I think it’s of special interest because it’s in the Fellows of the ABA — the ABA Foundation. And I’ve been a Fellow for some [since 2000] — that’s what the Fellows are for, to fund research on topics having to do with law, lawyers, the legal system. One of those research professors is a woman whose name is [Victoria] Woeste. This past year — we had already corresponded — she was coming to L.A. on a book tour for the book about [Attorney] Aaron Sapiro and Ford. An article was written, I asked her to — she wrote it for this. However, this is an article having to do with Aaron Sapiro and his work in California, which most people don’t even know about.

Zakheim: No, I don’t know about it.

Smith: Right, and then there are a couple of book reviews. As I say, that bundle of work — almost five hundred pages — just came to an end.

26 “Membership in The Fellows is limited to less than one percent of lawyers licensed to practice in each jurisdiction. Members are nominated by Fellows in their jurisdiction and elected by the Board of the American Bar Foundation. . . . They have demonstrated outstanding achievements and dedication to the welfare of their communities and to the highest principles of the legal profession.”
Zakheim: Justice Werdegar is right. You did everything for that Society, and you are the heart and soul. I don’t think they would have succeeded to that degree without you.

Smith: Well, I think people are very polite. By the way, did you yet get your new NAWL [National Association of Women Lawyers] magazine? I just got it yesterday.

Zakheim: So maybe I’ll get this and that together.

Smith: Yes. And here it is. I put it out because I thought that might be the case.

Zakheim: Oh, Selma, every time I see your name with that [NAWL’s Selma Moidel Smith Law Student Writing Competition] I grin! Oh, I love this, Selma — what a great picture! 27

Smith: Oh [laughing] —

Zakheim: I do. It’s wonderful.

Smith: Well, let me just quickly show you something here. This is Col. Maritza Ryan, the editor’s page. It’s just this page. And she — as you will see who she is [“Professor and Head of the Department of Law, U.S. Military Academy at West Point”].

Zakheim: I’m looking for you. There! “The indomitable, ever-radiant, Selma Moidel Smith,” 28 — oh, this is terrific. So true! I’m glad they’re honoring you.

Smith: And she’s now the new executive editor.

Zakheim: I just love that they — “Smith’s career as a general civil practitioner and litigator” — absolutely great!

Smith: And I had no inkling. I was absolutely startled out of my wits when I got this yesterday. So now you know what’s coming in your —

Zakheim: I do. I’ve got a lot coming in my mailbox.

Smith: And now I get to something else. As I say, today is different. Very currently, something new, which of course will be part of this, ultimately. You remember, last time I showed you the listing in the *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers* —

Zakheim: Yes.

Smith: And referred to “a hundred compositions” and so on. Well, I want you to see them [showing book of sheet music, *Espressivo: Music for Piano* by Selma Smith].

Zakheim: Oh, Selma, that is fantastic!

Smith: As you see, for music at that time, I used just that name, Selma Smith. Here they are, and what number do you see?

Zakheim: One hundred.

Smith: Yes, I wanted you to see it with your own eyes.

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Zakheim: Oh, Selma, this is precious. It’s really precious to have this — waltzes and tangos and everything. Everything.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: My musical ability is about like my Spanish, not enough. I admire you so much. You are so multi-talented. It’s really something, Selma.

Smith: I don’t know. At any rate, you also remember very well that my birthday is April 3rd, which is, maybe, three months from now — a little bit less than three, today being the 10th, and that’s the 3rd of April. I can only tell you parts. I led into it with this [pointing to the book of music]. That would be my 95th birthday.

Zakheim: How wonderful.

Smith: That’s if I get there. You know, I mean —

Zakheim: Well, yes.

Smith: I have no contract.

Zakheim: I know.

Smith: At least, we have a contract, but I don’t know —

Zakheim: Don’t know when it’s up [both laughing].

Smith: I don’t know when the dates are set in that contract.

Zakheim: Yes. That’s what my mother says, too, and she’s ninety-seven and a half, so I know what you’re saying.
Smith: So, at any rate — something, I guess, is being planned. It all has to do with music — with the music. Obviously, they’re not going to play a hundred pieces, but a program of my pieces. Different kinds. There will be more than one participating. Well, you’ve heard of the L.A. Lawyers Philharmonic.

Zakheim: Yes.

Smith: They will be performing.

Zakheim: Ohhhh!

Smith: You know, they’ve already performed my music.

Zakheim: Yes.

Smith: And including at our [Walt Disney] Concert Hall. We’re going tomorrow to check out a possible venue where this can take place. So he is going to be one — his orchestra will be one — and I have to select various things, and people who will be performing. And there’ll be another group as well, performing, musicians. It can’t be on my birthday, which happens to be on a Thursday. Instead, it’s going to be on a Sunday afternoon. It’s ten days after the birthday, which is the 13th. You can see what an undertaking that is going to be.

Zakheim: Yes.
Smith: It will involve people from San Francisco as well as L.A. They plan to video the whole thing. It would be the kind of thing that lawyers would be invited to — as well, others. It would be at no charge. It’s just to come and, hopefully, to enjoy —

Zakheim: And to celebrate you.

Smith: And that will be the first time in my life that that’s happened [a concert of my own music]. Of course, you’ll be there. I have a mountain of things I have to do in connection with it —

Zakheim: Yes.

Smith: Of choices I have to make, of who I’m assigning what. I will be going through one hundred pieces.

Zakheim: Oh, my goodness!

Smith: Yes. You understand what I have in front of me.

Zakheim: Yes.

Smith: And obviously, I want it to go well.

Zakheim: Yes!

Smith: It’s not something you repeat again, or take another whack at later, you know. It just seems to have come about, now. I mean, tomorrow is when we’re going to see the possible venue. And I have a list of things already, from here to then — is going to be
a major job. I must take care of going through all of these. Decisions have to be made, all the way along — everything that, like when you come to a concert —

Zakheim: A big project! It’s a very big project.

Smith: Everything that had to be done to put it all together, that you can come in and sit and listen. Everything. As of right now, you’re coming in at the very beginning.

Zakheim: I understand what you’re saying.

Smith: Let’s face it. They tell me that I’m almost ninety-five. I’m saying that in the sense that, somebody would say to me, “Then how in the world can you go back seventy years” — it’s now seventy-one that I was admitted — “and go back into things that are fifty years ago, sixty years ago.” And I do, but in order to be able to talk to you in a way that makes an informed oral history —

Zakheim: You have to be focused.

Smith: And let my mind remember things. Remember what I said to you last time, about what goes on when you’re — how can I live in those years, all of those years, right now, at the same time that I have to say, “Yes, I’m going to choose that; no, we’re not going to do that”? Can you picture where it puts my head?

Zakheim: Yes, I can. And so, you cannot do the interviews between now and then, is what you’re trying to tell me [chuckling].

Smith: It would seem that I would have to have my head examined, because anyone would know —
Zakheim: Your mind is somewhere else.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: It’s April 13th, right? I’ll put it on my calendar when I get home.

Smith: Sunday, two to four.

Zakheim: Two to four. This is very exciting. It really is.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: And then I’ll see you again, April 13th, I hope, and we’re going to resume after mid-April.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: And now, as we’ve done each time, we’ll conclude with a piece of your music that you’ve chosen for the day. I’m guessing that it’s one we’ll be hearing at your concert in April. It’s a tango, and it’s called, “Tango in D minor, No. 3, Opus 56.”

[Click below to play music.]
Zakheim: Today is November 8, 2014, and this is Rosalyn Zakheim. I’m at the home of Selma Moidel Smith to continue her interviews for the ABA Women Trailblazers in the Law Oral History Project. Selma, at our last interview you were preparing for your “95th Musical–Legal Birthday Celebration” on April 13, 2014. I was fortunate enough to be invited to this wonderful event and had a wonderful time. And to see you celebrated by all of the people who came — more than 300, I believe — and have people play your music, and to hear everybody wish you well on your 95th birthday was such a pleasure! And I know the people I sat with, who were mostly past presidents of Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles, felt inspired to be there and really happy that you had invited us. Would you like to say a little bit about what it meant to you and what happened at that wonderful event?
Smith: Well, yes. You know, one never thinks about it. One never imagines such a thing. I certainly didn’t until shortly before — well, about two months before, when the idea occurred to me. Because it was a 95th — at which I was quite amazed myself [both laughing] — it seemed that at last, it would be possible to join together the parts of my life that had special meaning to me. And of course, what would it be but the law and the music, and a few other things that we’ll get to, ultimately, I’m sure. So, that’s how it all came about, and then it was a matter, of course, of some of the people that came. I really wanted to give medals out [both laughing] for people who put aside other things and came from long distances — just the sheer fact of being able to look around, from the podium, and at that moment from that spot, be able to take a sweeping look around at all of the lovely people who filled in my life for quite a long time.

Zakheim: Selma, some of the people who came from your legal career were the — are the giants of the legal profession in California, and some from the ABA as well who came from afar. Could you tell us who came, and what they said about you?

Smith: Oh, what they said [both laughing]. Oh, no. Let’s put it this way: I was certainly honored by the presence of the chief justice — of California, yes, so we don’t get confused with any other states, you know — our own Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye,
Associate Justice Kathryn Werdegar, our former Chief Justice Ronald George — who took occasion to recount an event from his oral history that was published last year — and former Associate Justice Joseph Grodin.

Zakheim: Could you mention that [event involving former Chief Justice Ronald George]? I think it’s a very special event. He said only you could have accomplished it. Well, I know he also recounted this episode in his book, and he inscribed it to you in a very special way. I’ll read it for the record: “December 2nd, 2013. To Selma, with enormous gratitude for your many efforts and great generosity in so many endeavors — in particular the [California] Supreme Court Historical Society. Best wishes, Ron.” And it’s in the book entitled “Chief” by Chief Justice Ronald M. George, and he signed that note that I just read. He signed it to you. A very, very special event.
Selma Moidel Smith

Session VI

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: Do you want to tell us about it now?

Smith: Well, it was the occasion when four of our justices, including [former] Chief Justice Lucas, were being given the formal copies of their own oral histories. In addition, we had seven [current] justices who were in attendance for the ceremonial occasion. When Justice Lucas was just starting to speak, I did hurry over to our Chief, and he looked up at me at his side, and I whispered into his ear that I really needed to have a photo of all of them before anybody would have left for the afternoon before the program might have finished. And so, on that occasion [chuckling], he interrupted former Chief Justice Malcolm Lucas — who stopped in mid-word, and looked surprised [chuckling], naturally — and our chief justice informed him —

Zakheim: From what I understand, you proceeded to get all of the justices who happened to be there together for a photographic session, and you preserved for history the justices who were at that meeting.
Smith: Yes, that is true. Our former Chief Justice George announced at that point that there was just one person on the globe who could have accomplished this interruption of “two chief justices simultaneously” and that was “our own Selma Moidel Smith” [p. 388], as he put it. At that, everything broke up, and I brought over the photographer I had scheduled, and this history-making photo was not only taken but Chief Justice George (at that time) had it hanging in the corridor just outside his door, so it was there for everyone to see. And he had referred to that in his book that he came out with, with his own oral history, which is wonderful to read for everyone. It’s not intended just for scholars or research people, but everyone will find many, many very interesting and very nicely expressed thoughts on his part and really getting to know him. I certainly recommend it to everyone, and I cherish the one that I was presented by him with his very kind and generous inscription.

Zakheim: And he did repeat all of this at your 95th birthday celebration, to — also — the delight of the audience, I might add, since I was there. In addition to the current chief, the associate justice, the former chief, there was also former Associate Justice Joe Grodin.

Smith: Yes, I was just about to say that I was pleased to see former Justice Grodin there. And, of course, he continues on

Selma, you are beyond words. You leave us breathless. Someone said we can’t know where we are unless we know where we’ve been, and you are one of our leaders in showing us where we’ve been with the California Supreme Court and California Legal History, among your other enormous accomplishments. It’s a great pleasure to be here and to wish you a very happy birthday.
with his work in the law as professor of law at Hastings College of the Law. I appreciated all of the words that I was really very pleasantly surprised to hear from these very nice friends and people in the life of California legal history.¹

Zakheim: Now I know there was another person who gave you a special surprise there — from the California Supreme Court Historical Society. Could you explain that?

Smith: Yes, and that was! Our president of the California Supreme Court Historical Society was Dan Grunfeld, and he was there to represent the Society, and to make many nice comments, and then to

Selma, you spoke a couple minutes ago about the gift of many years, and you certainly have had that, but there’s another gift that I think we all hit on that is your gift to us: You have touched all of us with your wisdom, with your patience, with your vision, with your work ethic, with your open heart — so while we’re celebrating your 95th birthday, we also collectively, whether we’re from your music side, or from your legal side, or from your family side, we’re celebrating the gift that is you, Selma. . . .

It is hard to emphasize how important Selma has been to this organization. She is the foundation upon which this organization has been run for decades. She is its soul and its heart. She is as active and as passionate and as engaged as she has ever been in the many, many years that I have been on the Board.

Many years ago Selma, as she is apt to do, had a brilliant idea. It is a competition, a competition for some of the young and best law students to come forward with their best writing about an issue in California’s historical past. And as you would imagine, it was Selma who not only came up with the idea, but administers and puts forth that every year there’s a competition; there’s an award-winner who’s published in our journal and then gets to meet with the Chief and the other members of the California Supreme Court who are members of the Society.

The announcement that I have to make is that last week the Executive Committee of the Society decided that henceforward this competition will be named in Selma’s honor.

Selma, this is a mere token of what you have meant to the Society, but more importantly, for all of us as your friends and colleagues. Happy birthday.

¹ Also recognized from the podium were California Court of Appeal (Second District) Presiding Justice Arthur Gilbert, Division Six; and Associate Justice Richard Mosk, Division Five.
announce that the week before our gathering that the Executive Committee had met and that a decision had been made to rename the student writing competition — that I had brought as an idea to the Society [in 2007] — to have it renamed in my honor, with my name on it.\(^2\) I appreciated the applause from the audience at that point because they were certainly expressing my feeling, and I appreciated the sentiments that were being expressed by that action. And I felt very — well, it was nice to hear that in the midst of my friends who could share it with me, and that was the best way — to share it.

Zakheim: And you also have a writing competition named after you for the National Association of Women Lawyers.

