
Trailblazers of the Mississippi Legal Frontier

Robert C. Cannada Jackson, MS

Bob was born and reared 20 miles west of Jackson in the small town of Edwards, Mississippi. His father farmed, raising corn, cattle, cotton, and four sons and served on the Board of Supervisors for Hinds County for about 16 years. Until he left home to attend college, Bob recalls milking two cows every morning. Raised as a Presbyterian in a little white frame church in Edwards, Bob has always lived by Christian principles. These principles were instilled in him at an early age as both of his parents were active in the church and conducted family devotionals every morning in their home. They attended church as a family regularly every Sunday.

Bob attended Hinds Junior College and went directly from there to Ole Miss law school. After graduating from law school and before entering the Navy during World War II, he practiced for two or three months in Jackson with the firm of Watkins and Avery, which was H. V. Watkins, Sr., and Ralph Avery. He served for four years in the Navy from 1942 to 1945 and returned to Watkins and Avery, the predecessor to Watkins, Ludlam & Stennis. However, during the war years, H. V. Watkins, Sr., had died and his son H. V. Watkins, Jr., had begun practicing with the firm. In 1946 after a few months with Watkins and Avery he left to join Stevens and Stevens, which was Phineas Stevens and Phineas' father, Judge Morgan Stevens, a former Mississippi Supreme Court Justice. Phineas and Bob had a number of personal ties, having been fraternity brothers in college, classmates in law school and successive editors of the Ole Miss law journal. The name was changed to Stevens and Cannada.

His early days were not particularly lucrative. He and his partners looked forward to Saturdays when they divided the fees from his Edwards clients who brought their vegetables to town that day in payment for Bob's legal services.

In 1946, Hinds County had one county court judge, one chancellor and one circuit court judge. There was one federal district court judge for the northern district and one for the southern district of Mississippi. Phineas remembers how Saturday morning was the busiest day of law practice as lawyers hurried to the courthouse to see the only Hinds County chancellor so they could close their offices at noon. This was the only day the chancellor heard ex parte matters.

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**“practice law
for the glory
of God”**

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In 1954, Charles Snow of Butler, Snow & O'Mara approached Phineas, Bob, and Francis Stevens, Phineas' brother who had joined Stevens & Cannada, about merging the firms. Judge Stevens was deceased at that time. An agreement was reached and they began practicing as Butler, Snow, O'Mara, Stevens & Cannada.

In 1954, there were no large law firms as we know them today, and the typical Mississippi law firm consisted of two or three lawyers. Bob believes their newly merged firm probably was the largest law firm in the state at that time – a total of seven lawyers. They were George Butler, Jr. (also a law journal editor at Ole Miss law School preceding Phineas) (1917-1998), Charles B. Snow (1894-1960), Junior O'Mara (1914-1986), Dan McCullen, Phineas Stevens, Bob Cannada and Francis Stevens. George Butler, Sr., the original Butler in Butler, Snow & O'Mara, had died in 1948.

One of the guiding principles within the firm was to build the State of Mississippi. At that time, much of the law business was going outside the state, for example, the bond business, complicated corporate matters such as large mergers, and issuance of stock to public companies. Mississippi needed a firm to do anything and everything and stop the flow of legal business outside of the state. The newly formed firm set out to do just that.

The law firm was committed to Christian principles. Every Tuesday morning at 7:00 a.m. they met for a devotional. The firm's perspective was to practice law to the best of your ability but practice it for the glory of God. Its philosophy was everyone must have a purpose, that purpose is to glorify God, and law should not be practiced for the money or for individual glory.

Collegiality was another maxim of the firm. Every lawyer was to have the same size office, and lawyers were to respect each other and to build each other up. The firm was determined to build a full partnership so partners would not be antagonistic to one another. At the beginning of each year, their percentages were set so everyone knew what the other would get. The prevailing motto was, "If there is work to do, find somebody else to do it." In other words, the most important thing was to

get the work done, but find the right person to do it. It was better for another partner to obtain recognition if he did the work than to be recognized yourself.

Many persons said this philosophy would not work as the firm grew. But with over 100 lawyers today, it is obvious the philosophy still works. Bob recalls how he attended conventions discussing law firm formation and operation where speakers would tell him how Butler Snow would never be successful with those principles. Bob recognizes it has its problems because nothing is perfect, but this philosophy gives a lawyer real joy and happiness in practicing law.

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Other guiding principles were that everyone can speak, have an opinion and be heard. However, as managing partner, Bob established a tenet that no vote was taken that would create a controversy. If the prevailing opinion on an issue was not almost unanimous, it would not be put to a vote.

In earlier days Bob remembers that drafting a deed with long descriptions was a major, time-consuming task requiring a full day's work. A deed could have no error in it. Remember, there were no word processors, no copy machines, and no air conditioning. An error meant rewriting the entire instrument, as there could never be an erasure.

