

Law, Legacy, and Longevity: Celebrating 125 Years of MSP

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By Linton Johnson Special to the Rome News-Tribune

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Anything that survives over time must evolve, and law firms are no different.

Case in point, when the older partners left what is now McRae, Smith, Peek, Harman & Monroe, they may have done so with a slight amount of trepidation.

“They only gave us 10 years but somehow, with luck, we made it,” MSP Managing Partner Scott Smith laughed.

The key to the longevity of the firm, 125 years now, has been flexibility and a familial culture.

“The key to me about longevity has been the culture and the ability of the folks in the firm to get along and work together even if we have differing opinions,” Smith said. “Because of our size, we have been able to find people who are a good fit. We have also been able to accept change on how we work. Times change and clients change and you have to be able to accept that change.”

That family atmosphere is what has kept Virginia Harman at the firm since 1991.

“We have staff as well as attorneys who have spent their entire careers here,” she said. “We are better together, and everyone acknowledges that. It is a culture of love, respect and pride in each other that keeps the focus on what we accomplish together rather than on individual agendas. I can’t imagine any other way to practice law and I am so lucky in that.”

That culture also finds its way to the firm’s clients.

“All of our firm members have developed tremendous professional and personal relationships with our clients, so the clients know we are committed to helping them — because we take our work so personally and seriously,” Michael D. McRae said.

‘Do Not Compromise Your Integrity’

Looking back at some of the firm’s premier legal minds and mentors over the years, many names come to mind: Jimmy Dick Maddox, Charlie Shaw, John Graham, Bill Davidson and Jack Harris.

One of the mentors many remember in particular was Oscar Smith.

“Oscar Smith was a benevolent dictator for the firm when I started as a clerk in 1986,” Jule W. Peek Jr. said. “He was the firm’s premier litigator and was truly revered by his partners, members of the Bar and the judges he appeared before for his integrity, intellect and professionalism. Mr. Smith was always in a suit and tie and never, ever, took his jacket off while in the office.”

Both Harman and Wade Monk shared anecdotes involving Oscar Smith that exemplify the way he conducted himself and influenced those around him.



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“At the time I joined, Oscar Smith had just retired,” Harman recalled. “However, I had the distinct pleasure of working with him and John Graham on some complex litigation during the short time he stayed on of counsel to the firm. I can not imagine two attorneys with more sheer brain power, creativity, or professionalism than those two.”

New associates assigned to work for Oscar Smith quickly learned that he never played fast and loose with legal requirements, no matter how trivial.

“I’d only been working for the firm a few months when he instructed me to track down a witness and have him sign an affidavit to lock down his testimony,” Monk said. “Since documents often had to be notarized in far-flung places, all of the firm’s associates were required to become a notary public.”

After looking around for a while, he found the witness roofing a home near the border with Alabama. Grabbing a ladder, Monk climbed onto the rooftop to administer the oath and get his signature.

Satisfied that he’d done his due diligence, he then returned.

“When I returned to the office and handed the document to Oscar, I apologized for taking so long, explaining that I’d had to drive all the way into Alabama.”

But that wasn’t the end of it.

“‘When did you become an Alabama notary?’ he asked. I didn’t even bother answering and instead just said, ‘I’ll be back as soon as I can.’ I drove to the scene of my crime, where I had to beg the man to come down off the roof and get in my car so we could drive a mile or so back into Georgia and make things legal.”



Wade Monk as a young attorney at what would eventually be MSP.

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A storied history

The late 19th century was a time of awakening for Georgia attorneys as to their professional responsibility as custodians of the law.

The state’s first two law schools opened their doors at the University of Georgia in 1859 and Mercer University in 1873. The Georgia Bar Association was organized in 1884 — with member dues of \$5 per year. The Supreme Court of Georgia transitioned from a system of circuit-riding justices and found a permanent home in the capital city of Atlanta in 1889.

Also in 1899, in Rome, George Edmondson Maddox and Col. William S. McHenry established what is today the oldest law firm in Floyd County and one of the leading firms in this part of the state. Now operating as McRae, Smith, Peek, Harman & Monroe LLP.

For many years, the firm was known as Smith, Shaw, Maddox in honor of longtime partners Oscar M. Smith, Charles C. Shaw and James D. Maddox.

During their years of active practice, those three attorneys are credited with building on the foundation set by the firm's founding lawyers by exhibiting the highest level of professionalism, legal ability and service.

In 1999, its centennial year, the firm added partners Michael D. McRae and Robert T. Monroe to establish its Cedartown office and expand its geographic base into Polk County.

Over the years, attorneys affiliated with the firm have served in various capacities in the judicial, legislative and executive branches of both national and state government, as well as professional leadership capacities — including, most prominently, Griffin B. Bell.

Early in his career (1950), Bell served as president of the Georgia Bar

Association's Younger Lawyers Section and was later appointed as a U.S. District Court judge by President John F. Kennedy. In 1977, Bell was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to serve as U.S. Attorney General.

This group also includes retired Supreme Court of Georgia Chief Justice Norman S. Fletcher; retired Rome Judicial Circuit Chief Superior Court Judge Walter J. Matthews; former State Board of Bar Examiners members Oscar M. Smith and John M. Graham III; former Emory University Law School Dean L. Ray Patterson; former University System of Georgia Board of Regents member James D. Maddox; and former State Bar of Georgia Disciplinary Board Review and Investigative Panels member Virginia Barrow Harman. Currently, two of the firm's partners, Michael D. McRae and Christopher R. Jackson, serve on the Board of Governors of the State Bar.

To celebrate the firm's 125th anniversary, MSP is establishing in partnership with the Community Foundation of Greater Rome two college scholarships to be awarded to students from Floyd and Polk counties.



Smith, Shaw, Maddox attorneys pose for a photo in 1994.

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