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Scarsdale attorney celebrates centenary — in his office

By ILENE NECHAMKIN

The year he was born the population of the United States was 92.4 million, the national debt was a scant \$1.15 billion, and a gallon of milk cost 32 cents. The life expectancy for men was 48.4 years, for women, 51.8 years; one in a thousand marriages ended in divorce, and the president was William Taft. World wars hadn't been fought, the Titanic hadn't left port, and women, whose hemlines didn't yet reveal their ankles, didn't vote.

George Seward, who still lives in the Greenacres house he bought in 1955, will celebrate his 100th birthday Aug. 4, well aware of his good fortune, but without any detailed advice gathered from spending a century on the planet. "I used to hear from some of my father's friends that the secret of longevity was a good 5-cent cigar," he told the Inquirer in a recent telephone interview from his law office. (Yes, he still commutes to his Manhattan office four days a week, riding the subway from Grand Central Station down to Battery Park Plaza.) "But I think the secret may be a good wine."

Even so, Seward doesn't imbibe every night, stressing moderation. "You have to be careful with alcohol, especially if you have a meeting the following morning. You have to control wines, not wines, you. You should know how to enjoy them, use them. That's all."

The law firm that bears his name, Seward & Kissel, threw an early birthday party for him yesterday, July 29. Seward considers the firm where he has worked for nearly 60 years his greatest achievement. "When I came," he said, "it was a tiny little firm, though with fine, classy people." The firm was then called Meyer, Kidder, Matz & Kissel, and had 16 partners overseeing 25 lawyers. "It's still small, but our client list is top grade," he said. "Some of the finest businesses in the world come to us for help."

Paula Huffell has been his secretary for 32 years, and she's able, sometimes, to complete Seward's sentences, or gently correct him. She sat in on the interview, on speakerphone. The firm once occupied two floors, she said. "We now have five floors in a larger building, and we're aiming for six."

Seward & Kissel, she said, now has 42



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George Seward and his legal secretary, Paula Huffell

partners and another 126 attorneys, nine summer associates and 155 staff members. More than 330 families are involved in the firm's operation.

Seward has enjoyed a long career as a commercial lawyer. "I don't call what I do work," he said, "because it's my pleasure." He chaired the business law section of the American Bar Association, and was elected to the ABA's House of Delegates. In 1970, Seward founded the business law section of the International Bar Association, and was later named its honorary life president.

These days he seldom sees clients. "Old clients, yes, maybe, but our firm is well equipped to put a young smart lawyer in charge of a new case," he said. "I'm a former partner, senior counsel to the firm."

"And you're a mentor to many young lawyers," Huffell added.

Seward drives himself to the train station in the morning, takes Metro-North to Grand Central, and he gets into his office "perhaps a little late" due to the long walk from the subway station. He answers telephone calls on his direct line himself, usually on the first ring.

"The first thing, Paula brings me a doughnut and milk and that gets me started. I take whatever's next on my desk — and no one can tell what that's going to be."

It could be a letter from a friend whose son wants a job, Seward said, or work connected with being president of the International Bar Association.

"You could be working on the history of the firm, correspondence or sending e-mails," Huffell said.

"Yes," Seward said, though he's less comfortable recently on the computer: "It's so easy to push the wrong button."

Educational moment

Seward was born in Omaha, Neb., and attended grade school in six different states. "My father was in the building business," he said, "and we went wherever he thought they needed new buildings. At dinner, my father would say, 'We're moving to Peoria,' and then, we would," Seward said.

He said he became a lawyer "because my father told me to, despite the fact that I liked philosophy and that was my major."

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He earned a B.A. cum laude in 1933 and an LL.B. in 1936 from the University of Virginia. During his second year, he was admitted to the Virginia bar.

But philosophy continued to inform his decisions and actions. “Almost everything I’ve done was colored by Plato and Aristotle, or by Kant, another especially good fellow,” Seward said.

“To be a lawyer, you have to know how people think,” he said. He has a philosophical view of experience. “All exams, whether oral or written, academic or, say, for a deposition, are educational. If you get through it, whether you got the result you hoped for or not, you’ve learned something.”

Seward said that his greatest surprise in practice is “how decent to each other most lawyers are.” Back in the day, he said, if you had a case in Brooklyn and you couldn’t get there, you’d drop opposing counsel a note — no e-mail then — and he’d agree to put it off. “Things have changed; someone’ll tell you, don’t worry about it, and forget about that conversation when he’s in court,” Seward said. “The practice of law has changed. Some lawyers are not as pleasant to each other.”

Money, he said, is a great factor in the erosion of civility. “Some lawyers work on a narrow earning potential. They make more money taking signatures as a notary than from their practice. Well, there aren’t very many of those. The law is filled by and large by knowledgeable people.”

Scarsdale

Seward and his wife Carroll, who died in 1991, moved to Scarsdale after living in White Plains. “I thought that the commute would be better in White Plains, but Scarsdale was equally good,” he said.

“Back then, my ticket from White Plains for the month was \$8. Now it costs more than that just to come in in the morning,” he said.

He paid “a pittance compared to the price now” for his Greenacres house, which he’s kept in good shape “because that’s what makes it pleasant.”

Seward said that the prior owner of the



George Seward at age 2 in 1912.

house visited him at some point “and said he was surprised how much nicer it looked.” Over the years, Seward has made improvements to the house including “a beautiful library in what was once a cellar.”

None of his four children, Gordon, Patricia, James and Deborah, became lawyers, he said.

“But one of your grandsons did,” Huffell noted.

Seward said his children were likely put off by the long hours he worked. “Families deserve a mama and a papa,” he said. “Mama is irreplaceable, and certainly papa, too.”

“As a lawyer in a growing firm, I had to treat every client as an important person, and if he wanted a job taken care of quickly, I learned that you had to get it done, even if you worked all night,” he explained.

In Scarsdale, he was a member of Hitchcock Presbyterian Church and the Town Club, now the Town and Village Civic Club Education Forum.

He served on the board of governors of

the Town Club, chaired its committee on public service and utilities and its special committee on the review of nonpartisan procedure for school board elections. He was also president of the Scarsdale Phi Beta Kappa Association and a member of Scarsdale Golf Club.

“I like living here,” he said. “The train service is good, and I like to sit down in the evening with my neighbors to chew over what’s going on. In Scarsdale, almost everyone is intelligent.”

He said that ownership of the houses on both sides of his house has “turned over a number of times, and each time I found someone I liked. But that’s not unusual, for Scarsdale. It takes a little money to buy a house here, and people are pretty decent.”

Changes

The law has gotten more complicated, Seward said, as every new administration, city, state and federal, enacts new legislation. “It’s too bad that the Constitution doesn’t have a provision that every law has a specific termination date, or it’s off the records every 20 years. We need to clean up the books. There are laws that we don’t even know they’re there,” he said.

Seward said he has much to reflect on as he approaches his centenary. “My interest in business law, for example, which brought me into the IBA, which, in turn, brought me contacts all over the world, good friendships and lots of travel,” he said. “Every state and national bar association is a member of the IBA,” he said. “A huge crowd, over 5,000.”

The annual meetings, he said, are not only a learning session, “but a chance to see your old friends.”

Huffell said she enjoys whatever she’s doing at the firm and hopes it will continue.

“I hope so, too,” said Seward. “Because I couldn’t continue without you. You’re helpful on everything.”

Seward also plans a celebration with his family, “my children, and their children, and their children.” He has five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. “They live all over the world but not near me,” he said. “I hope they’ll be staying a while.”