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Twice Through the Glass Ceiling: Sue Birdwell-Alves

BY CYNTHIA DEVLIN

After the tumult of the 1960s that included the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, and the Youth Revolt, women in the South slowly began to step outside the narrow confines of home and family. Young women postponed marriage to enjoy degrees of freedom and self-fulfillment, while some married women reevaluated the status of their marriages or their families' financial stability and thus decided to exercise self-direction and enter the workforce. A few jettisoned their controlling and backward-thinking husbands for the freedom to choose their own destinies. Eventually, these women assisted in breaking the molds that had prevented women from exploring new roles and having careers instead of menial jobs.

One such woman not only established herself as a successful businesswoman in the oil industry, but she also forged a second career in the financial world. Sue Birdwell-Alves began her search for a career in the late 1960s, and in 1974, at the age of forty-five, became the first independent female landman in the traditionally male-driven oil business. She cultivated and courted clients and carved out personal oil royalties while, at the same time, increased the wealth of her customers.

After a successful career as a landman, she revitalized her career and transformed into a stockbroker extraordinaire, garnering the title, "The Legend," by her retirement at seventy-six years of age.¹

The overt sexism of the time hindered Birdwell-Alves' journey, but she still converted herself from a grits and gravy, white-glove-wearing Southern belle to a suit-wearing, forward-thinking businesswoman of substance, character, and determination. As if overcoming a patriarchy that articulated an Antebellum agenda that prevented the advancement of women in the workplace was not enough, Birdwell-Alves also felt that the women's liberation movement and its unique agenda thwarted her efforts. She insisted that Southern women best made their own path through hard work, longer hours, and acquiring more knowledge than men. According to Birdwell-Alves, southern men projected an

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“Antebellum-Rhett Butler” attitude that sought to keep women barefoot and pregnant, and definitely at home. Birdwell-Alves “knew in her heart” that there were men who believed that qualified women could enter the business world and she simply needed to identify those able to mentor her through the processes necessary to succeed in a man’s world. According to Birdwell-Alves, the National Organization for Women, organized by feminist Betty Friedan, promoted a strident, almost militant, agenda that did not much more than disturb the sensibilities and social mores of many Southern women without increasing their chances for success.²

Sue Caroline Birdwell (Birdwell-Alves) arrived in the world on April 8, 1929 at Port Arthur, Texas. As the only girl, her brother James Allen Birdwell remembered that their father called her “Sue Baby” and spoiled the young inquisitive child. The world’s population stood at a little over two billion in 1929; and by the end of that year, the Great Depression ravaged the nation while businesses and banks in Texas approached paralysis. About twelve million Americans were unemployed by 1932, and people prayed that the economic stimulation and social changes promoted by the Franklin Roosevelt administration would ameliorate and eventually alleviate all the pain and suffering. The Birdwell family fared better than many Americans because most of them had graduated from colleges and universities and worked as professionals. Birdwell-Alves’ father, Leroy Birdwell, a graduate of Texas A & M University, worked as an engineer for the Texas Company, the predecessor of Texaco, Incorporated. Alton W. Birdwell, her uncle, served as the first president of Stephen F. Austin State University from September 18, 1923 until 1942. Some females in the family taught school and, as well, some worked outside the home.³

Leroy Birdwell moved his family to San Antonio, Texas sometime in 1930 when the Texas Company built a new oil refinery in the area. The headline of the *San Antonio Express* on September 28, 1930 stated, “Better times . . . in store for San Antonio and the rest of the United States.” Such a statement defied reality. During the 1930s, the Birdwell family bought and distributed food sacks in their neighborhood to the needy, an art of giving to the community in times of dire need that Birdwell-Alves would apply to her later church and charity work, but lessons that would also provide the foundation for her future in the business world.⁴

While Birdwell-Alves relished her relationships with her male relatives, it was the women who shepherded the young woman into adulthood with solid ideas that a female could select her own destiny through education, drive, and strength of character. Birdwell-Alves' mother, Frances Taylor Birdwell, proved a strong role model for her daughter. Not a traditional housewife and mother, Frances Birdwell acted in the little theatre and performed many deeds of charity for her community. She also directed the activities of the Parent-Teacher's Association as president during Birdwell-Alves' school years. Birdwell-Alves also saw her mother awarded the keys to the city for her work on San Antonio's Riverwalk renewal project in the 1930s. Her aunt, Allie Myrrl Birdwell, also provided the eager-to-learn girl with a fine example of a pioneering woman. Birdwell-Alves noticed with delight when her aunt, a math teacher, published an advanced algebra book in concert with Oscar Miller, the superintendent of schools in San Antonio. She realized at an early age that knowledge truly translated to power. Birdwell-Alves remembered reading together as a family and playing lots of board and card games. She described her childhood as fun but always challenging since her parents expected their children to attend college and to achieve certain goals, especially respectability and competence. Failure to succeed had never been an option for this young and dynamic Texan.⁵

