

Elmore County Probate Office Experiences Record Year in 2013

Staff Report

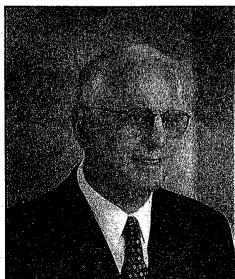
"You can take the pulse of the county by the transactions that occur in the probate office each year," said Probate Judge John E. Enslin. This past calendar year of 2013 was a record breaking year for the Elmore County Probate Office in several respects, Enslin said.

"Our courteous staff issued 13,471 driver licenses last year. That's an average of well over 50 driver licenses per work day. Keep in mind that a driver is only required to renew his or her license once every four years. We do have some visitors from other nearby counties who buy their driver licenses in Elmore County. They say that our staff is more courteous and they prefer to deal with us despite the extra drive. But even if we factor in the visitors and the replacements for lost licenses, it is still safe to say that we now have over 50,000 licensed drivers in Elmore County."

The probate office sold 646 marriage licenses last year and 313 of the marriages, or 48% of them, were performed by either Judge Enslin or his chief clerk Brent Helms.

Glenda Norris, a probate clerk who assists with name changes, spoke of the large number of name changes this past year: "For one reason or another, 128 residents of Elmore County changed their name last year. A substantial number of them did so in order for their driver licenses to match the way their names read on their vehicle titles."

Speaking of vehicles, there were 117,536 vehicle tags or stickers sold last year. Lori White, the supervisor of the tag department said, "The biggest chunk of the \$9.2 million that the probate office collected last year came from taxes and fees associated with vehicles. The revenue commission office across the hall collects more money than we do based on the taxes they collect on real property, but a whole lot



John Enslin - Elmore County Probate Judge

more people own cars than own timber land. That's why our transactions are more numerous and take place year around and not just during three months of the year. We would love to have shorter lines for the people, but that is not going to happen until we have more space, more employees, and more people using their credit cards from home."

License clerk Judy Shaw, who has been working in the probate office for over 8 years, commented on some of the other licenses that were sold. "We processed 7,657 boat licenses and 2,839 business licenses. I can only imagine how many business licenses we would sell if the county actually had a license inspector. We also sold almost \$15,000 in hunting and fishing licenses," Shaw said.

Bridget Lewis, the recording clerk, collected almost 1.4 million dollars in recording fees and taxes this past year. "There were 68,161 pages of new public documents that were scanned and made available for public viewing this past year. Most of these documents deal with real property transactions. These documents were indexed and added to the collection that can be viewed in our office or over the internet. An increasing number of our incoming documents are being electronically filed without the need for someone to physically bring the documents to the probate office," Lewis said.

The new Administrative Assistant with CFO responsibilities in the probate office, Vicki Stewart of Deatsville, described what happens to the money.

"A lot of people think the probate office gets to keep and use the money that is paid because the people only know that they are paying it to us. But we are just a collection agent, primarily for the state, the county commission, and the boards of education. The money just temporarily passes through our hands. The State of Alabama gets more than half, about 52%, of all the money collected by the probate office. The county commission gets about 28% of all of our collections. The Elmore County Board of Education and the Tallasse Board of Education share the remainder on a 12 to 1 ratio, with the exception of a small amount that goes to the cities in the county," Stewart said.

The probate court was very busy this past year, docketing 513 new cases.

"There were 89 new adoption cases filed and 148 new estates opened," said Tish Elmore Probate Clerk.

What would really surprise most people, Enslin said, is the number of people that were committed for mental illness treatment.

"We held 96 commitment hearings last year," Judge Enslin said regarding the commitments. "No family, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, black or white or in between, is exempt from the devastating effects of mental illness. We wish that the State of Alabama gave higher priority to those who suffer from mental illness. We just do the best we can with the resources we are allotted."

Expanded office in Millbrook

Enslin said he would like to move the satellite office in Millbrook to a new location and expand the services available

**Elmore County Probate Office
2013 at a glance**

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- 513 new cases in probate court
 - √ 89 of which were new adoption cases
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there, for example to allow taxpayers to pay real estate taxes in Millbrook without having to go to Wetumpka.

The Probate Office already collects a \$1 fee for copies of documents but the law limits expenditures of the funds collected in this manner to "archival and indexing equipment." Enslin says that the office already has enough money for scanners and computers and that he would like to use the surplus to lease office space in Millbrook and possibly even Wetumpka.

"We are bursting at the seams in our limited, original, 1931 space. We don't even have room for another employee, no matter how badly we may need one. With the steadily increasing population growth in the county, we find ourselves on an unavoidable collision course with the law of physics, and the law of physics always wins," Enslin said.

Enslin submitted a request to the legislature to amend the existing statute to include office space for the permitted uses of those funds. The bill is still going through the legislative process.

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Bain appointed to serve on ECBOE



Probate Judge John Enslin issues the oath of office to Dale Bain for District 1 on the Elmore County Board of Education. Bain's wife, Dee, is standing next to him. Bain was appointed to serve the remainder of the term following the resignation of former board member Robbie Lusk, who moved out of the district.