

By Rebecca Patrick

THE BIG 2-0-0

Vincennes Firm a Part of State's History



The firm's current partners carry on the tradition established two centuries ago by founder Samuel Judah (inset), who was also "almost a U.S. senator". Judah was Jewish and there are accounts of that being held against him at the time.

Samuel Judah of New Jersey strode into Vincennes in the spring of 1819 with a letter of introduction saying he could practice law. Fifty-one governors and 22 name changes later, the firm – now branded Kolb Roellgen & Kirchoff LLP – is still thriving.

It also may be among the oldest in the country.

"The American Bar Association did an article not too long ago about three very old law firms out East that are older than we are," begins partner Jeffrey B. Kolb, who joined the practice in 1976 right out of law school.

"Then there's a law firm down in Arkansas called the Rose Law Firm that Hillary Clinton used to be a part of and it was founded in 1820. At one time, it claimed to be America's fourth oldest law firm. So, we might actually be number four but we don't know for sure.

(Still) that is our claim until proven wrong."

As visitors walk in today at Kolb Roellgen & Kirchoff, the storied legacy is on display opposite the front door. A wall of pictures recalls past partners and features a copy of the Judah letter.

There have been approximately two dozen partners in total. But the current crop will have to wait for their place in lore. "A picture doesn't go on the wall until retirement or death," explains Kolb, currently the longest serving partner.

A lone exception to the tradition: An early 1900s partner was disqualified from the honor altogether.

"He came to work early every day. This work habit was admired until he was found opening envelopes before anyone else arrived and removing firm checks for his sole benefit," Kolb declares.

That tidbit is one of many Kolb shares in a book he recently completed, *Lunch with the Partners: Historical Vignettes from a 200-Year-Old Law Firm*.

The two centuries of continuity primarily rely on six partners,

according to Kolb: Judah, James C. Denny, George G. Reily, James Wade Emison, Ewing Rabb Emison and Ewing Rabb Emison Jr. The Emison family was involved for more than 120 years, ending in 2010 with the passing of Emison Jr. Kolb, it seems, was being modest when he spoke to *BizVoice*; he's been with the firm over 40 years himself.

What Kolb is quick to reveal is the pride he and the other employees feel in the organization, evolving from an office with one attorney to a staff of six lawyers, two legal assistants and three other key team members.

From the Samuel Judah law firm to the current incarnation, the office has been what Kolb calls a "county-seat practice. You have to have lawyers who can do almost everything, and we do." With Knox being a border county, they also have attorneys who can practice law in Illinois.

Kolb is certified as a specialist in trust and estate planning in Indiana. In fact, he wrote the test for it. He quips, "As a result, I didn't have to take the test. ... I knew the answers!"

Lasting impression

All the attorneys serve on local boards or represent some kind of charitable organization, Kolb offers. "In this type of practice, you really have to be involved – and we want to be. It's such a small community."

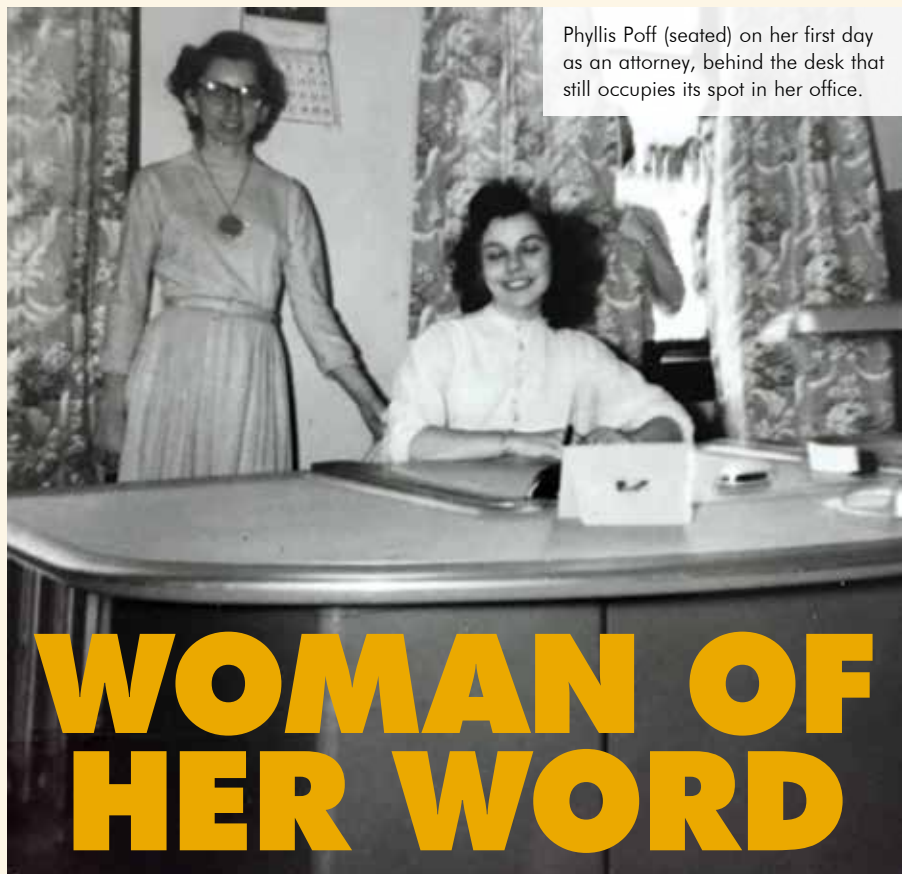
That attitude goes back to the start – when Judah more than did his part to shape Vincennes and beyond.

