

JERRY JAHN

Nurturing Prosperity in Champaign

by Edward McClelland



CHAMPAIGN—The city of Champaign has nearly doubled in size since Francis J. “Jerry” Jahn arrived there as a University of Illinois undergraduate in 1960. As a counselor to some of the city’s leading businesses, and the president of **Meyer Capel**, its largest law firm, Jahn has played a key role in that growth.

Jahn has been involved in business deals and developments that have expanded the boundaries of Champaign, and have bolstered its most important industries: agriculture, restaurants, education, shipping and warehouses. He’s helped acquire the land to build golf courses, warehouses, shopping centers, and negotiated the ground lease for the development of a university research park.

Jahn grew up in the southern Illinois towns of Harrisburg and Cahokia. When he arrived at U of I, he intended to become a journalist. As it turned out, he never wrote a word for the *Daily Illini*, the college paper.

“I actually started out in the pre-journalism program,” he says. “I had been involved in school newspaper and yearbook when I was at Cahokia, and the advisor for those publications and I had come to a conference up here during my senior year in high school, and I had decided that was what I wanted to do, so I got involved in the program. In the spring of my freshman year, I went to the journalism department to see if they could give me any leads or help with finding a summer job in the newspaper business somewhere in the metropolitan St. Louis area. The guy said no, no jobs like that available, and there aren’t many jobs available in journalism anyway. That gave me a little pause for thought, and I started to look at some other areas. I had always

had somewhat of an interest in law, and decided at that point I was going to switch majors to political science, with the hope of going to law school.”

Law was another of Jahn’s youthful interests, so he decided to go in that direction. In high school, he had followed news accounts of Supreme Court cases and written a paper on divorce laws. Jahn married his wife, Helen, just before starting law school, so he stayed in Champaign to study law. At the time, U of I legal scholars didn’t study in the most sophisticated setting.

“When I started law school, I think we were the only law school in the Big Ten that had a horse barn across the street from the law school,” he says.

Starting Out as a Utility Infielder

While Jahn studied law, his wife worked as a legal secretary at Phillips, Phebus and Tummelson, an Urbana firm. Jahn clerked with them the summer after his second year, then joined the firm once he had his law degree. He had grown up in small-town Illinois, and he’d decided that was where he wanted to make his career.

“I had wanted to practice somewhere in Illinois, not in Chicago and not in the East St. Louis area, so I had kind of restricted my looking to Champaign, Decatur, Rockford, Peoria, areas like that,” Jahn says. “I didn’t want the commute in Chicago, and being essentially lost in a big city. I had grown up in smaller areas. The East St. Louis area was at that time not a particularly good area to be practicing in.”

Working at a small firm in a smaller city not only saved Jahn a lot of driving back and forth to work, it allowed him to grow as a lawyer more quickly than his classmates

who were practicing in the big city.

“The guys that I went to law school with that went back to Chicago and started with some of the larger firms—of course, back then, a large firm was maybe 35 to 50 lawyers—they had very little client contact the first few years, and would up doing a lot of either second chair or third chair work in litigation area,” Jahn says. “I started off almost immediately with substantial client contact and trying cases by myself. The firm that I started with was primarily an insurance defense firm that also represented railroads, defending crossing cases, and also had a fairly good banking practice. So I did defense litigation, and subrogation claims for insurance companies, and a lot of loan document preparation for the banks and savings and loan companies. At a firm that size in a community that size a new lawyer pretty much had to be a utility infielder and do a little bit of everything. I did some family law work, some collection work, drafted some wills.”

After three years, Jahn left Phillips, Phebus & Tummelson. He had a couple motivations for quitting the firm. First, the state had just passed a no-fault auto insurance law, and there was some doubt as to whether the insurance defense law practice as he had known it was going to continue. Second, a son of a senior partner had just joined the firm, the grandson of another senior partner was in law school, and the son of yet another partner was seriously contemplating attending law school. That didn’t bode well for his prospects of rising in the ranks.

In 1970, Jahn joined Meyer Capel. At the time, he was only the fifth lawyer in the firm. Once again, he did a little bit of everything. Jahn started off doing litigation, and estate

administration work, as well as personal injury and wrongful death cases. He was also involved in business litigation over contracts, and employment non-compete covenants.

Six years later, Chris Meyer, the firm’s business lawyer, retired from his legal practice to manage his family’s television stations. By default, Jahn became Meyer Capel’s business lawyer.

‘Getting Fair Deals Done’

One of Jahn’s longest-lasting business relationships has been with Clint Atkins, a major developer in Champaign-Urbana. Atkins developed the North Prospect Area, the area’s first major development north of Interstate 74, selling the land to Sam’s Club and Wal-Mart.

