

LOTT THOMAS, STU MAMER, ROGER HAUGHEY

The Deans of Trust, Will and Estate in East Central Illinois

by Keith Picher



Stuart M. Mamer, Roger E. Haughey and Lott H. Thomas have far more in common than their roles as named partners at **Thomas, Mamer & Haughey LLP**, the second largest law firm in Champaign-Urbana.

All studied law at the University of Illinois. All began practicing after a stint in the military. All are over the age of 70. Mamer is 85, Haughey is 78, and Thomas is 72.

“Some Chicago firms do not believe anybody over 65 can continue to practice law,” notes Mamer, “but all three of us have.”

Mamer, Haughey and Thomas have not strayed much from their traditional practices of probate law, real estate and commercial law, even though the firm around them has expanded. At different times, the three shared at least one other role at the firm that indicates how much the times have changed. Thomas, the son of James G. Thomas who founded the firm with Wallace Mulliken, replaced Haughey as the firm’s junior attorney.

“Roger probably was happy to have me come along,” jokes Thomas, “because I took over some of the work that came down the chute and because the newest associate always had to get up on a stepladder and change all the fluorescent lights in the office.”

“I had passed that job on to Roger (when he became the junior associate),” Mamer chimes in. The landlord does that kind of maintenance now, he adds, although one of the firm’s associates today might be tall enough to handle the task without a stepladder.

During the last 60 years, far more meaningful aspects of the firm have also changed to keep pace with the needs of Champaign County and the rest of East Central Illinois. In many ways, the end of World War II spawned the law firm. Mulliken returned from the war in 1946 and decided to go into practice not with his own father, who was on the verge of retiring, but with Lott’s father, James G. Thomas.

“I think he got the best of both worlds,”

recalls Mamer, pointing out that Mulliken could pick up clients from his father and from Thomas. Mulliken did most of the court work, Thomas focused more on estate planning, and both had heavy transactional practices.

Mamer joined the firm as an associate the next year after completing a law school career that was interrupted by time spent as a pilot in the military. Haughey became the next associate, joining in 1953 after completing law school, getting drafted and serving in Ft. Lee, Va. for two years.

During that time, the firm represented some small businesses and took on a fair amount of real estate matters, representing lenders, developers and those involved with subdivision and condominium projects. The elder Thomas also had several University of Illinois faculty clients because he had worked as Assistant Dean of Men while in law school.

Lott Thomas was the next associate to join the firm. After college he served as a military pilot from 1956 to 1959. When he finished law school, he reported to his father’s firm in 1962.

“My family has been in a rut over the years,” Thomas half-jokes as he explains his choice to pursue the law. His maternal great-grandfather had practiced law 20 miles west of the firm in Farmer City just after the Civil War. His maternal grandfather practiced there as well. His father met his mother at the University of Illinois before he became a lawyer. And Lott’s daughter, Melissa A. Thomas, followed in her family’s footsteps when she joined the Illinois bar in 1994 and the firm in 1999.

Mamer and Haughey did not have the same family history in the profession. Although Mamer’s uncle was a lawyer, his father farmed for a living. Mamer decided to pursue law in high school and never changed his mind.

Haughey, on the other hand, was more interested in math and science. He considered a career in engineering, but after finding he could not make certain experiments work “even with a manual to help,” he decided it was not in the cards. He went to the university’s law school one day, talked to a few people, and decided to give it a go.

After Mulliken died in 1967, the firm hired Al Manion, a Chicago attorney, to focus exclusively on trials. He brought business from several

insurance companies.

"That whole area mushroomed from then on," Haughey remembers.

The firm continued to add trial lawyers and the practice grew even more when George S. Miller joined in 1971. Until Miller left a decade later, the firm was known as Thomas, Mamer, Haughey & Miller. Miller went on to serve as a judge for the Sixth Judicial Circuit before returning to the firm in an "of counsel" capacity when he retired in 1999.

Thomas, Mamer and Haughey have all served on several bar, community and charitable organizations during their careers. Haughey was chairman of the Champaign-Urbana Mass Transit District at a time when it lacked a director. Mamer sat on the panel of the Illinois Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission.

Today, the firm's practice is a barometer of East Central Illinois. The estate planning and tax work that was a staple for the firm since its start has diminished considerably because of the rapid increase in the federal estate tax exemption, Mamer says. Statistics show generally that the \$2 million exemption per person (\$4 million per couple) means that only five in 1,000 people who die will be subject to any estate tax. So, Thomas, Mamer & Haughey LLP, like most firms with estates practices, finds itself shifting more of its transactional work toward clients with business transactions.

As the number of University of Illinois graduates has grown in recent years, so has the variety of the firm's clients. Some of the sprouting numbers of high-tech professionals need help organizing their businesses or dealing with basic intellectual property issues.

Thomas, Mamer & Haughey LLP also represents a number of farmers whose businesses are more significant today than they were years ago. Many seek estate planning advice and a few have income tax issues. The farmland in Central Illinois is among the best in the world and land prices have reached unusually high levels in recent years because of the demand for Internal Revenue Code Section 1031 exchanges. These exchanges allow transitional land that is ready for development to be exchanged for farmland so farm owners can defer capital gains taxes and increase their farm acreage.

"We do quite a few of those," says Mamer.

The health care economy in Central Illinois is also strong. The firm has 18 lawyers who concentrate in medical malpractice defense, as well as general civil defense, workers' compensation, employee relations and the transactional practice.

Some of the firm's major clients have dissolved over the years, but that is to be expected. Contractors who have engaged in



considerable development retire from time to time, and no longer require legal counsel. Thomas, Mamer & Haughey LLP has lost banking work, as many law firms have, when mega-banks acquire smaller institutions and move work to the home office. Despite such expected losses, the transactional practice continues to thrive and the firm is planning to hire one or two additional transactional attorneys in the near future.

So, what does the future hold for the second largest firm in Champaign-Urbana?

"I think my idea would be to keep it as it is now," Mamer says, "but that might have something to do with my age."

Thomas adds that the firm plans to brainstorm about the future at a retreat scheduled for early 2007.

Haughey hopes the firm will continue to prosper with new blood by remembering what helped it succeed and by adjusting flexibly to meet client needs. He likens partnership to marriage.

"You have to have trust and confidence in

your partners, and you have to be able to get along." He says he feels very lucky for the congenial working relationship the firm has enjoyed.

If the feedback from clients is any measure, the firm continues to succeed. Morris L. Hecker, who Thomas recently helped with real estate transactions, has known all three attorneys for years.

"I was in the Boy Scouts with Stu Mamer when I was 14," he offers. "They are all three fine men, sterling characters, capable lawyers and outstanding citizens."

Don Whitsitt, a close friend of the firm and a former savings and loan president, has known all three men since 1958, when he and his wife returned to Champaign. At that time, the law firm served as general counsel to his company, though the family also has used the firm for its own needs.

"There is not a firm around that I've ever met with principals who have more integrity and honesty in their dealings," he says. "They're just down-to-earth, great people." ■