

Rawalt in Review

By **Trustman Senger**

August 28, 1986

Lorena Weeks went to work as a telephone operator in Wadley, Ga., her senior year in high school. In 1966, almost two decades later, she learned of an opening for a switchman's job and applied. The company said it would not consider applications from women and awarded the position to a man with less seniority.

Weeks sued, hoping recently enacted civil rights legislation would support her claim. But the court held that the company was trying to protect Weeks from a job that would require her to lift a 31-pound piece of equipment. Weeks returned to work the next day, passed her heckling bosses on the way into the building and sat down to hand write her reports. She refused to lift her 34-pound typewriter out from under an antique desk.

"I was suspended," Weeks recalled recently. "And that like to have killed me, I felt like a crook. I hated to keep being a troublemaker over and over and over, but I kept thinkin' some day maybe I would have granddaughters."

Weeks now has granddaughters, and all three of them are thankful that in 1967 a 72-year-old Washington lawyer named Marguerite Rawalt had never learned to take no for an answer.

In her first 90 years, Marguerite Rawalt has achieved the impossible at least twice: She's given lawyers and feminists a good name.

"As long as you're right, you know it's a thing that ought to be done and you keep at it," she says, sitting in a chair in the Arlington apartment she refers to as "a rat's nest." The "nest" is as orderly as Rawalt's mind. It's just that she's had to make room for the copying machine in the dining room, and the closets are full of filing cabinets stuffed with papers documenting her life and the history of the women's movement.

She's never been able to remain idle. Besides a 33-year career as an attorney for the Internal Revenue Service and caring for her husband, she managed in her spare time to become the first and only woman president of the Federal Bar Association, to be president of the Business and Professional Women's Clubs, to serve on President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women and to help found the National Organization for Women and its Legal Defense Fund.

That's when she heard of Lorena Weeks and set about securing her the switchman's job and \$31,000 in back wages.

She has spent the last two years opening up her closets and her life to biographer Judith Paterson in the hope that "Be Somebody: A Biography of Marguerite Rawalt" (Eakin Publications) would serve as a chronicle of the years between suffrage and women's liberation. Betty Friedan says Rawalt "was a feminist in that period when it had become a dirty word. She was accepted by the establishment that was functioning to keep women quiet. But she knew there had to be a movement."

Unlike Friedan and other feminists, Rawalt has never evidenced a flicker of resentment for the men whose rulings made it difficult for women to function in the work force. "Men are not to be censured for continuing to run and to control organizations that are theirs by long practice. I don't blame

them. If women had been in control of the political parties in this country for 165 years, we too would have placed the interests of women first," she says, eyes twinkling.

Rawalt has had no difficulty maintaining comfortable relationships with the men she dealt with while crusading for women. Her attitude was simple: "They had the power and we had to persuade 'em. We couldn't fight them." NOW cofounder Phineas Indritz says that Rawalt "is not the kind of person who would engage in fisticuffs. She would simply try to persuade in a very rational and decent manner."

Catherine East, who worked with Rawalt on the President's Commission and NOW, thinks this is the reason Rawalt was the most impressive witness to appear before Congress on behalf of the Equal Rights Amendment. "The men, and they were all men, looked at her and she wasn't a wild libber, and she was a lawyer who backed up her comments with things they understood."

Rawalt spent her early days riding ponies and doing chores with her two brothers on the family's Texas farm. "I was always just one of 'em. I never knew I was 'the girl' in the family and they were 'the boys,' " she says. The tale of her childhood days spent traveling cross-country in a covered wagon to the years in Washington when she rubbed elbows with Eleanor Roosevelt, Bess Truman and Lady Bird Johnson would seem unremarkable to Rawalt -- if she ever wasted a minute reflecting on such matters.

In 1928 she decided to come to Washington and become a lawyer, leaving her family, her friends and a recently divorced husband in Texas. "I was very sure at the time," she says -- "why goodness sakes, I'd be here just long enough to get that law degree and then back home I would go . . .

"My father said to me, 'Marguerite, I think you're making a mistake. You will starve to death trying to practice law here in south Texas. They are not ready for a woman lawyer,' " she remembers with a chuckle.

Apparently the enlightened residents of Washington weren't fully prepared, either. Georgetown Law School politely informed her that it did not accept women as students. George Washington had a night school, but refused to accept the credits from Rawalt's tiny Texas college. Her appeal to GW's complaints committee was unsuccessful, but Rawalt wasn't about to pack up and return to her manager's job at a Texas Chevrolet dealership, even if it did pay more money than she could hope to make as a lawyer.

So she demanded that GW's new president explain why her credits weren't good enough for his school. It wasn't long before she was elected to GW's first law review and passed her bar exam a year before she finished school. But she still needed to find work as a lawyer.

Didn't she ever consider giving up hope?

"No, no," Rawalt says without a moment's thought. "Just getting the job."

She worked every political connection she had from her days in former Texas governor Pat M. Neff's office, until she was offered an appointment in the Office of the Chief Counsel at the Bureau of Internal Revenue. But Rawalt's family had been hit hard by the Depression, and she worried that she wouldn't be able to continue supporting them if she accepted a job that paid only two-thirds her current secretarial salary.

