

70 years in practice: Mobile's Denniston honored for lengthy career

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By **Press-Register Correspondent**



Robert P. Denniston is shown in his office at the law firm of Wright, Green, P.C. (Maurice Gandy/Press-Register Correspondent)

MOBILE, Alabama — Robert P. Denniston of Mobile was honored in Point Clear on July 16 at the State Bar Association of Alabama annual meeting with an award for which only he is qualified: longest-practicing attorney in Alabama, with a 70-year career (interrupted by 6½ years of military duty), beginning in 1941.

And he is still in practice.

“For the more than 30 years I have known him, Robert Denniston has been the epitome of professionalism in the dedicated service he has rendered to his clients, community and the legal profession. He is as skilled as any lawyer in Alabama, but also one of the

most humble men I have ever met,” said Keith B. Norman of Montgomery, executive director of the State Bar Association.

Denniston is one of two people (the other being former Alabama Gov. Albert Brewer) who has twice received the Award of Merit, Alabama Bar Association’s highest recognition, Norman said.

As an 82-year resident of Mobile, Denniston jokes that he was born even farther south: in La Paz, Bolivia, where his father, Harold Siebert “H.S.” Denniston, a native of Brooklyn, N.Y., was a successful businessman and banker.

After his wife’s untimely death in that country, the father and five children moved to Long Island, where the widower met and married Florence Foster of New York.

The Mobile connection was made when the father met Frank Boykin, "a rising business tycoon" (and later congressman from Alabama). Following a visit to Mobile the father decided to move to the Port City for new business opportunities, according to "Lasting Legacies: H.S. Denniston and The American National Bank & Trust Company of Mobile, Alabama." The book, published in 2000, was commissioned by his lawyer son and authored by USA adjunct history professor Martha Jones Mercer.

In 1929, the elder Denniston headed a group of investors to start a new bank, the American Trust Co., which became the American National Bank and Trust Co. until 1983, when it was merged into AmSouth Bank, according to the book on his life.

In 1928, the family came to Mobile and moved into a newly-purchased antebellum mansion (circa 1833) known as Oakleigh, which they renovated and occupied until 1945. The home is now open to the public as the Oakleigh Historic Museum, operated by the Historic Mobile Preservation Society.

The first child who 8-year-old Robert met in Mobile was Herndon Inge Jr. They became close friends on through Leinkauf Elementary School, Murphy High School and then as attorneys in separate practices in Mobile.

"Bob Denniston is a genuinely fine man, absolutely superior in all respects, and a very outstanding lawyer," praised Inge, now a retired Mobile County circuit court judge.

His path to becoming a lawyer was not easy, Denniston said. His father, a self-made man and wealthy by the standards of the day, attended only two years of high school in Brooklyn before dropping out to work to support his family. Therefore, he saw no need for a college education. Both of Denniston's brothers went to work in the bank immediately after high school.

Denniston was impressed by the lawyers hired by his father to do the bank's legal work, especially Thomas A. Hamilton, a young lawyer whom he later joined in a law practice.

His father agreed to the lawyer idea, but only if his son paid his own way, remembered Denniston, who worked during holidays and summers to gather money to attend the University of Alabama.

Denniston paid his way through college and law school (which could be entered after just two years of pre-law courses at the university) as house manager of his fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon.

He started practice in Mobile in June 1941, immediately after graduation and a week before his 21st birthday, doing title clearing work.

Six months later he was called into the Navy for active duty after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He became an ensign, served briefly ashore as a coding officer, then spent the rest of World War II at sea. He served on a submarine chaser and became a commanding officer of a subchaser at 22.

Later, he served as the anti-submarine officer aboard a destroyer escort, the USS Weber, which made 20 convoy crossings of the Atlantic protecting merchant ships, according to a Press-Register article, "Veteran spent six years at sea in two wars," dated Nov. 9, 2000. After the war in Europe began to wind down, the Weber was sent to the Pacific and ultimately to Okinawa to serve picket duty, intercepting Kamikaze suicide aircraft. "My ship was never hit, but they hit other ships in our immediate area," Denniston said.

