

Honorable Edwin J. Peterson, 1972-73

Justice Edwin Peterson was interviewed in June, 2005 by Fred Leeson. Excerpts of the interview appear below.

MBA involvement and history

"I was active in the MBA the entire time I practiced in Portland. I came to Portland in 1957, right out of law school. I joined the MBA and started attending meetings. At that time, the MBA was mainly a social organization. Lawyers would get together for dinners periodically. They also sponsored golf and tennis tournaments. I competed in tennis a number of times, but essentially that was what the organization was. They also had a liaison with the Multnomah County Law Library. Frank Harrington was active working with the law library. The law library was a very important area for Portland lawyers because it was before the era of computerized legal research. If you wanted to do research, you would end up in the library.

"In the 1960s or early 1970s, I'm pretty sure the MBA had no permanent staff. I think the biggest positive change for the MBA was the development of continuing legal education programs for lawyers. The Oregon State Bar started having CLE programs early on. The county bar had no particular CLE activities, but gradually in the 60s or 70s they started to do that.... I know that during my tenure (as president, 1972-73) we really made an effort to have meaningful CLE programs. One involved Robert E. Jones and Dick Unis. There were some pretty good and well-attended programs.

"Someplace along the line, the bar association hired staff. The interesting thing was the social activities of the MBA were much more significant events than they are now. If you have a bar reception now, you are lucky to get 100-200. In those days, the 1950s and 1960s, there were really great turnouts for almost all the bar events. The bar was smaller, and had a much more collegial atmosphere. We always had a good turnout for the big annual dinner. As the bar grew, the turnout declined. This was pretty much parallel with Oregon State Bar conventions.

"Jim Spiekerman followed me as president. I have a vague recollection that there was an office on 5th between Morrison and Alder."

Women and minorities

"In Portland, there was Virginia Renwick, who was vice president when I was president. I don't recall whether there were prior officers who were women. Virginia Renwick is the first person I remember who served as officer of the association. There was a lot of prejudice against women in those days. Some of it we male lawyers wouldn't admit to. But there was a very deep-seated prejudice against women, more deep-seated than we understood at the time. Some of the leading lawyers were Jean Lewis, Shirley Field, oh, half a dozen or a dozen. Mildred Schwab. The real influx of women lawyers in large numbers didn't happen until the mid or late 1970s, if I recall correctly."

Memorable lawyers

"The male sweetheart of the lawyers, particularly small practitioners, was John Ryan. John was a very good lawyer. Very ethical, upright, professional lawyer. He could always be counted upon at bar meetings to take the position of the small practitioner, solo practitioner or small law firms. The senior partner in the firm I was a member of was Lamar Tooze Sr., who also was a major general in the Army Reserves. He served in both World War I and World War II. I always thought of him as Mr. Oregon State Bar; very professional and courteous. The stories are legion about Roy Shields, especially in conjunction with tent shows. He was an imaginative, decent fellow.

"One of the feistiest trial lawyers in Portland in those days was Walter Cosgrave, at that time in the same firm as Shields. He was a feisty, red-haired Irishman, also a very decent lawyer. He was a trial lawyer in civil cases, mainly on the defense side. Once when I was still a young lawyer, in my early 30s, the phone rang. It was Walter. He said, "Someone gave you a very nice compliment." He repeated the compliment. I thanked him and his response was, "We lawyers don't get very many compliments in the course of our work. I make it a practice whenever I hear something good about a lawyer to call him and tell him."

"We lawyers are steeped in dispute resolution. That is our stock in trade. One year, I tried 24 circuit court cases in Portland. I was standing waiting for a light to change to go back to my office and the thought struck me that I spent almost all my time doing one of two things. One was to keep other people's hands out of my clients' pockets; second, I also tried to get my clients' hands into someone else's pocket. It's not an exalted view of law, but it is true.

"The smartest lawyer I ever knew was Lamar Tooze Jr. He was not well known and not active in the bar, but boy, he was smart.

"I've always thought of the 1970s as the golden age of the law in Portland in this respect. If you check the Oregon Blue Book, look at who we had on the bench in Portland. Never in my lifetime have I seen such an assembly of talented, good judges. Charles Redding, Robert E. Jones, Clifford Olsen, Jack Beatty - we were blessed with an outstanding judiciary in the 60s and 70s."

The MBA - then versus now

"I do follow the MBA fairly closely. I'm still a member, but comparisons are difficult. In the early days, the bar was so small and so intimate. In a sense, the association was almost a fraternal organization. Today, with the growth of lawyers from 2,500-12,000 (in 2005), the bar is an impersonal environment. I guess that's what I would say. If I had to sum up the change in one sentence, the bar, through the fault of no one, has ceased to be a personal environment. It has become an impersonal environment. I don't mean that in a critical way. The evolution of the state bar illustrates the fact that a measure of collegiality and personalness still exists in sections of the bar. You have a fairly wide acquaintanceship with persons in the area in which you practice."

MBA community service

"I remember the first development. The Multnomah Bar took a significant role, in about 1968, in opening the first Legal Aid office in Portland with full-time Legal Aid lawyers. I think Herb Schwab took a significant role in that. I think Ron Gevurtz may have been the first full-time Legal Aid lawyer. That was a very significant event. I remember so distinctly that bar meeting, I think it was 1968, when Herb Schwab was discussing what was happening."

Funny stories

"I'll tell you one in the abstract. It didn't take me long to learn that lawyers who were hard to deal with often received that kind of conduct from their opponents. Their professional life was not a happy one. I remember vaguely, before 1979 when I became a judge ... once a lawyer treated me very shabbily in the morning on the telephone, something to do with discovery. When I hung up the phone, I thought, well someday, the worm will turn. It didn't take long. The phone rang that afternoon and the worm had turned. I did not respond in kind. The worm always turns."