

**Multnomah lawyers met Kennedy's civil rights call:
The South's racial tension drew Oregon volunteers in '60s
By Vicki L. Smith**

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“[W]e call upon [Gov. George Wallace] to stand aside...”

These words are those of 46 prominent American lawyers in a statement directed to the governor of Alabama on June 10, 1963. Their purpose was to ask Wallace to abide by a court order to desegregate the University of Alabama, as Wallace had vowed to defy the court order.

This was followed on the evening of June 11, 1963, by President John F. Kennedy's address to the nation on the Alabama situation promising new legislation concerning civil rights. Kennedy said that evening, “we are confronted with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities....”

Kennedy then outlined the need for sweeping federal civil rights legislation, as he explained, “if we are to move this problem from the streets to the courts.”

The challenge of moving the issue of racial equality and civil rights protection from the streets to the courts was clearly evidenced the day after President Kennedy's speech when a key civil rights leader, Medgar Evers, was assassinated in the driveway of his own home in Jackson, Miss. The President's team moved swiftly to get new civil rights legislation through Congress. As part of that effort, on June 21, 1963, Kennedy, Vice President Lyndon Johnson and Attorney General Robert Kennedy met in the east wing of the White House with some 240 specially invited lawyers from around the country. In the words of the invitation to those lawyers, the meeting was “to discuss certain aspects of the nation's civil rights problem.”

Portland attorney James C. Dezendorf (from the firm now known as Lane Powell PC) and McMinnville attorney Eugene E. Marsh, then President of the Oregon State Bar, attended that meeting at the White House. The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law was conceived out of that meeting, with a mission to assist in assuring the supremacy of the rule of law and the promotion and protection of equal rights envisioned by the president, for the time being focusing on the problems in the South.

Dezendorf was selected as a member of the original executive committee of the elite Lawyers' Committee. The Lawyers' Committee sought the participation of other bars around the country and the Oregon State Bar was no exception. According to a Lawyers' Committee report of November 12, 1963, “the Oregon State Bar officially offered to cooperate” [with the Lawyers' Committee] and asked for a suggested program for local bar associations in the state.” The Multnomah Bar Association and its Multnomah Lawyer publication announced the volunteer opportunities and urged members to serve if they could.

The Lawyers' Committee ultimately determined to set up a litigation office in Jackson. It was to be staffed in part by volunteer lawyers from outside the state to assist in providing legal services not being provided by the Mississippi Bar and to assist in civil rights cases. Again, Oregon lawyers rose to the challenge of Kennedy's call to move the problem into the courts. The Jackson office opened on June 2, 1965, and Portland attorney Cliff N. Carlsen, Jr. (from the firm now known as Miller Nash LLP) was the first chief counsel of that office. Following Carlsen's lead, least 25 Oregon attorneys volunteered their time and legal talents in Mississippi during the tumultuous, not to mention dangerous, 1960s. Several of those who served in Mississippi have reported their belief that Oregon had the greatest number of lawyers of any state's bar answering the call to duty in Mississippi.

Besides Carlsen, those known to have served in Mississippi are: Larry Aschenbrenner, Frank Bauman, Carl Brophy, Kevin Carey, John Dellenbach, William H. Ferguson, Robert Gygi, John Haugh, Elliot Holden, Pat Hurley, Bernard Jolles, Herbert Lombard, Jr., Don Marmaduke, William C. Martin, Bonnie Mentzer, Charles Merten, Carl Neil, Joe Richards, Roger Rook, Leslie Swanson, Jr., Jacob Tanzer, William Tobin, Jr., Glen Walker, Donald R. Wilson.

A resource for further information on the background of the Lawyers' Committee is a publication entitled "The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law: The Making of a Public Interest Law Group," by Ann Garity Connell.