



Still **Time** for *Golf!*

With Val Wilson

It is our pleasure to introduce Mr. Ralston Alexander, QC, a partner in the Victoria law firm of Cook Roberts. His work is primarily involved with commercial real estate, including representations of Government, Hospital Authorities, and School Districts. Ralston is also the President of the Law Society of BC.

The Scrivener: You were raised in small-town BC. Please tell us about your early years.

Ralston: I was born in Toronto, Ontario, and moved to BC at age 2, with my parents . . . I wasn't yet driving. We spent a year or two in Kamloops before Dad settled our family in Salmon Arm in 1948. He was one of only two Physicians there at that time. I attended Salmon Arm Junior Secondary and Salmon Arm Senior Secondary schools, graduating from Grade 13 in 1963. I then went to UBC and received a Bachelor of Commerce in 1968 and a Bachelor of Laws in 1969 on the UBC combined degree program. I articulated immediately to Ed Pearlman, of Pearlman and Lindholm in Victoria, and was called to the Bar in May of 1970.

The Scrivener: What was your career experience before you became a lawyer?

Ralston: I spent my Summers—six in all—working for the Department of Highways, doing inspections on the contractors that were actually paving the roads of our province. That was mostly in the north of the province, from Prince George to Smithers to Terrace and even Prince Rupert. I learned about rain there. Roads have to be dry to be paved with hot mix. We had 15 days of actual paving to do there and it took us two months. For the rest of the days, it rained.

He used to say, "Promise the work for Friday and deliver it on Wednesday. They will come back for more." He was right.

I worked at the local newspaper during high school, doing all the things a kid can do in a small newspaper office.

The Scrivener: Why did you choose to become a lawyer? Did you have a mentor and are you a mentor?

Ralston: I always wanted to be a lawyer. The blood and stuff of my father's work did not appeal. People encouraged me to pursue the law, suggesting I had an inclination to talk out loud, perhaps to



Ralston Alexander, QC

a fault. I was clearly victimized by type-casting at an early age.

I did not have mentors till I started practising law, then worked closely with Ellis Achtem, first as an associate, then a junior partner, and finally a full partner. He was a very successful "business" deal-making lawyer; I learned a great deal from him. He used to say, "Promise the work for Friday and deliver it on Wednesday. They will come back for more." He was right.

I tried mentoring early in my career and it broke my heart. I had a few "stars" in whom I invested considerable energy because I saw great potential. I was right about the potential but failed to factor in the economics of the law profession. Lawyers in Victoria do not make as much money as lawyers in Vancouver. My "stars" all figured that out faster than I did and moved, mostly just when they were starting to pay dividends on the mentoring investment. After a while, I stopped.

The Scrivener: Why did you choose to practise law in Victoria rather than Vancouver??

Ralston: I do not like the climate in Vancouver. It rains too much. About twice as much as in Victoria. I was a small-town guy, from Salmon Arm. Vancouver was huge. Victoria is more manageable, size-wise, and a lovely setting in which to raise a family. Victoria has the same kinds of

Photo credit: www.francaimman.com

transactions as Vancouver, but most of them are smaller. They still need careful attention to be done properly.

We considered a move to Vancouver a few times but I really had developed deep roots in Victoria with a comfortable and loyal clientele. I was not sure they would move with me.

The Scrivener: You are currently President of the Law Society of BC. Please tell us about your responsibilities in that regard.

Ralston: The job is many-faceted and a ton of fun. You must be the “face” of the Legal Profession to the public. There are many public appearances, both legally related and otherwise. The President presides at all “call to the Bar” ceremonies and chairs meetings of the Benchers, the elected Directors. To some extent, the President gets to influence the overall agenda of the society, although in small steps only. Lawyers are not an adventuresome lot, so the changes in policy direction, where necessary, happen fairly deliberately—read: s-lo-w-l-y.

This has been a slightly different year because I have felt it necessary to be a bit more visible for the staff of the organization—about 140 people. We have been operating under the staff leadership of an “acting” Executive Director following the resignation of our former ED in late November 2004. The search process has been demanding time-wise. Happily, effective June 1, Tim McGee, former CEO of Bell ExpressVu™, has been installed as the new CEO/Executive Director of the Law Society.

In addition, many local Bar associations want an opportunity to tell the President where he is going wrong. I have tried to respond to as many of those as I can because I think that is also an important part of the job.

The Scrivener: You are a member of the Electronic Filing and Registration Committee and actively participated in setting up the new Land Title and Survey Authority. How did you become involved?

Ralston: The e-filing stuff is fascinating. I came to that relatively late as a replacement for one of the Benchers that had moved on. I have always had an interest in computers—bought an Apple II Plus in 1982 and taught myself entry-level programming. I still use some of the programs I created in the ‘80s, including a mortgage amortization program and an NFL football pool. The Apple II is still operational and gets some regular use.

I think the most important work I have done thus far is in respect of the creation and launch of the Land Title and Survey Authority.

My involvement with e-filing was a “natural.” All of us on the Land Title Branch established e-Filing Committee work the same way. A group of solicitors, all of whom are experienced conveyancers, we spend most of the time at meetings brainstorming the approach that must be taken to solve the many issues and problems the designers of the system raise for consideration. Basically we are the guinea pigs for the various approaches that have been tried, to get us where we are in that project. It is a great success.

The Land Title Authority was born of the frustration that resulted from a couple of unfortunate decisions of Government. They had determined that all departments of Government service could be “downsized” equally, that the “fat” in the Public Service was shared by all across the board.

