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Memoir

Minnie Frumer Goodman: An Early Female Attorney in Louisiana and Missouri in the 1930s – A Tale and an Appreciation

Jay S. Goodman* **

My mother, Minnie Frumer (Goodman), was born in Shreveport, Louisiana in January of 1913 to Jennie and Isadore Frumer, turn of the century immigrants from Russia. Located in northwest Louisiana, near Texas, Shreveport is in Caddo Parish (a political division similar to a northern county), and was the scene of an oil boom starting in 1906.¹ By the late 1920s, Shreveport was a national leader in oil and gas production.²

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**I am grateful for the participation and contributions of my sisters, Suzanne Goodman Liss and Fay Goodman Cohen in myriad ways in this work. I also appreciate the help of my Wheaton research assistants, Lelah Artan and Phillip Hamilton.

1. Billy W. Scott, *History of Fair Park High School, Shreveport, Louisiana*, <http://fairparkhigh.com/FPHS%20History.htm> (last visited Jan. 30, 2011).

2. *Id.*

Minnie's parents, who spoke as much Yiddish as English, were exceedingly hard working. With a population of 76,000³ in 1930,⁴ Shreveport was also a railroad hub where Minnie parents together operated a "railroad store." Catering to train crews, the store's hours were five a.m. to two p.m. My grandmother was also a professional seamstress. An industrial sewing machine, with a gigantic wheel and foot pedals, occupied one whole wall in her bedroom. She sewed clothes for her family and for ladies, using printed patterns.

Although the 1920s nationwide was an era of anti-Semitism and religious prejudice, and the South later became known for these attitudes, by published accounts Shreveport mostly escaped.⁵ The town had four Jewish mayors in the late 19th century and numerous prominent Jewish families.⁶ Some of these families were in banking, so it is likely that some of the small Jewish-owned enterprises were able to obtain bank credit.⁷ The first Jewish families were from Germany and central Europe. My grandparents and their relatives, however, were from Eastern Europe. My grandparents, embedded in a small, tight network of related families and enterprises, did not feel oppressed. They were certainly aware of the brutal racial segregation and poverty of Louisiana. What they appreciated was that, unlike in Russia or Lithuania, no one was trying to kill them. Their Christian neighbors were actually very kind and respectful to them. They could vote, own property, and pray freely. Most importantly, there

3. U.S. CENSUS 456 (1930), available at <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/03815512v1ch05.pdf>. Between 1920 and 1930, Shreveport's population grew by 75%.

4. *Id.*

5. Beverly S. Williams, *Anti-Semitism and Shreveport, Louisiana: The Situation in the 1920's*, *Louisiana History*, 21 J.L. LA. HIST. ASS'N 387, 397-98 (1980). This view seems too sanguine, given that the famous anti-Semitic preacher-broadcaster Gerald L.K. Smith set up his headquarters in Shreveport in the mid-1930s. See also Glen Jeansonne, *Gerald L.K. Smith: From Wisconsin Roots to National Notoriety*, WIS. MAG. HIST. 18, 23-25 (Winter 2002-03), available at http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/wmh/pdf/wmh_winter02_jeansonne.pdf. See generally GLEN JEANSONNE, GERALD L.K. SMITH: MINISTER OF HATE (New Haven & Yale U. Press 1988).

6. See The Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, *Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, Shreveport Louisiana*, <http://www.isjl.org/history/archive/la/shreveport.htm> (last visited Jan. 30, 2011).

7. *See id.*

were good public schools for their children. The way up was a clear path to them. It was true that even the families, or at least the girls, of the oldest Shreveport Jewish families were excluded from the country club;⁸ but that was not a concern of my grandparents. Nor, if they even knew that their children would have faced quotas at Harvard, would that have mattered to them then.⁹ In the heart of the Depression, with my grandfather semi-grounded by what was believed to be a heart problem (in the end he lived to be eighty-three) my fierce grandmother supported her two surviving children through law school. Her oldest son died at thirteen and she never recovered from her grief, but she launched Minnie, now the oldest, on a remarkable path. In 1928, at age 15, Minnie graduated from Byrd High, opened in 1926,¹⁰ and went off to the University of Texas at Austin. She told her grandson in a 1986 oral interview that she decided to become an attorney while in high school after working summers for David B. Samuel, a municipal judge.¹¹ She took care of office files, conducted research, and even drafted some documents for him. Judge Samuel may have known Minnie's father through the Synagogue, B'Nai Zion,¹² and that may have been how Minnie initially connected with him. When Minnie went off to school, a law degree, which at the time was a Bachelor of Laws, consisted of two years liberal arts plus three years of a law curriculum, for a total of five years.

