

Charlye O. Farris and Edna Cisneros:

Stories from the
lives and legacies
of two Texas
Legal Pioneers

Women's History Month 2023





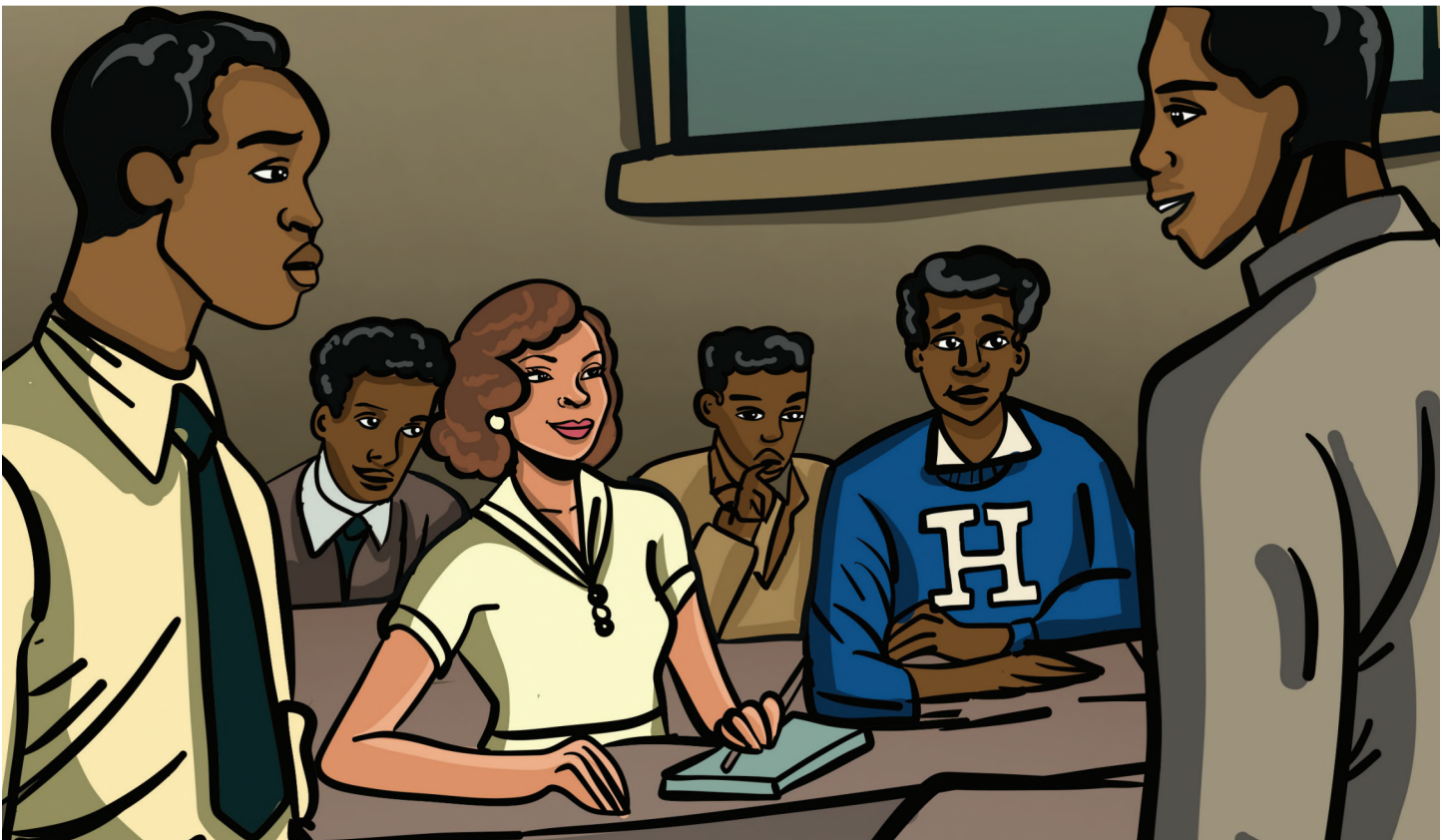
Charlye O. Farris

One name is bound to come up in any discussion about the history of women lawyers in Texas, and that is Charlye O. Farris, widely regarded as the first Black woman admitted to the practice of law in Texas.

