

Memorial: Frances H. Thompson (1918–2006)*

¶1 Frances H. Thompson, former head law librarian at South Texas College of Law in Houston, died Tuesday, January 17, 2006, at Tremont Nursing Facility in Houston, Texas. Many may remember her husband Robert, who attended some AALL meetings with Frances. Robert preceded her in death. They were married for fifty-two years.

¶2 Frances was born June 22, 1918, in Fairhaven, Massachusetts. She graduated from Fairhaven High School in 1937 and from Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, in 1941. She earned her masters degree in library science from Louisiana State University and worked as a librarian in various secondary schools in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

¶3 In 1966, Mrs. Thompson (or Mrs. T, as she was called by library staff) became the law librarian at South Texas. She continued as librarian for twenty-one years until her retirement in 1987. Frances was the only library employee for seven years before hiring assistants. In 1966, the volume count was 18,000 volumes with a budget of \$20,000. In 1980, the volume count was more than 130,000 volumes and, according to the student newspaper, while the “exact budget of the library would not be divulged, [Mrs. Thompson] says that it is excellent and reflects a definite commitment on the part of the administration to upgrade the library.”¹ Also in 1980, Mrs. Thompson oversaw the installation of a dedicated computer terminal for accessing Westlaw (and later LEXIS).² Mrs. T also oversaw the rearrangement of the collection into Library of Congress class order.

¶4 Frances was always concerned about the security of the library collection. Consequently, she kept all unbound issues of law journals locked up in a room next to her office. When anyone, including faculty, wanted to use them, they had to come to her to retrieve them. Rosie Taylor, an employee of the library since 1978, said that it wasn’t that Mrs. T didn’t want them to have the material, it was just that “she didn’t want the material to walk off.”

¶5 Monica Ortale, faculty services and reference librarian at South Texas, said that when Mrs. Thompson interviewed her for a job, she read Monica’s palm during the interview . . . “and time has shown that she got it half right—yes, I got my law degree, but no, I didn’t get married and have three children!”

¶6 Eddie Yarbrough, another individual hired by Frances and now the administrative associate for the library, says about Frances Thompson: “Anyone who ever spent any time with Frances understood immediately that she was a woman of great intelligence, intuitive skills, and strong opinions, which she often expressed

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1. Frank Stagg, *Thompson Says Library Important*, ANNOTATIONS, Aug.–Sept. 1980, at 11.
2. *Westlaw System Gaining Popularity*, ANNOTATIONS, Jan. 1981, at 1.

without warning.” Her staff swore she had the talent to divine things, which were sometimes charming, sometimes accurate, but always unpredictable.

¶7 Eddie’s “moment” with Mrs. T’s divining ability occurred in 1981. Eddie was a single mom who had been at South Texas barely two years and really needed to remain employed. The college dean, Garland Walker, decided he wanted to place a painting in the library and, as luck would have it, it was hung on the wall behind Eddie’s desk. Dean Walker had refined taste and an amazing art collection. But the very large painting he chose, a collection of black, gray, and orange tones, resembled molecules on a microscope slide. To Eddie, it was truly *wretched!*

¶8 Eddie struggled with this dilemma. She decided to tell Mrs. T that she was such a klutz that she was worried about accidentally damaging the painting with an elbow. She wondered out loud to Frances, could she ask the dean to take the painting back? Mrs. T nodded in solemn agreement and made an appointment to see the dean immediately. Frances insisted that Eddie join her in talking to the dean. Eddie followed innocently.

¶9 When they entered Dean Walker’s office, Frances loudly announced, “Eddie *really* hates your art work!” Dean Walker chuckled and asked if that were true, and Eddie admitted that while she actually preferred landscapes, her primary concern was the safety of his painting. In fact, it turned out the painting was worth around \$20,000! The dean graciously conceded that it should be moved, and Eddie kept her job. For Eddie, it marked a dawning sense of awe and respect—not to mention a fair amount of caution—for Mrs. T’s ability to divine the truth behind any statement made to her and to speak her mind with unintimidated, unrestrained, and unpredictable freedom.

¶10 Ann Puckett succeeded Frances as law librarian in 1987. In 1995, I succeeded Ann. I knew Frances through attendance at AALL Annual Meetings. She always seemed pleasant and jovial. One year we were in Washington, D.C., for the convention. Rothman Publishing was hosting a “green slips” river dinner and cruise on the Potomac River. At a table for four, I joined Frances and her husband Robert, and Della Geyer, longtime law librarian from Baylor University, where I was working at the time. We had a great time talking about how libraries and AALL had changed over the years. It was a genuine pleasure to hear the stories and participate in some of them. Frances will be missed and remembered by many.—*David G. Cowan*³

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