

2006

Little Biographies

Mary Whisner

University of Washington School of Law

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/librarians-articles>

 Part of the [Legal Biography Commons](#), and the [Legal Writing and Research Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mary Whisner, *Little Biographies*, 98 LAW LIBR. J. 427 (2006), <https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/librarians-articles/61>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Librarians' Publications at UW Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Librarians' Articles by an authorized administrator of UW Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact cnyberg@uw.edu.

Practicing Reference . . . **Little Biographies***

Mary Whisner**

Although few reference librarians do the painstaking research involved in developing full, nuanced biographies, Ms. Whisner explores how most can and do pull together little biographies all the time.

¶1 On the day editor Frank Houdek told me that this issue of *Law Library Journal* would include a biography theme, I was working on two projects. In the morning, I was helping an emeritus professor annotate a collection of speeches by a federal judge who died a few years ago.¹ In the afternoon, I was expanding a Web-based guide² for a career services talk. After a moment's reflection, I realized that my day's work fit the issue's theme. Although these weren't projects where the reference librarian wrote a full-scale biography or helped a patron locate published biographies, they certainly were common assignments that benefited from biographical information.

¶2 Judge William L. Dwyer gathered a number of his speeches but died before preparing them for publication, so our professor is editing them. In a speech to a bar association meeting or alumni group, it is very natural for a speaker to refer to the association president or someone else present—or well-known in the community at the time—without spelling out who that person is. But years later, when the speech is in print, the context is lost. And so the professor gave me a list of people to identify: former law school deans and bar leaders, the judge's law partners, other judges, political figures, and so on. My task was not to provide any in-depth information or analysis about them—their struggles, political beliefs, or personal attachments, for instance—but rather just to get the correct spelling of their names and some dates. Thus, I found out that George Hugo Boldt (1903–84) served as a judge in the Western District of Washington from 1953 until his death in 1984; Charles Royer was elected mayor of Seattle in 1977 and served until 1989; and Gordon C. Culp was Dwyer's law partner in the firm of Culp, Guterson, Dwyer, and Grader.

* © Mary Whisner, 2006.

** Assistant Librarian for Reference Services, Marian Gould Gallagher Law Library, University of Washington School of Law, Seattle, Washington. Nancy C. Unger, an actual biographer, made helpful comments on a draft of this essay.

1. WILLIAM L. DWYER, *IPSE DIXIT* (Meade Emory ed.) (forthcoming 2006?).

2. Mary Whisner, Getting the Scoop on Jobs and Careers, <http://lib.law.washington.edu/ref/jobs.html> (updated Oct. 18, 2005).

¶3 To find these bits of biographical information, I tapped into a number of databases. One of my favorite Web sites is the Federal Judicial Center's Federal Judges Biographical Database (www.fjc.gov/public/home.nsf/hisj). It allows a researcher to find information about any Article III federal judge from 1789 to present. In addition to retrieving information by a judge's name,³ you can also use the database to generate lists—say, of all the judges in the Western District of Washington or all the African American judges nominated by President Reagan. For Washington State history, I was able to use Historylink: The Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History (www.historylink.org), a not-for-profit Web-based encyclopedia with entries about individuals and events. I also used newspaper databases on LexisNexis and Westlaw, searching for obituaries or profiles that would fill in the information I needed.

¶4 But I couldn't do it all online. For some questions, I went to our compact stacks to locate and thumb through old editions of the *Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory*. A retired or deceased attorney may not be on the firm's current Web site, but his or her basic biographical information is preserved in the pages of *Martindale-Hubbell* from years ago. To find when a few superior court judges served, I ended up going to *Washington Reports* volumes and scanning the lists of judges in the front matter, checking whether an individual who was on the bench in 1961 was still listed in 1964 or 1966.

¶5 Perhaps it is not surprising to need biographical information for a project like this—supporting a professor's work in creating endnotes for a collection of speeches. A less scholarly—but still powerful and important—application is in career development and job hunting. Students (and others) can use biographical information at many stages of their career planning, from the very beginning stage of trying to learn what lawyers do for a living to the later stage of preparing for a big interview. Here are a few tips and resources.

