

THE BECKY KLEMT LETTER¹

By Judge Jerry Buchmeyer



Becky Klemt is a lawyer in Laramie, WY (with the five-person firm of Pence & MacMillan). On Aug. 17, 1988, she wrote a letter.

It was only one letter—"just one funny letter" as Becky describes it. But these are the "reviews" of The Becky Klemt Letter, by various lawyers, judges and clients, as quoted in an article in *The Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 6, 1990) ("*A Lady Lawyer in Laramie Writes A Landmark Letter*");

"Hilarious". . . "a masterpiece". . . "a jewel". . . "brutal". . . "skewers the pretentiousness of big-city lawyering with incomparable wit". . . "the pot-shot heard round the world". . . the "most photocopied letter in legal history". . . "the best writing (ever done) on legal stationery."

Tom Scott of Midland (Bullock, Scott, etc.) got copies of the letters from Becky after reading *The Wall Street Journal* article and—since The Letter was not printed in that article—suggested that it be published *in full* in this column. So here it is, together with two other letters which set the scene for *The Becky Klemt Letter*:

Laramie, Wyoming
July 19, 1988

Mr. Stephen G. Corris
Attorney at Law
Irvine, California

Re: Broomell vs Broomell
Civil No. 16424

Dear Mr. Corris:

This firm obtained the enclosed Judgment against Defendant, Stephen H. Broomell, on June 4, 1987.

The Judgment remains only partially satisfied and there is due and owing as of this date principal and interest in the amount of \$4,239.84. Interest accrues at the rate of \$1.06 per day.

Would you please advise whether or not you would be interested in collecting on this Judgment and, if so, your fees for doing so. It's entirely possible that a letter from you to Mr. Broomell will be all that's needed.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Pence and MacMillan
Becky N. Klemt

August 8, 1988

Ms. Becky N. Klemt
Pence and MacMillan
Laramie, Wyoming

Dear Ms. Klemt,

I apologize for not getting back to you sooner, but I have been in and out of the office for the past six weeks. Seems that there's never enough time.

I want to thank you for offering me the opportunity to collect the judgment on behalf of Ms. Marcia L. Broomell, but, I must decline.

Without sounding pretentious, my current retainer for cases is a flat \$100,000, with an additional charge of \$1,000 per hour. Since I specialize in international trade and geopolitical relations between the Middle East and Europe, my clientele is very unique and limited, and I am afraid I am unable to accept other work at this time.

I am enclosing the copy you sent of the judgment and again, Ms. Klemt, I thank you for your thoughts. It was very nice of you.

Very, sincerely,
Stephen G. Corris

Laramie, Wyoming 82070
August 17, 1988

Stephen G. Corris, Esquire
Attorney of Law
Irvine, California 92715

Dear Steve:

I am in receipt of your letter to me dated August 8, 1988, regarding collection of a judgment against Stephen Broomell.

Steve, I've got news—you can't say you charge a \$100,000.00 retainer fee and an additional \$1,000.00 an hour without sounding pretentious. It just can't be done. Especially when you're writing to someone in Laramie, Wyoming where you're considered pretentious if you wear socks to Court or drive anything fancier than a Ford Bronco. Hell, Steve, all the lawyers in Laramie, put together, don't charge \$1,000.00 an hour.

Anyway, we were sitting around the office discussing your letter and decided that you had a good thing going. We doubt we could get away with charging \$1,000.00 an hour in Laramie (where people are more inclined to barter with livestock than pay

in cash), but we do believe we could join you in California, where evidently people can get away with just about anything. Therefore, the four lawyers in our firm intend to join you in the practice of international trade and geopolitical relations between the Middle East and Europe.

Now, Steve, you're probably thinking that we don't know anything about the Middle East and Europe, but I think you'll be pleasantly surprised to find that this is not the case. Paul Schierer is actually from the Middle East—he was raised outside of Chicago, Illinois, and although those national newsmen insist on calling Illinois the Midwest, to us, if it's between New York and the Missouri River, it's the Middle East.