Smith: Oh, yes. Well, that was back in 2005 when, on their own — again, total surprise to me — I was called up in front of the group [at the Annual Meeting in Chicago] and informed that I had indeed been honored by their naming a student writing competition that would be thereafter the Selma Moidel Smith [Student Writing Competition], which they have done annually ever since, and this is their ongoing project. Again, I’m grateful for their faith and confidence and their expression of appreciation — which I feel is more than earned by them by what they do on behalf of our National Association of Women Lawyers.

I’ll intersperse: You see, [over there] on the chair, there’s a scarf hanging?

Zakheim: Yes.

\(^2\) Also recognized from the podium were Society Past President Ray McDevitt and his wife, Mary, from San Francisco, Vice President John Caragozian, Treasurer George Abele, Board Members Joyce Cook, Ellis Horvitz, and Mitchell Keiter, and Director of Administration Chris Stockton from Fresno.
Smith: Do you remember the magazine of the National Association of Women Lawyers that was so complimentary —

Zakheim: Yes!

Smith: — That she [Maritza Ryan] wrote that whole page. She couldn’t be at the program — I invited her — and she is head of the law department at West Point. She was the one who wrote all that. That wasn’t good enough for her. Just recently, she sent me a gift that she bought at West Point, this all-silk beautiful scarf. And on it, it has tiny names, “West Point, West Point, West Point.” She wanted me to have that. It wasn’t enough what she wrote!

Zakheim: Oooohhh!

And I know that President Dan Grunfeld mentioned you were “the foundation of the California Supreme Court Historical Society” and that they couldn’t have gotten along without you.

Smith: Well [chuckling], let’s say that I think everyone must have inhaled the same perfume or something because I was hearing these various very complimentary comments, and it helped a great deal that I was in the company of others because they helped me to share what would have been something that I would want to have not just had in isolation [chuckling].

Zakheim: In addition to Dan Grunfeld, representatives of other legal organizations expressed their happiness and joy at your celebration. Could you tell us who was there?
Smith: Yes. There was, for example, from the Board of Governors of the American Bar Association, a member of that Board, Charles Collier. He was referring back, of course, to the fifteen years that he has known me and indicated that when he did come to the American Bar Senior Lawyers Division, I was already chair of the Editorial Board of *Experience* magazine, a publication of that Division, and that since that time we have been good friends, which is indeed true. He indicated also that I had been a member of the American Bar since 1946.

Zakheim: Oh, my goodness.

In addition to Charles Collier, I know that representatives of various women’s bars came and spoke.

Smith: Yes, and I was very happy for that. One was Lisa Gilford, the past president of the National Association of Women Lawyers, and aside from her very nice comments, I appreciated her [chuckling] — I was going to refer, you remember — she referred to her music talent?

It was my pleasure to meet Selma about 15 years ago in the Senior Lawyers Division of the ABA. She was then the chair of the Editorial Board for our magazine called *Experience*, and she certainly brought a lot of experience to that magazine. Since then, we’ve remained good friends. I see her frequently. She’s currently an honorary Council member for the Senior Lawyers, and she attends the meetings and she goes on various trips that we have and special occasions.

On behalf of the ABA, and the Board of Governors of which I’m currently a member, we’re delighted to be here. It’s getting pretty close to 70 years that she’s been a part of that organization. In recent years she’s certainly remained very active in the Senior Lawyers, and we always look forward to having her participate, which she does.

We’re certainly delighted with all you’ve contributed to the national bar associations of various kinds, ABA among them. The ABA has close to 400,000 members, so it’s a very large national organization, and Selma has always been one of the leaders in many of our activities. So we’re delighted to wish you the very best on this occasion.

Selma, it’s always a pleasure seeing you, doing things with you, spending time with you, and I want to wish you a very happy birthday and I hope many of us can gather again for the hundredth.
Zakheim: Yes [laughing], that it wasn’t quite up to yours.

Smith: Well, that she was just the right height [as a child] for the instrument she was playing, being the only one who could hold it straight up —

Zakheim: That’s right [laughing].

Smith: And so, that was her fame, you know, that she held it straight up, but that was all. I don’t want to really just take her words because people will have the opportunity — let me use this diversion to say to you, by the way, that the DVD of our event that we are discussing is now in the Stanford University Law School Library.

Zakheim: That’s wonderful, and hopefully one will be provided to the Women Trail-blazers Project with your oral history.

Smith: Happy birthday, Selma. It’s such a treat to be here this afternoon to hear your beautiful music. You don’t know this about me, but I’m a fellow classical music lover. I played the bassoon growing up in school. Unfortunately for me, my enthusiasm for the music, unlike you, was not matched by my talent. The instrument was chosen for me because I was the only one tall enough in grade school to be able to hold it upright, and I’m afraid I didn’t distinguish myself any farther than being able to hold it upright. So I’d really like to thank you for inviting me to hear your lovely music. It was as moving and as inspirational as you are and you have been to me for many years.

I am joined here today by two of my colleagues, two of my NAWL sisters as we call ourselves. First, I’d like to recognize Ellen Pansky; she is a former president of NAWL. We also have a part of the younger generation of NAWL leadership; Sarretta McDonough is here. Sarretta currently sits on the NAWL Board as assistant secretary.

Selma became a member of NAWL when she first became a lawyer, and she has served in a wide variety of positions over the years. You have heard about her work as a historian. In 1999 she wrote the centennial history of NAWL, a history, of course, that she helped to make. Also in that year, we were honored to present to Selma the NAWL Lifetime Achievement Award for her service. But of course, Selma did not stop giving. In 2005 we created a law student writing competition on the subject of women in the law, and we have named that competition in Selma’s honor.

Every year the membership of NAWL gathers in the Gold Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria to hold its annual convention, and for myself and many others it’s really not an Annual Meeting until we see Selma standing there welcoming everyone, year after year, into the Gold Ballroom. An Annual Meeting is not an Annual Meeting until we see Selma’s smile, her words of encouragement, and her gifts of light that she gives. As was mentioned before, we paid tribute to Selma on the occasion of her 95th birthday and we called her radiant. That was a well-chosen word. So I’d like to thank you, Selma, for being a guiding light to NAWL everywhere for so many years. Happy birthday.
Smith: I’ve already provided that to her [Project Chair Brooksley Born].

Zakheim: Fantastic.

Smith: Oh, yes.

Zakheim: It’s a wonderful, two-DVD set of this entire proceeding.

Smith: I thought it would be the best way to explain to her why there had to be a lapse of time for anything of that dimension to take place. And I’m sure she can, from that [laughing] —

Zakheim: She will see, and it’ll be in some ways a good oral history in itself because the people who came talked about your legal career and that she could listen to the music and hear what you had composed — and just had such wonderful talent. Selma, it is fantastic.

One thing I did want to say — because I don’t know if it will fit in otherwise — is your ability to speak Spanish, because I know that some of the people who were servers at the event, who spoke Spanish themselves as their native language, listened to you, and they looked at me and said, “She speaks perfect Spanish!” And they were very surprised and really very happy that you were able to converse with some of the guests who were there in perfect Spanish.

Smith: Well, I have to tell you that that is something that I’m constantly being told by them. And it’s always with great surprise because I never look the part.

Zakheim: That’s right [both laughing].
Smith: They’re sure that “es una nórteamericana — ¿cómo es posible?” I’m happy to say it’s been that way from the first word I ever uttered. How they all came out that way, I can’t tell you.

Zakheim: But that’s really wonderful.

I know that in addition to people who spoke, you introduced a lot of the other guests, very prominent legal guests who were there, and were very happy to be there to honor you. Could you tell us a little bit about them and your relationship with them?

Smith: Yes — Anne Tremblay, who was the current president in April of this year, 2014, of the Women Lawyers Association of L.A., and then Ruth Kahn, who was the immediate past president. I must say that each of them had the same kind of generosity of spirit in comments that they made that would have been connected to my association with them. I am very grateful for all of the words that were said, and I was equally glad to have other representatives who were there from, well, our United States Circuit Court of Appeals, Judges Arthur...
Alarcón, whom I knew very well through years of work together on the Clara Shortridge Foltz project, the renaming of our Criminal Courts Building in her honor — the first woman lawyer in California and creator of the public defender system.

And then Dorothy Nelson, with whom I had the great pleasure of working. I had been requested by the Ninth Circuit [Historical Society] to interview her for her oral history. We got to know each other quite well. I have a copy of it here — the transcript. As you see, it was in her Pasadena chambers, and there’s a lot that we talked about that was not on the record, as well. I had one thing that I had to overcome immediately — in her chambers there was a grandfather clock.

Zakheim: Oh, no!

First, I’d like to recognize and acknowledge a few other members of the Women Lawyers Association who are with us today: the Honorable Holly Fujie, president of the State Bar in 2008 and now a judge on the Los Angeles Superior Court; Patricia Phillips, the first woman president of the Los Angeles County Bar Association; Susan Steinhauser, president of the Board of Trustees of the Los Angeles County Law Library and vice chair of the California Arts Council.

Let me share just a few facts about Selma that we haven’t heard already today. First, Selma was admitted to the California Bar at the age of 23 on January 5, 1943, and she joined the Women Lawyers Association that same day. Not wanting to waste any time, Selma became president of the Women Lawyers in 1947 and was reelected to serve again in 1948, and she’s remained active with our organization for more than 71 years. In 1998, Selma was appointed our first — and only — Honorary Life Member. I have been privileged to know Selma for many years in connection with my activities with the Women Lawyers Association, and I’m absolutely thrilled to be here today.

Selma is such an inspiration to all of us. She is so incredibly accomplished, yet she is humble, thoughtful and appreciative. Selma had perfected the art of multi-tasking before anyone had heard that word, and she continues to excel at everything she does — take this party for example. Some might compare her to the Energizer Bunny. I think she goes way beyond that.

This event is a wonderful way to commemorate the lifelong accomplishments of a lovely lady. Selma, thank you so much for including me in your 95th birthday celebration. You are a role model. You are a remarkable woman. Happy birthday.

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Smith: It was — [imitating the tick-tock sound]. At any rate, after overcoming a few simple things, including me crawling under the table that I had my recorder on, to get to the wall to unplug something. As you see, we got to know each other quite well [laughing].

Zakheim: Dorothy Nelson was once dean of the USC Law School, was she not?

Smith: Yes, she was. She was their first woman dean — they have said, also, of major law schools in the country at that time. That was quite a feather in her cap. And Kim Wardlaw, who was in fact a past president of the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles, and we knew each other in that regard.

And from Memphis — all the way from Memphis, Tennessee — came Bernice Donald who was president [at that time] of the American Bar Foundation, and also, of course, judge of the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, but the thing I think that we may be remembered for [chuckling] in that particular regard is that we did a little dance together when the Chris Hardin Trio was doing their jazz versions of my music that they had selected to perform. I was in effect really returning the favor to her because, on a different occasion in San Francisco, during a meeting of the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation, I was surprised to enter the reception area
and, as soon as I appeared, I felt a hand grasping mine, and I looked up and it was Bernice Donald, who was dancing with me, who danced around with me while a trio was playing in the corner of the reception hall. So, she and I had danced, much to my surprise, at that time. So, on this occasion, I waltzed over to her while the trio was performing a samba, and stood in front of her, put out my hands, and she very quickly [both laughing] understood what was expected of her, and she got up, and we did dance — for the rest of the samba performance. And I must say I appreciated the applause of the audience, who had already begun clapping to the rhythm of the samba. So, she and I have a special, additional reason to remember this event, and I enjoyed her very, very much. She’s a lovely person.

Zakheim: That’s wonderful.

And there were representatives from the California Court of Appeal, Second Appellate District?

Smith: Oh, yes. That was Presiding Justice Arthur Gilbert and Justice Richard Mosk. I’m so happy that each of them, whom I do know and have worked with, were able to be there and to share in all of this as well.

Zakheim: Selma, you’ve mentioned dancing, which brought up music and the trio, and I know this event was meant to commemorate not only your legal experience but also your musical background, and part of this was involvement with the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic. Can you tell us about that?

Smith: Yes, a forty-piece orchestra appeared, led by their founder–conductor, Gary S. Greene, who is a lawyer of, oh, almost forty years — and on this occasion, in addition, was
acting as our Master of Ceremonies. In fact, my connection to them was earlier. In 2010, the orchestra performed a selection of pieces of my music in the Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles as well — which went off very well, and he used the occasion to ask me to stand and be recognized, which I was. We did a similar thing in June [2014], just a couple of months after this event that took place, and he selected other music of mine to perform, which was very nice again.

Zakheim: Helen Kim is another past president of the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles who has an illustrious musical background. I believe she’s a Juilliard graduate?

Smith: Well, yes, in fact, even more than that. She
holds a masters in piano performance. That is coupled with her legal background, and she performed a number of pieces — about fifteen of my compositions. I was very happy to have that combination of law and music. And then, I would go on to say that

the Chris Hardin Trio performed their collection of my pieces that Chris, the leader who is a pianist himself, had given the jazz treatment. And so, I noticed the audience was pleased to hear that. And that was where we ended up their work with the dance with Bernice Donald and myself.

Last and not least, a world-famous pianist, Eduardo Delgado from Argentina. He ended up playing thirty-two pieces. He’s been a professor — the head of the piano department — at Cal State Fullerton, but also has concertized always. He spends a great deal of time going back and forth to Argentina. In fact, among his many things was a prize from Juilliard as well. I was very pleased to be able to mention that in the notes about him.

Zakheim: How did you meet him?
Smith: Actually, at a piano gathering — no surprise! I remember that the first thing that I said to him [laughing], which completely took him by surprise, was in the break in a master class we were attending, and a concert. It was near the refreshment table, and I looked at him, and I looked him up and down, and I said — and those who speak Spanish will understand why I said that — “Señor Delgado, es de veras, es delgado.”

Zakheim: Could you explain?

Smith: Yes, “delgado” means “slender, slim,” and I looked him up and down and then said, “Yes, Señor Delgado, you are indeed” [both laughing], which was a play on his name, of course, because it meant a name, but also at the same time “delgado” is a man who is slim, and that’s exactly how he appeared. At first, he looked at me in great surprise, and then, of course, he realized what it was, and had a good chuckle over it. So the very first words to him were in Spanish. I met with him in his home, and we have become good friends.

Zakheim: That’s lovely.
Smith: The day before the performance, just before, he sent me an email —

Zakheim: Oh, this is beautiful.