“I’ll typically be involved after Clint has had initial conversations with farmers to acquire land,” Jahn says. “I would draft letters of intent and go from there to drafting the contracts to acquire the land, handling the closing of those transactions, dealing with prospective buyers of land or prospective lessees and negotiating and closing sales contracts and negotiating lease terms of the property being leased.”

Atkins started working with Meyer Capel in the mid-1960s, and estimates he has been involved in “many hundreds” of deals with Jahn.

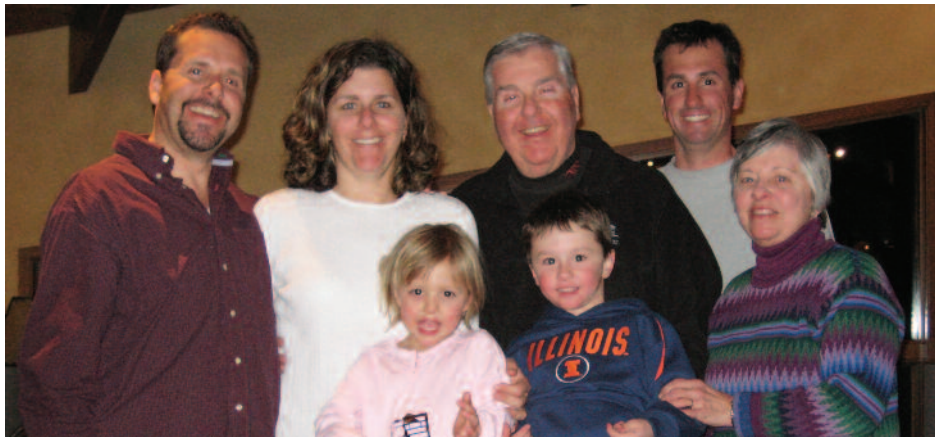
“Jerry’s really good at getting fair deals done,” Atkins says. “A fair deal will get done. An unfair deal will not get done. He has helped really kind of nurture companies along. I think getting good counsel from your law staff is critical to the growth of a company.”

Atkins is also the former owner of Hobbico, the world’s largest distributor of radio-controlled airplanes, boats and cars. Like many shippers and suppliers, Hobbico takes advantage of Champaign’s location in the middle of America and at the intersection of three major highways.

“In addition to having three interstate highways serving the area, we also have Willard Airport with decent commercial air traffic,” Jahn says. “We also have more privately-owned jets for a town of this size than any other community. From the warehouse and distribution standpoint, the interstate highways and the rail service that we have are the key factors.”

With Jahn’s counsel, The Atkins Group also built warehouses in Champaign for Allen Bradley Co., and developed an industrial subdivision that sold property to Federal Express and SuperValu among others.

A Champaign booster—he’s a member of the Rotary Club—Jahn points out that thanks to a combination of the agricultural economy, the university community, and



Warming up during a family ski vacation. Front row, from left: Jahn's grandchildren, Marybeth and Stephen Dyson. Back row, from left: son Mike; daughter Amy Dyson; Jahn; son-in-law Ed Dyson; and Jahn's wife, Helen.



Jahn enjoys a Valenti Management Company employee incentive cruise with, from left, wife, Helen, Jody Davis, and her husband, Jeff Davis, Jahn's law partner. Jahn serves on the Valenti board and as general counsel.

two significant medical facilities—Carle Clinic and Christie Clinic—Champaign is nearly “recession-proof.”

“I think Champaign has a lot of advantages of a much larger city with very few of the detrimental qualities,” he says. “It’s an easy town to get around. You can go from one point of town to the other side of town in 20 minutes. The University, of course, attracts very bright people, and a lot of them wind up staying here. There’ve been a number of entrepreneurs who have either stayed in town or come to town because of the University. The city of Champaign has been quite progressive in wanting to attract business and commercial endeavors, and has been cooperative in dealing with developers, making it relatively easy to get projects done.”

When Jahn came to U of I, Mattis Avenue was the western boundary of Champaign. Since then, the town has grown west and south. Atkins’ developments have pushed the city limits to the north. With no geographical barriers to growth on the north and west, Champaign continues to annex.

Recently, three high-rise projects were built on or near the University of Illinois campus. The old Burnham Hospital was converted into an apartment complex with retail on first floor. A 15-story tower built on Green Street, and another 7-story building went up nearby.

Nonetheless, he said, “development has really slowed over the last year. There have been a number of projects that have been in the works and have been completed, and as those were winding down it was just like

someone had shut off the tap.”

In recent months, “we’re starting to see some movement—more inquiries, more proposals being made now. I would say within the next six to nine months, we would see some more building projects getting started.”

