

Interview with Louis Ritz
Interviewer: Brian Williams
April 20, 1999

Q: This is Brian Williams. We are at the offices of Kahn, Dees, Donovan & Kahn in one of our conference rooms with Louie Ritz. Today is Tuesday, April 20, 1999. As I say, I'm Brian Williams. I'll be conducting the interview. I'm one of the attorneys at Kahn, Dees, Donovan & Kahn. It says I'm supposed to reveal my age, so I am 43. What law school I went to - I went to Indiana University Bloomington. I'm at Kahn, Dees, Donovan & Kahn as a partner and I've been practicing since 1981, so that means I've been in practice for 18. Is that right? I hadn't thought about that. Time accrues is right. The date is April 20, 1999 and of course we're at the offices of Kahn, Dees, Donovan & Kahn at 5th and Main Streets up on the third floor in one of our conference rooms. I am very pleased to interview today Louie Ritz. Louie, why don't you go ahead and spell your full name. It's not a deposition, but you know.

A: Louis. L-O-U-I-S. Ritz, like Ritz crackers.

Q: I hate to ask this, but I guess they want age.

A: I seem to be exactly 50 years your senior. I'm 83.

Q: O.K. That's great. And, tell me a little about your legal history -- where you went to law school -- what you've done as an attorney.

A: Well, a routine I frequently use in education background, I attended Wheeler School in Evansville which they tore down. I then attended Central High School, which they also tore down. I got my undergraduate degree at Evansville College, which they renamed, and then took my legal education at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, earning an LLB, which is a degree they no longer grant. So, I'm beginning to feel a little obsolete.

Q: When did you obtain your LLB at University of Michigan?

A: In 1939.

Q: You grew up here in Evansville?

A: Yes.

Q: What do you recall about growing up in Evansville in the 30's? You were born when?

A: 1915.

Q: You're my father's age - if that makes you feel old or not, but my father was born in 1915.

A: Well, I had a relatively uneventful childhood, other than having rather bright red hair which is no longer evident. And, went through the round of education here and for some reason I decided at about age seven or eight I wanted to be a lawyer and never deviated from that. I majored in business administration at Evansville College because one of my mentors was Leo Warren who was a prominent attorney before his premature death almost 40 years ago now. He had done this. He had been at Evansville College and taken business administration and discovered this gave him a distinct advantage when he proceeded to the University of Michigan law school.

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Q: Was Mr. Warren a neighbor of yours, or how did you know Mr. Warren.

A: Well, his family was a member of First Presbyterian Church - then Grace Memorial Church which I was, and I'd known him growing up. He was about ten years older than I.

Q: Where did he practice law?

A: He practiced in Evansville.

Q: Do you remember what firm he would have been with?

A: No. As I need to touch on in a few minutes, the firm situation in those days was much different than it is now.

Q: Were there any members of your family practicing law or were you the first.

A: No. I was the first in my family.

Q: Who were your parents and where was your childhood home?

A: My parents were Louis Park Ritz and Bertha Ritz. Dad was an engineer. I first lived on Chandler, near third street and until I finished college.

Q: Your father was an engineer, so he had an undergraduate degree.

A: He had also attended Michigan which was one of the reasons I wound up there.

Q: What do you recall of your law school experience at the University of Michigan?

A: Well, principally, that I then lived in a style I've never been able to afford since. Due to a benefactor whose name now escapes me, who had cornered the market on street railroads in New York City and consolidated them to a single system, and then quarreled with his family and died leaving his entire estate to the University of Michigan, they built the Michigan Law Quad, which was both residence dormitories, really small apartments, and the law school library, the dining hall in which we ate nightly. It was a magnificent facility.

Q: When did you graduate from the University of Michigan?

A: In June of 1939.

Q: And, what did you do immediately thereafter?

A: I came back to Evansville. Between my junior and senior years in law school, I had spent the summer with the firm of Walker & Walker, which we'll touch on a little later, and so I rejoined them and remained with them until January of 1941, where, as the proud owner of National Draft Order 37, I lead the first group of draftees to leave Evansville and, as it turned out, left for about five years.

Q: Do you recall what you were paid in those first years at Walker & Walker.

A: Well, let's see. During the -- while I was sort of an intern during -- while I was still in school, I received \$50.00 a month. When I came back on full-time, this was increased to \$150.00 a month.

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Q: And was that from your experience reasonably typical of paying somebody on a monthly basis?

A: Yes. That was more or less a going rate at that time. At that time, charging more than \$10.00 an hour for one's time was unheard of. So, in proportion, this is not completely out of line.

Q: So hourly fees in 1939 to 1941 would have been in the \$10.00 per hour range.

A: \$10.00 per hour -- maybe \$15.00 for one of the more prestigious lawyers.

