

THE ORIGINALS *The Networker*

THE LEGAL PROFESSION HAS CHANGED A LOT OVER THE PAST 40 YEARS. AS PART OF OUR 40TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION, WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO TAKE A STEP BACK IN TIME WITH “THE ORIGINALS” – THE SEVEN ATTORNEYS WHO JOINED JOHNSON & BELL IN THE 1970S AND STILL ARE PRACTICING TODAY. WE SAT DOWN WITH EACH OF THEM TO FIND OUT HOW THE LEGAL PROFESSION HAS EVOLVED, WHAT CASES BUILT THE FIRM OR THEIR OWN INDIVIDUAL CAREERS, AND THE VARIED PATHS THEIR RESPECTIVE CAREERS HAVE TAKEN OVER THE PAST FOUR DECADES. WE HOPE YOU ENJOY THEIR INDIVIDUAL STORIES.

Humble beginnings are what Jack Riley recalls about the early days of Johnson & Bell, Ltd.

Compared to lavish, carpeted lobbies with color-coordinated marble walls at Chicago’s Kirkland & Ellis, from which the founding lawyers had broken away, “I think we had a fake Parquet floor in the tiny reception area,” jokes Riley, an original Shareholder and current Co-Chair of the firm’s General Negligence Group. Riley was a second-year associate working at Kirkland when he left to open the office at One North LaSalle Street. “We were a bunch of wet-behind-the-ears kids, except for (the more seasoned attorneys) (Bill) Maddux and John (Bell).”

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While the future Johnson & Bell got its start with insurance defense cases from Kirkland, he says the firm’s lawyers quickly diversified into numerous practice areas and also began directly representing the companies and institutions the firm serves today. “Whereas today there are close to 30 defense firms in Chicago, back then, there were only 5 -10.”



Early clients included Travelers Insurance and Medical Protective of Fort Wayne, Ind., a medical malpractice carrier.

As far as technology goes, the firm’s IBM Selectric typewriters with limited memory were considered high-tech. “You could have a letter printed out without physically typing,” he says, but white-out (or correction fluid) and chalk paper white strips were still correction staples.

While some attorneys quickly focused mainly on one area of law, Riley says, “I ended up with a wide variety of suits,” ranging from complex tort, class action, and catastrophic injury to medical malpractice and commercial claims. He also tried unusual cases such as the defense of a power company where the jury

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was taken outside the courthouse to view a 60' ham radio antenna which had electrocuted the plaintiff during erection, defense of a foreign born doctor who wanted to address the jury and examine witnesses himself in a medical malpractice death suit, and defense of a dialysis center in another wrongful death claim in which it was accused of falsifying records.

At the same time he focused on business development, working to impress defendants as well as their insurers. "I was trying to do a good job, so next time the defendant would ask for us to represent them," Riley says.

"[We] felt it was good to get a national reputation; direct business would arise out of it."

Networking was also key, and he credits Johnson & Bell for supporting him over the years as he climbed the ranks of prestigious local and national associations, such as the Illinois Association of Defense Trial Counsel (IDC), for which he started the law journal, the *IDC Quarterly*, and became President; and the Federation of Defense and Corporate Counsel (FDCC) of which he also became president after serving as chair of the publications committee.

It was all extremely time consuming, Riley recalls, noting that just to qualify as a candidate for officer of the FDCC he was charged with running a week long convention for 600 people at The Breakers Resort in

Palm Beach, Fla. He, along with his secretary and his wife, single-handedly coordinated all the logistics, from collecting payment, booking the hotel and hiring the bands to planning the menus and paying all the bills. "We'd get up at 4 a.m. in the morning to inspect all the meeting rooms. That's the sort of ideal 'trial by fire.'"

"For four years as an officer, I spent half of my time on non-billable work for the FDCC," Riley says. "Bottom line — most firms wouldn't have supported someone in doing this." But as a young firm, Johnson & Bell "felt it was good to add to its national reputation; and hoped that direct business would arise out of it" through attorney referrals, word-of-mouth, and contact with insurance carriers and corporations.

In fact, it was through his involvement with the FDCC that Riley learned about the American Law Firm Association, or ALFA, an international network of law firms, which only permits one law firm per city. Thanks to the FDCC, "We had the inside track when we applied," he says. "And that's a major part of our business now."

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