For reasons unknown, Minnie transferred after one year at Texas directly to Washington University in St. Louis for one year of liberal arts education and then law school. We do not know if she was aware that Washington University School of Law was an early admitter of women candidates, starting in the mid-19th century.¹³ Minnie had accompanied her father on buying trips to

8. Williams, *supra* note 5, at 397.

9. Much later, in 1961 a brilliant granddaughter matriculated to Radcliffe College, in the third cohort of women to be offered Harvard degrees.

10. Scott, *supra* note 1.

11. Oral interview with Minnie Frumer Goodman (October 7, 1986) (on file with Aaron Cohen).

12. Wikipedia.com, David B. Samuel, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_B._Samuel (last visited Jan. 31, 2011). Judge David B. Samuel, 1874-1937, was a Shreveport Municipal Judge from 1916-1937. *Id.*

13. VIRGINIA C. DRACHMAN, *SISTERS IN LAW: WOMEN LAWYERS IN MODERN AMERICAN HISTORY*, 46 (Harv. U. Press, 1998).

St. Louis to stock the store in Shreveport, and somehow through those trips they may have heard about the law school. Minnie entered the Washington University School of Law in the fall of 1930. She met her future husband there, my father, Harold, also a law student, at a party he crashed. After one year at Washington University School of Law, the Frumer family ran out of money, and Minnie's father came to St. Louis to take her to Louisiana State University Law School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where tuition was free.¹⁴

Founded in 1904,¹⁵ Louisiana State University Law School (LSU Law), by academic year 1929-1930, had twenty-nine students in its entering class and sixty-four students in the entire law school.¹⁶ For the prior decade, between ten to fifteen had survived to graduate from each class. Upon my request, the Law School Registrar kindly searched Minnie's record and produced some original documents; however, she was unable to find a written application, speculating that there might not have been one.¹⁷ The law faculty consisted of four full professors, one associate, and one adjunct.¹⁸ Professor Carolyn Hargrave, biographer of the law school, notes with some shock, "[p]erhaps the most surprising development was that five women were listed as law students that year."¹⁹ Total estimated law school expenses may have been as low as \$371 or as high as \$689.²⁰ First-year required courses were: Contracts, Agency, Torts, Sales, Criminal Law, Common-Law Pleading and Practice, Civil Code of Louisiana, and Legal Bibliography.²¹ Second-year required courses were: Public Service Law, Real Property, Constitutional Law, Negotiable Instruments, Equity, Civil Code of Louisiana, Evidence, and Louisiana Code of Practice.²² Third-year required

14. W. LEE HARGRAVE, *LSU LAW: THE LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY LAW SCHOOL FROM 1906 TO 1977*, at 50 (La. State Univ. Press) (2004).

15. *Id.* at 58.

16. *Id.*

17. I am grateful to Ms. Georgia Bradford, Administrative Coordinator 3, in the Office of the University Registrar, Louisiana State University. We had many conversations and she was amazingly patient as we worked to follow an old, cold trail.

18. Hargrave, *supra* note 14, at 61.

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.* at 62-63.

22. *Id.*

courses were: Conflict of Laws, Criminal Procedure, Private Corporations, Bankruptcy, Federal Procedure, Admiralty, Civil Code of Louisiana, and Moot Court.²³ Third-year electives were International Law, Insurance, and Taxation.²⁴

According to her official transcript, Minnie Frumer arrived at LSU Law on September 23, 1931.²⁵ She received thirty-two transfer liberal arts credits from Texas and Washington Universities and fifteen first-year law credits from Washington University School of Law.²⁶ She received law credit for Real Property, Contracts, Torts, Criminal Law, Agency, Use of Books, Civil Procedure, and Personal Property.²⁷ In her second year of law school, now at LSU, she studied Admiralty, Louisiana Code of Practice, Code of Louisiana Constitutional Law, Evidence, Louisiana Civil Code, Negotiable Instruments, Private Corporations, and Equity. Her grades were all B's and C's.²⁸ For her third year of law school, 1932-1933, she took Conflict of Laws, Bankruptcy, Federal Procedures, Moot Court, Criminal Procedure, Criminal Moot Court, Insurance, Sales, Civil Code of Louisiana, and Public Service Law. Minnie's grades improved; she received four A's, including Public Service Law.²⁹