"He had about the biggest bookcase in town. People would go to his house to read and learn and he would mentor young lawyers," Kolb states. That mentoring tradition lives on. "In fact, our most recent addition interned for us for several years and when he graduated from law school, he came and joined us."

Judah, who later became a state representative and Indiana Speaker of the House in 1840, perhaps is most revered for his contributions to Vincennes University.

"He was very important in saving the school, which was founded by William Henry Harrison in 1801. In 1838, Judah began the 20-year process and litigation that would finally get the money that the state of Indiana had taken from it (once statehood was enacted; sporadic instruction had taken place since). The university is one of our (area's) biggest employers now," Kolb declares.

"(While in the General Assembly), Samuel managed to secure passage of legislation that reconstituted Vincennes University and filled its board of trustees. The case involved two trips to the Indiana Supreme Court and one trip to the United States Supreme Court.



Phyllis Poff (seated) on her first day as an attorney, behind the desk that still occupies its spot in her office.

WOMAN OF HER WORD

Attorney on the Job for 65 Years

By Symone C. Skrzycki

"I didn't do anything special in my career."

That was Phyllis Gratz Poff's initial response when asked to recount her experiences as Indiana's longest-practicing female attorney. But it's her humility, compassion and commitment to clients – and family – that make her story so special.

She was born the day after Christmas in 1930. At age 23, she opened her private practice in downtown Auburn on Main Street. For most of her career, Poff has specialized in family law as a solo practitioner. Although she tried one murder case early in her career, working with an attorney from another firm (a jury ruled in their favor), it was her first and only jury case (in favor of spending time with family).

Poff barely stands 5 feet. But you can't miss her.

When the charismatic 87-year-old welcomes *BizVoice*® to her office, she's decked out in a pale green skirt suit and lime green sandals. A cross necklace is draped about her neck. She's thoughtful and witty.

Poff didn't know it at the time, but son Randy let us in on a secret: He was planning a surprise retirement party in August.

At press time, whether she was ready to stop practicing was unclear. In light of various health issues, she no longer handles domestic relations, instead taking clients by appointment and working on wills.

However, she said this:

"My son thinks, 'Mom, you should retire!' But work helps keep you healthy too. How many people do you see that when they retire, they have heart trouble? They start having all of the other type problems. And the more you keep your mind working, your body parts work better."

THE JOHN MARSHALL LAW SCHOOL

CLASS OF JUNE, 1953—(Afternoon Division)



Poff, the only woman in her law school class, later persevered through cancer and other health issues. One example: Three days after undergoing thyroid surgery, she was back in court.

'I'm a human being'

In high school, Poff joined the debate team. She even appeared on Fort Wayne's WOWO Radio.

"My folks would discuss politics," she remarks. "We (she and her siblings) were encouraged to vote and to be patriotic. My mother came from Austria when she was 16 years of age."

Poff praises her high school teachers.

"My government teacher was excellent. And my history teachers were good.

Unfortunately, I don't think our children get the patronage and the patriotism taught in schools like we were taught."

In 1953, Poff graduated from The John Marshall Law School in Chicago.

Her impressions of the Windy City?

"I hated Chicago!" she confides, noting how much larger it is than her hometown.

Despite her gender (she was the only woman in her class), she says she hasn't experienced discrimination. She asserts that prejudice never cost her any cases or resulted

in inferior treatment.

"I'm a woman. I'm glad I'm a woman, but I'm a human being! It doesn't make any difference whether you're a male or female. You're an individual and you should stand up for what you think is right."

Poff has been at her Cedar Street location in downtown Auburn for more than 45 years. Her personal telephone number (she doesn't count calls as billable hours) is printed on her business cards.

Heart and soul

It wasn't always easy for Randy and his sister Michelle to "share" their mom with her clients.

"She was trying to be helpful for the children and the parents going through the divorce. But it was trying for us because they're calling through dinner or calling late at night," Randy recalls. "She'd be up until midnight or 1 a.m. working on cases and then back up at 5 a.m. to get ready for the next day.

