

Carl Bell: Making the World a Better Place

By Lyndon Vix and Amy Fellows

Ralph Waldo Emerson said that, “A person's life is limited, but serving the people is limitless.” Perhaps as much as any member of the Wichita Bar, Carl Bell has devoted his life to serving people limitlessly. In addition to a distinguished legal career which as spanned have a century, Carl has epitomized the kind of public service that makes all of us proud to be lawyers.

Carl A. Bell, Jr., was born and raised in Wichita. His father owned a grocery store where Carl worked as a clerk while growing up. Early on, he showed a penchant for public life, as he delivered a sermonette at the St. Paul’s Methodist Episcopal Church at the age of 14. He later served as president of the Wichita Junior Statesmen’s Club, a role which allowed him to fill the role of Wichita’s “city-manager-for-a-day” as part of “Boys State Day” in Kansas.

Carl graduated from North High School in 1941 where he was active in debate and served on the student council. After beginning studies at the University of Kansas, Carl joined the army in 1942. He served in the medical corps in Germany, along with a short stint as a chaplain, before receiving his discharge in 1946.

Eight days after being discharged, Carl married Gwendolyn Kaucher of Wichita and resumed his education, obtaining a B.A. degree from the University of Kansas in 1947. He went on to Washburn law school where he graduated magna cum laude in 1949. While at Washburn, Carl was a member of the law review and also worked for the Kansas Supreme Court as a law clerk and assistant librarian.

Upon passing the bar, Carl and Gwen moved back to Wichita where Carl began a private practice with Grey Dresie in the firm of Dresie and Bell. He later was part of the firm of Blake, Jones, Bell and Maben. Carl was one of the new lawyers profiled in the very first issue of the Bar-o-Meter on February 1, 1950. The story recounted his educational and military background and also noted that “he speaks and writes Italian.”

Carl was involved in private practice for 22 years, many of which were in partnership with the late Lew Timmerman in the firm of Timmerman & Bell. Jack Kratzer, an associate with the firm in the sixties, found Carl to be an honest, hard-working and very capable attorney who served as a mentor and role model for Jack. Jack also learned early on that Carl and Lew enjoyed traveling. After working for the firm for two or three months, Jack was informed that he was going to be in charge of the office while the Bells and Timmermans took a previously-planned trip to Europe.

Dora Timmerman, Lew’s wife, also recalls with fondness the annual trips they took with the Bells to Santa Fe. She recalls that Carl and Gwen were anxious to explore the culture—and

particularly the food culture—of the places they visited. Carl’s friend Ed Law has similar recollections of Carl’s epicurean prowess, describing him as having a “very strong constitution.” Ed recalls traveling to Santa Fe with Carl and being brought to tears by “3-alarm chili,” while Carl enjoyed the “6-alarm” variety.

Carl’s private practice was varied. He was appointed legal advisor to the Sedgwick County welfare department and, in what was described as the first case of its kind, successfully represented a man who had been denied a liquor license because he had been convicted of gambling in a private card game over 15 years earlier.

As was the practice of the time, Carl was given numerous criminal appointments, including the case of a 21-year old school teacher from Quincy, Kansas, who was convicted of writing \$40 in bad checks. Carl was quoted in the *Wichita Beacon* as saying that his client “just likes to write checks.”

In 1955, Carl, along with Paul Kitch, represented a 21-year old man whose legs were amputated in a train accident. They obtained a settlement of \$79,111 from the railroads which was described as “the largest settlement ever made in a Kansas court.”

Perhaps also indicative of the times was the fact that Carl served as a *pro tem* probate judge and, along with Grey Dresie, was specially appointed to prosecute an airman accused of shooting and attempting to murder his girlfriend when she tried to break off their relationship. The irony of that appointment was that the victim was Carl and Grey’s own secretary.

In 1953, at the age of 31, Carl made his first foray into politics, running for Wichita School Board. He topped the field of 17 candidates and subsequently served as the Board’s president. During his eight years on the School Board, Carl was an advocate for higher teacher salaries. He also advanced a controversial proposal to eliminate the \$200 salary differential paid to male teachers and instead pay the additional amount to “heads of families” regardless of gender.

In 1957, Carl became a leading member and first president of the Civic Progress Association, later known as Civic Progress, Inc. (CPI). The group was formed as a result of dissension within the Wichita City Commission which had essentially paralyzed local government. City Commission meetings were dubbed the “Tuesday Night Fights,” partly because of the internal discord and partly because at least one argument escalated into a physical confrontation. CPI included a number of prominent Wichitans including Olive Ann Beech, Hugo Wall, Paul Woods, James Sargent and Ed Law. The group favored progressive economic and social policies which it felt were essential to the continued growth and development of the city.

In 1961, with the backing of CPI, Carl ran for City Commission. In announcing his candidacy he said, "In my view, current local problems of recession and threatened industrial cutback should not cause us to act as a city hiding in the valley of despair. Rather, we must conduct ourselves as a city on a hill, a city proud of her past, aware of her great assets and eager to face her challenging future."

Carl and fellow-CPI candidate Gerald F. Byrd were elected to the Commission and Carl was named president of the Commission. He was subsequently elected by his fellow commissioners to serve as mayor for 1962-63. During this time period, the Commission moved forward with a number of important projects which have had a longstanding impact on Wichita. A bond issue was approved that led to the construction of Century II and the nearby Wichita Public Library. The Commission secured the city's long-term water needs by obtaining federal funding for the construction of the Cheney Reservoir, and more than doubled the city's size through annexation. Wichita was also named as an All-American City by Look Magazine and the National Municipal League.

