

Notes On: Women Labor-Management Mediators and Their Story at USCS and FMCS

By Jerome Barrett

For over 100 years, the FMCS, with its predecessor the United State Conciliation Service (USCS), has provided continuous full time conflict resolution assistance to labor and management. Like most organizations in the early 20th century, USCS began with an exclusively white male mediators staff. It would be almost 10 years after its creation that the USCS added its first woman mediator.* It would take another 20 years before USCS would hire several more women mediators. This article presents this story of women slowly gaining acceptance in a white male-dominated occupation.

During the USCS 33 year history (1914 to 1947), only four women were hired as mediators. All four women were ultimately transferred to FMCS in 1947 when all USCS employees were transferred as FMCS replaced USCS. All mediators transferred from USCS to FMCS, as well as all subsequently hired FMCS mediators, were given a hiring number beginning with the number 1. In this paper, the hiring number appears in parenthesis after the mediators' name.

Of the four women hired by USCS as mediators, the latter three were hired during World War II.

Four Women USCS Mediators

JEROME (JERRY) BARRETT, a former FMCS mediator and official, is the Founder of FMCS History Foundation, which has gathered, preserved and publicized an extensive collection at George Washington University Special Collections and at his website (mediationhistory.org). The GWU portion of the collection is 135 shelf feet long and includes over 200 oral history interviews. Barrett earned an EdD from George Washington University, and has written over 100 articles and papers about USCS and FMCS.

Anna Weinstock Schweider (190) was hired by USCS on December 16, 1922 at age 27. She was stationed in Worcester, MA, the center of the clothing and needle trades industry in the U.S. Prior to joining USCS, she had been President of the Boston Women's Trade Union League, and an official in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts recommended her to USCS. Her experience in clothing industry labor relations matched the USCS need to cover that important industry. Among her many awards during her long career, she received the Distinguished Service Award from FMCS Director Joseph F. Finnegan on December 16, 1957. Cornell University's Ted Kheel Center archive has an extensive collection on Anna Weinstock's life. A Google of her provided extensive information about her career. She retired in 1965 at age 70, and began an arbitration career. She died in 1979 at age 83. I met her briefly at a New England labor-management conference in the early 1970s. When we discussed the start of our careers in mediation, she joked that she started mediating younger than me. Unfortunately,

our meeting was ten years before I started recording oral histories of mediators.

Rose Forrester (62) was hired by USCS in 1941 at age 61. She was stationed in the Washington D.C. field office, and retired from FMCS in 1949. She died in 1979 at age 84. No other information could be found on her.

Eloise Labounty Steward (207) was hired by USCS in 1942 at age 36. Ms. Steward had practice law before joining USCS. She served in USCS offices in Washington D.C., Atlanta and Chicago before retiring in 1970. She died in 1978. While I was stationed in Milwaukee (1965 to 69), I overlapped with her final years in Chicago. She had an excellent reputation as a very strong mediator among the dozen male mediators stationed in Chicago. Retired Regional Director James McPherson, in a 1986 oral history interview, said that while he was Chicago's Assistant Regional Director responsible for assigning cases, he assigned her any kind of case, from nurses to heavy manufacturing, and she handled them very effectively.

Mary Currier (37) was stationed in Boston, and as result of a Reduction in Force at FMCS on 9-2-49, she left FMCS. No other information could be found on her not even her hire date. It was probably during WW II.

FMCS Period

Unlike other Federal agencies, FMCS was allowed to handle its own hiring process in the early years after 1947. That occasionally resulted in some unique hiring practices. The first two women hired by FMCS illustrate that. There was no policy or practice at that time encouraging the hiring women mediators.

Twenty-one years after its birth, FMCS hired the first women mediator, who at age 34 was seven years older than the first woman hired by USCS 46 years earlier. A further irony is that by the late 60s, women in the male workplace was much more common than in the early 20s.

In December 1968, Nancy Fibish (590) was the first woman hired by FMCS. She had earned a BA and a MA in Industrial Relations, was a Fulbright Exchange student, and fluent in French. Prior to FMCS, Nancy worked as a social worker and for the NLRB in Chicago. She was hired and assigned to Chicago as a GS-11, one grade below the normal entry level. Later, she moved to the National Office Washington D.C. to coordinate the new Health Care Amendment to Taft-Hartley. In 1974, her leadership was noted by her selection to participate in the year-long Fellowships in Congressional Operations for Executives program sponsored by the Civil Service Commission in cooperation with the American Political Science Association.

In July 1970, Linda Lafferty (613) was hired by FMCS. In my 1985 interview, Linda described an odd hiring process. She was born and educated in Canada, earned a nursing degree, and worked as an operating room nurse. Without any experience in labor relations, she went to Cornell Industrial and Labor Relations School to earn a MA in Industrial Relations in 1966. During a job interview at the Department of Labor, the interviewer, based on Linda's expressed interest in collective bargaining, suggested that she talk to FMCS located in the same building in Washington D.C. At FMCS, she talked to someone in personnel, and then several mediators were gathered to interview her. She believed that she had fascinated them with her suggestion that as a nurse in the operating room she could think clearly and quickly in a stressful environment. Within a few weeks, she was offered a job as a mediator intern. She had already taken a field examiners job at the NLRB in Boston. So she asked if the intern job could wait while she got some experience at the NLRB. Two years later, she accepted the FMCS offer. After a few weeks of orientation, she was assigned to Cleveland, where she worked contentedly for three years. Her boss in Cleveland was Regional Director Jim McPherson, who spoke favorably about Eloise Labounty Steward above. In Cleveland, she was assigned cases without regard to her gender, and the Detroit and Cleveland newspapers carried stories about her being the only woman mediator in that region. The only trouble she recalled having as a mediator was with a few labor and management negotiators who had failed to get hired by FMCS. Subsequently, she went to work for the Federal Impasses Panel where she remained until retiring. It is likely that her assignment to Cleveland was because Cleveland Regional Director Jim McPherson was relatively younger than other Regional Directors and therefore more likely to welcome a women mediator.

