



# FSMS Pioneers

*A series that honors the legends of surveying in the state of Florida*

By Dominic Levings

## Edwina “Byni” Polk

*With resolve and kindness, Polk overcame barriers as a female surveyor in a different era*

In the lobby of the Florida Surveying & Mapping Society office in Tallahassee, just to the left of the doorway, a large picture has hung on the wall since 1998. A wooden frame surrounds a portrait of an elderly woman, looking out from behind giant metal-rimmed glasses. The plaque beneath the picture reads: Edwina “Byni” Polk, Florida’s First Lady of Surveying.

Born on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1921, in Lakeland, Florida, Byni Polk was a trailblazer for women in the surveying and engineering professions. Sixty-one years ago, in February 1958, she became the first female licensed surveyor in the State of Florida, PLS #1332.

Polk is best known for her 26-year stint with the Polk County Engineering Department from 1963-1989, in which she started as a draftsman, became the de-facto county surveyor, and eventually obtained the title of assistant county engineer.

Polk passed away in August 2002, at 81 years old. She died peacefully in her home in Lakeland, a house that her grandfather built in the 1920s. She lived in the same house her entire life.

She is remembered as an incredibly intelligent woman, who had a gift for mathematics and a straight-shooting personality. Many who knew her say they’ve never met anyone else like her.

“She was the total package. She was professional. She was the mentor, the teacher. She was brilliant, charming – you can’t say enough things about her,” said Jack Breed, who worked for Polk in the 1980s.

### Choosing A Different Route

Polk attended Florida Southern College and graduated in 1942 with degrees in mathematics and chemistry. She finished college just six months after the United States

entered World War II.

She was offered a scholarship to attend graduate school, but she decided to join the war effort instead. Because of her mathematical prowess, both the Army and Navy recruited her. She chose to join the Navy because she would be based in Charleston, South Carolina, which was much closer to home than the Army base in Colorado.

Polk’s chief duty was to calibrate guns on American and British battleships. It was during this time that she would first encounter sexism and discrimination in a professional setting.

She once recalled that when she started with the Navy, she was assigned to assist another man, even though they were qualified to do the same exact work. They had the same education, and unsurprisingly, he was paid more.

Some captains did not want her to



*Byni Polk, circa 1998. This picture is framed in the FSMS office.*

board their ships at all. But when they were told by base officers that she was the woman for the job, and that she would make their guns shoot straight, they relented.

“It was one of the things she was admired for. At that time, a woman going on a ship to calibrate a gun... you looked at it askew,” said John Clyatt, who also worked with Polk in the 1980s.

After the war, Polk returned to Lakeland and taught high school math for a year. She then held various design and drafting positions, including private sector stints with Lakeland Engineering Associates and IMC-Agrico.

It was during this time that she met her eventual husband, Virgil “Ike” Polk, at Dixieland Baptist Church. He worked for the State Road Department, and they were married in 1949.

It was because of her husband that Byni eventually became a licensed surveyor, but in a rather roundabout way.

The young couple realized that Ike would have to obtain his survey license to further his career. The problem was, he wasn’t very good at math. And so, Byni had to teach

him.

“I undertook to teach it to him. I had to learn about surveying. I got interested,” Polk said in a 1998 interview. “By the time he was ready for the exam, I could have taken it too.”

And in late 1957, Polk would do just that. When she took the survey exam, the men administering the test were surprised to see a woman walk in.

“I was the only woman taking the test,” she recalled. “All of the men just stared.”

Polk’s physical stature surely also played a role in the men’s astonishment. She was not only a woman, but an extremely diminutive one.

“She couldn’t have weighed 90 pounds sopping wet. She was a little bitty, tiny woman,” Breed recalled.

But Larry Sharp, who worked for Ike at the State Road Department, says she was perfectly equipped for that sort of situation.

“They didn’t expect to see her. Especially a woman who was smarter at mathematics than they were,” Sharp said. “What helped her was ability and personality.”

After receiving her license, Polk wasn’t just known as Florida’s first female land surveyor. Because Ike also had a surveying license, the couple was dubbed “Florida’s First Couple of Surveying”.

### **The Polk County Engineering Department**

Polk began working for the Polk County Engineering Department in 1963. At first, she designed drainage systems and bridges, and led an effort to catalogue all 4,900 roads in Polk County.

In 1976, after being named Assistant County Engineer, she led the production, design, and drafting departments. She also oversaw right-of-way acquisitions and made recommendations regarding road closures to the County Commission.

Former employees and others who worked with Polk say that her maleable personality allowed her to garner respect and lead effectively. She had the ability to be stern and direct, as well as generous and kind. But regardless of which style was being employed, she was always just trying to solve problems.

