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# The Colorado Lawyer

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## **Leo S. Altman (1911-2001)** **by Wm. David Lytle, John Keilbach**

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### **About the Authors**

*W. David Lytle has been with the law firm of Altman, Keilbach, Lytle, Parlapiano & Ware, P.C. for thirty-seven years. He worked with Leo Altman for twenty-seven years. Lytle was CBA President during 2007-08—lytle@altman-keilbach.com. John J. Keilbach was with the law firm of Altman, Keilbach, Lytle, Parlapiano & Ware, P.C. for almost twenty-nine years. He was a member of the CBA Board of Governors during 1989-90 and was President of the Colorado Lawyers Trust Account Foundation during 2001-02. He currently serves on the Legal Aid Foundation Board.*

Chief Judge Dennis Maes of the Tenth Judicial District recently recalled memories of his first meeting with Leo Altman:

When I was a younger lawyer and had started working with Legal Aid, I had a client with a real estate problem that involved unfamiliar issues. I wasn't sure where to begin. I asked around the office and someone said, "Do you know Leo Altman?" I hadn't met Leo at the time, but I was told I should go ahead and call him. So I did. I explained to Leo who I was and inquired whether he would mind if I asked him a question. "What are you doing right now, Dennis?" was his reply. "Come on over." Well, I wasn't doing anything else at that time, so I went to his office. He made me feel very welcome. He helped me frame my questions and gave me direction on where I could find the answers I needed. All the while, he made me feel like I was a bright young attorney. Over the years, I learned that this was a typical Leo Altman response. Any attorney, older or younger, who sought Leo's guidance had a similar experience.



Chief Judge Maes's story about Leo is in keeping with the many other stories that were shared with us after Leo's death in July 2001. It is representative of what we witnessed and personally experienced in the office of Altman Keilbach Lytle Parlapiano & Ware PC.

### **Personal History**

Many attorneys practicing in Colorado today may never have heard of nor known Leo Sidney Altman, even though he practiced in the state for more than sixty-five years. He was born more than a century ago in May 1911, and he devoted the majority of those years practicing estate planning, probate, and real property law in Pueblo and Southern Colorado.

Leo was born in Denver to Simon Altman and Gilsea (Marmorstein) Altman. Shortly after his birth, they moved to Idaho Springs. The family relocated to Pueblo when he and his sister Frieda were children, and this became his lifetime home.

Leo attended college and law school at the University of Colorado (CU) in Boulder. In 1935, he graduated from the CU School of Law. He passed the bar and returned to Pueblo, where he went into

graduated from the CO School of Law. He passed the bar and returned to Pueblo, where he went into practice with Ben Koperlik. The law firm of Koperlik and Altman was founded in 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression, making them the only practicing Jewish lawyers in the city of Pueblo at that time. By 1938, having become well established in the practice of law, Leo was earning almost \$1,800 per year.

In March 1942, in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Leo enlisted in the U.S. Army. He served until April 1946, rapidly rising to the rank of Captain.

After leaving active duty, he remained in the Army Reserves until 1966, when he retired with the rank of Lt. Colonel. After his wartime service, Leo returned to Pueblo and picked up with his old firm where he left off. After Ben Koperlik passed away, Leo joined forces with J. W. Preston and David Preston in 1956 to form Preston and Altman. He remained with the firm as an active lawyer until shortly before his death in 2001, when the firm was known as Altman, Keilbach, Lytle, Parlapiano & Ware, P.C.

## Professional Memberships and Service

Leo was a lifelong member of the American Bar Association (ABA), the Colorado Bar Association (CBA), and the Pueblo County Bar Association (PCBA), all of which he served in a variety of capacities. He was Vice President of the ABA's Junior Bar Conference (1941); a member of the CBA Board of Governors (1952–56); CBA Vice President (1956); a member of the Colorado Supreme Court's State Board of Law Examiners (1964–68); and a member of the CBA Real Estate Standards Committee for a good number of years. He also was a Fellow of the American College of Trust and Estate Counsel.