Q: So, do you recall if you were charged out at \$10.00 per hour to begin with, or would you have been even less than that?

A: Probably it may have been less than that. It may have been \$7.50. I really don't remember specifically.

Q: How did you get your first job at Walker & Walker?

A: Well, again through the church. Henry Walker was an active member of the church. He and my father were both elders at the church and I think dad helped arrange this. And, apparently, I did satisfactorily during my intern summer, so there was problem. I came directly back. It was understood I was coming back and I was in their office I think the week after I left Ann Arbor.

Q: You've indicated you worked at the Walker & Walker firm. Tell me a little about the Walkers. If they were both there and, if you will, comment on your experiences.

A: Well, it was considerably more than both there. To begin with, the firm had been established back in the 1880's. It was a family tradition that the oldest son would be a member of the firm. The second son would be doctor, because this was the same family that what gave the name of once was Welborn Walker Hospital. When I was there, James T. Walker had just retired but still came down occasionally. His son, Henry B. Walker, was the head of the firm and his son, Henry B. Jr., generally known as Hank, was graduated I think the year before I did and had just come into the office. At the time, in addition to the two Walkers, there was John Early who had married one of the Walker daughters, and Ross Meyers, who was one of the more capable practitioners of what was known as dilatory law (and I'd like to make a few comments on that later), and Charlie Sparenberger, who I think had joined two years earlier, and myself. This was by about three, I think, the largest group of lawyers practicing together in Evansville. Until after the war, Evansville lawyers apparently didn't like one another too well. Or, did not want to be in close association with them. There were partnerships of two and sometimes three lawyers, but I think there were no others that had more than three lawyers at that time.

Q: If I'm counting correctly, there would have been six with you. Is that correct?

A: Well, James T., of course, was of counsel. Six not counting him.

Q: Six, plus one.

A: Yes.

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Q: Roughly what were the ages of each of these folks. And, I realize you won't know exactly.

A: I won't know exactly. James T. was in his upper 70's I believe. Henry Walker, Sr. was generally known as the Colonel because he had a reserve commission which very rapidly became an active commission at the outbreak of WWII. He would have been in his very early 50's. Ross Meyers would have been about 40 or so. Hank was about my age. Charlie Sparenberger, I think was a couple of years older.

Q: And what about John Early?

A: John Early would have been in his mid-30's.

Q: You say it was unusual to have -- or, this was the largest firm in town with six plus the one of counsel. What was it like practicing law in your first couple of years of experience? Can you describe that?

A: Well, it was mainly administrative. I really, I spent more time in legal research than anything else, because nobody else in the office enjoyed this and while I can't say I was thrilled about it, I was interested in it, and so I got all of those assignments. As a matter of fact, I think I got my low draft number because the day that one had to register for the draft, which was in 1940, I was making my first appearance before the Indiana Supreme Court in an appellate matter that I had done the research on and had to register in Indianapolis. Of the group that I left Evansville with, more than a third had registered out of town, which was either a very unusual coincidence or indicates that there was a little trafficking (? unintelligible) in hot numbers between various (? unintelligible) municipalities.

Q: Well, tell me briefly, what was your draft number?

A: 27.

Q: 27. So you had a low number and you were going.

A: I was going. I was unmarried, in reasonably good health, had no reason not to go, and so I went. I was not thrilled.

Q: You say that on the day in 1940 when you were required to apply for the draft, you also appeared in front of the Indiana Supreme Court. Can you tell me about that experience? What was that case about and what do you recall about the Supreme Court at that time?

A: Well, really, I recall very little about either matter. It was my first exposure. It was a question concerning mineral rights underlying the Ohio River. It was one of a series of cases I later became involved in another way after the war, but it was distinctly a question of first impression at that time. It made some interesting -- it was interesting doing some research on it.

Q: Do you recall the party's name or if any decision was published.

A: I'm sorry, I don't.

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Q: That's O.K. Tell me a little bit more about your experience with the law firm. Do you have any memories of specific instances of conflict or comradery with the Walkers, with John Early, with Ross Meyers, Charlie Sparenberger?

A: Of course, with only the six of us actively there, there was a good deal of comradery. The Walkers were very informal, especially Hank, but all of -- it was a very compatible medium in which to practice.

Q: Tell me what you mean by informal? What does that mean?

A: Well, that meant if you had a question of anybody, as long as he was not entertaining a client, you just walked in and said, "Look, I've got this problem -- I've run into this. Do you have any idea?" One of the facilities that was made possible and I helped organize a little -- they had about four drawers full of various briefs that had been filed at various times which were pretty well indexed. So, in addition to going through the normal reference sources, we had some local material. The Walkers were also the first -- I spent a good deal of time the year before between my senior and junior year running down citations in the Recorder's Office because they also had their own system. The Walkers -- really, I think probably a third of the legal matters that were being handled were somehow related to the Walker holdings. They had extensive real estate holdings in Evansville and we also represented the Old National Bank. We were in the old bank building and that provided a source of ...

