
Trailblazers of the Mississippi Legal Frontier

Clare Sekul Hornsby Biloxi, MS



**"next to the
ministry
the law is
the noblest
and highest
calling"**

Clare is a first generation American from a Yugoslavian family from Dalmatia Brac', who believed that next to the ministry the law was the highest and noblest calling. The church was central to the lives of this close-knit family who lived on Point Cadet in Biloxi. After the church, obtaining an education was the second most important thing in their lives.

Early in his career, her father owned and worked on a fishing boat, an occupation her mother thought was too dangerous. So he began a seafood packing business while her mother ran the family-owned grocery store. The store was an integral part of the neighborhood, and Clare and her siblings learned about life and people while working there. It opened at 7:00 in the morning, and its porch served as a community gathering place until the store closed at 9 or 10 o'clock at night. At the grocery store, the Sekul family helped their neighbors in innumerable ways, providing the only telephone in the neighborhood and even caring for sick children.

A rather large population of Yugoslavians lived in Biloxi and supported the Slavonian Lodge where the Yugoslavian immigrants held meetings, weddings, family suppers and dances. The Lodge helped to maintain a sense of community among the Yugoslavian immigrants. Clare served as queen of the Slavonian Lodge in 1938 beating out her competitors for the crown by collecting the most money.

Her only brother, John Sekul, who later became a judge, wanted to be a lawyer, and her parents decided a brother needed a sister to follow him into the profession. Clare's parents chose her, the youngest of their five daughters, to be the lawyer. And what a lawyer!

For two years Clare attended Perkinston Junior College at the same time Boyce Holleman attended. Clare fondly remembers the school held three dances a week. Clare then attended Ole Miss and was enrolled in the Ole Miss law school when World War II began. The class dropped from 28 students to two. Another student later transferred in so Clare graduated in a class of three in 1945. Evelyn Gandy and Clare were classmates during that time.

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After graduation Clare returned home and became the first female lawyer to practice on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In 1946, she met her future husband Warren Hornsby, a Connecticut Yankee, who was stationed at Pass Christian in the Merchant Marines. Warren had not only fallen in love with Clare but also with the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Warren shipped out with the Merchant Marines and, coincidentally, was assigned to a short stay in Yugoslavia. While there, he visited the Brac' from where Clare's parents and many of the Gulf Coast residents with whom he had become acquainted had immigrated. The times were very rugged for the Yugoslavians. Warren would carry a light bulb from house to house to use as a source of light during the visits. A dance was held to honor Warren, and he danced with the older women. When the Merchant Marines shipped out, he encouraged the captain to leave any extra supplies they might have with the Yugoslavians. When he returned to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the Yugoslavian immigrants touched and hugged Warren, because they knew he had touched their beloved relatives in Yugoslavia.

In 1947 Warren and Clare were married. Warren eventually joined in the family's seafood business. Although he could not sing in Yugoslav, he always said he could stomp in Yugoslav.

Clare's parents never told her it was a man's world. She embarked on her career without ever considering she might encounter any discrimination, but it soon came.

Although Clare wanted to enter practice with her brother, his partner did not want a woman practicing law with him so Clare, as adventuresome as they come, set up a solo shop in Biloxi for ten years. She will tell you it is the best thing to happen to her, although she did join her brother in law practice later. In 1958 they were admitted together to the United States Supreme Court, the first brother/sister team to be so admitted. They also teamed up to try the famous "Seabee" case in which they won an acquittal for their 18 year old client accused of rape.

As a female lawyer, it was difficult at first getting clients, but Clare persevered, staying open on Thursdays and

Saturdays when most lawyers closed their offices and slowly clients began coming to her. Although the male lawyers sometimes played pranks on her, she remembers all as being kind to a neophyte, female lawyer who needed help.

Although she began her career with a general practice, she later concentrated on family law. Clare developed a thriving adoption practice drawing from surrounding states and counseled unwed mothers. In fact, she had her own ministry with her clients, from unwed mothers to battered women to accused criminals – always helping the person as well as the client through their troubled times. It is abundantly clear she goes the extra mile for her clients.

Known as the "Queen of the Biloxi Bar," Clare has been its president for 18 years and is famous for inviting judges from all over the state as its speakers.

Having been reared in a Christian family, Clare recalls the profound shock she felt when she first learned that clients do not always tell the truth. A criminal client who knew she was an unseasoned lawyer convinced her he had no criminal record and told her what to tell the judge. When she was defending him in federal court, the prosecutor stunned her when he produced a very lengthy criminal record. With tears in her eyes, Clare said, "Judge, you know he lied to me." The judge replied, "Yes, sometimes a client will do that."

Clare shares her philosophy of practicing law which has been honed over 50 years of practice. She lets her client talk first and get it off his or her chest. Then she tries to impress on her client the right thing to do. She forewarns her client, "You do not want me to tell you

what you want to hear." She tells them they are smart and know what is right, what they should do, and how she can make it better for them. If they need parenting classes, she tells them. Who better to give advice than a mother of an adopted child from Yugoslavia and three children born to her and Warren, to whom she was married for 50 years until his death.

It was Warren who advised her to develop her legendary flare for patterned stockings and a mouse pinned on the back of her left shoulder so that people would remember her. Warren thoroughly supported her career and accompanied Clare to numerous law conventions where he regaled in telling convention-goers that Clare finished third in her law school class.

