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Law firm marks 150 years with book of its history

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CHRIS DORST | Gazette photos

Spilman Thomas & Battle attorneys Brian C. Helmick (from left), Heather Heiskell Jones and Eric W. Iskra talk about the history of their law firm, which marks its 150th year this year.

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — A year after West Virginia celebrated its 150th birthday, the Charleston law firm of Spilman Thomas & Battle is celebrating its own sesquicentennial.

Today, Spilman Thomas & Battle serves local, regional, national and international businesses. The firm has seven offices in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia.

The firm's lawyers are admitted to practice law in more than 20 states to serve the regional and national needs of its clients.

Those clients range from major Fortune 500 companies, with thousands of employees, to entrepreneurial start-up businesses. Over the past 20 years, the firm has grown from 100 employees to 267 today — including 133 lawyers, along with paralegals and other staff members.

The firm just published a book about its long history, "Spilman Thomas & Battle's History of Service: The First 150," which was written by Elizabeth Jill Wilson, a former news reporter and press secretary for Gov. Gaston Caperton.

Wilson spent more than five years digging into historical records, reading microfilms and visiting libraries while working on the book.

"We are a regional firm. We have not grown through major mergers. And every office has close friendships," said Eric W. Iskra, head of Spilman's client relations department.

Benjamin Harrison Smith and Edward Boardman Knight founded the law firm, originally called Smith & Knight, in Charleston in 1864.

During the formation of West Virginia as a state, President Abraham Lincoln had Smith help him resolve issues with land ownership titles in the new state, according to the history.

Knight became a delegate to the West Virginia Constitutional Convention and was the main author of state constitutional provisions governing property taxes and voting rights.

In 1910, Gov. William E. Glasscock chose Spilman lawyer George E. Price to represent West Virginia before the U.S. Supreme Court in a boundary dispute with Maryland. Spilman lawyers were major legal advisers to the shale gas industry when West Virginia led the nation in natural gas production between 1906 and 1917.

"We are humbled to follow in the footsteps of such prominent leaders in the regional legal community. We learned from these men and women to make client goals our top priority," said Michael J. Basile, the firm's managing member. "Drawing upon this wisdom, we have been able to build and maintain long-term,

collaborative relationships with our clients. True client focus, coupled with top-quality lawyers who produce A-plus legal work, has allowed Spilman Thomas & Battle to endure for 150 years.”

Lawyer Heather Heiskell Jones, who heads the firm’s litigation department, said, “Our legal work focuses on our clients, who include corporations, small businesses and individuals. We also charge much lower rates than many firms.”

The firm didn’t hire its first female lawyer until 27 years ago, but Jones said several are in leadership positions now at the firm.

Lawyer Brian C. Helmick, who heads the firm’s corporate department, said his department “covers everything not in the court system, like corporation formation, general contract matters, buying and selling of goods, taxes and real estate transactions — from residential buildings to large companies.”

Iskra said, “Our philosophy is to be a business partner with our clients. We see ourselves as part of their team, not just charging for hours of our time. That is not the way we look at things.”

Spilman is sometimes paid, Iskra added, by flat fees or through ongoing retainer arrangements.

“Everything we do is to help the growth of this area and the region,” Iskra added. “When we help our clients grow, that helps grow the region’s economy.”

The firm’s client relations department often focuses on legal issues like estate planning, wills and corporate transactions.

Jones spoke about other activities. “Each week, a staff member raises money for a charity. Our firm ran a campaign that recently led to a major contribution to CAMC’s Cancer Center.

“We have also become a more diverse firm than we were 20 years ago. We make an active effort to have diversity here and in all of our seven offices,” Jones said.

In the new book, Iskra states, “Because we are in Charleston, West Virginia, we are able to control costs and keep billable rates lower than other regional and national firms. It puts us in a unique position to offer true value to our clients.” The firm now has offices in Charleston; Morgantown; Wheeling; Pittsburgh; Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania; Roanoke, Virginia; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

In his introduction to the book, DuPont Senior Vice President Thomas L. Sager wrote, “When I look to the future, I envision Spilman will continue to grow and flourish. The same values that have fueled and sustained this law firm from the 19th to the 21st Century will certainly serve it well in effectively meeting the challenges of an increasingly competitive, global marketplace.”

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