

KEITH CASTEEL

He Relates to Agricultural Clients from Experience

by Allison Petty

DECATUR—Growing up on a farm in rural central Illinois, Keith W. Casteel learned the value of land to a hardworking family—his own.

Now, the 63-year-old partner at **Samuels, Miller, Schroeder, Jackson & Sly, LLP** counsels clients as they buy and sell farmland that can be worth millions of dollars. Those formative years in the corn and soybean fields undoubtedly help instill peace of mind in Casteel's clients, who know he can relate to their values and concerns.

Agricultural law is just one of three areas that take up equal portions of Casteel's practice. He also handles wills, trusts and estate planning and business law for clients throughout the state.

Colleagues at Samuels Miller say his style is methodical, deliberate and extremely intelligent.

"He can relate to farmers, and does relate to farmers, extremely well," says fellow partner Mark E. Jackson. "He understands the problems they

have with regard to getting good production and so forth from their farms."

Jackson has known Casteel since 1975, and the two have worked closely together on some matters. Jackson describes Casteel as down-to-earth, "more quietly aggressive than openly antagonistic," and always dedicated to the best interests of his client.

Partner Bridget C. Hogan says she has learned a lot from Casteel in the 17 years they have practiced together at Samuels Miller. He answers questions thoroughly, drawing on a breadth of knowledge that she believes could encompass every possible situation. It is, she says, impossible to throw him off.

Casteel has more going for him than just his capabilities as an attorney, Hogan says. He is a true gentleman whose community oriented nature and sense of humor can forge great relationships with clients.

"His clients are really more his friends," she says.