Smith: [Reading] “I hope tomorrow you will hear in your music a combination of your feelings combined with mine. I want to make you happy because I know how much it means for you, but it also means a great deal for me. It is really music from the heart to the heart. I love each piece, and every one means so much to me. Each one is like a different world.”

Zakheim: He very much appreciated your music, as well as the opportunity to play it.

Smith: Isn’t that something! When I saw that — and that was the last thing on his mind before his [performance] — “Although I do not know you so well, I feel I know your feelings through your music. See you tomorrow,” as though we’re just talking about anything, you know, “See you tomorrow.” And then he says, “con gran cariño” — with great affection.

I don’t have to tell you what a pleasure this is for me. I am so delighted and happy to see all of you and to be surrounded by my friends. I want to say that I take nothing for granted. I want to express my profound gratitude for the gift — the gift of years, the privilege of time, so that I could be here and so that I could have done with pleasure the many things that I have found rewarding. . . .

I want to introduce two members of my family. In equal parity, I want to present the senior of my father’s family, my cousins, Attorney Bruce Moidel with his wife Attorney Ritva Moidel, from Montreal, and they have come that distance just to be here today with us for this occasion. And the senior member of my mother’s family, Owen Simon, who is a retired vice president of Westinghouse Broadcasting, also known as Group W. . . .

I want to make one last thank-you. It is to my co-worker, and to my host for this occasion — my host, my son, Mark Smith.
Zakheim: That’s just really remarkable, that your music meant so much to him, and that he was able to play at your 95th birthday party.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: You had quite a career as a composer, and many of your compositions were played by other people. How did you get into composing music, and what did you like about it?

Smith: I did not know that I was getting into composing. I began to *hear* compositions. It came from a place nothing else comes from. And I heard the first note. It played itself through, to the very end, to the last note — and then moved directly into memory, so that I could at any time always recall it. And in fact, it played itself whenever it wanted to. I have no answers as to how that happens, and as you already know, you have seen the table of contents of the compositions, and they total about a hundred. So, that is how they come, at any time and place, here — anywhere in the world.

Zakheim: And they’re in various forms.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: It isn’t that you have one particular —

Smith: No. They’re all short pieces. All of them are melodic. All of them, I imagine, are communicating *something* — from what I understand from others. This is what I am surprised myself to be calling “composing” because, rather, I was *receiving* compositions — complete. And all of them have been like that.
Zakheim: Well, that brings up something we were going to talk about, which was the musical forms you have composed. What types of music did you compose over the years?

Smith: Yes, if you think of it as something I set out to do in each case. There are many, many musical forms, for example, dance forms like the waltz, the tango, the samba, beguine, jota, mazurka, minuet, bolero, and also nocturne, prelude, elegy, barcarolle, berceuse, and others. The very first thing was a tango.

Zakheim: A tango just came to you, and that was the first composition that came to you.

Smith: Yes [sings aloud the notes of the complete melody of her Tango in A minor, Opus 1]. There you have it.

Zakheim: Thank you.

Smith: You had an example, this second. We said it — out it came, from that memory place. You heard the whole melody, beginning to end. It stops. You had it demonstrated right in front of you.

Zakheim: Yes.

Smith: That’s what it means, that about a hundred of those are sitting up there, on call, or on their own call. Sometimes, I wake up to one. I say, oh! I haven’t heard that one for a while.

Zakheim: That’s wonderful.
Smith: Yes, and it’s there whether anything else is going on or not. It doesn’t respect anything else. It’s as though it takes care of everything [laughing]. So, you had it illustrated, right in front of you.

Zakheim: Yes, yes. Thank you. I feel very honored, actually, to hear it and to realize how it does just come to you, and is stored in you, at this point —

Smith: — at this point. I looked at a baby picture of mine, when I was one year old, and I look at the picture and I realize, there it was. It was there all the time. When I was five or six and I walked over to it — well, how would I know what the black spots on the paper were, that they even were notes? How would I connect it with sound? I never heard a radio that was with music or anything, only what my brother played.

Zakheim: My goodness.

Smith: And it was a new piece that he had just bought.

Zakheim: Well, he had a good page turner.

Smith: Yes [both laughing], yes.

Zakheim: He had an expert page turner who was to become a composer herself —

Smith: Yes, because he knew I could read the music. Where that came from, who knows? Certainly not from anything that ever touched me. So, I’m glad it happened. It happened right in front of you.
Zakheim: Absolutely, absolutely.

Smith: Oh, my!

Zakheim: Just as you were a member of Women Lawyers and the ABA and other professional legal organizations, did you belong to any professional composer organizations?

Smith: Oh, yes. Yes, I did. I am a member of ASCAP — that stands for American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers. It’s there for composers.5

Zakheim: And you have had many performances and memorable occasions. Could you describe them?

Smith: Yes, in addition to the Women Lawyers’ Association and the Lawyers’ Club events that we’ve already talked about, there was a piano master class that took place in 1987, in July. It just happened that it was a one-time event that was done by the Royal College of Music together with UCLA. And this did not mean that the people had to be students at UCLA, or necessarily the Royal College of Music. It was a master class for piano. They had representatives from the U.K., and I remember one woman in particular from Australia, another from Saudi Arabia — she was American

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5 Separately, on service as a director of the National Association for American Composers and Conductors (later “NACUSA”), see “Music Critic [Arthur Goldberg] Feted,” Van Nuys News (May 31, 1974): E38A; and “Ralph Heidsiek Honored at Luncheon Event,” Van Nuys News (June 5, 1975): W-9B.
and was there because her husband was an engineer with one of the American companies doing construction for Saudi Arabia at that particular time, so she taught music in the American School and was a pianist, and she was one of those who came for this master class. And the others were from England. We had to qualify. We had to have references from faculty, and so I provided mine from UCLA. I had enrolled again. I had been at UCLA as a pre-legal, “poli-sci” [political science] major, and so I petitioned and had the major changed to — this time — music. So, it was in the Fine Arts. I was in the School of Music. And so the faculty who became aware of this recommended me.

Zakheim: That’s really special.

Smith: I was informed that I was selected, and in fact, I can show you my certificate from the Royal College of Music, London, and the University of California, Los Angeles:

“UCLA/RCM Programme — This is to certify that Selma M. Smith has satisfactorily completed a course of study — Master Class in Piano: Bach, Schumann, Debussy,” signed by the director of studies, by the dean, and by the registrar, issued from London.

Zakheim: That must have been quite an experience.

Smith: Yes, it was. And those were piano teachers who were performers as well. At the end of the term, everyone had to play something. All of them completed their offering with a choice of something from my music.

Zakheim: Oh, Selma!
Smith: They were all delighted to be taking music back with them — one to Australia, another to Saudi Arabia, which I hope was welcome in the American School, at least. So, that was an unusual experience. In fact, the professor in charge, Yonty Solomon, was from South Africa. And so, this is where we spent our time. Once a week, we went to his home, and he showed great hospitality. Well, of course, we had music there, and the rest of the time was in the College. We also went across the street to the Royal Albert Hall where we heard certain concerts they wanted us to hear. I spent several weeks this way. It’s something that I will never forget. It was a unique experience — unique.

Zakheim: Selma has shared with me photographs of her stay there, and in the middle of some of these photographs is a very happy, smiling Selma Moidel Smith with the other students. It’s really wonderful to behold that you had that kind of experience and that your time at UCLA allowed you to do that.

Smith: Yes. My music has also been performed at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. That was in 1989 [March 15]. I was invited to be present, and I was. It was very well received, and I remember that I had the experience for the first time of having listeners come up after the program and asking me to autograph their programs. So, I can say that has happened in my experience now, too.

Zakheim: A celebrity!

Smith: Oh, my. Of course [laughing]. Just Wednesday, someone who has been in a master class that I occasionally drop in on had invited me to her home. She had attended our thing in April, and she made a musicale evening. She was waiting to do that and —
Zakheim: That’s delightful!

Smith: She invited — and she played my music.

Zakheim: Oohhh!

Smith: Then, also, I’ve played on educational television for something else, which was the Docents of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Zakheim: Ah!

Smith: But that’s a whole subject of its own, and more than we could cover in this session, so why don’t we leave it for next time with the Docents.

Zakheim: Okay, I’ll look forward to hearing about your involvement with the Docents and other musical organizations at our next session. In the meantime, we’ll close with another of your compositions, one of the pieces Eduardo Delgado played at Selma’s 95th birthday celebration. It is a waltz. This is her piano rendition. The title is “Waltz in E minor, No. 3, Opus 66.”
Zakheim: Today is November 10, 2014, and this is Rosalyn Zakheim. I’m at the home of Selma Moidel Smith to continue her interviews for the ABA Women Trailblazers in the Law Oral History Project. Selma, when we finished last time, you had just mentioned playing one of your compositions on educational television for the Docents of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Today, we’ll be talking about your work with the Docents and other music organizations. Would you begin by telling us about the Docents?

Smith: When I mention docents, I think I should explain — we’re not talking about people who will tour you around the building. This was a group of music docents. These are volunteer musicians who have to show first that they are well trained in whatever their instrument may be, or voice perhaps, and they are going to be presenting previews of the Philharmonic concerts, and “Concerts for Youth” as well, and introduction-to-music programs in schools — public and private schools. After auditioning, you had to present a program to be approved, that they would see what you would do when you got to the school, and once they saw that you could in fact represent them properly, then you were sent out to the school, and the school sent back an evaluation — it was done very carefully.
Zakheim: I have before me a letter that says, “Selma, Fantastic!!” — with three exclamation points — “How lucky the children are to have you. Such talent, ingenuity, and a warmth that would make anyone interested in music.”

Smith: So, that tells you something about the fact we did indeed have quite a careful structure. It was supervised very closely by the associate conductor of the Philharmonic who was present at all training sessions. It wasn’t just that they approved you, and then you never came back. Quite the contrary.

Zakheim: And you were a Docent for quite a while, from 1971 to 1982.

Smith: Yes. I was the first — and only — bilingual, Spanish-language Docent. A woman in Pasadena, Beverly Ballard, was president. Her husband was the vice president of the Broadway Department Store chain.

Zakheim: Oh, my!

Smith: She had occasion shortly after I became one of them to write me this note: “Dear Selma, you are an answer to my prayer for a Spanish-speaking Docent!” — exclamation mark— “Are there any more where you came from? [both laughing] My
husband and I enjoyed the article in *Classics West.*” That was a magazine of KFAC [classical music radio station], and I wrote an article on American composers for them. “The many fine things you do will certainly be a stimulant to our Docent activity. Sincerely, Beverly Ballard.” That was February 6 of 1972. One of the things that happened as a Docent was I had thought it was important in a city like Los Angeles with our constituent groups of people in greater variety perhaps than some of our states that are more homogeneous. It seemed to me that the Spanish-speaking students should also be, in the same way, enriched by the opportunity to hear music — to learn perhaps, *somewhere*. There are among us talented children who can be given the opportunity to have lessons. We would provide instruments. This was something that was part of the Minority Training Committee [of the Philharmonic], and I was very much on that committee, during the time of Zubin Mehta —

Zakheim: — who was the conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Smith: — who was our conductor, yes, for a number of years, and very well remembered, and still, of course, he comes.

Zakheim: Selma, to me, coming from Los Angeles, and I was born here, it’s very surprising that there was no bilingual, Spanish–English Docent before you. You *must* have been the answer to their prayers.

Smith: Well, I didn’t know she had made a prayer [both laughing]. It was my own thought, because I’ve always been involved in Spanish things, that that, too, should be part of their experience — and the opportunity to be recognized for talents that otherwise just go to waste. So, I felt it was essential. When I went out to these various schools, and
I have quite a list of them, they presented *me* the opportunity to give them what I wanted for them to know and share. This is now *La Opinión.* You can see a picture of Beverly Ballard.

Zakheim: And they mentioned particularly, “Selma Smith, miembro de la agrupación Philharmonic Docents.” And, “la señora Smith, prominente dama” — the whole article is about Selma and what wonderful things she did for the children as a Docent of the Philharmonic.¹

Smith: I also provided something they never had had. In addition to classes where I was the one and only teacher, I arranged that I would take an orchestra from junior high over to one of my schools, and have them play for them. As I told the children, “Watch very closely, and listen, and look, because when they finish playing, you will have a chance to come up and touch and hold the instrument you would like to, and you can make a sound on it, and so be sure that you’re looking and listening very carefully.” I had already preselected the kind of music that I thought would make an impression on them, nicely. And I played for them; I sang in Spanish, and accompanied myself with my Spanish guitar, which pleased them no end. In fact, the principal was always present. She stood guard, you know, to see everyone behave properly, and she almost got lost in the proceedings herself, listening to everything. Here is the photo. This is the orchestra leader that I took from the junior high school orchestra.² This is his little orchestra. She’s the one in charge of this school, that this was all brought to — she was the principal.

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Zakheim: Now, was this the Nightingale Junior High that went to an elementary school?

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: Do you remember which elementary school?

Smith: That would be Ford Boulevard School, and also there was Cortez Street School. As you see, I’m holding things that when we came for the photo the children had already made for me.

Zakheim: Oh, Selma.

Smith: After the event, they all wrote little thank-you notes, and they made colored things, flowers, you know. And I’m holding a bouquet that they made for me. I have to say that I have boxes full of things that I received from them.

When we got through with both my singing to them and the orchestra playing, I had the children in the orchestra stand and hold out their instruments, and they did.

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3 Nov. 22, 1972, and Feb. 1, 1973, respectively.
They did it very graciously. The children came up and, of course, several wanted to hold my guitar. In addition, they got to make a sound. I said, “Now, do everything gently,” although when they got to the percussion, I said, “All right, you can make a sound, but remember there are other sounds being made.” All of this I said in Spanish, of course. It was a wonderful time. And the children who were in the seventh grade, who came with the orchestra, those were the ones who were looking at the fifth and sixth graders who were the ones in the auditorium, who could be the big brothers, big sisters, to look down and hand over something and watch the reaction of another child, looking at music for the first time, and the sounds of music. My eyes did not rest for a moment. I looked to see even the telltale things of someone who is coming from a possible music interest — and we would report this back, and the school would apply for the instruments that could be sent over. [looking at a letter] This is, “Dear Selma — ”

Zakheim: It says, “Dear Selma,” and it’s dated March 18, 1972, “Word of the marvelous work you are doing has reached my ears indirectly. Jay Heifetz, director of promotion for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, has requested that I put some publicity on the radio, TV, and newspapers regarding the visit you arranged for, of a junior high orchestra to an elementary school. I would appreciate it very much if you would send me the full details, date, background, etc., as soon as possible. Thank you and bravo! Most sincerely, Carolyn Gordon.”

