

**T**HE LEGAL TROUBLE and disputes that people in Sonoma County get themselves into these days are a little different than they used to be. In 1901, for example, Santa Rosa law enforcement arrested 146 people for drunkenness, five for using vulgar language and cited 22 people for riding bicycles on the sidewalk. Brothels were legal within city limits for a while, and several others did brisk business in Petaluma and El Verano. Three men were hanged from a tree in the Rural Cemetery on Franklin Avenue, lynched by a group of well-organized vigilantes in December 1920. Speakeasies and stills were common during Prohibition. Sensational homicides did happen, but were thankfully few and far between.

One Santa Rosa law firm has seen it all for well over a hundred years: it has evolved along with the kinds of problems clients present to the attorneys to handle. Its connection to the past is evident—an old safe and the original judge’s bench from the original county courthouse are reminders of the strong foundation on which the firm of Geary, Shea, O’Donnell and Grattan was built.

Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves line one wall in a conference room in the firm’s offices in the Empire Building on Courthouse Square. The shelves hold dozens of law books, some nearly a century old, as well as more recent editions. While law books lend an air of hushed dignity and authority to the atmosphere of any law office, these books are not just for decoration.

The older books are yellowed and a bit frayed at the edges of the spines. For over 100 years, attorneys at this firm have pulled these books from their places on the shelves to cite case law and provide inspiration. While the practice of law has changed considerably since a century ago, attorneys refer to old cases to help them construct the arguments they will use to represent their clients today.

“We still use them for reference. The principles of laws established in 1918 are still valid even though so much else has changed,” says firm partner, Pat Grattan. He is part of a venerable Santa Rosa firm with roots dating back to the 1800s. Sonoma County was part of the Wild West back then, and the firm has remained intact ever since.

Geary, Shea, O’Donnell and Grattan is technically the oldest law firm in Sonoma County, started when Thomas J. Geary passed the bar and opened his practice in Petaluma in 1872. Through the turns of two centuries, growth in population and shifts in popular



**In  
the**

# Beginning

*Sonoma County’s oldest law firm*

by Juliette Campeau



**Back left to right: John Geary, Felicia Strankman, John Holdredge, and Ray Fullerton. Front left to right: Steven Olson, Patrick Grattan, William Geary, and Thomas Taylor. (Not pictured: Steven Mitchell, Lee Bartolotta, and Thomas Winter.)**

DUNCAN GARRETT PHOTOGRAPHY

thinking, the Geary family helped shape Santa Rosa socially, politically and legally. Bill Geary is Thomas's grandson, the third of four generations in a family of litigators, district attorneys, superior court judges, a federal legislator and vice presidential nominee. He has been with the family firm since 1958.

He explains that while his grandfather moved his practice to Santa Rosa in 1876, there was a short time when there were no Gearys actually practicing as part of the firm. It's a complicated history that includes elections to district attorney posts and appointments to the bench, along with additions of partners to the practice.

"T.J. was born in Boston in 1854 and came west with his family to settle in San Francisco. He opened his practice initially in Petaluma, I believe, in 1872. He became District Attorney for Sonoma County about five or six years after that and moved to Santa Rosa," Geary says. "He was elected to Congress in 1890 and served two terms until 1894."

People of that era took their politics seriously, personally and enthusiastically. A report in the November 5, 1888 *Daily Humboldt News* described "an incipient riot started yesterday afternoon at the Scandinavian Saloon. Causes, too much politics and beer. No arrests." Thomas J. Geary was colorful and flamboyant, known throughout his district, which included Sonoma, Mendocino and Humboldt counties, for his oratory skills. Newspaper clippings from the time recount his speeches and meetings with large crowds of avid Democratic constituents. He was also known nationally for his commanding presence on the Congressional floor—and for authoring the Geary Bill, a piece of controversial legislation passed in 1892. The bill was also called the Chinese Exclusion Act and was meant to limit immigration. Thomas Geary continued to be active in local and state Democratic party politics until he died in 1929.

"He had nine children. Two sons, Finlaw, who was named for the doctor who delivered him, and Donald, my dad, also became lawyers and practiced with T.J. after his time in Congress," Bill Geary says.

"Donald was appointed superior court judge of Sonoma County at age 31. Finlaw remained an attorney. The firm changed names a few times—it was Geary and Geary; Geary and Tauzer; and Geary, Spridgen and Moskowitz. My dad and I formed this firm as it is now in 1958 when I came back to Santa Rosa three years after law school, after the Korean War. My dad had retired from the bench by then.

