

A Life of Service

Based on an interview of Judge William Hamblen by John Primeau in February 2016

My earliest memory of Judge William Hamblen was when, as a brand new prosecutor, I entered a courthouse elevator, with His Honor as the sole other occupant. I had not yet appeared before the judge but knew of his somewhat fearsome reputation. His hands pushed into his pants pockets, he looked askance at me and murmured, “Mr. Primeau... as I live and breathe....” That chance encounter was my first experience with a man who would be a powerful figure in the courthouse for over thirty years.

Judge Hamblen joined the Prince William Bar Association in 1974 and later served on the General District and Circuit Court benches from 1986 until 2012. I recently sat down with him to recall his memories of the Bar, his tenure on the bench and the judges and lawyers he worked with during that time.

Judge Hamblen was the son of a career Air Force officer and lived most of his early life in Northern Virginia, although he fondly remembered living as a teenager for three years in Holland. Not feeling quite ready for college, in 1966 he enlisted in the Army and served in active duty for three years as an infantryman. Specifically, he served for eighteen months with various infantry units in Vietnam, mostly as part of reconnaissance teams. Judge Hamblen was hesitant to dwell on his experiences in Vietnam. “It clearly, in many respects, was the hardest thing I have ever done.”

Upon his discharge from the Army, Judge Hamblen attended Virginia Tech and then William and Mary Law School, graduating in 1974. He then came to Manassas to begin practicing law. When asked why he chose Manassas, he stated “I sort of liked Manassas. I thought it was kind of a neat little place. It looked about the right size, not too big, not too little.” He began practice as an associate with Ralph Coon and Ray Kellam for a year and a half, then formed a partnership with (later Judge) Paul Gluchowski and Bill Evans. That lasted for four years.

When Judge Hamblen joined the Prince William Bar, he remembers the bar as being collegial, but “small, sort of insular. A lot of people had been here a long time.” The Bar was “predominantly male, for sure...I don’t think there were any (women) there and...there weren’t that many women in my law school class... So it was predominantly sort of a white male operation.”

After his partnership with Messrs. Gluchowski and Evans, in 1980 Judge Hamblen joined Paul Ebert’s Commonwealth’s Attorney’s Office, where he stayed for six years. He prosecuted a wide array of cases, including many homicides. One in particular was the case of Timothy Dale Bunch, a Marine who murdered a woman in Woodbridge, attempted to stage her death as a suicide, and then returned to his duty station in Japan. Young ACA Hamblen and a homicide detective had to go through extensive diplomatic channels to obtain visas to travel to Japan to interrogate Bunch and return him to the United States. He was eventually convicted of capital murder. Judge Hamblen also obtained one of the first spousal rape convictions in Virginia.

Judge Hamblen spoke of some of the lawyers he admired during his tenure as a prosecutor. He described Ed McGolrick as “a very able lawyer” and complimented Pete Steketee as “just a delightful guy, just civilized to the nth degree... and a very effective lawyer.” He also enjoyed trying cases against the late Brooke Howard, describing him as “just a very nice guy... who had enormous credibility. (I)f he proposed something, you would have to think about it because he was just that kind of guy.” He retold a story about Brooke Howard in which, while Mr. Howard was putting on his evidence, the presiding Judge interposed a question to the witness. Mr. Howard said to the judge “Your Honor, if that question was asked for the defense, I respectfully withdraw it. If it was asked on behalf of the prosecution, I respectfully object to it.”

Judge Hamblen went on the General District Court bench in 1986 and the Circuit Court bench in 1990. At the time, the other Circuit Court judges were Frank Hoss, Selwyn Smith, Percy Thornton and Herman Whisenant. Judge Hamblen spoke of how much he enjoyed his colleagues in chambers. He spoke specifically of Judge Frank Hoss. “Just a good guy. He was an excellent colleague in all respects. (W)e had a mutual respect for each other’s work product.” Their relationship was not without some barbed humor, though. “Frank (who was 6 foot 5)... would make critical remarks of me and refer to my stature using words like ‘diminutive’, you know, hurtful kinds of words like that. Should have been preceded by trigger warnings.”

I asked Judge Hamblen to describe his favorite part of being a judge. “Oh, I think the intellectual give-and-take with the lawyers has to be my favorite part of it. There are some fairly nuanced questions you have to resolve... put to you by some very bright people whose job it is to persuade you to their point of view... and the answer is not immediately apparent. So it becomes real rigorous I think, and I enjoyed that a lot. I really did.

He elaborated. “I’m like every judge. I love good lawyers and I hate bad lawyers. Good lawyers just beat you up and put you through your paces, make you work really hard, but properly so. They would say ‘We can’t resolve this. You do it. That’s what they pay you to do. Make a ruling.’ I liked that a lot. And I was exposed to a lot of good lawyers and they taught me. It’s a symbiotic relationship between lawyers and judges. And the better the lawyers, the better the judges can be. (Being a judge) ain’t easy. I mean, it’s easy to do; it’s hard to do right.”

And his least favorite part? “My least favorite part of the job was sentencing people. I didn’t like that at all. But it is a necessary kind of thing and one that you have to do. If you take the king’s shilling, you do the king’s work.”

How have the lawyers who have appeared before him changed over the years? “Some civility issues I think loomed larger for sure when I left than when I (went on the bench.) Lawyers had to respect the institution and what was going on in court... because it’s an important institution, in my view. You show respect to the institution in a lot of different ways, especially as a lawyer. You don’t show respect to the institution by showing up not being prepared, late, and not giving a (hoot) about what’s going to happen to your client or the case.”

I asked Judge Hamblen, who resides with his wife Donna in Williamsburg, how he spends his time now. He sometimes sits as a substitute judge in various Circuit courts around the Commonwealth, although not as much as he used to. He teaches citizenship classes to immigrants who are working toward becoming U.S. citizens. He is also auditing an economics class at William and Mary and teaches adult literacy. He is currently helping a 53 year old man learn to read who started out not even knowing the alphabet.

I thanked Judge Hamblen for his time in providing this interview and for his many years on the bench, noting that lawyers in the courthouse regularly lament his absence. “It’s an important business that I was involved in. And I tried to do it as well as I could.”

Twenty years or so ago, Judge Hamblen said to me “We are all works in progress.” From command in Vietnam to twenty-six distinguished years on the bench to teaching a middle-aged man to read for the first time, Judge Hamblen’s progression through life has been marked by two consistent themes: service and excellence. In a year when the Prince William Bar Association has been called upon to be a model of public service and pro bono participation for the rest of the Virginia legal community, Judge Hamblen’s life stands as a powerful example of how much progress one individual – and perhaps, one Bar Association - can accomplish.