

LEONARD JOSEPH DIFANI

RCBA PRESIDENT 1934

In this magazine's continuing effort to profile the past presidents of the Riverside County Bar Association, this month features Leonard Joseph Difani, who, besides being the RCBA president in 1934, was a colorful two-time California State Senator.

Difani was born in Riverside on August 19, 1894 to Andrew James Difani and Alice Difani (Robinson). He had an older brother Leo Andrew and a younger sister Corrine Beatrice.

He grew up in Riverside and attended Riverside Poly High School where he played on the school's football team. In an article dated June 8, 1912 in the *Riverside Enterprise*, it was reported that he was also named by the Riverside Poly Student Board as a candidate for "yell leader".

After graduating from high school, Difani attended the University of Southern California. During the time that he was there, it was noted in the Riverside Daily Press on November 29, 1916 that he had traveled to Eugene, OR to attend the National Convention of Sigma Chi as the delegate from the USC chapter.

While he was subsequently attending USC School of Law, Difani decided to enlist in the United States Navy. In an article dated October 22, 1918 in the Riverside Daily Press, it was reported that he had completed his officer's training in the U.S. Naval Reserve at Mare Island and had won a coveted commission of ensign. He was waiting to receive his orders. In a subsequent story, it was reported that he had been assigned to the USS Brutus. It was further reported on December 12, 1918 in the Riverside Daily Press that he had been stationed in Seattle for the past month and that he was returning home so that he could complete his legal studies. He had been in the US Navy for one year and seven months.

Upon completing law school, it was reported in the Los Angeles Herald on June 24, 1919 that the District Court of Appeals had admitted, among others, Difani to the practice of law. He began his legal career with Carnahan & Clark in Los Angeles. After a short time with this law firm, he returned to Riverside to work as a junior partner at his father's law firm A. Difani & Sons.

The year of 1919 was also an eventful one for him because, on December 24, he married Ruth Elizabeth Stephens who was from Iowa. They may have met while he was stationed in Seattle since she had attended the University of Washington. In an article dated December 26, 1919 in the *Riverside Enterprise*, it was reported that the couple were married in the Music Room of the Mission Inn in Riverside. It was also noted that they left for a honeymoon to Santa Barbara and San Diego and that they would then make their home at 326 W. Seventh Street in Riverside. Over time, the couple would have four children: Eleanor, Edward, Ewing and William.

Once he was admitted to the practice of law, some of Difani's cases were reported in the local press. The *Riverside Enterprise* reported on July 16, 1922 that he was appointed by the court to defend Charles Davis of Corona who was charged with using a fictitious check. That same year, an article dated October 4 in the *Riverside Enterprise* reported that he was defending John Wesley Watkins who had been charged with having entered the home of Manson Durham with the intent of committing larceny.

He was again mentioned in the news when the *San Bernardino Sun* reported on October 24, 1929 that defendant Waldemar Mattmueller, age 22, had been charged with breaking into a combination lock safe at Riverside City College. It was subsequently reported that Difani was able to obtain a dismissal of the burglary charges against his client due to lack of evidence.

In a case in which the defendant was charged with stealing “a barrel of salad oil” from the Soboba Hot Springs Resort, Difani was noted in the October 5, 1933 edition of the *Beaumont Daily Gazette* as representing suspect Bill Cagle. Trial was set for October 19. In a subsequent article dated October 26, it was reported that Difani had successfully defended Cagle when the jury acquitted him.

A more sensational case was reported in the *San Bernardino Sun* on October 20, 1938 when it was mentioned he was representing “Riverside socialite” Mary Hayes Pattee and her husband Gordon Pattee who was described as a “prominent Riverside citrus grower”. The article states that the Partees had taken a “wild nighttime ride” into San Bernardino and had been charged with reckless driving. Mary Partee was noted to be an experienced horseperson and they evidently had been returning from a rodeo in Victorville. They were charged with recklessly driving through the Cajon Pass near Verdmont. In a subsequent edition of *The Sun*, it was reported that Ms. Pattee had pled guilty and had been sentenced with a fine of \$250 or spending 120 days in jail. Difani reported to the court that his client would pay the fine.

Besides his work as an attorney, Difani would periodically serve the legal community as a Justice of the Peace. Some of the matters which he handled were reported by the statewide media. For example, an article in the August 25, 1925 edition of the *Madera Mercury* reported a controversy about dairymen selling milk from tubercular cows in violation of California law. Difani was described as a Riverside judge who had fined an offender the sum of \$25. In the August 26, 1926 edition of the *Salinas Daily Journal* about a state-wide problem with the illegal killing of deer and selling of the deer meat, it was reported that fines had been ranging from \$25 to \$250. Justice of the Peace Difani was referenced as having issued the heaviest fine of \$250. The February 9, 1927 edition of the *Gustine Standard* noted that Difani had recently issued fines of \$50 each to two violators who were in possession of quail out of season.

When serving as a Justice of the Peace, Difani would occasionally cross paths with Hollywood celebrities. The January 29, 1927 edition of the *Imperial Valley Press* reported that he had performed the wedding ceremony for movie stars Richard Arlen and Jobyna Ralston at the Mission Inn. It was noted that the wedding culminated a romance which had started as “screen sweethearts” during their latest film *Wings*. Difani was again in the news of March 6, 1929 when the *Oakland Tribune* reported that he performed the wedding ceremony for Russian screen stars Nicholas Soussanin and Olga Baclanova (known as the “Russian Tigress”).