Charlye was born in Wichita Falls, Texas, on June 30, 1929, to two public school teachers. Needless to say, education was important in her family. Indeed, Charlye could read and write by the time she was three years old. Charlye did very well in school, so much so that she skipped several grades and graduated from high school at just 15 — as valedictorian, no less. Her parents believed that teaching was the only respectable career available to a young Black woman, and encouraged her to pursue a career in teaching. So Charlye enrolled at Prairie View A&M University, where she was exposed to people, ideas, and events that would influence her desire to become a lawyer, even though it was not considered to be a woman's profession at that time. Fortunately, her professors and a friend encouraged her to follow her dream.

In 1948, at age 18, Charlye graduated from Prairie View with a bachelor's degree in political science. To appease her parents, she began teaching elementary school in Stamford, Texas, but after a year, she gave it up to pursue her interest in law. At that time, there were very few women lawyers licensed to practice law in Texas, and none were Black. But Charlye was determined to go to law school, and she enrolled in the University of Denver Law School, where her cousin was pursuing a master's degree. There, almost all of her classmates were white men and she had no one to talk to about the complexities of the law.

Convinced that she would do much better at law school if she were surrounded by other Black students, in 1950 she transferred to Howard University School of Law, a historically black university in Washington, D.C. At Howard, Charlye made friends with most of her peers and professors, and loved discussing law, politics, and world events with them. In her civil rights class, she even had the opportunity to listen to Thurgood Marshall (who would later become the first African American U.S. Supreme Court Justice) and his team practice their Supreme Court oral arguments for the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* case.





Charlye graduated from Howard University School of Law in 1953. She passed the Texas bar exam and on November 12, 1953, became the first African American woman admitted to practice law in Texas. Charlye began her law practice back home in Wichita County.

Charlye made history again in 1954, when the Wichita County Bar Association elected Charlye to serve as Special Wichita County Judge or County Judge Pro Tem, a short-term position of several days requiring her to serve in the absence of the elected county judge. Her election, which drew national attention, made her the first Black person to serve as a judge in the South since Reconstruction.

Despite her election as judge, being the first Black woman to practice law in Wichita was not without its challenges. Segregation was still alive and well in the South. Charlye was initially not allowed to join the Wichita County Bar Association, nor could she attend its meetings as they were held at a hotel that refused to serve Blacks. Even at the local county

courthouse, (which was segregated until 1962), Charlye had to use separate restrooms for "colored" people in the basement and the "colored" drinking fountains, which were located on a different floor from the district courtrooms.

In the face of discrimination, Charlye nonetheless remained undeterred in her pursuit of justice for her clients. Her practice grew and she opened up her own law office, focusing on family law, will and probate cases, and criminal law. She gave every client her best effort. When she sensed hostility from jurors, who were almost always men, she would usually respond, "You may resent me because I am Black, and you may resent me because I am a woman, but please remember that our legal system requires that you make your decision based on the facts." She came to be admired by her colleagues for her intelligence, exceptional skill, hard work, and dedication. In the summer of 1973, she served as acting judge of the 78th Judicial District Court, attesting to the reputation she earned in the legal community.

Charlye operated a successful solo legal practice for more than 50 years. Her hard work and persistence opened doors for women and people of color to enter the legal profession.

She received many awards and honors throughout her career, including the prestigious Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award from the American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession, the National Bar Association of Women Lawyers' Award for Distinguished Lifetime Service, and the Texas Bar Foundation's Outstanding Fifty-Year Lawyer Award, among others.

Charlye passed away on February 18, 2010. In 2011, the Texas Historical Commission honored her with a historical marker in front of the Wichita County Courthouse, located across the street from where she practiced law until her retirement in 2009. The marker reads, "Her life is a testament to the determination and the impact one individual can have on a community, state, and nation."





Edna Cisneros

Edna Cisneros — a Tejana you should know. As the first Latina attorney in Texas, she paved the way for other incredible Latina attorneys such as former Texas Supreme Court Justice Eva Guzman and Texas Attorney General candidate Rochelle Garza.

