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Mr. Bass turns 100

Centenarian lawyer reflects on his roles in downtown desegregation, tort reform 1930s-style and more

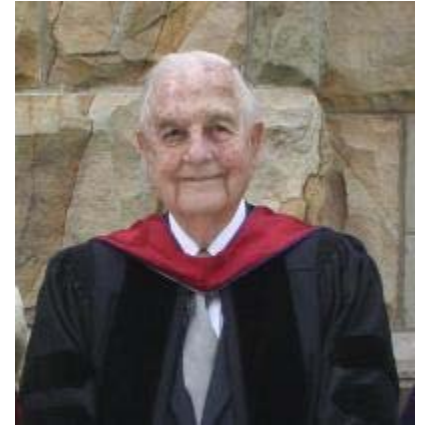
By E. Thomas Wood

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James O. Bass Sr. is 100 years old today. Odds are, he has gone into the office as usual.

The law firm he joined after graduating from Harvard Law School in 1934 — Bass, Berry & Sims, co-founded by his father in 1922 and among the city's premier corporate legal practices ever since — now occupies prime space in Nashville's newest downtown office tower, the 28-story Pinnacle at Symphony Place.

Mr. Bass answered his own line when a reporter called the office last week. There was plenty to talk about, in theory, but he has made clear in the past that he will not discuss much of his career as a litigator out of deference to his clients, even when they are long dead.



James O. Bass Sr., in a 2007 photo taken when he was honored as the oldest living alumnus of the University of the South

It might have been fun, too, just to ask him about some of the side-ventures in commercial real estate that turn up in a perusal of his *Nashville Banner* clipping file at the downtown library's Nashville Room. Bass and a few partners seem to have done very well over the years getting into and out of properties on the Public Square, at the West End-Elliston split, near the former Harding Mall and elsewhere.

But experience teaches that a gentleman of his vintage will usually not say much about his private investments.

So let's talk public service.

Rousting the JPs

"I went to the lower house in 1936," Bass recalls, when asked about his brief career in the General Assembly. "I ran on a ticket with some very substantial business people.

"We had all agreed that the basic plank in our platform was to abolish the old JP courts. Any justice of the peace had a right, if he wanted to, to hold court on small claims. A lot of them did, and it was a bad situation because they were acting as a judge when they obviously had a conflict of interest because they made their

money from the fees the plaintiff was paying them.

"Nobody liked it, but it had been going on for years."

Bass recalls that he asked Pete Haynes, speaker of the house, to let him introduce as House Bill #1 in the new legislature a measure to abolish justice-of-the-peace courts and create a General Sessions Court in Davidson County. Haynes agreed, the bill passed, and most of the state's other counties eventually obtained the right to elect General Sessions judges of their own.

"In '39, I said, 'I've been up there once. That's all I want to go,'" Bass remembers. "I didn't want a political career.

"Two years later, a lot of the business people came to me and wanted me to run for the Senate. I didn't want to do that. I told them I didn't have time. And they promised, 'If you'll run, you won't have any opposition.'"

He says he agreed to run because he wanted to further the business leaders' goal of creating a civil-service system in Davidson County. That system came to pass, although a 1946 clipping finds Bass denouncing a slate of local candidates who had pledged to try to undo civil service and, one can only presume, bring back the spoils system it supplanted. The repeal effort amounted to nothing in the end.

In October of 1942, having once again left public office on his own terms, Bass took up a Captain's commission in the Judge Advocate General's Department of the U.S. Army. He rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and earned the Bronze Star for his service with the 104th Infantry Division in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany in 1944-45.

Progress, the Nashville way

In May 1963, Bass was thrust into a pivotal role dealing with racial integration in Nashville. Local developments in the past three years had given Nashville a reputation for being able to resolve its interracial conflicts more peacefully than was the case in some other Southern localities. But further challenges loomed.

Birmingham had exploded in April and May of 1963, as Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor met the protests of African-Americans with massive resistance. Footage of youths under attack by dogs and firehoses was already jolting much of the nation in May, and the deadly bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in August would prove even more shocking.

"With all that was going on, there was concern — not only with local authorities and the political figures, but with the public generally," Bass remembers. "That was a fear that everybody had, in different degrees. Fortunately, we had very little violence, relative to other communities."

Although Bass was in the midst of what he remembers as "a very busy time in my law practice," history wouldn't wait.

"The Mayor, Beverly Briley, called me one day and told me he wanted me to chair his Committee on Human Relations," Bass recalls.

"I said, 'Beverly, I haven't got time. I'm doing a lot of traveling—' And he interrupted me. He said, 'I'm not asking you, now, I'm telling you. You've got to do it.' So I did."

Serving on the committee with Bass were leaders from across the community, including bankers Sam Fleming and Andrew Benedict, insurance exec Guilford Dudley Jr., *Tennessean* publisher Amon Carter Evans, the Rev. Kelly Miller Smith of the African-American First Baptist Church-Capitol Hill, entrepreneur

Inman Otey and the Rev. Will Campbell.

Bass remembers his role as mainly involving a few holdout drugstores. "We had a few meetings with leaders at the drugstores and otherwise, and we got it pretty well worked out," he says.

He emphasizes that the hard work was already done by the time he took the helm of the committee. News reports from the time, though, suggest the committee accomplished somewhat more than just a cleanup job on straggling segregationist business owners.

One news item confirms that the Nashville Retail Druggists Association announced in August 1963 that its member stores would begin serving patrons "without regard to color." But the same item also noted a new commitment by St. Thomas Hospital, which had "opened its medical and surgical facilities to Negroes for the first time since its founding in 1898."

Other articles credit the committee with helping arrange for most local restaurants and hotels to end segregation at their facilities.

By the time Bass stepped down from the committee in mid-November 1963 — citing time pressures from his legal practice — his announcement was coupled with news that Nashville's major banks, insurance companies and many retailers had devoted themselves to non-discriminatory hiring practices, at least on paper.

It happened one day

James Orin Bass was born on July 12, 1910, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Frank M. Bass Sr. of Nashville. Here are a few other events that transpired that day:

- Aeronautical entrepreneur Glenn H. Curtiss impressed onlookers at an Atlantic City aviation meet by dropping "bombs" (oranges) on an "enemy fleet" (a group of yachts). "The warfare of the future," a retired general in attendance told reporters, would depend "largely upon the perfecting of the air machines."
- Charles Stewart Rolls, co-founder of automobile maker Rolls-Royce Ltd., died at the age of 32 when the aircraft he was flying broke apart over the English coastal town of Bournemouth. He was the first Briton to perish in an aviation accident.
- Authorities in London unearthed the body of aspiring actress Belle Elmore Crippen at the home from which her husband, Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen, had fled a few days earlier to sail for Canada. Dr. Crippen would later hang for the notorious murder.
- Both houses of Georgia's General Assembly voted by wide margins to ratify the 16th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which enabled the imposition of a federal income tax. Of the first eight states to approve the amendment, more than half were from the South. (Alabama, Kentucky, South Carolina and Mississippi preceded Georgia.)

We wish Mr. Bass a happy birthday.

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