

From Our Founder

June 2010

This year will mark my fiftieth year of law practice. In 1960, I began as a law clerk for the Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court in Maryland. After a brief interlude of military service, I entered private practice in Washington, D.C. with a five-lawyer firm, Hedrick and Lane. In 1975, Carl Nordberg and I formed Groom and Nordberg, which, following Carl's retirement, was renamed, Groom Law Group.

- In the 1960's, most Washington, D.C. law firms were local, without offices in other cities. D.C. firms were well connected, both on the "Hill" and with administrative agencies. In my early days, I worked on a wide variety of corporate tax problems, ranging from oil exploration and development in Africa to regulatory accounting for taxes of natural gas transmission companies and reserve allowances for financial firms.
- Few law firms, here or elsewhere, had a significant employee benefits practice. Those that did concentrated primarily on plan qualification and participant taxation. Law firms in the 1960's were not dissimilar from firms of the prior century, except that scribes were no longer employed to produce or copy documents. There were still one-to-one lawyer per secretary ratios. Documents were produced on typewriters using seven pages of carbon copies, and each typo was manually corrected seven times. Preparation literally involved cut and paste. Duplication was provided by mimeograph using wet, black ink that seemed to be equally divided between the parchment and the clothes of the operator. Draft documents on urgent client matters were hand carried by messengers to other cities. And the hallmark of a good law firm was an immense library of books.

Many of the ideals that we have at Groom have been present from the beginning. From my student days at Harvard Law School, I believed in Justice Holmes' vision that a person can live greatly in the law. We represent clients to whom we have a duty of loyalty. We have professional obligations to provide service with integrity, competence and imagination. Everyone employed at our firm shares these values and plays an important role in achieving favorable outcomes for our clients.

From Our Founder Continued

Groom is considered the nation's best employee benefits law firm. Some think of employee benefits as a narrow niche practice. We think of it as a robust practice of broad scope. Retirement plans clients account for the bulk of U.S. savings, and benefit plans and issues impact nearly every employee's compensation, retirement income security and health care. By some measures, employee benefits account for nearly 40% of the American economy.

- Groom was started in 1975, shortly after the enactment of ERISA. I was fortunate to be able to represent several clients with strong interests in ERISA during the two-year period prior to September 2, 1974, when President Ford signed it into law. These included Prudential, The Western Conference of Teamsters Pension Fund, and the New York City Teachers Retirement System. As we are now witnessing, most legislation is enacted in order to meet some real or imagined timetable. ERISA was enacted at the end of the summer of 1974 in a rush to avoid the total engagement of the Congress in the then pending Nixon impeachment proceedings.
- There is a continuously evolving circle of law that has no single starting or ending point. A problem in civil society may be resolved initially based on custom in the marketplace or litigation. Legislation, such as ERISA, is enacted because of perceived inequities or adverse economic effects. Legislation spawns regulation and administrative interpretations. Lawyers advise clients as to the limits and intent of these interpretations. When problems become unsolvable or when the solutions do not serve the needs and aspirations of large segments of the nation, the process begins again. Groom is involved in every aspect of this on-going evolution of law. Our work with clients on daily problems of administration and compliance makes us better legislative advocates and litigators, and our advocacy in each forum provides insights for our work in others.

From Our Founder Continued

- Groom's benefits practice group immediately following enactment of ERISA consisted of Lou Mazawey (sometimes called the "founding associate") and me. Lou was just out of law school, but had the same elephantine capacity for analysis and memory that he has to this day. We gradually built our practice, and were joined soon by Steve Saxon, who quickly became a master of Title I and all things ERISA. I met Gary Ford while he was Senate Labor Committee Benefits Counsel on the Multiemployer Pension Plan Amendments Act of 1980. Gary joined us soon after MEPPA was enacted and started our litigation practice representing multiemployer plans in arbitration and the courts. Gradually, many other outstanding lawyers (with apologies, too numerous to mention) joined the firm, and added new capacity to our core benefits practice.

I have particularly enjoyed the diverse and challenging legal issues I have addressed over my professional life. I am proud of being a mentor to many of the lawyers within our firm who have grown from young men and women to professional leaders. Perhaps my most important contribution to our firm has been to help select and recruit lawyers whose talents exceed my own.

We have been particularly blessed assisting a variety of loyal clients who provide important products and services and who improve the quality of our lives by their example, imagination, creativity and integrity. Sometimes our relation is purely professional, but happily many of our clients - or individuals within our clients - also become our friends. We share the hard knocks and – hopefully more often – enjoyable achievements of our work together.

Ted Groom
Founder
Groom Law Group