

June Borina Schnacke recalls days as DA

Earned solid reputation as competent, efficient DA

By LANE WALLACE
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June Borina Schnacke was probably the first woman district attorney in California, but it wasn't that distinction that earned her a solid reputation in Santa Cruz County.

"She was very good, very efficient. There was no issue" about gender, recalled Frank Osmer, Watsonville police chief during Schnacke's term as district attorney from 1947 to 1955.



Ray Scott, June Borina, hired by Schnacke as assistant district attorney in 1952, remembers Schnacke as competent and "extremely conscientious," and a boss who expected high ethical standards from her attorneys.

Schnacke, then called "Miss Borina" in the newspaper style of the day, joined the district attorney's office — then three attorneys — fresh out of Stanford Law School in 1943.

In 1947, District Attorney Stephen Wyckoff resigned to devote more time to his civil practice, and Schnacke was appointed district attorney. There was some support for another assistant, John McCarthy, to be named district attorney.

Schnacke said she also thought McCarthy should have been named district attorney, but he lived in Watsonville and county supervisors wanted a district attorney who lived in Santa Cruz. Schnacke, born and reared in Watsonville, was then living in Santa Cruz.

"I was in the right place at the right time," recalled Schnacke during a break in the Santa Cruz Superior Court trial over the estate of her sister, Mary Ann. Schnacke took the witness stand yesterday and continued testifying today.

Schnacke, then 27, made the transition to the top job smoothly.

"You couldn't tell the difference from her predecessor," said Osmer, just 26 himself when he was named chief around the time Borina got her job.

"It was a simple life" in those days, Osmer said. There wasn't as much crime as there is today, and the district attorney's staff of three also did civil work for the county.

Schnacke may have been California's first woman district attorney, but her reputation was earned by a solid performance at her job. 'She was good, very efficient,' recalls Frank Osmer, Watsonville police chief during her term as district attorney. Gender just wasn't an issue, he said.

Little did Schnacke know at the time that her tenure as district attorney would end in a hard-fought election seven years later, or that her successor would resign amid scandal after less than a year in office.

Schnacke tried civil and criminal cases as district attorney, but turned over major criminal cases to McCarthy, who had remained in the district attorney's office as an assistant.

She remembered that her father, Nicholas, who died in 1949, was so proud he posted a letter about her appointment in his office and would point it out to visitors. "He'd bore people," she said with a laugh.

Scott, now in private practice in Santa Cruz, said Schnacke was "sensitive about protecting people" and told her staff to make sure they had a case before filing charges.

Schnacke, elected without opposition in 1950, ran again in 1954 against Charles Moore, 26, who promised to clean up gambling in Watsonville.

Osmer recalls Moore as a "trou-

blemaker and agitator" who was making all kinds of allegations during the campaign.

Scott remembers Schnacke running her campaign in a "high road manner."

Schnacke said Moore "looked like a DA" and was helped by appearances on the relatively new medium of television.

"I don't fault him. He was trying to get a job," Schnacke said. Schnacke led in the June 1954 balloting, but lost to Moore in the November runoff.

Moore started a "crusade" to clean up gambling and other vices, but wide-open gambling still went on. It was later revealed that Moore's "special investigators" had criminal records, and that a friend of Moore was running a gambling house in Freedom.

The gambler went to prison and Moore resigned before his trial on misconduct charges. The Register-Pajaronian won a Pulitzer Prize for public service for its coverage of the Moore case.

After Moore's resignation, Schnacke was contacted by two

county supervisors, asking if she wanted her old job back.

She declined, saying it was time to move on. It all worked out for the best — she got a job in the U.S. attorney's office in San Francisco and married her boss, Rob-



ert Schnacke, now a semi-retired federal judge.

Scott was named district attorney, and served, he said, "long enough to get public confidence back" in the office.

After her marriage, Schnacke worked as an administrative assistant for another judge, and later did volunteer work in the courts.

She hasn't forgotten her roots. "I loved it," she said of her days in the district attorney's office.

Although she moved away 38 years ago, Schnacke considers the Pajaro Valley home. "I'm still a Watsonville farmer girl."

June Borina Schnacke left Watsonville 38 years ago, but she still considers the Pajaro Valley home. 'I'm still a Watsonville farmer girl.'

REFERENCE

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