Birdwell-Alves attended high school during World War II. While the city bustled with war-related activities, the Birdwell household celebrated life by hosting air cadets and soldiers for after-church Sunday dinners. Birdwell-Alves stated that "[i]t was common knowledge that my Mama had a big spread of food at 10:30 P.M. every Saturday night." No invitation was needed and, "[a]fter rolling up the rug, we danced," said Birdwell-Alves. They did this because, "Mama knew that it kept teenagers and future soldiers off the streets and out of trouble." During this time period, Lady Bird Johnson purchased KTBC, her first radio station, and the mythical Rosie the Riveter, as portrayed by Norman Rockwell, graced the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* on May 29, 1943, indicating that women could accomplish men's work. The cover represented the culmination of a government campaign that began in 1942 and had recruited women to the workforce in the name of the "war effort." American women had actually filled necessary roles during all wars, beginning with Abigail Adams, who managed land for her war-

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engaged husband, John Adams. In the Confederate States of America, women handled plantation activities during the Civil War, and Western women worked homesteads while husbands fought in Indian wars. During the nineteen months of World War I starting in 1917, about one million women went to work as the men went to fight. Those years between the two world wars proved extraordinarily difficult for women who wished to or needed to work. They suffered from workplace discrimination, received low salaries, and often worked in menial jobs with little chance of advancement. Major changes reshaped the workforce when sixteen million men went off to fight in World War II, leaving job vacancies in wartime that nineteen million women eventually filled.⁶

Birdwell-Alves' awareness of women and their roles in the business arena and in the war effort was heightened with her increased exposure to state and national news, as well as with Hollywood's release of pro-American movies that coupled heroics with the warfront scoop. She knew that her observations and reactions to the news, in addition to the non-traditional role model that was her mother, encouraged her to dream without boundaries.

Expectations remained high after the war. Birdwell-Alves graduated from San Antonio's Thomas Jefferson High School in 1947. About that same time, her parents sold the family home and moved to New Jersey, where her father would build a refinery for Texaco. Birdwell-Alves, for the first time in her life, experienced a family void that prompted her to mature quickly as she entered Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. During her college years, she guided her sorority as president; and she gained membership in several other honorary organizations. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in home economics with a minor in history in 1951, joining notable Southwestern graduates such as Texas folklorist J. Frank Dobie and United States Senator John Tower. Twenty-four percent of the degrees awarded in the United States in liberal arts and professional studies in 1950 had gone to women, but in Texas most degreed females worked as secretaries, salesclerks, or teachers.

Home economics, an acceptable major for women during this after-war, pro-domestic transitioning period, had equipped Birdwell-Alves with the skills to run a home and to rear children. Such skills, however, failed to impress most men when she decided to enter the

male-dominated work force. Her experience in college, though, provided her the needed organizational skills and time management skills necessary for a productive life. More importantly, Birdwell-Alves honed her exceptional reading skills. Like Birdwell-Alves, many women believed if a woman could run a household efficiently, then she would be able to run a business in the same manner. The study of history at the university provided her a sense of belonging to a larger community, one in which scholars and practitioners promoted the ideas of “American exceptionalism” to counter the Soviet Union’s expanded role in the world. Birdwell-Alves believed in capitalism, coupled with democracy, and in the exploits of great American heroes. While seemingly oxymoronic, she remained simultaneously both exceedingly idealistic and completely pragmatic.⁷

For most women, including Birdwell-Alves, the 1950s represented a time when marriage remained the primary lifestyle choice. Women gave up their jobs when the men returned from the war. Despite such a development, 1950 Census data revealed that more women than ever were working, even though most remained housewives and stay-at-home mothers. The proportion of women in the workforce continued to climb yearly, long before women began to organize and clamor for equal rights. Several months after her college graduation, Birdwell-Alves chose marriage to Richard T. Alves, who had been her brother’s friend while he attended Texas A & M.

