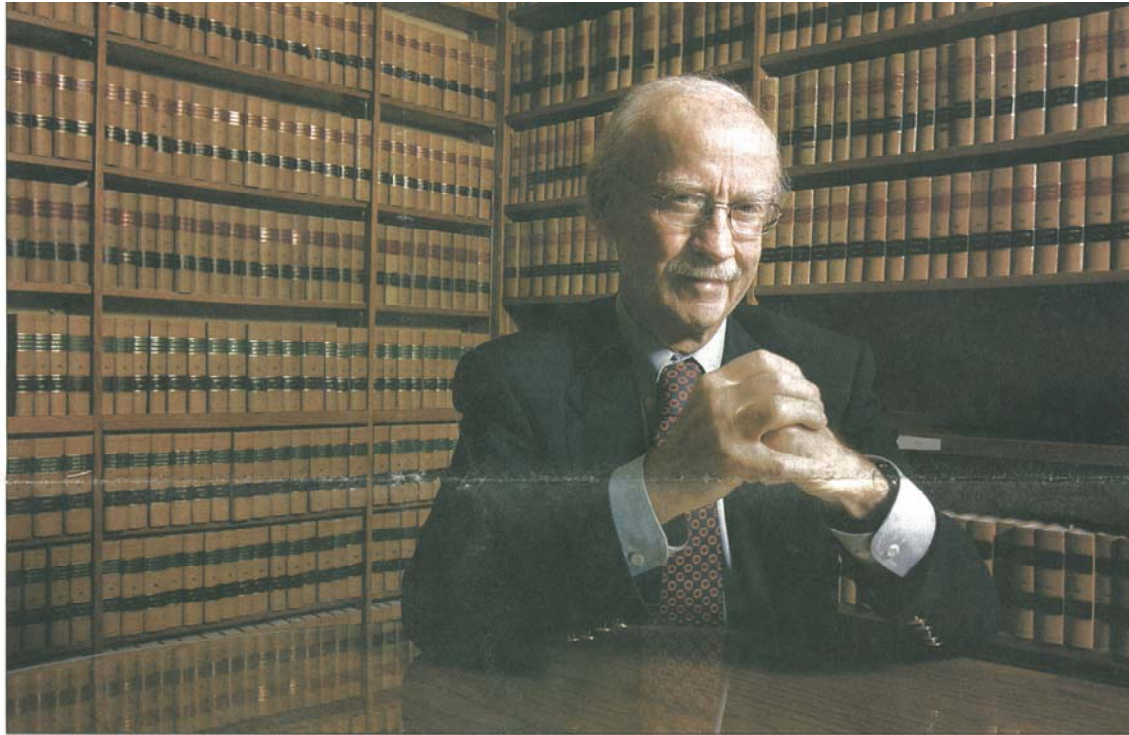


Reasoning, well seasoned



At 77, Joe Richards has represented nearly every local school district during his 50-plus years of practice. He says he has no plans to retire.

When legal questions arise, area schools turn to veteran Joe Richards

By ANNE WILLIAMS
The Register-Guard

Finding anyone who harbors ill feelings toward Joe Richards, the Eugene School District's chief attorney, is about as hard as finding anyone who can remember when he wasn't the school district's legal counsel.

Richards has been around awhile. Nearly three decades have passed since the Eugene law firm where he is a partner, Luvaas Cobb, nabbed the contract to handle the district's legal work. What's even more impressive is the fact that Richards, 77, already had been practicing law for 24 years when he came on board.

Clearly, the school district's administration has been happy with his work. But even those who at times find themselves at odds with Richards speak of him with admiration.

"He is a very, very honorable and respectable individual," says Paul Duchin, president of the Eugene teachers' union. "What Joe says you can take to the bank."

Richards surely can boast one of the most enduring legal careers in Eugene. (Although he's got nothing on his partner, Ralph Cobb, who

JOE RICHARDS

Occupation: Partner in the Eugene law firm Luvaas Cobb, representing school districts and businesses

Family: Wife, Marian; sons, Jeff, 54, and Martin, 50; daughter, Laura, 45

Last book read: Joan Didion's "The Year of Magical Thinking"

Favorite music: Classical

Something people might be surprised to know: He took up windsurfing at 60, although he gave it up about 10 years ago. "It was kind of a craze and it seemed like a good thing to do," he said.

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founded the firm in 1950 and is still going strong at 84.)

Starting with his association with the Eugene schools, Richards has come close to cornering the local market on school law, representing not just the Eugene district but also Bethel, Junction City, Fern Ridge, Pleasant Hill, Lowell, Siuslaw, Corvallis, Yoncalla, Harrisburg, Crow-Applegate-Lorane and the Lane Education Service District.

School law was not an interest of his initially. The firm got the contract, he said, "and suddenly two-thirds of my practice was school law."

Richards soon realized he'd landed in fertile ground. School districts, with their critical responsibilities and varied stakeholders, provide a wealth of challenging, fascinating and ever-changing work.

