Selma Moidel Smith

Women Trailblazers in the Law
Oral History Project

American Bar Association Midyear Meeting, Miami, February 8, 2007.
Selma Moidel Smith

By Kathryn Mickle Werdegar
Associate Justice of the California Supreme Court

Part 1 — Remarks at Selma’s 95th Birthday Celebration (2014)¹

Today represents the coming together of two aspects of Selma’s life — her talent and success as a practicing attorney and a leader of women attorneys, and her gift and passion for music. I think this program cover, which you all have, represents that. In the middle, we have a beautiful portrait of Selma. On one side, we have the scales of justice — on the other, the musical notes. For those of us who only know one aspect of Selma, today is the opportunity to come together and honor and celebrate the whole of Selma.

I first met Selma when I joined the Board of the California Supreme Court Historical Society. At that time, she was clearly a highly-valued member of the Board, but in short order it became more clear that she was its backbone, its soul, and its heart. And she continues to be so today. We are most fortunate to have her wanting to participate in our organization.

A little later, I became aware of the other aspect of Selma — her gift for music in every way — the violin, the piano, the guitar, voice, dance, and prolific composition, which we are enjoying today. Over the years, one could see Selma on television on behalf of the Women Lawyers announcing and promoting Law Day. On another day, on educational television, you could see Selma instructing students — in Spanish — about the joys of classical music. That’s our Selma.

In the words of the National Association of Women Lawyers, they recently wrote about Selma, our “indomitable, ever-radiant Selma” — in her, we have a truly renaissance woman, outstanding in the law and leadership of women, and renowned for her musical gifts and compositions.²

Selma, happy birthday. We all are thrilled and honored to be here for this wonderful celebration.

¹ Remarks delivered by Justice Werdegar at the “Musical–Legal 95th Birthday Celebration” for SMS, Los Angeles, April 13, 2014.

Part 2 — “A Tribute to Selma”

Selma Moidel Smith was elected to the Board of the California Supreme Court Historical Society in September 2001, and from that time forward has been a devoted and energetic member of our Board. As chair of the Publications Committee, she has served as editor of both the Society’s annual journal, California Legal History, and its semi-annual Newsletter, elevating the quality of both publications to the highest level. She inaugurated the Society’s successful writing competition, inviting students in law schools and graduate programs to submit essays relevant to California’s legal issues and history — and the competition was renamed in her honor in a surprise announcement at her 95th birthday celebration by Society President Dan Grunfeld. Since Selma joined the Board, the success of each of the Society’s educational programs has been in large measure due to her creative spirit, her generous gift of time, her attention to detail and her willingness to assume any task, large or small; Selma, in short, has over the years been at the heart of the Society’s many diverse endeavors.

But there is more. The California Supreme Court Historical Society is not the only organization fortunate enough to have engaged Selma’s attention and talent. The Senior Lawyers Division of the ABA accorded Selma the extraordinary honor of dedicating the Spring 2012 issue of the Division’s Experience magazine to her in gratitude for the many articles she has written for the Division’s publications, her innovations for the benefit of the magazine, and her outstanding service as Chair of the magazine’s Editorial Board, the first woman to hold that office. As stated in the Prologue to the issue, “What a gift we got in Selma!”

This latest accolade is just one in a treasure chest of honors that have been showered on Selma over the span of her career, and not all related to the law. Selma is a gifted musician: she is a pianist, violinist, and Spanish guitarist, and a composer of

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more than 100 piano and orchestral pieces, many with a Latin flavor. Her music has been performed at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and, most recently, at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles by the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic, resulting in a standing ovation. She is listed in the *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers*. Fluent in Spanish, she was the first bilingual docent of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, giving in-school music presentations in Spanish-speaking communities and appearing, at the piano, on educational television. Selma expresses her love of music through dance as well, and is gifted with a fine soprano voice.

During her years of law practice, she also continued her music studies and was selected by audition to sing in the University Chorus at UCLA and, later, to participate in an international piano master class at the Royal College of Music in London. Her gifts in the arts also include poetry, as evidenced by the poem, “Dawn and Sunset” written and published when Selma was 16 years old (and was read aloud by Justice Werdegar in Part I of Selma’s oral history, on page 21).

