

## The Chairman: John Bouma

By Jack L. August, Ph.D.

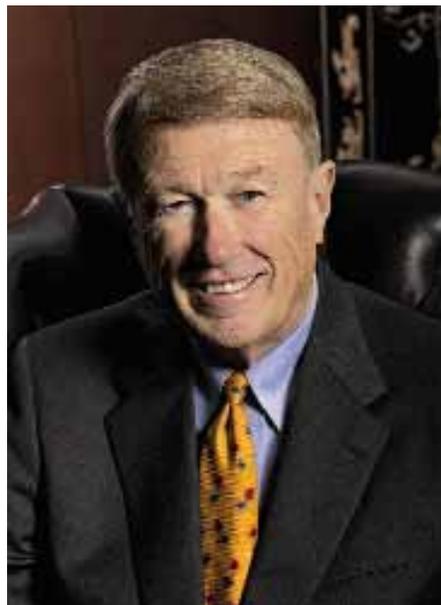
In August 2004 The Business Journal of Phoenix published its annual "Readers' Choice Awards," and Snell & Wilmer Chairman, John Bouma, was selected as the "Most Respected Business Leader" in Phoenix and the Valley of the Sun, edging out first runner-up Jerry Colangelo. Similarly, readers of the publication, for the second consecutive year, voted the law firm he leads, Snell & Wilmer, as the best law firm with which to do business. As a member of a rival firm put it, "Bouma and Snell & Wilmer are a lot like

I first met John in May 2003 in order to discuss a biographical and topical study of Mark Wilmer, one of the firm's co-founders, and the landmark water law case Arizona v California. At first he fooled me; he seemed like a laid back guy whom I had learned prior to our meeting loved hunting and fishing. Quickly, however, I realized he was urbane, direct, and had the ability to cut right to the heart of an issue, synthesize its various parts, and arrive at a sound conclusion. I sensed my answers to questions were being analyzed and interpreted for any hint of weakness or gaps in knowledge. In fact, he was forceful, confident, and his personality and six-foot-four-inch frame filled the room. At the same time he possessed that uncommon ability to put others, like me, at ease; a graceful quality that marks his understated yet solid style.

For most of the over forty years Bouma has practiced law in the Valley he has been acknowledged as a litigator of the first order. The list of service awards and professional recognition is long and impressive, including The National Law Journal in 1997 citing him as one of the "100

the New York Yankees, they are the establishment and everyone takes aim at them but more often than not they win the World Series of law firms here in Phoenix and wherever they are in the West." In its 70 years of existence, Snell & Wilmer has helped shape the nature and direction of economic growth and development, public policy, and cultural life not only in its home state offices in Phoenix and Tucson but also at the firm's more

recent additions to its growing practice in Las Vegas, Irvine, Salt Lake City, and Denver.

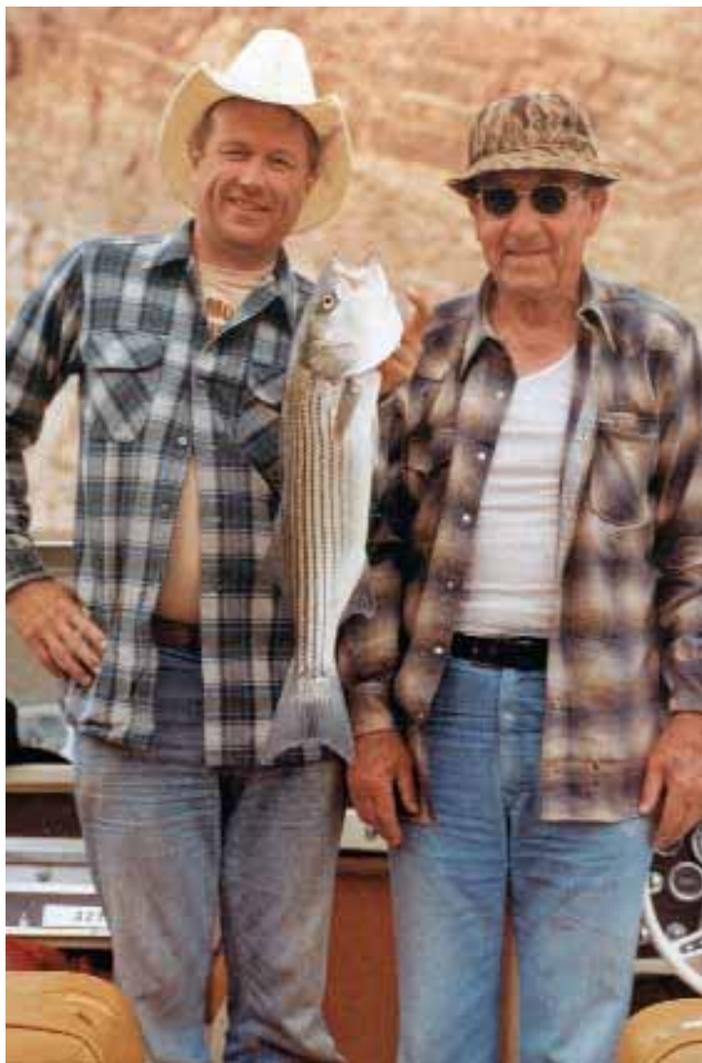


John Bouma, Snell & Wilmer Chairman

Most Influential Lawyers" in the nation. The year 1998, however, stands out as special. He received the Walter Craig Distinguished Service Award, Arizona State University College of Law Distinguished Achievement Award, and the Community Legal Services (CLS) Decade of Dedication Award. The CLS award recognizes those Arizonans who have distinguished themselves by their more than ten years of dedication and support for the delivery of legal services to the poor. And in honoring John, CLS recognized his leadership in the delivery of pro bono legal services on a national, state, and local level for the past 15 years, during which "he has provided generously and consistently giving of his time and talent to promote increased

