Relativity

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Lately, the newspapers have been filled with stories about the salaries paid by big city law firms to lawyers fresh out of law school. According to the articles, $60,000 a year is standard and, for a graduate from one of the better law schools, a salary of $80,000 is not unheard of.

I was one of those law school graduates in 1935. The recent newspaper stories reminded me of how different it was then. The Depression still dominated our lives and people didn't have much money to spend. A few unfortunate brokers and bankers were still leaping out of high windows above Wall Street.

There were about ninety students in my graduating class at the University of Chicago Law School. Most of us descended on La Salle Street at about the same time. Our paths crossed again and again on the streets and in the lobbies of office buildings as we visited firms and exchanged notes on how we were received and what, if anything, we were offered.

Most of our class enrolled in a bar review course to help prepare for the dreaded bar examination. I did not. I had painfully accumulated the cost of the course, about $20, but on my way to sign up for it, I walked past one of Chicago's better clothiers of the time, Capper & Capper. There in the window was a cocoa brown, double-breasted linen suit with mother of pearl buttons. I just could not get past that window. After a few misgivings, I walked into the store and bought the suit.

What about the bar course? Well, a friend of mine let me read his books. I wasn't able to attend the classes or take the sample exams, but I read the questions and answers from previous bar exams and prepared in that way. But what a price I paid. For twenty years thereafter, wherever and whenever we met, my friend would loudly demand his share of my brown linen suit. It was only then that I regretted buying it.

In those days, law firms did not send representatives to the Law School to interview prospective graduates. To the contrary, we looked up the firms and tried to find out which partner was doing the hiring. We then either called for an appointment or walked in unannounced to ask if anyone was hiring.

It was that kind of approach that led to my first job. The firm was the leading political law firm in Chicago at the time. I would not have thought to interview there, but word got out that the firm was looking to hire, so I jumped at the chance. The partner who interviewed me—Lou—was a pleasant, round-faced man, about forty-five years old. Lou listened with interest to my vital statistics and seemed impressed. He then told me, regretfully, that earlier that same day he had hired one of my classmates. He...
explained that this ordinarily would preclude consideration of anyone else, but because he was impressed with my qualifications he would make an exception and offer me a job. I was flattered—until I asked about the pay.

"Fifteen dollars a week," he said, without so much as a smile. That was low, even at the time. With some trepidation, I blurted out that the salary should be at least twenty-five dollars a week. He had the perfect answer. How could he pay me more than my classmate, whom he had already hired? When I looked doubtful, Lou suggested I take the job with the understanding that if I proved satisfactory, the firm would consider a raise within a reasonable time, say six weeks. I quickly fell in with his suggestion and the deal was struck.

The next day I reported for work. The firm's offices occupied the top two floors in the tower of a modern office building on La Salle Street. There were about twenty lawyers, which made it a medium-sized firm at the time.

I soon learned that all of the lawyers had their own idiosyncracies. The most cantankerous of the lot was one of the senior partners, whom I will call Ben. Ben had a reputation throughout the Loop for having an irascible disposition and a violent temper. When he was angry, which seemed like all the time, he would bellow like a mad bull. His voice could be heard throughout the suite. The younger partners, to say nothing of the staff, trembled in his presence. As I recall, he was a Master in Chancery, a kind of judicial assistant with a good deal of power.

Once I arrived on the scene, I was given lots of work, including representation of the receiver of the Chicago Produce District Trust, which owned and leased stores and coolers in Chicago's wholesale produce market. I drafted leases, negotiated with tenants and prepared complaints against those who would not or could not pay their rent. After about a month, I was directed to prepare a petition to the judge in the receivership cases for fees for both the receiver and our law firm. The judge awarded us $1,500 each for legal services for the month. As the only lawyer who had performed any services for the Trust during the period, it appeared (to me) that it was I who had earned the fee.

The six weeks went quickly. At the end of that time, I waited anxiously for Lou to make good on his promise, Days dragged by, but no word. Finally, one morning I summoned up my courage and asked Lou how he thought I was doing. "Fine, fine," he said and turned to take a phone call. I waited until he had finished and then broached the subject head-on. "You remember, Lou, what you told me about a raise? Well, the six weeks have gone by, and no one has said a word about it." "Yeah, yeah," Lou muttered.

"But Ben has been on a rampage. It wouldn't do to upset him now. So let's wait a few days." "Okay," I replied and turned to leave his office.

At that moment, Ben walked in. He already looked out of sorts and I hoped Lou would say nothing. But he could not hold back. "Ben," he said, "Joe here has been asking me for a raise. "WHAT!" yelled Ben. The windows rattled and nearby secretaries trembled. Lou himself squirmed a little, and I wondered what he would say. "Well, Joe here has been telling me about the good work he's been doing." "Good work!" Ben shrieked, and he turned toward me. "Don't you know, young man, what a great thing it is for you to be able to work here—what an opportunity we're giving you?" I gulped, but nothing came out. Obviously, Lou hadn't mentioned our understanding. Ben's voice now reached for the upper registers. At the top of the crescendo, he yelled loudly enough for everyone on two floors to hear, "And if you don't like it, young man, you know what you can do!"

Of course, I did. Even now, I remember how low I felt as I realized I was again to join the ranks of the unemployed. As luck would have it, however, the client for whom I was working on the receivership told me he would be glad to recommend me to his regular law firm, which was in the market for a beginning lawyer. A few days later I got the job. This time, my salary was $85 per month.