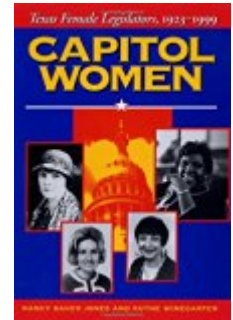


Nancy Baker Jones, Ruthe Winegarten. *Capitol Women: Texas Female Legislators, 1923-1999.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000. x + 328 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-292-74062-x; \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-292-74063-1.



Reviewed by Linda Hudson

Published on H-Texas (September, 2002)

Empowered Texas Women

Award winning Texas women historians Nancy Baker Jones and Ruthe Winegarten had a worthy goal when they compiled this reference work on women who served in the Texas Legislature from 1923 to 1999. Over a three-year period the authors conducted video interviews with the women still living and they researched archives, libraries, newspaper and magazine articles, private collections, books, theses and dissertations. The authors' goal was to inspire women to run for public office. This handbook provides information on what these Texas women were like, why they sought office, the issues they pursued, and determined that women legislators made a difference. The authors contend that women made a difference in the types of issues raised and the legislation that passed into law such as improved education, juvenile reforms, child support, work and health issues, family violence, stalking, equal credit, sexual assault, job protection, and fair housing.

Capitol Women has biographies of fifty-eight Texas senators and representatives with snap-

shots of twenty-eight women serving in the legislature in 1999. This book is not a history of the legislature or of women in Texas politics, but it provides a glimpse of the potential for extended research into these areas. Truly a man's world from 1846 to 1923 and to a degree since, while six thousand men have passed through the legislature, less than a hundred women have served. In 1999, Texas women made up 20 percent of the legislative body, but more than 50 percent of the population.

The book is arranged into four parts; "The Political Context," "Biographies," "Snapshots," and "Appendices." The first section of the book consists of a series of essays that place the women in the context of their times. An interview with Myra Banfield Dippel reveals that she sold her children's piano to help finance her first campaign in 1960. Another essay equates the legislative chambers as comparing to bar rooms and bordellos before the arrival of women—a severe criticism unless one recalls the flagrant activities at the La Grange Chicken Ranch or Austin's madam Hattie Valdez. Another essay explains how the Texas

Legislature works; the elections, terms of office, number of members, the pay, and diagrams how bills become law. The power structure of the Texas Legislature has been conservative, white, male, Protestant, Democrat, and made up primarily of businessmen and lawyers.

The second section makes up half the book and consists of concise biographies of women who have served in the legislature. Unlike most reference works, the women are listed in chronological order by decades rather than alphabetically. This does seem unusual but the authors explain that the arrangement allows researchers to more easily see the relationship of women to eras and issues over time-which it does. Reading through the biographies in chronological order, one does get a sense of continuity and change.

The weakest portion of the book is the "Snapshots" section that consists of women who were serving in the legislature in 1999. This part has only photos, political affiliations, districts, and committee assignments listed. It would have been helpful to have more biographical information available about these women.

The six appendices and index make up the remaining quarter of the book. Women are listed by chronological order of their years of service; statistical summaries list the number of women, their party affiliation, ethnicity, firsts, their counties and cities of residence, occupations, marital status, children, and reelection. One table lists women in the legislature by number and by name. Lastly, a time line from 1868 to 1999 has significant events listed that relate to these women who served the people of Texas in the capitol.

Jones and Winegarten draw no conclusions, and make no analysis or give a synthesis, but through their efforts others may be inspired to research these remarkable women and produce more insightful works in depth. This initial publication has scratched the surface of materials that are available.

In scanning the biographies certain patterns emerge such as types of legislation considered that showed a concern for children, families, and women-rural and urban, education, mental health, disabilities, and the welfare of families. Examining the women legislators by decades, one sees that children and family issues may be the only consistencies of these women legislators. Most of the first women legislators were teachers, several were newspaper women, others filled vacated seats by deceased fathers or husbands. In more recent years, most women had legal training. While the majority of women were Democrats, most were conservative.

