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Mists of time reclaim one of Illinois' oldest law firms

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Special to the Law Bulletin

SPRINGFIELD — Lawyers riding to work in horse-drawn buggies isn't the only thing swept away by the passage of time at the Springfield law firm of Chapin & Chapin.

After 118 years in existence, the law firm itself is no more.

The firm — one of the oldest in the state — saw a long history of changes in lifestyle and law practice until the brothers Chapin close their doors for good last week.

The Illinois State Bar Association said Chapin & Chapin is one of just a handful of law firms able to trace its roots back as far as the 1880s. Deciding who is qualified for the distinction is complicated by the fact that many firms went through name changes over the years as new partners were added from one generation to the next.

When founder Edwin Lorenzo Chapin decided to take up law back in the 19th century, he simply studied under the tutelage of two nearby attorneys until he felt ready to call himself a lawyer and apply for his state license. Then, in 1882, he opened a practice that was to span well over a century with the help of his son, Roger, and his two grandsons.

Charles "Chick" Chapin, 79, and John Chapin, 81, decided to call it quits for a number of reasons, not the least of which is a lack of any younger Chapins willing to take over the reins. While none of Charles Chapin's children decided to study law, John Chapin's family includes five lawyers who all practice out of state. "They opted for warmer climates, and I can't blame them," he said.

When a new company recently purchased the downtown Springfield building where their office has been since 1922, raising the rent and cutting back on services like janitorial help, the brothers decided it was time to

move on. John chose retirement while his younger brother has decided to continue practicing for another law firm.

Having started his career in 1950, the younger Chapin said he has to stick around a while longer if he wants to match his grandfather, father and brother in putting in over half a century in the practice of law.

As the Chapins close out this chapter of their family history, they take with them another aspect of law practice that may also be fading into history: the tradition of passing on a family law firm from generation to generation. Judge Harlington Wood Jr. of the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is a lifelong friend of the Chapin family. His father was a judge who was a friend and colleague of Roger Chapin. Wood said multigenerational firms are not as common as they once were. "It doesn't happen much anymore," he said. "It's a unique thing."

Wood said he believes family firms have a special significance because the experience and the lessons learned in one generation are more often passed onto the next, improving the quality of the firm. "There used to be more of that: a solid, reliable firm to go to where you can be treated right, treated fairly," Wood said.

He said that helped Chapin & Chapin build a good reputation in Sangamon County. "When I went into practice I learned right away there was a lot of respect for the Chapin firm. They were reliable and had a strong client following," he said.

One of the bigger changes that has occurred since Chapin & Chapin was established is that title companies now do the work that lawyers once did.

"Up to the 1930s, real estate practice consisted not only of deeds and mortgages but of abstract examination," said Charles Chapin. Having extensive files on area properties was one way his firm was able to build a solid business.

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Where another lawyer might have had to start a title search from the very beginning, Chapin's grandfather and father would simply dip into their file cabinets to search for information on much of the city's real estate. In the years to come the firm remained in general legal practice, taking on all types of cases.

Charles Chapin said another big difference now compared to his grandfather's day is that, because of changes in tax laws over the years, fewer people now use wills. "It's something that people of modest means don't worry about," he said.

Another difference: lawyers of old could be surprised by who the witnesses were when they came into court. The revision of the law in this area is one of the more positive changes, according to John Chapin. He said it was hard to prepare a case without knowing who the witnesses would be, and "you were trying to trick the other guy."

For John Chapin, another notable improvement was the Civil Practice Act, which in the 1940s altered the way pleadings were written: "I think the Practice Act changed everything. In my grandfather's day they had that old form of pleading and the pleadings just went on and on indefinitely. They said strange things in their pleadings which nobody

understood. But the Practice Act changed all that."

The necessity of having malpractice insurance is something John Chapin notes is very different from his grandfather's day. Referring to another former Springfield lawyer, he points out, "I don't think Abraham Lincoln had that expense."

While John Chapin said he planned to become a lawyer since he was very young, he's not so sure he would choose the same career path today.

"Lawyers are getting such a bad reputation. Of course, it's just a small percentage of lawyers who are more concerned about making money than self-respect. But you look at the Yellow Pages — my lord, all these people running ads saying things about themselves that may or may not be true."

But, John Chapin adds, "A lot of them are good guys who just have to compete with the guy next door."

Meanwhile, Charles Chapin has moved on to build on his 50 years in practice, and for him there are a few things still around from old Edwin's day. For one thing, he rides a horse every day, but just for fun. And he's gone to work for Brown, Hay & Stephens, a Springfield firm that's actually older than Chapin & Chapin.

PHOTO BY [T.J. SALSMAN/SJ-R](#)

From left, brothers Charles and John Chapin are closing their family's law firm after 118 years of business.