Bogged down in the Korean Conflict (1950-1953), President Harry S. Truman found it necessary under this “police action” to send more troops abroad; and, once more, women took up the slack in the workforce. Thus, Richard T. Alves went to war, and his wife went to work. While he served in the United States Navy, she resided in San Francisco (after living over a year in the Philippines during the Korean War) and worked as a claims clerk for a large insurance company that catered to the trucking industry. She celebrated her employment, finding work outside the home both addictive and intoxicating. The job proved fruitful as her knowledge of business grew extensively. She also enjoyed signing the back of her paycheck and adding it to the bank account. She longed to continue working outside the home after the war ended in 1953; but Richard T. Alves, like so many other Southern-bred men, had other ideas about how a woman should conduct herself.⁸

After leaving the military in 1958, Richard Alves moved the family

to Lafayette, Louisiana to work in the oil business. That same year Mary Rocbling took the helm as the first woman governor of the American Stock Exchange. Lafayette was home to 586 oil companies in 1959, and the employee payroll of the city was over nine million dollars. Oilmen from Texas and Oklahoma moved their families to the overwhelmingly Catholic, Cajun, and all Democratic city, where folks looked askance at interlopers who spoke English, who did not relish “gators, gumbo, and étouffée,” and who acknowledged that America had two major political parties. Because Birdwell-Alves had grown up in the multi-cultural city of San Antonio, she accepted her new environment more easily than some. However, Birdwell-Alves emotionally suffered from the cultural expectations of placing family responsibilities over her own dreams and aspirations. She wondered why she could not have a career and attend to her family obligations as well. After all, men did both. Her frustrations frequently boiled over, but she stifled her desires while promoting her husband’s career.⁹

Most young women during the 1950s appeared content to nest in their newly-purchased homes, to rear their children, to wear the new kissable lipstick from chemist Hazel Bishop, and to attend newly organized Tupperware parties; but Birdwell-Alves learned about stocks, land, and wealth. Birdwell-Alves quietly focused dogged attention on the world of finance when she sought to increase the worth of a small amount of stock shares in AT&T and Texaco that she had received as a wedding gift. Not unlike female investor Hetty Green, a Quaker who had amassed a fortune on Wall Street in the mid-to-late 1800s, Birdwell-Alves sought the secrets to financial success.

Combining motherhood with her obsession to learn, she frequented a public library on a quest for knowledge concerning financial matters. She adopted economist and philosopher Adam Smith’s idea that “[I] and is the basis of all wealth,” and she consumed everything in print written by seminal financial figure Benjamin Graham, who was known as “the father of modern security analysis...and...the founder of the value school of investing.” Dismayed to find that women could not open brokerage accounts with financial firms during the 1950s, she insisted that her husband sign the papers on her behalf. An astute self-taught investor, Birdwell-Alves held the gifted stocks through numerous splits, reverse splits, and corporate buyouts, and she relished her financial advantage.¹⁰

During the 1960s, housewife Birdwell-Alves barely noticed when President John F. Kennedy held the first presidential commission on the status of women, nor did she realize that the world's population had grown to an estimated three billion. However, she did respond negatively to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, dismissing it as "ridiculous rubbish" not founded in logic or reality. Friedan's book undeniably influenced the feminist movement, but to some (such as Birdwell-Alves) her ideas promoted a mythical Amazonian utopia that was unrealistic in theory and in practice. Birdwell-Alves never agreed that female heroines, such as the first stewardesses, as Friedan suggested, represented future role models for women. Stewardesses never directly competed with men whether they were nurses or simply young women seeking adventure. According to Birdwell-Alves, Friedan's references and comparisons remained flawed. By the 1970s, books such as *Coffee, Tea or Me* raised eyebrows with feminists and with Birdwell-Alves because stewardesses morphed into sex goddesses instead of addressing and demonstrating the serious nature of the actual job. The evolution to "sex object" demeaned women and slowed their overall advancement.

When Harvard University admitted the first woman into the Graduate School of Business Administration in 1963, Southern women mainly worked as teachers, nurses, secretaries, and clerks. Birdwell-Alves checked the job want ads for something she could do to fulfill a need to "feel good about her life." Never having learned to type, she felt sick that women had to use their fingers on a bulky machine in order to put bacon on the table when men could use their social skills to make business deals while playing golf at the country club, drinking a beer at a local ice house, or fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. Birdwell-Alves recognized that many Southern women of her generation had simply accepted the traditional idea articulated by Tennessee Williams' character "Big Daddy" Pollitt in his 1955 play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, that women of well-to-do families subjugated their lives to powerful men in order "to be taken care of in the same manner in which they grown accustomed." "Don't worry your pretty little head about it," a common saying by men to women that infuriated some, but also provided comfort to others that someone "was looking after them" did not apply to Birdwell-Alves. She wanted to "look after" herself, and in her eyes "Big Daddies" of the post-World War II era in the urbanizing South were nothing more than reincarnated post-Civil War Bourbons.

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Breaking away remained her goal.¹¹

Birdwell-Alves' experience, as with so many women of her generation in the South, stemmed from her volunteer work through her church and other community services. Her summers were spent teaching Vacation Bible School and organizing family gatherings. She had reared her children well and had sent them off to college. She soon found herself grappling with the idea of divorce because of the social, moral, and religious implications; and she consulted trusted family members and close friends about her dilemma. After resolving the emotional conflict between the need to exercise her own personal freedom and the idea that she should remain married out of a sense of tradition, she traded her Antebellum-thinking husband for a chance to succeed in the business world. At forty-five years of age and without health insurance, the newly divorced and somewhat physically frail Birdwell-Alves charged ahead with her dreams. She was not alone. Twenty million women went to work between 1975 and 1990, some seeking career opportunities, while others simply needed the money. Birdwell-Alves, unlike most of the women entering the workplace, did not need the money because throughout the 1960s she earned dividends from her stock investments.