Minnie Frumer graduated from LSU Law on June 5, 1933.³⁰ There were twenty-four graduates in her class, four of them women. She must have passed the bar exam shortly thereafter, because on July 14, 1933, she was sworn in by the Louisiana Supreme Court, all seven of the members signing her 15" by 22" certificate: Charles A. O'Neill, C.J., Winston Overton, John R. Land, John St. Paul, Wynne G. Rogers, Rainey Brunot, and Fred M. Odom.³¹ However, Minnie was not yet twenty-one and was thus not eligible to practice law.³² The Supreme Court hired her

23. *Id.*

24. Hargrave, *supra* note 14, at 62-63.

25. Louisiana State University School of Law Official Transcript, issued November 29, 2010 (on file with author) [hereinafter Transcript].

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

29. *Id.*

30. Louisiana State University School of Law, Commencement Program, conferred June 5, 1933 (on file with author).

31. Certificate of Admission (on file with author).

32. *Shreveport Girl Plans Law Practice Next Year*, undated, unidentified

to teach the bar exam to men who were studying to take it, some presumably on the apprenticeship and exam system rather than the law school track. This free-floating system lasted until 1963.³³

Minnie's progress to the bar was the subject of a news story in what was probably *The Shreveport Times*.³⁴ A preserved undated, unidentified clipping states, "Shreveport Girl Plans Law Practice Next Year."³⁵ This article also exclaims, "Miss Minnie Frumer Passes Bar Examination, But Is Not Yet 21, So Must Wait Before Practicing."³⁶ The six-inch article chronicles her wait to begin practice, reports that she took the bar exam in New Orleans, that she was teaching law to keep from "getting rusty", and that she was planning to practice in Shreveport.³⁷ The article reports that several Shreveport women had passed the bar and practiced for short periods, but that none were practicing there at the time the newspaper article was written.³⁸ The article contains a nice headshot photograph of her, with the bottom caption, "Miss Minnie Frumer."³⁹

My family has some other decaying, undated press clippings about Minnie from the era, which suggest that she was viewed as a favorable legal novelty. One story was entitled "Girl Attorney Wins Acquittal in Auto Theft."⁴⁰ Another states "Young and Energetic: Office in Giddiness Lane Bldg."⁴¹ During 1935 and 1936, Minnie tutored a class of eight men for the bar examination.⁴² In October 1936, Minnie married Harold Goodman in Shreveport and then moved to St. Louis where they opened an office in the midtown Arcade Building, a good location,

newspaper article (on file with author) [hereinafter *Shreveport Girl*].

33. Hargrave, *supra* note 14, at 24.

34. *Shreveport Girl*, *supra* note 32.

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.*

37. *Id.*

38. *Id.*

39. *Id.*

40. *Girl Attorney Wins Acquittal in Auto Theft*, undated, unidentified newspaper article (on file with Suzanne Goodman Liss).

41. *Young and Energetic: Office in Giddiness Lane Bldg.*, undated, unidentified newspaper article (on file with Suzanne Goodman Liss).

42. *Attorney's Wife, Lawyer Herself, To Practice Here*, undated, unidentified newspaper article (on file with author) [hereinafter *Attorney's Wife*].

to practice law together.⁴³

Minnie's arrival to St. Louis was noted in a six-inch newspaper story, "Attorney's Wife, Lawyer Herself, To Practice Here," printed in what was likely *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.⁴⁴ The sub-head said, "Mrs. Minnie Frumer Goodman, 24, Enrolled on Motion of Her Husband."⁴⁵ The lead paragraph read, "Mrs. Minnie Frumer Goodman, 24 years old, who tried her first criminal case in Shreveport at the age of 21 and recently was licensed by the Missouri Supreme Court, was enrolled in circuit court here today preparatory to her start of practice in St. Louis."⁴⁶ After reporting that she planned to engage in civil practice, the story went on, "[o]nly 4 feet 10 inches tall, with brown hair and eyes, Mrs. Goodman was the first woman to plead a criminal case in Shreveport."⁴⁷ This story was also accompanied by a photograph of her, head to waist, with the caption, "Mrs. Minnie Frumer Goodman, 24 years old, who was enrolled in the circuit court here today preparatory to starting the practice of law in St. Louis. Mrs. Goodman, who tried her first case in Shreveport, La., when she was 21, is the wife Harold M. Goodman, a St. Louis attorney. They live at 5580 Waterman."⁴⁸