Smith: “P.S. Please include names.”

Zakheim: Yes. Did you learn later that any of them had gone into music?
Smith: Oh, yes, because I knew that some of the Pasadena women took the children to their lessons with a member of the Philharmonic. I knew who they would be and, also, I sometimes heard from the musicians themselves. I know that they furnished violins, primarily, and there were some wind instruments, too, but primarily they were string. And so, we could make it possible.

I don’t have to tell you that the evaluations that the principals would send — I guess, from what they told me, I received consistently — . I saw one upside-down when our president was reading it, and I thought, “My, that’s just a few words.” I thought to myself, “With all the time that I spent and all the things I did, how would this be possible? What was left out?” Anyway, she then handed it to me, and it said, “Mrs. Smith was outstanding in every respect.” [laughing] And then, period. And that was her total —

Zakheim: You can’t get much better than that!

Smith: It was at that point that I realized there are many ways, I guess, to show — . I never appeared anywhere that they didn’t always request me to come back. In fact, I was out to all the [Roman Catholic] parochial schools. As soon as they saw me, you know — they didn’t have any idea what they were going to have happen, and as soon as I started to speak to them, you could tell that this must be okay because [chuckling] otherwise they wouldn’t be getting it. These are all my Latin-American audiences. Here’s the list of some of the schools. Would you take a look?


Smith: At any rate, I can tell you that they finally tallied up, I think, about three thousand students that I had had direct contact with. That was in addition, of course, to television. Ernest Fleischmann, who was the executive director of the Philharmonic, called me his “special, one-and-only, Spanish-speaking docent,” and took great pleasure in me, and arranged television interviews of me by having them come from different stations — once was KMEX. They interviewed me in the Music Center.

Zakheim: Oh!

Smith: Joan Boyett was in charge of education.

Zakheim: This is dated February 7, 1974, on the letterhead of the Southern California Symphony – Hollywood Bowl Association —

Smith: Before they ever took on the “Philharmonic Association” by itself.

Zakheim: It’s to Selma. “Dearest Selma, How can I say thank-you adequately for the splendid job you did on television last night. I thought KMEX’s coverage was quite comprehensive, although the Spanish was a bit fast for my faulty grasp of the language. We are much in your debt. Most sincerely, Joan Boyett.”

Smith: On other occasions, I went to television stations directly, in their studios — and spoke on behalf of the Philharmonic and these programs. And then, at one, the educational

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4 In one series of school visits in April and May 1973, in preparation for the May 26 Symphony for Youth concert by the Philharmonic.
television program arose because that station happened to want to show something unusual for the general audience of people listening to ordinary English-speaking educational television. They wanted to show how music was being fostered. They went from one school to another to view different ones, to make a choice, of which one they were going to put on. As it turned out, when the television crew came to the particular school that I happened to be at that time — I was already seated at the piano, of course, and the children were around me — at the moment, I happened to be playing one of my own compositions for them, a Spanish one of course. When they were coming in, I immediately stopped, naturally, and I was told, “No, no, keep playing,” because, “oh, that’s good music!” So I did, and they then set up all their equipment and chose that one as the one that they were going to put on.

Zakheim: That very day?

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: Oh, my! Now, did you use castanets that time? I understand you used them in some of your classes.

Smith: I always had them with me, and I certainly did when I took the orchestra. When I finally gave someone my guitar, so my hands were free, I picked up my castanets and did castanet rolls that only castanet players do. Oh, they all stopped and [clapping] made a big-big clap, so I had to do it all over again! [both laughing].

Zakheim: I’ll bet some of the children wanted to play the castanets.
Smith: Oh, well, I handed them over. And then they found out they are a musical instrument, and you don’t just [laughing] — . You have to know the right hand from the left — one is lower, one is higher. You have to know the finger motion — which is going to be up, which is down. Well, it’s a whole instrument, actually. They come in all sizes, you know, for little hands, for bigger hands [chuckling]. Certain kinds of wood are used. You choose the best wood for the best performers. They carve them out in ways that are especially advantageous.

Zakheim: For the acoustics.

Smith: Yes. And, of course, they’re held only by the thumb on each hand. I’m about to give you a lesson in castanets [laughing], but I won’t do that at this moment. Also —

Zakheim: I think there was a Saturday Institute at East L.A. College?

Smith: Yes, that was still a different kind of thing altogether. This was one where the orchestra was coming to the area — not having the people come to them, but coming to do their music right in front of them, bringing it into their home ground, East L.A. College, where I think it was probably ninety percent Spanish-speaking in the community there. And so, I came out as a preview to that concert that they were going to give.\(^5\) This was going to create the atmosphere, and the interest, that people would come when the orchestra was going to come and play for them, which was very soon — to interest them in coming. I did. In fact, the person in charge had been one of my piano teachers at UCLA. I spoke in Spanish entirely, since the audience was at

least ninety percent such — and told them all about the program, told them the pieces that were going to be played.

I had made my point to the Philharmonic that for those Symphonies for Youth — Introduction to Music, and that kind of thing — if they’re coming from that area, you cannot expect the children to sit there and listen to Bach, Beethoven. I said, “Where are the Spanish composers, what happened to the Latin-American ones, where are the ones from Mexico? Where are the rhythms that they are familiar with, that they know have to do with music?” I said, “We have to build a bridge. They’re not going to come from this area to listen to something that they haven’t the faintest grasp of.” In other words, I spoke as their representative. It began to take shape. And I said, “It wouldn’t hurt, you know, if for the youth, the conductor could be one of the Latin-American conductors, somebody they can identify with. They have to be able to feel, “That is me, or mine, or something that I want to make mine,” or, “I’m almost there, and this is another way to get there” kind of feeling, and so they began to do that. They began to make a few little changes.

Zakheim: Oh, that’s great.

Smith: There were several things that I was encharged with. I had already become chair for the Latin-American community. And I was made chair for public relations altogether. In fact, I was sent by the Docent organization to represent them at every conference of every like kind of activity in the whole county, and beyond. It included Palm Desert as well. Caroline Ahmanson sponsored an arts conference there, and I attended. This was quite a conference. In fact, I have here some photos from the event.
Zakheim: Here is a picture of Caroline Ahmanson, the director, William McCann, the vice-president of the California Museum Foundation, and our own Selma Moidel Smith, “representing the Docents.” The picture was taken February 16, 1981, in Palm Desert, with the California Arts and Humanities Seminar.

Smith: Here’s another one, as chair of Press and Public Relations.

Zakheim: You were a presenter at the National School Volunteer Conference and creator of the Docent display at the Sheraton–Universal Hotel Ballroom in L.A., from April 8 to April 11 of 1973. Selma is quoted as —

Smith: That’s my quote.

Zakheim: Please read it — it is your quote.

Smith: “We cross the language barrier to reach the universal language.”
Zakheim: Were you still practicing law at this point?

Smith: Of course!

Zakheim: Yes, I wanted to show it was not two discrete parts of your life.

Smith: No.

Zakheim: They were always combined. Is that correct?

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: So everything you’ve been doing was very well appreciated. That must have helped you with your very, very busy schedule. At the same time you were practicing law, you were getting accolades for your contributions as a Docent of the Philharmonic.

Smith: But you know, I tell you something. Roz, whatever I have ever done, I have done simply because — . When you walk, do you think about how you’re walking? Which foot you’re going to put next, and so on? You just walk your way, the way you do. And that’s the way I do. It’s my only way to be [pause] in this life. I don’t know. I just do most of the — . I don’t initiate a lot. I mean, it may be for outward things that I initiate, but the urge to do it isn’t something I initiated. It’s just there.

Zakheim: It’s how you live. It’s how you are.

Smith: It’s how I was put together. I guess, you could just say it that way. It’s how I was put together. I once said, and you may have heard me say it, “Whatever you are, you bring to whatever you do.” That’s the only answer I can give you for the whole thing.
Zakheim: Well you were so generous of your time because, as a lawyer, working so hard, to also —

Smith: And in my office at 8:00 every morning.

Zakheim: I mean, I’d be interested in how you did that, because that’s a very difficult thing to do all of this for the Docents and the children in East L.A. and also practice law.

Smith: Well, fortunately, like East L.A. College, that was on Saturday. I took them at times that would be good for me, or I couldn’t. And I would let them know when I was available, when I was not. And there could be a passage of time when I was in trial or whatever, and they understood.

Separately from all this, I had a dear friend, Roz. Sylvia was my friend’s name, and she married a Latino. Her last name was Vega as a result — very happy, a lovely couple. Carlos was her husband. We went to the Million Dollar Theater [where Spanish-language movies were shown].

Zakheim: On Broadway I believe, in downtown Los Angeles.

Smith: She was so in love with my music. It was due to her, her insistence — . I said, “Sylvia, I really don’t have time. I really can’t take time to do the things that music people do.” And she said, “But Selma, you have to!” Your music should be heard. Everybody who hears your music will want to hear more.” I said, “That’s fine, Sylvia.” you know, “some year!” I’m sorry Sylvia didn’t live to see this, but it was because of her that I first got printed sheet music. And people who knew me bought it. I said, “I don’t want you to pay for these.” Sylvia said, “You let them do that.
You’ve got to get in training for that.” She said, “You have to get out and do more things in music. Your music can’t be neglected.” And she, on her own initiative, wrote to the president of the California Federation of Music Clubs and told them about me. She told her to invite me. She didn’t even know her, but she recommended me. She was a very articulate person herself. Sylvia told me once herself, “You know, when I first met you,” she said, “I hated you.” She said, “I worked so hard in Spanish,” she said, “and I broke my head trying to learn Spanish,” and she said, “and I still do. I hated you because it just flows out of your mouth.” She said, “How do you do that?” I said, “I don’t know.” And she said, “I can tell you that now because I love you.” [both laughing] And so, she’s the one. I was invited, and it was at the Huntington Hotel in Pasadena. They had a weekend of their conference. As a result of Sylvia I was invited to it, and I was sitting at a dinner table. The president wasn’t even sitting near where I was. When I got up to get something off of the dessert table, I found she’s at my elbow, and she is saying, “Selma, I want to have you on my Board of Directors.” I looked at her, and I said, “But you don’t even know me.” And she said, “I think I know enough.” Whatever she observed, I don’t know. She was obviously looking once in a while, I guess, at me. And here, she wasn’t inviting me to be a member; she was inviting me to the Board of Directors. So, anyway, I became a Board member.

Zakheim: And what do these groups do?

Smith: Their sole purpose is to raise money to help educate in music and to help those who’ve shown talent to get them opportunities — to be heard, to study with so-and-so. This is what their goal is.
Zakheim: It fit in perfectly with your Docent experience.

Smith: Yes. As a result, as soon as I became a member there, I found myself — . As you see, in their publication, *Music Clubs Magazine* — this is the National Federation of Music Clubs — “dedicated to music education and promotion of creative and performing arts.”

Zakheim: Since 1898!

Smith: Yes. As you see, [under the heading] “State Projects and Events”:6

Zakheim: “Joseph Alioto,” who I remember, “Mayor of San Francisco, receives an Award of Merit for his support of American Music Month from Selma Moidel Smith”! “In Los Angeles, Mayor Tom Bradley proclaims February 1977 as American Music Month.” And I bet you had something to do with that.7

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Smith: I had everything to do with it.

Zakheim: Okay! What did you do to ensure these proclamations?

Smith: I also got it from the governor, and Pete Wilson who was then [mayor] in San Diego. I — simply on my own — called these people. I introduced myself to them, told them what it was about, and I referred to the specific thing by which they had become eligible — that I wanted to thank them and that I have awards I would like to give them. And that was true for KFAC also.\(^8\) Here is *Classics West.*

Zakheim: “Classical Music Magazine.”

Smith: Yes. There’s Aaron Copland.

Zakheim: Oh, my goodness, there’s a handwritten inscription in the magazine, “For Selma M. Smith, cordially, Aaron Copland, 1972.”

Smith: Yes. And this is the article that appeared.

Zakheim: Selma had written an article called, “The American Composer.”\(^9\) And then you were state chairman, Parade of American Music, sponsored by the National Federation of Music Clubs.

Smith: Yes. That’s Gottschalk; are you familiar with him at all?

Zakheim: No.

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Smith: Let me show you these photos.

Zakheim: Zubin Mehta, right?

Smith: Yes, as you see, we are not strangers with each other, either. We were on the same Minority Training Committee. That’s in his office.  

Zakheim: Then, you were the national vice-chairman for the Western Region, National Federation of Music Clubs.

Smith: But it wasn’t the beginning. I mean, I was, for some time before that — and you can picture, I was a Docent at the same time.

This is at Cal State L.A. I represented the National Federation at the gala concert honoring composer Roy Harris. I don’t know if you’re familiar with him.

Zakheim: No, I’m not.

Smith: An American composer, probably one of the best. Gone now, of course. And here I became state chairman of the Parade of American Music for the National Federation — ’72 to ’75.  

This is the auditorium, and podium. That’s Roy Harris, and you see who is here.

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10 Photo and caption, Music Clubs Magazine (Special 1976): 15.
Zakheim: And you were the only woman on the dais, I see. And you’re holding the mayor’s proclamation of February as American Music Month. And the Coordinator of Fine Arts, Dr. Robert Strassburg was also there with you.

Smith: Yes, there he was. And Roy Harris had just gone up to the podium when that photo was taken. There I was. Of course, this again was in an evening. This was never out of my office time. Do you remember Efrem Zimbalist, Jr.?

Zakheim: Oh, yes! Absolutely.

Smith: Well, as you see, I presented him, too.¹³

Presenting award to Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., at his home, May 8, 1977.


Zakheim: At that point, you were national vice-chairman for the Western Region.

Smith: That was ’74.

Zakheim: National Federation from ’74 to ’77.\textsuperscript{14} And in these photographs, you are presenting him an award at his home in May of 1977. He was both an actor and a composer.

Smith: Yes, and a very nice fellow.

