"Shoulder
To Shoulder"

Litta Belle Hibben Campbell
and Women
of the USC Law School
During the Early Years

by Associate Dean
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The study of law fulfilled all my hopes and ambitions. It was for me the ‘pursuit of happiness’ guaranteed by the Constitution. It satisfied my sense of justice and almost, if not quite, my longing for religion, for in those days the law was the Golden Rule . . . .” “Those days,” which Litta Belle Hibben Campbell ’13, so buoyantly remembered in her 1963 memoirs, referred to her life as a student at the University of Southern California College of Law from 1910 to 1913, when she graduated as the top student in her class.

Litta Belle Hibben Campbell (1886-1980) was not the first woman to graduate from the Law School - twelve others preceded her - but she was the most successful female student to that date. Her impressive academic accomplishments aside, Hibben Campbell helped colonize USC as a place for women to study law. With several other women, Hibben Campbell founded and was president of the Legal Lights, the women’s law association at USC, and a founding member of the Phi Delta Delta [PDD] sorority in 1911, the first law student sorority in the country. In Hibben Campbell, the personal, social, and national coalesced during her time as a USC law student; no wonder she referred to those years as “among the happiest in my life.”

The Law School benefited from her success as well because her presence made the USC Law School a place different from most other American law schools. Even after graduation, Hibben Campbell’s life in the law remained closely connected to her alma mater. She practiced for two years in the Los Angeles law offices of her former torts professor, Kemper Campbell ’07, LL.M. ’09, before becoming the first female deputy district attorney in the United States. She resigned in 1918 to return to the Campbell offices, this time as Mrs. Campbell, as well as attorney. Between 1914 and 1918, Hibben Campbell taught torts in the Law School. Two sons, Kemper Campbell, Jr. and Joseph Campbell, subsequently attended the Law School. In 1958, Hibben Campbell and her late husband created the Kemper Campbell, Jr. Memorial Lounge in the law building.
Hibben Campbell, in her ambitions, academic, social, and professional accomplishments, as well as her life-long engagement with her alma mater, was instrumental in making the Law School an institution which purposefully sought, and educated women law students in unprecedented numbers.

**Women and the Decision to Study Law**

“One of the significant features of this (College of Law) enrollment was the fact that . . . women decided to study law (here),” observed the editor of the 1918 *Stare Decisis*, the USC Law School annual published between 1910 and 1919. Dean Frank M. Porter often made the same point in his reports to the national journal of legal education, *The American Law School Review*. By 1930, more than 115 women had, like Hibben Campbell, survived the rigors of USC Law School; other women enrolled but left before graduation. In comparison with other law schools of that time, particularly those whose membership in the American Association of Law Schools (AALS) marked them as aspirants to the highest levels of legal education, the presence of so many women lent a discernible element to the Law School.

The 1914 *Stare Decisis* contains a one-page description of the Legal Lights association, one of several women’s social organizations created at the Law School. It was founded in 1912 to provide academic and emotional support for women law students. The author, most likely the associate editor, May Lahey ’14, reported that the Legal Lights organization was “merely a branch of the women’s movement,” one that “far antedates our generation.” This clearly reflected what was happening in the rest of American society at the time. The suffrage movement, the most conspicuous real and symbolic expression of women’s civic, enlightened self interest, achieved its goal in California in 1911, when women won the vote. 1911 is also an important symbolic date for the story of women at USC Law School. The year when PDD sorority was founded, it was also a time when public issues converged with institutional creation.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, middle-class Southern California women were actively discussing suffrage in two Los Angeles women’s clubs, the Friday Morning Club (1891), and the Ebell Club (1894), founded by Caroline Severance and Whittier millionaire Harriet W. R. Strong, respectively. During the 1890’s, Strong toured the country with her friend, Susan B. Anthony, advocating women’s suffrage, economic independence, and admission to the professions. Always an adherent of educating women for economic independence, Strong pushed for women’s participation in professional life. By 1897, Strong testified to her belief in the importance of legal education, especially for women, when she joined the board of trustees of the newly organized Los Angeles Law School. In his capacity as dean, James Brown Scott received counsel from one of the few female trustees of a U.S. law school and also benefited from her important civic connections; the nascent Law School commenced classes in 1897 in the Ebell Club, which Strong had founded.

Harriet Strong also graced the cover of the 1917 issue of *The New American Women*, a short-lived review intended to advance women in the professions. In the magazine, editor Clara Foltz also praised the accomplishments of several women graduates of USC Law School, including Sarah Wilde Houser ’00, Orfa Jean Shontz ’14, Georgia Bullock ’14, and Litta Belle Hibben Campbell ’13.

Education for the professions, particularly law and medicine, was an integral aspect of the women’s movement throughout the nation. In the field of legal education, two Boston law schools represented polar opposite responses to women students. At Harvard, trustees removed a woman from a law

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class in 1899, even though the professor was willing to include her in the class - it would be 1953 before the school graduated its first woman law student. By comparison, Portia Law School admitted only women until 1938.