Q: Now, when you say the Old National Bank building -- the old building at 5th and Main Street.

A: Yes.

Q: What was the dress code like then?

A: Oh, highly formal. One wore coats, suits with vests and of course a tie. I feel today -- not wearing a tie is one of the prerogatives of retirement. And, of course nobody dared appear in court in anything but a totally matching ensemble. If you were to appear in a jacket that didn't match your trousers, you would be immediately expelled.

Q: The court that you would have appeared in Evansville would have been what we refer to now as the Old Courthouse?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Any memories about the Old Courthouse.

not particularly. I spent a lot of time in the law library up there. I say since I was doing legal research.

Q: Where was the law library in the Old Courthouse.

A: It was across from the Superior Courtroom on the second floor of the Courthouse, on the 5th Street end of the Courthouse -- the 5th Street wing of the Courthouse.

Q: How would you describe the law library then? Was it a -- how did it compare to the University of Michigan's, or ...

A: There was very little comparison. We had all of the standard reference books and, of course, at that time we were awaiting Corpus Juris had just started issuing Corpus Juris Secundum and we kept hoping

volumes would come out containing materials that were useable. A.L.R. had been started and it was a great coup if you found an annotation in A.L.R. that was anywhere near the question you were researching because it saved a great deal of time. I distinctly remember the West key system was based on the Decennial Series. I'm sure you remember those too, where you had to go back and run your West key number back volume from decennial to the previous decennial. Or, if you found a case, then run it down to follow it up. It is certainly far different than the computer-based operations today.

Q: Do you remember anything else about the library in the Old Courthouse.

A: Well, of course, it was in what had been originally designed to be courtroom. We had space for four courtrooms, but since we had only one Circuit Court, one Superior Court, and one Probate Court, that left the fourth courtroom that became the law library. It was sort of a dismal place and not always too well heated.

Q: Was there any staff person in charge of the library?

A: No.

Q: How was the library maintained?

A: It was maintained by contributions from the budgets of the three judges. So far as I can remember, the Bar Association had very little to do with this at the time. I certainly don't recall any fund-raising operations or anything of the sort. And, it was not, let's say extensively used. It was unusual to find more than two people there at any given time.

Q: Who were the Judges then?

A: Oh, Lord. Well, this is the point at which I have a problem. Because, by reason of my -- the way my career progressed, I was never in court. As a matter of fact, during particularly the period after the war until I retired, whereas some lawyers attempt to keep their clients out of jail, my principal objective was to keep them out of court.

Q: You mentioned earlier that one of the attorneys in your firm practiced dilatory law. Tell me what you mean by that.

A: Well, this was under the old court rules. I do not remember when, simply because I was not operating under the system, but sometimes I guess in the early 50's the Federal Rules were adopted in Indiana which changed everything. But before that it was an interesting system which has been sort of reviled and I think to some extent unjustly. The procedure was the Plaintiff filed a Complaint. You automatically filed a Demurrer stating that this did not constitute a cause of action and then you filed a Motion to Make More Specific, and then a Motion to State Facts to Support Legal Conclusions, and then a Motion to Produce Documents. Now, each one of these motions required a hearing, an actual hearing in court. And while it may take only a few minutes, there were so many of these floating around, that generally the Judge excused himself and a Special Judge was put on who was one of the younger lawyers and since you were paid I believe it was \$10.00 a case if I remember correctly for each Motion that you heard, it was a way in which one could supplement one's other legal income. Now when you've gone through all of these motions, the next step was to file for an automatic change of venue from the Judge. Three Judges were named, each party struck one and the third took over. At this point you started the

whole procedure over again because this Judge might rule differently so you went through your five or six motions. If you exhausted those without relief, then you filed for an automatic change of venue from the County and you would go to a different county and start the whole procedure over again. Then if you were not able to throw the case out of court, this is from the Defendant's viewpoint of course, then you filed a Motion for Change of Venue from Judge from the County Judge of the County in which you left and then you could also -- each time you're going through the entire procedure again and eventually you could wind up in Vincennes, or Tell City, or heaven knows where -- you could go three or 4 counties away and of course this increased the cost of the operation. Now I know this sounds hopelessly cumbersome, but it was really a way to do two things. First, to discourage frivolous litigation because nobody could afford to file a suit unless he was prepared to set in for a fairly long haul and then second thing that it did was to promote settlement because all of this was in part designed to wear down the clients, Plaintiff and Defendant, to the point where they were willing to settle, and so it resulted very few cases, relatively, I have no statistics, but I would suspect less than one in twenty actually reached a decision before a judge or jury. They were simply at -- the proponents -- simply came to the point where they'd say we'll do anything to end this process and they would settle and, in that way, it was a relatively efficient process.