[pointing at another photo]
This was a television program.

Zakheim: Oh, my goodness:

“Appearances on ‘World Talk’ program, television channel KCOP, channel 13 — Panel discussion organized by Selma Moidel Smith, with composers Dorrance Stalvey, Aurelio de la Vega, and William Kraft, taped February 12, 1972, and aired February 21, 1972.” There’s also a picture of Selma presenting an award to host Florence Thalheimer — who I remember, actually —

Smith: Of course!

Smith: Yes, this was five months after that one [taped July 29, 1972]. That’s my thanks to her for this program that I arranged. And as you see, this is what I did: I would arrange things, and it would serve the purpose of the National Federation, and music.\(^1\)

Zakheim: And you were on the Lawrence Welk show as well!

Smith: Twice.\(^2\)

Zakheim: Presenting awards, and oh!, now what is happening there, Selma?

Smith: What do you think?

Zakheim: It looks like Selma’s receiving a kiss. I don’t know who it’s from, but — [laughing].

Smith: Yes, there’s Lawrence Welk, and while he’s doing this, Bob Rolston snuck in and [both laughing] — he’s the one who was actually the performer of that particular piece [and received the award].


Zakheim: Ah! [both laughing]

Smith: And now, here is the brochure from the 27th Biennial Convention —


Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: And the theme, I see, is “Music exalts life,” which seems to be a theme of your life as well.

Smith: Yes. And so I chaired the state convention. It was a two-day event. These were all the people present.

Zakheim: You were moderator on a panel —

Smith: On music education.


Smith: Yes.

17 Photo and caption, Music Clubs Magazine (Autumn 1972): 35.
Zakheim: Something you have a lot of experience with.

Smith: Well, in addition, here is the music program. One of the pianists performed some music of mine at one of our events.18

Zakheim: It’s interesting because you did some very serious composing, and you also made music popular.

Smith: Ah, yes.

Zakheim: That’s quite an accomplishment. People can sometimes do one or the other — .

Smith: Yes. [turning to another group of photos] At the same time that I joined the Federation, one of the people on the Board of Directors said, “You have to come to my Euterpe Opera Club, and I want you on the Board.” So, this is Euterpe Opera Club. I was not only on the Board, but I was Auditions chairman, and also Awards chair.19

Zakheim: Oh, my!

Smith: This was in the International Ballroom at the Beverly Hilton — the Awards Luncheon.

Zakheim: In 1974, and you’re presenting awards to the best-rated singers of that season.

Smith: Yes, in other words, it was all educational. And I will show you a picture of our Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, where — on Monday mornings — the Euterpe Opera Club would present their operas. These are the people I invited and introduced as my guests at the opera. I introduced all of these people, without notes, from the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion of the Music Center. I called these people and said, “Our Euterpe Opera group is performing an opera, and I’m inviting you to come.” I had a row reserved for them.

Zakheim: And who did you invite?

Smith: Here they are: Dean Grant Beglarian — he was dean of the USC School of Music; Howard Rarig from USC — he was chair of the Music Department. I had called each one individually, and when I spoke to Howard Rarig, he called back that evening and he said, “You know, I don’t know why but my wife tells me that she would like to come. Is there any way I can bring my wife, too?” And so I said, “Of course, of course,” and so I added her. All these were the people from USC [pointing at list]: Margaret Schaper, chair of the Voice Department; and this is Dorothy Jean Hartshorn [chair of Music Education]. This one is Dr. David Scott; he’s from Cal...
State Northridge, head of the Opera Department. And here’s Carl Princi from KFAC. Gerhard Samuel, associate conductor of the “L.A. Phil.” Those were my guests. Carl Princi used to be the one who’s on KFAC about opera, that I was working with when I wrote that article in *Classics West*.

Zakheim: This is the picture I love.

Smith: Yes, well this has to do with Plato.

Zakheim: Really!? Oh?

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: Now, we should note that Plato is an organization at UCLA, maybe other places, too. I don’t know.

Smith: No.

Zakheim: Just at UCLA?

Smith: At UCLA.

Zakheim: Where people gather to learn, as senior adults usually.

Smith: Let me inform you. Plato is not one you join because you’d like to. There is an Admissions Committee, always was, because it was under the umbrella of UCLA Extension. And in fact, I was in the photo that they had in the [Extension] Catalog.

Zakheim: This one is just beautiful.
Smith: Well, —

Zakheim: You’re in costume, with a fan raised to the heavens, and obviously in a dance pose. You’ve been dancing.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: And you look very happy!

Smith: What do you think my opposing counsel would think?

[both laughing] Anyway, I have to say that when you go to the Admissions Committee you tell them why you want to join. They tell you in the brochure that this is for executives and professionals. I remember meeting with the committee. They asked me different things, and I was a lawyer, I was this — . They had doctors; they had a few other lawyers. And the point of the whole thing was, you’re going to do something you didn’t do in your main thing that you were doing. I said to them, “I want to learn.” I said, “Above all, the thing I love most is learning.” I never even got to take my foot out of the room. The committee all nodded to each other. Before I even got up out of the seat, they had already made me a member. I remember I sat in on a few things, and I looked at their list of offerings, the courses and the days, and there were two-hour ones. They were all fifteen-member groups, with a coordinator. The object was, in that particular subject matter, these are a list of assignments, and you volunteer, you pick out what you will be responsible for preparing. And you get a card from the [UCLA] Research Library, because you’re a
member of Plato. You are expected to do research, and you’re expected to make a presentation.

Zakheim: What did you coordinate? Because I understand it was a very popular class.

Smith: Well, they said, “We already want you to be a leader of a group.” I hadn’t even warmed a seat as a member. They already said the man in charge of UCLA Extension is going to be in charge of a weekend retreat, and that’s when they’re going to talk to the people who are going to be coordinators. Anyway, the long and short of it was that I said to them, “I’m sorry I don’t see a subject matter that I would particularly want to really do my work in.” So they said, “Well,” and they look around at each other, “why don’t you make up something that you really would like to coordinate.” They never spoke to me about being a member. And they said, “and you’ll go to the weekend retreat for our coordinators.” It was at a convent.

Zakheim: It was outside of Los Angeles?

Smith: Yes, it was right in Montecito. So, as a result, I was there for the weekend. I finally came back and told them, I said, “I know what it is I want.” I said, “I want to combine a couple of things. It’s got to be music, and it’s got to be my Spanish. It’s going to be ‘The Music of Spain, from the 6th Century to the Present.’”

Zakheim: Oh, my goodness!

Smith: They were fourteen-week courses, two hours at a time, in a week.

Zakheim: Now that’s an ambitious class for fourteen weeks.
Smith: Yes, but I knew that these were people who’re going to go to the library. So they put it on the catalog. We had part of a session in which everybody had three minutes to tell what theirs would be — and all the members are listening. That’s when they all convene to find out what’s for the next term. And you could put a first choice and a second choice, because they would see who got in first, and you could be on a waiting list, or you’d go as a second choice into some other group this time, and try your luck next time. So, I got up and gave my little spiel for “The Music of Spain." I wanted to make it clear that I was just referring to a very narrow slice, and I said, “It’s one more way to enjoy music, one more way that you can have to broaden your interests in music.” Because I realized, who knows Spanish necessarily? Anyway, they filled my enrollment.

What I did was, I made a big map of Spain, I would put it on the board — you know, the ledge where the chalk goes — to which I would point, with every composer, where they came from in Spain. And if it was music that had something that was of that particular region, I would point to that, pronouncing everything correctly in Spanish. And so, I’d say to them, “When we are within these walls, I will correct your Spanish, because if you are not familiar with it, I don’t want everyone thinking by my silence that that is the correct way to say it. I don’t want you to not learn it correctly.” So, that’s what I would do. That was fine with everybody. And then, the first session, everybody picked their things. And then, you see, when they give it, they have to be open to questions from the group. And I remember the first ones — they would give their presentations the best that they could and had researched, and of course people who had been to Spain had an interest in it even
more — and I remember like I’m sitting there right now, they’d finish and then say, “Now, if you have questions, give them to Selma! [both laughing] She’s the only one in this place who will know the answer!” And I got very kind reviews. They wrote wonderful things about the whole course. And there was a waiting list. In fact [pointing], you see that glass bowl, that crystal bowl?

Zakheim: Yes.

Smith: That was from my assistant at one of the courses — Seba [Kolb-Tomkins]. She became a docent at the Skirball [Cultural Center]. She passed away some years ago — wonderful dear soul, wonderful person. Anyway, the person in charge, when we would all be signing up for things, had an admonition, “You may not repeat Selma’s course. Everyone has to have a chance.” Seba managed, don’t ask how [laughing] — she waited a few years, and she took it again. And no one said anything, and she said to me, “When you see me, it’s all been arranged [laughing].” At the time that my music was performed by the Brentwood–Westwood Symphony Orchestra,\textsuperscript{20} while I was teaching there — they opened their [1986–87] season with my music — on that occasion, Seba said, “I’m going to make a party at my home, a reception after the concert, so all of the Plato people can come to me.” Because you can imagine everybody came, and she made a lovely party. She was up in the hills right there, not too far from the performance. Seba just wanted to do so many nice things for me. And, by the way, these works of art [on the wall] were from different people in my Spanish music courses. Even though they were in Asia, they wanted to bring me

something. And I have gifts from my students in that course, “The Music of Spain.”

This one gave me this, and gave me that —.

Zakheim: How many times did you coordinate this class?

Smith: Oh, my gosh, well, I guess, once a year, for ten years.

Zakheim: How did the music appear in this class, because you said that was the major reason you wanted to give it.

Smith: I played the music that they learned about, that somebody composed. I collected some of it in Spain, and I got tapes from other places. I took a lot from the UCLA Music Library. If I opened those drawers [pointing], they’re packed with those cassettes. Packed.

Zakheim: Ohhh! Well, those students were very lucky, very lucky.

Smith: Yes, and I would put them on, and time and again, they would say, “How do you time it that the last note is just at the end?” And I said, “Well, just works out.” [both laughing]

What I also did, whenever there was something doing in town that was a Spanish performance, either dance or a Spanish program that was music —. And you know the Romeros, the family, the guitarists, “The Royal Family of the Guitar”?
Pepe Romero, one of the sons, still does a lot, and I have a photo with the Romeros [showing it].

I introduced to them the name that was unknown — and played the music — of Plácido Domingo!

Zakheim: Oh!

Smith: With his photos and all about him. Yes! With a number of others. Alicia de Larrocha — the Spanish pianist — marvelous pianist — she passed away a few years ago. And would you believe, I had an encounter with her, too, at the Hollywood Bowl, in her dressing room. Seba was a good friend of someone who was a friend of hers. And so Seba had arranged for me to meet her because she also knew she would be delighted with my Spanish. And so, I had gone down to the dressing room during the intermission. Seba just waited outside. So I came in, and I met her and so on, and we certainly did exchange — . And then, she said, “Excuse me, I have to use the ladies’ room,” that is, her own bathroom there. It was in her dressing room area. And while she’s in the bathroom, a man comes to the door of her dressing room, and he said, “May I come in?” And I said, “Oh — ,” and he said, “May I take your hand?” He said, “I just want you to know, I can’t thank you enough for that wonderful performance.” She had changed her hair to blond, and he had a seat far enough back [both laughing] that he couldn’t tell one from another, and so being that it was her
dressing room that he was directed to — he came and wanted to have the thrill of his lifetime. And so he was holding my hand and telling me what it meant to him to hear the piano played so beautifully, and he said, “You don’t know what you’ve done for me tonight.” With that, he turned and walked out. I didn’t tell him — .

Zakheim: It was okay!

Smith: It was his luck because, he, forever after I’m sure, told people of his meeting with Alicia de Larrocha. This is the kind of thing that can happen to you, and it happened to me, with her. But I had my bunch there to hear her, and whenever anything was going on — . We had something at the Greek Theatre. They had once a whole Spanish production that came to L.A. I told my “Music of Spain” group that I arranged the whole thing for them, that all they had to do was show up, and we had our seats. These were always, as you know, nighttime or weekends, so this was something I could do and not interfere with the fact that at eight o’clock in the morning I’m going to be down in my office interviewing some witnesses for a trial. This is how I have lived my life, Roz.

Zakheim: This was wonderful, Selma.

Smith: And, of course, Tuesday I leave for San Francisco.

Zakheim: For the Society’s meetings?

Smith: Absolutely, the Board meeting. And also, I have a winner of our competition.

Zakheim: Oh, Okay!
Smith: Yes, who is going to take a photo with the Chief Justice, that I have already arranged.
That’s what I do: I arrange all of it so it can all be at the same place at the same time
with the Chief Justice and Justice Werdegar.

Zakheim: Well, Selma, it’s hard to believe, but we’ve covered all the subjects you laid out when
we started our sessions a year and a half ago. I know you’ve saved one last topic for a
final session with Justice Kathryn Werdegar next week. It’s just perfect that you’ll be
able to bookend your oral history this way, finishing as you began, with a
conversation with Justice Werdegar. So now that we’re finishing the last of our own
sessions together, I want to tell you what a delight it’s been to have this time with you
for a year and a half, learn about your life, and especially learn about a treasured
friend who’s done so much with her own life.

Smith: It’s been quite a time reviewing all of these things and bringing them fresh to mind
again. One never expects quite what the process will do, but that is what it does, and
here we are now at the end of what we are doing together. Thank you so much for
your patience and your cooperation and your, well, just being a good friend. And
thank you again for all the time that we have spent together.

Zakheim: Thank you, Selma, It’s been very special.

And now to conclude this session of Selma’s oral history, we’ll hear one of
Selma’s piano compositions. It’s your very first piece, Selma, the same one you
sang for us last time, “Tango in A minor, Opus 1.” [Click below to play music.]
Werdegar: Good afternoon. This is Kathryn Werdegar, Associate Justice of the California Supreme Court. With me in chambers once again is Attorney Selma Moidel Smith.

Today is November 12th, 2014, and we have just come from a meeting of the Board of Directors of the California Supreme Court Historical Society, on which we both serve and — I might add — on which Selma is the heart and soul and the backbone.