Right after the war, his ship was part of a fleet sent to Nagasaki through mine-filled waters to receive American POWs from a Japanese prison camp. Unaware of the radiation danger, the sailors (who came out unharmed) toured where the atomic bomb hit and witnessed "an immensity of destruction beyond comprehension," he recalled.

The young veteran returned in the spring of 1946 and joined his mentor, Thomas Hamilton, in a law firm which became Hamilton and Denniston.

He continued in the Navy Reserve, eventually becoming the commanding officer of a Naval Reserve Battalion in Mobile, according to a 2000 Press-Register story. He also found time for fun and recognition as King of Mobile Mardi Gras in 1948.

Denniston practiced law in Mobile until 1951, when duty called once again for the Korean conflict. He served two years of destroyer duty as executive officer of the USS Barton, first in the Atlantic Ocean and then off Won San Harbor in North Korea, controlling the harbor and denying the North Koreans use of the anchorage.

The destroyer bombarded railroads and highways close to the shore in North Korea and was on one occasion bombarded by shore gun positions in a 90-minute duel. A shell hit the number one stack on the Barton, destroying a 40-millimeter gun emplacement and killing a sailor.

Later, the destroyer joined a carrier task force in the Sea of Japan, assisting soldiers and sailors fighting ashore, before taking a hit from a floating mine which claimed five lives and put the ship out of action. It was repaired and returned to the U.S., according to the 2000 Press-Register story.

Through all of his school and military experiences, Denniston said that he never smoked and very seldom took a drink.

Back in Mobile for good, Denniston took on a variety of cases in a number of venues. He handled cases in real property, estates and guardianships (his professional specialties), criminal cases, and divorce cases in different local courts, around Alabama (about half a dozen before the Alabama Supreme Court) and in Mississippi, he said.

He traveled out west to handle cases in Arizona, New Mexico and a \$450,000 judgment in his client's favor in California. A highlight of his career, he said, was presenting (as part of a legal team) an oral argument before the U.S. Supreme Court in a usury dispute.

While giving blood at the local Red Cross in 1958, he met the head nurse, Juanita Sandlin of Mobile, whom he married in 1961. Their son, Michael Sandlin Denniston, is now a lawyer in Birmingham.

In his spare time, Denniston enjoys doing yard work on about eight acres surrounding his home near the Dog River. He was also an avid long distance runner, participating in the Azalea Trail Run for many years. He still walks a good bit and reads books extensively, having twice read through the entire Encyclopedia Britannica for enjoyment, he said.

Denniston praises Mobile's 300-year history and magnificent trees, calling it "a lovely city to drive in, to walk in, and to visit."

In his award speech on July 16, Denniston encouraged other lawyers, especially those new in the profession, to "give back" and "pay back" with participation in the local and state Bars. Also, he promoted two projects to which he has been devoted: merit selection (rather than election) of appellate judges in Alabama and the Volunteer Lawyers Program, whose members donate legal work for deserving individuals and nonprofit organizations.

Among the many plaques and certificates in his office, he is most proud of the Alabama State Bar award for his service with prepaid legal services, 1977; the Award of Merit for his sponsorship of the merit selection of judges, 1994; and at least three awards from the American Red Cross for serving as president of the local chapter during 65 years of volunteer involvement.

Always ready for a fresh challenge, Denniston is in the process of completing an autobiography called "Lawyer and Sailor," that should be finished with the next month or two, after five years in the making, said the author. He hopes to combine this book with "Lasting Legacies," the story of his father's life and career, to be published as a single volume, entitled "Father and Son (1886-2011--)."

The busy attorney is playing his retirement cards close to the vest. "I am still a practicing attorney," he said. "Within the next two, three or four months I will finish the cases I am working on and will not take any new cases beyond that. I want to retire when the time comes as quietly as humanly possible."

Denniston said he plans to maintain his office at Wright, Green, P.C. on University Boulevard where he is presently located, even after retirement.

At that time he will look after his own business affairs, volunteer work, and service on various boards of directors. And keep in touch with the Alabama State Bar which has been so important throughout his career, concluded Denniston.

This story was written by Maurice Gandy, Press-Register Correspondent.

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