Jahn has also done a lot of work in another recession-proof business: food. He serves on the board of directors of Valenti Management, which started in the nearby town of Loda, Illinois and now has its headquarters in Tampa, Florida. Valenti started off acquiring 26 KFC restaurants in the midwest, 39 Taco Bells in Florida, and developing a number of Kenny Rogers Roasters Restaurants in the sun belt, before that chain disintegrated. Valenti now has 125 Wendy’s restaurants in eastern Pennsylvania and metropolitan Memphis, as well as 15 Chili’s restaurants in Alabama and Mississippi.

Jahn has also represented a number of retail grocers, including Kirby Foods, Inc., which has 19 stores in central Illinois and western Indiana. Vic Buraglio, former owner of Kirby Foods, began working with Jahn in 1986.

“Another attorney in town had told me he was a very good corporate attorney and he was a good people person,” Buraglio says. “Jerry’s the type of guy I always felt like we always talked more as friend to friend than client to attorney.”

Buraglio also values Jahn for his work ethic.

“I think he’s very, very well regarded as a corporate attorney,” Buraglio says. “He will put in whatever hours are necessary. Deals don’t sit on his desk very long. When you’re working on a deal and it’s hot, you need to get it done. Jerry will just go and go and go. I think he just loves the thrill of the hunt. He’s the kind of guy, he wants to go to Hilton Head to play golf, he’ll work ’til 10 o’clock every day to get everything done, and when he gets back, he’ll work ’til 10 o’clock again to catch up. I asked him, ‘Is it worth it?’ He said, ‘Absolutely.’”

Jahn became president of Meyer Capel in 1999. That meant assuming more administrative duties while carrying the same practice load. In his 60s, Jahn works even harder than he did as a young lawyer, spending 10 to 15 hours a week on administrative work, while billing 35 to 40

hours a week. He spends about one week a month out of town, often on activities that combine business and pleasure. Valenti Management often invites him on employee incentive cruises, where he meets with executive-level employees, and attends board meetings. The trips have taken him “almost everywhere in the eastern and western Caribbean: St. Thomas; Cozumel, Mexico; Puerto Rico. I think there have been 9 or 10 of those cruises.”

The majority shareholder of Valenti Management also has a house at Snowmass near Aspen, Colorado, where Jahn pursues one of his passions: downhill skiing.

“My son, with whom we started skiing at a very early age, went to school at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and a couple years ago moved back to Aspen after bouncing around for awhile, and so the last two years, we’ve spent three weeks skiing,” Jahn says. “I’ve gotten my grandkids involved in skiing at ages 5 and 3 for the first time a couple years ago. Downhill skiing, especially in the West, is absolutely exhilarating. The scenery is spectacular. A lot of times you’ll get bright blue skies with the sun shining and fresh snow. It’s just really hard to explain unless you’ve been there and done it.”

When he’s home in Champaign, Jahn plays golf (he worked on acquisition of the land and negotiation of contracts for the development of Stone Creek Golf Club in Urbana) and attends every University of

Symphony, so the couple regularly attends classical music concerts. The couple is also very active in the Faith United Methodist Church in Champaign.

One indication that Jahn is one of the state’s most highly-regarded business lawyers is his service on the Illinois Secretary of State’s Corporate Acts Advisory Committee, which grew out of a steering committee of lawyers formed to help pass the Business Corporation Act of 1983. Once that Act was passed, the group evolved into the Corporate Acts Advisory Committee. Jahn was appointed in 1986, when Jim Edgar was Secretary of State. Meeting monthly in Chicago or Springfield, the committee reviewed proposed legislation or legislative fixes that related to the Business Corporation Act, the Uniform Partnership Act, the Limited Partnership Act and helped write the Illinois Limited Liability Company Act. The Committee also advised the Secretary of State as to what position, if any, he should take on pending legislation which affected the business community. He resigned in 2003 so a younger lawyer in the firm could take his place. Soon after, Secretary of State Jesse White disbanded the committee.

As Jahn’s law practice has helped Champaign grow, Champaign has helped his law practice grow. In 1970, there only seven or eight multi-lawyer firms in town. Now, there are over a dozen. With 30 lawyers, Meyer Capel is the largest. The



Skiing at Snowmass with friends and clients. Front row, from left: Marcy Sloan; Sheila Valenti; Esther Lambert; and Jahn’s wife, Helen. Back row, from left, Steve Sloan; Darrell Valenti; Steve Nesbitt; and Jahn.

Illinois men’s football and basketball game, wearing an orange sweater or an orange tie to show pride in his alma mater. Jahn and his wife also had season tickets to women’s basketball, but dropped those because “it seemed like we were living at the Assembly Hall.”

He is also a strong supporter of the men’s golf team.

Jahn’s wife is extensively involved with the Guild of the Champaign-Urbana



Jahn and his family. From left: wife, Helen; daughter Amy Dyson; grandson Stephen Dyson; son-in-law Ed Dyson; granddaughter Marybeth Dyson; and son Mike.

half-century long relationship between Jerry Jahn and Champaign has been good for both the man, and the city. ■