

## OBITUARIES

# M.E. Talbott, 1st woman on Camden County top court

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STAFF WRITER

Mary Ellen Talbott, 95, of Haddonfield, the first woman appointed to the Superior Court bench in Camden County, died Saturday, Sept. 16, of complications from a stroke at the Evergreens Skilled Nursing facility in Moorestown.

After the 1959 death of her husband, Navy Lt. James N. Talbott — leaving her a widow at age 38 — Judge Talbott enrolled in law school at the University of Pennsylvania.

She was one of only two women in her law school class. She was admitted to the bar in 1963, and went on to practice law before serving as a municipal court judge in Camden County.

In 1973, she was appointed to the Superior Court of New Jersey by Gov. William T. Cahill, becoming the seventh female appointed to the bench in the Garden State.

Douglas E. McCollister, a Marlton lawyer who clerked for the judge, said “She was kind, conscientious, and displayed exemplary judicial demeanor while on the bench.”

Judge Talbott wrote one of the first opinions in the country on the admissibility of thermographic diagnostic testing for injured or ill parties seeking reimbursement under New Jersey’s No-Fault Insurance Act.

The technique, in which skin temperature is measured to detect underlying injury or nerve damage, was challenged by large insurers including Allstate and State Farm. The two refused to cover the cost of the test.

But the judge ruled that the technique had medical value, and her opinion was upheld by the New Jersey appellate and supreme courts and remains the law today, although subsequent steps have been taken to standardize the cost.

In March 1978, the judge, who

tended to favor the downtrodden, chastised four Camden County municipalities for what she called “snob zoning.”

She ordered Berlin Township, Voorhees Township, Pine Hill Borough, and Stratford Borough to amend within 90 days their ordinances setting a minimum of 1,100 square feet of floor space as the size for all homes.

“The fact that minimum space requirements serve to exacerbate the housing shortage leads inescapably to the finding that these ordinances are an exercise in ‘snob zoning,’” the judge told the New York Times.

Judge Talbott retired from the bench in 1988, but stayed active handling superior court arbitrations, and serving on the New Jersey Supreme Court Task Force on Women and as a commissioner on the Camden County Board of Taxation.

Born in Aurora, Ill., she was the daughter of Lucille Miller Weiss and John F. Weiss. A precocious student, she graduated from public high school at 16, and from the University of Illinois with a bachelor’s degree in economics.

Judge Talbott was a voracious reader of books, newspapers, magazines, and journals. She pored over the leather-bound classics in her grandmother’s library, carefully cutting apart the pages because no one else had ever seen them.

In a high-school essay she wrote: “I dreamed of the day when my life would be my own to direct. I imagined great positions I would attain, and fascinating places I would visit. My escape was in books.”

In 1943, Judge Talbott received a commission as lieutenant in the U.S. Navy Reserve Supply Corps. She served as a purchasing officer at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard until 1948.

While there, she met Lt. Talbott. The couple married in 1948, and moved to Haddonfield, where all four of their children were born.

She kept house during the 1950s in a newly built post-World War II neighborhood. She planted pansies and fruit trees.

Judge Talbott enjoyed following baseball, at first the Chicago Cubs, and later the Phillies. She had held season tickets since 1970.

In the 1960s, she also owned and operated a Cherry Hill coffeehouse called The Trend. In addition, she was a longtime supporter of the Camden County Children’s Garden and was on the board of the Camden County Mental Health Association.

“I’m so sorry to hear [of her death], but I’m comforted that she lived a long, fulfilling, and productive life,” said her former law clerk. “She presided over the wedding of my wife and I in 1975, and she drove through a blinding snowstorm to celebrate our 25th anniversary. She will be missed.”

In 1970, Judge Talbott hosted the only local radio talk show on WCAM-AM (1590), in which she interviewed local personalities at lunchtime behind the street-level showroom window of the Lit Bros. department store on Market Street in Camden.

A diehard Democrat, she was active in the Camden County Democratic Party for many years. She ran unsuccessfully for public office three times — for state assembly in Camden County’s Sixth District in 1967 and 1989, and for county freeholder in 1970.

Daughter Jane Thorndike said that Judge Talbott was always there for her children. “She was such an example of you can do anything,” Thorndike said.

In addition to her daughter, the judge is survived by children Kitty Talbott, Barbara Talbott Irwin, and James Talbott Jr.; eight grandchildren; 12 great-grandchildren; and a sister. A brother died earlier.

A viewing from 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 28, will be held at Kain-Murphy Funeral Services, 15 West End Ave., Haddonfield. Funeral services and interment will be private.

Memorial donations may be made to the Camden Children’s Garden, 3 Riverside Drive, Camden, N.J. 08103, Attn: Donations.

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Mary Ellen  
Talbott