

“It’s Been a Good Ride”

Based on an interview of Judge James B. Robeson by Alissa N. Hudson in November 2015

Retired Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Judge James Robeson grew up in McLean. His father was an attorney whose practice was in DC, and while he didn’t insist on James attending law school, their daily discussions of what he did, and frequent visits to his office just naturally lead him to choose law as a career. Robeson attended Grove City College, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in business administration and attended the University of Richmond School of Law, graduating in 1966 along with classmate Herman Whisenant. Other classmates included Bill Stephens and Bob Coppoch.

His first job after law school was with the FBI in Springfield, IL and his first assignment began with the agent in charge saying, “Grab the shotguns!” Four or five agents were tapped for the assignment and drove with great haste to Peoria, IL to track down a bank robber. Once the bank robber arrived, he threatened to kill himself and a standoff followed that lasted for hours. It turns out that film crews were in town to cover the Speck case, (a man accused of killing several nurses in 1967), and upon hearing about the standoff at the bank, all came running with their cameras to capture events as they unfolded. “Welcome to the FBI!” mused Robeson. He would be transferred to Buffalo, NY a year later, and resigned when his father’s health was failing, which is what lead him back to Northern Virginia and ultimately, Manassas.

His first job as an attorney was with “two wonderful guys, Turner Smith and Jim Davenport.” Robeson’s father knew Turner Smith from the days when they both practiced in DC. Smith had moved his practice to Manassas some time later and was sharing space with James Davenport when Robeson joined them in the fall of 1968. Robeson describes them as “...just wonderful guys to start with. Easy to work with. Intelligent. And they knew everybody.” Robeson goes on to say, “If you ever looked for the word “Virginia gentleman and you went to Webster’s dictionary you would see a picture of Turner Smith right there beside that word. He just embodied it.” Turner Smith is the PWC Bar Association’s first recipient of the Arthur W. Sinclair Professionalism Award.

Other senior attorneys in practice when James Robeson came to Manassas were W. Hill Brown, Stanley Owens, and C. Lacey Compton, Sr. Three of the Bar Association’s Founding Fathers.

Within a year of starting with Smith and Davenport, Commonwealth’s Attorney Paul Ebert asked Robeson if he would “like to be an Assistant Commonwealth’s Attorney, (ACA).” Robeson agreed and served as one of only three part-time ACAs at the time, along with Bill Murphy (Judge Murphy), and Ed Fox. He describes the office as “a wonderful training ground for anybody.” He really thought of the office as a “sort of family.” Robeson’s brother, Stuart, would join him at Smith and Davenport and as an ACA within a couple of years, following his graduation from William and Mary’s Marshall Wythe School of Law. Tom Murphy also became an ACA in the same time frame, and is described by James as “A brilliant guy. A lawyer’s lawyer.” James served as an ACA until 1980 and when the position became full-time, opted for private practice instead.

Prince William was part of the 19th Judicial Circuit in 1968, which included Fairfax and Arlington. Judge Percy Thornton and Judge Arthur Sinclair were the local Circuit Court Judges and William May and McDougal Rice were the local County Court Judges, hearing cases that would be heard in our General District and J&DR District Courts today. (The current District Court structure was put in place in 1973 with HermanWhisenant serving as the first JDR District Court Judge.) Robeson recalls trying more cases in those days, saying, that’s “where you really learned how to handle yourself as an attorney. When you get your butt kicked a couple of times, you’re never going to do that again. You’re always learning. You could learn from the judges and from opposing council,” and he quickly listed Ed Flournoy, Bill Stephens, Tom Palmer, Ed McGolrick, and Ralph Coon as those whose skills he admired.



The Prince William County Bar Association had about 40 members when James Robeson joined and at least half of them would attend the monthly meetings. He has watched the community grow 10 fold since then, from what he describes as a rural environment to the more urban environment of today. He recalls the IBM facility coming to Manassas in 1969 and how that helped to spur growth in Manassas. He also recounted the turmoil associated with the building of the new Judicial Center in 1984, and shared pictures of the construction of the first phase along with pictures of every old courthouse in the state of Virginia and many beyond; a hobby of the self-professed history buff since 1983, along with collecting old signs and refurbishing windmills.

In 1997, the General Assembly added the fifth seat to the JDR District Court and James Robeson was appointed to the new position, serving with then Chief Judge Pat Mollinary and Judges Becker, Wellington and Gluchowski. He served until his retirement in

2009. Robson concluded with, "It's been a good ride, so-to-speak. He has, "Loved it. Love Prince William. Love the Bar Association. Love the Commonwealth's Attorneys. Love the Defense Attorneys."