Selma has always been supportive of issues important to women, in both the law and other significant arenas, and has held positions of leadership in numerous organizations directed to women’s professional advancement; indeed, every organization Selma joins ultimately places her at its helm or in a position of leadership. In 1953 she was invited by the college president to become a charter member of the National Board of the Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania (later the Medical College of Pennsylvania),
which was founded in 1850 to enable women to train as physicians, and she later served as president of the Board.

In 1965 she was invited to attend the First Washington Conference on World Peace through Law as the official representative of numerous women’s legal organizations, as well as to serve as host for Latin American judges and lawyers.

She has been president of the Los Angeles Business Women’s Council and has held many posts in the International Federation of Women Lawyers, the National Association of Women Lawyers (which has honored her with its Lifetime of Service Award in 1999 and the creation of the annual Selma Moidel Smith Law Student Writing Competition in 2005), and the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles, which in 1998 awarded her its first and only honorary life membership in recognition of her then-55 years of commitment and service including two terms as president. Throughout her career and to this day, Selma has been an inspiration to all who know her.

Although we are neither the first nor the only organization to appreciate the “gift of Selma,” appreciate her we do. Members of the Board had occasion to express their admiration, affection and appreciation of Selma, when, after three years, she announced that while she would continue as Editor of our Journal, she would hand on her editorship of the Newsletter. (And as of 2018, she had completed 10 annual volumes of our Journal.) At that time members of the Board wrote to Selma, expressing heartfelt thanks for her work with the Newsletter and the Society.

Thank you, Selma, for all you have done and continue to do for the Society. We honor you for your leadership, dedication and generosity in the sharing of your talents, all to the benefit of the Society and the wider community of judges, lawyers, and scholars that it serves. We are privileged to have you in our midst.

At the U.S. Supreme Court — with Chief Justice Earl Warren during the Washington World Conference on World Peace Through Law, September 1965.
From Selma’s 95th Birthday Celebration (2014)  

Tani Cantil-Sakauye, Chief Justice of California:

Dear Selma, what a tremendous pleasure it is to be here in this auditorium to listen to your music. I speak from a place of extraordinary respect and admiration for you, for your leadership all these years, and for adding to the pleasure of all of our lives with the music you’ve composed and played. It’s an honor to be here. Thank you for letting me say these few words. Happy birthday, our dear Selma!

Ronald M. George, Former Chief Justice of California:

Selma, what a joy it is to be here among your colleagues in so many venues and to stand in awe of your numerous talents that we’re being exposed to here. I’ve been so pleased to work with you in the Supreme Court Historical Society efforts to preserve and disseminate the work of our courts. And you are truly a force of nature. You have brought that organization to the fore with the incredible publications that you have worked on, and you’re a person not only of vision but of detail.

We look forward hopefully to another one in five years, maybe in the same venue here. So keep it up. You’re indomitable. Thank you so much, Selma.

Joseph R. Grodin, Former Associate Justice, California Supreme Court:

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.

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5 For the complete text of all greetings, see Part VI of the oral history.
Arthur Gilbert, Presiding Justice, California Court of Appeal:

I’m here to say a few words about Selma Smith. Selma and I met several years ago when she was just a kid — in her eighties. She was and still is editor of the California Legal History journal. I had to take a leave of absence from the court. I had to do that because I received Selma’s curriculum vitae. It’s so extensive that it has a table of contents. Have you ever seen a C.V. with a table of contents? It’s over forty pages of single-spaced contents that include an array of articles, panels that she’s been on, authorships, panel discussions. Got a few hours? — and I’ll tell you . . . . If you took twenty or thirty Nobel Prize winners and had them combine their accomplishments, I don’t think it would even equal what Selma has accomplished in her lifetime.

This award that we’re giving her tonight, like many of the many awards she’s received, recognizes a lifetime of extraordinary leadership, both in the legal profession and throughout the larger community as well. . . . Internationally, she’s known — her paper on legal education which advocated clinical training in law school was presented by invitation at the 1948 conference of the International Bar Association at The Hague and was adopted by resolution. She has held posts in other countries, not just in this country, because when I tell you her reach is far, I’m not joking. She’s held many posts with the International Federation of Women Lawyers. She was decorated with La Orden del Mérito Juan Pablo Duarte by the Dominican Republic in 1956.