Carl also found himself in the midst of the rapidly growing civil rights movement of the early sixties. These struggles are well-documented in the recently published book, "Dissent in Wichita: The Civil Rights Movement in the Midwest, 1954-72," by Friends University associate professor Gretchen Cassel Eick.¹ Based upon an interview with Carl, Professor Eick describes the beginnings of his involvement as follows:

Early in Bell's mayoral term, a biracial group that included Chester Lewis, Charles McAfee, and several black clergy met with him to discuss their concerns about civil rights. Fair housing was high on their agenda. Bell's maternal grandfather had written Oklahoma's Jim Crow school law. His father, although he owned a grocery store patronized by African Americans, had cautioned him to stay away from the issue of fair housing or never again be elected to office. Given his background, the perspective Carl Bell, Jr., received on issues of race from these meetings with Lewis and the others was disquieting and caused him to rethink his assumptions.

In fact, Carl became an advocate of fair housing in Wichita. On October 27, 1963, a coalition formed to advance the cause of equal housing rights sponsored a march in support of a fair housing ordinance. All five city commissioners were asked to participate. Only Carl and Gwen Bell did so, and Carl addressed the crowd of 5,000 promising that the City Commission would take up the issue of fair housing. Carl would later describe this as a "deeply emotional experience." In fact, according to Carl's oldest son Allen, Carl is more

¹ "Dissent in Wichita" is published by the University of Illinois Press. The text can be viewed online at <http://www.press.uillinois.edu/epub/books/eick/>

proud of his work in support of civil rights than any other aspect of his public service, including the building of Century II.

The fair housing ordinance issue was a volatile and, at times, violent one, which was opposed by various groups including the real estate industry. Carl came under considerable pressure as a result of his support for the ordinance. One of his clients, a savings and loan association, suggested that it might have to look for other counsel if he continued to pursue the issue. Nevertheless, Carl kept his commitment and brought a fair housing ordinance to vote in the City Commission. Prior to the vote on February 11, 1964, Carl spoke in favor of the ordinance, stating:

With all of the arguments presented to me, with all of the reasons I have been given as to why I should or should not vote for the Ordinance, I cannot get around the fact that any way you slice it, this issue presents a basic conflict: The conflict of a moral right with a property right. I wish, actually, that I could vote to support the property right, for I imagine that my own economic self-interest lies in that direction. But, Mr. Mayor, with all of the sincerity that is within me, I cannot submerge the moral right when I am faced with this clear a choice. I would not be true to my Christian commitment . . . and what is most important, I would not be true to myself.

The ordinance did not pass. Nevertheless, Carl remained an advocate for fair housing and equal rights in Wichita even after his tenure on the City Commission ended in 1965. He was chosen to chair the Low Economic Areas Problems (LEAP) Committee, which, from 1967-69, studied and made recommendations which were a key part of the process of desegregating Wichita's schools.

Carl was also instrumental in persuading Bill Lear to bring a Learjet manufacturing facility to Wichita. According to Ed Law, Lear was planning on taking his operations to Switzerland when Carl persuaded him that, "They build watches in Switzerland, but we build airplanes in Wichita." Dora Timmerman recalls that she and Gwen Bell were often charged with entertaining the wives of executives and celebrities who came to Wichita to purchase Learjets.

In 1964, Carl was presented with the opportunity to further his political career when State Senator William C. Farmer announced that he would not seek re-election. Carl was seen as a likely replacement for Farmer but, after giving the matter consideration, concluded that at that stage of his life, his obligation to his family had to take precedence over public service. The same considerations led him to not run for re-election to the City Commission.

In 1971, Carl left private practice to become general counsel to the Law Company, a Wichita construction firm. He served in this role for 16 years, developing expertise in the areas of construction, architecture and arbitration. In 1987, he joined the firm of Fleeson, Gooing, Coulson & Kitch where he continued to practice in these areas and where he remains of counsel. He remained involved in politics, particularly through the campaigns of his close friend, Senator Nancy Kassebaum.

In September of 2001, Carl was presented with the "Pride of the City Award" by Mayor Bob Knight and the Wichita City Council. In addition, the Council renamed Century II's Convention Hall as the "Carl A. Bell, Jr. Convention Hall in Century II," in recognition of Carl's efforts in leading the construction of Century II.

Carl and Gwen have now been married 57 years. They have three children, Carl III (Allen), Thomas and Robert. It would take another page to list all of Carl's accomplishments and the organizations he has served. A few of his awards are the DeMolay Legion of Honor Award from the Masonic Lodge, the Wichita Junior Chamber of Commerce Distinguished Service Award, the Kansas Chamber of Commerce Young Man of the Year Award and the Urban League Award for Outstanding Leadership. Among the civic groups in which he has held leadership roles are the Urban League, Wichita Public Library and Branches, Kansas Chapter of National Conference of Christians and Jews, League of Kansas Municipalities, Community Chest, Community Planning Council, Family Consultation Service, Metropolitan Arts Board and Central Christian Church.

As Ed Law suggests, Carl Bell is the personification of the adage, "Leave the world better than you found it." It is to Wichita's benefit that he did his work here.