In October 24, 1972, Carol Holter (653), age 42, was hired by FMCS as GS-12, the normal entry level. She had a BA in Philosophy and an MA in Education. Before FMCS, she held several private sector personnel jobs that included some labor relations work between 6-52 and 9-66. For several years, she represented Scientific America in negotiations with the News Paper Guild. Then for a short period, she was self-employed as a food writer based on her chef experience, before joining FMCS. After one year with FMCS, she advanced to a GS 13, and in 1980 she advance to a GS 14. In 1981, FMCS separated her. No information was available on this action.

In August 1973, Ruth Carpenter (666) was hired by FMCS at age 34. Prior to FMCS, Ruth attended North Idaho College. Between May 1960 and May 1967, she worked in the bargaining unit for General Telephone in

Idaho and Washington State. From June 1967 to August 1970, she was Chief Steward for IBEW Local 77. She was Business Agent from 1970 to 1973 for IBEW local 89 in Everett, Washington. A Seattle mediator and the Regional Director encouraged her to apply to FMCS. Except for a short period as a manager, she spent her career mediating in San Francisco. Her reputation in the Bay area was such that the City and County named the day she retired in 2008 as "Ruth Carpenter Day". The mayor invited her to City Hall to receive a plaque.

In its first 26 years, FMCS hired only four women mediators, only one of whom stayed until retirement. Two of the women mediators who transferred from USCS to FMCS had long careers as a mediator before retiring from FMCS, one after 18 years and other 23 years.

A Shift in Hiring Women

In the next phase of this story, I played a noteworthy role in increasing the hiring of women mediators beginning in 1975 and beyond. I left FMCS in 1969 to work for a foundation that was attempting to mediation civil rights disputes. Then, for three years, I worked at DOL for Assistant Secretary Bill Usery. When he was preparing to leave to become Director of FMCS, he asked me to accompany him to help, in his words, "wake-up sleepy little FMCS." He wanted me to head a new office called the office of Technical Assistance that would be responsible for recruiting and training mediators, among several other functions. So he asked for my thoughts on that function. I suggest two things I'd like to do: (1) Bring in more young people via an intern program, and (2) Recruit more women and minors. He agreed and explained he intended to increase the number of mediators. Bill was always interest in doing something that hadn't been done before. We moved from Department of Labor to FMCS in 1973. Bill Usery kept his word, and as a result, in 1975 five FMCS women interns were hired. Ten women were hired at the normal entry level between 1975 and 1977. In the 1980s, 12 more women were hired, and 21 in the 1990s. When I left FMCS in the summer of 1984, the opportunity for women to be hired by FMCS was well established.

During 1975, the women mediator interns remained in Washington for six month under my supervision, which provided me the opportunity to learn about the difficulties ahead for them in the field, and to helped me offer the guidance I thought they needed. During their first year in the field, I remained in phone contact with those who ran into difficult with their Regional Director. In addition to the gender issue, the women mediator interns had the additional issue of age, because they were all younger than traditional new hires.

As part of my oral history collection, which includes more than 200 interviews, I interviewed 14 women mediators, as well as 13 women with other jobs at FMCS. These interviews helped my understanding of the issues women faced in entering a male-dominated occupation.

Bill Usery's success in expanding the size of the mediation staff during his term, was favorable to the hiring of women.

Some Reflections

A major problem for women in the early days ^{was} included some male mediators refusing to take a woman mediator into their mediation cases. Thus violated the long-standing FMCS practice of on-the-job training, which relied primarily on observing experienced mediators working. Regional Directors, not fully committed to women mediators, did not force this issue. A supportive Regional Director was crucial for women in gaining experience and acceptance by fellow mediators and the labor-management community.

As more women negotiators appeared at the bargaining table, women mediators had an easier time gaining acceptance with the parties. That also gave FMCS an incentive to hire more women. The health care industry and education were particularly helpful with that.

Some women mediators moved beyond mediating to become managers. Two women left via transfer: One joined the Federal Labor-Relations Authority staff, and the other joined the Foreign Service. A third woman accepted a presidential appointment to the National Mediation Board.

Two women hired in 1970s set precedents for FMCS: one married a fellow mediator at another duty station, and the other was the first mediator to give birth.

Over the years, a number of women mediators left FMCS for better opportunities. The dynamic of that was that many males joined FMCS after long careers as negotiators, while the early women hires tended to have only the minimum experience required to be hired. Thus after five to ten years with FMCS, a woman mediator was eligible to seek greater opportunities elsewhere.

Current Status of FMCS Women Mediators

Currently, four of the ten FMCS Regional Offices are headed by a woman. The General Counsel and the FMCS Director are both women. Women constitute 28 percent of FMCS 165 mediator staff.

* The official title of mediators at both USCS and FMCS was Commissioner. USCS referred to their Commissioners as Conciliators, while FMCS referred to their Commissioners as mediators.