
Solano County Oral Histories Ready for Legal History Museum

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In January 1986, I, along with Solano County Superior Court Judge Richard M. “Mack” Harris, had the opportunity to interview Solano County Superior Court Judge Ellis R. Randall. At age 81 Judge Randall was nearing retirement having served on the bench since 1966. He had been a member of the California bar since 1934. This interview was to be the first of many oral histories to be collected by us as part of a fledgling effort to document the history of the Solano County legal community.

Judge Randall regaled us for almost two hours with stories of what it was like to practice law in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. He not only told us what the judges of that era were like on the bench but also who they were off the bench. He related their eating and drinking habits and even did impersonations of them. At the conclusion of the interview Judge Randall shared with us the names of others who could assist us with our history project. Our research was up and running.

Unfortunately for our project, although fortunately for me, one month later I was appointed to the bench. My focus then shifted from what had happened in the Solano County courts 50 years earlier to what was on my calendar the next day. To say the project was “put on the back burner” would be an understatement. Very little was done for years.

Fast forward to January 2009. Having retired and now a member of the Assigned Judges Program, I had the opportunity to sit on assignment in the new Placer County Justice Center in Roseville. At the end of a busy day handling a criminal calendar, one of the attorneys who had appeared before me that day asked to approach the bench. He wondered if I might have known his late grandfather who had been a judge in Solano County. Who might that be, I asked. Judge Ellis Randall, he replied. Well, of course I knew him. And I shared with him that I had an audio tape recording of his grandfather’s interview from 23 years earlier. Amazingly, that night I found the tape which I had placed in a file folder decades earlier.

The next day as I drove back to the Placer County court I listened to the tape for the first time since it was recorded. It was both delightful and dismayed. Delightful to hear Judge Randall’s recollections again.



Old Solano County Courthouse

Dismaying in that I had not contacted the others Judge Randall believed could help our project — they were all now deceased.

That experience prompted me to renew my efforts to chronicle and preserve the history of the Solano County legal community. This time however, it was placed on the “front burner” where it remains today.

I have had the opportunity and pleasure over the last year to conduct videotaped interviews

of numerous judges and attorneys whose combined legal experience exceeds 600 years. Among those interviewed were First District Court of Appeal Justice J. Clinton Peterson, Solano County Superior Court Judges William E. Jensen, Dwight C. Ely, Michael L. McInnis, William C. Harrison, F. Paul Dacey and Franklin R. Taft. Also interviewed were numerous attorneys including Lewis F. Brown, the first African-American attorney in Solano County. Each of these interviews revealed events, both serious and humorous, which otherwise would have been lost to history.

In addition to these interviews I have researched, among other topics, the history of judicial elections and significant trials in Solano County primarily through contemporary newspaper accounts and case files.

But what to do with all this information? Solano County has a courthouse built in 1911 which has sat vacant for the last six years since the county offices moved into a new government center. It sits empty to this day. The good news is that it is scheduled to be renovated and returned to court use as one of the statewide renovation projects funded by SB 1407. Coincidentally, next year is the centennial anniversary of the original opening of the courthouse. What better place to house and display the memorabilia and history of the Solano County legal community?

At this point no commitment has been made by the various “stakeholders” on the renovation team as to what space, if any, will be made available for the history project. But I and others continue to lobby, as members of the Old Courthouse Advisory Group, for adequate space to share with the community the rich and sometimes forgotten history of the Solano County legal profession. ★