

One Life Touches Many

Based on an interview of Judge Selwyn Smith conducted by Alissa N. Hudson in October 1999

Selwyn Smith is one of the only two people who have had the privilege of serving in all three branches of government in the state of Virginia during this century. (Governor Albertus Harrison, deceased, shares this honor with Judge Smith.) Smith served as the Prince William County Commonwealth's Attorney from 1960 to 1967, as State Senator from 1972 to 1975, as Secretary of Public Safety from 1976 to 1980, and as a PWC Circuit Court Judge from 1980 to his retirement in 1993. Though, technically retired, Judge Smith still serves as a substitute judge throughout the Commonwealth.

Selwyn Smith knew when he graduated from high school that he wanted to do two things, "to practice law and to serve in the General Assembly." He attended VPI, graduating through an accelerated program in 1943. He attended OCS in Fort Benning, GA and served his country as an officer during WWI, in numerous capacities, both here and abroad. He was seriously injured on the first day of the last battle of the war in Europe, and spent five months in a body cast recovering from those injuries. He was subsequently given "limited duty" assignments which ultimately provided him with his first opportunity to advocate. He became a Battalion Adjutant and served at several stateside military bases where he found himself defending and later prosecuting Court Martials. Prior to the promulgation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, a non-attorney could participate in such proceedings. Hence, Smith's first legal experience was acquired prior to receiving his formal legal education.

After leaving military service in 1947, Smith went to law school at UVA, where he took an accelerated course schedule and graduated in two years. (It is interesting to note that because he always took accelerated programs, he has never actually participated in a commencements ceremony.) Although he initially considered setting up a legal practice in Florida, his wife's home state, Smith eventually opened up a law practice in Manassas, in March of 1949. He shared office space with Bill May and remembers being the eighth attorney in the area. Arthur Sinclair was the seventh. Office rent was \$100 per month and Smith and May shared a secretary for \$25 per week.

In January of 1950, the first in a series of events occurred which would greatly impact Smith's career. His friend, Arthur Sinclair, became a Circuit Court Judge, which gave Smith the opportunity to absorb some of Sinclair's case load and to fill appointments Sinclair had held. This provided tremendous opportunities for Smith to enhance his business and to become known in political circles. In 1956, he made his first run for State Senate against Frank P. Moncure. Although Smith lost that race, it prepared him for what was to come, and he ran successfully for Commonwealth's Attorney in 1960, (oddly enough, against Bill May). The annual salary at the time was \$10,000. While serving as Commonwealth's Attorney, Smith remembers bringing in an assistant Commonwealth's Attorney named Paul Ebert, who was a "...tiger in the courtroom." Smith also brought in James Davenport, and Frank Hoss. Davenport would later be introduced to Turner Smith, by Selwyn Smith, and start an office sharing relationship that would lead to their partnership. When Selwyn Smith left the Commonwealth's office in 1967, he returned to the practice of law with Frank Hoss and was eventually joined by Bill Stevens, Herman Whisenant, and Bill Murphy. Smith, Murphy, Hoss and Whisenant would later become PWC Judges.

While practicing law in the late 60's and early 70's, Smith decided to run again for State Senate and won in 1972. This was a time for reform in the lower courts, as Municipal and County Courts were evolving into the current General and Juvenile Domestic Relations District Courts. Because of Smith's experience as a prosecutor, he had more court room experience than any of the other legislators in Richmond, so he became very involved in the restructuring process. It was Smith who proposed placing the designation of Chief Judge on a rotating basis verses assignment to the senior member of the court.

Smith's tenure as State Senator and Secretary of Public Safety took him through the 70's, which was a time of great change and controversy in PWC as the cities of Manassas and Manassas Park were formed. The PWC Board of Supervisors went through a difficult period as rezoning issues were addressed. Board member Charles Colgan emerged as a strong voice from that era, and later became the Senator from this district.

In July of 1980, Selwyn Smith became a Circuit Court Judge for PWC, a position he held until his retirement in 1993. As he reflects over 50 years of legal practice and service to the community he comments on the people whose advice he sought, such as Judge Paul E. Brown, who, according to Smith, "had as much influence over me as my own father did." Whenever he needed advice along the way, Smith would seek it from a trusted individual, and tried, always to provide the same kind of advice to those who came along after him. He has numerous connections to members of the local legal community, no doubt, more than are mentioned here. It was an honor to see him receive his *50 Years of Legal Service Award* at the Virginia State Bar Annual meeting in June of this year, and a privilege to attempt to chronicle his impact on Prince William County.