



O.H. "Buddy" Sharpless
Executive Director

One last column...

...with memories of more than 36 years with the Association of County Commissions of Alabama.

My last day as executive director of the Association of County Commissions of Alabama will be Feb. 28, 2009, and this will be the last article I will write for *County Commissioner* magazine in that capacity.

You would think that after 36-plus years in the employment of ACCA, all but a year-and-a-half as executive director, I could easily think of something appropriate to say in this last article. Well, it was not easy. And, as I began thinking about it, it seemed to me that the easiest thing to do would be to just say, "Thanks for the opportunity. I had a great time, and good luck to you all."

And, then I thought that an appropriate "swan song" would be in order. One filled with cogent memories of people, successes and failures, and finished with a lament about the mixed feelings of a time ending. Neither of those approaches seemed fitting.

When word got out that I would soon be retiring, many people approached me with the expected questions: "Why are you retiring?" "What are you going to do next?" etc. It came to me that a good way to approach this last article would be to simply pose and answer a number of questions relating to my tenure with ACCA. So, that is what I have attempted to do here.

What were the circumstances of your employment with ACCA?

While a student at Troy State

University, now Troy University, I got involved with the Student Government Association. I was elected during my junior year to serve during my senior year as state chairman for an organization known as Southern Universities Student Government Association. During that year, it was my responsibility to visit several universities and colleges in Alabama and organize and conduct statewide meetings of the organization. I mention this because it was my first involvement with association work.

The degree I received from TSU in 1970 was in Business Administration and Marketing, so after college I took a job with the J.C. Penney Company in Montgomery. Sometime in late 1971, a lady named Ruby Middleton came to work part time with the department in which I was working. It so happened that she was the secretary for then ACCA Executive Director Winston Stewart. She informed me that the Association was considering hiring an assistant executive director. One thing led to another and I was hired on June 1, 1972. I became executive director on Jan. 1, 1974.

What have you liked most about working for ACCA?

Unequivocally, getting to know and work closely with so many great people. I have had the privilege of working with literally thousands upon thousands of some of the finest people in the

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world. Not just casually, but up close and personal. I also enjoyed working on many major projects like construction of the headquarters building, the insurance programs, training programs and many others.

More specifically, what I have enjoyed most were the many opportunities I had to help county officials and employees solve problems. I will miss the hundreds of telephone calls I receive each year from individuals looking for answers and feeling their sense of appreciation when we worked through a situation.

What did you like least about working for ACCA?

The answer may come as a surprise to some, but what I liked least about my job was working with the Alabama Legislature. I have always said that the most important function of the Association is to be effective in dealing with the legislature. Although I was the “point man” for ACCA at the legislature for

more than 20 years, I never liked it. While I understood the process and enjoyed some notable successes during the years, I really never caught on to the political side of the process. I suffered under the misconception that all you had to do to be successful when dealing with the legislature was go before the individual members and its committees and simply say something that made sense. I learned, sometimes the hard way, that there is a lot more to it than that. That is why, while trying to act disappointed at my ineptness, I was actually very pleased and relieved when **Sonny Brasfield** came along and demonstrated an enormous ability in legislative-related activities.

What do you think were ACCA's most significant legislative accomplishments during your tenure?

The Association's membership annually adopts a legislative program to be presented to the legislature. We have been able to identify about 160 laws that originated as items on various Association legislative agendas adopted during the past 36 years. While they were all important, some do stand out as significant. These are mentioned below:



One of the many trips to Washington D.C.

Fuel Tax Increases: The legislature has increased the taxes on gasoline and diesel three times beginning in 1980. Counties receive annually more than \$70 million from the proceeds of these additional taxes. The revenue generated from these levees has proven to be invaluable to counties in maintaining the system of secondary roads and bridges in the state.

Subdivision Regulations: The legislature in 1979 authorized county commissions to adopt and enforce regulations applicable to the construction of subdivisions in unincorporated areas. The act has been amended at least twice. The act gave counties the authority necessary to ensure that the taxpayers are not saddled with the costs of shoddy construction and to make sure



A young and slender Buddy Sharpless talks over the future of the oil industry with a representative of the state's petroleum industry.

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that individuals who purchase property in such subdivisions get their money's worth.