**Enlightened Deans and a Special Women's Department**

Amidst national discussion of women's suffrage and rights, several Los Angeles women lawyers and legal apprentices heeded the November 1896 call to discuss formation of the Los Angeles Law Students Association. Two women, Bertha Lebus and Sara Wilde, signed the by-laws launching formal legal education in Los Angeles. Hence, Lebus and Wilde were among those who hired James Brown Scott as the first instructor for the Law Students Association. Dean of the Los Angeles Law School in 1897, Scott and his faculty delivered lectures to a student body which included several women, most prominent of whom was Sara Wilde, first female recipient of a USC law degree.

Wilde's presence at the Law School likely reaffirmed Scott's appreciation for women's intellectual capabilities, ability to work, and stamina for professional schools -
all of which were currently called into question by critics of women in the professions. Ambitious women in professional schools were an integral aspect of Scott’s experience - one of his sisters graduated from the Philadelphia Women’s College of Medicine and practiced medicine in Los Angeles; the other enjoyed a profession as a painter. Her portrait of James Brown Scott still hangs in the halls of Harvard Law School.

Scott’s most notable successor, Frank M. Porter, dean of the Law School during its formative period from 1904 to 1926, set a consciously inclusive tone that not only encouraged women to enroll but celebrated their presence in regular reports appearing in *The American Law School Review*. Twenty women enrolled in the spring semester of 1912, 41 a year later, and 50 the following spring of 1916. By 1927, at the conclusion of Porter’s tenure as dean, which remains the longest in the history of the Law School, the graduate alumnae population totaled 90.

Like Scott before him, Porter’s early experiences with talented women had most likely formed his appreciation for women law students. As a student at the University of Wisconsin Law School in the early 1880s, Porter counted among his classmates Belle Case La Follette ’85, the first women graduate of that law school. An outspoken advocate of women’s rights, Case La Follette married the future Wisconsin Senator, Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette. A friend of Porter’s, La Follette delivered a much celebrated lecture to the USC Law School student body in 1912.

As dean, Porter initiated two academic programs to make USC Law School more accessible to women. In addition to the three-year day program, Porter added a four-year evening program in 1908. Some of the leading female graduates of the Law School, such as Georgia Bullock ’14, Mable Walker Willebrandt ’16, LL.M. ’17, and even Litta Belle Hibben Campbell ’13, attended the evening program as they continued to work.

In response to an enrollment of 22 women, Porter inaugurated a Women’s Department in 1912, to recognize “the great interest that women are taking in the study of law...” In the 1912-13 catalogue, Porter underscored that some of the women “are preparing for the practice of law as a profession, others wish to acquire the knowledge of law more as an aid to business and to citizenship. This is particularly true in California where suffrage is now given to women, and much thought is being given by them to matters of government and law.” A highly focused curriculum - offered to women only - included four courses: criminal law, criminal procedure, torts, and domestic relations. Tanna Alex ’09, Lucretia Norman ’10, and Litta Belle Hibben Campbell ’13, joined Beulah Wright and Gertrude Comstock as faculty for this short lived program.

By 1916, the law catalogue makes no mention of a Women’s Department. Perhaps Porter had discovered that there was no need to offer select courses for women only since all of the women enrolled at the time were seeking degrees. In 1917, 38 women were enrolled in the Law School, 12 less than the previous year but well within the range of the 30 to 38 women who typically registered for classes from 1917 to 1930. The three year experiment in single sex classes ended uneventfully; women continued to enroll in numbers which ranked USC among the lead-
Mrs. Mabel Walker Willebrandt and Dr. Rufus B. von KleinSmid at the 1926 dedication of the Law School Building

Helen Wheeler Riddle, 1927

Lillian Copeland, competing at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics

In his 23 years as dean, Porter had helped to shape an institution which included a women student body that ranked the Law School among the leading AALS law schools in the country. In 1920, a harbinger study of women in the law included a survey of law schools with women in their programs. USC had graduated 21 women through 1919. Among those schools holding membership in the AALS, of which there were 56 in 1920, only NYU, Boston University, Northwestern, and the Universities of Michigan and Iowa had graduated more women law students than USC. Enrollment figures for 1918-1919 showed USC as the third most accessible AALS law school for women; only NYU and George Washington reported greater numbers.

“Well Fitted for Leadership”
Profiles of Six Women

The national women’s movement, the steady and articulate leadership of Harriett Strong and Clara Foltz, sympathetic deans of the USC Law School such as Scott and Porter, and curricular programs friendly to working women, helped enable the success of individual women law students, giving credence to the national image of USC as offering a legal education accessible to women. A closer look at six women - Litta Belle Hibben Campbell ’13, May Lahey ’14, Mabel Walker Willebrandt ’16, LL.M. ’17, Sara Danning ’24, Helen Wheeler Riddle ’27, and Lillian Copeland- illustrates the variety of lives that women brought to the Law School, the variety of ways in which they navigated their studies, and the variety of paths their lives took after graduation.

