

# HAWAII BAR NEWS



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# Marguerite Kamehaokalani Ashford, 1891-1970

By Marguerite Ashford-Hirano

The following is another excerpt from the forthcoming book *Early Women Lawyers of Hawaii*, a joint project of Hawaii Women Lawyers, The Hawaii Women Lawyers Foundation, The Biographical Research Center, and the Foundation for Hawaii Women's History. The book will be published in January 1990.

Marguerite K. Ashford was known as the dean of Hawaii's women lawyers. When she was sworn in on Jan. 27, 1916, she became the first woman attorney to practice in the Territory of Hawai'i. It was not until eight years later that she was joined by another woman.

She began private practice in Honolulu, finding that life was difficult for a young woman in what had always been regarded as a man's field. In later years she commented that she had battled male prejudice all her life. She was not bitter about this, simply regarding it as a fact of the environment in which she lived and practiced law. She soon developed a reputation for being a fighter; she would stand up for what she believed was right no matter how unpopular the cause or how unpleasant the circumstances.

Early in her career she developed a strong affinity for appellate work and became known as an excellent brief writer. She is referred to as a "lawyer's lawyer" since much of her work was on behalf of other lawyers seeking her assistance in appeals. In these cases she would either handle the entire appeal or write the brief and provide consultation. During the 30-odd years from her admission to the bar until her initial retirement, she participated as counsel in more than 100 cases before the Supreme Court of Hawai'i.

Public service was another important aspect of her career. She served as first deputy Attorney General for the Territory 1925-27, and following that was at times given special deputy status to represent the Territory in certain cases. The writing skills developed in appellate work were also transferred to the legislative field. She was a superb legislative drafts-



—Honolulu Advertiser photo

man and served as attorney for the Territorial House or Senate during each session over the period 1934-1953. In retirement she was frequently called back by the Territorial Leg-

islative to provide consultation in this field. In 1953 she was appointed Commissioner of Public Lands, becoming the first woman in Hawai'i to hold full cabinet rank. Under her leadership substantial new Hawaiian Homes Lands were opened for settlement at Waimanalo and at Lalamilo on the Island of Hawai'i. When she stepped down from this position in 1956, it was known that she was a contender for a seat in the Territorial Supreme Court. National politics, however, played the role of spoiler. Alaska achieved statehood prior to Hawai'i; by 1959 the timing for her appointment was no longer right.

Marguerite Ashford viewed herself as a fiercely independent and conscientious defender of the law and the Constitution. She chose to work in a man's world, and often her role was played primarily in the background because of her sex. She had a keen mind and a passionate belief in fighting for what she perceived as right. Her life was centered around the intellect, and it was a strong intellect that she admired in others. She did not succeed in doing all that she wanted with her career, but she was proud of what she did accomplish and did not regret the choices that she made.

## STATE JUDICIARY HELPS WIN AWARD (Continued from page 29)

ations will be effective and efficient.

Released in January, the master plan received strong support in the recent session of the State Legislature, according to Wolf, who cited the "personal commitment and foresight of the chairmen of the Senate Ways and Means Committee Mamoru Yamasaki, the Senate Judiciary Committee Ron Menor, the House Finance Committee Joseph Souki, and the House Judiciary Committee Wayne Metcalf.

"They ensured the funding for all the top priority projects that we asked for, and more," Wolf commented.

Wolf noted, for instance, that the analysis for a new youth detention

facility project was not completed in time to be included in the Judiciary's initial capital improvement projects request to the Legislature. "Despite its late submittal, the project was included in the Judiciary's CIP appropriation.

"It was very responsible of them to include the new youth detention home, because the need is quite critical," Wolf said.

A display providing a synopsis of Hawaii's plan will be exhibited at the national AIA annual conference; the plan will be among the outstanding 1989 architectural accomplishments honored in the national AIA magazine *Architecture*.