Residential Building Codes:

Because of an act passed in 1993, counties can now adopt and enforce residential building codes in unincorporated areas of the state. This law gave county commissions a means through which to protect citizens from unscrupulous and unqualified home builders.

The Alabama Trust Fund: The Association was successful in 1986 in convincing the legislature to allow counties to receive a portion (10 percent) of the income produced by investments of the assets in the Alabama Trust Fund. The legislature has visited the subject of the Alabama Trust Fund several times in recent years and provisions protecting the revenue counties receive from that source are now found in the *Alabama Constitution*. Counties can now rely on this as a permanent source of funding.

The Alabama Local Government Training Institute: A 1992 act requires newly elected county commission members to attend a course of training aimed at instructing them in the basic laws and principals of county government. This law has helped hundreds of county commission members get off on the right foot as they entered public service.

Collection of Local Taxes: Prior to 1996, most county commissions had to rely on the Alabama Department of Revenue to collect most of their local

taxes. A 1996 act authorized counties to collect or contract with private companies for the collection of local taxes. Counties that have exercised this authority have collectively realized millions of dollars in additional revenue.

Joint Purchasing Agreement: A 2000 act of the legislature authorized two or more contiguous or noncontiguous counties to enter into joint purchasing agreements. Counties have been able to enjoy enormous savings through such agreements.

Limitation on Unfunded Mandates: In 1998, the legislature passed and the voters ratified what is designated as *Amendment 621* to the *Alabama Constitution*. This amendment significantly restricts the legislature's ability to pass general laws that would require county governments to expend additional revenue. The amendment has for the most part eliminated what is commonly referred to as "unfunded mandates."

These eight accomplishments are by no means all the important legislation the Association helped steer through the legislature



In the early days of the ACCA insurance programs, Sharpless often delivered payments himself!

during my tenure. Some might say I picked the wrong eight. These do, however, stand out in my mind.

What do you think were the most significant events that occurred or accomplishments that were realized during your tenure?

There were many, and like choosing the most significant legislative accomplishments, it is difficult to choose among many important events or accomplishments. One of the most significant events occurred in about 1975 when ACCA's Board of Directors decided to begin the process of constructing a headquarters building. The Association had been for years renting office space in a building with a dozen or so other associations. When we eventually moved into the building, it immediately gave the Association a visibility it had never enjoyed. The new building also gave ACCA the ability to expand its

Notes from Buddy Sharpless' First Board Meeting as ACCA Executive Director...

- Facing heavy debt due to printing costs and few advertisers, the Association's magazine, *Mr. County Commissioner*, was given an oversight committee, which included Sharpless.
- Sharpless was appointed to the State Social Security Advisory Board.
- After a 10-year absence, the adoption of the minutes of the ACCA Board of Directors was reinstated.
- The budget of the Association was \$64,709.
- ACCA staff would be expanded to include one more person for legislative activities.
- Discussion of educational programs took place as part of a discussion of suggestions to better member services.
- The early stages of a purchasing manual for counties was discussed.
- Conventions and conferences were discussed, particularly how they could be improved upon for the membership.
- Sharpless discussed the need for stricter parliamentary procedures during the meetings, a need to study the voting procedures for members and a procedure to follow if a county failed to pay dues.

programs and services without having to look for larger office space. Perhaps most importantly, it gave the county family a sense of pride in knowing they had a place of their own.

One of the other areas of accomplishments I look upon most favorably is what the Association has done in the area of formal training for county officials and employees. It began with what was referred to as the County Commissioners College. This program was the forerunner to the training now administered through the Alabama Local Government Training Institute. The Association now sponsors formal training for county administrators, county engineers, county revenue officers, directors and employees of emergency response (9-1-1) programs and assisted in the development of training of county emergency management directors. Because of all these training and educational programs, county officials and employees are much better equipped to provide services that benefit the citizens of the state.

The list would not be complete if it did not include mention of the self-funded workers compensation and liability insurance programs sponsored by the Association. These two programs have proven to be the most practical and cost-effective means through which counties provide workers compensation benefits to employees and protect county resources from the consequences of their activities.

