

# Village Treasure: Eason Balch

By Rick Watson

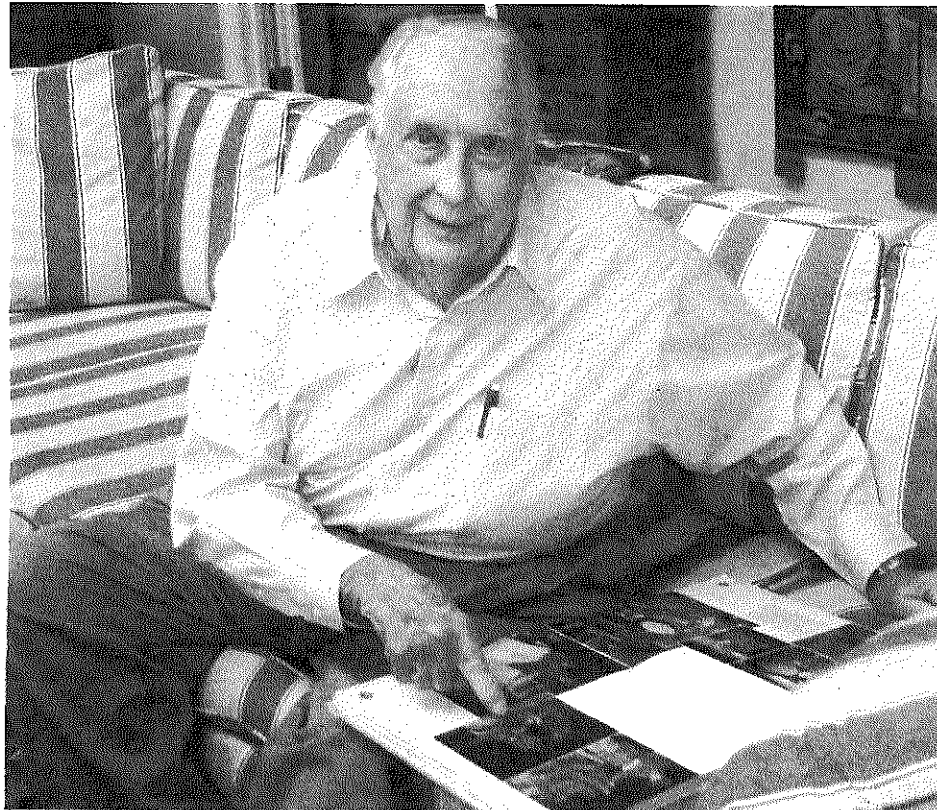
An apocryphal story: Two young lawyers are having lunch when the conversation turns to the oldest partner in the firm. One lawyer says, "I sure hope I look as good as John when I'm ninety." The other lawyer says, "You don't look that good, now!"

They could easily have been talking about attorney Eason Balch of Mountain Brook. Balch's own life, he says, has not been remarkable enough for anybody to interview him about it. Other people differ, and so we all get to decide.

Balch grew up in Madison, Alabama, with a population of about 500. His family's farm was a "working" one, so he learned early to chop cotton, milk cows, and help raise and kill hogs to put food on the family's table. His last three years in high school, he also worked at a Madison drug store.

Balch left for Tuscaloosa in 1936, and when he graduated from the University of Alabama's School of Commerce in 1940, he weighed only 111 pounds. He'd been in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) at the university, but when he went into the Army, he was considered "too skinny" to attend OTC. He chose to go in as a private, but his education and work ethic quickly came to the attention of Army brass and the weight restriction was waived.

Eason Balch soon entered OCS and became a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army. It was at OCS in Virginia that Eason met his future wife Betsy Brock. Balch entered active duty in November of 1941, a month before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Instead of making Balch a foot soldier during that crisis, the Army utilized his organizational skills to help maintain and manage the tools needed to help win the war. He would help organize,



Eason Balch's military training has served him well

jeeps, ambulances, trucks, command cars, and ordnance - the large artillery weapons used on the front lines.

During the early years of WWII, Balch worked at military installations in Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and Florida. At a post in Saint Augustine, he befriended an Army doctor in his new unit. When the doctor's wife learned that Balch was romancing Betsy, she invited her down from Richmond for a visit, and the courtship blossomed further.

The two began making plans to marry. But Balch, ever the gentleman, would not tie the knot until he met with Betsy's

guess it was providence, but the Army moved my outfit back to Fort Bragg, N.C. and Richmond, Va, nearer to Betsy's home in Richmond, Virginia," Balch says. They were married in the spring of 1943.