*Law partners in 1985 gathered to celebrate Leo's fifty years as a member of the bar (left to right): David Lytle, David Parlapiano, Leo, Adele Anderson, and John Keilbach. Anderson later became a county court judge.*

## The Character of the Man

What has been said so far is mostly the kind of information that can be found in obituaries and reference publications. It doesn't say much about the character of the man, or what made him unique and outstanding. My collaborator on this profile, John Keilbach, and I practiced law with Leo for many years—John for twenty-nine years and I for twenty-seven years. We consider Leo to be one of the most remarkable people we have ever known.

During the 1940s, Leo was the Pueblo Municipal Judge. He was active all his life in a wide variety of civic organizations, including the American Red Cross, United Way, and the American Legion. His faith was important to him, and he was a member of Temple Emmanuel and B'nai B'rith.

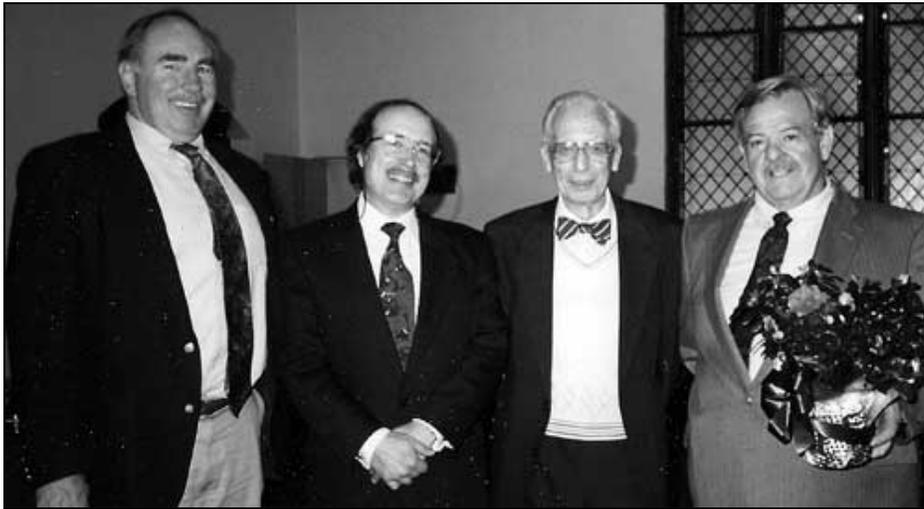
Leo was a generous benefactor of many charities, but he was very quiet and modest about both the time and the money he gave to help others. Leo did not give to receive thanks or accolades; he gave because it was the right thing to do. He gave his money, his time, and his expertise to help young lawyers or the many clients who sought his counsel without the ability to pay. Leo never turned away a prospective client because he or she didn't have the resources to pay a fee.

Leo didn't go into law for financial rewards. In 1995, after having actively practiced law for sixty years,

Leo didn't go into law for financial reward. In 1955, after having already practiced law for sixty years, Leo was asked why he continued to work. Initially, he answered, "I still enjoy it. I've said many, many times that I'd rather practice law than work for a living." Of course, that was said with a smile, a chuckle, and a twinkle of the eye. In a more serious vein, he talked about his love of the law and the ability to help others:

Part of it is the people. Part of it is the service I can render. Part of it is being able to keep up with what's going on in the world of business and the world of law.

On one occasion when Leo was recognized with the Award of Merit by the PCBA for his many years of service to the community and to the legal profession, and after many of his accomplishments had been recounted by others, Leo quipped that he was glad to have lived long enough to hear his own eulogy.



*Gathering in 1995 to celebrate Leo's sixty years of practice are law partners (left to right): John Keilbach, David Lytle, Leo, and David Parlapiano.*

## **A Mentor With a Keen Mind and Kind Heart**

Leo had a keen legal mind and a vast knowledge of the civil law. He was always well prepared. He stayed up-to-date with new developments in real property, estate planning, business, and finance, and he also provided thoughtful and valuable assistance in almost any other area of civil law where help was needed. When asked how he became so organized, he related that shortly after he was admitted to the bar and began practicing with Ben Koperlik, Ben walked into Leo's office and told Leo he was going on a vacation for a month or two, and that Leo should "take care of things." Leo said it was either get organized very fast or be disbarred. The attorneys in the firm could not have had a better mentor.