Q: And you say who was the specialist in dilatory law at Walker & Walker?

A: Ross Meyers.

Q: Tell me a little more about Ross Meyers.

A: Well, he had stayed -- I think he had been with the Walker firm at that time something like 20 years and had no ambition to leave. It was a nice niche. He was -- I'm not sure whether he was actually a partner or not, but obviously his remuneration was considerably better. He knew he was feared by the rest of the bar, so if Walker & Walker came in to represent the Defendant, there was more chance of settlement -- its much like some of the more able tort lawyers today are able to produce better results for their clients because the insurer will settle with them where they might continue to litigate with a lawyer that they weren't aware -- capabilities they were not aware of.

Q: Do you remember any particular -- how would you describe Ross Meyers?

A: Well, he was a -- he was obviously a very capable lawyer. The other interesting thing about him was, as I said, he would have been well over 40. I think probably 45 or so. He was an avid handball player and excused himself about 4:00 every afternoon to proceed over to the Y and take on all comers at handball and I understand he continued to do so until he was well into his 60's. There's one other member of the Walker staff that certainly shouldn't be overlooked -Miss Hattie Falk. F-A-L-K. She was always Miss Hattie. No one ever thought of addressing her as Hattie and it was a little -- the situation was a little too informal to address as Miss Falk. She had come to Walker & Walker as a secretary for James T. who was now retired, and she simply ran the office for the Walkers. She had -- although she was, I'm sure in her 60's -- she had not blatantly blonde, but obviously not natural blonde hair, wore pince-nez.

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Q: What were those?

A: Little glasses that had a hinge so that they clipped onto your nose without earpieces, so on and so forth. She was also one of her peculiarities -- this, of course, was in the day before stick-on notes, but when a message came in for any of the lawyers - any lawyer who was outside of the office - she would write it down on a small piece of paper and pin it to her blouse. So, when you came in, you could know exactly whether you had any calls to return or not. With the exception of Ross, she was probably the best legal practitioner, draftsman, in the office. We would go through the routine of dictating a pleading to her and what you got back was not necessarily what you dictated, but it was probably more correct than the one that you dictated. If she really liked you, she'd stop you and explain why she was making the changes. I think I learned about as much from her as I did from any of my professors at Michigan.

Q: Was the dictation then with pen and pencil?

A: Pen and paper -- legal pad -- dictation pads. This was long before -- I think I may have had when I was ... I faced a problem. I was in the army for five years doing nothing resembling legal work and when I returned, I realized I either had to go back to school or specialize. That was just at the time that the oil industry was taking off in the Tri-State (Southwestern Indiana, Illinois, and Western Kentucky) and I elected to specialize by joining the Farm Bureau Refinery in Mt. Vernon as their -- in their legal staff-- doing primarily title law, but some contract work and so on and so forth, and after about ten years there, I had come to know enough oilmen that I thought I would be able to open my own office, which I did and practiced then about 10 years, and was --well, it was successful in that I think I may have been the only lawyer in Evansville to have a sign on the door of his reception room "By Appointment Only" and enforce it. This was in part because there were people in the oil business I would have preferred not to represent, but, in any event, the other side of this was I was working nights, weekends and everything else trying to keep up with the amount of business that I had. Breaking out of...that the bar would specialize. No one came out of law school equipped to deal with oil law and so teaching somebody to be an assistant would be more trouble than doing it yourself and I solved this problem by joining the staff of a then small oil company, Tamarack Petroleum Company, and became their general counsel until my retirement about ten years ago.

Q: O.K. You never held any public office or government position?

A: No.

Q: Tell me a little bit about some of the unique experiences then in oil and gas -- your oil and gas work.

A: Well that's almost both -- its too much to go into and too -- really irrelevant to the question of the practice of law. We had a sort of an Oil Bar in Evansville.

Q: Tell me who would have been in that Oil Bar.

A: Well, the first was Alan K. Swann who was a very interesting figure. He came here -- he had been an oil attorney I think in Oklahoma and came here with the beginning of the oil boom and was, for a time, the leading lawyer. He later -- his lamp was somewhat extinguished by when he appeared in Time magazine as a mysterious man in black and was later identified as such in some negotiations between oil companies that were under investigation. A.K. was the only man I've ever seen who could dictate to

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three stenographers simultaneously. He'd run through his notes in this. He could then turn and pick up the with second secretary exactly where he'd left off in the letter he was writing and then turn to the third on and proceed with the brief that was based on the other two. It was an amazing performance. He was highly compd. And then the . .

Q: Before we leave A.K. Swann, when did you first meet him?

A: When I went -- well, as an attorney for Farm Bureau ...

Q: At the refinery?

