

RAYMOND EUGENE (GENE) BEST

RCBA President 1925

According to community lore, Raymond Best commenced his law practice in 1892 when he purchased the law library of John G. North, the son of Riverside's founder John W. North.¹ And supposedly, the rest is history.

Raymond was born in Indiana in 1868 to James William Best and Jane Comstock. His father, James Best, was born in Kentucky, married in Tennessee, and farmed in Indiana. By 1860, James was a common school teacher having had two years of a college education. James was an ardent Methodist, purportedly having never touched tobacco or the demonic drink. James' sons, Raymond and Ralph, attended DePauw University. Raymond graduated from DePauw in 1889 and Ralph graduated in 1890.

Raymond's first career was as an elementary school teacher with a salary of \$45 per month. Not satisfied with the income, Raymond sought a career path change and "read the law" for one year. But his time reading was interrupted.

In about 1890, James Best moved his family west to Riverside, California. Raymond described the move being in an "emigrant outfit," a railroad box car filled with all of the family belongings, which included four horses.

In Riverside, Raymond continued his law studies in the office of E. B. Stanton. That effort resulted in Raymond Best being admitted to practice law by order of the California Supreme Court on the morning of April 8, 1891.

Raymond Best's first reported "hanging of his shingle" was in September 1891 in south Oceanside. The community was relatively new; a rail line having been constructed in the early 1880's from Los Angeles to San Diego via Temecula and Fallbrook to the coast. By 1890, Oceanside had a wharf that was being subdivided and growth for the area appeared to be the way of the future. However, Raymond didn't stay long enough to experience it.

Raymond returned to Riverside in late 1891. Shortly thereafter, Raymond, now 24, met and married 20-year-old Jennie D. Curtis, a native of Arkansas. The marriage took place in Los Angeles.

Unlike Raymond's contemporaries in the law at the time, Raymond was not to be found in common publications regarding any particular legal representation. Raymond's initial success

¹ It may be an accurate fact that Raymond purchased the law library as believed, but it seems illogical it occurred in 1892. Most likely Raymond purchased the library, and desk, after John G. North died in 1910. John North was still actively practicing law up to his unexpected untimely death. Moreover, Raymond's profession of choice was running his Title Abstract company up to 1915.

was in the real estate title business.

By May of 1894, Raymond and four others incorporated the Riverside Abstract Company. Abstracting was the precursor to title insurance. In abstracting, an attorney would review a chain of title and provide a legal opinion as to the sufficiency of the title subject of a transaction; is the buyer acquiring title free and clear?²

Over the next decade, Raymond worked to grow his title business, which regularly consisted of a daily trip to the San Bernardino and Riverside County Recorders to review public title records followed by drafting and presenting his findings.

By the turn of the century, Raymond had become involved in the Riverside community. He was respectable enough to be welcomed in public speaking on topics such as “The Foundation of Success” and “Literature” in general.

Raymond became a member of the Riverside Present Day Club, along with fellow attorney’s A.A. Adair, W.A. Purrington, and Miguel Estudillo. The Present Day Club’s principals were: no rules, no by-laws, no preaching nor profanities, the purpose for which being to encourage discourse on important topics of the time, dining in full dress and occasional musical enlightenment. An example of the topic of discourse was the Monroe Doctrine and diverse opinions thereabout. Another example was the February 1913 ratification of the 16th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which allowed the Federal Government to tax individuals; our modern income tax system was born. Raymond, as chair of the Present Day Club, organized the discussion of the new process. In 1922 he became a member of the Riverside Lions Club and remained as such for the rest of his career.

Raymond was also a member of the Knights of Pytheus with legal colleague Miguel Estudillo. The Pythegoran’s were known to have their midnight advancement ceremonies under the full moon atop Mt. Rubidoux.

By 1906, discourse arose in the ownership of the Riverside Abstract Company. Fellow shareholder, W. L. Koethen, holder of 171 shares of stock, sued Raymond, holder of 338 shares, and the Company, demanding an accounting. Raymond had appointed his father, mother-in-law and brother-in-law to the board of directors and with a majority gained approval of a hefty annual salary of \$2,500. Koethen contended Raymond’s services were only worth \$1,500 a year and that in 1902, Raymond misappropriated \$270.02 and again in 1903, an additional \$389.52. How the dispute was resolved is not known.

The Riverside Abstract Company legal dispute did not hurt Raymond’s stature in town. By 1908 Raymond was requested by then Mayor S.C. Evans to join a committee to consider the practicality of building a new City Hall.

² Nowadays title insurance companies also complete an abstract of the chain of title, but also provides insurance that the title being purchased is free and clear (or with notable exceptions) of defects.

By 1913, Raymond expanded his business reach by incorporating with others the banking institution of People's Loan and Trust Company. The purpose was to finance real estate transactions. That venture operated in the same building with the Riverside Abstract Company.

As if he was not busy enough, Raymond was active in his Methodist Church and was reported to be an assistant teacher for the Brotherhood Bible Class. He was also an ardent photographer, actively involved in the Riverside Camera Club and occasionally hosting club exhibitions of his work.