The 1920s-1930s saw women backing legislation for such issues as compulsory education, physical education, education for prisoners in the penitentiary, and education for firemen. They supported fairness and voted for Texas A & M University to share in the University of Texas oil royalties. Some women were activists such as Sarah Hughes of Dallas who was labeled aggressive and told by a male colleague that she should "stay home and wash dishes" (p. 97). Others, such as Laura Burleson Negley, daughter of Woodrow Wilson's Post Master General Albert Sydney Burleson, was not "out to remake [the] world" (p. 88). Before she could sit on a jury, Hughes became the first woman state and federal judge in Texas. She then became the only female judge to swear in a United States President when Lyndon B. Johnson became president on *Air Force One* after John Kennedy's assassination in November 1963.

The 1940s and 1950s saw more women serving in the legislature and with more diverse views. Women continued to sponsor and back educational and women's issues such as the Texas Married Women's Act that allowed women to buy and sell their separate property without their husband's signature. Esther Neveille Colson, of Navasota, whose mother managed her campaigns, served in both houses for a total of twenty-eight years. She refused to sponsor any women's bills.

According to the *Dallas Morning News* Colson acted "like a lady" while "voting like a man" (p. 110). What she is most famous for is The Colson-Briscoe Act that established the farm-to-market paved road system and took rural Texans out of the mud. As a tribute, the longest girder bridge in Texas is named for her. Sixty-seven of her bills passed at a rate of 81 percent over an eighteen year period in the senate chambers. Another woman, Rae Files Still co-sponsored the Gilmer-Aiken Bill that established state school funding based on attendance and established vocational education classes. Mary Elizabeth Suiter helped regulate insurance companies. Virginia Duff, who served in the 1950s, recalled that the women wore hats everyday and that the chambers were filled with cigar smoke and spittoons when she arrived. While she worked for an improved mental health system, Duff sponsored a bill to "keep blacks out of our schools" (p. 127). Anita Blair of El Paso was the first blind woman to serve in office (1953-55) alongside her guide dog Fawn. She worked for education and safety and rights for the disabled. She co-sponsored the bill that allowed women to serve on juries. Maude Isaacks was in her 80s when she helped repeal the poll tax.

The 1960s and 1970s saw women in the Texas legislature rise to national prominence and change come to the chambers. When Myra Banfield first served in office, she said that lobbyists gave men a case of liquor, a carton of cigarettes, and call girls. One of the few liberal women, Frances Farenthold thought that minorities were not represented in the legislature, but she learned that Texans were not either. She became "an advocate for lost causes" (p. 155), but as one of the "dirty-thirty" reformers she helped bring down the "good old-boy" network of insiders involved in the Houston Sharpstown Bank scandal. Barbara Jordan, the first black woman elected to the house, then to the senate and then to the U.S. House of Representatives, saw half her bills pass the legislature. Voted most prominent women in the country in 1976 after her national news cover-

age during the Watergate hearings, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1994 for her civil rights work. Kay Bailey Hutchison was the first Republican woman elected to the legislature and sponsored fair treatment for rape victims and equal credit rights for women. As the first Republican and female U.S. Senator from Texas she said, "We did make a difference because we were women" (p. 160). One of the nation's most controversial U.S. Supreme Court Cases, *Roe vs. Wade* (1973), was argued by Sarah Weddington because she had once been a "scared graduate student in a dirty, dusty Mexican border town." She was "determined that other women not have to face the same experience" to have an abortion (p. 162). According to Eddie Bernice Johnson, the "booze, beefsteaks, and brawls," of the male legislature were replaced by hunting and fishing trips" (p. 171) that excluded the women members. When Senfronia Thompson first came to the legislature, she heard comments such as "niggers ought to be back in the fields chopping cotton" (p. 178). Undeterred by any racist remarks, Wilhelmenia Delco, another black legislator, helped pass the "No Pass, No Play" rule for high school athletes and the Texas Assessment Skills Test that made schools accountable. "Black is beautiful," she explained, but "not when it is poor and dumb" (p. 185).

Jones and Winegarten have created an essential book for everyone's library reference shelf. Aside from encouraging women to seek public office, this publication should challenge women in other states to produce similar references on women legislators. When it was published, *Capitol Women* was the only publication dedicated to women lawmakers in a particular state and one of only three general works on women legislators published in the United States.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-texas>

Citation: Linda Hudson. Review of Jones, Nancy Baker; Winegarten, Ruthe. *Capitol Women: Texas Female Legislators, 1923-1999*. H-Texas, H-Net Reviews. September, 2002.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6736>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.