We are going to continue, and conclude, the conversation we held on June 19th, 2013, which began Selma’s oral history. Selma informs me that she has saved a special chapter of her story for this occasion. The subject is her fifty years of service on the National Board of the Medical College of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, which period spans the entire fifty-year history of the Board’s existence. The college served as a parallel group — parallel to women attorneys — of women trailblazers, in this case women physicians. The college was founded in 1850 and was known until 1970 as Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania. In 2002, it became the Drexel University College of Medicine.

Selma, my understanding is the Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania was the first medical institution in the world established to train women in medicine
and offer them an M.D. degree. Could you tell us how you became involved with this college?

Smith: Yes, of course. I would have to begin with a letter that I received from the president of the college [in 1953]. It was from Burgess L. Gordon, who was then president, and who was inviting me to become a member of what would be called their “ambassadors of goodwill,” the National Board. When I received this, I called him and said, “I can understand your confusion, but I’m not the Smith you’re looking for. I’m a lawyer — you probably were thinking that I was a doctor. And let me at least wish you my very best wishes.” And so, he came back immediately to say, “No, we know exactly who you are, and we do want you to be a member of our National Board. We are starting this for the first time, to be a National Board.”

Werdegar: So he had heard of some of your endeavors with women?

Smith: Apparently so, or just as a lawyer, or however.

Werdegar: That’s amazing.

Smith: And so he said, “I hope you will have occasion to be coming east very soon.” He said, “If you will, I will personally show you around our medical college, and I’m sure you will be interested.” First, he said they would just put my name on as a Board member, and I said, “No, I’m sorry, I don’t do that. I don’t lend my name anywhere that I don’t know the institution.”

Werdegar: Oh, well that’s a good principle.
Smith: And that was when he said, “Well, I hope you’ll be coming east soon, so I can show you around, and you will know us.” So I said, “Well, as it happens, I do have occasion in another month or so to be going to the East,” so I said, “I will, I’ll come.” And so he said, “Splendid.” Then, as that period passed, I did go to the College. I was shown around by him, and I did meet the dean, Marion Fay. That already impressed me, to see a woman in the position of a dean at a medical school.

Werdegar: Yes!

Smith: From the moment we met, with our first handshake, we became very good friends. And what I saw was very stimulating — something that I thought, “This is,” as we said, “a parallel to the women lawyers’ experience.”

Werdegar: So, at this time in 1953, they evidently decided they wanted a board, which I gather they hadn’t had before?

Smith: No, it was the brainchild of Gladys Daskam, the wife of a minister in Philadelphia, who was the assistant to the president of the college.

Werdegar: I see.
Smith: And it was her idea to form this, entirely hers, and she always referred to all of us as her “girls” [chuckling].

Werdegar: So you were a Charter Member —

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: And who were some of the other Charter Members?

Smith: Speaking of just women lawyers or those in the judiciary who were members of this “ambassadors-of-goodwill” National Board, one was Judge Florence Allen of Ohio. She, of course, was the first woman U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals judge. And there was Judge Burnita Shelton Matthews of D.C., the first woman on a U.S. District Court. Then, there was Judge Dorothy Kenyon of New York, and Judge Hazel Palmer of Missouri, and from New York again, Judge Florence Perlow Sheintag, and then in Pennsylvania, Judge Sara Soffel. And we had a few past presidents of our National Association of Women Lawyers. Those included, again, Burnita Matthews, Charlotte Gauer, and Marguerite Rawalt, who moved my admission to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Werdegar: Oh, my goodness! That’s quite an array of female judges — outstanding women.

Smith: Yes, and also the first woman treasurer of the United States, Georgia Neese Clark Gray. And then the first woman governor of a state (and first woman director of the

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U.S. Mint), Nellie Tayloe Ross, from Wyoming. Oh, we had some others from the arts and letters, as it were, like Marian Anderson, the singer, and Agi Jambor, the pianist, Grace Kelly, actress, of whom we’ll be speaking more later, Sylvia Porter, economist, and we had a number of well-known authors and scientists and doctors. Also, just for a sprinkling [chuckling], we had the wives of a U.S. vice president, four senators, and three governors — and of university presidents, bank presidents, and industrialists. I noticed, and I’m sure they did, too, unavoidably, I was by far the youngest person present. All of them were at least one generation — and some, two generations — older than I.

We would stay at the Barclay Hotel [on Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia], where we were put up. What amazed me the very first time it happened — we were due at the college for our meeting, and we all came out on the street and were going to get cabs, you know, and arrived a group of limos! The ladies, on the Main Line of course, got out of their limos and turned their chauffeurs and limousines over to us so that we would all arrive in comfort. And then they are standing out there on the street hailing cabs. That’s what they thought of the college!

Werdegar: Well, this college obviously attracted a lot of capable, outstanding women who wanted to support it, which speaks to what a marvelous institution it was — a very exceptionally distinguished board, no question!

Smith: You know, I had asked the president, “Who brought me to your attention?” and so he said, “I’m sorry, our Charter Members will never be informed —

Werdegar: I see!
Smith: — as to who that individual was.”

Werdegar: Who tipped him off!

Smith: To this day, I don’t know who it was.

Werdegar: Well, there might have been many, Selma. I mean, you were not unknown in the legal community.

Smith: But I would hardly expect from a medical college to —

Werdegar: Yes, well, that’ll be a mystery.

Smith: Yes, and it still is, and it always will be. There’s no one else I can ask any more.

Werdegar: One of those mysteries! [both laughing]

Smith: Yes!

Werdegar: As a lawyer, were you able to offer any special support to the college, with your training and skill?

Smith: Yes, I thought of sending a letter to my fellow — as I put it in my letter — “Dear Sister-in-Law.”

Werdegar: I like that.

Smith: I wrote to over six hundred women lawyers in California — a letter which, of course, I passed before the California State Bar Ethics Committee to make sure that it passed muster before I sent it, because I was suggesting to them that they and their clients
might have occasion to consider that there were worthy beneficiaries of funds that sometimes have not been designated, that arise in many ways. And for this reason, to have them in mind. Of course, my enthusiasm was apparent from the beginning. I said, “This college is unique! It’s the first medical school, and today, the only medical school in this hemisphere exclusively for women.” And I said, “This college is inspiring. The graduates pioneered the practice of the profession in the farthest reaches of the world and are still doing so today!” I said, “In my capacity as a member of the National Board, I send to you and to your clients a cordial invitation to visit Woman’s Medical College in Pennsylvania, and you will find its vital spirit most contagious!” I enclosed a brochure that I had put together. I had suggested to them that we needed a brochure, and so they printed up what I had sent as the contents of the brochure, just exactly as I had written it.

Werdegar: I’m sure that that elicited some favorable responses.

Smith: Oh, yes!

Werdegar: After all, women attorneys would respond to the needs of women physicians, understanding especially in that time how underrepresented the professions were, by women.

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: Do you know how many women lawyers there were at that time?
Smith: Well, over six hundred women lawyers in California. Let’s put it this way: At the time that I was admitted, three percent of the lawyers were women.²

Werdegar: When were you admitted, because that was the statistic when I was admitted?

Smith: January 5, 1943.

Werdegar: It didn’t change much in the next twenty years, because the statistic that was quoted to me was three percent.

Smith: That’s right, and that’s what it was — which was reflected, of course, when I went to USC Law School, because the entering class of a hundred and fifty included five women.

Werdegar: And you started law school in ’39 or ’40?

Smith: Yes, ’39.

Werdegar: A couple years later we were going to war, right?

Smith: Yes, we did.

Werdegar: And that’s when more women, if you could speak of more women, I understand entered law classes because they wanted to fill the classes and there were no more men.

Smith: The letter that was sent to my own colleagues was to show my support for the college as a lawyer. Others made different kinds of contributions. I was very pleased to be

² California State Bar records indicate approximately 20,000 lawyers in California in 1943.
able to make a unique contribution. And this was one I could offer to make, and they were very appreciative.

Werdegar: An excellent idea, and I’ve seen this mind at work on the Historical Society board, and I can see that it long preceded the Historical Society.

Were there particular national special events that occurred, arising from your Board membership?

Smith: A group of the National Board members were invited to the White House by then—First Lady Mamie Eisenhower, in April 1958. We went for our very nice visit. In fact, I rode in the taxi with Margaret Kelly — Grace Kelly’s mother, because we were friends, and we were in Washington, D.C., now for this visit. So, we went from our hotel to the White House in the cab together. In fact, I can still see us as we pulled in to the guard at the gate, and we had to announce ourselves, and here we are, “Kelly, Smith,” [both laughing] and it sounded so funny for some reason at that moment, and all of us had to laugh, you know.

At any rate, while we were waiting for Mamie to come into the East Room, while we were just visiting among ourselves for a few minutes, a woman approached me, that I realized must be a member of our National Board, and she said to me, ”My name is Selma Smith.” And I said, “My name is Selma Smith.” And she said, “Yes, I know.” And I take a look over to Margaret Kelly who’s still standing right next to me, and she’s looking very innocently all around the room [laughing], just as though she knew nothing about this, and this woman goes on to say, “and I’m from Ohio.” And I said, “Well, I’m from Ohio,” and she said, “Yes, I know.”
Werdegar: Oh, dear!

Smith: And I look at her again, and she’s looking even more innocent. And, obviously, this is a set-up. So, she said to me at that moment, “I’m Mrs. Harold Burton [Selma Smith Burton]. My husband is Associate Justice Harold Burton of the U.S. Supreme Court.” And I said, “Oh, how nice,” I said, “because I have business with them. And I said, “In the next couple of days, I’m going to be admitted to the U.S. Supreme Court, so I will be seeing him.” And she said, “Oh, good! I’ll tell him tonight.”

Werdegar: Ohhh!

Smith: Well, what happened on that occasion — . This was just a one-person admission. Marguerite Rawalt, the past president of the National Association of Women Lawyers, was moving my admission. There was no large group, as there often is, you know. As the associate justices were filing in to take their seats, in their black robes and looking very dignified [laughing], a certain associate justice, as he passed in front of me, looked at me [winking] — just like that!

Werdegar: That was a wink!

Smith: And everybody laughed. Everybody that was lined up, you know, everyone that had any business in the Court, including the litigants, everybody laughed. And at that moment, the chief justice said, “Well, then I shall take this moment to welcome my colleague from California, Selma Moidel Smith.”

Werdegar: Oh, wonderful, wonderful!

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Smith: And you know who that was — .

Werdegar: Yes, I do — .

Smith: Earl Warren [laughing]. So that was how I was sworn in. And that was just after my visit to the White House.

Werdegar: That had to be a really thrilling experience!

Smith: It was what we would call *special* kinds of events.

Werdegar: Now Mrs. Burton, on the “Selma Smith” — that wasn’t really her name, was it?

Smith: Oh, yes. It was, absolutely!

Werdegar: It was! All right!

Smith: How possibly could it be that it would be that very day!

Werdegar: Yes, really extraordinary. Everything was special that day.

Smith: Yes!

Werdegar: Were there any particular *California* events? This Board membership took you to Washington, and it was a *Pennsylvania* hospital. Were there some California events?

Smith: Oh, yes. In California some of the special events were a luncheon at Pickfair, hosted by actress Mary Pickford in honor of our dean, Dr. Marion Fay.⁴ This was in 1962. And the hostess was, as they used to call her, “America’s Sweetheart.”

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Werdegar: Well, I was going to say that. She was a legendary screen actress —

Smith: Oh, yes.

Werdegar: — and she, in her day, was known as “America’s Sweetheart.” Did you feel that way when you saw her?

Smith: Very much so, and I can see why they said it, because the way she carried herself, the way she communicated, everything about her suggested that very kind of vision.

Werdegar: How old was she then?

Smith: Oh, she was a little past middle age.

Werdegar: Oh, heavens! I would think way past, because she was a silent movie star, wasn’t she?

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: How did she look?

Smith: Oh, she looked very nice!

Werdegar: Well, that had to be thrilling.

Smith: And her husband was there, her young husband [laughing]. Even to visit Pickfair was a special occasion.

Werdegar: Even I’ve heard of Pickfair.
Smith: Of course, and it really was a lovely, lovely occasion that they did themselves proud for Marion Fay.

And then, there was a premiere at the Pantages Theater in Hollywood of the motion picture “The Happiest Millionaire” — with a block-long red carpet, which we all walked on, those of us who were invited. This was in 1967, and all proceeds of this premiere went to the college. It was preceded by a private dinner in honor of Mrs. Anthony J. Drexel Biddle, Jr. at the Beverly Hilton Hotel.5

Werdegar: Was this the Mrs. Biddle who was the wife of the United States ambassador?

Smith: Yes, of course.

Werdegar: How did the college or the Board arrange to have a premiere benefiting them?

Smith: That was through another member of our Board, and that was Grace Kelly. And she was the one who made those arrangements.

Werdegar: Oh, that makes sense!

Smith: And then, too, in California, I was twice designated as the official college delegate to an academic convocation and inauguration of a president of the University of California [which took place] at UCLA. The first was Charles Hitch. That was in 1968. In fact, I have a photo right here showing — well, you can see who it is showing.

Werdegar: I see that it is showing you and Charles Hitch and Lady Franks and Lord Franks, the speaker — a very handsome-looking group. And down below, I see — oh, there you are with your cap and gown in the academic procession. It’s from the red carpet to the academic procession!

Smith: Yes. These were superlative events. And then again in 1984, for President David Gardner, that was the inauguration as fifteenth president of the University of California. That was in April of ’84.
Werdegar: And here we have the official Inaugural Program with the University of California seal. I’m opening it — wonderful. “Delegates from Universities and Colleges” — I see there, from the Medical College of Pennsylvania, founded in 1850, “President Emerita, National Board, Selma Moidel Smith, Esq., J.D.” How thrilling!

Smith: Yes, these were beautiful events. They certainly had delegates from all over the world, and all of them in their own caps and gowns. It was quite a sight to see the academic procession.

Werdegar: In all its —

Smith: In all its glory [both chuckling]. Yes!

Werdegar: — grandeur and glory and ceremonial pomp.

Smith: And I was dressed in my cap and gown. I brought the one from the Medical College of Pennsylvania, which they appreciated very much.

Werdegar: Oh, of course.

Smith: And I was dressed by the vice chancellor, Rosemary Park. We didn’t even don our caps and gowns without someone of position from the university —

Werdegar: Sort of ceremonially —

Smith: Exactly.
Werdegar: And to be a vice chancellor as a woman probably had to be unusual.

Smith: Yes, she was an outstanding person.