Birdwell-Alves was far from the stereotypical women's rights pioneer of the 1960s and 1970s. She realized that most women of her generation had not finished college and some had never gone at all; thus, they would find careers closed to them due to experience or education requirements. As a traditionalist she felt uneasy about the social chaos of the time, and the headlines that called the Vietnam War endless and not winnable probably dismayed her. Never having been prejudiced, she applauded the Civil Rights Movement and, no doubt, supported the idea of feminine equality. Women's rights issues to her, however, did not include the need or right to burn bras, to live in communes, or to smoke marijuana. Jane Fonda's trip to support the North Vietnamese violated her closely held conservative philosophy, and her values very often conflicted with the leaders of the "women's movment." Nevertheless, she remained an active citizen who voted and assisted the less fortunate; but she also moved forward with her personal goals in this time of social upheaval.¹²

By the early 1970s, Birdwell-Alves had established herself as the unofficial "go-to-woman" for many of her female friends who needed

expertise on how best to manage their money. She had met most of these women through her church and her numerous charities,;and when some became widows, Birdwell-Alves often became an advisor to prevent them from financial ruin. Few knew how to balance a checkbook; how to budget for household expenses; or, much less, how to invest money and have that investment furnish a financial future. Birdwell-Alves urged her friends to assume the economic responsibility necessary to provide a good life for themselves and their children without a husband guiding the way. She noted that one widow simply spent the life insurance money until "precious little remained", and it barely fed her and the children while the woman learned to type and find employment. She actively promoted the idea of education and encouraged women to go to college and earn degrees that would provide them an entrée into the job market.¹³

While companies such as Motorola and Deloitte and Touche formulated and enhanced programs for the promotion of women into lower-level management, oil companies and service companies in the South seldom considered women qualified for promotion. Birdwell-Alves noted that men without college degrees often moved up the ladder in the oil business, whereas a female secretary with the same high school degree remained forever a secretary with few raises and no pension. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prevented discriminatory practices in pay and promotion; however, Birdwell-Alves noted a prevailing antiquated attitude that considered the ideal woman to be "family oriented, not business oriented." Complaints to the boss usually meant a dismissal from the job. She wanted such a mindset changed.¹⁴

Regardless of the obstacles, Birdwell-Alves decided on a career as an oil landman. Although a few women landmen during this time worked for large oil companies, such as Donna Gustafson of Chevron, who was jokingly referred to in a local Plano newsletter as a "landlady," Birdwell-Alves entered the business world in 1974 as the first independent female landman. Ironically, while she could work as a landman, according to Louisiana law of the time she could not serve on a jury, a discriminatory barrier that did not end until 1975 with the *Taylor v. Louisiana* decision by the United States Supreme Court. She secured her position as a landman through a network of contacts she had met and cultivated through her charitable efforts. She chose the oil

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industry because Lafayette had been an oil center since the 1950s and was dedicated to the growth of the industry. The oil business during the 1970s remained difficult due to Middle Eastern oil embargoes; oil shortages; and, according to many in the industry, the formation of the Department of Energy in October, 1977. The purpose of this government agency was the following:

The Department provided the framework for a comprehensive and balanced national energy plan by coordinating and administering the energy functions of the federal government. The Department undertook responsibility for long-term, high-risk research and development of energy technology, federal power marketing, energy conservation, the nuclear weapons program, energy regulatory programs, and a central energy data collection and analysis program.

Texan Eddie Chiles of the Western Company of North America became an unofficial spokesperson for oil-related companies upset with federal government policies and with government overspending during the 1970s. His television ads, radio ads, and automobile bumper stickers in Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana expressed the opinions of many in the oil producing states: "Let the Yankee bastards freeze in the dark" and "If you don't have an oil well... get one." Birdwell-Alves remained undaunted and, as she noted, "I worked in the [oil] business because that was where the money was." She instinctively knew that without the help of oilmen the doors would remain closed.¹⁵

