

It's English the Way It Was Meant to Be Spoken

Based on an interview of Thomas C. Palmer, Jr., by John D. Whittington in August 2014

Tom Palmer was born in Glasgow, Scotland. His father originally came to the United States in June of 1954 and the family followed in December of 1954. His family originally settled in Passaic, New Jersey where Tom attended high school. As a result of discussions Tom had with his high school counselor, he applied to William & Mary. To his surprise he was accepted.

Tom attended William & Mary from 1959 -1963 obtaining his undergraduate degree. Law, as a career, first came to Tom's mind while he was an undergraduate, and he went on to William & Mary Law School from 1963-1966 and obtained his law degree. Tom was a member of William & Mary's cross-country and track teams. He was also a member of the Phi Kappa Tau fraternity and actually did some acting while at William & Mary. One of Tom's classmates at William & Mary was lawyer, Dan Newland.

Tom worked for a prominent law firm in Richmond during the summer. In 1966, after graduating from law school Tom joined the Fairfax law firm of Senator Adelard Brault. Senator Brault was a very well respected trial lawyer in his own right. The firm, then known as Brault, Lewis, Plummer & Geschickter, did primarily insurance defense litigation. The firm had a client that suggested opening an office in Manassas. Manassas was starting to grow and Tom, who lived in Manassas, opened up the office there in 1970. At the time, Tom lived in a townhouse in Georgetown South. Tom eventually represented its Board of Directors. He also became a member of the Board of the Blue Ridge Speech & Hearing Clinic on Grant Avenue.

After moving to Warrenton in 1977 he was active in that community serving, on the Board of the Moving Arts Centre and on the Board of the Fauquier Department of Social Services. He has also been a past President of the Virginia Association of Defense Attorneys (VADA) and a past President of the Virginia Law Foundation. One of the programs that the Foundation strongly supported was CASA.

Tom and his wife, Yates, lived in nearby Warrenton for many years while raising their 2 sons, Rick and TC. While practicing law in Manassas, Tom formed both professional and personal relationships with local lawyers, to name a few, Ed McGolrick, Ed Flournoy, Bernie Bowles, Jim and Stuart Robeson, Joe Gallagher, Paul Gluchowski, and Herman Whisenant. Tom recalls the Prince William County Bar being a relatively small, close knit group. The Prince William County Bar Association had meetings but not as often as we do now. Also, there were not as many activities and committees. Tom served as President of the Prince William County Bar in 1985. He was also our Virginia State Bar Council Representative for 8 years, during which he served on its Executive Committee.

Tom considers Senator Brault as a major mentor in his life, as well as then partner, Richard (Dick) Lewis. He recalls a situation early on in his career about the need to consider everything one does in the courtroom. Senator Brault was sitting with him at counsel table, and after Tom's opening statement the Senator leaned over to Tom and said "I have just one thing to say about your opening statement. You used the word 'woman' when referring to the Plaintiff." He said to Tom "Call her a lady." One of the things Tom remembers fondly is going to lunch and dinner with the partner's back then and discussing cases and law the entire time.

The nature of Tom's practice has been primarily representing insurance carriers and/or self-insured entities. In the early days when Tom first began his practice there was a tremendous amount of subrogation work that was done and a lot of which went to trial. When he first started practicing law, very little arbitration and/or mediation was done to resolve cases. Tom would routinely try 2 to 3 cases a day in General District Court. He recalls trying 32 Circuit Court jury trials in one year. The Civil Rules of Discovery were just getting traction in Virginia practice. Prior to that time, litigation was somewhat "trial by ambush." There was always a line of cases followed by some judges who at that time just didn't believe discovery should be allowed. If discovery wasn't allowed, both parties would appear in court with their witnesses and the lawyers would have little idea what they were going to say until they testified.

I had the honor of working for Tom Palmer from 1981 to 1986. In 1994, I had the good fortune of traveling to Scotland with Tom to attend the 1994 Open at St. Andrews. This golf tournament was eventually won by American, John Daly. We arrived on Sunday. Tom and I put our bags in our small hotel room, bought some Cuban cigars and decided to take a walk to the old St. Andrews Cemetery to see the headstone of golf course designer and golfer, Old

Tom Morris. As we were walking on the church grounds towards the cemetery a not so well to do Scot was sitting on a bench. As we walked by he looked up at Tom and said what appeared to me to be “blah, blah, blah, blah.” Tom then responded to him what appeared to me to be “blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” I asked Tom what the man had said to him and Tom replied “He asked me if I had a cigarette.” I then said “what did you say to him?” Tom replied, “I told him I didn’t.” Befuddled, I then asked Tom “what language were you two speaking?” Tom looked me straight in the eye and said, “English, the way it was meant to be spoken.”