
ATTORNEY PROFILE

Robert R. Campbell

By: Eric J. Morrison

"...for the distinction and honor brought to the profession by enduring, faithful and distinguished service to this community." These words, which are engraved on the plaque for the 1988 Governor's Award, but briefly describe the accomplishments and services which Robert R. Campbell has brought to this community.

Born in Knoxville in 1930, Robert Campbell has lived in Knoxville all of his life, except for a few years while serving in the Army. He attended the University of Tennessee for both his undergraduate and law school education, graduating in 1956 with an LL.B.

His interest in a legal career occurred, as he explained, by a process of elimination. An early interest in the study of government and civic affairs, to an undergraduate emphasis on business, Campbell began to study law and how essential law was to a civilized society. Wanting to stay in Knoxville but with little opportunities available, "I just hung out my shingle and tried to make a living. Those first years were really tough," he recounted. In fact, he still keeps a ledger book as a reminder of those first years. "One month I probably made about thirty dollars, then another month I might lose about one hundred twenty dollars," he said.

In 1958, Campbell joined the firm of Poore, Cox, Baker and McAuley, and four years later, in 1962, he became the fifth attorney with Hodges, Doughty and Carson. His current practice consists primarily of corporate and insurance defense representation. He is married to Ruth Campbell, and they have three children: Robert, Jr., who practices law in Nashville with Stokes and Bartholomew; Bill, who is a physician in a surgery residency at Emory University; and Cady, who teaches school in Nashville. He likes to jog and enjoys playing golf and tennis occasionally.

During his years in Knoxville, Robert Campbell has seen tremendous changes with the local bar. When he started his practice, law was not a flourishing profession. Even in 1972, when he served as President for the Knoxville Bar Association, there were only approximately three hundred attorneys in the local bar. Now, there are over eight hundred practicing attorneys in the KBA. Among the major changes which he has witnessed in the legal profession, Campbell cites the dramatic increase in litigation of all kinds.

Governors' Award - 1988
Robert R. Campbell

However, unlike some, Campbell sees this increase in litigation as a positive rather than a negative. "It demonstrates that the system is working. People are settling their disputes in the courts, instead of the streets," explained Campbell. Campbell also noted an increase in the competence of younger lawyers. "They are more prepared and more solid substantively," he said. Campbell was also grateful and gratified with the cohesiveness of the Knoxville Bar and in the way it represents its clients and practices its craft.

However, Campbell is not pleased with all changes which have occurred in the legal profession. Dismayed with what he described as "the hardball approach to litigation" involving excessive adversarial relationship between attorneys and an overkill in discovery, he felt this practice only serves to clog the system in both the law office and the court, thereby making it more difficult and costly. He also criticized advertising by attorneys as demeaning to the legal profession.

Among Campbell's favorite aspects of practicing law was his association with fellow lawyers. Quoting Harrison Tweed, Campbell stated, "Lawyers are better to work with, play with, fight with and drink with than any other variety of mankind." He also enjoys being in a profession that is "stimulating and competitive and that, win or lose, you go on to the next contest." He also felt that law and the role of attorneys was such an important and critical part of society, but, unfortunately, was largely unappreciated by the general populace.

Besides those already mentioned, Campbell's accomplishments include - former member and Chairman of the Tennessee Appellate Court Nominating Commission, Chairman of the Tennessee Bar Foundation, Life Member of the Sixth Circuit Judicial Conference, and membership in various organizations, including the Advisory Committee on Rules for the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, the American Board of Trial Advocates, and the American Inns of Court, to name a few. He is also a Fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers and the American Bar Foundation.

When asked if he might have any advice to younger attorneys, Campbell urged younger attorneys to concentrate on developing their competence by hard work wherever that may take them, for the sake of improving themselves as a lawyer and not for money. "It's not easy and never will be," noted Campbell. "Success in the practice of law is a journey and you never reach your destination, because just when you think you've arrived, all you have to do is look ahead and see the many hurdles which will follow."

And finally, during my interview with Mr. Campbell, he related the story of one case which had a particular impact upon him as an attorney. In 1977, he defended a libel suit in a case styled, Street v. National Broadcasting Company. The libel suit was born out of a television docu-drama entitled "Judge Horton and the Scottsboro Boys." The show was based on an incident in 1931 in Alabama, where several black men, the Scottsboro Boys, were charged with the rape of two white women. The trial of one of the defendants, Haywood Patterson, was presided over by Judge James Horton of Decatur, Alabama. Despite apparent overwhelming proof to the contrary, Mr. Patterson was convicted. However, seeing the injustice in the jury's verdict, Judge Horton set aside the verdict and granted a new trial. Judge Horton lost his next election as Judge and later lived out his life as a farmer.

The libel suit had been initiated by one of the ladies who had accused the black men of rape and was based upon the unfavorable light in which her character was cast in the docu-drama. (The docu-drama was based largely upon the transcripts of the trial.) The court granted NBC a directed verdict and dismissed the case. Besides being victorious in the libel action, the case had a tremendous impact upon Campbell personally. As Campbell stated, "With raw courage in the face of scorn and criticism, Judge Horton sacrificed his career and position and voted his conscience in overturning the jury's verdict. That case, and in particular the actions of Judge Horton, have always stayed with me."