One who gave her help was Robert G. Furse, Sr., a West Texas oilman whose family hobnobbed with George Herbert Walker Bush's family at Kennebunkport, Maine. Furse, a Yale graduate and a past president of the Lafayette Petroleum Landmen's Association, was also a leader of the International Association of Petroleum Landmen. He lived in Birdwell-Alves' neighborhood. After some joint discussions, he assisted her with her career objectives, and he obtained the all-important health insurance provided by a group policy through the international association. Furse, as Birdwell-Alves stated, "made it happen." Without a mentor her foray into the oil business would have easily failed; mentoring proved crucial to her success as a newcomer

to the industry, and Furse assisted her in the development of a business plan and instructed her as to the execution of that plan. He also coached her in the intricacies of starting and running your own business. As a mentee, Birdwell-Alves clarified her goals, thought through her problems, and graciously demanded feedback from Furse. When doubts and fears crept through her mind during the wee hours of the night, she knew that her mentor would provide encouragement at their next meeting.¹⁶

Birdwell-Alves tapped her male contacts and finessed her way through the gender differences in order to convert such folks to clients. At first, she experienced some uneasiness from those who did not know her, but won over most; and they willingly assisted her. Some men refused to speak with her and others “told her off”; some, in vivid language, suggested that she go home and “fry up” something. Instead, she steeled her emotions, sutured her wounds, and fertilized her dreams as she transformed herself into a landman.

The term “landman” most likely originated with the British Royal Navy during the eighteenth century at a time when sailors referred to a seaman who had less than one year’s experience as a “landman.” Later, this informal assessment changed to a formal ranking. Presently, the term “landman” refers to those, both male and female, who “do negotiations and title research work for oil and mining companies.” Birdwell-Alves negotiated various pathways to her success by turning obstacles into open doors. Since, as a female, she could not belong to the Petroleum Club of Lafayette, she had to garner an invitation. Because she was never invited on deep-sea fishing trips with the area oilmen, she found a way to meet them at local restaurants or to “corner them” after church. Oilmen played golf, but females could not join country clubs at the time. Instead, Birdwell-Alves knew where the men met for morning coffee; and she sat at the counter. She remained positive and relentless in her pursuit of success.¹⁷

Nineteen parishes define the state of Louisiana, and Birdwell-Alves combed through old land records in five of them in attempts to locate leasable land with the potential of production for her clients. Some landmen remained skeptical that she had the skills to maneuver the convoluted land records of a state whose Spanish- and French-inspired legal title system was arcane and obscure, to say the least. Ever diligent, Birdwell-Alves worked at learning the necessary processes that

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serviced her clients well. She studied and learned how to read old maps in dusty and dimly lit parish courthouses. Louisiana land records date to the initial French occupation from the years 1698 to 1763 and from the takeover by the Spanish in 1763 until Spain returned the territory to France in 1803. France owned Louisiana for about twenty days before Napoleon Bonaparte sold it to the United States.¹⁸

Louisiana is a federal-land state, meaning that lands were generally acquired from foreign sovereigns and then transferred to the United States government. After the famous Louisiana Purchase, owners of land had to prove their ownership to the United States, and those land recordings are now contained within what is known as “The Superior Council Records.” While landmen today can access those files on microfilm at Tulane University in New Orleans, Birdwell-Alves patiently dug through such records in a pre-computer world, where analytical and critical thinking skills proved indispensable. Because Louisiana retained the “Napoleonic Code of Law,” landmen accessed records that contained the husband’s and wife’s names and those of all of the heirs who happened to be living at the time of death of either spouse as directed by that code. Most oil company landmen tapped the legal minds of lawyers for an understanding of French law and the nuances and anomalies that set it apart from the common English law of the other forty-nine states. Birdwell-Alves sought advice from Lafayette oil and gas attorney S. K. Hartley, and he proved a strong mentor for the novice landman. He also knew researchers who would assist her with land records. Birdwell-Alves’ overall successes rested not only on her continuing educational endeavors and her attendance at relevant seminars, but on her development of these strong personal relationships.¹⁹

After making inroads into the landman business, Birdwell-Alves’ male clients frequently escorted her to the Petroleum Club in Lafayette. These men were members, and they bought her meals. Many times she attempted to pay, but the club refused to accept her money. Dow Chemical Company conducted business at the club, and when one of their in-house female landmen was not allowed inside, they supported the woman in a lawsuit. Dow Chemical won the suit and management requested that Birdwell-Alves become one of the first female members. In a short and swift proclamation, she stated, “No, I don’t need you now.” As with the tenor of the times, many service

clubs, such as Rotary International, the Jaycees, the Kiwanis, and the Lions, did not permit women to join. Finally, in the 1984 case *Roberts v. U.S. Jaycees*, 468 U.S. 609 (1984), the Supreme Court outlawed sex discrimination in membership policies of organizations, opening many previously all-male organizations to women. Following the decision, Birdwell-Alves, who had been asked to address, according to her own words, “some pretty powerful groups,” at some of these clubs, declined a 1988 invitation to join the Rotary International Club, but accepted membership in 1990 as the third woman to become a Rotarian in Lafayette. Moreover, Birdwell-Alves became the first woman member of the Lafayette Association of Petroleum Landmen. She later joined by invitation many local and national service organizations, including several financial committees and directorships of the Asbury Methodist Church. She assisted many of these organizations with financial advice on how best to manage their money and to remain solvent.²⁰

