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People in H&S: Louis A. MacKenzie

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After some minutes of discussion of Haskins & Sells as a place to start a career in public accounting, the interviewing partner asked the student:

“Do you have any questions about our firm?”

“Yes, sir, I do,” the student replied.

“How far can I go in Haskins & Sells?”

“The sky’s the limit!” was the response.
The incident occurred on the Notre Dame University campus back in 1941, when Louis A. MacKenzie was being interviewed as a prospective recruit. Now, thirty-seven years later, it is clear that the student did not ask the question idly, because Lou was confident of his ability and had the energy and determination to give his best to any job. Nor was the partner’s reply an exaggeration, because the student has long since proved himself as one of the foremost leaders of Haskins & Sells. There had to be room at the top for a man like him.

Member of the Firm’s policy committee, partner in charge of the Firm’s national affairs office in Washington, former PIC in Detroit and before that an outstanding audit partner in the New York practice, Lou MacKenzie has left his mark at many points along the way. And even though his retirement is scheduled for next year, he shows no sign of preparing to halt, or even to slow down. As one of his partners has said: “Lou’s dedication and drive are awesome.”

“I think it is useful sometimes to take a look backward and see where you have come from, so you get a realistic perspective on where you are and where you’re going,” Lou says, as he considers the number of turns his career has taken. “But you shouldn’t always be looking over your shoulder. A good manager looks down the road ahead, he thinks about recruiting the replacements for himself and his contemporaries. He plans. There are no prizes for yesterday’s winners.

“In a professional organization like ours, you must communicate. You have to be open and frank with people—after all, that’s the way you want them to be with you. That’s the only way we can help each other, you know—saying what we think, right to the other person’s face.”

Lou MacKenzie’s independence of mind and expression are perhaps an outgrowth of his early training. He came out of high school in Groton, Connecticut in 1934, when America was in the grip of the Great Depression. Lou went to work at seventeen at the Electric Boat Company in Groton (now a division of General Dynamics), starting in the accounting office. He spent three years there, learning on the job, and worked his way up to be in charge of a large accounting section. Then, in 1937 the company controller told Lou’s father, who also worked at Electric Boat, that he would have made Lou assistant controller of the company if the young man were of age, and that Lou had a real flair for accounting. At that point Lou decided that he should go to college and study accounting seriously. So he entered Notre Dame the following September.

“I worked like hell in those days,” Lou recalls. “I studied hard, because I had been away from school more than three years, and I had to work my way through. I corrected papers for the Spanish prof, waited on tables, worked summers at Electric Boat… I even picked up cash on the golf course. I was a pretty good player!” (A discreet warning here to anyone tempted to play a round with Lou for a friendly wager.)

Lou graduated in 1941 magna cum laude, second in his class in the Notre Dame School of Commerce and seventh in the University’s graduating class of 655. That summer he started to work in the Haskins & Sells New York office report department, at $130 a month. Four other men from his Notre Dame class came with him, one being Larry Walsh, now PIC in Miami. Lou recalls those early training days warmly:

“It was a great experience for junior accountants to work in the New York report department and to be able to question partners who had signed a report on why
they had done things in a certain way. I met J. Harry Williams in this work, and I learned a lot from him. He was the first partner I came into contact with on the job, and he impressed me with the professionalism of the Firm."

After a few months on the Crucible Steel engagement, followed by several months in tax work, Lou's career with the Firm was diverted when he joined the U.S. Army shortly after Pearl Harbor. His 20/200 vision (which at the time he insisted was "corrected to 20/20") first kept him out of the Navy and later kept him from being trained as a tank commander. He became a finance officer, training finance personnel for most of his service, and winding up his days in uniform as a captain in charge of the contract-termination accounting section of the New York Ordnance District.

Early in 1946 Lou returned to the New York office of H&S as a senior assistant accountant. Right away he was sent to Connecticut to work on the audit of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation's Naugatuck synthetic rubber plant, which was operated by U.S. Rubber Company. He then was assigned as the senior on the U.S. Rubber (now Uniroyal) engagement. In the ten years after he became a partner in 1956, Lou became widely known as a specialist in bank auditing, while also serving a broad range of clients in other industries. Among his clients in New York, to name but a few, were: Morgan Guaranty Trust Company, Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company, the Bank of New York, The New York Times Co., the Hearst Corporation, Presidential Realty Co., Airco, Canada Dry, the Rockefeller Foundation and Yale University.