Over the years, Clare has encountered a few difficult female clients with whom it was hard to communicate. The client simply would not listen to her advice. When that has occurred, she tells the client that maybe she is not comfortable with a female lawyer and then refers her to a male lawyer. If the woman is particularly religious, she tries to refer her to a lawyer who represents the church.

Clare has worked closely with priests, ministers and the church in her practice and referred clients to them for help. She has called upon Back Bay Mission and other relief agencies to assist with getting food and other assistance for clients. Whatever it takes, Clare does it.

She has also devoted her time to her fellow attorneys. Known as the "Queen of the Biloxi Bar," Clare has been its president for 18 years and is famous for inviting judges from all over the state as its speakers. She has also served as President of the Harrison County Bar Association. She is renowned on the Mississippi Gulf Coast for her genuine hospitality and ability to put a party together in a matter of a few hours. Not only has Clare been a tremendous goodwill ambassador for the Biloxi Bar Association, but she has also been one for the State of Mississippi, attending numerous national bar conventions and meeting many nationally known legal figures.

For years Clare has been active with
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the military. In 1970 she was selected to attend the Air Force College flying there in a T-38. She has served as President of the Air Force Association on the Coast and has toured numerous military bases across the country.

In this video, Clare gives advice to young lawyers, just starting their careers. She urges them never to go anywhere without their cards and stresses congeniality among lawyers. According to Clare, shake hands with every lawyer in the courtroom, get to know your fellow lawyer, work hard, be sincere and care. She adds that if you believe in your client, you can do anything for him.

Grounded on solid family values, steeped in religion, and endowed with boundless energy, a positive attitude, a

genuine love for her fellow man, and a passion for life, Clare Sekul Hornsby has attained a loving following of clients and friends. Just about anywhere she goes in the state, she meets people who have been her clients. She still receives letters from clients thanking her.

One of the many blessings in her life is her grandchildren. One particularly thrills her as he is attending law school to continue a tradition begun by his grandmother and granduncle. Clare says she will not retire from the practice because without it she would die. Perhaps, she and her grandson can practice together.

What have been her rewards? To Clare, the rewards have been many – meeting so many diverse people, the happy feeling in handling adoptions,

mothering unwed mothers, starting someone on the right road to get their family back together, solving someone's problem which seems like a mountain to that person and seeing that person leaving with a smile. Her passion for life and helping other people overwhelms the viewer.

Len Blackwell, II, a long time friend and fellow Gulf Coast lawyer, does an outstanding job of interviewing Clare. Carol West and Bob Shepard devoted many unselfish hours to producing, directing and editing this video. Not only did they get beautiful shots of the Biloxi harbor and lighthouse, Clare's church and Mary Mahoney's, but they dedicated themselves to finding the wonderful photos that were edited into the video. ■

4th Annual Legal Beagle 5K

The fourth annual Legal Beagle 5K run/walk (3.1 miles) is set for March 22, 2003. Since the Legal Beagle was founded by David Maron and Leigh Vernon in 2000, the race has evolved into one of the largest 5K races in central Mississippi. The first annual Legal Beagle saw just over 150 participants. Last year's race, however, drew a record number of over 250 participants, including almost 200 participants in the 5K run.

The Legal Beagle is sponsored by the Jackson Young Lawyers' Association. Proceeds from this year's run will again go to benefit the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project. The Volunteer Lawyers Project is a joint venture for federally funded legal services programs and the Mississippi Bar Association, and is headed by Phyllis Thornton. The Volunteer Lawyers Project places pro bono cases for poor people with volunteer lawyers. These cases include a variety of civil matters ranging from divorces to adoptions. Although last year's race raised almost \$2500 for the Volunteer Lawyers Project, the Volunteer Lawyers Project will lose \$30,000 in funding in 2003. So sponsorship for the 2003 race is that much more critical for the ongoing success of the Volunteer Lawyers Project.

Registration for the Legal Beagle will begin at 7:00 a.m. on March 22, 2003, at the Union Planters Bank alongside the I-55 Kroger (between the post office and

Krystal). The 5K run and walk will begin at 8:15 a.m., and will be followed by a 1 mile fun run for kids 15 and under at 9:15 a.m. There will be a team trophy for the law firm or organization with the most team participants. The cost to enter the race is \$12 if your registration form is postmarked on or before March 15, 2003, and \$15 if postmarked thereafter. Race day registration is also available for \$15. Legal Beagle race t-shirts are available for \$12 without race entry.

The course is the old Phidippides Watermelon Classic course. This is a flat, fast course through the residential streets of Northeast Jackson. This fast and easy course is a popular attraction for fast and slow runners alike, and is ideal for setting a "personal best." The race starts at the top of a hill on Old Canton Road at Brecon Drive, and finishes alongside the I-55 Kroger between the post office and Krystal.

The success of the Legal Beagle would not be possible without the support of sponsors. Please do not hesitate to sponsor this event. Individual sponsorships and law firm sponsorships are available for \$225. In return, the individual or law firm's name will appear on the back of the popular Legal Beagle race t-shirt. If you would like to sponsor this event, please contact Leigh Vernon at (601) 948-6470 or lverson@watkinseager.com.