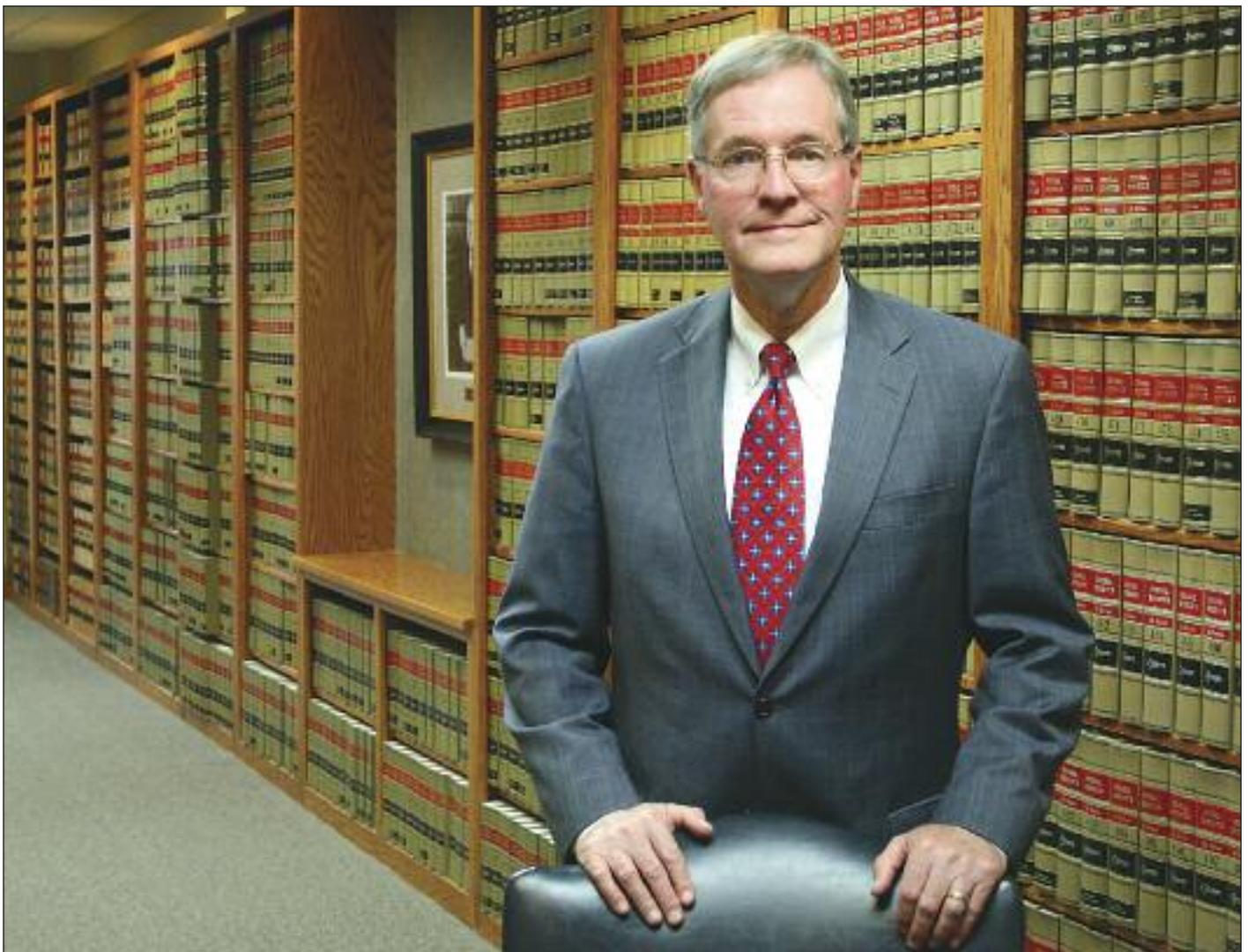
A People-Oriented Career in Law

The farm where Casteel grew up remains in his family. About 30 miles east of Decatur, it is so remotely located that his address was tied to one town and his telephone number to another.

Farm life provided a good childhood for Casteel, who enjoyed showing his Angus cattle at various fairs in the summertime.

Knowing that he would enjoy a job that involved working closely with people, Casteel chose to study industrial engineering at Purdue University, where he was a member of the Iron Key and a recipient of the G.A. Ross Award for Outstanding Senior Man. He graduated in 1972 and briefly worked as an engineer for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency.

Though he enjoyed that position, Casteel decided to attend the University of Illinois College of Law, where he learned that he preferred the law





Casteel fishes in Alaska with two of his sons during the summer of 2013.

slightly more than engineering. He developed a predilection for taxes, contracts and real estate, matters that continue to make up the bulk of his practice today.

It was during law school that Casteel first encountered the firm where he would spend the entirety of his legal career. After being impressed by Samuels Miller during his summer internship, Casteel returned and, 38 years later, he has no regrets.

“I enjoy working with all of our 14 lawyers, and I enjoy working with our support staff,” he says. “There’s no downside; it’s all upside for me.”

Location played a strong part in Casteel’s decision. Though he enjoys working with clients throughout Illinois and in other states, he wanted to practice in a place where the commute from home to the office was about 10 minutes. A fan of outdoor hobbies such as gardening and hiking, Casteel found that remaining in central Illinois offered him an opportunity to engage in those pursuits more easily.

The region also boasts some of the richest farmland in the state, and agricultural clients make up a large part of Casteel’s practice. This work includes buying and selling farmland, preparing leases, creating entities to own farmland, preparing

easements, creating partitions to divide farmland between owners, handling tax-free exchanges and resolving or litigating title problems.

“A lot of the farmers I deal with will ask me if I have any knowledge about farming, and I will tell them, if they just ask about it, that yes, I grew up on a farm; yes, I also helped raise corn and soybeans; yes, I had my own Angus cattle; yes, I’m familiar with most of the farm-related issues today because I dealt with them many years ago growing up,” he says.

Agricultural work frequently takes Casteel across the state to farm auctions, where he most often represents the sellers. At the auction, he will prepare contracts, obtain signatures and explain any issues related to easements or other legal matters. On occasion, clients give him power of attorney to purchase land for them, and he will attend the farm auctions as a bidder.

At any given time, Casteel may be handling several different farm sales or purchases. That work has changed dramatically in just the past 10 years, as the price of land has skyrocketed from \$3,000 to \$4,000 an acre to \$13,000 or \$14,000 an acre. The sales handled by Casteel’s firm can range from the smaller side, at \$500,000, to between \$15 million and \$20 million.

Casteel attributes the increase in land value to several factors. From 2006 to 2008, many people sold farmland near cities to developers and used the profits to buy other land. In the past four to five years, the price of commodities such as corn and soybeans also has risen.