Balch continued his training in automotive, small arms, and larger ordnance. Then, the Army transferred him to Camp Pickett, about an hour south of Richmond. With that move, he received a promotion to captain.

Then, Balch's unit shipped out for Europe, landing in La Havre, France, near the site of the historic Normandy invasion. Balch soon got a close-up look at the

When the German soldiers were forced to flee further north, they left a state-of-the-art Daimler-Benz truck factory in their wake. Balch's military unit, working with old-time German craftsmen, soon had the plant back in operation. "The Daimler-Benz officials saw the writing on the wall, and knew the war would soon be over," Balch recalls.

In 1945, the Army ordered Balch's unit to the Pacific to support the war effort against Japan. But then, the U.S. dropped "Little Boy", the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and the war ended before Balch's unit arrived.

Once out of the Army, Balch wasted no time getting into law school. He first tried the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, but couldn't find housing, so he headed back to Virginia where Betsy's family lived. He graduated from the University of Virginia School of Law in 1948 but still couldn't find work that paid a decent wage. By that time, Eason and Betsy had two children and he needed a good job.

Fortunately, the dean of the Virginia law school had connections in Alabama, and learned that a firm in Birmingham was hiring. He recommended Balch for the position.

He and Betsy came to Birmingham for the interview with Martin, Turner, and McWhorter. "Logan Martin went to West Point," Balch said with a smile, "and he ran the law firm like it was a military unit. All he wanted to talk about was my military experience."

Martin asked Balch if he and Betsy would join him for lunch and they agreed. Balch was offered a position and moved his family to Mountain Brook. "I was so broke I couldn't afford a house," he says, "but we found an apartment near Dexter Avenue."

Balch became the eleventh lawyer at Martin, Turner, and McWhorter, one of the oldest firms in the state. Some years later, the name of the firm was shortened to Balch & Bingham. "The name got so long that the receptionist couldn't get it all out.



The Rev. Richmond Webster blesses Catherine Ann Conner's new bunny while mom Lauren Connor looks on.

## BALCH

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So they just answered the phone 'Balch & Bingham,'" he recalls. The name stuck.

The small firm handled legal work for some of the most powerful corporations in the South, and soon grew to more than 250 lawyers. The litigation that Balch was personally involved in was not the sensational stuff of movies, but the nuts and bolts that keep the wheels of America's infrastructure turning: licensing of hydro-electric dams, rights of way, labor arbitration, and labor union contracts.

In tribute, all three of the Southern Company's nuclear power plants--Vogtle, Hatch, and Farley--are named after Balch's former law partners. "They didn't so much as name a transformer after me!" Balch says, with a wry grin.

He was also part of a legal team that worked with Congressional committees in Washington to change legislation that had prohibited non-profit groups such as Southern Research Institute from using experimental chemo-therapies to treat cancer.

The downside for Balch, of that year, was that he spent more nights at the Mayflower Hotel in D.C., than in his bed in Alabama.

"Betsy and I were married 63 years and had five children," Balch says, but we lost one child. Eason Jr., Gene Austin Limbaugh, Garden Lanier and Ann Miano are all healthy and they all live nearby.

I have nine grand children and four great-grand children, and they all spend Christmas here."

When Balch is asked about his late wife, who passed away in May of 2006, he looks off into the distance and his eyes get misty. "She was a great lady," he says. "Alzheimer's took her. Some people get mean with that disease, but she remained sweet until the end."

At 91, Eason Balch is in remarkable shape. When asked how he remains healthy and active as he gets older, his philosophy is simple.

"You eat well, exercise, find work that you enjoy, and keep a positive mental attitude," he says. "It's also good to have a hobby, and to stay mentally engaged."

And Balch practices what he preaches. He swims when weather permits, plays golf three times most weeks, plays bridge twice a week, and is an avid reader.

He's also working on his family's genealogy, and has documented his and his wife's ancestors back to the 1600s.

When asked what he wants to do for the next several years, Balch doesn't hesitate before answering, "More of the same."

*Rick Watson's book Remembering Big is available at The Little Professor Book Store in Homewood or online at [www.homefolkmedia.com](http://www.homefolkmedia.com). You can contact him at [rick@homefolkmedia.com](mailto:rick@homefolkmedia.com)*