

LOUISE RAGGIO

Speaks Her Mind

WHEN LOUISE BALLERSTEDT RAGGIO began practicing law in 1952, she could not legally file documents for a client under her own signature or even start a law practice without her husband's permission.

"As long as a woman was married, her husband was in control of everything," said Raggio. "Married women

could not buy or sell their own property, could not sign contracts, could not make decisions for their children, could not control their paychecks, or open their bank accounts except with the permission of their husbands."

Raggio changed all that by leading the (otherwise all-male) task force to draft and

secure passage of the Marital Property Act of 1967.

In an engaging and personal memoir, "Texas Tornado: The Autobiography of a Crusader for Women's Rights and Family Justice," Raggio tells the fascinating journey of "a poor, unattractive, unpopular girl from the mud farms of Central Texas."

"Now," Raggio writes, "I am known by my friends as 'mentor' and 'sage,' and by my enemies, in one of their kinder terms, as 'one tough broad.'"

Raggio was born in Austin and grew up on a cotton farm 18 miles east of town. When she was 13, "to free an adult for more important things," she drove to school, picking up cousins along the way, all the while looking "between the steering wheel and the front of the hood to keep us on the road."

In 1939, after graduating Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Texas, Raggio was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation grant for a one-year internship at the White House. She revels in the "intoxicating" year during which she had supper at the White House with Eleanor Roosevelt, dated John Connally (before he married Nellie), and danced with Lyndon B. Johnson. She also worked hard for the National Youth Administration (NYA).

Reluctantly she returned to Austin in 1940 and found a job with the NYA.

And that's just the first four chapters of the book — all that happened before she met and married Grier Raggio, had three sons, was the only woman in her class at SMU School of Law, served as the first female criminal assistant district attorney in Dallas under the legendary Henry Wade, spearheaded the Family Code project which made Texas the first state with a unified family code, and was the first woman elected to the State Bar board of directors.

In the last chapter, Raggio says, "I find it refreshing to have at last found my own voice and to speak my own mind" — and she does, on the Communist witch hunts; on capital punishment, discrimination, divorce, the gap between the rich and poor, and equal rights for women; and on being a feminist and a grandmother.

"Every person has the ability to do something the world needs," Raggio writes. "Success means you have found your niche and used your best efforts to try to solve the problems."

Proceeds from the book will benefit the Louise Raggio Lecture Series at SMU School of Law.



STATE BAR PRESIDENT GUY HARRISON WITH LOUISE RAGGIO.