An opportunity next arose that permitted Birdwell-Alves to fulfill her adult dream of becoming a stockbroker. She saw an ad in the local paper about a test that would be given on a certain day and at a specific time for a financial position. She tested for the position, not knowing the name of the company that posted the potential job. Shortly thereafter, in 1984, Birdwell-Alves became assistant trader at Howard Weil Lahouisse & Friedrichs, a financial firm headquartered in New Orleans. Management took a gamble on her, and the company manager never failed to remind her that she had absolutely no financial background.

Social and cultural pressures confronted working women concerning their wardrobe choices and their physical appearances during the 1970s and through the 1980s. Birdwell-Alves strongly believed that the Women’s Movement emphasized “dress” over substance in the struggle to compete with men in the workforce. She had no intentions of conforming to the standards articulated by women’s magazines. Designers such as Diane Von Furstenberg introduced what became known as a career woman’s staple, a simple jersey knit wrap dress. The wrap dress seemed conservative at a time when Southwest Airlines introduced flight attendants in “hot pants” and boots. Diane Keaton, in the 1977 movie *Annie Hall*, introduced and accelerated the men’s wear look for women in the workforce. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, many women seeking to move up in their careers wore

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ties to work with men-styled shirts and houndstooth patterned suits in an attempt to compete with men for promotions. Seeing no need to dress as a man, Birdwell-Alves purchased beautifully tailored feminine suits and topped them with butterfly broaches and pretty necklaces. She intended to win in the workforce based on her business acumen, rather than attire. One of the reasons for her confidence certainly stemmed from her successes as a landman.²¹

Management quickly realized that the savvy lady knew the ins-and-outs of stock and bonds. They insisted Birdwell-Alves become a registered broker, and she passed the test the first go-around, becoming the company's very first female stock trader. In order to become an investment adviser, all persons must receive a series 66 license, issued by the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA). Then, in order to sell stocks and other securities, all persons must obtain a series 7 license, also issued by the FINRA. A series 7 license authorized Birdwell-Alves to sell stocks, bonds, certificates of deposit, mutual funds, commodities, and limited partnerships. She earned both licenses. However, she needed to amass a certain amount of money "under management" within ninety days or "she was out." Such a challenge provided her with the opportunity to use the great connections she had nurtured during her landman career. She called many of her former clients and asked for their business. Roustabouts, petroleum engineers, wildcatters, and oil executives brought their money to her because they trusted her judgment, and they had no qualms about placing their financial futures in her hands. She immediately went to work maximizing their portfolios; and after the fiscal quarter closed, the profits exceeded the expectations of management and that of her clients. As time passed, the leadership of the company treated her as a "seasoned pro and with respect."²²

Legg Mason, Wood, Walker, Inc. purchased Howard Weil in 1986, and during the 1987 stock market drop of five hundred points in one day, chaos ensued at the company. Many brokers resigned under pressure. Management promoted Birdwell-Alves to the position of manager, and she assumed the duties of federal compliance and contended that she happened "to be in the right place at the right time." Birdwell-Alves had courted relationships with the members of the board of directors and with upper management, and she had impressed them with her financial acumen. James W. Brinkley, the Chief Executive Officer of

Legg Mason, became her new mentor.²³

Legg Mason formed a team of financial advisors in 1996 that enhanced and expanded the efforts of Birdwell-Alves, who had amassed huge assets for the company, as well as a strong client base. She had made it in a man's world; the glass ceiling crashed, and she was near the top: "The glass ceiling is a theory that attempts to explain why women do not advance into the uppermost professional and managerial jobs in business." The belief remains strong that the rise of women entrepreneurs stemmed from their inability to move forward in traditional companies. Birdwell-Alves had formed her own business in 1974, and by 1996 she had moved forward in a traditional company. She had accomplished two major goals by becoming not only an independent entrepreneur, but a corporate team player as well. Her financial partners included Glen Raxsdale and Randy Landry, both of whom she assisted as they progressed in the financial industry. She mentored many men and women, and older men with younger wives came to Birdwell-Alves because she had the reputation of taking care of widows and ensuring their financial security.²⁴