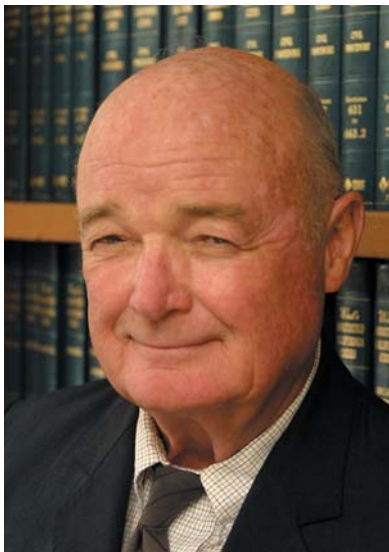
"Back then, there were 70 or 80 lawyers in the county. There's at least ten times that number now."

When Geary and his father began working together, their office was in the old Wells Fargo building where The Cantina now

stands. The offices have taken up the third and fourth floors of the Empire Building since 1964, except for a short time when they had to move out after a fire gutted much of the building in 1975.

These days, 11 attorneys, including seven partners, practice at Geary, Shea, O'Donnell and Grattan. Bill's son, John, is one of the firm's attorneys. The practice of the firm is primarily devoted to civil litigation, business issues and estate litigation, trust and probate law, and real estate matters. They also have an office in Petaluma.

The firm's attorneys have never taken on criminal defense cases although Geary says, until the late 1960s, before the public defenders' office was established, judges appointed lawyers from around the county randomly from a list to represent those



**William Geary of Geary, Shea,  
O'Donnell & Grattan in Santa Rosa**

accused of committing crimes.

Geary says that over the years, along with the county, the firm has grown; the way law is practiced now has changed as well. "We've grown and lost by death three partners. Dick Pawson fell from a hotel room window in 1968—he and his wife were on their way to Europe. Jack Shea joined before my father died in 1986. Mike O'Donnell died just a couple of years ago.

"The practice and practicing law have changed over the years. Initially, everyone was a generalist, at least in a community this size. More specialties have developed by necessity—more and more laws have been passed. Maybe it's just my age, but it seems to me that more cases are filed and litigated today than should be. Disputes have become more formalized.

"The practice of law seems to have become more paper heavy. Again, this might be my age speaking, but case files that used to be an inch thick by the time

they were ready to be tried and we took them to the courthouse are now a foot-and-a-half thick."

Grattan has been with the firm since 1977 and agrees that the legal profession has changed over the years. "When I started out, I was doing everything—corporations, personal injury, bankruptcy, family and tax law—you name it. There's more specialization today, and I think this is true everywhere, except in the smallest towns. It's difficult to be a generalist today. There's been a huge proliferation of cases and statutes. There's just so much more law."

It's not just the written law that has changed, Grattan says. "Clients have become more sophisticated. Perhaps attorney advertising has affected this, but people will now interview several lawyers before hiring one to represent them. As law becomes a profession of specialties, that fact is not lost on clients. Many know from the outset they should look for a specialist.

"As the county grows, we're doing more business law, dealing with more real estate and land use issues, and more cases related to grapes. We handle sales contracts between growers and wineries, and cases dealing with the suitability of land use for one purpose or another. We're sure not seeing as many people being injured by horses and the like these days," Grattan says.

The relationships within the profession have changed, too. "There used to be more personal and professional relationships between attorneys. It's more impersonal simply because of the numbers. You can't know everyone. With the courts, too, it's also grown more impersonal," Geary says.

One thing hasn't changed all that much since Thomas Geary represented clients over a hundred years ago. The attorneys associated with Geary, Shea, O'Donnell and Grattan remain active and involved with local and national Democratic Party politics, particularly Jack Shea and Mike O'Donnell, Grattan says. "There have been many interesting people here in this conference room. Pat Brown, Tip O'Neill and Supreme Court justices have all been at gatherings hosted here."

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>NORTHBAY<br/>biz</b><br>SONOMA • MARIN • NAPA | 3566 Airway Dr.<br>Santa Rosa, CA 95403<br>707-575-8282<br>707-546-7368 |
|  | —REPRINT—<br>from July 2002<br>Page 33-37                               |
| northbaybiz.com                                  |   |