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In Memoriam: Wilson Gesner Stapleton 1901-1979

Owen C. Neff

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OWEN C. NEFF*

From the great swirl of mediocrity that plagues this earth, it is seldom that a man is born. Resolution! Courage! Loyalty! Truth! By all standards of judgment, Wilson Stapleton was one of these men.

He was born at Bath, Maine on the 9th day of February, 1901. From an early age, he was raised by an uncle in Nova Scotia where he attended Halifax Academy. His uncle, himself a teacher, instilled in him those qualities of mental discipline and rigor that were to serve him so admirably in later life. These lessons were sometimes accomplished by a liberal use of the harness strap.

After five years service as a pilot in the United States Army, he became an academician supreme. He graduated from Boston University in 1928 with high honors and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. We were blessed when he somehow found his way to Cleveland where he became first a title examiner, and later, a title officer while attending the Cleveland Law School, from which he graduated in 1934. In 1941, he was awarded a Master of Science degree from Western Reserve University. In 1954, he was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws.

He became a member of the faculty at University School where, regardless of social standing, he applied the same tactics and teaching methods imposed upon him by his uncle. It was often said that the indolent, while at the blackboard making a careless grammatical error, felt or heard the sharp buzz of an eraser fly past their ears.

In 1945, he was the moving force in the merger of the Cleveland Law School and the John Marshall Law School. From 1946 until his retirement, he served with distinction as its Dean.

Although an accomplished administrator and educator, it was as a teacher that he was most loved and admired. The student, unable to meet the financial demands of tuition found a friend in him. Those who tried their level best, but were of marginal success academically, found a second chance. There are many successful practitioners in the bar today in both categories who owe their success to him. Half of the members of the Bench in this county studied under him.

As a churchman, he cherished the Book of Common Prayer, written in the Elizabethan style with which he was thoroughly familiar. Shakespeare was his idol and he could quote it *cum eidem*. At Christ Episcopal Church, he served as the chairman of that rebel cause known as the Furnace Philosophers. While there, it was often said of him that though the Bishop might propose, he and they would dispose. And they did.

He was Councilman and later Mayor of Shaker Heights, all while carrying on an active law practice. At his retirement, he was the oldest ap-

* Attorney, Snyder, Neff & Chamberlain, Cleveland, Ohio.

plicant to ever take and successfully pass the Bar examination in the State of Florida.

To all of the above, may I add a personal note. I always knew him and loved him as the Dean. He was like a father to me, as he was to many others. In the early years of my practice, when I fought for survival, he saved me and took me in. When I came to him for advice on his subject, which had become mine, his explanation was lucid. Countless others can say the same.

He would have made a great commander of men. He instilled confidence. He was fair and just. No one ever suffered injustice at his hands.

He was restless and impatient, but his goal was never obscure. But he was eager, introspective, and serene. He was blunt and to the point. He did not equivocate, mislead, hedge or deceive. One always knew where he stood with him. He was conscious of his responsibilities and he met them. He abjured sophistry and shame. In a world twisted and torn by torment, the life of Wilson G. Stapleton was beautiful indeed!