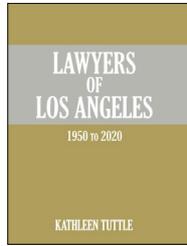


Once Upon a Time in Los Angeles

BY DAN GRUNFELD

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LAWYERS OF LOS ANGELES: 1950–2020
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IT IS HARDLY a surprise that Los Angeles ranks among the world's most influential twenty-first century cities. Love it or hate it, the city's enormity, outsized impact on the global economy, strategic location as a gateway to Asia, and South and Central America, political power, and leadership in the entertainment and other industries have earned Los Angeles a deserved role as an internationally consequential city.

It wasn't always so. Kathleen Tuttle's marvelous *Lawyers of Los Angeles: 1950 to 2020* sheds insight and light on the city's transformation, which was due, in no small measure, to the efforts of visionary lawyers and innovative law firms.

The practice of law in Los Angeles in the 1950s was, in Tuttle's description, a "provincial Pacific paradise."¹ It was a small and intimate world. There were only ten Federal District Court judges (compared to 49 in 2020), 70 judges on the Superior Court (compared to 501 judges in 2020), and 100 lawyers in the District Attorney's Office (compared to over 1,200 at present).² World War II had transformed the city. Military service had brought hundreds of thousands through Southern California during the war, and after their discharge many had decided to make the area their new home. By 1948, Los Angeles had more veterans than any city in America. One UCLA professor noted, "the . . . community draws, as with a magnet, thousands upon thousands each year who beg for a chance to make a living in this nature-favored spot."³ Among those drawn by the magnet, or soon to be attracted to the area, were such future luminaries as Warren Christopher, William French Smith, Shirley and Seth Hufstедler, Carla A. Hills, Constance ("Connie") Rice, Mary Nichols, and Johnnie Cochran. They and others would go on to profoundly impact not only the practice of law and their own city, but the course of the state, the nation, and the world.

Although the weather may have been worthy of a "Pacific paradise," the issues roiling the country made practice far from idyllic for many. Not until 1951, more than 70 years after its founding, did the Los Angeles Bar Association admit the first lawyer of color — Thomas L. Griffith, Jr., former counsel for the local NAACP chapter. During the anti-communist "red scare" of the 1950s, when public officials combed the country for Communist Party members and sympathizers, "Los Angeles was a particular focus, with its avant-garde Hollywood celebrities and the 'liberal leanings and loose morals.'" ⁴ In one of the book's most fascinating accounts, Tuttle describes how Los Angeles lawyers were deeply involved on both sides of the issue. Senate candidate Richard Nixon, a lawyer and a member of the LABA, accused Helen Gahagan Douglas, the Democratic front-runner in the race, of harboring communist sympathies. Nixon's Senate campaign was led by a fellow lawyer and LABA member Murray Chotiner. Conversely, prominent Los Angeles lawyers, such as Ben Margolis, Joseph Ball and Herman Selvin, courageously led campaigns to defend the rights of witnesses who were called before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Tuttle seamlessly chronicles the defining moments of the subsequent decades and the critical role Los Angeles lawyers and legal institutions played, for good or bad, in changing the city from a somewhat provincial entertainment and aerospace-based center to the global powerhouse it is today. For example, in 1960, John F. Kennedy delivered his iconic "New Frontier" speech in Los Angeles because attorney Paul Ziffren had been instrumental in securing the Democratic Convention for the city. In 1970, Judge Alfred Gitelson's order to desegregate the Los Angeles public school system through busing exposed fissures in the legal community and beyond that resonate to this day. The election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, a defining moment in the rise of the modern conservative movement, was ably facilitated by Los Angeles attorney (and future attorney general) William French Smith, who was Reagan's personal lawyer, business advisor, and political confidant. As a *Los Angeles Times* writer noted: "Smith was a key architect of the Reagan Administration's conservative shift on issues affecting domestic policy, including civil rights."⁵

On the other side of the aisle, in 1992, President Bill Clinton appointed Los Angeles attorney and O'Melveny & Myers leader Warren Christopher as the country's 63rd secretary of state. Christopher was instrumental in bringing about the Oslo Middle East peace accord.

1. Kathleen Tuttle, *Los Angeles Lawyers: 1950–2020*, Los Angeles: Angel City Press, 2021, 45.

2. *Id.* 62.

3. *Id.* 45, quoting William Deverell and Tom Sitton, eds., *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, 13; quoting Clarence Dykstra, circa 1930.

4. *Id.* 53, quoting "That's Entertainment," *Los Angeles Lawyer*, July–Aug. 1981, 26.

5. *Id.* 257, quoting "William French Smith, 73, Dies; Reagan Advisor and Atty. Gen.," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 30, 1990.