He doesn't handle special education — firms that specialize in the field typically handle those issues — but he's worked on just about every other type of school-related matter, including racial and sexual harassment, bond and levy elections, student rights, construction quarrels and — a biggie — personnel disputes that included the 1987 Eugene teachers' strike, one of the district's most wrenching episodes.

Few of Richards' school district cases have become "high-profile," in part, say those who work with him, because he's skilled in helping districts decide when to fight and when to quietly negotiate.

"You're an advocate, yes, but first you're a counselor," said Richards, a slightly built man with a neat mustache and gracious demeanor. "Your first job is to counsel the client and give them the downside, if there is a downside."

His clients say Richards is someone they can count on.

"I expect there's not a day that goes by that we're not in contact with him about legal issues," Eugene schools Superintendent George Russell said. "Clearly he's one of the premier knowledgeable folks around school law."

Retired Bethel Super-

"He is a very, very honorable and respectable individual."

PAUL DUCHIN
PRESIDENT OF THE EUGENE TEACHERS' UNION

intendent Kent Hunsaker worked with Richards for all 16 years he led the district.

"There's nothing like good service to promote continuing relationships with people, and that was my experience," said Hunsaker, who now heads the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators. "When we had a legal question, we called him and we got very, very good advice." However, Richards' best known case — and among his most satisfying — didn't involve schools. He represented Chase Gardens in a lawsuit against Northwest Natural Gas Co. that dragged on for 11 years. In the end, the Oregon Supreme Court agreed with a Lane County jury, ruling that the gas company erred when it filed a lien against the rose grower for an unpaid gas bill. The 2002 decision reinstated a \$1.9 million verdict against the gas company.

Richards' colleagues describe him as smart, competent, ethical, precise, hard-working and genuinely gentle and kind.

"He has been a perfect complement from my standpoint in our respective practices," said former partner and close friend Bob Fraser, who worked the Chase Gardens case with Richards. "He's a go-to guy, he thinks things through thoroughly. His philosophy in the law practice was as soon as I open the file, how do I close it?"

Fraser, who plans to come out of retirement to return to the practice, said it's no surprise that Richards is still working.

"He loves solving problems, he loves answering questions," he said. "I've seen him solve questions in a matter of five minutes that might take a younger lawyer two or three days to find the answer to, simply because of the fact he has the history and he has a great mind."

Lane County Circuit Court Judge Jack Billings worked with Richards when Billings served on the Eugene School Board in the 1980s. He said Richards was a steady, reliable presence through tumultuous times.

"He doesn't use florid language — in fact he's one of the more terse attorneys I've ever encountered," said Billings, noting that he would often joke that Richards "used two words when three would do." "But it seemed like, in those few sentences, everything you needed to make a decision was there."

From 1965 to 1970, Richards served in the Oregon House of Representatives, in an era of trailblazing legislation and towering personalities such as Mark Hatfield and Tom McCall, who both served as governor during those years. He was then — and remains — a Republican, a fact he said often surprises people, even him.

"The atmosphere was different then than it is now," Richards said. "Sure, it was partisan, but there wasn't any rancor."

At the end of his term, he spent a month in Mississippi, one of three Lane County lawyers volunteering with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, a group chartered by President Kennedy. He defended a black man accused of killing a local bootlegger, successfully arguing for a life sentence rather than the death penalty.

"I think in Oregon I'd just been too sheltered from racial issues," Richards said of his motivation to go. "It was time to learn more."

The son of an oil truck driver and a schoolteacher, Richards was born in Colfax, Wash., and moved to Ontario, near the Idaho border, when he was 8. He was an average student who played fullback — at 142 pounds — on his high school football team his senior year.

It wasn't until his senior year at the University of Oregon that he decided to pursue law.

"My father wasn't very excited about that," said Richards, an only child. "He didn't have a very high opinion of lawyers."

He earned his law degree at Willamette University, returning to Eugene in 1954 to take a job in the District Attorney's office. Within a year, he'd been snapped up by Luvaas Cobb. Fraser said part of what defines Richards is his need and ability to render service to others, in his practice as well as in the community. He has served on the boards of United Way of Lane County, the Pearl Buck Center and other organizations. In the early days of the current war in Iraq, he joined with Physicians for Social Responsibility to give community presentations about the health effects of war.

"I was against this war in the first place and have been ever since," Richards said. "I'm against any pre-emptive war."

He sat on the Oregon Environmental Quality Commission for eight years, and worked with Citizens for a Hospital in the Heart of Eugene, which tried unsuccessfully to persuade PeaceHealth Medical Group to keep its hospital downtown.

The father of three grown children, Richards has been married to his second wife, Marian, for 25 years. The pair spend the month of February in Palm Desert, Calif., and do a fair amount of international traveling.

An avid runner until about 10 years ago, he still works out four times a week, although back surgery sidelined him temporarily last spring. He started playing golf six years ago, and recently took up charcoal drawing.

Although he stopped trying cases five years ago, Richards has no plans to retire and still works nearly full time.

"I enjoy what I do very much," he said. "Problem-solving — that's my practice."