A: Well, at the refinery or -- one of the things that I was encouraged to do at the refinery was to provide legal advice -- free legal advice -- to some of the oil men who were selling their oil to the refinery. There was considerable competition for the ... and the oil. And, just incidentally, at this time no Evansville bank would make a loan based on oil properties or the valuation of and so the Farm Bureau refinery in order to induce people to sell oil to them, would make loans themselves, and one of my principal duties as evolved was both checking their records and doing all of the documentation required to cure it. They were then required not only to sell the oil from the property that was posted as collateral, but from all other properties that they then owned, which so far as I know, Farm Bureau was the only refinery that ever did that, and this was the basis of their steady growth.

Q: Mr. Swann was an attorney in Evansville?

A: He was an attorney in Evansville.

Q: Was he in a firm or did he practice by himself

A: He practiced by himself. In those days, practically everyone practiced by himself.

Q: Do you know how he found his way to Evansville from Oklahoma?

A: When the oil boom started here, he realized that an oil lawyer -- some of his clients in Oklahoma had either moved here or had set up operations here were complaining about the fact that no one in Evansville knew the first thing about oil law and so he came here and ...

Q: Did he retire from the practice of law here in Evansville?

A: More or less, yes. As I say, several of his clients left him and he was by that time ready to retire.

Q: You mentioned that he appeared in Time magazine.

A: Life.

Q: Life magazine. Do you recall when he would have appeared in Life magazine by year?

A: No. It would have been in the -- probably around '55, give or take a couple of years. .

Q: Tell me about that Life magazine article or what you recall about it.

A: I recall very -- the Life article had a picture from the rear of this emissary between two parties who were involved in litigation and it then developed, from this picture, he was somehow identified as

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having been this mystery figure that appeared in a national magazine and he was in a position apparently where he should not have been such an emissary.

Q: Tell me what you mean by that. Is there some scandal around him?

A: Well, yes. I do not remember what the litigation was about, but he was representing one party and he was not supposed to be conveying information from one side to the other. I do not remember the details.

Q: I understand that. That's been quite some time ago. How did all of that come out? Was that then in the newspaper, or was that discussion amongst the bar?

A: Yes. It appeared in the newspaper. When a local, a fairly prominent local attorney was identified as being this mystery figure, there was a good deal of publicity on it and, as I say, this was the point in which he decided to retire. He was not in a firm, but he had employed a younger attorney named Joe VolButt who then succeeded him as the head of the oil bar here.

Q: How do you spell his name?

A: Joe. J-o-e. V-o-l-B-u-t-t.

He hired two lawyers right out of law school as time went on named Wes Bowers and Joe Harrison. So, they came in and were doing, during the first few years, were doing primarily oil law and then left Joe to form their own firm which still remains - Bowers and Harrison. Doran Purdue was practicing in Henderson and moved to Evansville in the late 50's because there was a good deal more going on, on this side in oil on this side of the river and became, of course, a leading member of our bar and is still recognized by the Purdue award and Jim Buthod in the meantime had graduated from law school -- I think he was, for a short time, with Joe VolButt, but then opened his own firm. And then of course I had left Farm Bureau.

Q: So, if I were to list the Oil and Gas Bar in Evansville and the surrounding area during the late 40's and 50's, it would have included Louie Ritz, A.K. Swann, Joe VolButt, Wes Bowers, Joe Harrison, Sr., Doran Purdue and Jim Buthod. Anybody else that comes to mind?

A: Not really. We were the ones that were doing essentially all -- devoting all of our practice to oil and gas. There were other attorneys who were doing -- examining titles and doing other things.

Q: Do you remember any fun stories about -- you've mentioned one about Mr. Swann -- about Joe VolButt -- Bowers, Harrison, Purdue, Buthod or yourself?

A: Not really.

Q: What can you tell me about Joe VolButt?

A: Well, he was a very capable attorney. He suffered from some ill health. He'd been in an accident that left him -- required the use of crutches and so that as time went on, he was practicing less and less and his law clerks -- however you want to term it -- I don't think any of them ever came into partnership with him -- but after Wes and Joe left him, he pretty much closed up shop.

Q: You've talked a little bit about changes in the practice of law, but do you recall any others?

