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- 125 Years -

LOS ANGELES COUNTY
BAR ASSOCIATION

INSIDE *The face of the legal profession: legendary trials, increasing diversity, legal landmarks, leading the way in serving the public, and more.*

from the chair

By Honey Kessler Amado and Richard Nakamura Jr.

Our Los Angeles County Bar Association was established in 1878, a year that feels amazingly familiar—these 125 years later—to 2003. In 1878, Britain and Russia were involved in a protracted series of wars in Afghanistan. Rutherford Hayes, the U.S. president, had been elected by only one electoral vote, with the hotly contested election resolved only by a special congressional commission. Thomas Edison was beginning his research on the electric light, and Alexander Graham Bell was suing Western Union for violating Bell's patent for the telephone. And the first motion picture was made here in California.

But the similarity of the bracket-years 1878 and 2003 belies the changes and growth that mark the intervening years. The world sank into two horrific world wars; at the end of each, an international body was created with the hope that nations could resolve conflict without war and in the context of international treaties and laws. The Hague Convention was established to enhance the legal and commercial relationships among nations.

In our own nation, women were granted the right to vote after a struggle that began in 1878 and successfully concluded in 1920. Schools were integrated when the U.S. Supreme Court acknowledged, at the midpoint of the twentieth century, that separate is inherently unequal. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 protected the voting rights of all people and finally eliminated tests and requirements designed to exclude African Americans from voting. We were faced with an attack on our country that revealed our vulnerability and challenged us to secure our physical safety without compromising our civil liberties.

Edison's electric light bulb became so ubiquitous that people now must leave the cities to see the stars. And through all these

changes, to meet the needs of our increasingly complex society, our courts looked both backward and forward to maintain and develop a body of law that continues to protect us and guide us. We lawyers are partners in that effort. As Daniel Webster cautioned in 1847, "The Law: It has honored us; may we honor it."

And the next 125 years?

That is six generations from now. Of those who will celebrate the Association's 250th anniversary, what will they say about us? What will they say about themselves? And how will they say it?

Words are the currency of our profession. On occasions such as the Association's anniversary, it is fair to ask whether the vocabulary of today will even make sense tomorrow. "Ethnic bar association." "Minority partner." "Affirmative action." Will these expressions still be needed 125 years from now? Will the charged idioms so passionately invoked today—"glass ceiling," "race card"—pack the same wallop in 2128? If so, chalk one up for the pessimists.

But we optimists are restless. We know that democracy thrives on differences. The challenge, though, in the never-ending debate is to discuss differences with discernment, not discrimination—and to be understood in that way. Too often, the words we use prevent that understanding. We have instead a cowboy culture stocked with lethal phrases indiscriminately fired like bullets: "Racist!" "Sexist!" "Baby killer!" When speech like this is hurled at us, we retreat to the comfort of insipid phrases, resulting in the giddiness of can-we-all-get-along-ness or the divisiveness of you-just-don't-get-it-ness. We deplore both as poor substitutes for the hard work, self-searching, and self-sacrifice that democracy demands. We know we can do better. We have done better. Take a look at the past 125 years. ■

Honey Kessler Amado and Richard Nakamura Jr. are the coordinating editors of this special 125th Birthday issue.

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