“We have a lot more at stake,” Casteel says. “There are more issues involved, and a lot more money involved, in farm transactions today than compared with 10 years ago.”

Business Law, Estate Planning

Another area of Casteel’s practice has also changed greatly in recent years. With the economic downturn, many businesses stopped increasing employment at the same rate they had been. Most were reluctant to begin construction on new buildings, but Casteel says that type of work has begun to grow again.

“If you can figure out a way to finance it and the financing is there, the money is there. If you can figure out a way to pay for the mortgage, it’s a good time to actually build new buildings, just because of low interest rates. So we get involved in quite a few new business deals or subdivisions of properties to allow for construction of new businesses.”

The complexities of the Affordable Care Act also created huge changes for some business owners, who seek help understanding what the law means for them.

Casteel prefers to keep the identities of his clients confidential, but he says his business clients generally cover the full spectrum of sizes. They include small family farming operations, multistate corporations and not-for-profit entities.

“Sometimes they’re not entities. They’re just a couple that has a small farm. They don’t have a corporation, and they don’t have a limited liability company. Yet sometimes we represent the very, very large entities that own farmland in many states.”

His work includes buying and selling businesses, creating business entities, transferring of business entities to a new buyer and advising on any number of issues, including employment matters.

Within the estate planning portion of his practice, Casteel also works with farm and business clients. He often handles succession planning, when a business owner or farm owner might want to set up a plan for children or grandchildren to take over.

Farm succession work in particular has increased in recent years, Casteel says, in part because the number of farmers is shrinking while their median age is increasing. They often seek counsel about how to be fair to their heirs, particularly if one child stayed behind to help at the farm while another left to pursue another profession.

Many times, the three principal areas of Casteel’s practice interrelate.

“We have a lot of clients that we do farm work for, agricultural law, who need estate planning, who need succession planning, who have also other business interests,” he says. “Those three areas of agricultural law, estate planning and business law sometimes can involve the same group of clients who are involved in all three of those areas.”

Finding Ways to Give Back

Casteel also serves on the board of several organizations, including the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, a not-for-profit that provides free civil legal services to low-income individuals and senior citizens in central and southern Illinois.

Executive Director Lois Wood says Casteel ranks among the most active of the foundation’s 21 board members, who are all very engaged. Wood says Casteel immediately became immersed in the foundation’s issues when he joined the board two years ago, and often asks insightful questions that draw on his previous experience serving on other boards.

“He’s been a wonderful board member,” Wood says. “He’s deeply dedicated to the concept of equal access to justice. He really cares very much that everyone has access to the courts, including the poorest, most vulnerable people among us.”

He also serves on the board of the Greater Decatur Chamber of Commerce, of which he is a former chairman. Casteel says, “I work for them because I think I receive a lot of indirect benefits from people throughout the greater Decatur area; I want to give something back, and so I give something back by helping a lot of not-for-profits, including chambers of commerce.”

Mirinda Rothrock, president of the Greater Decatur Chamber of Commerce, says Casteel is thoughtful and effective, with the leadership ability to inspire others. His commitment to the

community and sense of civic responsibility are strong.

“He’s very dedicated to the organization,” she says. “His communication and people skills are excellent, and he has had some very innovative ideas.”

Casteel also serves as chairman of the Grace United Methodist Church Council.

Casteel credits his parents, Charles and Bernadine Casteel, with setting a strong example by participating in many community-related activities.

Those who know Casteel also describe him as a family man, and that much is evident in the pride

with which he speaks about his wife, Kathy, a registered nurse, and their three sons.

Ryan Casteel holds an engineering degree from Purdue University and a master’s degree in security policy from George Washington University, and he works for the federal government.

Seth Casteel graduated from Chapman University with a fine arts degree in film and television. His stunning photographs of dogs underwater became very popular as people shared them on the Internet in February 2012, and he has published several collections of the photographs.

Clayton Casteel has a finance degree from

Indiana University and an MBA from Georgetown University. He works in Chicago as an investment banker.

Though their careers have taken them across the country, the Casteel men reunite at least once a year for an annual fishing trip. Most recently, they visited the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska.

When he’s not working or serving a charitable organization, Casteel enjoys several hobbies, including gardening, hiking and bicycling, as they afford him opportunities to get outside and enjoy fresh air. ■