

# WINDOW TO THE PAST

*A look at the exhibit chronicling the life of the State Bar of Texas.*

INTERVIEW BY HANNAH KIDDOO AND LINDSAY STAFFORD MADER

It's an unassuming glass display in the back of the Texas Law Center lobby. Easily overlooked, it might be worth finding on your next trip to Austin. This case houses collections curated by the State Bar of Texas Archives Department—and throughout 2014, visitors and staff members had the opportunity to view an exhibit that chronicled the birth and growth of the State Bar of Texas.

Archives Specialist Caitlin Bumford and Archives Director Alexandra Myers Swast compiled the 75th anniversary tribute. While many look to the Archives Department for information about routine bar business, Bumford and Swast continually prove that the various records, photos, and recordings in the vault have their own evidential value. The anniversary exhibition materials were no exception. The *Texas Bar Journal* recently asked Bumford and Swast about the display, their process, and the State Bar's fascinating 75 years.

**With 75 years of material to choose from, how did you decide what would be included in the exhibit?**

**Swast:** Our goal was to tell the story of how the unified bar in Texas came about and how it has supported the lawyers and citizens of Texas for the past 75 years. We looked for stories that might surprise you or that can help provide context to current issues. We seek to highlight the accomplishments of our members and our organization with items created or collected by the bar itself. Visually engaging materials are always reviewed—how can we tell these stories with images and text that our visitors, of all ages and backgrounds, can enjoy?

**Walk us through your process—what went into researching and assembling a cohesive exhibit?**

**Bumford:** To tell the story of our 75-year-old bar, we had to start our research at the very beginning—why and how did the State Bar of Texas come to be in the first place? Luckily, because the *Texas Bar Journal* was established a year before the unified bar, we had access to lots of documentation of the unification process. Each article and document we found pointed us in another research direction, until the story began to tell itself. However, that's not to say that exhibit development is quick or easy. All told, it takes us about three months to research, curate, design, and install one of our exhibits while also fulfilling our daily responsibilities.



The first panel of the 75th anniversary exhibit tells the story of the unified bar movement.

**“It’s no secret that Texas lawyers can be found front-and-center during moments in our nation’s history. Whether focusing on one year, one event, or all 75 years, we want to showcase the bar’s role in legal history and how the Archives Department has collected, preserved, and made these historical resources available.”**

### Where did you find the materials?

**Swast:** The State Bar of Texas is one of the few state agencies lucky enough to keep all of its official records on-site. For the most part, the materials you see on exhibit are items from the permanent archives collection. We also included two photographs from the Austin History Center.

### What was the most interesting tidbit you learned when creating this exhibit?

**Bumford:** My favorite part of creating any exhibit is the opportunity to discover and tell the stories of outstanding attorneys who may not be well known. When perusing the lists of lawyers who were licensed in the bar’s first year, I came across the name of Clint Small Jr., who later became State Bar president in 1965, and whose father, State Senator Clint Small Sr., was a sponsor of the 1939 State Bar Act. I soon discovered that the Smalls have quite the history of Texas lawyering, and I had the opportunity to email with Cecily Small Gooch, the family’s fourth-generation Texas attorney, about the pride she has for following in these footsteps.

### What were the most challenging and rewarding aspects of putting it together?

**Bumford:** I come across dozens of stories that catch my interest and that I’d love to share with our co-workers and bar members, but in the end, I need to pare down exhibit content to something that is easy to digest for our main audience—the many busy attorneys and members of the public passing through the Texas Law Center.

What’s most rewarding is seeing the finished product after our graphic designer, Chris Beasley, has had the opportunity to take the content we’ve compiled and turn it into a set of attractive and organized exhibit panels. Without his touch, our exhibits wouldn’t be nearly as successful as they are.

### What is your favorite part of the display?

**Swast:** The year 1939 seems quite late for unification in some respects (we’re only slightly older than Bugs Bunny), so it was interesting to research and include the efforts to professionalize bar groups in other states. There’s a great map in the exhibit that color-codes the status of state bars, labeled “All Our ‘Neighbors’ Have Unified Bars.”



A panel from the 75th anniversary exhibit features attorneys who were licensed in 1939, the year the State Bar Act was signed.

**Bumford:** My favorite is the State Bar’s public relations cartoon ad campaigns from the 1960s. I can really see the bar responding to concerns for the profession’s reputation and fulfilling its ongoing responsibility to advocate for its members and the legal profession.

### How does this exhibit compare with other State Bar-related exhibits you’ve done in the past?

**Swast:** Last year, we focused on the year 1963, imagining what it was like to enter the practice of law 50 years ago, and we wondered how the bar responded to the civil rights movement and the Kennedy assassination. It’s no secret that Texas lawyers can be found front-and-center during moments in our nation’s history. Whether focusing on one year, one event, or all 75 years, we want to showcase the bar’s role in legal history and how the Archives Department has collected, preserved, and made these historical resources available.

### What do you have in mind for the next exhibit?

**Swast:** Our next exhibit will delve into the history of a topic that affects every Texan—but you’ll have to come visit to find out more. **TBJ**

To explore all of the exhibit’s panels, go to [texasbar.com/75yearsexhibit](http://texasbar.com/75yearsexhibit).