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## Growth in Fox River valley leads to waves of legal business

by Molly McDonough

Fourth generation lawyer Michael W. Clancy remembers an uneasiness in the legal community when his father opened his practice to three of his JD-toting children.

He is grateful the community quietly withheld judgment.

"Lawyers were holding their breath to see if Dad had turned his law firm into a welfare agency for his children," Clancy said.

As it turned out, at least according to the Clancys, he hadn't.

Not only are the younger Clancys at Clancy, Higgins & Clancy in St. Charles getting referrals from others in the community, but the children are attracting their own loyal customers — old high school friends and acquaintances.

"I saw people in the grocery store I hadn't seen in 25 years — Three weeks later they were walking in the law office," said Timothy G. Clancy, who was with the firm from 1995 until June when he became counsel for STERIS Corp. in Cleveland.

Asked whether he would ever return to the family firm, Timothy Clancy said "I left that door wide open."

The Clancy firm, which primarily represents plaintiffs, now is composed of six lawyers, half of whom are members of the Clancy clan. Partners are Wendell W. Clancy, John B. Higgins and Michael Clancy. Associates are Susan Clancy Boles, John S. Burke and Nancie Gohnick Dorjath.

The law office itself speaks of a long history coupled with a unique approach: The firm is housed in a turn-of-the-century silent movie theater that features 25-foot-tall ficus trees in an atrium.

But the area's long history is combined with new population growth,



Michael Clancy



Wendell W. Clancy

and lawyers are among those descending upon the Fox River Valley.

In the late 1970s, back when Michael Clancy's grandfather, Gates W. Clancy, was practicing at the Second Avenue office, there were only about 20 lawyers in St. Charles listed in Sullivan's Law Directory.

St. Charles, split between Kane and DuPage counties, now boasts more than 200 attorneys.

Twenty years ago, Kane County alone had 438 registered lawyers, according to the Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission. By 1988 the number jumped to 656. And last year an additional 200 were registered, bringing the total to 856, the ARDC reported.

Kane County's more populous neighbor, DuPage County, saw a similar explosion of legal business. In 1978 DuPage County had 1,015 attorneys. The number more than doubled by 1988 to 2,075 and tripled by last year with 3,158 lawyers, according to the ARDC.

While many are newcomers, others have been in the area for many years, and the Clancy brood has been particularly fruitful in producing legal professionals.

The late Chicago attorney John D. Clancy was the first of the Clancys to read the law. Admitted to practice in 1901, he fathered four children, two of whom became lawyers: John D. Clancy Jr. and Gates Clancy, head of the Clancy line in St. Charles.

Gates Clancy's son, Wendell W. Clancy, decided to keep the tradition going, and three of his four children also became lawyers.

He neither encouraged nor discouraged them from his profession. And when they did go to law school at Boston College, Case Western and Valparaiso University, Wendell Clancy told them they couldn't practice with him until they obtained experience elsewhere.

"I'm a trial attorney, and I think you don't do that in law school," Wendell Clancy said.

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“Dad’s philosophy was always, ‘Go out and get your training somewhere else because I don’t want you to think you’re not worthy.’ ” said Susan Clancy Boles.

Boles, who joined Rooks, Pitts & Poust after law school, had no plans to join the family practice. But when it came time to have a family of her own, she and her husband thought Clancy, Higgins & Clancy was an ideal solution.

“I really didn’t expect them all to come back,” Wendell Clancy said. “But when they did, it was a windfall.”

Wendell Clancy’s eldest son, Michael, came home in 1992. He had had enough of Massachusetts, where he worked for a 100-member firm and later established his own practice.

Michael Clancy said he realized he wanted to come home while he was working for himself.

“There really wasn’t anybody to talk with,” he said. “I missed that and I also, perhaps atypically, liked my family.”

And, he said, he liked working with his father, despite earlier head-butting during their first trial together.

“This is essentially like practicing law in my living room,” Michael Clancy said. “I’ve known these people forever.”

Following Michael were Timothy and Susan. The fourth child, Scott Clancy, moved to Chicago from Atlanta after his siblings migrated homeward. When Timothy left the firm this summer, it was partly for family reasons of another kind: His wife’s family is from the Cleveland area.

“They all have brought a different mix to the table and the practice of law,” Wendell Clancy said.

For years, Wendell Clancy’s wife Kay Clancy also played a key role in the operation of the firm, acting as comptroller. She even attended The John Marshall Law School for a while after she delivered her fourth child.

Like others in the Fox River Valley legal community, non-relative John Higgins “didn’t attempt to prejudice” the decision to bring the young Clancys

aboard. In fact, Higgins was happy to have the extra help.

When Michael Clancy hired on, the firm was down from a high of seven to two lawyers. Higgins adopted the perspective that as long as there was enough work, he would be supportive.

“We’ve done pretty well with a minimum amount of friction,” Higgins

siblings returned to the Fox River Valley, they found a changed region.

Michael Clancy remembers missing the school bus in St. Charles and then walking across the cornfields and through the old Moline Malleable Factory lot to get to school.

“That time has completely passed St. Charles by,” Michael Clancy said.

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**Wendell Clancy: “There will always be a niche for smaller firms**

**as long as you do a good job.”**

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said. In fact, each lawyer has his or her own areas of expertise and practice.

Higgins focuses on insurance defense, real estate work and some DUI; plaintiff’s lawyer Michael Clancy concentrates in catastrophic injury, medical malpractice, product liability, civil rights and complex commercial matters.

Wendell Clancy’s litigation practice mostly is composed of plaintiff’s work, but he has worked to establish a client base in defense work, as well. He focuses on personal injury, legal and medical malpractice and corporate law.

Wendell Clancy also recently became the only Kane County member of the American Board of Trial Advocates. He also is past chair of the Illinois Supreme Court Committee on Jury Instructions in Civil Cases.

“I feel very proud to be a part of the Illinois chapter and a representative of Kane County,” Clancy said about his ABOTA membership. “This is a singular honor in a lifetime of practice.”

Susan Clancy Boles, who has three young children at home, is an associate of the Clancy firm, but currently is handling administrative duties.

When her children are school age, Boles said she plans to return to full-time, practicing insurance, estate and environmental law.

When Michael Clancy and his

“It’s almost a bedroom community.”

The transformation of the area’s inhabitants from farm and factory workers to commuters has spurred housing development and new markets in real estate law, business law and some corporate law.

In response to the booming growth, larger Chicago firms are establishing satellite offices in the region, competing with many of the small firms such as Clancy, Higgins & Clancy.

Wendell Clancy said a few of his business clients have been approached by satellite offices, but so far his small family firm has not been hurt by the competition. He has, however, seen other practices, especially those with a single focus, hurt by mammoth, more general practice, firms.

Though he worries about the aggressive posture of the satellites, he is comfortable his firm is in a secure niche with loyal clients. He said he believes there will continue to be a place for firms like his.

“The population is divided into people who like size and people who get lost in large firms,” he said. “There will always be a niche for smaller firms as long as you do a good job.”

Michael Clancy also attributed the Clancy name to the firm’s success.

“Because we’re here and rooted in the community and accountable in that way, people continue to come to us.” \*