So serious was Birdwell-Alves about educating women on financial matters that she agreed in 1991 to address, without compensation, the Association of Women in Management Fall Conference in Denver, Colorado. This small group of women originated at Eastern Airlines; and after the company filed for bankruptcy in 1989, Continental Airlines hired many of them. They continued the association with educational seminars; however, the fall conference never took place because Continental filed for bankruptcy in December of 1990. Birdwell-Alves provided complimentary advice to several of these women, even after the cancellation. No woman, according to Birdwell-Alves, should depend on a man for her complete financial support. She spent hours assisting women whose finances were tangled to the point that their financial solvency remained dubious. Particularly worried about elderly women, Birdwell-Alves created financial plans so these ladies could avoid becoming dependent on family members for their survival: "The difference between an old woman and an elderly lady—so goes the old saying—is money." Until 2007, she provided complimentary financial advice to all the widows who attended her brother's church in Katy, Texas. By the end of her career, Birdwell-Alves had clients as far away as Indonesia and from all over the oil-producing states. She continued

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attending seminars and absorbing everything possible about all things financial. Moreover, Birdwell-Alves insisted that her clients learn about the market and read consequential financial material.²⁵

Legg Mason, a Baltimore, Maryland-based company, grew rapidly in Lafayette and was eventually acquired by Citigroup, Smith Barney in December of 2005. In May 2007 her original mentor at Legg Mason and presently the vice-chairman of Smith Barney Private Client Group, James W. Brinkley, introduced Birdwell-Alves as a shining star and acknowledged their long friendship at a Smith-Barney client-broker luncheon in Lafayette. She relished the mention of her new title, “The Legend.”²⁶

Birdwell-Alves eventually retired to conduct a personal battle against cancer. Her only son had become ill and passed away in 1996, but she continued a close and strong relationship with her brother, her daughter, and her grandchildren, whom she insisted go to college and “make something out of themselves.” They did, and Birdwell-Alves glowed with pride over her granddaughters’ accomplishments. She fought her cancer as she had all the obstacles placed in front of her by economic, social, and cultural pressures during her lifetime. Sue Caroline Birdwell-Alves died March 31, 2008. A celebration of her life was conducted at the Asbury United Methodist Church in Lafayette, Louisiana, on April 5, 2008. One of her favorite quotes was from Isaiah 40:31: “They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall walk and not be weary, they shall run and not faint.”²⁷

Birdwell-Alves believed that a woman of her generation “had to work harder than a man and she must know more.” Glass ceilings had crashed around her because she had remained self-motivated, she had good role models, she had graduated from college, she had worked during wartime, she had benefited from court cases and legislation meant to assist women, and she had dared to enter a male-dominated sphere of business by seeking the help of good, strong male mentors willing to assist her. Proactively setting her strategies for success, Birdwell-Alves secured her future through processes that enabled her to mentor, to teach, and to tutor a younger generation, whose business sojourns proved less daunting because of her ability to pass that knowledge and experience forward in a society that previously had shown more deference to men than women. By dismissing the image of Scarlet O’Hara, who exercised feminine wiles in order to survive, Birdwell-

Alves employed brainpower and her love of learning to win in a man's world during an age of urbanization and hyper-consumerism. Unlike the main character in Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, she had no ruminations about her decision to earn money and to be happy in her job because her children were grown. However, for many women and men, that quandary of how best to balance family obligations and career mandates still weighs heavily on their minds. Birdwell-Alves enjoyed the money provided by her labor; however, she never believed it necessary to "show off", she drove a twelve-year-old Oldsmobile in a time when two stockbrokers who reported to her drove those ubiquitous BMWs popular with the successful set. Her money went to scholarship funds and to charities of her choice. Birdwell-Alves' immediate and extended family members provided strength, encouragement, and praise—all needed and desired elements of her successes. In particular, her brother James Birdwell "sang her praises" and remained her muse until her death. As she had written in a personal letter, "I think I led a very charmed life. Weren't I blessed?" Yes, but she was also smart and quite determined to crash through that glass ceiling not only once, but twice.²⁸

(Endnotes)

¹ Sue Birdwell-Alves, interview by Cynthia M. Devlin, 5 July 2007; AAPL – American Association of Professional Landmen, <<http://www.landman.org>> (20 February 2007).

² Birdwell-Alves interview.

³ Office of Public Affairs. "About SFA," 7 September 2007, <<http://www.2.sfasu.edu/publicaffairs/SFA-about.html>>; James Birdwell, interview by Cynthia M. Devlin, 17 September 2007.

⁴ Birdwell-Alves interview; Birdwell interview; "Repatriation in San Antonio," <<http://www.repatriationsanantonio.colfa.etsa.edu>> (20 February 2007); Randolph Air Force Base, <<http://www.randolph.af.mil/library/factsheet>> (20 February 2007); Carol Krismann, *Encyclopedia of American Women in Business: From Colonial Times to the Present*, Vol. 2 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 476.