Besides his involvement in the legal community, Difani was also involved in many national organizations. He served as the scoutmaster for Local Boy Scout Troop 7 in Riverside. He was a member of the American Legion and he also served at the Exalted Ruler of the local Elks Lodge from 1927-28.

Other activities of his also were reported in the local media. For example, he must of have been a good—or at least lucky—golfer since the *San Bernardino Sun* mentioned in its January 28, 1934 edition that Difani, an 11 handicapper playing on the 178 yard 13th hole at the Victoria Club, “hit a ball onto the green and it trickled in for a hole in one”.

Several days later, his success continued as reported by the *Beaumont Daily Gazette* in its February 1, 1934 edition that Difani has been installed as the president of the Riverside County Bar Association during its banquet at the Mission Inn.

Unfortunately, some of the news which was reported about Difani was not always good. For example, it was reported in the January 1, 1933 edition of the *San Bernardino Sun* that he was “severely injured” during an automobile accident on the Cajon Pass Highway near Verdemont. With Assembly-Elect J. P. Phillips as his passenger, Difani was traveling to Sacramento to attend the opening session of the legislature when his vehicle collided with a vehicle operated by Anton Kaufman of San Bernardino. Difani was described as having been ejected from his vehicle and striking his head against the asphalt (Phillips was uninjured). He was transported to San Bernardino Hospital where he received treatment for a concussion and head laceration. Difani was later discharged from the hospital and then he and Phillips traveled to Sacramento by train.

Difani was again injured in another vehicular collision. The *Santa Ana Journal* reported on June 28, 1935 that he had “momentarily dozed” while driving near Pomona and collided with a heavy truck. He was hospitalized but no other details were provided about this incident.

By 1937, the *Desert Sun* reported in its November 19 edition that Difani had purchased a home in “Desert Acres” in Palm Springs. The article noted that “he has been an attorney of prominence who was active in civic affairs in Riverside”. The story further mentioned that he had opened a law office in Palm Springs and that “the Friday of each week will find Mr. Difani present, cordial, alert and willing to serve his clients”.

As noted above, Difani also served (two terms) as a California State Senator. He was a Republican who represented the 37th senatorial district. Like most modern-day politicians, Difani was involved in some controversial—and sometimes humorous—press coverage.

On the lighter side of his political career, the *Truckee Republican* reported in its February 2, 1933 edition that “things looked pretty gloomy for young senator Leonard Difani when he tried to get his first bill through senate”. He had proposed a resolution that the postmaster general issue a stamp commemorating the anniversary of the planting of the first naval orange tree in California. The measure appeared to be defeated by a unanimous vote but, just before the vote was announced, his colleagues arose, one by one, and changed their respective votes from “nay” to “aye”.

As for the more controversial side of his political career, an article dated February 8, 1933 in the *Napa Valley Register* discussed the current \$1,000 property tax exemption for veterans who had served during war time and who owned a home with a value of less than \$5,000. The article noted that Difani had proposed an amendment that the exemption would only be applicable to veterans who were bonafide residents of California at the time of their enlistment or drafting. His amendment would remove the benefit to veterans who moved to California after the war.

Difani also became involved in a controversial “nuptial problem” while serving as a senator. The October 24, 1934 edition of the *San Bernardino Sun* published an article about potential wedding problems encountered by Ellen Wilson McAdoo who was the 19-year-old granddaughter of former president Woodrow Wilson. She and Rafael Lopez de Ornate, age 38, who was known on the movie screen as Ralph L. Novarro, had filed a Notice of Intention to marry in the clerk’s office of the Riverside County

Court. The article noted that Senator Difani had asked the County Clerk to review the documents. Difani had apparently been retained by an “anonymous person” to look into the matter because Novarro was a native of the Philippines. A recent amendment to California’s mixed marriage laws precluded marriages between Caucasian blood and persons of Filipino or Malay blood. The anonymous person who retained Difani obviously did not want the marriage to proceed.

In another controversial matter, the *Imperial Valley Press* reported on February 26, 1935 that numerous crime-influenced bills were being submitted by California legislators due to “prison overcrowding and a steady increase in crime”. The story noted that a bill submitted by Difani proposed sterilization of mental health inmates or convicts in cases where “offspring would have a tendency to serious physical or mental disease or mental deficiency”.

An article in the *Red Bluff Daily News* dated June 15, 1935 discussed an immigration issue that was as controversial then as it is today. Declaring that California was rapidly becoming a haven for indigents from all over the nation, Difani had sponsored a bill which would have authorized the placing of armed guards along all of California’s borders to refuse admittance into the state by indigents. Other senators opposed the bill on the grounds that “it was un-American to seek to bar persons from California because they are poor”. The proposed bill was eventually defeated by a vote of 22-11.

During his career as a state senator, Difani served on many committees including public health, finance, insurance, judiciary, military affairs, motor vehicles and road & highways.

Difani ultimately passed away in Riverside on October 26, 1987. His wife Ruth died the previous year on April 15, 1986. They are buried next to each other in the Riverside National Cemetery (Section H, Site 839).

Written by Bruce E. Todd.