A: Well, yes. There are several areas of this. One is this matter of specialization. So far as I know, this Oil Bar -- the group that we were just mentioning -- was the first group here that held themselves out to be specialists. There were lawyers who were generally considered to be criminal lawyers -- however you want to interpret that -- and some of them were kind of known to be the worst lawyers, but practically all lawyers in Evansville held themselves out as able to do anything in the field of law and there was no real emphasis, in most cases, on any one period. And, so as I say, when I came back from the army and viewed the thing -- I mean law in general was becoming more specialized. They'd become more specialized and I could realize this in the five years that I had been gone and since I was in law school and no one was recognizing it yet. I made the decision that it would be better to specialize, and I've never regretted this. Tort law was emerging but really didn't emerge as a special field until the ban on advertising was raised. In the panel that we had for the Vanderburgh County Historical Society that was emphasized by the panel as being the one-year change, major change, in practice. Another, of course, was the adoption of Federal Rules that we talked about. But, until advertising -- one reason nobody specialized was there was no way you could inform the public that you had specialized. Now, in the case of our oil attorneys, there were several local oil associations to which practically all of the oil operators belonged, and we could address them and otherwise indicate our availability without advertising. It was not until you were able to put something -- put an ad in the telephone book -- I can remember when one of our firms and I don't remember which one unfortunately, it was one of the major firms was rebuked by the Bar Association because they had their name printed in bold letters rather than the customary letters.

Q: And how were they rebuked?

A: The matter was brought up at the Bar Association and they were urged to change it, which they did the next year.

Q: Do you remember when that would have been, approximately?

A: I would guess in the late 60's. I would just guess and that is an estimate. But then, of course, when first of all you were authorized to put a little card in the phone directory and then the telephone company opened this up to half pages and full pages. Then at this point it became possible to inform the public that you specialized and of the course the first field which was so recognized was tort law, because unless you hired a "ambulance chaser" there was really no way that you could inform someone who had a tort claim that you were available or the person who had the claim could find out who was available and who might be competent or claimed to be competent until advertising occurred. Now I'm afraid it's too late to put that genie back in the bottle, but it certainly has not helped the prestige of the profession.

Q: So, it served a purpose, but it has probably hurt some too.

A: It served a purpose and it hurt some too. It has made available and now you can run through the phone book and decide pretty much or have some idea of whom to call.

Q: Would you have ever advertised?

A: As my career progressed, I had no reason to. As I said, when I was working at Farm Bureau, they were telling me what to do. That is, I had no private clients. When I opened my own office, by the end of the first year I had more work than I could keep up with and this kept getting worse and so I didn't want to advertise. I was really discouraging new clients and then, of course, when I became a house attorney and there was no point.

Q: You've mentioned, of course, being away to WWII for approximately five years. Do you have any experience or knowledge of what happened to the practice of law in Evansville during WWII? Or, since you were gone you really don't have ...

A: Not really. I was in India for three years of that five years and did not know a great deal about what was going on.

Q: What part of India were you in?

A: I was with a truck company that was sent to India to operate trucks over a road running from Northeast India -- the point at which the rails came together in Northeast India, a little hamlet called Lido which later gained some prominence because the road that we would operate on ran from Lido, hooked into the Burma road north of the point at which the Japs (Japanese, pardon me) were in control to enable supplies to be - to come from India to the Chinese government in Western China which was in effect pretty well blockaded by the Japanese. Unfortunately, when we got there, we discovered the British had not got around to building the road yet and so we spent the first year and a half, almost two years, building the road and it just was beginning to operate when the war ended.

Q: You've talked about one of the major changes in the practice of law was the advent of advertising. What changes have taken place inside the law office of significance?

A: That was something else I wanted to talk about. We've just touched on the fact that this course was before the days of any sort of dictating machines. When I was at Farm Bureau, I think I may have had one of the very first commercial dictating machines which used not tape, but a very fine wire to record on, and it was simpler because if the wire broke, which it would from time to time, you repaired it by simply tying a knot in the wire, clipping the loose ends and you might miss a syllable but that was all. They had spools that were about the size of your fist that ran from -and you could put almost an hour of dictation on one of those spools that contained several miles of wire.

Q: What kind of wire was it?

A: It was -- it appeared to be stainless steel. It was quite fine, little more than a thread of wire. This was the first machine. This predated any type of tape.

Q: What was - who was the manufacturer?

A: I have no idea. They were around for perhaps two years and they were somewhat unsatisfactory because of the tension problem. The wire frequently would snap and would have to be repaired and when one of them snapped, I said all you had to do was tie it and that was not quite correct because it was like having a fishing line break. You had this terrible tangle and of course you could cut that out and

if you cut that out you might cut out two or three or four words, so you made an attempt to untangle it before you retied it. It was a little frustrating.

Q: When it played back, did you listen to it out loud, or how did you listen?

A: Yes. They had a loudspeaker in the -- let's see it would have been about two feet square, almost two-foot cube and weighed perhaps 50 pounds.

Q: Now, did they use that system for court reporting too, or do you know?

A: I don't know. I'm inclined to doubt it because it would have delayed matters to keep repairing those broken tapes. I used it primarily because I would spend my days checking records in the courthouse and come back to the office and dictate title opinions in the evening so that they could be transcribed the following day.

Q: Any other memorable changes in office equipment or law office operations?

A: Oh yes. The first one that I remember was the electric typewriter. I think I saw my first electric typewriter in 1936 when Sunbeam imported one and a former U of E graduate -- an Evansville College graduate inherited it and was very proudly showing it.