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⁶ Carol Krismann, *Encyclopedia of American Women in Business: From Colonial Times to the Present*, Vol. 1 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), xxx, xxix; Birdwell-Alves interview; “OCS Oral History Project,” Department of History & Geography, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, <<http://www.louisiana.edu/academic/liberal/>> (10 July 2007).

⁷ “John Tower Biography,” <<http://www.smu.edu.twer/biography/>> (18 October 2007); “J. Frank Dobie,” <<http://www.library.txstate.edu/swwc/exhibit.dobie/>> (18 October 2007); Birdwell-Alves interview; Robert A. Calvert, Arnolde DeLeón, and Gregg Cantrell, *The History of Texas*, 3rd ed. (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2002), 416.

⁸ Birdwell-Alves interview; Birdwell interview. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: BasicBooks, Inc., 1992) 157-159.

⁹ Virginia Drachman, *Enterprising Women: 250 Years of American Business* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press) 70-73; Birdwell-Alves interview; “Benjamin Graham,” <<http://www.bufferstock.org/graham.htm>> (10 July 2007).

¹⁰ Dorothy P. Moore and E. Holly Buttner, *Women Entrepreneurs: Moving Beyond the Glass Ceiling* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997) 1; Birdwell-Alves interview; Krismann, Vol. 1, xxix.

¹¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1963) 40-41; Birdwell-Alves interview; Trudy Baker and Rachel Jones, *Coffee, Tea or Me* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 140; Bret Harvey, *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) 140.

¹² Birdwell-Alves interview; “Legacy '98: Detailed Timeline,” <<http://www.legacy98.org/timeline.html>> (14 July 2007).

¹³ Birdwell-Alves interview.

¹⁴ Birdwell-Alves interview; “Women In Business,” <<http://www.referenceforbusiness.com/enyclopedia/Val-Z?Women-in-Business.html>> (21 February 2007).

¹⁵ Birdwell-Alves interview; “Donna Gustason,” Professional Landmen’s Association of New Orleans <<http://www.planoweek.org/1970.asp>> (14 July 2007); Taylor v Louisiana, 419 U.S. 522 (1975), Cornell University Law School; Mark Singer, *Funny Money* (New York: Knopf, 1985) 21; “Origins & Evolutions of the Department of Energy,” Department of Energy---History. <<http://www.energy.gov/about/history.htm>> (15 August 2010); “Mad Eddie,” <<http://www.time.com/time/printout/0.8816951478.00.html>> (1 August 2007).

¹⁶ Krismann, Vol 2, 375; Birdwell-Alves interview; “History of Landmen,” <<http://www.landmentechology.infomine.com>> (21 February 2007).

¹⁷ Birdwell-Alves interview; Louisiana Public Records Information, <http://www.publicrecordsinfo.com/public_records/Louisiana_public_records.htm> (14 July 2007).

¹⁸ Birdwell-Alves interview; Thomas A. Bailey, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 5th ed. (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1975) 200-201.

¹⁹ Birdwell-Alves interview; “Louisiana Genealogy,” <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/comsite5/bin/pdinventory.pl?page=s...ITM&item_id=0286-7107144> (14 July 2007).

²⁰ “United Methodist Foundation of Louisiana,” s.v. leadership <http://www.umf.org/default.asp?id=14> (20 February 2007); Birdwell-Alves interview.

²¹ Robin D. Givhan, “Diane Von Furstenberg Caters to the Masses---and Their Money,” *Washington Post*, 5 January 1966; “Hot Pants, Southwest Airlines,” <<http://www.time.com/time/2003/flight/fashion4.html>> (13 August 2010).

²² Birdwell-Alves interview.

²³ Birdwell-Alves interview.

²⁴ Birdwell-Alves interview.

²⁵ Birdwell-Alves interview; Citigroup/SmithBarney, “James W.

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Brinkley Biography," document 190880: FCM7008; Mary Elizabeth Schlayer and Marilyn Cooley, *How to Be a Financially Secure Woman* (New York: Rawson Associates Publishers, Inc., 1978), 2; The Association of Women in Management at Eastern Airlines promoted the idea that women mentoring women was the best way to move up the business ladder during the 1980s and 1990s. Eastern Airlines employed approximately 18,000 employees. Approximately sixty women in management registered for the seminar held in Miami in 1990. Forty-six women registered for the Feb. 26, 1991 meeting in Houston. Eastern Airlines filed for bankruptcy March 9, 1989 and was completely liquidated in 1991. The fall 1991 meeting that Birdwell-Alves was scheduled to address in Denver was canceled because Continental Airlines filed for bankruptcy.

²⁶ Birdwell-Alves interview.

²⁷ Birdwell-Alves interview, Birdwell-Alves obituary.

²⁸ Birdwell-Alves interview; Sue Birdwell-Alves, handwritten letter to Cynthia Devlin, 3 September 2007, Devlin personal papers; Birdwell interview.