3. Here is a typical listing:

Dwyer, William Lee

Born March 26, 1929, in Olympia, WA

Died February 12, 2002, in Seattle, WA

Federal Judicial Service:

U. S. District Court, Western District of Washington

Nominated by Ronald Reagan on July 28, 1987, to a seat vacated by Donald S. Voorhees; Confirmed by the Senate on November 5, 1987, and received commission on November 6, 1987. Assumed senior status on December 1, 1998. Service terminated on February 12, 2002, due to death.

Education:

University of Washington, B.S., 1951

New York University School of Law, LL.B., 1953

Professional Career:

U.S. Army Lieutenant, J.A.G. Corps, 1953-1956

Law clerk, Supreme Court of Washington, Olympia, Washington, 1957

Private practice, Seattle, Washington, 1957-1987

Race or Ethnicity: White

Gender: Male

¶6 The “Career Counsel” page (www.abanet.org/careercounsel/profile/profession.html) on the Web site of the American Bar Association (ABA) features profiles of attorneys, arranged by practice area, employer (law firm, in-house, government, etc.), location, and firm size. A student who is wondering about different practice settings can browse through the entries, reading about different lawyers, what they do, how they got where they are now, and what they like about their jobs. The attorneys profiled offer advice to lawyers and law students interested in their practice areas, list people who have influenced them, and (what librarian wouldn’t like this?) recommend relevant reading material.⁴ This site could be useful to students who are just developing an idea about what sorts of legal careers there are, as well as to students and lawyers who have specific goals.

¶7 I also recommend a book from the ABA: *Dear Sisters, Dear Daughters: Words of Wisdom from Multicultural Women Attorneys Who’ve Been There and Done That*.⁵ This was a project of the Multicultural Women Attorneys Network, which solicited letters from attorneys who had been in practice ten years or more. The letters offer accounts of the writers’ careers and advice to younger attorneys on building a practice, dealing with office politics, balancing professional and family life, and more. While the book is aimed at women of color, the advice is sound for anyone. (And it wouldn’t hurt for people who are not women of color to learn about these writers’ experiences, good and bad.)

¶8 Conducting informational interviews with practicing attorneys can help students learn about the profession and particular communities, give them ideas for directing their job search and, often, provide them with good leads. But where does a student start? I like to show them ways they can use the Martindale-Hubbell and West’s Legal Directory online databases to find lawyers to contact. Both directories are available on free Web sites,⁶ but the versions on LexisNexis (Martindale-Hubbell) and Westlaw (West’s Legal Directory) provide much more flexible searching. As a way to make the first contact and start the conversation, students can find lawyers who went to their college or law school or have some other link to something the student has done or cares about. They can focus on firms of a certain size or with a particular practice area. For example, using Martindale-Hubbell on LexisNexis:

-
4. For example, Patrick Sean Ginty, a conflicts specialist in his law firm, recommends JAMES TUOHY & ROB WARDEN, *GREYLORD: JUSTICE, CHICAGO STYLE* (1989), because it “chronicles appalling episodes of corruption in the Cook County court system in the 1980s and the subsequent prosecutions and convictions of dozens of judges and lawyers. After reading this book, you realize how important ethics rules are and how awful the judicial system would be without them.” Profile of Patrick Sean Ginty, <http://www.abanet.org/careercounsel/profile/ethics/gintys.html> (last visited Dec. 28, 2005).
 5. *DEAR SISTERS, DEAR DAUGHTERS: WORDS OF WISDOM FROM MULTICULTURAL WOMEN ATTORNEYS WHO’VE BEEN THERE AND DONE THAT* (Karen Clanton ed., 2000).
 6. The Web version of Martindale-Hubbell is available at www.martindale.com; West’s Legal Directory is on Findlaw (<http://lawyers.findlaw.com/lawyer>), although if you enter www.wld.com, you will be redirected to the Findlaw site.