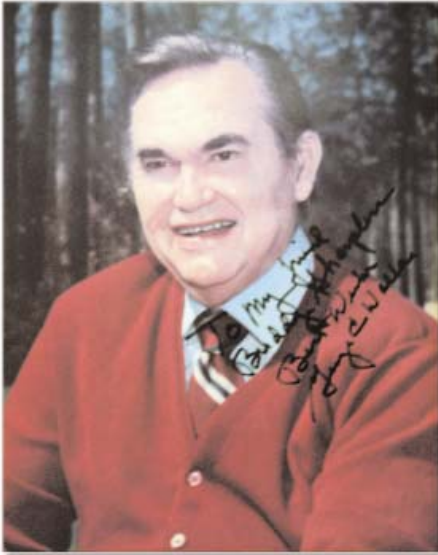
When viewed from a historical prospective, it may be that the most significant accomplishment ACCA has enjoyed over the past three decades is found in its success in holding the county family together. Except for a couple of hiccups along the way, the Association has never experienced a major controversy over any issue. Only in one year has every county not maintained its membership. The Association has never experienced a major controversy over such matters as partisan differences, large versus small county issues, policy establishment, or race. Much of the success the Association has enjoyed during the years is directly related to the unity it has maintained.

Who were some of the more interesting people you met during your tenure?

There is not enough space here for me to mention all the interesting people I have encountered during the past years. I could also list some I consider my favorites. I will not do that out of fear someone would be offended by not being mentioned.

I think I can say without offending many that one of the most interesting people I worked with and one who would be on the list of my top two or three most favorites was former **Gov. George Wallace**. When considering who and what he was and his impact on Alabama and the nation for that matter, it was a daunting experience just to be in his presence.

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A photograph personally signed by the late Gov. George Wallace.

There were many occasions when I and other ACCA representatives had reasons to meet with Gov. Wallace. The meetings were usually related to matters concerning the legislature.

One such meeting stands out as significant. It was during the session of the legislature when it was trying to figure out what to do with the hundreds of millions of dollars oil companies were paying the state for the privilege of drilling for oil and gas in Alabama waters in the Gulf of Mexico. The legislature was considering a constitutional amendment to have the money placed in a permanent trust fund and having the earning from the investment of the money allocated annually to the state's general fund.

A group of county and municipal officials went to the governor to urge him to support having a portion of the earnings allocated to counties and municipalities. It

was at that meeting that Gov. Wallace agreed to statutory provisions that provided that counties and municipalities would each receive 10 percent of the investment earnings when the annual earnings reached \$60 million.

The appropriate legislation passed with his blessings and the rest is history. The governor did not have to support our position, but he recognized the importance of having local governments share in the benefits the state was about to receive because of its natural resources.

There was another incident involving Gov. Wallace I think is worthy of mentioning. It is more personal in nature. It was during the year in which **Ron Green**, then chairman to the Macon County Commission, was serving as the first black to be elected president of ACCA.

The two of us were able to secure an appointment with the governor. I do not remember the issue we were to meet with him about, but that is not the point here. The meeting involved just the three of us.

No one else was in his office. As we entered his office, I noticed a stack of the governor's photographs placed on a television near the entrance. We visited with the governor about 45 minutes and at a point when Ron was engaged in conversation with the governor, I eased out of my chair to walk toward the stack of photographs.

Gov. Wallace observed me out of the corner of his eyes and as I was returning to my chair, he interrupted the conversation and said, "Buddy, everyone who has come into my office lately has asked me to sign a picture. Y'all must think I am about to die." I quickly responded that I did not think that he was about to die, but I knew that many of his autographed pictures were not actually signed by him but by staff members who were adept at signing his name and that I wanted the real thing.

Well, it did not take Ron long to realize the significance of the moment. He secured one of the pictures for the governor's signature. The governor graciously signed a photograph for each of us.

This is not to say that our desire to have a personally autographed photograph of George Wallace in any way reflects on our acceptance of, or agreement with, any activities or positions taken by the governor. There was a time, however, when very few blacks would have been in any way interested in a photograph personally autographed by the man.

The event took place during Gov. Wallace's last term and during the time he was confined to a wheelchair. Our eagerness to have the personally signed photograph is at least a reflection of and comment on the changes that occurred during the governor's life as a public servant and how public attitude toward him had changed.