Litta Belle Hibben Campbell’s life as a law student was successful by any measure. Before practicing permanently in the law offices of husband Kemper Campbell, she practiced on her own, taught torts and real property at USC Law School, and was the first woman in California to be appointed to the district attorney’s office. She also taught medical jurisprudence at the Loma Linda Medical School for 30 years. Hibben Campbell’s father attended college and her two sisters both graduated from USC professional schools, one in den-
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Lawyers Club, where she served as president in 1931. Among the charter members of the organization were Lahey’s law school classmates, including Georgia Bullock ’14, Orfa Jean Shontz ’14, Hibben Campbell ’13, and Mabel Walker Willebrandt ’16. Sara Wilde Houser ’00, was also present, as was the doyen of California women lawyers, Clara Foltz.
Another distinguished classmate was Mabel Walker Willebrandt (1889-1963) who was singled out by Law School Dean Justin Miller in 1930 as “the most distinguished graduate of the school.” A member of PDD, Willebrandt worked as a school teacher - her undergraduate training was taken at the Arizona Normal School - to pay law school tuition for both herself and her husband, Arthur ’15. Admitted to the California Bar in 1915, a year before she graduated, Willebrandt began doing pro bono work in the police courts where she represented 2,000 cases as the first public defender of women in Los Angeles. Convinced that a women lawyer would not be considered the equal of her male counterpart, she finished an LL.M. degree in 1917. In addition, Willebrandt joined classmates Fred Horowitz ’16, and John Shepard ’18, in practice. She continued to teach school, largely to Mexican-American children, and remained committed to important social issues all her life. The Associated Press considered Willebrandt among the most famous woman attorneys in the United States and certainly, during the 1920’s, she was the most conspicuous. President Calvin Coolidge appointed Willebrandt Assistant Attorney General, a position she held from 1921 to 1929. Responsible for the enforcement of the Volstead Act, tax laws and the Bureau of Federal Prisons, Willebrandt contended that during her tenure in Washington, she had argued more cases before the Supreme Court than any contemporary save the Solicitor General. Following her life as “Prohibition Portia,” as she was derisively called by one adversary, Willebrandt established a thriving private practice with offices in Washington D.C. and Los Angeles. She developed a lucrative, pioneering interest in aviation law, a field of interest to several USC law faculty members in the 1930’s; she also represented Metro Golden Mayer and other Hollywood clients.

“A legal training,” Willebrandt declared in 1929, “makes a woman well fitted for leadership in public, civic, and community questions.” Although Willebrandt’s career certainly confirmed her observation, not all women graduates of the Law School led such visible lives. Sarah Danning ’24, retired in 1995, after 71 years in practice. Born in 1902 in Los Angeles, she was - like most of the students who studied law at USC - the first person in her family to attend college, let alone study law. A graduate of Los Angeles High School, Danning’s parents paid her tuition while she lived at home to save money. While preparing for a job interview, she remembered the wise counsel of Judge Clair Tappan who was also a professor at the Law School from 1904 to 1928: “Don’t tell the interviewers you can type; you will be treated as a secretary rather than an attorney.” Her seven-decade career included ten years in practice with classmate Ladislav “Jack” Styskal, and 22 years as a trustee on the bankruptcy court. She retired from Danning, Gill, Diamond & Kollitz.

Other women graduated from the Law School but never practiced. Helen Wheeler Riddle ’27 (1904-1956), the first known black woman to graduate from the Law School, spent her career in management with the post office in Los Angeles. Born in Indiana and raised in Bakersfield, Wheeler Riddle was persuaded by her uncle, Willis O. Tyler, to study law at USC. Harvard educated, Tyler was arguably the most prominent black attorney in Los Angeles, and at the center of a budding black professional bourgeoisie. During her life, Wheeler Riddle was active as a civic volunteer, particularly in the NAACP, and the black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, of which she became a charter member in 1923.

The Law School culture in which Wheeler Riddle studied was famous for its “look-to-the-left, look-to-the-right” freshman orientation speech, which warned students that one-third of the class would not
register for a second year, and only one-third would graduate. Lillian Copeland (1904-1964) was one of those students. Born in New York, Copeland graduated from Los Angeles High School before earning a B.A. at USC in 1928. Copeland’s prowess as an Olympic athlete no doubt compromised her ability to focus on her law studies. While an undergraduate, Copeland was a national champion discus thrower; at the 1928 Olympics she won the silver medal, followed by the gold medal in the 1932 Olympics. She left law school in 1931 to pursue a career in the Los Angeles county Sheriff’s department.

The 115 women who graduated from the USC Law School between 1900 and 1930 - as well as those who attended but never graduated - were quite conscious that both their presence and their numbers distinguished USC from other American law schools in the prestigious AALS. Although Dean Frank Porter, and his predecessor, James Brown Scott, made the Law School accessible to women, it was the success of women as law students that vindicated both the message and the messengers. Litta Belle Hibben Campbell and her classmates fashioned the Phi Delta Delta sorority and the Legal Lights women’s law association in order to stand “shoulder to shoulder” with their male colleagues in the study of law. Hibben Campbell intended that through women’s associations like Legal Lights, the “standard of scholarship (would) be raised, [and foster] a livelier interest and enjoyment in their college work.” Given her aspirations, and her accomplishments as a law student at USC, it is understandable that Litta Belle Hibben Campbell ’13, remembered her years in legal education as among the happiest of her life.

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