- To look for New York lawyers who went to Reed College and have been in practice less than ten years, choose “NY Listings” and search for **college (reed) and admitted aft (1995)**.
- To find California firms that represent big newspapers, choose “CA Listing” and search for **clients (los angeles times or san francisco chronicle or san francisco examiner or sacramento bee or san jose mercury or san diego union-tribune)**.
- To find lawyers who clerked for a Judge Coughenour, search for **text (clerk! w/5 coughenour)**.
- To look for medium-sized firms in Colorado, choose “CO Listings” and search for **firm size < (60) and firm size > (10)**.

In West’s Legal Directory on Westlaw:

- To find University of Washington law graduates practicing in Hawaii, choose WLD-HI; in the template, enter Law School Information: **“university of washington”**.
- To find Washington attorneys who have done volunteer work with particular organizations, WLD-WA, and enter as a standard search: **“northwest women’s law center” or “american civil liberties union” or aclu**.
- To search for University of Washington law graduates who are government attorneys in Western states, choose WLD-GOV; in the template enter State: **wa or ca id nv az ak** [remember that Westlaw reads a space as “or”] and Law School Information: **“university of washington”**.
- To look for smallish California firms that represent labor unions, choose WLD-CA; in the template, enter Area of Law: **labor**; Firm Size: **11–25**; Representative Clients: **union* or local**. (You’ll get some false drops—“Union Bank” and “American Civil Liberties Union”—but you’ll also get good examples of what you’re looking for.)

¶9 I recently spoke with a student who wanted to talk to graduates who, like her, had gone to law school in their forties. How did they handle the job search? Did they manage to fit in with first-year associates who were in their twenties? Here is a sample Martindale-Hubbell search to find Hastings graduates in their forties who have been in practice less than five years: **law-school (hastings) and admitted aft (2000) and born-date bef (1965)**.

¶10 Legal directories are just a start. Students and other job-hunters can move on to other sources to learn more about the attorneys they’d like to meet. Most firms have Web sites with attorney profiles. Students can also check to see whether the attorneys have been on committees of local bar associations or nonprofit groups or have been in the papers for newsworthy cases or deals. If they do a bit of research before an informational interview or a job interview, then they’ll have more to talk about. They might also impress the lawyer with their initiative and research skills.

¶11 On some level, job-hunting is an autobiographical undertaking. Superficially, we can point to the resumes applicants construct that present their lives to date in a certain way—highlighting, of course, achievements and progress toward professional goals. More deeply, think of students' creative work in imagining their autobiographies in forty years, as they choose their first few career steps now. One reason for students to look at profiles of lawyers—and to talk to them about their work—is to imagine whether the paths of such people might work for them. What would it be like to work in a big firm and then move to a corporate counsel's office? What about small firms? Government agencies? What will the work be like? What would each day bring? Would there be excitement, pressure, tedium, predictability, security, chaos? How will the work fit with the family the student hopes for? What about time to travel? Does the work relate to what the applicant really wants to accomplish? Making career plans is like sketching an outline of what one hopes one's autobiography will be.⁷

¶12 Our libraries include grand biographies like the mammoth one of *Learned Hand* by Gerald Gunther,⁸ and those are wonderful to have. But we often only need just enough for some small purpose—the date a particular judge was appointed or the names of a couple of attorneys a student can talk to about law firms in Denver. In this essay, I've focused on these "little" biographies, giving examples and highlighting some sources from two different projects—a scholarly collection of speeches and job-hunting. Reference librarians are often asked for this sort of information in other contexts as well—for example, when the dean needs to introduce a speaker, a lawyer prepares to meet a new client, or a litigator seeks information about opposing counsel or a presiding judge. Few of us do the painstaking research involved in creating full, nuanced biographies, but most of us can and do pull together little biographies all the time.

7. See PO BRONSON, *WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH MY LIFE? THE TRUE STORY OF PEOPLE WHO ANSWERED THE ULTIMATE QUESTION* (2003) (profiling dozens of people who wrestled with decisions about what work would bring meaning and satisfaction to their lives).

8. GERALD GUNTHER, *LEARNED HAND: THE MAN AND THE JUDGE* (1994).