Turns out the Land Title Office was already lean and mean, in no small measure due to the efforts of an earlier *Scrivener* Cover Boy, Ken Jacques. [Vol. 13, No. 2, June 2004] When he was required to downsize the already efficient LTO staffing, turnaround times grew dramatically; the only way to balance the budget was to close some LTO offices, including Kamloops and Victoria.

Neither the skyrocketing delays nor

the LTO closures met with any approval from the public or the Bar. We started by yelling at Government—figuratively, of course—then we met with them. By a fortuitous coincidence of timing, at the height of the public outcry about the LTO closures, we showed up and suggested there was a better way to do this task—move it out of Government and let the stakeholders take on some responsibility for the operational design of the system.

The Torrens system was and is sound. The only problem was that it needed to be properly staffed and accessible—both outcomes the new Authority could deliver.

A succession of cabinet ministers responsible for the service saw the wisdom of the approach and threw their support behind a project to examine the concept. We never looked back. The compelling wisdom of the notion overwhelmed the occasional critic and the Authority was born in what can only be regarded as a remarkable timeframe. From conception to reality, roughly 15 months.

The Scrivener: It is an excellent service. What is the most satisfying aspect of being a lawyer?



Ralston at the practice facility of one of his favourite courses, Eagle Ranch Golf Resort at Invermere, BC

Ralston: The best part of being a lawyer is finding a solution for a client's problem when the problem is difficult and when expectations in the client are low. For example, he or she has either been told elsewhere that the problem cannot be solved or will be too expensive to be worthwhile.

The Scrivener: What is your greatest career achievement to date?

Ralston: I think the most important work I have done thus far is in respect of the creation and launch of the Land Title and Survey Authority. It is difficult to assess the extent to which I had an impact on the outcome, but I think the fact that the Law Society . . . as represented by a senior volunteer—me . . . was strongly behind the initiative had an impact on its success.

I was thrilled when it became a reality, regardless of the extent to which I was responsible for its happening, because it is a very, very good idea. And now it is a reality.

The Scrivener: Do you currently have time for community service in your schedule?

Ralston: I am not involved in anything else right now—the Presidency takes between two and four days a week and the practice takes three or four of the other days in each week. Sometimes it doesn't add up properly. A great line from a friend of mine who was a very involved and active Bencher with the Law Society—“Oh goody; it's Friday. Only two more working days until Monday.” That is the unfortunate reality for me these days.

Until I became the first Vice President of the Law Society in February 2004, I was on the Board of Directors and the Treasurer of the Uplands Golf Club—a terrific volunteer job—and was involved during my six years as Treasurer with a number of significant and interesting projects that required imaginative financing approaches, all accomplished with the help of a very cooperative banker. We had great times on that Board.

From 1975 to 1990, I was heavily involved with the United Way, first locally—as the President in Victoria—then nationally. I finished my United Way

commitment as Chairman of the Board of the United Way of Canada after a number of regional and national Vice Presidencies. I spent a lot of weekends in the 1980s in Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto.

I ran out of energy for the long airplane rides. That Board was a very committed group of fine people who worked tirelessly to improve the lives of those less advantaged. It was important work and I was sad when my time there ran out. They had term limits and I was “done.”

...there really is nothing finer than four or so hours spent with your mates in the fresh air, walking and talking and joking.

I spent a few years, from 2000 to 2003, with the Rotary Club of Victoria as President of their Housing Society, a non-profit group that built and looks after a 42-suite apartment building for seniors, single moms, and physically disabled tenants. The rents are subsidized according to BC Housing guidelines. A very valuable public service is provided by the considerable volunteer-management component provided by Rotarians and by others in other similar buildings.

I had to quit Rotary because, although I was still attending all the housing society meetings, I did not have time to attend regular Rotary meetings due to my escalating responsibilities with the Law Society. There was an almost automatic conflict between their regular meetings and the Law Society—both met a lot on Thursday. I was always clear that the Law Society took precedence if there was a conflict.

The Scrivener: In your limited spare time, you avidly pursue a hobby. Let's talk about golf!

Ralston: It's an utter obsession with me. I started late—at age 40—and have no natural—or other—athletic ability so my accomplishment of a credible handicap

of 11 is nothing short of miraculous. Someone said recently that it would get boring if we were required to play golf every day. I replied that I would like to give it a try. Not possible in my present circumstances, but I still try to get out at least once a week—usually at the expense of some work that I really should be doing, but golf is important to me.

I don't want to make it sound like more than it is, but there really is nothing finer than four or so hours spent with your mates in the fresh air, walking and talking and joking. There is the occasional wager—another element of the fun.

Scores are really a lot less important than the experience. The game became a great deal more enjoyable for me when, early on, I came to grips with the reality that I would never be a “scratch” golfer—0 handicap—and that if I worked at it a bit, I could probably play at an acceptable level and have a great time doing it.

I still remember the joy I felt the first time I played 18 holes with some pals who had asked me along when I had not played since a brief fling with the game in high school. I thought I wanted to come back the next day and do it again. It is so fun!!! and definitely *not* a “good walk spoiled.”

The Scrivener: What is most important to you in life?

Ralston: Yikes, you saved the best for last. I think the most important thing for me is to be well regarded by my peers as someone who is competent in the work that we do and as someone who has given something back to the profession. People, including my wife of 38 years, often ask me why I do the things I do. It seems to them that I bring an unnecessary degree of stress onto myself, but I would not have it any other way. It is pretty clearly the way I am built.

I am afraid of what will happen to me when this year as President is over. Old Law Society Presidents are not recycled; they are just sent away with effusive thanks. I will not be happy being sent away. I have promised my wife that I will take a year off from any new volunteer jobs—that might be tough for me to do. I guess we'll see. ▲