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Recommended Citation

Buck, Morison, "Josephine Howard Stafford: first of her gender (1921-1996)" (2000). *Morison Buck Biographies of Hillsborough County Judges*. 48.
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***** CHIPS OFF THE OLD BENCH *****

**JOSEPHINE HOWARD STAFFORD: First of Her Gender
(1921-1996)**

Although she came along 41 years later than he, Josephine Howard shared one thing in common with General Douglas MacArthur. Both were "Army brats." Their fathers were in active military service at their birth. Josephine's father, Joseph, was not a general officer (as was MacArthur's sire). But as a Sergeant Major he enjoyed the highest non-commissioned officer rank, which gave him great prestige in the Regular Army structure and tradition. At Fort Bragg, N.C. he was in a pack-mule outfit, Fourth Field Artillery.



Josephine (Jo, as she was affectionately known during her career) was born July 27, 1921 in San Antonio, Texas, home of Ft. Sam Houston. Curiously, MacArthur was a native of Little Rock in the neighboring state of Arkansas.

As is typical of life in the military, the Howards probably never entirely unpacked their belongings because transfers are the order of any day. After an interlude at another permanent installation on the Mexican border, the Swiss Family Howard relocated to Fort Robertson, Nebraska about 1930. When Jo was ten years old they journeyed by troop train to Fort Bragg, and that was her headquarters through her college years.

Jo, like the author, her contemporary, was a product of the Big Band era. We called it music. Difference was that she was a sparkling jitterbug, winning several dance contests according to both her brother and her half-sister. During the war years, she wrote articles for the daily newspaper aboard the U.S.S. Heintzelman; wrote, directed, sang and danced in a variety show aboard the vessel, and did similar duty many times at shows at Veterans Hospital in Fayetteville.

She earned her LLB from UNC in 1952, having previously received a BA from Woman's College, University of North Carolina. Following WWII she sojourned in Germany for a couple of years, the most pleasurable of her life says daughter, Julie, who is the talented Development Director of the Hillsborough County Bar Association.

In 1953, she came to Tampa for a job interview with Fowler, White and was hired as an associate. She and James E. (Jimmy) Thompson, a West Virginia transplant with that firm were administered the oath at the same time by Judge Henry C. Tillman at the newly occupied County Courthouse.

The celebrated French impressionist painter, Degas, apparently steeped in philosophy as well as art, wrote: "Everyone has talent at twenty-five. The difficulty is to have it at fifty." Josephine showed signs of special gifts, in addition to making exceptionally good grades in school rather effortlessly in her 20s, especially with the pen. She was the first woman to write a column for an Army newspaper, the Fort Bragg Post – she called it, "The Voice of Femininity." She won the 1952 North Carolina Poetry Contest with "Discrimination" which she described as a "socially significant" poem.

Composing thoughtful verse was for her a lifetime passion. One of her Christmas poems (slightly edited for reasons of space) appears later in this piece.

One of only a few lady lawyers around and a relative newcomer to Tampa, Josephine was ambitious and eager to become a force in the community. With her straightforward manner, keen intellect, and fresh good looks, she made a favorable impression wherever she went. She was an activist in volunteer programs almost beyond count. These included state and local Bar committees, Mayors' committees on social issues of special interest to women and minorities, and other organizations. She served as President of Florida Association of Women Lawyers, and also the West Coast Chapter of that group. She spoke on the radio, at schools and seminars, lectured at all local colleges, and was the first woman to be honored as "Boss of the Year" by Tampa Legal Secretaries Association (one of her secretaries at Legal Aid was a male temporary (not he – the position). She was a Presbyterian, but she could have showed Moslems a thing or two about the "whirling dervish" syndrome. A 1993 resume prepared by her consisting of 4 ½ pages of her accomplishments would be the envy of Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

Not long after leaving Fowler, White, Jo assumed directorship of Legal Aid, replacing Delbert McLaughlin who became Court Commissioner in child support matters. That was in 1958. During her tenure there, Jo created an effective public relations program, publishing a periodical entitled, "The Legal Aid Brief Case." The June 1963 edition contained a panoramic look at a typical days work for the Director with particular reference to her broadcast on WHBO radio. Former judge John F. Germany recalls Jo appearing before him many times, always lugging around a huge stack of legal files due to the volume of her caseload. Honors continued to pile up for her. She was named in Who's Who in Commerce & Industry, and Who's Who of American Women.