Early in his years at the firm, John Keilbach went into Leo's office with a question to which he was sure Leo knew the answer. Leo responded by asking John whether he had carefully reviewed the applicable statutes and knew what they said. John went away and reviewed the statutes. He returned to Leo, discussed what the statutes said, and expressed his need for additional assistance. Leo's response was, "Have you carefully reviewed the applicable Rules of Civil Procedure?" It was back to the drawing board for John, who returned to Leo with statutes and rules in hand, but still with no clear answer to his question. Leo offered that there were a couple of cases John might want to read, at which point he proceeded to give John the case citations off the top of his head. John got the idea. Leo was there to help, not to do the work for us. Lawyers from outside the firm who came to Leo for guidance may have had the good fortune of receiving a quick answer, but he taught John and me to review everything we could so we would be fully prepared whatever the situation.

I learned fairly quickly in the early years of my practice that Leo was widely known and immensely respected, not just for his legal acumen but for his kind, civil, and humble approach to everything and everyone in life. Many of Leo's contemporaries, including those with whom he worked or whom Leo had helped, either have retired or died. Those who became acquainted with Leo when they were novice attorneys, such as Chief Judge Maes, or who worked with him only briefly or throughout their own legal careers, regarded him with great respect and remember him fondly.

## Partners in Life and Travel

Leo was single until 1949, when he married Helen Kimball Charles. They were married for fifty years. Helen passed away in 1999. Leo and Helen had no children together, but by extension, Leo eventually became "grandfather" to four (and he excelled in this role, as well). Leo was a devoted and loving husband to Helen and they traveled extensively throughout their marriage. They traveled to 108 countries in six of the seven continents—Antarctica being the only continent they never visited. Their traveling ventures ended around 1990, when Helen developed a debilitating physical condition.

Once, when Leo was preparing to be away from the office for three months so that he and Helen could explore the African continent, he was asked by another attorney how he could possibly take off for thirteen weeks. Leo responded: "I didn't have any clients when I started my practice. If I don't have any clients when I come back, I guess I'll just have to start again."

He didn't lose any clients. John and I and our late partner Dave Parlapiano didn't begrudge Leo's long trips a bit. When he was in the office, he was the most assiduous, efficient, and effective worker among us.

## A Model of Efficiency, Craftsmanship, and Unique Style

A testament to Leo's efficiency was his desk, which was actually a beautiful but simple oak table that he had refinished. There was space for a few pencils, a notepad, and his calendar, along with his telephone and an index box suitable for three-by-five-inch index cards. When Leo came to the office in the morning and when he left at night, his "desktop" maintained the same impeccable appearance. Throughout the day, though, numerous files passed continuously over that desktop.

The index box contained a tickler system specific to Leo's needs. Each card was dated and was followed by another index card that listed what had to be done that day. Somehow, whatever was listed on the card always got done.

The index box was the product of Leo's craftsmanship. Woodworking was a passion for Leo and he was a master craftsman. There also was a beautiful walnut display cabinet in Leo's office that displayed fine handiwork and wonderful scrolling. Leo had made it, as well. Inside the cabinet were a variety of items representing some of Leo and Helen's peregrinations. Some of the items had been purchased in far-off countries, but many of them were replicas of things Leo and Helen had seen that were not available for purchase—a replica or miniaturized image that Leo had carefully fashioned from memory.

Few things about Leo may have been predictable, but one thing that was certain was that he would be wearing a bow tie every day he came to work. (There are photos of Leo in earlier years wearing a necktie, but perhaps that may be attributed to youthful indiscretion.) Leo had a large collection of bow ties in amazingly different colors and patterns.

Most people did not know that Leo was color blind, so they may not have realized that his combinations of colors and patterns were not meant to be trend-setting; it simply meant that he got out the front door in the morning without Helen seeing what he had put together for the day. In his own way, Leo's unique style made it acceptable to wear the most interesting combinations of plaids, stripes, and colors without fear of retribution.

## A Man With an Intense Mind and a Big Heart

Shortly after Leo's death in July 2001, Third Congressional District Representative Scott McInnis made the following comments about Leo on the House floor:

His humility pervaded his character as did his patience, professionalism, and care. Seemingly always giving more than expected, Leo was a dedicated man and well respected. Leo Altman shall be remembered as a man with an intense mind, a delicate character, and a big heart.

These words perfectly describe the Leo Altman we knew. He set incredibly high standards for himself and lived up to them. He was a remarkable example of the quintessential lawyer.

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