I have written a few articles for the California Supreme Court Historical Society, for which Selma is editor and publications chair. Selma was my editor-in-chief on more than one occasion. It was not just her sharp eye that caught the most subtle points, but her ear and sense of tone. She refused my offer to make her a senior research attorney at the Court of Appeal. But Selma — as you know — her talents are not just limited to the law. She’s also a composer . . . and I, even, have had the distinction of playing one of her works.

Selma and I have become buddies. She has a wicked sense of humor. Subtlety does not elude her. She gets it. Our conversations are punctuated with laughter, preceded by appropriate pregnant pauses. It’s not just the law we talk about, but music, the arts, the human condition. How fortunate I am to know this extraordinary individual and to be her friend. Her contributions to the law, to women, to women lawyers, to all lawyers, to the community at large — a community that extends beyond our borders. Selma, I want to thank you. The gifts you have given us enrich us and our future generations. You’re exquisite. We love you. Thank you.
Comments by Others

Sarretta McDonough, President-Elect, National Association of Women Lawyers (2017):

“A Conversation with Selma Moidel Smith”
Lawyer, composer, volunteer extraordinaire — trailblazer — she is both a role model and an inspiration to all.  

Selma has been an inspiration to generations of the NAWL family and has served as a guiding light and mentor to NAWL’s leadership for more than a half-century. . . .

I have fond memories of your 95th “Musical–Legal” celebration, not only the music and the remarks by lawyers and musicians alike, but your dancing as well! When I think of a life well lived, I think of you. You are a true, life mentor to so many of us. Thank you for all you have done for NAWL for over 74 years (and counting!).

Ruth D. Kahn, President, Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles (2013):

“Selma Moidel Smith’s 70th Anniversary as an Attorney and Member of WLALA,”

Selma Moidel Smith is legendary in Los Angeles and is a beloved Life Member of WLALA. She served two terms as President (1947, 1948) of the Southern California Women Lawyers, and fulfilled a dream of creating a unified women’s bar as a leader of the movement to unify SCWL with the Women Lawyers Club in 1964, creating WLALA. She has continued to contribute to the organization in a variety of ways over the years. On January 5, 2013, Selma will celebrate her 70th anniversary as a lawyer and a member of WLALA. Selma is a woman of many talents. . . .

Selma, you are an inspiration and role model and I can’t think of a better place to showcase that right now than the January 2013 issue of the WLALA newsletter as you celebrate your 70th anniversary as a member of the California State Bar and of WLALA (since the age of 23).

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Over the years, I have bumped into Selma Moidel Smith a number of times at WLALA or other bar events. I knew she was a long time WLALA member and former president, but not much more. This past December, I had the privilege of sitting with Selma at a couple of different bar events and I decided I needed to learn more about her. Selma is such a wonderful treasure and a delightful person that I felt compelled to share a little of what I learned.

On April 3, 2017, Selma will turn 98 years old. I am confident that she could beat me in a foot race and I can only hope to be half as spry, witty, and engaging when - and if - I reach the same age.

Last year, Selma was selected as one of 20 individuals from the Los Angeles legal community to be honored with an exhibit, a public film premiere: “Overcoming Adversity: Real Stories.” All of the honorees appearing in the film were nominated and selected by a committee of legal professionals and officials from the LA Law Library as part of its OPENING THE DOOR: Personal Stories of Groundbreaking Los Angeles Lawyers, Judges and Legal Professionals Project. The honorees are lawyers, judges and other legal professionals in California who have achieved extraordinary success in the legal profession despite obstacles including race, gender, socioeconomic barriers and disability. . . .

Selma Moidel Smith was sworn in to the California bar on January 5, 1943, beginning a long and impressive career as a litigating attorney, advocate, speaker, historian, writer and editor.

Harry N. Scheiber, Riesenfeld Chair Professor of Law and History and Chancellor’s Professor, Emeritus, UC Berkeley School of Law (2016):

“Selma Moidel Smith, Esq., a figure of great standing in the bar, . . . as editor-in-chief has transformed the journal California Legal History into a treasure-house of both primary materials and excellent new scholarship.”

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