Werdegar: Were there commencement ceremonies that you were engaged in?

Smith: Yes, those were the commencements at the Medical College itself. We were invited always to be members of the party that entered just ahead of the new graduates.

Werdegar: How large would a graduating class be, in your memory?

Smith: Well, between thirty and fifty. It would vary but would certainly be that number. And there’s the photo, coming down the aisle.

Werdegar: Oh, that’s a wonderful photo.

Smith: That’s in Philadelphia.

Werdegar: “Selma Moidel Smith in academic procession.” You look like you just got your degree! [both laughing] You look very happy. That’s wonderful. This is the commencement at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, May 29th, 1976. And what was the connection of the Academy of Music with the medical college, or was there any?

Smith: Only a place that was a lovely location and which was selected each year by the college in which to have the graduation.

Werdegar: Oh, I see — lovely!
I see another photograph of Selma Moidel Smith. It looks like there’s a little breeze there. “Commencement, Philadelphia, June 9th, 1964.” There you are in your cap and gown. Very nice.

Now, apart from these celebratory and ceremonial occasions, did you have other responsibilities as a member of the Board?

Smith: Yes, I very soon was placed on the Executive Committee, and —

Werdegar: I’m not surprised! [chuckling]

Smith: — and for years on the Awards Committee. Well, from ’72 to ’85, I served on that committee. And what we did was — and this was a most important kind of thing to do — the Board established a cash prize of ten thousand dollars —

Werdegar: Significant amount of money!

Smith: — to a woman medical scientist. It could be a physician, or it could be someone in one of the medical fields. It could be biochemistry — but it had to be someone outstanding, who made contributions to the medical field. It was from all the states, the whole U.S. It gave prominence to even those women who might not be getting the attention that they really deserved because every medical school wanted to have the P.R. that goes with having a winner of a national competition. This served many purposes. And women dusted off their c.v.’s and added information as to their medical discoveries in order to enter this competition. So, I was on the committee
that was to review the submissions from these candidates for these competitions, and
I still have, in fact, on my shelf — a particular shelf [chuckling] — these
submissions. We all voted individually for the woman that we felt was —

Werdegar: Uh-huh.

Smith: And, of course, Marion Fay was the medical expert. I’m happy to say, in each
instance, I always happened to pick the one that actually did receive the award.

Werdegar: It was called the “Marion Spencer Fay National Board Award,” wasn’t it?

Smith: Yes, it was.

Werdegar: What a way to honor her!

Smith: Yes, indeed. And she merited every bit of honor. I remember the occasions very
well! And also, the publicity that attended those selections, and wherever she was,
whether in a medical firm, or at a hospital, or a teaching institution, there was light
shown on places that never, never would have been brought to light. It became an
annual thing. We were happy, very happy, and I have a photograph here with one of
them that you might like to look at.

Werdegar: I would like to see that. Oh, my! Selma Moidel Smith with Patricia Gabow, M.D.,
recipient of the Board’s annual medical woman award. “Dinner at the Union League,
at the National Board’s Spring Meeting in Philadelphia, May 28th, 1982.” And you,
at that time, I see — reading from the bottom up to the top of the photograph — that
you were president of the National Board from 1980 to 1982. And everybody, you and the recipient, look very happy in this photograph!

Smith: She has become the C.E.O. of Denver Health, which is, I think, as far as you can go!

Werdegar: Yes.

Smith: So she has had quite an outstanding career.

Werdegar: So she had leadership potential then, and she was clearly distinguished.

Smith: Oh, yes.

Werdegar: Well, how lovely to be in a position to give these awards and recognition to these women in a previously male-dominated field.

Smith: Yes, and also, they served as an opportunity for a woman to stand out, as she would then join other medical groups. In other words, any medical organization that one of these winners would become a member of would have quite a different reception into that organization when they are welcoming a prizewinning —

Werdegar: Yes!

Smith: Yes, and this is something again that women may have gotten a position to start with, but may not be moving up, may not be looked at, recognized any more for —
Werdegar: They had to pay attention!

Smith: Yes, and so here, when one of them reached a level, and they often, right from there, came to be offered other positions —

Werdegar: Absolutely.

Smith: — it became a very essential part, and something that they had not had before, and it was a pleasure. I enjoyed every one of them because it was a vicarious enjoyment of what they were doing. And I was so pleased, because it paralleled so much the history of women lawyers.

Werdegar: That had to be a thrilling responsibility for you to participate in that. Very rewarding.

Smith: Yes!

Werdegar: Well, I know in your work on the Board, you certainly met some other outstanding people. Do you want to tell us about some of those?

Smith: Yes, I’ll mention a few at the moment. There will be others later. I, of course, would be mentioning what was previously an actress’s name, Grace Kelly, but who became Princess Grace, and I will have more to say about her. I will mention that her mother, Margaret Kelly, was really a pillar of the college and had always been, right there in Philadelphia. And I’m happy to say I was a guest numerous times at their home in Philadelphia.

Werdegar: Well!
Smith: Yes. I remember the room I liked best was the morning room. It was filled with sunlight, and despite whatever winters they were having in Philadelphia, in that room you could pretend that all was sunny. And I remember very well being there on an occasion where I was sitting at Princess Grace’s dressing table and looking at the large photograph at the side, on the table, of Prince Rainier and her children.

Werdegar: Well, hers was a fairytale story, at least in the public eye.

Smith: Oh, yes, very much so. We had several things for the National Board, for certain members particularly, at their home. She was most hospitable, and her mother was a lovely hostess.

Werdegar: She was a gracious woman?

Smith: Oh, yes, absolutely. And really meant a great deal to the college, a great deal.

Werdegar: Ummmh!

Smith: I’m looking at the names: Virginia Boyd Connally from Texas. She’s an M.D. I have to tell you about Virginia because we still correspond, and we talk on the phone. She is one hundred. It was in Washington, on one of our Washington visits. We had one of our functions, and Virginia had heard some reference to the fact that I had had music performed at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Anyway, she knew that I had a CD, and so she insisted that I bring the CD and play it for a meeting of our National Board. So, I brought the CD, and so she saw to it that it was played. And I absented myself, and I stood, like where you’re offstage, and I could see the audience. I came back in and everybody was clapping, you know. Everybody was
saying, they wanted one — without exception, everybody. Oh, they all had their hands up. They want one. And so, Virginia said, “All right! I’m not surprised at all. I want to propose that I want to make a gift to Selma. I will underwrite that she will be able to send a CD to each one of you.” That’s what she did. So, I made more of them — I had all of their addresses, of course — and sent them all out. She paid for everything, for the CDs, for the postage, for whatever expenses were involved, and they were sent out — with a card from her, with her name inside, that this is a gift in honor of Selma. We still talk on the phone.

I’ll mention also the name of Audrey Mars, who was married to — well, I think everyone knows Mars Bars, the candy.

Werdegar: So that’s the relationship? Oh, indeed we do. [both chuckling]

Smith: She had a penthouse apartment at the top of the Watergate in Washington, D.C. She had invited me to her home, and I took occasion — it was when Mark was there, on one occasion; he was a young fellow at that point. She was very interested in the fact that he was going to be an architect. We were standing out on the balcony of her lovely place, and we were looking in one direction at the Kennedy Center — she was just steps away from it, of course, at the Watergate — and looking in the other direction was the National Cathedral, and she asked Mark, “Wouldn’t you like to have a tour through the National Cathedral?” She said, “I could just phone my friend,” and she gave his name, and she said, “He’s in charge; he’ll show you about.” And so, we did in fact go, and, thanks to Mark, I got to see a lot of things that would not have been open to me, but they certainly were to him. She continued her
friendship with Mark, as well, even sending him clippings later of things going up in
Washington.

Werdegar: What a nice person!

Smith: Oh, yes, a lovely person! We were very good friends.
There is a lot that she and I arranged together. And I
remember, during my presidency, which was two years, not
one but two [1980–82], and in fact, I declined a third —

Werdegar: It would have kept you going! [laughing]

Smith: It was only on the assurance that I would serve as 30th
Anniversary chair.

Werdegar: I see. So you don’t take the presidency a third year but you
assume the 30th Anniversary chair [laughing]?

Smith: Yes, which was a two-day occasion. She called me about that time, and said,
“Selma, what can I do for you, what would you like?

Werdegar: That kind of a person!

Smith: So I said, well, I know that a number of the ladies of the National Board would be
delighted to get to see your lovely home here at the top of the Watergate. And she
said, “Oh, all right. Well then, I’ll have a little something here during your two days
that you’re arranging for. And so she did. She scheduled a nice little something, like
a tea, which added a lovely thing to the two days of the 30th Anniversary of the
National Board. We continued to be close friends. I always seated her at my side when I presided during my tenure as president. This was something she appreciated as well.

Werdegar: Well, it was mutual.

Smith: Well, yes. In addition, when I visited Florida, and I had dropped her a note or something, I was unaware when I mentioned a city in Florida, Fort Lauderdale, and she said, “Oh, Selma, when you’re there, stop in — you can be a guest at my club.” She said, “I’d be delighted for you to make use of it.” I was simply letting her know that I was going to be in Fort Lauderdale. I had no idea in the world that she, obviously, had that kind of thing in various locations.

Werdegar: And she was a very generous person —

Smith: Oh, yes!

Werdegar: — and very fond of you.

Smith: Yes, we were very good friends. When she wanted to ask something sometimes, she would step over to me, or she would say, “Selma, who is that over there? You know, I want to greet them, but I can’t think of their names.” And so, I would step up to her, apparently facing her to one side, so that I could speak into her ear and tell her the name of the person without appearing to have said anything to her.

Werdegar: Which you would know!?
Selma Moidel Smith

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Smith: Yes [both laughing]. And, at any rate, we did that — we could do that kind of thing. And she’d step up and say something private to me. They understood it in general, that we were exchanging information about something, and they took for granted that —

Werdegar: You were friends.

Smith: Yes. I was so sorry — all her life, she had always been a collector for the American Cancer Society, and sure enough, that’s what she died of — unfortunately and unexpected, totally. And I was asked to say some words for her, which I certainly did.

Returning now to Princess Grace of Monaco, when it was time for the 20th Anniversary of our National Board, her mother decided to make a gift to us, and that gift was: she was going to bring Princess Grace back to Philadelphia for our occasion, and she would be our guest of honor.

Werdegar: Oh, how lovely!

Smith: Yes! Oh, well, everyone was just thrilled to pieces to know that she was going to be coming. I remember very well — Mark was with me on that occasion. It was his first trip to Washington, D.C. — and I remember very well, when Princess Grace met Mark, she took to him at once. I said, “I want you to know this is his [chuckling] first rented tux.” He was sixteen years old. And she said, “He reminds me of my son at home there, because he has the same height and general appearance and looks like him. My son doesn’t know” — this took place in December [1973] — she said, “My son doesn’t know that in the box under the tree at home, that there is in there his first tux! So, I really think I’m getting a real preview of what my son will look like in the tux by looking at your son.”
Werdegar: Oh, isn’t that nice!

Smith: Well, she took to him immediately.

Werdegar: That’s wonderful.

Smith: Yes. It was a stellar occasion in all directions. It is from this, of course, that we have the photo [pointing]. This was the receiving line at the dinner at the Sheraton–Carlton in Washington, D.C.6

Werdegar: Oh, my goodness! Here you are, at the center of this photograph, with Princess Grace of Monaco, “Board Member and Guest of Honor,” and this is at the National Board Dinner, at the Sheraton–Carlton Hotel, and you’re standing right next to her, and you’re both greeting somebody. It’s a lovely picture, and I’ve seen other pictures of you with Princess Grace as well. Well, thank you for that!

There was a meeting in Washington in the fall of 1981, and you were president of the Board at that time —

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: — and there were some very distinguished speakers. And you arranged them?

Smith: Yes, —

6 Later, the St. Regis Hotel.
Werdegar: You must be very persuasive, to get this list that we’re going to hear about [both chuckling].

Smith: As a matter of fact, for all of my activities, I was very much in communication with the members. We didn’t just see each other —

Werdegar: At meetings.

Smith: There were two times that the Board met — in the spring in Philadelphia and then in the fall in Washington, D.C. — and I would make one or both of the meetings each year, for fifty years.

Werdegar: That’s remarkable.

Smith: At any rate, when one thinks back, you know, to that — . Many memories, I must confess, collide with each other and seek to be first. But, I arranged all of those speakers, for all of those events that I had anything to do with, by telephone, to people I didn’t know.

Werdegar: I was going to say, these are pretty exalted people that you were ringing up.

Smith: Yes, yes, however — .

Werdegar: But they took your call.

Smith: I called and introduced myself and told them what the purpose of the call was, and what event would be taking place, and that I would be very happy to have them — for whatever would have been relevant in their particular field.
Werdegar: I see Secretary of Health and Human Services Richard Schweiker?

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: I’m looking at a program: “Medical College of Pennsylvania, National Board Fall Meeting,” on the cover here, “November 19th and 20th, 1981,” in Washington, D.C., and the headquarters were the Four Seasons Hotel, 2800 Pennsylvania Avenue — I can picture it myself — Georgetown! Here’s the National Board of the Medical College, “President, Mrs. Selma Moidel Smith; Honorary Chairman, Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson.” So this is the program, and did you want to tell us a little bit about who spoke, or how this event unfolded?

Smith: It was right about the middle of my presidency, so when it became time for our annual events, I would put together events that I thought would be nice for the members to attend. Considering that we would either be in Philadelphia or Washington, depending upon where our facilities would be, I would call — and as you see, the luncheon on November 19 of ’81 was in the Senate Dining Room — I had called and made arrangements for us to have our luncheon there.

Werdegar: That sounds very special, exceptional.

Smith: Oh, yes. That was in the Dirksen Senate Office Building. Then, on the program, a “Welcome to Washington” I arranged with Senator John Heinz from Pennsylvania, and guest speaker was Ariel Hollingshead, Ph.D. She had been one of those who had been an awardee. She was a cancer research —

Werdegar: Oh, one of those ten thousand dollar awards named after —
Smith: Yes, originally. Yes, and so I called on her and she made a talk, in the midst of which [laughing] I saw Senator Heinz come into the room at our luncheon, and I knew that he was there to say a few words to our group, because I had requested him to do so. Naturally, senators can’t always know minute by minute exactly the progress of their day — so he came in at just that moment during our luncheon, and Ariel was speaking at the time — and so I saw the situation. And Ariel became a member of our National Board, so I decided there was no way around it.