involvement by the legal profession in the delivery of legal services for the poor, and the preservation of financial support for Community Legal Services and the Volunteer Lawyers Program." Bouma and the firm have played the key role in the Equal Justice Foundation, donating an average of \$200,000 per year to provide funding for agencies that legally

represent the disadvantaged. From recognition for helping the less fortunate to representing nationally prominent business clients, to serving as President of the Board of Trustees of the Phoenix Art Museum and President of the Arizona Opera Company, Bouma's numerous accomplishments and public profile continue to grow though he avoids drawing unnecessary attention to himself.



*(l-r) John Bouma and legendary lawyer Mark Wilmer enjoy their favorite pastime.*

Bouma's interest in law and the outdoors are rooted in small town Iowa; he was born in Ft. Dodge and grew up in Pocahontas (population 1,970) where his father ran the local movie theater. As a youngster he enjoyed arguing and his father encouraged him to pursue a career in law where, the elder Bouma advised, he could be paid for it. John graduated from the University of Iowa with a degree in political science (with high

honors) and attended law school there, graduating in two years with highest honors in 1960. In that year he took his first job at Foley, Sammond & Lardner, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin but left after four months to fulfill an ROTC obligation at Ft. Huachuca in Arizona. Upon completion he joined Snell & Wilmer—then a 20-lawyer firm—in November 1962 and plunged into trial work, handling mostly personal injury defense and commercial litigation. By 1967 he made partner and through the 1970s he developed four specialties; antitrust, product liability, medical malpractice, and environmental law. Over the past two decades he has focused his practice in complex commercial litigation, including antitrust, commercial and business torts, financial institutions, professional malpractice defense and alternative dispute resolution. Significantly, in 1983 Bouma became chairman of the firm, which through the 1980s and 1990s grew at an unprecedented rate and today, at the firm's 70th anniversary, Snell & Wilmer boasts 439 attorneys in five western states.

In many ways, Snell & Wilmer's growth parallels that of Arizona and the West during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Founding partners, Frank Snell, Jr. and Mark Wilmer, were legends in their time and major contributors to the welfare of Phoenix and Arizona. For example, in the 1950s Snell facilitated the merger of the State's two major utility companies into what became Arizona's largest utility, Arizona Public Service. In the early 1960s, Wilmer, arguably the State's premier trial attorney, won what was the longest Supreme Court case in American history, *Arizona v California*. The case established Arizona's right to a specific and significant portion of the waters of the Colorado River system and without the victory Arizona would not have become a civilization of economic growth, development, and hope.

As I have observed John and grown to know him better I realize he maintains numerous attributes that influence Snell & Wilmer's legal culture; he builds consensus, renders superior legal service, encourages public service to the community, and personifies an upbeat and optimistic work environment. For me, when I secure an hour of his time the conversations are unfailingly fascinating. Importantly, he listens carefully and well. But there is something more. John's brand of leadership has engendered a collective pride and distinctive cultural identity about the firm. As one senior partner put it, "In my humble opinion John Bouma has been, and still is, the very best law firm manager in the United States. John has consistently communicated, both in words and actions that his only agenda is to do what is best for the firm, the lawyers who practice there, the staff it employs, the clients it serves, and the profession. He has also had the unerring good judgment to select the best course of action when those goals seemed to be in apparent conflict. We [Snell & Wilmer] could not have achieved even a fraction of the success we have enjoyed had someone other than John been at the helm." That comment squares with that of another partner, who cornered me in an elevator and said, "I hope John stays on as chairman for as long as possible; he's like stability and excellence rolled into one." Without question, Bouma has honored the memory of the two legal giants before him and the broad regional course he has charted for Snell & Wilmer since 1983 continues to shape the direction and quality of life in Arizona and the West during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

*Dr. Jack L. August, Jr. serves as Executive Director of the Barry Goldwater Center for the Southwest and Visiting Scholar in Legal History at Snell and Wilmer L.L.P. He has taught at the University of Houston, the University of Northern British Columbia, Prescott College, and Northern Arizona University, where his courses focused on the American West and environmental history. He is a former Fulbright Scholar, National Endowment for the Humanities Research Fellow, and Pulitzer Prize nominee for his volume, **Vision in the Desert: Carl Hayden and Hydropolitics in the American Southwest** (Ft. Worth: TCU Press, 1999). He is coauthor with former Arizona Senator Dennis DeConcini of **Senator Dennis DeConcini: From the Center of the Aisle** (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006); and his most recent book is **Dividing Western Waters: Mark Wilmer and Arizona v California** (Ft. Worth: TCU Press, 2007).*



**BARRY GOLDWATER**  
 CENTER FOR THE SOUTHWEST