

ATG hitting the half-century mark

By Jamie Loo

Law Bulletin staff writer

When [Peter J. Birnbaum](#) was in law school, his friends didn't understand the obsession he had with his job as a law clerk at Attorneys' Title Guaranty Fund Inc.

In 1981, the title insurance company had four people in its Chicago office and a few in Champaign. Birnbaum saw a company of committed staff and dedicated attorney members that was poised for growth.

He never left, and now he serves as ATG's president and CEO.

"It's been nothing but interesting and fun," Birnbaum said. "I couldn't be happier with the choice I made. I'm really proud of the company that we've built."

ATG is celebrating its 50th anniversary and will issue its 3 millionth policy this year.

The company is owned by its more than 4,000 member attorneys in Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin and Michigan and provides services such as title-insurance policies, process serving, real estate auctions and legal education.

In the early 1960s, commercial title companies started to offer title services without involvement from attorneys, who typically represented buyers and sellers in transactions, conducted research and wrote title opinions for real estate closings.

Urbana attorney Stanley B. Balbach, [Richard L. Thies](#) and Charles M. Webber thought this was a troubling trend and came up with the idea to create ATG, a company owned by lawyers which could issue title opinions and title-insurance policies backed by its member attorneys.

Back then, insurance companies in the state had to be qualified to do business in each individual county with a \$5,000 deposit to the state. Balbach and his partners did a lot of traveling in downstate counties looking for lawyers to invest in the company.

"Our mission was to keep the lawyer involved in real estate transactions," said [Ward F. McDonald](#), an attorney at Meyer, Capel P.C. and former ATG CEO.

"It wasn't so much a profit center as it was to keep the lawyer involved in real estate transactions so that the public would be better served."

When McDonald became CEO in 1970, ATG had reached about 45 of the state's 102 counties. McDonald and his staff aggressively recruited more attorneys in the face of opposition from bar associations, commercial title companies, lenders and brokers.

In 1975, ATG got the \$500,000 bond it needed to qualify for operations in Cook County and statewide. Getting into the Cook County market was a huge milestone, Birnbaum said.

“Ward was able to transition the company from an idea to a viable business that could work,” he said.

The company started expanding beyond title insurance to other services in the early 1990s. Birnbaum, who became CEO in 1991, said his goal was to diversify into other products and services so the company wasn’t completely dependent on the real estate market.

The Judicial Sales Corp. was created in 1993 for judicial foreclosure auctions, which were exclusively handled by county sheriff’s offices at the time. It took a change in state law to allow ATG to enter that arena.

“We were one of the first companies to seek approval as a private auction officer,” Birnbaum said.

ATG now has six subsidiaries that offer title services, trust management, online auctions for private commercial and residential real estate, process serving and skip tracing and legal education.

The company garners more than \$100 million in annual revenue and has 18 offices and 250 employees.

The company hosted a 50th anniversary celebration on July 10. Birnbaum knew nearly all of the 700 guests in attendance.

“We grew up together. We raised each other. A lot of our members and customers have been with us their entire careers,” Birnbaum said. “It’s wonderful to be part of an organization that has that kind of collective energy and spirit.”