The Best family was like the many others in the Inland Empire, who, if they could afford to do so, escaped to the beach to beat the summer heat. Laguna was the choice for Raymond and his family, as it was for Glenwood Mission Inn owner Frank Miller and his sister.

In 1915, Raymond sold his interest in the Riverside Abstract Company. Raymond's general practice of law followed.³ For the next several years, Raymond's practice included cases covering real estate fraud, divorce, probate, business transactions, to name a few areas.

By 1918, Raymond decided to run for District Attorney. His opponent was Loyal C. Kelley. Raymond did not receive a single endorsement, professing in an advertisement that pandering for endorsements would be un-American. Needless to state, Raymond was soundly beaten by Kelley 4,246 votes to 2,985.

1918 is also notable as the year, Raymond's son, Raymond Eugene (Gene) Best, passed the California State Bar and was admitted to practice. Gene did not initially commence to practice law as he remained an escrow clerk with Riverside Abstract Company. However, by 1922, after having moved around Northern California in the Title Industry, Gene returned to Riverside to join his father in the practice of law. They announced the team as "Raymond Best & Eugene Best" attorneys.

By 1925, Raymond made his son a partner; Best & Best as it was known. Best & Best continue in that form until 1941 when John G. Gabbert was made a partner resulting in firm being renamed Best, Best & Gabbert.

Raymond Best never wavered from his community involvement. He could be found as a participating citizen at a public meeting to voice concern over the possible danger foisted upon animals at the local animal shelter; the new natural gas recently installed was rumored to be killing animals. Raymond also argued before the City Council to protest against heavy truck traffic on residential streets during the night hours. And as early as the mid 1920's, Raymond

³ As stated in footnote 1, John G. North died in 1910 while in London representing the California Bank of San Francisco; North was still actively practicing law and one would assume still required his law library. John North and Raymond were charter members of the Present Day Club founded in 1902 and more likely than not, good acquaintances. Perhaps Raymond acquired North's library from North's estate.

decried Riverside was getting too large due to the influx of individuals to the area from out of state.

When Raymond began his actual involvement in the Riverside Bar Association is not known, but he was part of the 1922 Riverside County Bar Association committee to change its Constitution to improve participation.

By 1925, Raymond Best was elected president of the Riverside County Bar Association. His working board included W. G. Irving, vice president, K. E. Schwinn, secretary, R. J. Welch, Jr., treasurer and trustees, C. L. McFarland, Frank Miller, and Lyman Evans.

Raymond Best was a devoted Republican. He supported tariffs to bolster California industry. During the Depression, he was a vigorous opponent of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and its expenditures.

The 1930's in California politics was not that dissimilar to politics of the decade of 2010. Because of the Depression, social upheaval was at the forefront, including strong movements to create programs considered a move from capitalism to socialism. Opinions were polar opposite, strong and hostile. For example, the famous novel *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in 1939 and described as a great depiction of the national plight of the downtrodden. A book reviewer of the novel described the book as something the "unregenerate conservative" should not read. Raymond Best, a conservative Republican of the time, would have been considered one of those "unregenerate conservatives." Another example of the divide was Upton Sinclair, the Bernie Sanders of the time. Sinclair, an author and radical Socialist, who ran for California Governor, was openly considered by the Riverside Republican Central Committee,⁴ within which Raymond was very active, the "political enemy."

By the end of the 1940's, Riverside County was finally receiving its third Superior Court Judicial position. In 1949, Governor Earl Warren had twelve possible candidates to fill the new position, Raymond Best being known as one of them. However, it was a 13th person who received the offer for the judgeship, Raymond's partner, John Gabbert. John was an active Republican just as was Raymond. The difference may have been that John's father was a highly connected and very well-liked publisher. John accepted the governor's offer. Best, Best & Gabbert became Best, Best & Krieger and has remained such to this day.⁵

For years, Raymond could be recognized driving from his home on little Mt. Rubidoux to his office in his 1929 Cadillac. He drove that same car until he gave up driving at 83 years of age; he regularly claimed cars weren't made like they used to be.

At the age of 86, Raymond decided it was time to retire from the firm. When asked about

⁴ Raymond was the Chairman of the Central Committee in 1930 and 1931 and eventually was the co-chairman for the 1940 Riverside, San Bernardino and Orange Counties Joint Committee Convention.

⁵ In 1952, Best, Best & Krieger had 5 attorneys. One year later the firm had 6.

his success in life, he credited longevity.

Raymond was fondly described in a 1952 Riverside County Bar Association magazine as having a real wit and a colorful language, which earned him quite the reputation as both a thoughtful and humorous after dinner speaker.

Raymond Best died in 1957 at the age of 89. His extensive library of over 2,000 books and periodicals, undoubtedly still holding some of the original John G. North acquisition, was donated by Raymond's wife to the University of California, Riverside.

Written by Chris Jensen.