“She would just talk to you if something was done wrong. She was a person who worked through problems,” said Bill Hinkle, who began working with Polk in 1979.

David Rivers, who was a right-of-way agent for the county, remembered that Polk was always one to tell it like it was.

“She was just a splendid woman to work with,” Rivers recalled in 1998. “As tiny as she was, she was very potent with words.”

Polk, of course, was aware of her reputation that she could occasion-



*Polk at the Initial Point Monument in Tallahassee.*





*Polk with former Department of Transportation Secretary Tom Barry.*

ally be a “spitfire”, as former drainage engineer Joel Johnson put it. She recalled that a co-worker once told someone else that “she might look like somebody’s grandmother, but don’t let that fool you.”

Breed remembers one time when he and Polk were reviewing a mylar he had recently completed.

“Jack, hunny, you’ve got an error on this plat,” Breed remembers Polk as saying.

However, the plat had already been signed and sealed. It was the final document, and the county commissioners had signed it.

This, evidently, didn’t deter Polk. She pulled out a pen and fixed the plat, right there.

“She flat out altered a public document because she knew what was right and wrong,” Breed said.

As Breed found out, Polk’s expan-

sive knowledge and her incredible memory were of legendary status to those who worked with her.

“She knows everything there is to know about this county, and most of it is probably not written down anywhere,” said Polk County Attorney Irvin Cowie in 1989.

Polk was a mentor to nearly everyone who worked for her, fostering interest in the profession and using every opportunity to teach. Breed remembers that she genuinely cared about people and wanted to know you.

“She wasn’t just a bureaucrat doing her job, she wanted to know who you were, and she paid attention to the people around her,” Breed said.

FSMS President Dianne Collins views Polk as a role model in the profession. In 1981, Collins was only the fifth or sixth woman to receive her surveying license in Florida - a full 23 years after Polk

became the first.

Collins, who lives in Lakeland, first met Polk in the early 1970s and formed a working relationship with her over the years. Polk agreed to be a reference for Collins when she applied to take the licensure exam.

“She was easy to work with, respectful, and dedicated to her work at the county,” Collins remembers.

However, everyone has their limits, and it seems mentoring was about as far as Polk would go for those she worked with. And John Clyatt knows this firsthand.

Polk contacted Clyatt in 1985 when he was living in Pensacola. She told him that he should come home and take an open surveying position with Pickett & Associates.

Polk was good friends with Clyatt’s parents, and Clyatt suspected that his mom asked Polk to contact him about the job, so that he would move back home. Clyatt would eventually agree and moved back home to Bartow.

“I spent quite a bit of time going back and forth to the county, asking her things about county rules and regulations. She was always very gracious and helpful,” Clyatt recalled.

Until one day, when Clyatt walked into her office again seeking help. Polk looked up from her desk and didn’t hold back.

“John, I’m real glad you’re back home, but I didn’t take you to raise,” Polk said bluntly.

Despite Polk’s refusal to “raise” him, Clyatt eventually became the President of Pickett, a feat which was in part possible because of Polk’s willingness to contact him.

“I’ve always been very appreciative of her thinking about me and reaching out and getting me to where I was,” Clyatt said.

Despite her encyclopedic knowledge, her role as a mentor, and her one-of-a-kind personality, Polk is perhaps most remembered for something else during her 26-year career with Polk County.

Byni Polk was a prolific baker.

At her baking apex, she baked a cake for every single employee in the engineering department on their birthday, which added up to over 60 cakes per year. She would also bake over 6,000 cookies every year around Christmastime, which were distributed to her employees, her husband's employees at the State Road Department, and other friends and family.

Over her 26-year career, she estimated she baked over 1,000 cakes, and well over 50,000 cookies.

"I was very impressed with what she would do for employees. She baked a cake personally, it wasn't



*Polk and other FSMS members at the Florida Capitol in Tallahassee.*

bought. And sometimes we'd get three cakes in one week," Hinkle recalled.

"It's incredible to take the time to do that. That's what impressed me the most, is that someone took the time to do that for those that worked for them."

thirteen years after her mom.

In 1998, 40 years after she became the first registered female land surveyor in Florida, the Ridge Chapter of FSMS decided to formally honor Polk. Hinkle led the recognition efforts along with Sharp, who was the Chapter President at the time.

## Retirement and Recognition

Polk retired from the Polk County Engineering Department in August of 1989, when she was 68 years old. Unsurprisingly, her retirement was followed by a chorus of appraising headlines from local newspapers.

"Human Archive Retires", read a headline in The Tampa Tribune.

"County Worker Leaves Legacy of Knowledge, Cakes" read another headline in Lakeland's newspaper, The Ledger.

