

# THE ORIGINALS *The Engineer*

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.

He’s not an engineer by training, but he probably could be. John W. Bell has defended a diverse group of product manufacturers for his entire legal career – everything from power hand tools and medical devices to cranes and fire trucks. Listening to him brief a reporter from a power tool trade magazine about the safety mechanisms of one of his client’s table saws is a lesson in mechanical engineering. It’s that attention to detail and meticulous preparation that has led to Bell’s success.



“The facsimile machines were archaic with scrolling paper; you didn’t have a cell phone; and everything was dictation.”

Johnson & Bell, Ltd. celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, and founder/VP Bell was there at ground zero. An attorney at Chicago’s Kirkland & Ellis, Bell and fellow attorney William D. Maddux and a few other colleagues, set out on their own with a sizable portfolio of insurance defense business. Kirkland even chipped in used furniture for their new offices, Bell recalls. A few months later, current president/shareholder William V. Johnson joined the firm,

bringing the lawyer count to six. “I didn’t have any grand plan on how to grow,” Bell says. “You just try to make sure your client gets justice and go on to the next one.”

Back then, electric typewriters, carbon paper and dictation were the norm, Bell recalls. “The facsimile machines were archaic with scrolling paper; you didn’t have a cell phone; and everything was dictation. All the secretaries could take short hand.”

The firm grew rapidly, and in 1979, it expanded into a larger suite of offices, and continued to move to larger office space until it assumed its current location at 33 West Monroe St., with over 100 trial lawyers on staff.

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Named by Chicago Magazine one of the “Top 20 Tort Defense Lawyers in Chicago,” Bell has tried countless prominent cases throughout his career. Notable cases include a not-guilty verdict in the Logan Conveyor Turntable Death Case in 1982, and representing crane manufacturers in 1986. That representation included defending his clients during an interview with Diane Sawyer of “60 Minutes.”

“Things were simpler back then,” says Bell, who concentrates his practice in product liability of complex/catastrophic litigation, with a focus on defense of personal injury litigation. Things such as mock trials and jury research “were not done at all when we started out in 1975. That got to be more common in the 1990s because of jury verdict inflation and the amount of money involved in these cases; clients would pay for jury research.”

“The bottom line is that clients like to win.”

Mediation and arbitration are also more common now, Bell says, as corporate America has grown afraid of outlandish jury verdicts. Even in Cook County, which has a reputation for handing down generous jury verdicts, Johnson & Bell has been successful, he says, at obtaining fair verdicts for its clients.

As the years went by, Bell tried cases outside of the Midwest, which boosted the firm’s exposure.

In 2000, he tried a case in Brooklyn, N.Y., defending a manufacturer of fire ladder trucks. He and Charles P. Rantis from Johnson & Bell obtained a non-guilty verdict in the case, which involved the collapse of a fire truck ladder during the rescue of four people. The case, later featured in DRI magazine, entailed 6 weeks of litigation. The Judge granted judgment notwithstanding the verdict in favor of Bell’s client, which was affirmed on appeal, and the complaint was dismissed.

“My client didn’t have enough insurance to cover the liability exposure,” from the tragic accident, Bell says. After its win, “our client continued to manufacture trucks for the fire department. Many of the trucks ruined in the 9/11 attack were theirs. That trial kind of helped with our national presence in terms of trying cases around the country.”

Bell’s winning record has continued unabated. It includes defending a national utility company in the drowning of a teen in Waukegan, the Miller Park Stadium Collapse and Ryobi, manufacturer of the Ryobi table saw in “Ryobi vs. Stolling.”

“John’s always been a tremendous partner,” says Johnson. “He’s a terrific trial lawyer.”

“The bottom line is that clients like to win,” says Bell. “I often tell young lawyers there’s no future in losing and to prepare a case to win it. It’s not enough to try a case; you have to win a case.”

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## CHICAGO OFFICE

33 W. Monroe St. / Suite 2700 / Chicago, IL 60603  
phone (312) 372-0770 / phone (312) 372-9818

## INDIANA OFFICE

11051 Broadway / Suite B / Crown Point, IN 46307  
phone (219) 791-1900 / phone (219) 791-1901  
info@johnsonandbell.com

JOHNSON & BELL  
TRIAL LAWYERS