"Then the whole darn family wrote and said, 'You take the job! What have you been going to law school for for three years? We'll get along.' "

Her first day on the job, the office administrator tried to make her a docket clerk, but Rawalt insisted on working as an attorney. She was assigned her share of cases and spent the next four years collecting unpaid taxes.

Those years were far from uneventful. Rawalt, who had gone to court to take back her maiden name after divorcing her first husband ("quite a thing then"), fell in love with Harry Secord, an Army Air Corps captain 11 years her senior. Yet a controversial law prohibiting two members of the same family from working for the government forced Rawalt to keep her marriage a secret for three years.

"Oh, that old Section 213!" she says. "Can you imagine? And the sort of man that Harry was, it was not his way of doing things at all."

Did he ever insist on making their marriage public?

"No, no, he wanted me as his wife, so that was the way."

And what did Harry think when his wife left her office at the IRS every day at 5 and headed over to the Business and Professional Women's Clubs to begin toiling at her second career?

"Well, I certainly had a very indulgent husband, I'll tell you that," she says with a grin. "He wasn't a spectacular person, you know, one of these movie-lookin' men, but he was a wonderful man and Harry was proud to know the women I worked with. He thought they were just tops."

Secord retired when Rawalt was still at the IRS, but was adamant that she go right on working. He spent his days visiting with friends, traveling and doing the grocery shopping. "Harry was a wonderful host," Rawalt recalls. "I could give a party and not get all nervous about whether we were going to have chicken sandwiches or something else, because he would have it all figured out."

But even before Secord retired, Rawalt was able to reap some rewards for her hard work at the office. She remembers the chief counsel calling her in to say, "Marguerite, you've been asking me to go down to the appeals division now for a couple of years and I'm going to send you down there. They don't want you, but I'm going to send you down there.' Well, wasn't that a beautiful way to have to go!"

Rawalt was determined to make a go of it even though the director of the appeals division greeted the news of her arrival by announcing, "I don't know why I have to have a G.D. woman in my outfit.'" She plugged away for a few years until one day she discovered that another attorney had made a serious tactical error in a case. The director rang the bell for her and "I went in there and he swore as much as my father did -- pretty much," she recalls. "He grabbed the telephone and told his secretary to get the man who had erred on the phone and he made the air blue.

"I knew I had arrived when he'd swear like that and carry on in front of me," she laughs.

"That's been typical of my experience with men," she continues. "You know, if they get the facts and they get to know that you can do the job, then they change their mind about you."

But Rawalt wasn't able to break through all of the prejudice she encountered during her career. Five times her name was proffered as a candidate for a judicial appointment. Five times she was rejected. Promotions within the IRS never came easily, as she was moving in uncharted territory for women. Finally, in 1964, Rawalt was told she was too old to be considered for the vacated associate chief counsel's position. She chose to retire.

But Rawalt's retiring is a factual impossibility. She simply devoted her energies to setting up the first tax-exempt foundations for women, including the NOW Legal Defense Fund and Education Fund, taking its first sex discrimination cases to court and working to get the ERA ratified by Congress.

"We didn't call it the ERA -- oh heaven forbid, we didn't ever use that term," she chortles. Yet Rawalt didn't blame people for having a negative reaction to the phrase. "Maybe years and years ago, I felt the same way. Because the only people that I knew who ever heard about the ERA were some very elderly women that were fanatical about it. They never analyzed the law, they just used rhetoric that I didn't like, like 'this is second-class citizenship' or 'it makes women slaves.' "

Rawalt marched, helped prepare a report for the White House, gave speeches, testified before Congress and organized campaigns in her efforts to persuade members of the House and Senate to vote for the amendment. "I knew we were right that we ought to be in the Constitution, just as I know it today, and the thing was to persuade the people who could vote us in to treat us that way," she explains. "It wasn't up to the men to seek this out, they were busy with everything, this was just one thing -- 'well, I guess the women think they're mistreated.' It was up to us to show them that the law actually said these terrible things about us."

Rawalt's energy and accomplishments appear to have produced few enemies and many admirers. East recalls the time Rawalt ignored a bleeding ulcer until her doctor insisted on operating. "A few days later, she had me bring some documents to the hospital so she could work on the footnotes to a brief she was writing."

Yet she always made time for her family and friends. "She once arrived late for a Kennedy Commission meeting explaining that she had to stay home and make blueberry muffins for Harry," East says.

"My recollections of her will stay with me as long as I have recollections about anyone," Indritz promises.

Not surprisingly, Rawalt rarely indulges in frivolous activities. "I permit myself one hour on the TV in the afternoon. I watch 'Santa Barbara,' " she admits.

Did she know that President Reagan favors the same soap?

"Oh, no!" she cries. "Oh dear, you've soured it."

"My social life is the women's bar, the BPW, the Zonta club, the Federal Bar Association," she says. "I go to the Federal Bar and I enjoy the men there no end, you know. I'm not after them and they're not after me, and they say things to me that just amuse the life out of me. They comment to me as if I were another man."

Now that her biography is finished, Rawalt is facing a totally new challenge -- spare time. She maintains that she hopes to be able to read a book or two. If she can sit still long enough.

But her friends know her better. "I can't imagine at the Bicentennial of the Constitution coming up in 1989," predicts Virginia Allan of the BPW, "we won't hear from Marguerite again."