

## Betty Roberts, first woman on the Oregon Supreme Court and trailblazer in politics, dies

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James Mayer, The Oregonian





Courtesy of the Roberts family/2006

Betty Roberts

Betty Roberts, the first woman appointed to the Oregon Supreme Court and a trailblazer for women in state politics, died Saturday. She was 88.

Her daughter, Dian Odell, said her four children were with her when Roberts died in her Portland home of pulmonary fibrosis.

"Betty Roberts was the greatest judicial pioneer in Oregon history," David Brewer, chief judge of the Oregon Court of Appeals, said Saturday.

"As the first woman to serve on the Oregon appellate bench, Betty endured much indignity with great dignity," Brewer said. "As a mentor and role model, she was a beacon of strength, humor, common sense, fairness, compassion and integrity to all who knew her."

Roberts was "one of a kind," said U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., who went to high school in Portland with Roberts' children and had known her for 50 years.

"You hear a lot in Oregon about the (Gov. Tom) McCall years and there are others who defined an era on the state and local level, but for over a quarter century, Betty Roberts had as much impact on the political process as anyone in Oregon."

Roberts was elected to the Oregon House in 1964 as a Democrat from Multnomah County, and won re-election in 1966. In 1968, she won election to the Oregon Senate and became the only woman in the Senate at that time. She was a co-sponsor of the Bottle Bill.

In 1974, Roberts ran for governor but lost in the Democratic primary to Robert Straub, the eventual winner. Later that year, following the death of Wayne Morse, the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate, she was picked to run on the November ballot. She lost to incumbent Republican Bob Packwood.

"She ran an amazing campaign against Packwood," Blumenauer said. "She came within a hairsbreadth."

In 1977, Straub appointed Roberts to the Oregon Court of Appeals to a new position in an expanded court. She was the first female appellate judge. Roberts resigned in 1982, when she was appointed by Gov. Vic Atiyeh to the <u>Oregon Supreme</u> <u>Court.</u> She resigned in 1986 when her husband retired and because of her commute.



The Oregonian/1976

Betty Roberts (center) greets Rosalynn Carter (left), wife of presidential candidate Jimmy Carter, in May 1976. Roberts was cochairman for the Carter campaign in Oregon.

In 1982, she wrote the opinion in State v. Charles, which adopted the duty to retreat in Oregon. This requires people to attempt to retreat in most situations before one could use deadly force, even in self-defense. That same year she wrote the opinion in the workers' compensation case, Hewitt v. SAIF, that men and women have equal rights under the Oregon Constitution.

"Every time you turned around, Betty Roberts was pioneering," said U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore. "Oregon has lost one of its true giants, but we have not lost the memory of what she gave to our state. Her stature in Oregon's legal, legislative and political history is legendary."

Wyden said he came to know and respect her in 1975 when she was one of the first elected officials in Oregon to give her full support for the Gray Panthers. Wyden led the Oregon chapter of the organization in the 1970s.

For many women in politics and on the bench, Roberts was a mentor and an inspiration.

Oregon Court of Appeals Judge Ellen F. Rosenblum described Roberts as a "great Oregonian."

"In addition to that, she really was the mother of Oregon women lawyers and judges, our mentor-in-chief," Rosenblum said.

When Rosenblum was running for re-election as a Multnomah County Circuit judge, she drew an opponent at the last minute. Roberts came to her house with charts on how to run a campaign.

Susan Graber, a judge on the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and a former member of the Oregon Supreme Court, said Roberts and her husband at the time, Keith Skelton, played a big role in her professional life.

"They directly convinced me I could run and were very supportive," Graber said. "She was an important influence for many women."

It didn't come easy.

In her 2008 autobiography, "With Grit and by Grace" tells about how she divorced her first husband because he didn't want her to work outside the home, and how her desire to obtain a doctorate in political science at the University of Oregon was thwarted by a chauvinistic department chairman.

She was married to Frank Roberts from 1960 to 1965. She married fellow legislator Skelton in1968, but had to threaten legal action to retain the Roberts name.

She was married to Skelton until his death in 1995.

Roberts remained active in politics after her retirement. She helped organize opposition in Oregon to Robert Bork's U.S. Supreme Court nomination. From 1988 to 1991 she was a visiting professor in political science at Oregon State University and she served on the state's Commission on Higher Education in the late 1980s.

And in 1992, she assumed a leadership role in defending women accusing her old foe Packwood of sexual harassment.

In March 2004, she presided over the first legal same-sex marriage when it was briefly allowed in Multnomah County. In 2006, the American Bar Association awarded her the Margaret Brent Award from its Commission on Women in the Profession.

U.S. District Judge Ann Aiken in Eugene said Roberts had been a hero of hers since Roberts led the floor fight in the Oregon Senate for the Equal Rights Amendment.

Survivors include her daughters, Dian Odell and Jo Rice; sons, John Rice Jr. and Randy Rice; her brother, Robert Cantrell; nine grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

Roberts will be cremated. Plans for a memorial service have not been finalized.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests contributions be made to Oregon Women Lawyers Foundation, the Center for Women, Politics and Policy at Portland State University or the Justice Betty Roberts Women and the Law Program at Lewis and Clark Law School.

- -- James Mayer
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