From 1937 to 1939, Minnie practiced in St. Louis with her husband. By their own subsequent very sketchy accounts, law practice was a hard slog with few successes and little income. Harold had a few regular clients and still worked part-time in the family's pawnshop and mercantile store. In 1939, Minnie left the practice to start a family. She never actively practiced law again although she kept up her bar memberships for quite a while and was an enthusiastic member of the lively Louisiana State University Alumni Association in St. Louis. She directly availed herself of the opportunity to convert her B.A. to a J.D. in 1969.⁴⁹ She never spoke to me about her law school or law experiences, but she told both my sisters that there were simply no jobs. Minnie instead became a dutiful homemaker-mother-club lady in

43. *Id.*

44. *Id.*

45. *Id.*

46. *Id.*

47. *Id.*

48. *Attorney's Wife*, *supra* note 42.

49. Hargrave, *supra* note 14, at 175; Transcript, *supra* note 25.

scouting and Hadassah, and a devoted volunteer. In keeping with the mores of the day, she behaved as a conventional wife. In other words, from being an academically outstanding professional pioneer and a member of the bar in two states, Minnie became a totally traditional woman, as if she were not a lawyer at all. Indeed, at age forty-five, she went back to college to obtain teaching credentials and worked as a permanent substitute second grade teacher.⁵⁰ Minnie supported the Equal Rights Amendment. She worked with senior citizens' councils. She told one of my sisters that she preferred children to criminals. She told me that she preferred children to adults. What happened to the woman who passed the bar at age twenty and tutored male bar candidates?

First, as all scholars of the issue of women lawyers in the United States note, the environment in the 1930s and 1940s was bleak.⁵¹ The large firms were exceedingly closed to women. In Shreveport, Minnie was offered only jobs as a legal secretary with established firms, which her mother refused to let her take. We are told that women of the era saw a need for a particular kind of man who would support their ambitions and facilitate them.⁵² Virginia Drachman chronicles the bleak prospects facing women attorneys in the 1920s and 1930s, with Jewish women lawyers facing especially hard walls.⁵³ Drachman argues that the key for women attorneys' success was finding the right man in a "companionate" marriage; i.e., a marriage where the husband actively supported the wife's goals and helped provide the material means for her success.⁵⁴

The culture of the country in the 1930s and 1940s did not encourage working mothers. In 1939, 76% of women attorneys had no children, and in 1949 that number dropped only to 70%.⁵⁵ The kind of support and day care we take today for granted was

50. In teaching, Minnie was something of a pioneer once again, in an early wave of mature women returning to higher education.

51. See Cynthia Grant Bowman, *Women in the Legal Profession From the 1920s to the 1970s: What Can We Learn From Their Experiences About Law and Social Change?*, 61 ME. L. REV. 1, 4-8 (2009), available at <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/fac/pub/12>.

52. DRACHMAN, *supra* note 13, at 105-12.

53. *Id.* at 217.

54. *Id.* at 103-05.

55. *Id.* at 257.

unknown. Additionally, immigrant-rooted middle-class Jewish culture in the South and Midwest was very traditional. Being a good wife and mother came first, and that is the direction Minnie's life ultimately took. In the 1930s, Harold seemed to appreciate her professional skills and want a legal partner. But as the years passed, and his own legal career sputtered out, he became more and more a traditional male head of household. If you knew Minnie after 1940, you would never have known she was an attorney. However, Minnie also seemed to have no regrets, at least none that she expressed to her children. She had real Southern charm, made friends everywhere, and seemed a happy person.

The early end of her legal career does not mean that Minnie Frumer Goodman's lawyer life was a failure. She achieved in law school and won the respect of those she worked with in Louisiana, including the justices of the Louisiana Supreme Court. Had Minnie stayed in Shreveport, she might have remained with the career.⁵⁶ But who can tell? Like almost all of the Jewish middle-class women of her era, and the women of the whole country, Minnie wanted marriage and family. She was a member in good standing of the bars of two states, probably into the 1950s. She had served clients, and she had tried both civil and criminal cases. By the standards of the day Minnie achieved a great deal.

56. She had an oil-drilling wildcatter client who wanted her to stay in Shreveport and also offered to hire Harold too. Ten years later he struck it big, according to the folklore.