

UFLC 74
Chesterfield Smith
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Chesterfield Smith is a graduate of the University of Florida College of Law, class of 1948. He practiced law in Bartow for many years and is now affiliated with the firm Holland & Knight in Miami. This interview is part of a series on the history of the UF College of Law.

Chesterfield Smith grew up in DeSoto County, in the small community of Arcadia. His father was involved in politics, and Smith traveled with him to Tallahassee to work as a page in the 1935 legislative session. Smith returned to Tallahassee in the two subsequent sessions of 1937 and 1939.

Smith joined the National Guard in 1940 and was promoted quickly through the ranks. He was sent to Officer Candidate School in the summer of 1942 and was promoted to captain in the summer of 1943, shortly before being shipped off to join the war effort in Europe, first to England and then to France, where he participated in the Battle of the Bulge. He maintains that his experiences in World War II made him into a leader.

Smith returned home in 1945 and entered law school at UF in 1946 under the GI Bill, which he describes as the “greatest single piece of legislation” in American history. During his time at UF, Smith served as law school president of the John Marshall Bar Association and as magistrate of Phi Delta Phi. Upon graduating in 1948, he was hired to work for a law firm back in Arcadia.

Two years later, Smith went to Bartow to join in law practice with Senator Spessard Holland, Bill McRae, and another partner named Bevis, and, within just a few months, became partner in the firm. Smith describes the implementation of new tactics in building the firm, and he also talks briefly about two of the firm’s biggest clients, phosphate and citrus.

Smith served as president of the Florida Bar in 1964 and 1965, where he sponsored the Judicial Qualifications Committee, served as chairman for the Constitutional Revision Commission, helped establish court rules, started Legal Aid, and addressed such issues as professional ethics and unauthorized legal practices. Smith also speaks extensively on the selection and retention of state judges.

Smith details the emergence of Holland & Knight (now an international law firm of roughly 1,100 lawyers), the chronology of the expansion and merger process, the structure of the organization, the internal workings and decision making in the firm, and the advantages and disadvantages of being such a large law firm. He also speaks briefly about the issues of bringing African-Americans and women into the firm. Smith served as managing partner of Holland & Knight until 1983, at which point he was succeeded by Bill McBride, and remains actively involved with the firm still today.

Smith reviews the makeup of the Constitution Revision Commission, which was created in the 1965 legislature. Smith credits John E. Mathews, Tom Barkdall and Richard Pettigrew as important members of the commission. The purpose of the commission was to rewrite the Florida state constitution, which, with its adopted

amendments, had become too lengthy and, in parts, outdated and contradictory. Revisions in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the state are discussed. The 1967 legislature ratified the new constitution, with some omissions, an action which some historians mark as the birth of modern Florida.

Smith talks of his association with the American Bar Association before he was elected president in 1973, the positive influence he derived from former ABA president, Lewis Powell, and, especially, his involvement with the committee on the availability of legal services, listing some of the achievements of that committee. He goes on to describe the election process of an ABA president and his own personal campaign.

The interview ends with a review of the events of Watergate, in particular the Saturday Night Massacre and his involvement as ABA president with the possible impeachment of President Nixon, including his world-wide public statement that no man is above the law and his subsequent appeal to President Ford for Nixon's pardon. He also names various other significant players in Watergate.