

## **Man recounts lifelong career as court reporter**

Writes book to share life's history with family

**By JODY L. MAYERS**

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OCONOMOWOC – Imagine covering endless court trials, including high-profile murder cases. Imagine being locked in a room until you were done typing a transcript from a mutiny trial on board a British merchant vessel during World War II. Sound like a movie? It's not. It's actual accounts from the lifelong career of court reporter Norbert "Coley" Griffin, who turned 89 in December.

"I was blessed with an amazing memory," he said. "I can recount almost everything in my life, down to the names and street numbers of papers I used to deliver as a child."

Griffin grew up in Jefferson, went to war, married Anne Snyder of Oconomowoc and ultimately began a career that would prove rewarding and interesting.

His wife died of cancer, and two of his children are deceased. Finally, after 67 years on the job, Griffin retired in 2003.

He has received the first Lifetime Achievement Award for his profession, has been featured in numerous publications and has spoken to future court reporters and moved them to tears.

He has 10 grandchildren who he adores, and has written a short autobiography to pass down to them when he dies, including old clippings of newspapers he kept the time of ward, his beloved shorthand book, magazines in which he has been featured and more.

"I thank God for having given me the good health for the years of service in a career that I loved, and for the opportunity to work with wonderful people," he said. "Every night before

a trial, I would kneel down and pray to God to give me the strength to write a good report based on the trial, and he never failed me."

### **The beginning**

With the motivation of a high school teacher who saw potential in Griffin, he perfected his shorthand writing and applied for a secretarial opening at a malt plant in Jefferson.

"I ended up losing out on the position to our class valedictorian but applied later on and was hired," he said. "But before I started, a local businessman had more than a passing interest in a famous murder trial that was being held in the circuit court at Jefferson."

Griffin said the man hired him to sit in the courtroom during the nine-day trial to take down all that he was capable of and type the finished notes at home on his typewriter.

"For each of those long days of work I was paid \$2 per day, and earned a whopping \$18 for the entire trial," Griffin said. "I was floored. That was a lot of money back then."

The small taste of life in the courtroom gave Griffin a hunger for more. He apprenticed with another court reporter until he was finally fast enough to be on his own.

"In return for getting an opportunity to start the position, I was paid \$50 per month, but I would also have to shovel the judge's sidewalk, mow the lawn, change the cat litter – which I was allergic to – and drive him to places such as the movies," Griffin said.

After a grueling year, Griffin was appointed official reporter for the 12<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit of Wisconsin, and his salary was raised to \$250 per month.

"At that time, the stenotype machine was in existence, but it had not reached Wisconsin," he said. "I still used a pen, which I held loosely in hand to avoid carpal-tunnel syndrome. Because my family didn't have a lot of money, I

couldn't afford to go to college to learn shorthand techniques further, so I bought a book for \$7 from a friend. It became my bible."

In his first year of reporting, Griffin served as a reporter in two first-degree murder cases and at least two lengthy civil jury trials that were appealed to the Wisconsin Supreme Court.

"This place quite a burden on a self-taught 19-year-old neophyte reporter," he said. "After only about three months into my new job, Pearl Harbor had a tremendous impact on my life. Since I was single, I enlisted in the Navy with the reassurance from a judge that the war would only last six months, and then I would be back on the job. Four years later, I returned to my position and my career."

### **War stories**

Griffin said he worked extremely long hours during the war, usually with other court reporters. He said although the Navy kept the ship supplied with fuel, water, food, guns and ammunition, somebody dropped the ball when it came to sending stenotype ribbons and ink to the Mediterranean area.

"As a result, my reporter friends were about to gloat at my having the brunt of the workload because I knew how to write fluent shorthand with a simple pen," he said.

While Griffin was awaiting a transfer to Naples, Italy, a British naval officer in dire need of a court reporter asked Griffin to cover a mutiny trial on board a British merchant vessel.

In the end, the three defendants were found guilty and sentenced to death.

"I thought my duties were over, but to my chagrin, the British officer took me ashore and locked me into a room in the British navy house and said he wouldn't release me until the notes were typed," Griffin said. "I did the fastest typing in my life that day."

### **The future**

Griffin said anyone interested in a career as a court reporter has to get used to hard work and dedication, and be willing to never stop studying.

"It is a fascinating career, but it takes hard work and dedication. This field has come a long way," he said. "Closed captioning at the bottom of the television screen is done by a court reporter. Without them, hearing-impaired individuals wouldn't be able to follow some of the most important historical accounts in the U.S., such as September 11, or even be able to sit in a courtroom and follow a trial as a juror."

However, the number of people going into the profession is decreasing, meaning those who want to move into it will have many opportunities.