Additionally, although I have never personally been to Europe myself, my sister just returned from a vacation there and told me lots about, so I believe I would be of some help to you on that end of the negotiations. Hoke MacMillan has actually been there, although it was 15 years ago, so you might have to update him on recent geopolitical developments. Also, Hoke has applied to the Rotary Foreign Exchange Student Program for a 16-year-old Swedish girl and believes she will be helpful in preparing him for trips abroad.

Another thing you should know, Steve, is that the firm has an extensive foreign language background, which I believe would be useful to you. Hoke took Latin in high school, although he hasn't used it much inasmuch as he did not become a

pharmacist or a priest. Vonnie Nagel took high school German, while Paul has eaten in Italian restaurants. I, myself, majored in French in college, until I realized that probably wasn't the smartest career move in the world. I've forgotten such words as "international" and "geopolitical" (which I'm not too familiar with in English), but I can still hail a taxi or find a restroom, which might come in handy.

Steve, let us know when we should join you in California so that we can begin doing whatever it is you do. In anticipation of our move, we've all been practicing trying to say we charge \$1,000.00 an hour with a straight face, but so far, we haven't been able to do it. I suspect it'll be easier once we actually reach California where I understand they charge \$5,000,000 for one-bedroom condos and everybody (even poor people) drive Mercedes. Anyway, because I'll be new to the area of international trade and geopolitical relations, I'm thinking of only charging \$500-\$600 an hour to begin with. Will that be enough to meet our overhead?

I look forward to hearing from you before you go away again for six weeks.

Sincerely,
Pence and MacMillan
Becky N. Klemt

P.S. Incidentally, we have advised our client of your hourly rate. She is willing to pay you \$1,000.00 per hour to collect this judgment provided it doesn't take you more than four seconds.

* * *

Almost immediately, Becky's letter began circulating in the Legal Humor Pipeline. (I got my first copy in March 1990 from a Phoenix lawyer.) Since then, Becky has received "hundreds of telephone calls and fan letters, job offers, legal referrals from places as distant as London, and *marriage proposals*"—as well as visits from out-of-Wyoming lawyers, including two New York attorneys who "think she is the funniest lawyer in America."²

What's next for Becky³ (who told Tom Scott she was "certainly enjoying my 15 minutes of 'Andy Worhol' fame")? Well, the judgment is still uncollected—and is still drawing interest at the rate of \$1.06 per day.

Becky, is there any way to make a federal case out of this—and trick the ex-husband into fleeing to Texas? *You're welcome in my court anytime!* And I'm sure we will have plenty of Texas lawyers—who enjoy practicing laws much as you obviously do—volunteer to act as local counsel without charge in the Broomell case.⁴

1. Don't panic! *Depositions v. Trials* will return in the next issue. Lawyers, judges and others have already sent more than enough contributions for another year of columns in our Epic quest—not including the ones that are so dirty (albeit hilarious) that I can't even sneak them by the editor in a footnote.
2. According to *The Wall Street Journal* article, "the obligation to pithily answer scores of calls and letters. . . has turned Ms. Klemt into something of a prairie philosopher. Law schooling, she says, aims "to convince the overconfident that they are truly superior." Of legal pomposity: "Most lawyers refuse to itemize it in their bills."
3. And what of Steven G. Corris, the "butt of a thousand faxes"? According to *The Wall Street Journal* article, Mr. Corris "concedes he overstated his fees to Ms. Klemt; he says his usual charge is closer to \$500 a hour. "I got calls from one Washington firm and two in New York," he says, "basically asking, How are you pulling this off? They wanted a piece of my action. I said get lost."
4. Actually, Ms. Broomell lives in Abilene, TX. *The Wall Street Journal* article ends with this quotation from her: "Sure, sure it's all incredible. Now a thousand lawyers know about my plight, and not one of them can be bothered to collect my money!"

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More et cetera

Jerry Buchmeyer is a federal district judge, Northern District of Texas, in Dallas. If you have a contribution to the et cetera column send it to Judge Buchmeyer, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Texas, Dallas, TX 75242.