Q: Who was that? Do you remember?

A: Katie Bibber. They were very expensive and at first very temperamental. The major change that it made that before the electric typewriter, it was possible to make only two or at most three copies of a pleading at one time because even the third one was very, very dim. But with an electric typewriter, you could set it to make up to ten copies.

Q: And how would you make copies? I think I know the answer, but ...

A: The answer is, with carbon paper, and if you made a mistake, then you had to erase that mistake - you had to put something behind -- you erased the back sheet first and then put a slip of paper in there so the carbon paper -- the erasure on the next page would not appear on the page behind it and proceed on that up to the first page and then go back and take all these pieces of paper out and then you were ready to correct the mistake, so a mistake was -- it encouraged very accurate typing. Accuracy at the cost of speed. Even the copies that were produced in that fashion were not very satisfactory. You knew exactly where you stood in the legal pecking order by the legibility of your copy. As a junior attorney, you got one that you would probably be using a magnifying glass on trying to figure out what it said.

Q: Other changes in law office operations or equipment that you recall.

A: Well, one that I --two that I used in this interim before the arrival of the Xerox -- first of all, because I had used a mimeograph machine extensively during my army career doing information education and creating maps and showing what was going on in the world, I became an information education officer somewhere in the process of building roads, and I came back familiar with a mimeograph machine that I started doing all my pleadings on mimeograph so I could make however copies were required and oil transactions very frequently involved a number of parties. They were more contractual work than

anything else, so doing it that way worked, except a mimeograph was inherently messy and you always got ink on your hands and frequently your nose. It was messy. And, then I got my first photocopier. The first ones -- the very first ones I don't remember the name of them, but they used a paper similar to the fax paper that is now ...

Q: Thermofax?

A: Thermofax, right. That paper yellowed and became brittle and it faded and that was not very satisfactory and then I got a chemical copier. And that made reasonable copies. The copies were made by first making, in effect, a negative and then running those on a positive. They had to be run through a bath of chemicals which were kind of odorous and also tended to spill. I resolved this by installing my photocopier in a bathtub where I could just turn the faucet on and get rid of the spills and so on and so forth. At this time, I had an office which had once been an apartment in an apartment complex which had been turned into a series of oil offices, so I had a half a dozen clients within yelling range. I also was I think the only lawyer in town that had a piano in his kitchen in his office. In any event, then Xerox arrived, and this was the ultimate because it gave you clean copies, as many copies as you wanted. It was absolute heaven to anybody that had to deal with multiple copies. Then, of course, there came the fax which is rapidly diminishing in usage yielding to e-mail. Before we got into word processing, we had the specialized word processors. The WANG was the one that you very well may remember. Their approach was to provide a button for everything you might have to do and you wound up with a keyboard about twice the size of a normal keyboard and it took some instruction to make sure that you punched the right button and didn't do something that you didn't intend to do and they weren't as capable as personal computers are in correcting mistakes that you made. So, there has been a great deal going on. I really don't understand why so many secretaries are needed in law offices now. It seems to me that every law school should require their students to be able to type as an entrance requirement and then teach word processing and other procedures because it is certainly much more efficient to type it out yourself and correct it as you go than to try to dictate it, correct the mistakes that you've made in dictating, correct the mistakes your secretary has made in transcribing it and doing it over and over again.

Q: Any other changes in law offices, operations or equipment that you can think of.

A: No, not really. Except, of course, I might add to something that I didn't think to finish in this question of specializations that we were discussing. This specialization has now come around because in an office like yours ... This is another way, as time went by, I can distinctly remember the first time I met Art Donovan. He came here as a "labor lawyer" and nobody in Evansville had ever thought of that concept before. And so, he came in. He didn't open an office. He came into a law firm and so established his specialization in an era which was a more efficient way of doing it than our oil bar where one or two lawyers were practicing alone with secretaries and law libraries.

Q: What about public officials? If I went down a list of judges, do you think you would recall those?

A: Really no, because I tell you ... I heard stories about them, but they would be third hand.

Q: Okay. What about in the title work. Tell me some about the title industry. Any County Recorders that you recall, or any Recorder's office stories or any title stories that you remember.

A: Well, I do remember at the Gibson County Recorder's office, when the oil boom started, they, with it came oil field recorders and oil field abstractors, Deister, Ward & Witcher, being the leading one. They came from the southwest.

Q: What were they? Tell me what they were.

A: Well, they prepared abstracts for examination which emphasized, of course, matters relating to oil law. But before then, an abstract was usually a true abstract. That is, a statement of the parties where any changes in description and so on and so forth, that is it was an abstract. But the oil field abstractors came to practice which has now been adopted by, I think, practically everyone. An abstract is no longer an abstract. It is a compilation of records, so you have a whole record, so what used to be a fifteen- or twenty-page abstract was a rather involved one. Now they run in to hundreds of pages.