After ten years of representing the poor, the weak and downtrodden, and toting those stacks of files, Jo decided to get back into law practice. She had just

been offered the post of resident attorney for the County Commission, but that would have required her to suffer a loss in income. The writer has no knowledge of Mrs. Stafford's financial circumstances at that time, but even poets have to eat. Here's what hard-boiled entertainer, Sophie Tucker, had in the way of advice to women:

"From birth to age 18 a girl needs good parents,
From 18 to 35, she needs good looks,
From 35 to 55, she needs a good personality,
From 55 on, she needs good cash."

Resigning from Legal Aid in February 1969, she became associated in law practice with William Blount in First National Bank Building in April of that year. Judge Rogers Padgett, who had an office in that building that housed considerable legal talent over the years, says that Josephine frequently expressed an interest in becoming a judge, having sat as a substitute in Municipal Court both before and after opening an office with Blount.

Life was a series of "Firsts" for Josephine Stafford. It is the thrust of this bit of inartful prose to focus on the selection of this grand lady to serve from time to time as Judge of Police Court (Municipal Court) thereby making her the first woman to preside over any court in Hillsborough County. "Police Court" was once defined by Harold Ross, longtime editor of *The New Yorker*, as a place where the city's detritus washes up for penance. But it was more than that, and the dignity and fairness she displayed when on the elevated bench caused many citizens to have enhanced respect for the process. She was first appointed Acting Municipal Judge by Mayor Nick Nuccio in 1958 on more than one occasion. Then Mayor Julian Lane utilized her services in 1963 on an interim basis. In his first term Mayor Dick Greco designated her as Acting Judge in July 1970. She was not able to serve after connecting with the City Legal Dept. in 1972, but it was just as well inasmuch as Municipal Courts were abolished when Article V of the Fla. Constitution was amended, eff. January 1, 1973.

In 1972 she was appointed full-time Assistant City Attorney and designated as Chief, Administration Division. She met and became close friends of Mary Bryan and Joan McConnell, also employed by City of Tampa. Between them, they have a treasure house of stories about Jo Stafford. Here is a brace of them:

"During her time as head of Legal Aid much of her work was taken with child support enforcement. She learned that a deadbeat dad called Red frequented a certain saloon. Tipped off that he would likely be there one late afternoon, she entered the joint, sat on a stool and ordered a Manhattan. In walks a tall man with long red hair and a beard of like color and an arm tattoo. When she learned the redhead's name from the bartender, she whipped out a

summons and served it upon the startled man. She then turned her back on him, raised her glass in a form of salute and uttered the immortal words: "Stafford always gets her man."

On another occasion, she and several lady friends were at a restaurant during the Christmas season. The waitress told them that a gentleman wished to buy a round of drinks for the table. When Jo learned that the gallant male was owner of a notorious nude dancing club, the preferred beverage was set aside, and she spoke up loudly, "Tell that person thank you but no thanks. I will not accept this token paid for by the ultimate servitude of a desperate sister."

Here is her poem written for Christmas 1973

All is ready for the celebration:
The wreath is hung; the candles glowing;
Wine is sparkling, still decanting,
While oven smells of turkey browning
Permeate the house, mingling with the scent of bayberry.
I've placed the mistletoe in the most strategic places,
And the Tom 'N Jerrys are warming in the chafing dish.
The tree, a northern fir, stands majestically dressed;
Its lights twinkling like a trillion stars.
Its baubles – green and gold and red – shine brightly.
Amid that reflected glow the Christ child sleeps.
The sweet curvature of his lips
Express more than he can articulate
of love, of human warmth, of peaceful sanctity,
Of kindness and compassion for all mankind;
Those weak, those poor, those beings thrust by
Adversity into the depths of despair,
And those whose sicknesses cannot be cured;
Those whose superior intelligence amazes us;
And those simple, happy people who bring comfort to a
troubled world. And thus we celebrate.

Her exemplary record of service to the public, including her devotion to justice while presiding over Municipal Court, was rewarded posthumously at the First Annual Women's History Month Celebration at City Hall, March 11, 1997. She would have been proud of the establishment of the Josephine Howard Stafford Memorial Award in her memory. Another "first" for Jo.

Morison Buck

AFTERWORD:

If I knew what poets know,
I would find a theme
Sweeter than the placid flow
of the fairest dream;
I would sing of love that lives
On the errors it forgives;
And the world would better grow
If I knew what poets know.

James Whitcomb Riley