Case closed

Chapin & Chapin law firm will close its doors after 118 years

By [DOUG POKORSKI](#)
STAFF WRITER

The legal terrain of Sangamon County will lose a landmark later this month when one of the oldest and most distinguished family law firms in Springfield closes its doors for good.

Brothers John and Charles "Chick" Chapin have decided it's time for the law firm of Chapin & Chapin. The founder of Chapin & Chapin was their grandfather, Edward Lorenzo Chapin, who hung out his shingle shortly after obtaining his law license in 1882.

Edward's son Roger joined the firm in 1914, putting twin Chapin names on that shingle. Edward died in 1934, but John joined the firm in 1946 and Chick followed suit in 1950. For the past 118 years, no one outside the family has held a partnership in the firm.

Being in a family firm has its pluses and its minuses, John Chapin said.

"Family firms are not politic," John said. "Most lawyers that form a firm take a Democrat and a Republican and a Socialist and a Communist and put them all together, so they've got all different political ties. When you have a family firm, they all belong to the same church, they all have the same political party, and they're all interested in the same things."

Added Chick: "That may be bad in one respect, but on the other hand I think it enlarges the confidence of your clients that anybody in the firm could take (a case) over from one of the other members on holiday or in the hospital or someplace else."

John, 81, and Chick, 79, once held out hopes that another Chapin might carry on the family name in the legal business in Springfield. While neither of Chick's two daughters nor his son are lawyers, John's family includes five lawyers, counting spouses.

No, it wasn't a lack of Chapin lawyers that kept the firm of Chapin & Chapin from continuing in Springfield. It was the weather in central Illinois.

"John's family provided the lawyers, but they all wanted to be in warm climates," Chick said.

Like their father and grandfather before them, the Chapin brothers pursued a general legal practice, handling all kinds of cases - from real estate to civil litigation to estates and probate matters.

Other types of work have included a specialization in oil and timber issues, thanks to Chick having several clients with holdings in Louisiana, and extensive work by John for the city of Springfield's urban renewal efforts in the 1960s.

"We accomplished so much so quickly that suddenly the city didn't have any urban renewal projects," John said.

About the only kind of law the Chapins did not practice very much was criminal law, an area where they lacked both experience and interest. However, John noted that they were occasionally forced by circumstances and local court practice to take cases on behalf of people who could not afford to hire their own attorneys.

One such case involved a prisoner being held at the county jail. As a disciplinary measure, the sheriff at the time had forbidden prisoners to have cigarettes, and John's client was suffering from a serious case of nicotine withdrawal.

When John visited his client at the jail, the man said, "Just get me out of here and get me back to Stateville. I can't stand this place. They won't let me have my cigarettes. It's the most awful place I've been in my life."

John visited the state's attorney. "I said, 'That man just wants to go back to the penitentiary at Stateville.' He said, 'That can be arranged.'"

Another of John's rare criminal cases involved a prisoner at the state prison at Menard who had fallen under the influence of the "jailhouse lawyer" syndrome and drawn up a petition complaining about all kinds of alleged mistreatment.

"They had drawn up this zany petition. It didn't make any sense at all," John said. "I said 'Look, if you file this, when you come up for probation, people are going to hold it against you. You have a good chance of getting parole when you come up in three months. The best thing for you to do would be to withdraw this petition and forget about it.'

"He said 'OK, I'll take your advice.' So I got out of it, and he got out of it. ... That was the best advice I could possibly give him."

In addition to their legal careers, the Chapin brothers have found time over the years to pursue other interests as well.

For example, Chick is an avid horseman. He currently has four horses - two registered quarter horses and two of "indeterminate parentage." He rides virtually every day except when the winter temperature falls too low.

John has been active in a number of organizations with a historical focus, including the Abraham Lincoln Association, the advisory board to the Lincoln Legals Research project and the Sangamon County Historical Society.

With Chapin & Chapin closing its doors, John, who has had some health problems recently, is looking at the possibility of eventually getting involved in some kind of volunteer work in the community.

Chick, who said he has been "busy enough to be satisfied" at work lately, plans to move three floors down in the Firststar Building, where Chapin & Chapin's offices have been located for decades. He will continue to practice out of the offices of Brown, Hay & Stephens, the only law firm in town older than Chapin & Chapin.

With more than 100 years of combined experience, the Chapin brothers both say they have enjoyed being lawyers. But they also note that the legal profession has changed - in some ways for the worse - in the past half century.

Chick said an increase in unnecessary litigation and a decline of professionalism among lawyers - as indicated by lawyers advertising on TV and billboards - are among the problems. Lack of mutual trust among lawyers also contributes to the profession's problems, which include a loss of public esteem.

John said there is another problem that relates to the others and is significant in itself.

"The worst thing that has happened is that there are so many lawyers now," he said. "There are almost 1,100 lawyers in Sangamon County. ... There were probably 200 when I started

"Instead of going into a courtroom and seeing a friend, now you see four or five lawyers you've never seen before."

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