In retirement, Polk spent much of her time listening to classical music and studying English history, her two favorite pursuits. She also took care of her family's two Arabian horses and cats.

Ike was diagnosed with bladder cancer in 1977 and battled it periodically until passing away in 1994. They had one daughter, Edith, who was an author. She passed away in 2015,

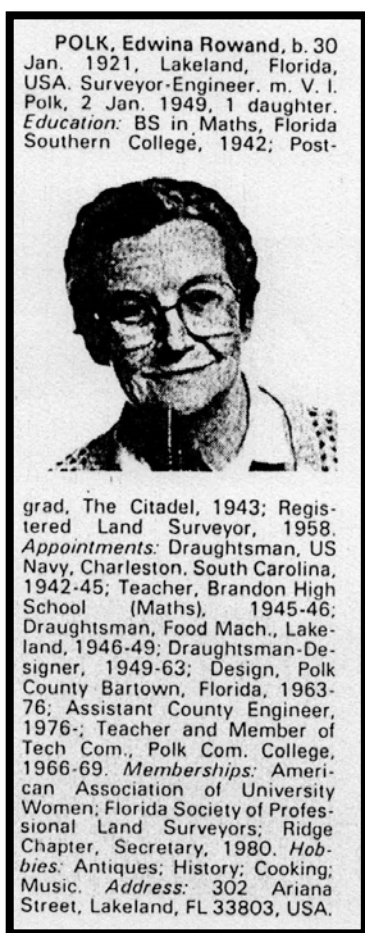
"We moved along pretty fast with it," Hinkle recalled. "It was pretty exciting to learn her history, to collect all of the stuff written about her."

On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1998, the chapter hosted a special ceremony for Polk at the Huntington Hills Country Club in Lakeland. The night was billed as "A Tribute to Florida's First Lady of Surveying."

The evening featured a social hour, a seated dinner, and a program that included several speakers. The Polk County Commission also declared January 20<sup>th</sup> as a day in her honor.

In the run-up to the ceremony, the local Fox News station interviewed Polk in her home for a Fox Network series titled "Fox Folks". The segment aired across the Tampa Bay area and was eventually syndicated across the country.

In early March 1998, thanks to further efforts by the Ridge Chapter,



*Polk's bio in the 9th edition of The World Who's Who of Women.*





*Polk with the Florida Cabinet. Governor Lawton Chiles is handing her the resolution.*

Polk traveled to Tallahassee to be honored again. On March 9<sup>th</sup>, her portrait and a scholarship were dedicated in her name at the FSMS Administrative Office.

The next day, she was honored by the State Legislature at the Capitol. In the Florida Cabinet meeting room, Polk was presented with a special resolution recognizing her as Florida's First Lady of Surveying. The resolution was presented by Governor Lawton Chiles and the rest of the Florida Cabinet.

### Remembering Byni

At the end of her career and her life, Polk suffered from severe arthritis in her hands, which left them misshapen. But she didn't let it slow her down.

"She had crippling arthritis in her hands, yet she persevered and still

had meticulous handwriting," Clyatt recalled.

The pain was so debilitating that when baking cakes, she had to use a nut-cracker with both hands just to turn the knob on her stove clock.

In many ways, this gritty determination illustrates why Byni Polk found herself being honored by the Florida State Legislature in March of 1998.

"She had gumption. She didn't give up. She was a very nice person and that was a big factor in making her very successful, because people very quickly respected her," Sharp said.

Breed identifies one personality trait in particular when speaking about the obstacles Polk had to overcome early on in her career.

"She overcame them all with grace," Breed said. "She was just a graceful lady."

Her grace and tenacity allowed her to forge ahead as a woman in a man's field, carving out a path for future female surveyors and engineers. She simply wouldn't accept a lesser role just because she was a woman.

"I had one boss who told me I was the best in the office, but that I wouldn't go any higher because I was a woman," Polk said in 1989. "I quit."

Her trailblazing career even landed her a spot in the 1985 edition of "The World Who's Who of Women" encyclopedia.

But Polk often downplayed her role as a woman pioneer, never wanting to bask in the spotlight of her accomplishments.

"I haven't done anything women don't do now," Polk stated in 1989. "I just did it earlier. As my daughter says, I was a woman's libber before there was such a thing."

Regardless of her reluctance to be acknowledged as an icon in the profession, those who knew Byni Polk will always know differently.

"She was good to work for and always fair," Hinkle recalled.

"She was a good lady, definitely. A great lady, I would say."

And it's certainly hard to argue with that.

*Sources listed on page 34.*



*The Ridge Chapter hosted "A Tribute To Florida's First Lady of Surveying" on January 20th, 1998.*