Phineas recalls that to run a title meant a lawyer's spending an entire day in the courthouse pulling books and then writing the opinion, much as today, but only receiving \$35.00 for issuing the written opinion. Now, their firm sends

the title work out to a title company.

When the firm first merged, Mr. Snow represented Dumas Milner, an up and coming automobile dealer, who built and owned the Milner Building, where Security Center now stands at the corner of Amite and Pascagoula Streets. The firm was among the original tenants of the building. As the firm grew, it moved next door to the Petroleum Building, also owned by Dumas Milner.

Until 1959, Bob handled the firm's litigation. However in 1959, he began converting to a business practice. He had as his clients some of Jackson's most influential families, the McRaes and the Hedermans. With Mr. Snow's death, Bob inherited the business practice for two of Mr. Snow's clients, Dumas Milner and Roger Stribling.

Dumas Milner, a true entrepreneur, was a Kosciusko native who after the war became involved in the automobile business. Returning servicemen were entitled to a certificate for payment on a car, and every serviceman needed transportation. Knowing this, Dumas Milner began opening automobile dealerships including one in Jackson. For awhile he was probably the world's largest automobile dealer.

From this beginning, he expanded. Dumas Milner would buy a dealership and would balance this by building or buying a hotel for depreciation purposes. This was done all over the United States. He bought other properties including an island in the Bahamas on which he built a hotel and then later sold the island. Dumas Milner also purchased a small company in Jackson by the name of Pine-Sol, developed it and later sold it for \$20 million. Bob handled all of these transactions for him and by doing so, Bob became very adept in business law.

Bob also handled the McRae family's business from its beginnings at one small store on West Capitol Street in Jackson through the sale of the numerous McRae's stores in several states to Proffitt's. He represented the Stribling family as it built its Caterpillar business and was a counselor to the Hederman family who owned the newspaper in Jackson for many years. His firm handled the sale of the Hedermans' newspaper business to Gannett, which was

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complicated by the fact it was the sale of multiple papers in several cities.

Bob is described by Hal Miller, his long time friend and law partner, as being a counselor to his clients and not just a lawyer. Bob's philosophy is that a lawyer has a responsibility to counsel his clients and not just tell them what the law is. Bob wanted his clients to think of him as a friend and had their welfare and not his personal gain as the top priority. He recalls on occasions praying with his clients as to what was being done or should be done. Even today although he has retired from the firm, Bob's Christian principles permeate it. As Bob says, "There is no limit as to what a person can accomplish when he doesn't take credit for anything."

In the 1940's and 1950's, lawyers had a general practice. However, as the firm grew, its lawyers had to specialize. Bob believes it is good for the client to have a lawyer who repeatedly does the same kind of work.

Law practice has changed dramatically since Bob and Phineas began practicing. Bob reflects upon what he sees as a

landmark in the change of the profession – from value billing to hourly billing. In his opinion, this altered the practice of law to more of a business and less of a profession. Bob and Phineas recall the days when champerty and maintenance were felonies unlike the support attorneys give to clients today. This also has fueled the changes.

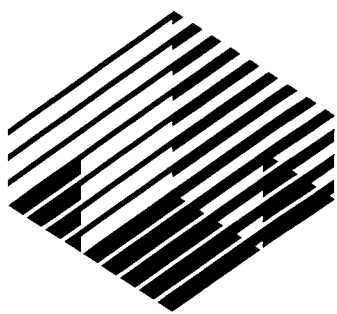
Although practicing law has been Bob's livelihood, his greatest calling is to God. Bob remembers that beginning at the age of six, he always wanted to be a foreign missionary and says he has waited his entire life for a calling to be one. Many will say he has been a missionary, although not in a foreign country. Bob was instrumental in founding the Reformed Theological Seminary in 1964 and the Presbyterian Church of America, commonly called the PCA, which functions nationwide and has churches in foreign countries.

Retirement for Bob does not mean retirement from life. Since retiring from his law firm (although he goes to the office almost every day), Bob has written a number of books – The Historic

Polity of the PCA, The Unique Governance of the Reformed Theological Seminary, and America's Rule of Law. He serves on the board of and is quite active in the National Lawyers Association, which promotes returning to the principles upon which our nation is founded, which is not necessarily the direction the U. S. Supreme Court has taken.

Hal Miller, the first associate hired by Bob and Phineas in 1959 and their friend and law partner for those many years, interviews both Bob and Phineas. When the three are together on the video, there is a certain spark of energy and genuineness present that only 40 to almost 60 years of togetherness can generate.

Anita Modak-Truran and Ned Currie produced and directed this video. It was filmed at the Reformed Theological Seminary; the offices of Butler, Snow, O'Mara, Stevens & Cannada; the town of Edwards and surrounding countryside; and the First Presbyterian Church in Jackson. Anita gives the viewer a unique look of Bob Cannada by editing into the video the exquisite photos from the Cannada's family albums. ■



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