

Circumstances Often Determine One's Course

Based on an interview of Turner Smith conducted by Alissa N. Hudson in December 1999

Turner Smith did not initially plan to go to law school. He received his undergraduate degree in Commerce from the University of Virginia in 1934, having completed the four-year bachelor's program in just three years. Since he had originally planned to be at UVA for another year, he enrolled in law school, and successfully completed his first year. Smith commented on the difficulties people faced because of the Great Depression, and cites this as the reason he felt he should leave the full-time pursuit of an education to join the workforce. He began working in his father's insurance company in Washington D.C. and completed his law school education at night, at National University which later became GW law school. He graduated in 1936, became licensed to practice in D.C. and opened a sole practice the same year. It was his uncle that encouraged him to open his own practice, and provided him with a loan to get started.

World War II caused the next change in Smith's path. The Northern Virginia law firm of Hogan & Hartson, H&H, lost several attorneys who became commissioned officers in the war, and Turner Smith was recruited by H & H to help fill the void. While there, Smith began volunteering at a recruitment office for the armed services and was commissioned himself in 1942 as a Navy Lieutenant, when a friend at the Attorney General's office offered him "an interesting assignment that will get you to Europe in 30 Days." Smith said yes, and spent the next 18 - 20 years working for various branches of military intelligence agencies around the world. It is interesting to note that, though they did not know each other at the time, Turner Smith and James Davenport's paths crossed in Casablanca during World War II.

In 1955, Smith purchased the farm in Haymarket, where he currently resides. The home was built right after the Civil War and he and his late wife Lois completely remodeled everything. He took up full-time farming and by 1960, retired from the intelligence arena and began looking for a place to set up a solo law practice, closer to home. He settled on Manassas and remembers being one of nine or so attorneys in the area. His friend and neighbor, Arthur Sinclair was already a Circuit Court Judge at the time, and Sinclair appointed Smith to defend his first capital murder case. Though Smith was hardly a seasoned attorney, having just returned to the practice of law, he successfully argued to reduce the charge from first to second degree murder. It was Selwyn Smith, who was then the Commonwealth's Attorney, who introduced Turner Smith to James Davenport. The two men begin sharing office space and a secretary, and started having lunch together. This office sharing arrangement eventually led to the formal partnership of Smith and Davenport in 1973. Upon creation of that partnership, a young attorney named Pete Steketee was associated with the firm, and remained with Smith and Davenport until his appointment as a General District Court Judge this year.

In 1968, Turner Smith remembers a young man named Jim Robeson, the son of a former classmate of Turner's, coming to work for him. Jim's younger brother Stewart also came to work for Smith upon completion of law school. Both Jim and Stewart were eventually recruited by the Commonwealth's attorney's office as part-time prosecutors, and later went into private practice together. Smith refers to the Robeson brothers as "... delightful boys." James Robeson was later appointed as a Juvenile & Domestic Relations Court Judge. Smith also fondly remembers a young man who had served in Vietnam as a helicopter pilot, who had just graduated from law school and needed a place to work. That was Chuck Sievers. Sievers joined the Smith and Davenport firm in 1973 and remained with them until his appointment to the General District Court bench in 1993. Bob Bendall, the current managing partner, joined the firm in 1976.

Turner Smith officially retired earlier this year and is now enjoying his days at home in Haymarket. We met twice to talk and reminisce about his life and the ties he has with the bench and the bar here in Prince William County. It was not surprising to learn that he was the first recipient of the Arthur W. Sinclair professionalism award. He is a gentleman who holds the people mentioned in this article in the highest regard and who is missed by his colleagues.