

The Gentleman's Practice of Law

Based on an interview of William May by Alissa N. Hudson in April 2000

Born in Kentucky, William May came to Washington D.C., through an appointment resulting from having taken the Civil Service exam when he was in eighth grade. (William was probably 20 when the appointment finally came.) He began working as a messenger in the Procurement Division of the U.S Treasury, for \$1080 per year. When a co-worker suggested he learn typing as a means of earning a better wage, William said, "I'm not going to be a typist, so I went to law school." He attended National University in Washington D.C. now part of G.W. Law School. As did many young adults in the 1940's, he worked full time, attending law school at nights. He took the Kentucky bar before the war, (referencing World War II), and started a law practice in Manassas in 1946.

May remembers Prince William County having only 20,000 people at the time he came, and considers himself the seventh attorney to start a law practice in the area. When asked to comment on the differences in the practice of law, from the mid 1940's to now, May indicated that, "The lawyers and the judges were closer together then, than they are now. You used to try a case before a judge, and when it came lunch time, everyone would have lunch together. He acknowledges that perhaps the sense of separation that exists today is necessary, but remembers a time when bench/bar relations were closer. When asked if any one took him under their wing when he first came to Manassas, he said, "...all of them were very helpful. If I had a question, I could go to any member of the Bar. If he knew the answer he'd give it to me, if he didn't, he'd sit down and help me look it up." When comparing the relationships that existed between attorneys then, versus now, he said "You don't have the camaraderie." The general practice of law used to be a more gentlemanly procedure because "we used to know one another very well, here and in Fairfax, and were all friendly. This time has gone by, and so many (lawyers) have come along, that you can't know them all." The friendly feeling amongst colleagues translated into a greater sense of trust. May mused that professional courtesies in the day to day practice were more prevalent in the early days, indicating that, "We'd fight hard on our cases, but we were all friends."

In a time before personal computers, fax machines or even copy machines, this tremendous sense of camaraderie was exemplified in the eloquent letters of support written between colleagues. May produced copies of letters written by himself and others, expressing well wishes, and congratulating one another on professional appointments or accomplishments. In his early years of practice, May also recalls hosting a Christmas party where he invited all the local attorneys (all nine of them!) and their secretaries via official summons delivered by the Sheriff's office, to attend and make their appearance in the "name of the Holiday Spirit". One attorney, Robert Hutcheson, was not able to attend due to health concerns and the inability to ascend the stair to May's office. Upon learning of this, the "Members of the Bar of Manassas" gathered prior to the end of May's Christmas party and went to Hutcheson's office, whereupon they delivered written oration, to express their admiration for their senior member of the Bar, and wish him well during the season.

The court structure was also quite different in the 40's and the 50's. In the mid 1950-s the court system employed Trial Justices. Trial Justices sat in the County Courts (the predecessors to the General and Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Courts), and were appointed by the Chief Judge of the Circuit Court. Lacy Compton had been the Trial Justice in PWC for over 20 years, holding court only three days a week, while also running a private law practice. As the docket grew the local attorneys began to complain that court needed to be held five days a week. Compton decided to devote his energies to the full time practice of law. Upon Compton's resignation, the, Circuit Court Judge, Paul E. Brown, appointed William May to replace him. May began holding court five days a week, and served as the Trial Justice in PWC for 18-19 years. In the mid 1970's, with the change to the current court structure, Willam May returned to the private practice of law, where he remained until his retirement last year.

William May's remembrances of the practice of law, from the early days, are recounted here as accurately as possible. Though the changes seem, on the surface, to indicate a worsening condition, it is important to note that May always pointed to the necessity of change, especially in light of area growth in the profession. Of course, civility in the practice of law should always be maintained. William May had kind remarks for all of his colleagues, and spoke of many of his close personal friends. Of his recent retirement, he said, "I didn't retire, I just quit." His legal career spanned six decades, and afforded him the opportunity to see the practice of law evolve. It was a pleasure interviewing him, and the Bar is grateful for his willingness to share his recollections with us.