How I Got Here
Gordon Baldwin

Last issue’s debut of the new series “How I Got Here” achieved instant hit status with Professor Stewart Macaulay’s reminiscence on how he came to teach at the UW Law School. This issue brings the story of another prominent, longtime faculty member, Gordon Brewster Baldwin, who began teaching at the Law School the same month Macaulay did: September 1957.

Gordon Baldwin, Evjue Bascom Emeritus Professor of Law, is a nationally known authority on constitutional law and foreign-relations law. Throughout his distinguished career, he has written on a broad range of legal topics; continued to work as a legal professional, arguing cases at all court levels; contributed his time in service from the local to the federal level; and shared his legal and political expertise with radio and television audiences as a frequent guest commentator.

When Gordon Baldwin was growing up and attending schools in the Northeast, neither Wisconsin nor a career in the law was on his radar screen, as the saying now goes. The sequence of decisions that brought him to a teaching career in Wisconsin was a product of history, upbringing, character, and chance.

Baldwin was born in the small city of Binghamton, in southern New York State, in 1929, the first child of an up-and-coming young hotel manager and his wife, a teacher of English and foreign languages. When Gordon was about two years old, the family moved to New York City, where his father had taken a job managing hotels for a corporation. Young Gordon was not fated to grow up in the metropolis, however: the family left the city two years later, when Mr. Baldwin quit his job at the height of the Depression, unwilling to raise his family in an establishment that sold liquor.

By 1939, the Baldwins had settled in Penfield, New York, outside of Rochester, when his mother received the 120-year-old family home as a gift from her father. “So I grew up on the old family homestead,” Baldwin says. “It was very rural — lots of animals.”

At first, Baldwin was homeschooled by his mother, a Bryn Mawr graduate known for her keen intelligence. “The public schools were too far away,” he recalls, “or maybe my mother didn’t trust them.” Baldwin’s well-known penchant for taking his own independent path may have had its beginning here.

Baldwin entered the public schools as a third-grader. “I found that I could do almost anything,” he says. “Except write legibly.”

Growing up during World War II, Baldwin developed a lifelong interest in maps and international affairs. The war brought change directly into the Baldwin household as well: the family opened its home to an English boy, one of more than 150 children evacuated from Britain between 1940 and 1942 by the “Kodakids” program organized by Rochester’s Eastman Kodak Company. “Peter spent the war with us,” Baldwin says. “He stayed for five years.”

Both boys attended the private Harley Country Day School, Gordon beginning in the ninth grade, and Peter in the sixth. (Baldwin’s sister and brother also attended, and his mother taught there.) Baldwin graduated at the early age of 16, and went on to Haverford College in Pennsylvania, his father’s alma mater, where he majored in history and government, was named to Phi Beta Kappa, and lettered in soccer and cricket.

Graduating in 1950, as the Korean War was breaking out, he entered Cornell Law School in
Ithaca, New York, with one eye on the draft board. He specialized in international affairs.

"The idea of becoming a professor never occurred to me," remarks the distinguished teacher, scholar, and attorney. "I had never been inside a law office; I had never been inside a courtroom."

Three years later, with law degree in hand, he went to work in the law practice of a friend. "I had a good record at law school — was on Law Review — but I couldn't bring any business," he says. Ironically, when he was drafted in the autumn of 1953, "It was a relief. I left a desk full of law business — personal-injury practice. It wasn't very interesting."

The military turned out to be more to his liking. "It was more relaxing than law school," Baldwin says. "They told me what to do, and it was doable." He had been drafted as a private, but after basic training, he was commissioned directly to the Pentagon as a first lieutenant and member of the army's Judge Advocate General's (JAG) Corps.

It was the army that gave Baldwin his first teaching experience: in 1955 he was assigned to the JAG School based at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, to teach the principles of international law that he had learned at the Pentagon. He had developed expertise in the subject of American soldiers' rights in foreign courts.

At this point in his career, Baldwin made a crucial career decision. "I almost went into the regular army," he says. "I was offered a position in Paris for six years. But the world looked peaceful at that point, and I had a few girlfriends around the country, so I didn't go."

