

STERRY R. WATERMAN - AN APPRECIATION

• Thomas M. Debevoise

Sterry R. Waterman died February 6, 1984, at the age of 82. He was trustee emeritus of Vermont Law School at the time of his death. As president of its Board of Trustees from June 6, 1974, to October 22, 1983, Sterry was responsible for the development of the first and only nationally accredited law school in the State of Vermont.

We at the school during his tenure as president felt the inspiration that he radiated. "The warmth that came from one of his greetings was strong and palpable," recalls a former student. "Seeing him on the campus always made my day."

Sterry had taken senior status as a judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit several years before he took responsibility for Vermont Law School. At the time he assumed control, the school had not completed its first academic year, its debts greatly exceeded its assets, and its chances for survival were slim. He accepted the challenge ("I'll have to ask Fran" [his wife]. "Of course you are going to do it, Sterry!") and he never looked back. During the law suits against the school's prior administration and the unfounded complaints against him personally of impropriety as a witness, he was always looking ahead to improve the quality of his law school. He was wont to state: "I have contributed nothing except dignity," but he contributed far more than dignity!

In all that Sterry said and did for the school, his love of God, of history, of Vermont, and of education was apparent. The depth of his feeling would sometimes make his stentorian voice break while making reference to them. He personally endowed an award for academic excellence at the school in the name of Learned Hand. He enriched its intellectual community by inviting personal friends who were leading scholars to lecture at the school and by attracting others as members of the faculty. Those he invited to give the commencement address each year embodied the history and accomplishments of the legal profession.

Sterry's words were always those of encouragement and chal-

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lenge. In his foreword to the first issue of the Vermont Law Review in 1976, he wrote:

As independent approaches to the disquieting problems of our society have been associated for generations in the minds of Americans with the name "Vermont," this is an ideal time in which to launch a Vermont Law Review. The new publication has a rare opportunity: an opportunity which its name provides, an opportunity to demonstrate the high standards of honest analysis and the forthright kind of pertinent comments which thoughtful Americans have always expected from Vermont and Vermonters.¹

The Vermont Law School family will be reminded of Sterry in future years by the materials he gave the library, the Learned Hand award, a lecture series and a scholarship bearing his name, and a portrait donated by his former law clerks on the 25th anniversary of his assuming the bench. But those of us who were there will carry with us much more. As one student described it: "During my three years at Vermont Law School, I always loved it when Judge Waterman was on the scene. He occupied a great presence."

I personally feel him present whenever I return to the school. I felt him present also at his funeral which, we were informed, he orchestrated, much as he did law school commencements. In the North Congregational Church of his home town of St. Johnsbury, I could hear his marvelous voice again boom out the welcome to Vermont Law School's first commencement:

It is my privilege this morning to welcome all of you here. The Lord has been kind to us; it is a beautiful day; and we are so glad everything has come about as it has. . . .

Distinguished guests on the platform, my fellow trustees, Dean Debevoise, honored clergy, distinguished delegates from sister institutions, Chief Justice Barney, Justices of the Supreme Court and Vermont courts, our three fellow Vermont federal judges, all of you are here because you recognized that this is a most unusual day and your presence is needed to make it a complete, unusual proceeding. . . .

You are our friends, you have wished us well, and we are glad that you are here with us today. . . .

Mr. Brant [composer of the anthem for the ceremony],

1. Waterman, *Forward*, 1 Vt. L. Rev. (1976).

Mr. Walsh [ABA President and commencement speaker], members of the faculty, members of the school administration - how nice for all of us to know that you, too, have contributed your special bit and will contribute your special bit to make this day a commemorative one. . . .

On the part of the Trustees, I welcome all of you to this, the first commencement exercise of Vermont Law School, to witness the graduation of its charter class, and to witness the formal induction of its dean. . . .

We all have been looking forward to this day. It is a day of special significance, of course. In every sense of the word it is a true 'first.' The first congregation of the first law school ever in the State of Vermont. The first awarding of the Juris Doctor degree to a graduating law class ever in the State of Vermont. . . .

This institution will have other firsts as the years go on and as its activities and as its influence become more widely recognized. But there will never be another first like this first. . . .

On behalf of the Trustees, on behalf of the administration, on behalf of the faculty, you are welcome. . . .

And we trust that the memories of this occasion will give you a sense of historic pleasure. You were there.²

Vermont Law School is but one of many institutions to which Sterry R. Waterman contributed his talents. But what a great legacy Sterry leaves in leaving Vermont Law School to history, to Vermont, and to education!

2. Welcoming address by Judge Waterman at the Vermont Law School Commencement on June 5, 1976 (available at the Vermont Law School Library).