Edna was born on February 2, 1930, in Raymondville, Texas, to Benita De La Garza and Manuel Cisneros, a local grocer. She was the second of the family's four daughters. Growing up in Raymondville, Edna attended public high school and graduated as class valedictorian in 1947. She later moved to Austin, Texas,

to study Business Administration at the University of Texas. She lived in Austin with her sisters in a home purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Cisneros while she and her sisters attended college.

In 1952, Edna graduated from the University of Texas, earning a Bachelor of Business Administration. She then attended the school's college of law and earned a Bachelor of Laws in 1955.

On September 6, 1955, Edna became the first Mexican American woman admitted to the State Bar of Texas. The same year, she joined Young, Young, and Dagget, a Houston-based law firm, once again breaking barriers by becoming the first Mexican American woman in Texas to practice law.





Women in the legal field were rare; a woman couldn't even serve on a Texas jury until 1954.

Despite this, at age 26, Edna made an unprecedented run for Willacy County District Attorney in 1956. Edna ran a grassroots campaign against her 16-year incumbent opponent, opting for door-knocking over public speeches and traveling as much as 100 miles each day to meet voters. Her campaign slogan was "Justice for All."

She faced machismo every step of the way, and told a newspaper reporter that while the men she met on the campaign trail "were polite ... a few made it plain that they didn't approve of women in politics." But

Edna's family included strong men who were very supportive of the women in their family.

Edna defeated her opponent by almost 300 votes, becoming the first Mexican American district attorney in Texas. She remained Texas' only female chief prosecutor for another eight years.

Media coverage of Edna's historic accomplishments was usually accompanied by sexist comments about her appearance, including some that described her as a "slender, brown-eyed barrister" or boldly announced, "Pretty Girl to take over as Willacy County's DA."

As district attorney, Edna was well-regarded for her legal skills. In one case, she obtained a guilty verdict on a murder charge where the jury meted out a rare 40-year sentence for the defendant.

Edna faced frequent sexism during her time as district attorney. One newspaper article about her preference against too many plea deals was titled, "Nose-Powdering D.A. Resists Trade-Outs." When faced with sexism, Edna stood firm and redirected the conversation to her achievements, arguing that she "may be a little short on experience — 'but it's because I'm 26, and not because I'm a woman.'"

In 1958, Edna faced her sister Diana in court when she prosecuted an armed-robbery suspect represented by Diana. The case garnered local media attention and crowds eager to see the rare event of two sisters arguing against each other as attorneys. The defendant pleaded guilty, and it was the first of many times the sisters would face off in the courtroom.

Edna served her community as district attorney for 29 years. She continued to live in Raymondville, Texas, with her husband Charles Ernest Carroll for many years following her service. Edna died on July 26, 2013, at the age of 83 in Harlingen, Texas.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS & THE ARTIST



Jasmine Wynton is a partner with Thompson Coburn LLP in Dallas. Jasmine is an experienced litigator who focuses her practice on high-stakes business litigation, employment law, and white collar criminal defense. She serves in leadership capacities for a number of civic and charitable organizations, and is currently on the Board of Trustees and Executive Committee of the Texas Supreme Court Historical Society.



Liz Rocha is an associate with Thompson Coburn in Dallas. She represents clients in the areas of antitrust and trade regulation, including advertising. Liz also represents hospitals and health care providers in coverage and reimbursement disputes. She is a Director on the 2023 Board of the Dallas LGBT+ Bar Association and a member of the Dallas Hispanic Bar Association (DHBA). In 2022, she served on the DHBA's committee for the 17th Annual Noche de Luz, an annual fundraiser that supports various DHBA pipeline initiatives, including law student scholarships, the Dallas Latina Leadership Program, and its Judicial Externship Program.



Laura Coleman is a Washington, D.C.-based illustrator and author who specializes in bold, vibrant designs and drawings of people. In addition to illustrations, her graphic designs have been featured in Adobe, Artomatic, The Washington Post, FemmeFatalDC and more. She believes in the importance and power of art in black culture and has penned three books, including a coloring book for all ages, "Color In My Style." Learn more at cosmicmedium.com.

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In honor of Women's History Month 2023 and our deep appreciation for these outstanding legal pioneers, Thompson Coburn has made a \$2,000 donation to the Farris-Cisneros Scholarship at the University of Texas at Austin School of Law.



The University of Texas at Austin
School of Law

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