

**MEMORIAL FOR
BILLY R. PESNELL
PRESENTED AT THE MEMORIAL AND RECOGNITION CEREMONY
HELD BY THE FIRST JUDICIAL DISTRICT COURT
NOVEMBER 9, 2023
UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE
SHREVEPORT BAR ASSOCIATION**

GOOD AFTERNOON YOUR HONORS, MAY IT PLEASE THE COURT:

Family, friends, and fellow members of the bar.

Billy R. Pesnell was born in Jackson Parish, Louisiana, on March 20, 1934, and passed away on July 2, 2023, at Christus Highland Medical Center in Shreveport, Louisiana.

Billy graduated from Ruston High School in 1952, where he was the valedictorian. He was very active in the Future Farmers of America, both in high school and, later, in college, and participated in a number of speaking contests and debates. He attended Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. There he was a member of the Boxing Team, completed the ROTC program and graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering. He was also a member of a number of honor societies, including Omicron Delta Kappa.

After he graduated from LSU, Billy returned to Ruston and married his high school sweetheart, Gloria Faye Fletcher. Shortly thereafter he received a Root-Tilden scholarship that he had applied for to study law at New York University, a scholarship widely considered to be the most prestigious public interest scholarship in the United States.

Billy and Gloria moved to New York City where Billy attended New York University and graduated in 3 years with his Juris Doctor degree. While in law school, he was offered a job by Standard Oil Company to work in New York. Billy turned it down because he and Gloria wished to return to North Louisiana. The Standard Oil lawyer who interviewed Billy recommended him to Leonard Hargrove and that is how Billy began his legal career with Hargrove, Guyton, & Van Hook. He practiced law with that law firm and its successors for almost 46 years. In 2004, he founded The Pesnell Law Firm where he practiced law in partnership with his children for another 19 years until his death. In total, Billy practiced law in Shreveport, Caddo Parish, and throughout the state of Louisiana, in both the state and federal courts, for more than 65 years. He was supported through most of his career by Debra Neal Ervin, his office manager, bookkeeper, paralegal, secretary, and friend. Ms. Ervin, who worked for him for more than 45 years, became a member of his family.

Billy was a lawyer's lawyer. He was a man of unimpeachable character and integrity, a man



with a thorough knowledge, understanding, and feel for the law, a persuasive speaker and exceptional writer, a man with great intuition, insight, and instincts, and a man with preternatural judgment. In short, he was a brilliant legal mind and the kind of lawyer that we would all like to be.

Billy tried to make his arguments and his briefs clear, concise, and effective. Although he believed that a case could be won or, more often, lost, on oral argument, he believed that cases were usually won or lost on the briefs. Accordingly, he spared no effort on his briefs. He would put his briefs through draft after draft until those briefs said exactly what he wanted them to say. He had a reputation for having one of the sharpest pens and writing the best briefs in the State.

Billy believed in hard work and its benefits. He worked every week day, most nights, and most weekends. There weren't many, if any, lawyers in Caddo Parish or in the State of Louisiana for that matter who worked harder or longer than Billy. And it was not for money but rather for the clients (many of whom became his lifelong friends) and (I believe) for the pure pleasure of the practice of law.

Billy handled a wide range of legal matters in which he frequently made new law. He often represented deserving persons who needed help and could not obtain it elsewhere at no charge - - pro bono. And he would, from time to time, take on and handle cases that involved or affected important public interests *gratis*, as a service to the public.

Just a few of the high profile cases which he handled over the years included *Associated Press v. Walker*, a seminal case on first amendment rights and libel, slander, and defamation of character for public figures; *Louisiana Environmental Society, Inc. v. Coleman*, one of the first cases based upon the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act ("NEPA") in which he sought to protect Shreveport's water supply by opposing the I-220 Bridge over Cross Lake for more than fifteen (15) years; and *Winterrowd v. Travelers*, a products liability case that resulted in a change in the law concerning manufacturer's liability.

He was open, honest, and fair, and always acted ethically and with integrity. His word was his bond. He was also unfailingly courteous, polite, and professional in his dealings with the bench and bar, but he was more than just that. He was humble and had a good (often self-deprecating) sense of humor. And he was considerate, collegial, and magnanimous. Billy spent untold hours mentoring and teaching young lawyers (this writer being one of them) not just how to analyze the law and write, but how to be a lawyer.

Billy believed that all a lawyer really had, at bottom, were his name, his reputation, and his

judgment, and he would not do anything to compromise them. He would not overstate, mischaracterize, misrepresent, or distort the facts or the law to the courts or to opposing counsel in discussions, arguments, or briefs. His contemporaries on the bench and in the bar knew that if Billy told you something, you could take it to the bank. Consequently, many judges have stated during hearings or arguments: "Mr. Pesnell has told us that this is the law. What we would like to hear from you is whether or not he is wrong, and, if so, why."

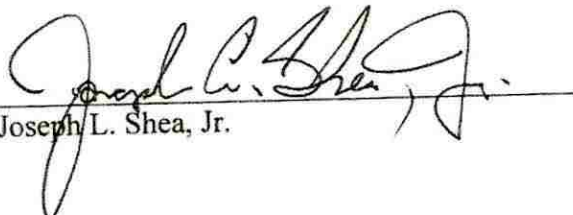
Finally, Billy was a member of the Harry V. Booth - Judge Henry A. Politz American Inn of Court here in the Western District of Louisiana, where he helped mentor younger members of the bar, and served as a member of the Louisiana Attorney Disciplinary Board for a number of years. It is safe to say that his passing leaves a void in the Shreveport and Caddo Parish Bars that will not be quickly or easily filled.

Billy was a devoted husband, father, and grandfather. He and his wife, Gloria, were happily married for almost 63 years - - from August 16, 1958, until her death on April 13, 2021. And he loved his children and his grandchildren. He did everything he could to raise them properly and went to great lengths to develop and expand their hearts, their minds, and their horizons. He was a long-time member of First Baptist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana, and was a faithful friend and supporter of First Baptist Church School.

Mr. Pesnell was preceded in death by his parents, Van Gordon Pesnell and Maggie Oda Lee Youngblood Pesnell; his wife, Gloria Faye Fletcher Pesnell; his sisters, Glenda Mae Pesnell Burch and Sharon Genet Pesnell Hamlin; and his foster brother, Robert Lee Williams. He is survived by his children, John Whitney Pesnell and wife, Tedy; William Alan Pesnell and wife, Evelyn; James Gordon Pesnell; Douglas Wade Pesnell and wife, Angela; and Susan Elizabeth Pesnell; his sister, Betty Sue Pesnell Ambrose and husband, Jack; his brother, Gordon Drew Pesnell and wife, Jean; his brothers-in-law, John Gilland Burch and Bruce Arnold Hamlin, and 11 grandchildren.

On behalf of the Shreveport Bar Association, we submit this memorial to the memory of Billy R. Pesnell, and move that it be inscribed in the permanent records of the First Judicial District Court, Caddo Parish, Louisiana, and that appropriate copies be presented to his family.

Respectfully submitted on this 9th day of November, 2023, in Shreveport, Caddo Parish, Louisiana.


Joseph L. Shea, Jr.