Werdegar: Oh, dear!

Smith: I stepped up to Ariel in the midst of her remarks at the podium [chuckling], I put my arm around her — which was genuine enough; we were good friends — and I said, “I’m so glad that Ariel is a member of the family, a member of our National Board, because Senator John Heinz has just entered the room and has just a moment in which to greet us.”

Werdegar: Oh, you handled that beautifully! It could be awkward.

Smith: Yes! [laughing] And that was the way I made it possible. The photographer for the college told me later — he said, “We were wondering back there, saying to each other, ‘How is Selma going to —?’” [laughing]

Werdegar: One might wonder, but you really managed beautifully.

Smith: At any rate, it went very smoothly. I was so grateful. That afternoon, after the luncheon, we went to Embassy Row. I had arranged with the Embassy of India for a
visit. From there, we went to the Embassy of Japan, so that they would have the opportunity —

Werdegar: This was a thrilling entrée into exciting places!

Smith: Yes, to places I had no knowledge of before, but simply arranged for this. And they made a very nice tea for us in each case. What we did was: we then reviewed the healthcare programs in India and Japan, so that we were really learning about them and making comparisons between the two of them as well as our own, of course. Let me show you the photos.

Werdegar: Surely. This is a photograph of the National Board luncheon at the U.S. Senate. Again, you are the president of the Board at this extraordinary meeting, and I want to see who was there. We have Senator Arlen Specter from Pennsylvania and, in addition to our Board president, Selma, we have William Brecht who’s chairman of the MCP Board of Corporators, and then, we have tea at the Embassy of India. Wouldn’t that have been so special! Every bit of this was special!
Smith: That evening, there was a reception and dinner at the International Club, in Washington of course. I was presiding, and Marion Fay made the invocation. I remember that Dr. Fay had, I think, the ideal invocation that I have heard throughout all my years, and that was [to begin], “Father of us all —.” And to me that meant everyone. And it seemed to me above and beyond.

Werdegar: Very graceful.

Smith: Yes!

Werdegar: And all-inclusive.

Smith: All-inclusive, yes. Then, as you can see, from there we went to the “Introductions.”

Werdegar: Which you made the introductions. And then Richard Schweiker welcomed everybody. Now here is a photograph taken at the dinner, and there is our Selma Moidel Smith, the president of the Board; Richard Schweiker, Secretary of Health and Human Services; and his wife, Mrs. Claire Schweiker, who’s a Board member. Everybody looks like they’re very happy that evening, as they should be. Next, we have Virginia Knauer, special assistant to the president — I remember her — director, United States Office of Consumer Affairs. She spoke about, “The White House and the Consumer.” That had to be an interesting talk.
Smith: Very! And very informative.

Werdegar: What a thrilling meeting.

Smith: And I thought that this would be useful, very useful to us. Then, on the following day, we had our general membership meeting at the National Press Club, in Washington there, of course. They were kind enough to give us a tour of the National Press Building, which we would ordinarily never get to do. It’s quite an institution. I wanted to mention that the last day of our arrangements was at the Capitol Hill Club, where we had a luncheon, in Washington. And I will say that arranging for these clubs was a very simple matter because our members —

Werdegar: Belonged.

Smith: — belonged. There was not a club in the city that we didn’t have membership on our National Board.

Werdegar: Very distinguished Board, yes!

Smith: And so, they all offered their facilities. We had a guest speaker on that occasion, Julia Walsh, who was a very famous financier. She and her sons had a marvelous company together. She spoke about “The Economy in the ’80s.” And then you have the Department of Health and Human Services. This was something that Claire Schweiker had discussed with me. She said, “Well, let me make a tea for you, at least, in our Department of Health and Human Services, and I said, “Well, if we’re doing that, then perhaps we will have a little tour.” And so we did have a tour of the Department of Health and Human Services. As you see, it says —
Werdegar: “Tea with Mrs. Richard Schweiker.”

Smith: — and it was a lovely, lovely event, I can tell you.

Werdegar: What wonderful memories! What an extraordinary meeting! I feel sorry for the chair that followed you. [both laughing]

Smith: Well, it seemed to me that we had opportunities, and that when you have the opportunity and not make use of them —

Werdegar: Exactly.

Smith: — especially since women were coming from all over the country, you know, to attend our National Board.

Werdegar: The Board was an extraordinary Board. And an extraordinary meeting.

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: Again, the National Board meeting, and here they are meeting — oh, I see Everett Koop, who I did have the privilege to sit next to at a dinner one time. This is in the secretary’s conference room, November 20th, 1981. And we have our secretary of...
Health and Human Services, Richard Schweiker, speaking. I have Dr. C. Everett Koop seated next to the podium — he was our surgeon general, and a very prominent one — and then Mrs. Claire Schweiker, and Selma, the president, and next to you is Congresswoman Nancy Schulze, also a National Board member.

Smith: I wanted to mention, in connection with that, that this was the first appearance of this new surgeon general. Claire Schweiker had called me and said, “When we have our get-together” — and she insisted on making a tea, as well, as I mentioned — she said, “Really, wouldn’t you like to hear him speak? This would be his very first as surgeon general.” And I said, “Yes, that would be delightful.” So, she said, “Well, then I’ll tell him.”

Werdegar: And he agreed —

Smith: And that was it.

Werdegar: He was a very distinctive looking gentleman, with his whiskers.

Smith: Yes [chuckling].
Werdegar: So this was the Fall 1981 meeting, which sounds like an extravaganza. I mean, I can’t imagine more wonderful events and venues packed into what, two–three days?

Smith: There were some who actually couldn’t quite keep up. I was going to say, just at that time, at the college the matter of personnel — the person who would usually be doing some of these things was ill. They thought, “Oh, my goodness, it’s all going to fall flat!” And so I did many of those things, which I would have done in any event. When it came to the bus that was going to take us on tour during those days of my presidency, there was no one to do so, so I simply called from L.A. to a bus company in Washington I had never spoken to before, and arranged for them to be the one to take us to our various things of those two days.

Werdegar: That’s critical.

Smith: Yes, and it worked very smoothly. I’m afraid I had them at my pace. When we left one, we went to another. When we left that, we went to another. I guess many of them —

Werdegar: [laughing] Some couldn’t!

Smith: — were unable to keep up with that, but [laughing] unfortunately, that was what I saw the opportunity for everyone to have. I just thought it would be a shame to not make use of all of them.

Werdegar: Well, it was certainly an array of illustrious speakers and venues and, I would say, quite a tribute to the college, and to you, that everybody would contribute as they did.
And then, two years later, you were chair of the 30th Anniversary celebration, again in Washington?

Smith: Yes, well, I never found it too great an effort.

Werdegar: You spoke to us about Audrey Mars in connection with the 30th, but we didn’t get to some of these speakers that I’m seeing. You had Senator John Heinz, a tea; Arlen Specter, lunch at the Senate. So here, I’m looking at some individuals that you arranged: Frederick Robbins, Nobel Prize winner.

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: He was president of the Institute of Medicine, National Academy of Sciences. He had a luncheon for you at the Senate?

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: And do you want to tell me about some of these others. I remember Janet Travell —

Smith: Oh, yes!

Werdegar: — as being President Kennedy’s physician. She was quite in the news.

Smith: And we also had Judi Buckalew, who was the special assistant to the president, the Office of Public Liaison, and she spoke to us at the dinner at the Washington Club. She was very well known at that time and was, truly, a very active special assistant. And we visited Dumbarton Oaks, where I had the director himself, Giles Constable, speak to us and show us around.
Werdegar: Beautiful place for the fall colors in full bloom.

Smith: Yes, absolutely beautiful!

Werdegar: Just beautiful.

Smith: Then, because of my wish to inject something of the Spanish flavor, I called the Organization of American States and happened to speak to someone very nice at the Pan American Union and arranged with them for tea, and so we were taken to a very lovely tea. In fact, it was after we had been to Dumbarton Oaks [laughing]. I remember the ladies said that in those few days they had seen and done more than they had done [laughing] at any time in their lives. And they gained so much. They said, “It’s not just to attend a meeting.” — we had our business meetings, of course — but I was able to open doors to places —

Werdegar: Oh, so much enrichment!

Smith: — yes, that they would have firsthand opportunities to see and hear and, in some way, be acquainted with.

Werdegar: Can we fast-forward to the 50th Anniversary celebration?

Smith: Oh, yes, by all means! They were very nice to, again, invite me to — on each occasion, everything that I did was by their invitation to me to do it; I never sought any part of it — I was asked to be the speaker of the occasion.

Werdegar: That’s a lot of pressure.

Smith: Well, I spoke for half an hour, without notes, reminiscing over my fifty years —
Werdegar: Oh, perfect!

Smith: — and the people who made it such a wonderful adventure for me.

Werdegar: Oh, it sounds like it was.

Smith: It was! I remember referring also to Mrs. Lewis L. Strauss [Alice], a member of our Board. We were also very friendly. She was a widow — you know, the husband was the admiral. I called her just before our 50th Anniversary dinner and told her about it. She told me, “Selma, I’m a hundred,” and I said, “Well, I’m eighty-four,” and she said, “Well-l-l-l.” She was living on their farm now, which she enjoyed very much, and she had invited me many times. She wanted very much for me to come and see it and visit and stay with her. I never got the opportunity. I was very much involved in litigation at the time, you know, in trials, and I had a court calendar to be observant of.

Werdegar: I don’t know how you could handle all this and be an active litigating attorney.

Smith: Well, I was, at all times. Also, when Ruby Sears, said to me, “Could you come and stay with me for a few days?” — Ruby Sears, her husband being part of the Sears Roebuck family. In fact, what reminded me at this moment was, I said to her, “I wish I could, Ruby, but I have to get back to my office. I have a trial coming up very soon, and my last-minute preparations for it — .” I said, “Mostly it’s done, but I now have to get ready.” And I felt so sorry because it turned out that she passed away very soon after. She had cancer, and somehow she kept us from ever knowing it. And so, she had wanted me to come and, I, in my fifty-year speech to them, or
reminiscences, I said how sometimes you look back at things you regret that you didn’t do and wish you had. It was a pity, and I’m sorry I couldn’t have given her that wish. It would have been lovely. I must say that when Marion Fay passed away, the college asked me to be the speaker for her —

Werdegar: Oh!

Smith: — which I did, of course. That, and my remarks at the 50th — they have kept all of that. It was all recorded.

Werdegar: Oh, that’s wonderful. Part of their archives forever?

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: And you not only gave the keynote speech, but you authored the Fifty-Year Commemorative Book?

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: It has an annotated list of Charter Members and later members, which came out to be five hundred women?

Smith: Yes. As I had said to the group at the fifty-year dinner, “One thing I can tell you. If you’re going to be a member, do it when you’re young, because then you can be there when all the things have been done.” And we decided that our fifty years was appropriate because we had achieved our mission — and that was to make women physicians — what shall we say: we brought them into where they were no longer at one institution, but they could be at whatever institution.
Werdegar: There’s a poetic completion there.

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: I see that the Board, “celebrated its 50th birthday and officially declared its mission accomplished.”

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: What a nice rounding out!

Smith: And I’m so happy that I was able to be one — the one, apparently — to be there at the beginning of that fifty-year period and the end.

Werdegar: Now, did the college join with another college and become coeducational?

Smith: Well, they were made coeducational along the way. That’s when the word “Woman’s” was dropped off, and it was just “Medical College of Pennsylvania.”

Werdegar: 50th Anniversary, five hundred women, mission accomplished.

Smith: Yes!

Werdegar: Well, Selma, I feel a little bit that I’ve been on that journey. I wish I had in fact. What a marvelous journey! I was very interested to learn and understand why, and hear and feel, how important this medical college was to you. Very touching. And all the women of accomplishment who joined together to make this happen! Yes, that was a wonderful era.
Smith: Yes. Again, I have no idea to whom I owe this debt of fifty years of this adventure. It was a unique one, but, as I have said, “I’m grateful for the gift of time” —

Werdegar: Yes.

Smith: — and grateful for the gift of many friends and kind people who have, along the way, added so much to my life.

Werdegar: Indeed! And vice versa, there’s no doubt about that — all the lives and causes that you have impacted! It’s remarkable. Are we now to conclude your oral history?

Smith: Yes, it seems that we are.

Werdegar: Oh, my!

Smith: It’s inevitable that one looks back a long ways. I have had occasion to do that in preparation for these various sessions. And I’m so appreciative of your conversation with me at the very beginning, and that now you are tying it up with a ribbon!

[chuckling]

Werdegar: Well, there might be an addendum! [both laughing] This is just the opportunity to conclude this part.

Smith: I would have to tell you, in all honesty, that we have by no means touched all of the areas in which I was active.

Werdegar: It must be frustrating if you can’t —
Smith: No, not necessarily, but this is not the sum total. Even though we’ve covered many things, there is much more. This’ll be the last chapter, however.

Werdegar: Well —

Smith: One never knows, of course.

Werdegar: As I say, you could always do an addendum.

[both laughing] I’ve enjoyed it very much. I’ve been privileged to do my small part, and I’m happy for you that this is concluded.

Smith: Well, I can’t just sit back and rest now, as the words are used — because I have work to do!

Werdegar: Well, speaking as a member of the Board of the California Supreme Court Historical Society, I hope that’s true!

Smith: As it happens, the 2014 journal [California Legal History, vol. 9] is in its final phases of preparation, so pretty soon — the end of December, you know — that will be coming out. As usual, it’ll be somewhere around five hundred pages. And we start out, the authors and I, as strangers, you know, and most often we end up, just by our sheer communications —
Werdegar: Becoming friends.

Smith: Yes.

Werdegar: It’s a miracle, not just to me but everybody, Selma. I mean, you are beyond remarkable.

Smith: [laughing] Oh, come, come!

Werdegar: I like the way that we’re going to end it with the pleasure of hearing one more of your piano compositions. This was one of the pieces performed by Eduardo Delgado at your 95th birthday celebration on April 13th, 2014, in Los Angeles. And I’m very happy to say, I was there, and we heard so much of your music. It was just a thrilling evening! This one — no surprise — is a tango, and this one is “Tango in B flat minor, No. 1, Opus 31.” [Click below to play music.]