

Richard S. White

Born New York City, May 5, 1920.

Hamilton College, 1941; Yale Law School, 1947

American College of Trial Lawyers, 1979

It is 2010, and Rich White, admitted to the Washington Bar in 1947, is still a regular commuter on the Bainbridge Island ferry to his practice at Hessel Fetterman in Seattle. According to a young partner in another leading Seattle litigation firm, Rich is putting him through his paces in a current and hard-fought case. That lawyer is learning from a master.

Rich White decided early on not to do things the easy way. His fall, 1941 entry to Yale Law School was poorly timed. By October, 1942 he had decided that law school was not his top priority. He left Yale for the U.S. Navy Japanese Language School at the University of Colorado. Rich had never before been farther west than the left side of Manhattan. His move to Boulder changed his life in a number of important ways.¹

It was at Boulder that Rich found Kathrin “Kaki” Pool, an undergraduate from Chicago who became his wife after the war. In Rich’s words, “I was stricken, almost like Paul’s revelation by the sudden shining light. I declared to myself, ‘That’s the woman I’m going to marry.’ Since I didn’t know her, I first had to meet her.” He did, and he did. An early example of the tenacious Rich White at work.

After completing language school, Rich White was commissioned in the U.S. Marine Corps. By February, 1945 he was with the 28th Marine Regiment in the Battle of Iwo Jima. His job was to translate captured documents, and to interview the few prisoners. Rich may well have wondered at his effort to learn Japanese when one soldier, routed from his cave, emerged with his hands in the air and asked “Parlez vous Francaise?” But when his interpretation of a Japanese map disclosed details of the defenses on Mount Suribachi, and materially aided the conclusion of the battle, he certainly realized his studies had paid off. Rich White was awarded the Bronze Star for his part in the Battle of Iwo Jima.

After the war, Rich returned to Yale, where he was on the editorial board of the Yale Law Journal, and garnered the top moot court prize. Upon graduation he resisted the blandishments of Debevoise Plimpton and Shearman & Sterling and made his way to Seattle, where he joined a small firm including Tom Todd, former governor Art Langlie, and Russell Hokanson.

Among his early legal successes, Rich is proud to point to *Ikeda v. Curtis*, in which he represented the purchaser of a hotel which turned out to be a “house of ill repute.” Legally, the case was known for establishing that an adverse inference could be drawn from the fact that a witness refused to answer a question on the grounds of self-incrimination. For Rich, the case was memorable because the defendant’s lawyer bet him a new hat that he couldn’t prove that the hotel was a whorehouse. Rich lost that bet. The Supreme Court only went so far as to characterize it as “a house of assignation.”

¹ Rich White has written a memoir of his early years, dedicated to the memory of his wife. I have shamelessly borrowed from that memoir.

Rich's Seattle legal career has been long and distinguished. As his practice matured, he became particularly known for his litigation in the areas of construction, utilities and anti-trust. In the hey-day of anti-trust, Rich had cases involving telephones, trucks, cruise lines, beef, milk, bread, beer, liquor, fish, mint oil and peat moss.

With his partner Bill Helsell, Rich spent a lot of time in eastern Washington defending various anti-trust cases. On one memorable deposition trip, he and Bill were invited to the Ephrata home of the plaintiffs' lawyer for dinner, and enjoyed a perhaps-over-convivial evening. On their way back to their Moses Lake motel, a friendly State Patrol officer suggested to Bill that perhaps his sleeping companion should drive the rest of the way. Rich, feeling none too chipper himself, crept along the back roads in the fog until he found himself flagged down by a truck with a large "Follow Me" sign, whose driver informed him that he was on one of the main runways of Larsen Air Force Base. That they spent that night in a motel rather than an Air Force brig speaks volumes about the advocacy skills of our fellows Bill Helsell and Rich White.

Val Tollefson • December, 2010