In 1966 Lou was appointed operating partner on the General Motors engagement in Detroit, an assignment that called for a three-year stay in the Motor City. Then, in 1969, he was named partner in charge of the Detroit office, where he served for six years. It was during this period that Lou MacKenzie's managerial style came into full flower.

"Unquestionably, I was and still am a tough boss," Lou admits without hesitation. "I give my best, and I expect everyone else to give his or her best, too. If you're not willing to set a high place in the sky as your goal, and then shoot for it, you shouldn't come into this profession."

One of the first things Lou MacKenzie accomplished in Detroit was, working with Michael N. Chetkovich, to put together the merger with Rutten, Welling & Company, an important Michigan accounting firm. The merger broadened the base of our Detroit office practice considerably, bringing Ralph Kilber, the Rutten, Welling managing partner, and a number of his partners into Haskins & Sells. Expansion in the practice laid the base for the opening of two affiliated offices in Michigan—Grand Rapids and Saginaw.

Lou has always been an innovator. When he sees a need, he likes to find a way to fill it. One of his more imaginative innovations in Detroit was the annual meeting of Detroit senior accountants, usually held in November before the rush of the accounting busy season. The purpose of the meeting was to stress to newly appointed seniors the importance of their role as in-charge accountants, and through speakers and workshop sessions to give them insight into the new stature they had achieved. A few years ago at one such meeting, Lou told the new seniors in his characteristically straightforward manner:

"If any of you think that just the passage of time gets you to the rank of senior accountant—forget it! I am confident that each of you has the ability to take on serious professional responsibilities, because you have already proved it. You are the lifeblood of this Firm. I expect all of you, senior accountants today, to be
directing this Firm just a few years down the road, when I expect to be playing lots of golf."

Another MacKenzie innovation, one that has reached every corner of Haskins & Sells, is the sprightly newsletter The Week in Review, which he started in Detroit and now produces from Washington. As Lou recalls its origin:

"The idea for The Week in Review came to me early in 1972 when I was riding to the office on a bus in Detroit. I realized how many papers and bulletins and newsletters and all kinds of material our people have to plow through in order to get the essentials of what they need to know. So I thought of getting the really important material together, and distributing it under one cover. We had a sneak preview of TWIR in May 1972, and put out the first regular issue in June.

"I have really been dedicated to it, and I try to get something of my own into every issue. Wherever I am, in Washington, or New York, or even overseas, as the editor I keep in touch with the staff and have them tell me the makeup of each issue."

Does this mean that Lou's keeping in close personal contact with the newsletter that is his baby interferes with the production schedule? Not a bit of it. "Every Friday at 11:30 A.M. it goes to press," he insists. "We've never missed an issue."

The weekly spread quickly from Detroit, as one practice office after another recognized its value for both internal and external use. As of the turn of the year weekly distribution exceeded 26,000 copies.

In the Washington office since 1975, first as partner in charge of the general practice, more recently as national affairs partner, Lou has concentrated on developing the Firm's relations with the federal government. In addition, he is the Executive Office partner responsible for the Firm's services to General Motors. But he has a fund of energy that impels him to take an interest in dozens of other things. On his mind, among other concerns, is advance planning for the Firm as a whole, because he cares deeply about the future of H&S as it moves into a new stage with the change of name to Deloitte Haskins & Sells.

A confessed sentimentalist, Lou carried out detailed research into the activity of Charles Waldo Haskins and Elijah Watt Sells in the early 1890s in Washington, where they met while serving as expert accountants for the Dockery Commission. On the basis of Lou's research, the Washington artist Robert Sivard produced for the Firm a realistic oil painting representing our two founders on a Washington street in 1895. Appropriately enough, the picture hangs in Lou's Washington office as an inspirational reminder of the work of the original partners on behalf of the federal government eighty-three years ago.

At home in their Washington apartment, Betty MacKenzie and Lou do take time to relax, although from seeing him on the job an outsider might wonder whether Lou is capable of unwinding. When work and weather permit, Lou can show all comers that he hasn't lost the skill at golf that helped him pay his way through Notre Dame. And he and Betty keep in touch with three sons and a daughter, plus two grandchildren, scattered widely in Ohio, Massachusetts, Michigan and Indiana.

Peppery, restless, innovative, outspoken, highly disciplined. All these adjectives apply to Lou MacKenzie. The qualities of mind and behavior that they stand for have combined to make him one of the most constructive, colorful and accomplished members of our Firm. But with all his energy, he is fully able to turn off the steam and relax.

"I never take the office home with me," he insists.