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There is one other person that deserves to be mentioned as one of my favorites. That person is **James W. Webb** (Jim) the long-time general counsel for ACCA. He was retained by the Association about six months after I came on board and served in that capacity until his death in 2006.

For more than 30 years, Jim Webb helped guide the Association through many of its major events. He wrote the Association's bylaws and articles of incorporation. He wrote the



Sharpless offers insight, advice and counsel to his colleagues from the other county associations at a NACo function.

documents that formed the Association's two self-funded insurance programs. He also served as legal counsel for the two insurance programs.

Jim Webb deserves much of the credit for where the organization is today. His quiet and patient leadership guided ACCA for many years.

What do you consider as some of the "low points" during your tenure?

There were three events or circumstances I consider as low points during my tenure with ACCA. One was the self-funded health insurance program we conducted for 13 years. Another was the lawsuit that was filed against the Association over the health insurance program, and the third was when the ACCA Board of Directors endorsed a candidate for the Office of Governor.

What do you think were some of the keys to your long tenure?

I have often said that one of the keys to my long tenure is the county commission elections conducted every two to four years. I am not sure I could have kept the

group happy for as long as I have if its makeup did not change.

One of the major reasons I hung around so long can be found in the fact that I am very much a fiscal conservative. ACCA's members and the various boards of directors knew that I would not spend their money unwisely.

Another factor contributing to my tenure probably has to do with

my constant effort to be accessible to the members of the county government family. I have always felt that people appreciate being able to contact me personally. I want to feel that people appreciated the fact that I generally gave them solid advice when they called on me.

And finally, one must give credit where credit is due. A major reason I have been around so long is that I have in most part had some outstanding individuals working with me for all these many years. So much of what we have accomplished during the years is directly attributable to the other ACCA staff members.

What do you think has changed the most about county government during the last 36 years?

I think what has changed most about county government is the perception in the minds of citizens and county commission members about what county government is about. When I came on the scene it was pretty much all about roads and bridges. Candidates thought they were running for and citizens thought they were voting for "road commissioners," not county commissioners.

The truth is, it is not just perception. Out of necessity and because of laws that have been passed, county commissions are performing services and functions today they would not have dreamed of 30 years ago. Citizens and county officials are gradually beginning to realize that county

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government is about so much more than it used to be. Industrial and economic development, emergency management, solid waste, subdivision development regulations, building code enforcement, law enforcement, and much more are all part of what county government does in Alabama.

I think professionalism at the county level has improved significantly during recent years. This has been brought on in pertinent part as a result of the emphasis placed on training officials and employees.

When I started there was no training available for new county commissioners and the members of their staffs that work closely with them. Today there is formal training for commissioners, administrative staff, engineers and many others. Professionalism at the county government level is at an all time high and improving every day.

What are you going to do in retirement?

No specific plans have been made. An arrangement has been made whereby I will remain for an indefinite period affiliated with ACCA in a consultant role. There is always the possibility that I will take employment with

some other organization. I have many interests and therefore will not run out of something to do.

As I look back over the last 36-plus years, I cannot help but realize how incredibly fortunate I have been to have had what I consider to be one of the best jobs in the world. That is a bold statement, but the more I think about it, the more I realize how true it is.

I have been part of something very special for a long time. I cannot have any feelings other than a great sense of pride as I think about how far the Association has come since 1972. The Association has become one of the most respected organization in the State of Alabama and in the whole country, for that matter.

Nothing would be farther from the truth for me to think I did it all. I just happened to come along at the right time and guide things along. The truth is...the credit for the progress ACCA has made should go to the Association leaders who have



Buddy and granddaughter Marley face off. We think Marley won!

showed up along the way. By leaders, I mean those who served the organization as its officers and directors. Their willingness to lead the Association into new areas of activity has been what made the difference. To all these individuals, I say, "Thank you very much!"

The Association will now move on to even greater heights. ACCA is fortunate to have Sonny Brasfield move into the executive director's position. With his leadership and support from the Association's leaders, ACCA will continue to prosper.

It has been an honor and privilege for me to have been employed by the Association of County Commissions of Alabama. I cannot imagine ever having another job. Thank you very much!