Q: Tell me what you considered an abstract to be versus now the compilation.

A: An abstract, as I say, gave the date of the transaction, the recording information, the parties and then any special terms. It had the description on the front, unless there was some diversion or change in that description, it was simply referred to the front, then when a new description was in, it followed that description until another description. So, you had up to five or six transactions covered in a single page of the abstract.

Q: So, an abstract was literally a summarization ...

A: A summarization ... it was an abstracting the essential information of the transaction rather than a copy of the entire ...

Q: And the abstractors were not necessarily lawyers. Lawyers would review what the abstractors had prepared.

A: What the abstractors did.

Q: And we eventually - when did we evolve then to this compilation where an "abstract" was just simply a copy of the documents in the Recorder's office?

A: Well, this was the practice that primarily the firm of Deister, Ward & Witcher, which was an Oklahoma abstracting firm which had moved into Texas and then came up here when the oil boom started in the forties. And when the local abstractors realized that they could charge by the page and produce a two hundred page abstract instead of producing by the entry and charge much less for that, they elected to follow the oil field format and so that has become standard. Of course, this was long before...there was never anything like title insurance available in those days. I'm not quite sure when title insurance evolved because I was then no longer doing general work.

Q: What were the title companies that would have been in existence then in the forties who would have adopted this compilation of ...

A: Oh, Sebastian Heinrich here and he was the principle one and ... I can't remember names as well as I used to, and I don't know how I would follow that. In most cases, there was one, an abstractor in Posey County named DeRoos Weber who was allegedly a lawyer but didn't practice much. He was primarily an abstractor, but he ... everybody and everything about titles and he was a walking abstract really. Fascinating character. His office was characterized by a large coal stove and he just had them dump the coal next to the stove so that he could shovel it in, and I don't know why all the paper that was scattered around on the floor didn't burn up in the process. But I started to tell you about the litigation that developed at Princeton because when the oil lawyer, there was such a group of abstracting, that was one of the first hot areas and there were too many abstractors to work in the Recorder's office. They were getting in one another's way and fights, actual fights, were breaking out. So, the Recorder solved this by licensing only two abstract companies to work at any given time. Well, naturally that did not set well, and the office was being kept open until 10:00 every night. That is, it was simply a tremendous demand because wells were being drilled very rapidly. You didn't want to drill a well without knowing whether your lessor had valid title and so you didn't want to pay for the rig and have it sit there while you examine title so this was very much a matter of moment and it was carried to the Indiana Supreme Court and decided that the Recorder had no power to bar anyone from his office. So, they went back to fighting one another again.

Q: Who was the Recorder, do you recall?

A: I don't recall.

Q: Any other fun stories that you remember about abstractors fighting with each other or recorders having issues that they had to deal with?

A: Well, not particularly. One thing that came about as a result of this and, of course, one of the things that happened was that the Recorder's fees - receipts from recording fees - skyrocketed and most, many of the recorders used part of this profit, of course it was not theirs, it was the office's, by having their earlier records transcribed, particularly from 1900 say, on down. Which has benefitted everyone since some of those older records, handwritten records, I'm sure you've seen some of them, were pretty illegible.

Q: Any other things that ... and you think the oil and gas boom helped with that transcription of those handwritten records?

A: Yes. Very definitely.

Q: Okay. What was it like to practice law in the summer? Did it matter in your area?

A: Well, it didn't much matter in our area. Of course, the problem was that the courts were not air conditioned and practically shut down. Now, in my case, I was never in court, so this was not really a problem.

Interview with Louis Ritz
Interviewer: Brian Williams
April 20, 1999

Q: Did the recorder's office shut down?

A: No, they kept going. Because of the demand and it got pretty miserable.

Q: Did you still have to wear your coat and tie in that area or what was the dress code?

A: No, well, you wore it to the office, to the courthouse, but then you took it off. You were not required to wear it in the recorder's office. That was only required in the courtroom.

Q: So, you could take your coat and tie off and you would work in short ... long-sleeves, short sleeves?

A: Mostly long sleeves in those days.

Q: Okay. Now if I went through a list of attorneys, would that help?

A: Really, no.

Q: Okay, you talked about the attorneys ... Mr. Ritz, anything else you would like to add to what you have told me today?

A: Not really. Except that as I think I have indicated; I think the old days are to some extent somewhat maligned because there were reasons for doing things as they were done. We have certainly improved facilities, particularly in the offices and I would much rather be practicing today than to have been practicing as I was under the, particularly doing legal research and producing documentation, I would much rather do that with today's ... but on the whole, I have enjoyed being a lawyer.

Q: Well, thank you. I appreciate your time.

A: Thank you so much.