"As we got older, we understood. We became more accepting."

Poff always made time for family.

"There'd be many times where she'd be in the backyard in high heels in a skirt throwing a baseball with me trying to get ready for Little League. And after I'm in bed, she's working on a case. Or when I was little,



Poff's advice to aspiring attorneys:

"Work hard and listen.
Be concerned."

I practically lived here (at the office). I'd walk from our house, 10 to 12 blocks, and stay here after school."

Poff looks at the furniture in front of her.

"This is the original desk my parents got me when I opened my office," she recalls affectionately.

Poff's family pride is evident as she talks about her childhood in nearby Waterloo.

Her father operated a feed and flour business. She and her siblings devoted hours to it. Poff's brother Danny – with whom she shared a special bond – redesigned their father's flour sacks and stationery (on display in her office) as a teen.

"He entered the service after graduating from high school," she notes. "He could have gotten a deferment from WWII because of my father's health, but he said he was going to serve. Unfortunately, he got killed the night before he was leaving for home – accidentally shot by an American soldier."

'Helping is happiness'

After her father closed his mill business, the Poffs owned an apple orchard. Her mom delivered apples to people in need at Christmas, which planted the seeds for community involvement.

"Helping is happiness," she asserts. "It's gratifying when you help someone and you know they appreciate it."

Phyllis met her match in late husband Dick Poff. Her eyes light up when she talks about him.

"When I married Randy's father (in 1962) – you couldn't do it now, but he'd go to the welfare (office) and ask if they had any children with families that may not have (money to celebrate) Christmas," Poff recalls.

He'd give them money for gifts – with instructions to buy a present for their parents before spending the rest on themselves – take them to dinner and see Christmas lights.

In 1964, the Poffs took a fall trip to Indianapolis that changed their lives.

"We stopped at a store. He had to get either a cigar or matches," she comments, grinning. "He came back out and says, 'I want you to come in. I want you to read this.'"

"On their bulletin board, they were asking for franchisees for Hickory Farms (which sells gift baskets and gourmet food items)."

Soon, they owned five franchises (in Fort Wayne, South Bend, Mishawaka, Elkhart and Lafayette). They also operated a warehouse in Auburn, and between 15 and 20 satellite stores during the holidays. It became another career – and provider of jobs for many in need – for a number of years.

Compassion, convictions

If there's one thing that inflames Poff, it's a client's blatant irreverence in court. An example is attire. She's seen people enter the courthouse in pajama bottoms or slippers.

"The disrespect! I have sent women home if they were wearing shorts and they were going to go to court to be before the judge," she emphasizes. "The first impression you have of anybody is what you see. And sometimes, the court looking at your client – if you don't give a good impression that can make a difference on your client or your findings ..."

A smile crosses her face:

"Attorneys are kind of like missionaries. We have to kind of guide our clients and try to teach them. If you want to do the best for your client, they have to be willing to (let you) do that."

That is exactly what Phyllis Poff has been doing in her attorney role for 65 years.



Ewing Rabb Emison Jr. – called Rabb – died in 2010 at the age of 85. He was the last in the Emison line at the law firm. Current partner Jeffrey Kolb says Rabb's "genteel manner and competitive nature made him an excellent trial lawyer and storyteller."

The very existence of Vincennes University depended on its successful outcome."

Kolb believes this history and longevity play into the type of clientele the firm attracts and adds to the trust and confidence factors.

"In Vincennes, many people are third, fourth, sometimes fifth generation. People who come to see me will say, 'My great-grandfather used to come here,' " he shares.

The firm's longest-standing relationship has roots back to the 1880s, when the first Emison represented William Brevoort when he started building levees.

"(Later) the Brevoort Levee Association had its first official meeting in 1918 and our law firm wrote the levee law, and now it's a levee that's over 33 miles long and protects 50,000 acres from flooding," Kolb recounts.

When pondering the successes of the past and present, Kolb points to creativity and a never-quit attitude to solving problems, large and small.

"The firm even got involved in slavery and race issues. All of the members back then were basically Republican (and the Whig Party before that), which meant they were anti-slavery. Later, Ewing Emison was very big in Republican politics himself and played a key role in the Ku Klux Klan issues."

Ewing Emison Sr. was also behind the firm's prominent role in the George Rogers Clark National Historic Park.

"He was a key supporter of Calvin Coolidge. When Coolidge was President, Ewing would actually go visit him and stay in the White House. That's one of the reasons the memorial got built, because of Ewing's influence with Coolidge."

It's hard to imagine what the Vincennes area would look like today without its education anchor and historic memorial that attract so many. Just remember, it all started when a young man headed west with a group of "interesting people" walking (yes walking!) to the new state of Indiana.

RESOURCE: Jeffery B. Kolb, Kolb Roellgen & Kirchoff LLP, at www.emisonlaw.com