The decision not to go to Paris was a crucial one that influenced his entire career. He stayed in the United States, left the army, and spent a few months in private practice in the town of Rome, New York. "Then, out of a clear blue sky, I got a letter from a friend: there was a vacancy at the University of Wisconsin Law School."

The friend was UW Law School Assistant Professor John Whelan, a former army colleague. Baldwin still has the letter, dated March 20, 1957. Whelan wrote, "The job you did at the JAG School certainly demonstrates your aptitude" for a teaching career.

Whelan also informed him, "I can tell you that Madison is a fine place to live in and that the law faculty is a most interesting and stimulating group of men."

UW Law School Dean Jack Ritchie had checked up on Baldwin's excellent teaching evaluations, and also noted his Law Review article on the NATO Status of Forces Agreement. Ritchie, who had hired Stewart Macaulay the same year, extended an offer to Baldwin to teach for one semester for Professor Richard Campbell, who was ill.

"I was hired for only one semester," Baldwin says, "and I've been here ever since."

One reason Baldwin stayed was that the Law School was supportive of the writing he was doing about the military. "That is one thing Stewart [Macaulay] and I have in common: law-in-action — what's really going on. I knew what was going on in the Pentagon," he says.

"I appreciate law-in-action," Baldwin continues. "One of the reasons I was hired was to teach international law — as opposed to doctrinal law."

Soon, other areas of law started to draw Baldwin's attention. "I was finding constitutional law more interesting — and took it up. I also taught admiralty law, First Amendment, foreign relations law, and a lot of criminal law."

In speaking of criminal law, Baldwin mentions Frank Remington as
the Law School colleague who had the most significant effect on him. “Frank influenced me probably more than [renowned Wisconsin legal scholar] Willard Hurst,” Baldwin says. “He was interested in the practical: who are the decision makers? It may be the cop on the beat more than the judge or the D.A.”

Things were going well on the personal front as well: he was enjoying Madison and the bachelor life. In early November, he had a blind date with Helen Hochgraf, the woman he would marry three months later. “Helen was a biochemistry grad student and a cutting-edge scientist. She was the first woman I met who was smarter than I was.”

Helen, a New Jersey native and graduate of Smith College, went on to accept a position at the UW Comprehensive Cancer Center, where she would remain for her entire career, retiring as Associate Director. Her work was another reason the Baldwins stayed on to make Madison their permanent home, raising their two children here.

The two Easterners also found themselves drawn to the city itself. “I like Madison,” Baldwin says. “I don’t know if there’s any place I’d rather be.”

During the course of his years at the Law School, Baldwin has combined his scholarly pursuits with serving in a variety of capacities on the local, state, and federal levels. He spent 10 years as counsel with the firm of Murphy Desmond SC; has argued cases in a number of courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court in 1983; was appointed by Governor Tommy Thompson to the State Ethics Board; served as the Law School’s assistant and associate dean; chaired the State Elections Board and the State Public Defender Board; and was director of Officer Education for the university for 26 years.

Baldwin was a visiting professor in Japan, Germany, Russia, and Thailand in the 1980s and ‘90s; was a Fulbright Professor in Egypt, Iran, and Cyprus in the 1960s and ‘70s; and taught international law at the U.S. Naval War College in 1963–64.

In 1999, Baldwin took emeritus status after more than 40 years of teaching, but he has continued to be an active member of the Law School community. He continues lifelong pastimes of broad reading (“It keeps me out of trouble”) and listening to music (“Music is a very important part of my life. I am a classical music fiend.”)

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International travel and friends from all over the world have also been an important part of life for the Baldwins. The couple has lived in France four times in recent years, and they have opened their home several times to students from around the world. “They become great friends,” Baldwin says.

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How did he get here? In addition to the workings of history and chance, strong intelligence, and an excellent education, another important trait that may have destined Baldwin for his career of professor and attorney is his talent for public speaking.

“I’ve never had any difficulty standing up in front of people,” he says. “I’m not self-conscious; I’m not shy. Many times I’ve talked about something about which I knew nothing — and that’s not likely to stop.”

Most of the time, however, Gordon Baldwin has talked about something about which he knows a great deal. Generations of law students have testified to that — and that’s not likely to stop.