During his tenure, the Balkans War broke out, and triggered widespread ethnic cleansing by Bosnian Serbs. A peace accord was reached in 1995. According to an *Atlantic* magazine article: “The talks would not have succeeded without Christopher’s tireless patience — and occasional, strategic bursts of anger.”⁶

Los Angeles Lawyers artfully explores the critical role that the city played, starting in the 1970s through the present, in the rise of the national, and then international, behemoth law firms. Once New York investment and commercial banks arrived in Los Angeles, beginning in the 1970s, and as the city eclipsed San Francisco as a gateway to the Pacific rim, leading New York law firms “would descend upon the city in a wave of westward expansion.”⁷ Although the firms’ original impulse was to follow their clients, it was soon clear that L.A.’s wealth and economic activity would yield additional unforeseen opportunities.

As the *Los Angeles Times* noted in 1987, “the leading law firms of the Los Angeles legal community, which enjoyed a clubby, well-ordered serenity for decades, are facing the greatest period of crisis and challenge in their 100-year history.”⁸ Firms began to poach each other’s stars. Billing requirements, especially for associates, skyrocketed. Many law firms grew dramatically in size and revenue while aggressive competition resulted in the demise of some highly regarded Los Angeles law firms.

Other leading Los Angeles firms, such as O’Melveny & Myers, Latham & Watkins, Manatt Phelps & Phillips, and Gibson Dunn & Crutcher, decided not only to protect their own talent and clients from eastern invasion but “to head east [themselves] to invade some of their turf.”⁹ Latham’s New York office grew, in time, to be the law firm’s largest, prompting Tuttle to observe, “it’s debatable which city had more impact on the other’s legal community.”¹⁰

Los Angeles lawyers and judges have also played a disproportionate role in the media’s fascination with so-called “celebrity trials.” These extremely high profile, frequently sensational, trials captivated the national media and public’s attention. All too often, they shaped public perceptions and expectations of what constitutes justice.

Every decade produced at least one L.A.-centric “trial of the century.” In the late 60s, it was the trial of Robert Kennedy’s assassin, Sirhan Sirhan. The 1970–71 trials of Charles Manson and his codefendants for a series of

grisly murders dominated public attention. In the early 1980s, it was the Hillside Strangler murder case, presided over by future Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court Ronald George. The 1990s featured both the Rodney King police misconduct trial and the O. J. Simpson murder and civil trials, which generate passionate debate to this day. The new century brought the “cold case” trial of Kathleen Soliah, a key player in the sensational Patty Hearst kidnap and crime spree of the mid 1970s. Tuttle’s book brings to light fascinating, little-known aspects about each of these legal proceedings. Moreover, the cases cumulatively reveal that the reason so many of these cases became so celebrated was because of L.A.’s increasing role as a global media center, its ongoing racial and wealth-gap tensions and, on occasion, the city’s Hollywood sensibilities.

Los Angeles was also destined to play a critical national role in one of the most positive and widely heralded developments in the practice of law in the past 50 years: the launching and spectacular growth of organized *pro bono* volunteer efforts to assist impoverished and marginalized individuals and communities with their legal needs. At first, the effort to mobilize volunteers in Los Angeles in a coordinated fashion met opposition: “The largest concern was that the new entity would take business away from the established firms, odd in retrospect, given that the indigent likely could not afford the legal fees of those firms.”¹¹ Others felt that while it was appropriate for individuals to undertake volunteer representation, “it was not the function of a bar association . . . to make these kinds of formalized commitments.”¹² However, through the efforts of visionary leaders such as Fred Nicholas and Ira Yellin, and the financial support first of the Beverly Hills Bar Association and, subsequently, of the LACBA, the country’s first *pro bono* law firm was officially established in Los Angeles in 1970. To this day, Public Counsel remains the country’s largest *pro bono* public interest law firm. (Full disclosure — this reviewer is a former president/CEO of Public Counsel and appears in the book.) Public Counsel became the model for countless other legal *pro bono* organizations throughout California, the country, and in due course, internationally. Collectively, over time, these organizations and their volunteers have assisted, without payment, hundreds of thousands of individuals, if not more, with their most pressing legal needs.

Tuttle’s book is crisply written, well organized and meticulously researched. *Lawyers of Los Angeles: 1950 to 2020*, at 320 pages, is greatly enhanced by many photographs, which often help illuminate decades-old events and their leading protagonists. Although the book is co-published by the LACBA and Counsel for

6. *Id.* 255, quoting “Warren Christopher, Mr. Diplomat,” *The Atlantic*, Mar. 19, 2011.

7. *Id.* 156.

8. *Ibid.*, quoting “N.Y. Challenge: Legal Boom Ends Calm at L.A. Firms,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 27, 1987.

9. *Id.* 158; Toni M. Massaro, *F. Daniel Frost and the Rise of the Modern American Law Firm*, Tucson: U. of Arizona Press, 2011, 90.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Id.* 149.

12. *Id.* 149, quoting “A Conversation with Ira Yellin,” *Los Angeles Lawyer*, January 1990, 10.

Justice, Tuttle, to her credit, does not shy away from exploring some of the bar associations' controversial events and decisions.

Seeking to explain and bring to life the legal practice in a city as complex as Los Angeles over a span of 70 years is no easy task. Tuttle's book meets this challenge with alacrity, grace, and insight. After reading it, one emerges understanding not only Los Angeles but the world in which we live with new clarity. ★

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