

# The History of ABOTA

*'The idea caught fire'*

The year was 1957. Los Angeles attorney Mark Robinson remembered the circumstances well: "Here in California, the press was having a field day giving lawyers a bad name. The courthouses were clogged — it could take as long as two years to get a case heard — and Governor Edmund G. Brown was talking about starting a commission system to hear workman's compensation, liability and other civil cases."

It was under this dark cloud — the potential death knell for the civil jury trial system — that the seeds were sown for the American Board of Trial Advocates.

That year, throughout the Los Angeles area, young working trial attorneys like Robinson were beginning to talk of the need for an organization specifically tailored for them: A place to gather socially, and a forum to speak out with a collective voice in preserving the American jury system.

Fred Belanger has an indelible impression of the founding of ABOTA. "At lunch one day, I brought up the American College of Trial Lawyers, which seemed to be solely for honoring the guys who had already made it, and I began wondering aloud if we couldn't organize a group of younger attorneys, those of us who were working in the trenches on a daily basis," he recalled.

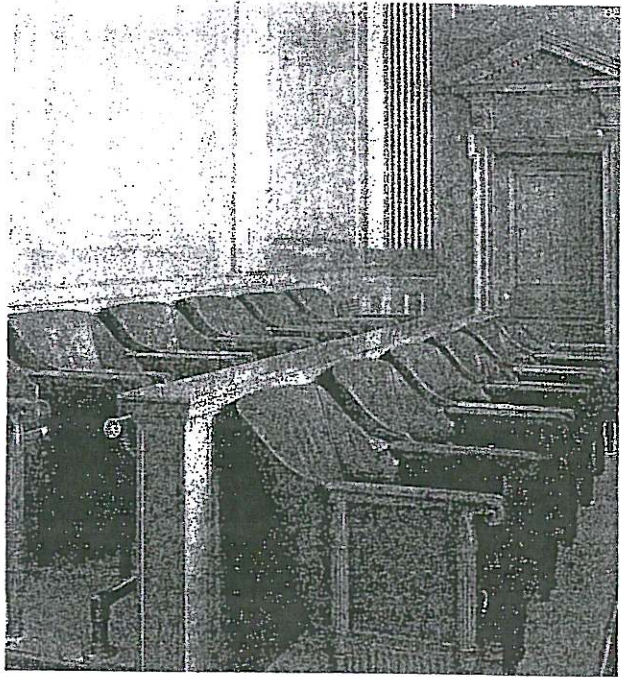
The idea caught fire. After several informal meetings between Robinson, Belanger and a handful of other Los Angeles lawyers over the next few months, the foundation for ABOTA was formulated and presented to 40 of their peers in November 1958.

"We considered keeping it strictly for Los Angeles attorneys," Robinson said. "But I kept pushing for a national scope, for a group that could credibly offer help in reducing some of the pressures in the courts, and for an organization that provided a system to certify the real trial specialists by setting standards for our members."

Robinson became ABOTA's first president.

In the ensuing years, chapter quickly grew strong and dynamic throughout California, though it would take 10 years before a chapter was chartered outside the state. Today, ABOTA has fulfilled Robinson's vision of a true national organization of skilled practicing trial attorneys who care passionately about the American trial system.

ABOTA has played an important role in legal and political affairs for nearly five decades. Over the years, political leaders have asked members for advice about pending legislation regarding the legal system, mem-



bers have served as judges pro tem to help ease courtroom backlog during the vacation season, and seminars and law school scholarship programs have proliferated.

ABOTA's influence now has extended nationally, with members hailing from 50 states in the union and 93 chapters spanning the continent and Hawaii. It is the premier lawyers' organization in the United States — selection for membership into ABOTA carries with it considerable prestige among attorneys, judges and legislators.

The complexion of ABOTA has changed a bit since the early years in Los Angeles. In the beginning, the organization included criminal attorneys as well as civil, and those original members were all defense attorneys — because we were defense lawyers, and that's who we knew best," Belanger explained. Membership, today, is limited to civil trial attorneys, and the organization strives to maintain a "bi-partisan" and equal split between defense and plaintiff lawyers in every chapter.

"That gives ABOTA a very unique feature," said Belanger, who became our sixth National President.

Many members feel that if it wasn't for ABOTA meetings, they would never have an opportunity to socialize with opposing attorneys. But the importance of this "mix" goes even further. "It lends us even more credibility in the political and public arenas," Robinson said. "Our job is nowhere near complete. The same forces are at work today as they were in the late 1950's — those people who want to dismantle the civil jury system — and the attacks are far less subtle. But we're devoted to our very purpose for existence."

"As we promised ourselves when we wrote the ABOTA Constitution, we will continue to push for preservation of the jury system and for improving the public image of lawyers."