

# Law Firm Dates Back To 1877

William Benjamin Wynne hung his shingle to practice law in Wills Point in 1877. It has been here ever since. In the 127 years that have intervened, lawyers practicing under that shingle have held high offices in federal and state government, the State Bar of Texas, as well as a variety of local institutions and causes.

Wynne's first partner was his older brother, Richard M. Wynne, who later distinguished himself as a State Senator. Other early partners included Clarence E. Gilmore, who became chair of the Railroad Commission of Texas and Gordon Russell, who became a United States Congressman and Federal District Judge.

In 1912, Wynne's oldest son, Angus Gilchrist Wynne, joined the firm. Angus was reported to be a ringleader in the infamous cutting of the T&P railroad flag line, requiring President Grover Cleveland to make an impromptu stop in Wills Point.

Angus was the first president of the State Bar of Texas and his obituary in the Texas Bar Journal declared him to be one of the State's most colorful lawyers. In turn, each of Wynne's other three sons, Buck Jim, Toddie Lee founder of Dallas' Presbyterian Hospital and Gordon Russell Wynne joined the practice. During the peak of the East Texas oil boom, Wynne & Wynne had offices in Longview and Athens, in addition to the home office in Wills Point.

W. B. Wynne's career began defending cases prosecuted by Jim Hogg, then District Attorney in the area and later governor of Texas. He ended it defending a Wills Point man charged with a notorious murder in Waco. Almost 50 years later, Wynne's great grandson, Prater Monning spent a year as law clerk to the Texas Supreme Court. While there, justice Price Daniel, himself a former governor of Texas, told Prater that W.B. Wynne had built such a reputation that the Baylor School, where Daniel was then a student, dismissed class to allow its students to watch Wynne practice his craft. In 1976, the Van Zandt County Bi-Centennial Commission recognized Wynne as the County's outstanding male citizen of the past 100 years.

When most long-time residents of the area think of Wynne & Wynne, they more than likely think first of the two Wynne brothers that were here the longest: "Mr. Buck" and "Mr. Gordon" Wynne. Both spent their entire professional careers in Wills Point, from the end of World War I until 1988. Their practice included important cases all across Northeast Texas. The Wynne brothers were so well

known that a fortune teller in Paris, told one of her customers that the customer's prospects were so bleak that only "Win & Win" in Wills Point could help.

The Wynne brothers actively supported a variety of local institutions. Gordon taught a Sunday School class at Russell Memorial Methodist Church for 50 years. Buck was City Attorney for a similar period. For almost the entire tenure of their practice, they maintained what they called the Lord's Drawer that made regular contributions to every church in the area.

Gordon was generally thought of as "Mr. Outside," handling most of the courtroom duties and Buck was "Mr. Inside," digging through the books and writing the briefs that made arguments stand up in court. Gordon's son, Gordon R. Wynne, Jr., joined the firm in 1966 and soon distinguished himself as an elite political consultant. In 1974 and again in 1976, Gordon, Jr. produced the Democratic National Convention. He was later named White House Counsel to President Jimmy Carter. Gordon Wynne, Jr. retired from the firm in 1994.

In 1970, Ben Monning, Buck Wynne's son-in-law, moved to Wills Point from Amarillo, where he had practiced law with his father since 1947. Monning had been President of the Amarillo Bar Association and received an "AV" legal rating from his fellow lawyers at a younger age than any lawyer in Amarillo ever had. Monning continued practicing in Wills Point until his death in 2002. The year before, Monning and his wife, Adele, were honored together as Wills Point's outstanding citizens in recognition, in his case, of the extraordinary free legal services Monning had provided to local charities.

Richard D. Davis, now a Canton lawyer, was with the firm for a short time during the early 1990's. Sharla Neill Fuller practiced family law with the firm from 1994 until 2000, when she moved to Dallas to join one of Texas' pre-eminent family law firms.

Wynne & Wynne has always been blessed with absolutely the finest legal secretaries and legal assistants. Carmen Hubbard, Ruth Gurney, then Ada Tankersley, then Mary Helen Castleberry formed the model that two others, Carolyn Lang Freeman and Patsy Kinney Lochead perfected. Freeman's commitment to excellence was so high that in her first weeks at work, she filled her trashcan each day with drafts of documents that did not meet the standards she set for herself. In time, she be-

came so proficient in handling real estate transactions that area lenders, builders and realtors routinely went directly to her with their transactions. When Gordon Wynne, Jr. retired, Freeman immediately became manager of Elliott & Waldron Title Company in Canton.

Lochead became something of a legend in her own time at area courthouses. One morning in 1975, Buck Wynne awoke and could no longer see well enough to read. Lochead was hired with the specific assignment of becoming his eyes. In little time, she added her brain to his, recalling precedents she had read to him in other contexts and applying them to new cases then being handled. She accompanied Wynne to court, sat beside him at the counsel table, and produced exactly the right precedent or exhibit at exactly the right moment in the trial.

Many stories can and have been told about this family of lawyers who practiced for 127 years, and Lochead figured in one that best illustrated Buck and Gordon Wynne's reputations. In 1985, Buck and Lochead were about to begin a trial seeking to cancel a fraudulent deed. Proof of the fraud required marshalling a large number of documents and other papers. Wynne was [91] years old and blind. Just before trial began, the opposing lawyer made a motion to the court to exclude Lochead from the counsel table, arguing that it is a place reserved for the lawyers and their clients. That was nonsense, and the opposing counsel, himself an excellent trial lawyer, knew it. But the lawyer was right about one thing: if Lochead was there, he would lose his case. And he did.

When Ben Monning died in 2002, his two oldest sons, Bruce and Prater Monning, made the easy decision to keep the then 125 year old office open. They already had an established practice in Dallas, but the tradition and support they and their forebears had received from people in and around Wills Point were too important to bring to an end. To say nothing of the 6,000 volume library, easily one of the most comprehensive in the state for a small firm.

One of the Monning brothers is now in the office two days each week. One can tell when they are here by the American flag is hanging outside. Tammie Harp, a superb legal assistant in the tradition of her predecessors and Shaina Primeaux, a young lawyer who normally handles the Wills Point City Court docket, join them in the Wills Point office.