
Trailblazers of the Mississippi Legal Frontier

Thomas R. Ethridge
Oxford, MS

If you ever wanted to meet a walking legal legacy, it is Tommy Ethridge, a man born into a family steeped richly in the law. The law profession was second nature to Tommy—having a grandfather who was a lawyer, a father who was a lawyer, and two brothers who were lawyers. Tommy said he did not know anything else to do and he did not really want to work so he also became a lawyer.

In the early years of the legal profession, no law school degree was required, and neither Tommy's grandfather nor father attended law school although each practiced. His grandfather died at an early age after having suffered strokes twice during murder trials. His brother, William Ethridge, became a paraplegic after having been stricken with polio at the age of 17. With only the use of one arm and partial use of the other arm while being confined to a wheel chair, he completed college, law school, and a masters of laws degree, taught law school at Ole Miss, and served as a Mississippi Supreme Court Justice and later as Chief Justice. The Moot Courtroom at the Ole Miss law school is named for William Ethridge.

Prior to World War II, Tommy was attending law school at Ole Miss, and after the attack on Pearl Harbor enlisted in the Marines finding himself with a number of other Ole Miss law students, among them Joe Daniels, Erskine Wells, Paul Johnson, Harvey Henderson, and their professor, John Wade. Tommy made combat landings in the Marshall Islands, at Saipan and Tinian to secure a base for the B-29's and at Iwo Jima. After the atomic bomb was dropped, he landed at Sasebo on the Japanese mainland about 25 miles from Nagasaki, although he did not have to stay long. Always finding zest in life, he is jokingly said by friends to be the only man who enjoyed World War II.

His good friend Dr. Beckett Howorth, a well-known surgeon in Oxford, loves to tell the story of going to a Japanese restaurant in New York with Tommy. Upon approaching the restaurant, Tommy announced to his friends not to worry about a language barrier because he knew Japanese. He could say "hello" and "come out with you hands up."

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**"I am glad
the statute of
limitations
has run"**

Thomas R. Ethridge – Trailblazers of the Mississippi Legal Frontier

Tommy returned home and finished his remaining semester of law school on the G.I. bill. In 1946 he began practicing law with his father as Ethridge & Ethridge on the Oxford square. There were approximately 8 practicing lawyers in Oxford where law practice was not thriving at the time. Deeds of trusts, notes, and chattel deeds of trust on a cow were the most common legal endeavors.

To survive the poor legal climate, Tommy was fortunate to serve for two years as Oxford's City Attorney at the great salary of \$75.00 a month. Several years later he served a second term as City Attorney.

In 1947 he ran in a special election for the Mississippi Senate but was defeated by about 50 votes. Undaunted, he ran again the next summer for the same office after his victorious opponent was unable to serve. This time he was elected and began serving with a number of other war veterans. That legislature has been fondly called the "Class of '48" and had the reputation for being more liberal than previous legislatures had been. As Tommy said, "They kept things stirred up." Newspaper columnist Bill Minor has revered this group of legislators, writing that they just don't make them like that any more. Tommy was elected to the Senate for two terms.

Tommy was serving again as City Attorney for Oxford during the great Beer Riot of the 1960's. You will not find this one in the history books but it is in the hearts of the Ole Miss students and others who tried to right the wrong of outlawing beer in Oxford. While the young men had been away at war, a referendum to outlaw beer passed which mightily aggravated the returning World War II warriors. Some years later an angry mob of students and other concerned parties marched down the street to the mayor's house to protest. Unfortunately, some of the crusaders were arrested. Tommy reminisces with a smile that as the prosecuting City Attorney he does not recall obtaining a single conviction as no beer rioter could be identified.

Tommy soon received another calling to public service. Prior to President Eisenhower's term of office, the U. S. Attorney's office had always been part-time. However, President Eisenhower

wanted full-time U. S. Attorneys across the nation and of all of his appointments, there was only one Democrat appointed as a U. S. Attorney – Tommy Ethridge. Tommy journeyed to Washington, D.C., for his appointment and was taken to the White House by the then Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr. Mr. Brownell told the President that he believed Tommy was the only Democrat he had appointed, whereupon the President announced, "I believe he is our kind of Democrat." Without explanation, but no doubt reflecting on a number of pardons granted by his Democrat predecessors, President Ike encouraged Tommy with these words, "If you will put them in jail, I won't let them out."

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Returning home, Tommy consolidated the numerous part-time U. S. Attorney's offices spread over north Mississippi in Aberdeen, Greenville, and Clarksdale into the first full-time U. S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District located in Oxford. This consolidation was accomplished in spite of opposition from the sitting federal judge. There was little funding for the office. To conserve funds, Tommy called collect to The Justice Department in Washington, D. C., to make his reports. At first, his calls were refused, but, after explaining he had no budget for telephone calls, they were accepted. Tommy then traveled to the Justice Department to beg for funding for the Oxford office. To show its needs, he took his old ragged government briefcase to Washington. Seeing it, the Washington bureaucrat begrudgingly gave Tommy his shiny, new briefcase. Funding came a little easier after that.

The office began with two rooms, four lawyers, four secretaries and no air conditioning. Tommy persuaded Murray Williams from Water Valley and Guy Rodgers and Dwayne Hale from New Albany to join the office staff. Euple Dozier had previously functioned as a secretary in one of the offices doing the land division work. She had become a lawyer by that time and, although Tommy had to keep her in a secretary slot for a time, when there was an opening, he promoted her to a lawyer position to handle the land division.

Tommy served for seven years as U.S. Attorney for the Northern District. For his efforts and dedication, the United States Attorney's newly leased office building in Oxford bears his name. Chancellor Robert Khayat of the University of Mississippi recalls on the video his address at the dedication of the building. "Not only is the Ethridge family being honored by naming the building after Tommy, but the building is being honored by bearing the Ethridge name."

After leaving the U. S. Attorney's Office, Tommy re-entered private practice in 1961 in Oxford with his father and Lowell Grisham. There were approximately 15 practicing lawyers in Oxford at that time.

After several years Tommy again left private practice to teach at the University of Mississippi Law School. Many a law student is indebted to him. In addition to teaching duties, Tommy also served as the University's legal counsel.

In this video he and his interviewer, Guff Abbott, reminisce that even though they practiced law before being law professors, they never knew much about the law until they taught. Known for his wit, Tommy quips that he is glad the statute of limitations has run.

The charm of the Ole Miss campus and the beauty of its most notable buildings are preserved in this video, as Tommy takes the viewer on a campus tour, detailing the history of the buildings. Tommy's passion for music is also captured. A musician for 70 years, if you are lucky, you can still book Tommy for a gig so you can hear him and his clarinet trill the scales.

Tommy has been a loyal family man, and the church has been a guiding force in his life. Married for over 50 years, he

Thomas R. Ethridge

and his wife Ester have raised two daughters and have been blessed with grandchildren, one of whom is continuing the Ethridge family's legacy by becoming a lawyer. Tommy has served the First Presbyterian Church in Oxford in almost every capacity possible, as a member, trustee, deacon and elder.

Guff Abbott, a fellow law professor and friend, does a marvelous job as interviewer of not only Tommy but also

Chancellor Khayat and Dr. Howorth. Hale Freeland, Q. Davis and Curtis Boschert contributed innumerable hours in the production of this video. It was filmed in the offices of the United States Attorney in the Ethridge Professional Building, on the Ole Miss campus, and in downtown Oxford. Besides filming by Eddie Nabors, Hale Freeland filmed short pieces which were edited into the video. ■

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